

MICHAEL DAVIE

Royal daughter of the Revolution

THE SOVIET UNION is celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Mrs Skipwith, who is to be found at the end of a godforsaken lane on the top of Bodmin Moor, has just celebrated her eightieth anniversary. She must be one of the few people in England who was in Russia during the Revolution. In fact, you could argue that she was one of the people the Revolution was about.

At 80, she is apple-cheeked and stalwart; a strong and entertaining character. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between the circumstances into which she was born and the way she lives now, in a Cornish cottage. A US state governor said recently that Vice-President Bush was born with a silver spoon so far back in his mouth that it would take a crowbar to prise it loose. It took a revolution to do the same to Mrs Skipwith.

'It was 10 when the Revolution started,' she said last week. 'It was all in Petrograd. I remember, when things became obstreperous, my dear Miss King and I crouching beside the granite wall of the bridge over the river Neva, while the bullets swished overhead.'

Mrs Skipwith was one of the grandest children in Russia and Miss King was her English nanny. A family friend, Prince Yusupov who shot Rasputin, used to visit her nursery. She was a princess, Princess Sophy Dolgorouky, a member of a princely family closely connected for centuries with the imperial court. One of her direct ancestors, she told me, Yuri Dolgorouky, is considered to be the founder of Moscow, which a week or two ago celebrated the 840th anniversary of this event with dances round Red Square and processions. 'Yuri's mother was the daughter of King Harold of 1066. Harold's brother was lord or whatever it was of Blisland

(the village where Mrs Skipwith lives). So I am closely tied to King Harold!'

Dr Christopher Andrew, whose TV programme about the myths of the Russian Revolution was broadcast last week, says that one thing that even under *glasnost* cannot be mentioned by Russian historians is the drunken orgy that took place in the wine cellars of the Winter Palace in Petrograd after it was stormed at the Revolution's climax. Mrs Skipwith remembers an earlier raid on her mother's family home, the Bobrinsky Palace — the shots and the singing of the 'Marseillaise,' the blood on the snow and the heavy smell of red wine in the air, and bottles scattered round the courtyard next morning. 'They were not so much raiding the house as the wine cellars.'

As tension rose, the Dowager Empress of All the Russias went south. 'My grandmother was her chief lady-in-waiting as well as her close friend. So we departed too.' In the Crimea, at first, life went on as usual on the great estates leading down to the sea, with tennis and riding. But slowly the Revolution came closer. The Red Army arrived and left; so did the Germans. Soviets were set up.

Then one day Miss King seemed to go mad, waving her arms on the balcony and shouting. She had sighted a Union Jack: the Royal Navy had arrived to rescue the Dowager Empress. Granny, Miss King and Princess Sophy went, too. Thus it happened that when Mrs Skipwith arrived in England aboard a British warship, the first people to greet her were, at Portsmouth, Queen Alexandra, the sister of the Dowager Empress, and, at Victoria Station, King George V, Queen Mary and the young Prince of Wales.

Seventy-odd years later,

Sophy, or 'Sofka,' Skipwith is a paid-up member of the Cornish branch of the Communist Party. How, one may well ask, did that happen?

The seeds were sown, she explains, in the Crimea 70 years ago. 'I was slightly different from the other princelings. I made friends with the lodge-keeper's two boys. They used to say, why should I be educated by a governess with lessons every day, when they were more intelligent than I was? Why should our family have more than one carriage, when they did not have any? My grandmother called me "the little Bolshevik".'

In England, Granny sold her pearls (Granny, incidentally, never in her whole life put on her stockings or her shoes herself); Sofka went to school at Queen's College, Harley Street. Her mother and father arrived in Western Europe. Her father had a house in Rome. Aged 14, Sofka met a Russian boy who worked in the English library in the Piazza di Spagna. 'I was reading idiotic books by Zane Grey. The boy stopped me and gave me a book called "Blind" about the Russian Revolution. That opened my eyes.'

Later, when she was 21, Sofka became secretary to the Duchess of Hamilton, a friend of her mother's. The duchess had a son, Douglas (later the Duke of Hamilton Rudolf Hess came to see), who unsuccessfully contested the Govan division of Glasgow as a Unionist in 1929. Sofka helped in the campaign. She was appalled by the poverty. 'When you've seen people in the streets with no jobs, under those conditions, you don't go on being a Unionist.'

She joined the Communist Party when she was an internee in a German camp in World War Two. By then she had been twice married, first to a penniless Russian descended from kings of



Sofka Skipwith (née Princess Sophy Dolgorouky) recalls 1917 and the smell of wine.

