

NPS-71

ALEXANDRA TOLSTOY

BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 24, 1974

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: VALLEY COTTAGE, NY

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE A. KEYLOR, 5/1979

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 5/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

RUSSIA VIA JAPAN, EARLY 1930'S

AGE UNKNOWN

NASH: Today is August 24, 1974. I am speaking with Miss Alexandra Tolstoy, President of the Tolstoy Foundation. Miss Tolstoy left Russia in the early '30s, and later came to the United States. Miss tolstoy, where were you born?

TOLSTOY: I was born in Russia, I was born in Russia in the State which was called Yasnaya Polyana, the merry--Yasnaya means the merry or light or meadow, where my father Leo Tolstoy was born, and most of the time, most of my early years, I lived there.

NASH: Could you describe the town?

TOLSTOY: It isn't a town, it's an estate where there are forest and meadows, and very few people, few buildings, only the village which was away from the house, and later on the grave of my father. It is a very big estate. It's about in acres I don't know what it is, disateen is eight hundred and one disateen is one and three-quarter acre, so that was a very big estate. and later on, according to the will of my father, nearly all of this estate, I would say, I don't know how many acres it was, but a lot of acres, I would say that maybe, two-thirds of the estate was according to his will, granted to the peasants of five villages, and that was the money I got from the first publication of my father's works. And then the Soviets took away from the peasants all the meadows and the forest, the most expensive land, but still they got, they became much richer and much better off until the revolution came. What are you interested in?

NASH: Well, I would like to know something about your education in the Soviet Union.

TOLSTOY: Not in the Soviet Union, in Czarist Russia. Well, I got a very good education and I never went to any gymnasium or any university because my father didn't want it, but I had an education at home. I had a man who was nearly a professor among literature, the world literature, of course, including the Russian literature. And then I wanted to pass my examination and I couldn't do it because I was already, since I was seventeen I was working for my father as his secretary. So that was my youth and it was a very happy time when my

father was alive. And really we were very great friends. He always looked at me, he said, "How sorry I am that you are not older, that I couldn't be a real friend to you as a person of much older age." I was the youngest because my little brother died when he was seven years old of scarlet fever. My two sister, who were very close to my father, they both married, and I was the only one who was very close to him in the family.

NASH: How old were you when he died?

TOLSTOY: I was twenty-six. Well, what are you interested in?

NASH: I would like to know what led up to your deciding to leave Russia?

TOLSTOY: The revolution, of course, the lack of freedom, the lack of freedom for the peasants, for everyone. And I myself was in prison. I was condemned to three years and since some friends who sympathize with me and afraid to say that they were Communists, but they admired my father as a writer and they helped me to get out.

NASH: How long of a time did you actually spend in prison?

TOLSTOY: I spent one year. Two months I spent in the very severe prison of Lugalka. Then I spent a year in the concentration camp, and then after that I was sent to

forced labor which was very easy for me because I was a typist for my father and I was sent to, I don't know where, to some kind of an organization where I typed. And later on saw the members of the Communist Party, they said, "Well, she might do a big job, a good job in Yasnaya Polyana, the estate of her father," so they let me out because there then I built a big school which was a high school, ten classes, we say, I don't--ten grades--and all kinds of physical and all the rest of them, and a big hall for recreation. That was a beautiful school. I'll show you the picture of that school later on. And the bricks, I made them right there where the school is built because the soil is clay and you make the bricks out of clay, and the specialists were in the province of Kaluga. So I got those specialists, I got thirty cars, how do you say, thirty, where you take all kinds of heavy loads, thirty--

NASH: Wheelbarrows?

TOLSTOY: No, no. Train, in a train.

NASH: Cars.

TOLSTOY: Cars with wood from Kaluga province, and there we built the, made those bricks, and I show you later, it's a very beautiful building. Six years I built it. So that was that. And then I stayed for a long time in Yasnaya Polyana and then they started to bring in atheistic propaganda into the school. And you know my

father was very religious, not specifically church religious, but he was religious in a wider sense, and I couldn't make the propaganda for atheism in the school.

NASH: What did they tell you to teach? How did they try to change the curriculum?

TOLSTOY: Atheism, atheism. No God, no religion, and they do the same thing right now. The other day there was a boy who came over and he said, "Please explain to me what God means and what religion means," so I tried to explain, but it was very difficult because he never heard the word God, and he didn't know what it was. So it was very difficult telling him, explaining in this short way what God was.

NASH: You had to make a choice then and you decided to, you left the school, is that right?

