

PETER STANFORD

From Communist princess to Catholic penitent

When Stalin's only surviving child died in November last year aged 85, she was portrayed as perpetually restless. Yet recently released correspondence with an English priest reveals that her Christian faith – and Catholicism in particular – was a constant in her life

We are all shaped in some way by our parents, most of us for the better. Others, though, have a more traumatic inheritance to cope with. Lana Peters was one. Her death in November at the age of 85 in the American Midwest state of Wisconsin was reported globally.

She used various names during her long life, but was born Svetlana Stalin, only daughter of one of the most murderous dictators in history. It was that baggage that she carried, despite her best efforts, to her grave.

As the obituary writers recorded, Peters (the surname of her fourth husband) spent much of her life under intense public scrutiny: first as "Stalin's princess", regularly photographed as a girl with her father and held up as a role model to other children in the old Soviet Union; then, in 1967, when her defection to the United States was played out against the backdrop of the Cold War; and later in the mid-1980s when she returned home (briefly and unhappily) to a new Russia struggling to emerge from the fag end of Communism.

Reference was also made in assessments of her life to her religious faith. The common theme was that she flip-flopped between denominations, in search of a personal redemption that remained elusive. However, a cache of correspondence between Peters and the English Catholic priest who received her into the Catholic Church in London on 13 December 1982 tells a different, more nuanced story.

"Thank you again and again," she writes to him 10 days after her reception, "for having opened this door for me. I cannot describe to you in what darkness I've been the last years, and what a great joy and inner peace I possess now." Ten years later, in a letter dated 7 December, 1992, her commitment remains strong. Far from moving restlessly between faiths as has been suggested in the obituaries, Peters describes being a daily Mass-attender and communicant at her local Carmelite church on Kensington Church Street in west London, writing: "I feel stronger and stronger, after these 10 years, that I am at the right place." Her last letter to her priest, on 23 January, 1993, sees her fixed on



being confirmed in the Catholic faith.

Her correspondent – who has asked to remain anonymous ("this is the story of her faith journey, not mine") – first came into contact with Peters when she relocated to Cambridge from the US in the summer of 1982. A mutual friend introduced them. In correspondence dated 7 November 1982, she describes "my constant (during these 15 years) and persistent admiration towards the Church of Rome and desire 'to be there'. Like a compass turns always towards the North Pole, I keep turning all the time towards the same direction: Rome."

She has been attending Mass at a local Catholic church in Cambridge, Our Lady and the English Martyrs, she writes, and observing as the congregation return to their seats after receiving Communion: "I watch those elevated, cleansed faces of the people. I love to watch that transformation so visible." It was something she wanted for herself.

Peters was born in 1926, when her father was already first general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Her mother, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, was his second wife. She died six years later, officially of peritonitis, but later it emerged she had committed suicide after being brutalised by her husband.

In January 1983, Peters sends a short story, strongly autobiographical, albeit written in the third person, to her priest friend. In it, she writes of her relationship with her father: "They were never close, because there was such a big difference in age between them. Little girls love young fathers and mothers, such who could play and run and sing songs with their children, and have fun together. Her father never did."

The story, entitled "The Last Words" and dedicated to the priest, describes Peters' devout paternal grandmother, who had sent the young Stalin to Orthodox school and then to the Orthodox seminary in Tiflis (later Tbilisi) in their native Georgia. He dropped out at 20 and went on to abolish religion. When, in 1939, he came to his mother's bedside (he later told Peters, she recalls), Stalin was rebuked with the words, "Oh what a pity you have not become a priest."

Writing of herself, still in the third person, Peters continues: "She thought now that all the troubles and cruelties her father had caused, all the unhuman [*sic*] politics of his party, all that was due to her abolishing of Christianity. And she thought that his own troubles started when he dropped out from his seminary, at the age of 20. It was then, exactly then, that his young soul, not used to fight Evil, had been grabbed by Evil and never let alone since."

As a 16-year-old, Peters had fallen in love with a Soviet film-maker, but her father had the man exiled to Siberia. She was allowed to marry fellow student, Grigory Morozov, in 1943, and had a son, Josef, but her father disapproved of the match, refusing to meet his son-in-law, and the marriage eventually collapsed under such pressure. In 1949, she was married for a second time, in a politically inspired match, to Yuri Zhdanov, son of her father's right-hand man. They had a daughter, Catherine, but quickly divorced.

Nine years after her father's death, with a gentle liberalising breeze blowing under Khrushchev, Peters was baptised into the Orthodox faith in May 1962 in the Church of the Deposition of the Shroud in Moscow, "because", as she puts it in her short story, "she did not want to live without God". She was later to tell her priest friend that, in their