Serbia, by whom she had two sons, and a second, in 1937, after an amicable divorce, to Grey Skipwith, son of Sir Grey Humberston d'Estoville Skipwith, 11th baronet. Through Universal Aunts, the general assistance agency, she had also, before the war, become secretary and helpmeet to Laurence Olivier.

In 1940, having returned as she thought briefly to Paris to help her relations, she was scooped up by the Nazis and interned at Vittel. Skipwith was killed in the RAF. In camp, the Communist Party was the only group in her eyes who were working effectively against the Germans.

One day, there was an influx of 250 Jewish people from Poland who had acquired South American certificates and thus escaped being sent to the extermination camps. Rumours about these camps had only just begun to reach Vittel. It became obvious

to Sofka and her colleagues that the papers were worthless. Yet she thought some outside intervention must be possible; after all, they were in a camp accessible to the Red Cross, and in an anti-Facist country. With a mapping pen, Sofka copied out all their names on to a couple of cigarette papers, which were smuggled out of the camp in a capsule made by the camp doctor.

She was also able to smuggle out letters appealing for help, one of them to a friend in the Foreign Office, Jock (later Sir John) Balfour, which eventually reached him at the British Embassy in Moscow.

'They thought they were safe. But eventually they got Auschwitz.'

Three years ago, in Cornwall, Mrs Skipwith was contacted by an academic at the London School of Economics, A. N.

Oppenheim. Researching in the Foreign Office archives, he had found letters from a woman named Skipwith. Through the London telephone directory he found a Skipwith who said the woman he was looking for was

his 'half-sister-in-law' who lived in a godforsaken lane in Cornwall. Oppenheim went to Cornwall. He even had a photocopy of the names on the cigarette papers.

What was the outcome of her brave efforts, I asked Oppenheim? 'In respect of that particular contingent of Polish Jews, perhaps the odd one was saved. But in terms of alerting the British Government to what was going on, she certainly did have an effect. That's my reading of the documents. I have put her name forward (to the Israeli authorities) to get her some belated recognition. She is a fantastic woman.'

After the war, Sofka became secretary both of the newly-formed Old Vic theatre company, where she again worked with Olivier, and of the Chelsea branch of the Communist Party. Then she started and ran a travel agency, Progressive Tours, taking tourists to Russia and Eastern Europe. She wrote a guide to Albania and founded the Albanian Society, which survives.

Then she met Jack King, a Communist who had been a toolmaker for 30 years in an electrical engineering factory in Chiswick. Confused by the Russian invasion of Hungary, he decided in 1957 to take a trip with Progressive Tours to see for himself. Next he went to work for Progressive Tours. Twenty-five years ago, he and Sofka bought the cottage on the moors — 'it was all we could afford.'

Since then, they have scarcely moved. They have no transport. Sofka reads voraciously: 81 books from the travelling library in 1985-86 is her record. 'I like the Viragos very much.' She feeds two wild cats and the pigeons. Jack gardens. For her eightieth birthday she made a rare trip to London for a party attended by innumerable rela-

tions, including the three successive wives of one of her sons, and two great-grandchildren. They have many visitors. One Russian who called in a while ago, with vodka, was Mr Gerasimov, now Mr Gorbachov's spokesman.

What does she think of it all, looking back? She and Jack pay their party dues (special rates for Old Age Pensioners), but have done nothing, they say, for 25 years and do not sound like wholly orthodox party members.

'I still believe in the basics,' says Sofka. 'I am anti-exploitation, anti-hereditary privilege. What most have forgotten is that Russia at the time of the Revolution was 200 or 300 years behind.' Sofka, if anyone, should know. 'Most think it was like a Western country.' She remembers her grandmother saying of a family property in the Caucasus, 'Oh yes. I believe we have something down there.' That generation had little to do with their estates. It was all done by managers.

The early revolutionaries were just carrying on where the Tsars left off. 'Trotsky, though one shouldn't mention him, said a wise thing: that no one was as conservative as a successful revolutionary.' Gorbachev had to go slowly, since the old guard was still entrenched.

She still has a few relics. The Dowager Empress presented her with an Imperial Easter egg in 1918. She has one or two books bearing the Dolgorouky crest; and some photographs. She gave me the latest number of the Albanian Society's journal, which reported the help being given by Albania to the Afghan rebels.

'We're quite happy here,' said Jack.