

# STALIN'S DAUGHTER BY ROSEMARY SULLIVAN. AN INTERVIEW ON MEMORY

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## Abstract

This article deals with Canadian biographer Rosemary Sullivan, one of the most important voices in Canadian literature. *Stalin's Daughter* (2015) is a biography of the woman who tried to free herself from the terrible weight of being the daughter of a dictator. Memory is an essential element in Svetlana Stalin's life, as in all those who knew her. In a sustained effort to understand Svetlana, Sullivan explored archives (including the KGB), travelled to the places where Svetlana had lived, asked questions of those who had met her. She reconstructed the life of Svetlana in a passionate and deeply researched biography. The article contains Sullivan's answers to questions asked during a skype interview.

*Stalin's Daughter di Rosemary Sullivan: un'intervista sulla memoria*

L'articolo si riferisce alla canadese Rosemary Sullivan, una delle voci più importanti in Canada. *La figlia di Stalin* (2015) è la biografia di una donna che cercò di liberarsi da un peso terribile: essere la figlia del dittatore Stalin. La memoria è elemento fondamentale nella vita di Svetlana Stalin e nel libro. Sullivan, in un tentativo, riuscito, di capire la vera Svetlana, ha lavorato negli archivi (anche del KGB), è andata nei luoghi dove visse Svetlana, ha interrogato chi l'aveva conosciuta. Sullivan ha ricostruito la vita di Svetlana Stalin, una biografia appassionante e altamente documentata. L'articolo pubblica inoltre alcune risposte di Rosemary Sullivan a domande poste via skype.

Rosemary Sullivan is one of the best-known living biographers, not only in Canada. Her latest biography, *Stalin's Daughter*, shares all the qualities that have made her books loved and famous: a most accurate and in-depth research and a passionate writing. It comes after a number of books, many of which obtained prestigious prizes<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Stalin's Daughter* was: winner of the 2015 Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction. Longlisted for the PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography. Finalist for the BC National Non-Fiction Award. Longlisted for the RBC Taylor Prize. One of *Newsday's* Best

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*Oltreoceano. L'identità canadese tra migrazioni, memorie e generazioni*, a cura di Silvana Serafin, Alessandra Ferraro e Daniela Ciani Forza, 11 (2016).

Her first biography, *By Heart, Elizabeth Smart* (1991), told the story of a Canadian writer who went to England, supported four children and frequented mid-century bohemian artistic circles: the story of a single woman-artist is told against the milieu she frequented. One of Sullivan's great abilities is to tell the story of one single person (writer, poet, etc.) and recreate at the same time the milieu and the epoch she lived in. This is true also for her second biography, *Shadow Maker. The Life of Gwendolyn McEwen* (1995, Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction), the famous Canadian poet. A third Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood, is again the subject of a biography, *Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (1998), concerning the early years of the writer who became perhaps the best known Canadian novelist of our time. In 2009 a biography of Sullivan's Irish family came out, *The Guthrie Road*, which is a personal story but also a story of Irish immigration in Montreal.

This book somehow shows the way to Sullivan's later choices, when she moved on to writing on more tragic subjects, where the life of a single individual is projected against great historical tragedies: in *Villa Air-Bel. World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille* Sullivan reconstructed the story of a house in the South of France, near Marseille, where Jews and intellectuals escaping from the Nazi invasion of France passed on their way to Spain, and eventually to America, creating an island of art, energy, will to survive. The story was based on diaries, memoirs, and letters of the individuals involved. Sullivan also revealed the private worlds of these people and the web of relationships they developed, in a tragic historical moment.

The special quality of Sullivan's biographies is on one hand that they are thoroughly researched – with a great amount of work in different archives and trips to the various countries and places to check what they might have been like – and on the other the sympathetic approach to the subject discussed.

