

Learning to Live Outside Stalin's House of Silence

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"I lived in a house of silence. My father worked for the KGB, and he was responsible for deciding the fate of many of the men arrested daily — whether they deserved short- or long-term gulag sentences, or even something more lethal. He could not share anything about what he experienced every day — his stress, his indecisions and eventually his nagging doubts about the Soviet system itself."

These words belonged to a doctor who grew up during Josef Stalin's rule. When I first met her, she spoke only of her "happy childhood" and the fact that she was very fortunate that her parents were not alcoholic or abusive to her or her little brother. But over the years I have known her, she has become more aware of how difficult it was growing up in an angst-filled home. As she researched several generations of her family during an advanced class, she found even more reason for the tension that often filled their apartment with such intensity that it was almost palpable.

She learned that her grandfather had been a peasant in a small village near the Volga River and had been accused of being a kulak — an enemy of the state — even though he and his family were actually quite poor. He was arrested and given a long sentence in a gulag prison in the far north. He was never heard from again. His wife and four children struggled to survive because they also were branded as enemies of the state. They were not able to obtain paying jobs, and the children were denied all but the most basic education. Often food was impossible to obtain, and their two youngest children died of starvation.

The oldest child — a son — felt responsible for the care of his mother and stayed in their village hoping one day his father would return. The daughter, however, was determined to survive at all costs and left her mother and brother to move to Saratov, the nearest city. She was 17 years old and beautiful.

She knew that her life was a stagnant pool that would only become more fetid in the coming years as long as her papers were stamped "enemy of the state" and it was known that her father was an imprisoned kulak.

She immediately began to use her charm to meet other young people at the market, in the parks or walking along the river bank. She met a young man who became entranced by her, and eventually she convinced him to help her find someone to provide her with forged documents. These powerful new papers gave her a new name, a new family background and, thus, a new life.

With the bogus papers in hand, she applied to a local university and rose rapidly in popularity with both faculty and students. No one guessed she was the child of a kulak. She joined the Komsomol youth movement and became an active young Communist.

She did not attempt to contact her mother or brother again. She left them behind in the stagnant pool and instead delighted in the clear, fresh water of her secret life.

She became skilled at lying about her family and her past. She fully embraced this new fake identity until it became her. The child of a kulak evaporated.

When she was in her final year at her university, she met a handsome young man at a Komsomol event who eventually became her husband and the father of my friend. He was a KGB officer and extremely dedicated to his job, the Communist Party and his country. Of course, this avid young Communist officer was never aware he was literally sleeping with the enemy.

When my friend was 8 years old and her brother was 5, their father's dedication paid off, and he was informed that he was in line for a major promotion. Of course, KGB officers were meticulous in researching his personal and professional records before they would entrust him with a higher rank that often dealt with top secret issues.

They were even more scrupulous when it came to investigating his wife. They were able to ascertain that her papers were forged and ultimately followed the trail back to her childhood village, where they found her mother, her brother and Communist Party records concerning the arrest of her kulak father.

My friend's father was furious and outraged that his wife would be so devious and deceitful toward him, her beloved husband, regarding something so critical. Not only was his entire professional future at stake, but also their lives. She was fortunate she was not immediately arrested, imprisoned or shot. But her husband was penalized and became frozen in rank. He was never allowed to progress in his career for the rest of his life. His anger and resentment did not abate, and he basically stopped speaking to his wife.

My friend grew up in a house of silence.

The Soviet system created a world in which honesty often was not an option if a person wanted to advance in profession and lifestyle — or simply to stay alive. Unquestioned obedience to authority and a firm belief in Communist Party doctrine was demanded of every citizen. During the Stalin era, to waver even the slightest could result in imprisonment or death.

One of my students recalled how his peasant grandfather had been very unhappy when he was ordered to hand all his farm animals, equipment and land to Soviet officials and forced to work on a collective farm. One day, he commented to a man that he thought was his friend, "I think our harvest was larger when we had our own farms than it is here on the kolkhoz." He was arrested the next day and was sentenced to 10 years in a gulag prison.

Another class member spoke about a 14-year-old neighbor who happened to be in the boys' bathroom at school when another boy told a mild joke about Stalin. The neighbor boy laughed. Both boys and their families were arrested that night and spent many years in prison. Both boys died there — just because they were being boys.

The Soviet system forced people to deny reality — to deny what they really thought and felt. It deprived them of their ability to speak freely regarding what was actually happening. They began to doubt their own truth and relented to the ongoing pressure to relegate their decision-making processes to the system.

It taught people to lie: to the government, to their employers, to their teachers, to their spouses, to their families and to their friends — and most of all to themselves.

For many Russians today, learning how to listen to themselves, to be honest regarding what they genuinely think and feel, is a major paradigm shift. But this is necessary if they truly want to live — not just survive.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times [here](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/14/learning-to-live-outside-stalins-house-of-silence-a1475).

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