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Cavalier Treatment

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Abstract

Kurth, Peter. *Anastasia: The Riddle of Anna Anderson*.

Cavalier Treatment

A Column by Lee Speth

Legend of a Lost Princess

I have just been reading Anastasia: The Riddle of Anna Anderson by Peter Kurth (Little, Brown, 1983), but what follows is not a review. I find myself reflecting on the dynamic of legend. The woman who was the subject of this biography, earlier books by champions and sceptics, myriad articles, several plays, and an Oscar winning movie, died recently in Virginia, but the figure of Anastasia shows every mark of being eternal. Mr. Kurth's is the most up-to-minute study, published more or less simultaneously with "Anna Anderson's" passing, but it assuredly won't be the last. There can be no final word on any subject that grips so at the imagination.

From the night in 1920 when the unknown, presumably suicidal woman was dragged from the Landwehr Canal in Berlin, through the emergence of her claim to be grand Duchess Anastasia (youngest daughter of Czar Nicholas, secretly rescued, she asserted, from revolutionary massacre), through the long sieges of acceptance and rejection, lionization and neglect, sanctuary and poverty, through her inconclusive German court case and last years as wife of an eccentric American professor, she walked in mystery, compelling, exasperating, inexhaustible.

"I have seen Nicky's daughter!" the Czar's cousin, Grand duke Andrei, cried out, shaken to his core, but most of the exiled Romanovs rejected her, usually sight unseen. There were always too many questions. What had happened in the Urals? How could she have survived? What was this about a child born to her in Rumania? What Czar's daughter would clandestinely marry an ignorant Polish soldier? Why could no one prove his existence? And did this claimant even speak Russian?

The Romanovs could distance themselves from the gathering legend but they could not distance the public, and the public was always ready to hear of her, hope for her, always hungry to feast on the tale of a vanished princess returned, of a child cast up from the shipwreck of state, of the dread images of our century, brutal men and heavy weapons, defied and frustrated by something frail and beautiful and lost.

Naturally, realistic and practical historians couldn't stand it. They had the Sokolov Report, the meticulous and complete statement prepared by the White Russian command, detailing the Bolshevik atrocity of July, 1918, when the last Czar, his wife and all their children had died in the basement of the Ipatiev house in Ekaterinburg. "My cousin Anastasia," the late Lord Mountbatten would tell an interviewer, "was bayoneted seventeen times!" And formal history would, it seemed, go out of its way to douse the pretensions of the stubborn mystery woman.

"Anastasia, the youngest daughter, also continued to show some signs of life, and was killed with the bayonet." (Alan Moorehead, The Russian Revolution) "...Anastasia, who had only fainted, regained consciousness and screamed. With bayonets and rifles butts, the entire band turned on her. In a moment, she

too lay still. It was ended." (Robert K. Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra) The lines seemed quite drawn between the realistic and the romantic, between the hard substance of history and the glamor of legend.

But it was never that simple. For one thing, the glamor of legend kept colliding not with history but with the reality of the woman--reticent, uncooperative, overbearing, ungrateful. She was the single worst enemy of her own masquerade if masquerade it was. Liable to melancholy and paranoia, her periods of humor, intelligence and real charm could always be expected to transmute into misunderstanding, grief, accusation. But then, the "realists" were so unsuccessful in pinpointing her reality. If not the Grand duchess, who was she? The one sustained attempt to provide an alternative identity was always shaky and finally dissolved completely. If not a living romance, the grumpy, imperious woman was an unprecedented impostor. For nearly sixty years, her claim was resisted by the shrewd, the informed and the highly placed, but was never truly discredited.

The wearying, unresolved life is over, but out of it I offer a couple of satisfactory ironies for the kind of people who read Mythlore. First, that despite the programs of the Bolsheviks, and their "scientific" blueprint for a new humanity with a redesigned consciousness, the great and enduring legend of the Russian Revolution is this of Anastasia. Out of the ultimate household of reaction she rises and transcends them and mocks them. She bids fair to outlive them all.

And second, accredited reality is reshaping, and doing so along romantic lines. There had always been an undercurrent that spoke of possibility. Certain statements had gotten on the public record, like that of Count Bonde, of the Swedish Red Cross, who recollected that after July of 1918, the train on which he was crossing Siberia was stopped and searched by Red troops hunting one of the Czar's daughters. And now it is not just overheated journalists who are crying that one did survive. Up to date forensic investigators and graphologists, with handwriting analyses, ear contours and meticulously matched facial indices, are declaring that the mystery woman and the Grand Duchess were one and the same. And the Sokolov Report, that solemn historian's standby, is now arraigned as a badly cobbled and irresponsible piece of propaganda (see Summers and Mangold, The File on the Tsar, Harper & Row, 1976). Those seventeen bayonet thrusts into the girl's body, so reassuringly, if improbably, tallied, may never have happened after all.

And, oh yes, "Anastasia" is Greek for "Resurrection".



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