Books of 2015. The *Daily Mail's* Book of the Year (2015). One of *The Boston Globe's* Best Books of 2015. A *New York Times Book Review* Editor's Choice. One of *The New York Times's* 100 Notable Books of 2015. One of *Kirkus Reviews's* Best Nonfiction Books of 2015. One of *The San Francisco Chronicle's* Best Nonfiction of 2015. One of *Washington Post's* Notable Nonfiction Books of 2015. One of Minneapolis Public Radio's Top Nonfiction Picks of 2015. A *Globe & Mail* Bestseller. A *Maclean's* Bestseller. Sullivan was the recipient of Guggenheim, Trudeau, and Jackman Fellowships and was awarded the Lorne Pierce Medal by the Royal Society for her contribution to literature and culture. In 2012 she became an Officer of the Order of Canada. Sullivan is professor emerita of the University of Toronto, and she is also the author of books on the poetry of Theodore Roethke, *The Garden Master: The Poetry of Theodore Roethke*, and of collections of essays, *Cuba: Grace under pressure; Labyrinth of Desire: Women, Passion and Romantic Obsession; Memory Making. Selected Essays of Rosemary Sullivan*. She is also a poet, and published *The Space a Name makes* (1986) and *Blue Panic* (1991).

*Stalin's Daughter* has all of these qualities: Sullivan researched the archives of the CIA, of the KGB, the Soviet archives; she went to Georgia, Tbilisi, where Stalin was born, and where his daughter, Svetlana, lived for a while as an adult; she went to Russia, to Moscow, to the Kremlin and the dachas where Svetlana grew up, married, had children; she went to India, where Svetlana was allowed to take the ashes of the man she had been forbidden to marry: in New Dehli, Svetlana walked up to the American Embassy, to defect to America, in 1967, causing great worry in the political circles of three countries, India, the Soviet Union and the USA. She went to England, where Svetlana lived in order to give her American daughter, Olga, a good education. Obviously she also went to the places in the USA where Svetlana lived: a pilgrimage that was linked to one characteristic of Svetlana, i.e. her continuous moving from country to country, from place to place, from house to house, a 'nomad', as Sullivan calls her.

But this is part of how one researches. What is so striking in this biography is the effort to understand a woman who tried, all her life, *not* to be Stalin's daughter, somehow never managing to escape that horrific brand or destiny; a woman, who in spite of everything, in spite of getting to know Stalin's crimes, in spite of her mother's suicide due to her impossibility to live further with Stalin and his criminal power, in her own way loved her father and in some ways was similar to him.

This biography is strictly linked to the theme of this conference: memory. Sullivan's book is based on memory, on the memories of the people who had actually known and written about Svetlana, on Svetlana's memories, and partly also on Sullivan's own memories.

Touchingly, Sullivan often underlines how one's childhood is always remembered as a period of joy, of love. It is so for her own childhood (Sullivan's) but it is so even for Svetlana, whose childhood becomes something to be cherished: when she lived in the Kremlin and in the dachas, when she had not yet discovered that her mother had committed suicide, when she was, as a child, Stalin's "little sparrow".

At the 2015 Venice Biennale, in the pavilion "Codice Italia", there was a video presenting Umberto Eco speaking on memory. Eco rightly underlined how memory is something that moves and changes: things we remember are not like things one can recover in the attic, they change as we grow old, as we try to remember: remembering is an active function – one could say a little like the CERN proton which changes as we look at it. Therefore using memory is trying to catch something that is not static, that changes as we try to capture it.

Memory is an essential element in *Stalin's Daughter*. In a skype interview we asked the following questions to Sullivan. We are most honoured and happy to be able to print here her answers.

## A skype interview

*Do you think that Svetlana, in old age, as Lana Evans (her American name, with which she tried to cancel Svetlana Stalin), or as Svetlana Alliluyeva (her mother's name), thought of her childhood with nostalgia, because it was so far and gone? Was she imagining it? Or did she really have a joyful childhood?*

When Svetlana spoke of her childhood, she referred to it as 'that place of sunshine I call my childhood'. She was remembering the summers and weekends she spent at the Stalin family dacha called Zubalovo. She could recall every inch of the dacha – the lilac gardens, the duck pond, the tree house where she played with her brother, the streams where she fished with her grandfather, Sergei, and the surrounding birch forest where they collected mushrooms. There were picnics with the children of visiting relatives and with the husbands and wives of her father's political colleagues. She called them all aunts and uncles. She kept this memory sealed, as in a glass globe, for it was destroyed when her mother died in 1932 when Svetlana was six-and-a-half. She was told her mother had died of appendicitis and did not learn that the cause of her death was actually suicide until she was sixteen years old. But Svetlana was too honest and too intelligent not to admit that many of the 'uncles' who visited had participated in the political purges of those years under Stalin's policy of forced collectivization. So her childhood was a strange fiction; she had to insist on her right to see it through the innocent eyes of the child. She was able to do this by believing that her mother had created this beautiful world of sunshine. After her mother's death, the world changed and a terrible darkness followed.