TOLSTOY: Yes, well, I had no choice because I just could not go against the teaching of my father. And I left my relatives, my brother, and my nephews, some of them, and I had to leave.

NASH: Where did you go?

TOLSTOY: I went to Japan because I was afraid to go to Europe. I had relatives and a great deal of acquaintances and I was afraid to harm them, and I was afraid for

myself in Europe.

NASH: Was it hard to leave the country, actually leave Russia? Did they try to prevent you?

TOLSTOY: I would say, it is practically impossible, and only the good relationship of some of the Communists, the higher standing like Kalenin and the more educated ones, like (?) they helped me leave the country. Of course, they were absolutely anti-Tolstoy ideas, but they respected him as a writer, and they respect him now as a writer. So that is the reason why I left.

NASH: Did you have people waiting for you in Japan?

TOLSTOY: Oh, yes. I was met by them immediately. I got a job of teaching English and Russian, and they were very, very kind to me. And I left with a friend that was her daughter and she immediately also got a job. And I was lecturing and writing and so I also earned my living, but it was a very, I would say, materially, we slept on the floor, and it was a very small Japanese house, and the house didn't come even with a bath, bathroom, so we had to go the Russian, the bath the Russians had, you know, specifically the bath house where you wash.

NASH: What part of Japan was this that you were staying in?

TOLSTOY: Well, I landed near Osaka and then I lived in the country. And then after that I lived for a while in Tokyo, so I really lectured all over Japan. So, I went to other islands, I forgot now all their names, old. And I would say that Japan is a wonderful country. First of all, I loved the way they received the visitors. The visitors were something which they respected, though I had spies after me all the time. And when I said, "Why do those men have to persecute me everywhere, those spies?" And then the man who was always with me as a translator, he said, "Well, it's just to protect you, you are protected by those people." And then it was very funny when those spies came--

NASH: Japanese spies?

TOLSTOY: Japanese spies, they came to ask my autograph. And I said, "Why do you ask, do you know Tolstoy?" And they said, "We read every book of Tolstoy." They are very educated, the Japanese. And they are always very, very nice with the visitors who come to see Japan, mostly tourists, of course.

NASH: When did you decide to come to the United States?

TOLSTOY: Well, I was interested in the United States. Then I was invited by a very big manager to lecture here, and I did know the language, so I just decided to come and see and stay in the United States. And, of course, it was very difficult to get here because I had no money. I came third class, taking third class all

from Moscow up to the United States, I could never travel decently.

NASH: What was the name of the ship?

TOLSTOY: I have forgotten. Some kind of (?), I have forgotten. It's such a long time, you know. I'm just now, probably shaking the Russian newspaper, my Japanese reminiscences, and if I find that in English, I have it translated, but you see, somehow I never have any success in my writing. Japan years, the Russia years, I have books published, but in the United States, they are not eager to publish my books. No sensation, not interesting, no romance, so they just won't publish them.

NASH: Well, what was your first impression of the United States when you came? Do you remember the day you arrived?

TOLSTOY: No. I have written it somewhere. My first impression was my first interview with the custom manager. He was so interested that he talked to me for two hours, at least two hours, and it was my first lecture. And he didn't know anything about Russia, he thought it was a wonderful country and he asked me, "Why did you leave?" And I told him all about it, what a wonderful country it was. They haven't changed, the same terror, the same torture, people. Now I don't know if that is right or wrong, but they say they put people in sort of cupboards attached to the wall where a man has to stand, where he can't lie

down, and he can't sit down. I don't know if it is true, but there is a rumor that I heard from Russian people through American people, but that they use tortures, yes. Beginning by very simple ones when I was in prison. For two days we didn't have any water. And then I was called to the judge and he questioned me, and there was a glass of water in front of me, with ice, nice clear water and I didn't drink for two days. So, he said, "Won't you have a glass of water?" And I said, "Yes, when you give me all the prisoners water, then I won't be an exception." That was a terrible thing to witness because, you know, when you are hungry you can bear it, when you are thirsty it's very difficult. We couldn't wash for two or three days and we didn't have water for two days. The prisoners were all knocking at the doors, at the windows, screaming, yelling, "Water, water, water." Nobody knows about those terrible things that they do in Soviet Russia to their enemies, like the great writers, the poets that they put in insane asylum. Did you hear about it? I suppose you never heard about it, that they imprisoned people who are against them, not in prisons, but in insane asylums which is worse than a prison. Not long ago a very big poet, a Russian poet, I get all the poems from Russia, I try to get them so that they won't. I remember one of his poems which only a few lines I don't remember, "And when I am dead, let the black vulture pick out the cross on the marble on my body." Now those poems you can't get here, it's very difficult. So (?) great help out Soviet Russia. I only wish that he could make these volumes of his shorter, that more people could have the patience to read them because, you know, when I hear that War and Peace is not read by some Americans, it is

too long, then I understand that Americans can't read long books. It must be short and then they will read Solzhenitsyn, but I think that still he is read. Did you read him, no?