*Memory seems to be important in Svetlana's life: not only the memory of her father's crimes – killing off or imprisoning even members of the family – but also the memory of what her mother – and one may say even her father – had done for her, giving her a very good education: Svetlana seems haunted by the sense that she must give Olga a good education, and her move to Cambridge is very much depending on the presence of a very good school, the Quaker "Friends' School" for Olga. Would you agree on this?*

In actuality, Nadya [Svetlana's mother] was a distant, preoccupied mother. Svetlana never remembered her mother embracing her, and only recalled the smell of her mother's perfume as she came to say goodnight. She treasured one photograph of her mother holding her as an infant because it was a testament to the fact that she was loved. But she held to the idea that her mother demonstrated her love for her by her devotion to her children's education. In addition to her nanny, Svetlana had a governess and music and art lessons, and was taught German by the time she was six. Svetlana transferred the same obses-

sion with education to her children. Even as her finances became increasingly precarious when she lived in the US after her defection, she found the money to send her daughter to private schools, both in Princeton and in Cambridge.

*Which are the most fascinating, or horrifying memories you have of your trips around the world to check out documents, things and places for this book? Which of your books offers you the best memories?*

Each of the biographies I've written has offered fascinating memories. When I wrote my biography of Elizabeth Smart I ended up having breakfast with the actor Peter Ustinov. He had met Elizabeth when both had attended acting school together. He was wonderful as he recalled "Canadian Betty". At the time, he had no idea she would turn into the woman who wrote the masterpiece *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. In writing about Gwendolyn MacEwen, I wanted to understand, first hand, her obsession with all things Egyptian and particularly with the Pharaoh Akhenaton about whom she wrote a novel. I was able to travel to Egypt with the world specialist on Akhenaton, Donald Redford, who invited me to accompany him with a number of his patrons on a three-week trip. We visited his dig sites, and many of the temples and landscapes that Gwendolyn wrote about. In writing about Margaret Atwood, I climbed through the ravines that abutted the bottom of the street where she lived as a child and that are such an obsession in her fiction and I followed her down to Radcliffe and Harvard so that I could reconstruct her graduate student years. However, no journey has been longer and more elaborate than the journey I took to follow Svetlana—from Saint Petersburg and Moscow to Tbilisi and London and the Lake District. The people I met compelled me, from Stalin's grandson, Alexander Burdonsky, to the archaeologist Lady Jane Renfrew, all so willing to speak about Svetlana whom they cared about deeply and whose fate they felt was tragic.

*The reader's reaction in reading this book is also a questioning of his or her own memory: as I was reading it, I was wondering: in 1953 how much did people, ordinary people, not politicians, know of Stalin's crimes? This is a more general, historical question, that touches on one's teen-ager's memories. One feels that one lived in a bubble, ignoring the tragedies that were going on in the Soviet Union, and of course in Europe in the Jewish annihilation camps. Which are your first memories of historical tragedies, gulags, Jewish persecution, war? Did you have any as a young girl?*

In 1953, it would have been impossible to know anything about Stalin's crimes. When these crimes were revealed by Khrushchev in his Secret Speech in 1956, the Soviet public were devastated. This only goes to show how powerful pro-

paganda can be. Soviet citizens believed in Stalin's cult of personality – he was the benevolent father who protected them against their enemies. It's a terrible strategy – to use fear to create the “enemies of the people” so that people can be manipulated and remain docile. I only became aware of the tragedies of the Stalin era when I entered university in 1964 and began to read Russian literature. It was then too, through my Jewish friends, that I began to really understand the enormous tragedy of the Holocaust. One of the first places I visited when I went to study in England in 1969 was Dachau.

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