NASH: Not yet.

TOLSTOY: Not yet, well, I hope you will because when you read Solzhenitsyn, then you will know the terrible life that the Russian people live, not only hunger, but tortures, and also the worst is the moral torture. That's very bad, very bad.

NASH: Well, I am just going to go back to the story of how you came to this country. When did you actually decide you were going to stay here? Did you know that when you first came or did it take you a while to make that decision?

TOLSTOY: Not a minute. I thought as soon as I get out it's finished, I'll never go back. I said good-bye to my eldest brother, he was twenty-one years older than I am. I said, "Serge, I am saying good-bye with you for always. You will not leave your home, you are too old." And he is a musician, he was a musician. And he lived in the former home of our's, of our parents and all of us children. So he decided to die in this home. They didn't touch him. He was too old to be put in prison. And he was a musician. He composed music, he played the piano very nice, very nice, and he was not interested in politics. To a certain extent I was, but what can you do? You can be put to prison, nothing else that Soviet

Russia can start fighting against, but there are now a lot of people, even the young ones, who oppose Communism. So I sometimes begin to believe that Communism is not going to last forever. I won't live to the end of it. I did hope, but I don't think that it is possible that the regime like the Communists nowadays can last. It just can't last because the world is too civilized to bear such a regime. When all those people die, it will die with them, and it is the only hope I have, that the Russian people will be free someday again. The greatest hope, I must say.

NASH: What were the things that were the hardest to get used to in the United States for you when you first came here? The hardest part of your adjustment?

TOLSTOY: I don't know, it was the wealth of the United States. I remember I was once going through the park in San Francisco, I discovered that there were very good mushrooms there that you Americans don't eat. You think it's toadstools, but they are wonderful mushrooms and in the park there, there were lots of those mushrooms. And I was going with a basket and picking those baskets, was sometime in the summer, suddenly I stopped because I saw something very strange. It was a pile of dry white bread. And it shocked me to such an extent that wealth, the way that you Americans waste food, and this I can't simple get used to it. In Russia, the peasant family sits down to dinner, and the children are taught that they must not waste a crumb. And if there are crumbs at the table, the child collects it in his palm, you say, and eats it, but he does not

dare to throw a crumb away. This is the way I was educated and when I saw this pile of white bread, which the dogs passing by didn't eat, I was terribly shocked. And I will never forget it. And when I speak to children now, I always say, "Take the bread then eat it, but never throw it away." And I say that to children where they grow up here, and I say that to my nephews, and I consider it one of the greatest sins when the people are hungry in the world to throw bread away.

NASH: Did you ever become a citizen or are you still a permanent resident? Is that your status?

TOLSTOY: I became a citizen in '41, because I thought it was much more honest to become a citizen, to take part in the work of this country. I always go to all of the, when you choose people, how--

NASH: The elections?

TOLSTOY: All the elections, yes, and I think we all must take part in the, I would say that I am interested in all the public interests of this country. That's why I try to speak against Communism for many, many, many, years. And I always had very good audience, very good listeners, a lot of questions. I don't know if something remained in the young heads because I had a lot of young people to whom I spoke. All the universities, colleges, and only three ago I stopped

lecturing because I thought I wasn't as bright as I was before. I forgot names, I sometimes would start an idea and I would just not be as bright as I was before so I thought I didn't have the right to lecture. Ninety years. I am still thankful for the brains I have, but it isn't as before.

NASH: How would you compare the position of women in the United States to the position of women, well, I don't know if I should say the position of women or just women in the United States to Russian women?

TOLSTOY: Well, what should I say? I don't know because I'm not for the rights of women.

NASH: Why?

TOLSTOY: I think a woman has her own business, marry, children. If it's not, schools, helping people, which is the greatest work a woman can do. And going into all those highest spheres or becoming engineers, I think it isn't our job. My job was always trying to help people, teaching. I had schools and I had to do a great deal with children. I felt fond of the way I had to live, and how it is with my friend Mrs. Schafers, whom you met, who is the executive secretary and the director of the nursing home which she built. She was a friend of ours. She worked three years before she got the money and the permission to build it. We built it on part of our land, and I had nothing to do with it. I was already to

old to work, but she gave her life to the Tolstoy Foundation. And when we met, the two of us, we decided, and she came from Europe, she told me all about the terrible condition of the refugees in Prague, in Czechoslovakia. She worked for the refugees with Alice Messerk, the daughter of the President. And when she came here, I was writing and working on (?) and she said, "What are you doing when there is so much work to do?" And she really persuaded me to help the refugees, and I left my little farm.

NASH: When did you meet each other?

TOLSTOY: Oh, in Russia, long, long ago.

NASH: Mrs. Schafers.

TOLSTOY: Yes, we were friends there. Then she was taken to one prison, to one prison camp, and I was taken to another one. We were separated and we never knew that we were so near each other, a few miles only. And I went to the camp where there was a dentist, so I went fixing my teeth there and I never knew that she was there. And then she came here and we talked a lot and we decided to start the Tolstoy Foundation together, and that was in the early '30s. So really, she inspired me because she took care of the refugees in Europe. And she told how difficult it was to get money to try to support them, to get jobs for them. So, I decided well, no farming anymore. I love farming and I love writing, but I

thought it was my duty and go and help refugees, so the two of us, we found the Foundation.

NASH: Did you have this property already in Valley Cottage or were you somewhere else?

TOLSTOY: Shall I tell you what we had?

NASH: Yes.

TOLSTOY: Twenty-five dollars. Really, that was all. And I had my little farm, seven acres.

NASH: Here or somewhere else?

TOLSTOY: No, in Connecticut. And she had fifty dollars. That was how we started the whole business in '39. In '41 we got the farm as a contribution.

NASH: What do you consider your life's greatest work, if there is one?

TOLSTOY: Is what?

NASH: Your life's greatest work?

TOLSTOY: Well, it is very difficult to compare because it is different. The greatest work for me and the best years for me was the work with my father, the greatest work for my soul, for my education, for that. The greatest work for humanity was the only one, the refugees. Refugees, the ones who escaped from Russia as I did. The same people, the same psychology, the psychology of the ones coming now is a little different because, as I say, not all of them understand what religion is, but they have come to it. There was one refugee who jumped the ship, who came here. We placed him. Now he is an engineer, he graduated from college. When he came to this farm it was the first time that he entered the church. Now he is very religious, he has a family, he is very happy, his work, he lives not far away from here, but he didn't know a thing about religion. As this man who talked to me, he says, "I don't know what God is, I just don't know." And it's the education, it's the, I would say, the corruption of a whole nation, not only one--

NASH: Do you feel that there should be any change in United States policy on immigration?

TOLSTOY: I will tell you that the United States has done more than any country for immigration, and they are still well, concerns the Tolstoy Foundation, I would say, that couldn't expect a better attitude towards the work at the Tolstoy Foundation that we had all along from the government. And I must say that I am grateful for myself, for my friend, and for all the Russians who are coming

here. Sometimes it is very difficult, the choice of it is very difficult. You can not make mistakes, people do make mistakes. Of course, once in a while we have a person whom we don't want to have here, but I would say that it is very seldom. And our workers abroad are just first class, and I always tell everybody that, "If you don't feel that you can sacrifice, don't join our work because all of our workers are sacrificing, they are sacrificing their hours, sometimes their money, they are sacrificing the jobs maybe that they are offered, but without sacrifice, no use starting this job." And Mrs. Schafers and myself, we know it very well because we knew that we had to give up big salaries, we practically get very, very little salaries because when a man who gets pension, who got pension, now they get more, fifteen dollars a month, he came to me and he said, "I'll give you one dollar a month out of my pension." Then you feel that if a man like that, an old man disabled, does that sacrifice, after your sacrifice a little and then we feel yes. And people who work with us mostly understand that. There are some who are working for salaries, they are not numerous. See what I mean? They get salaries, you can't live without money, nowadays especially, but it isn't for the salaries that they are working. And right now, in the nursing home which I want you to see, our chief there who is, I mean who is the head of the whole thing here in this place. He had an accident and he doesn't walk very well, but I don't know a man who is so sacrificial, so clever, so just with all of his subordinates, as this boy. He is very young, he is twenty-nine I think. And he has been living here since he was three years old, when he got that accident. And I want you to go and see the

nursing home which was built by Mrs. Schafers--

NASH: Well, I have enjoyed speaking with you very much.

TOLSTOY: Well, wait a minute. So, will you go and see the nursing home?

NASH: I would love to.