

Agnessa Ivanovna Mironova-Koroli. *Agnessa: From Paradise to Purgatory; A Voice from Stalin's Russia*. As told to Mira Mstislavovna Yakovenko. Translated by Rose Glickman. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2012. 223pp. Bibliography. Appendices. \$29.95, paper.

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As the title makes clear, this is a Soviet rags to riches to rags story. Agnessa Mironova-Koroli, a part Greek, part Russian, part Yakut woman born in 1902 in Maikop in southern Russia, fell in love with a Jewish man from Odessa, who rose in the ranks of the revolutionary regime ruled by a Georgian Bolshevik. Unlike typical tales of the U.S. melting pot, however, this story ends tragically. The Georgian, Joseph Stalin, was a brutal despot, Agnessa's husband was most probably a willing collaborator, and Agnessa fell from the heights of Soviet society into the gulag.

Agnessa's life after the Revolution highlights the contradictions between the lofty goals of the Bolsheviks and the complications of attempting sweeping social change. In the early revolutionary years at least, religion was still honored, even among those on the Red side. Agnessa fell in love with Ivan Aleksandrovich Zarnitsky, a priest's son, chief of staff of the Red Army's Border Patrol. In accordance with Agnessa's mother's wishes, they married in 1922 in a Russian Orthodox church, hurrying to have the ceremony before the onset of Lent, when weddings were forbidden.

But a year or two later, Agnessa's true love entered her life. Miron Iosifovich Korol, in the self-transformation of the times, had Russified his name to Sergei Naumovich Mironov. He made an immediate impression on her at a listless rally celebrating the Red Army's anniversary:

Suddenly an unknown figure mounted the podium, a man in black leather, an army cap, a revolver at his waist. He spoke about world revolution. I scarcely heard a word he said, so enchanted was I by his strong, handsome face and his kind, endearing expression. He had the most beautiful brown eyes and amazing eyelashes—long and thick, like fans (35).

Leaving Zarnitsky, Agnessa lived a charmed life with her Mirosha, enjoying the bounty of the elite. Married in 1936, she claims to have been oblivious to the Ukrainian famine, only learning about it when visiting her sister in Rostov. In the abodes of the Soviet elite, thrice daily "the police brought our food from a special sanatorium. Sometimes at dinner we had freezers full of ice cream"(62).

But all the privilege depended on Stalin's whims. Mirosha, moving up the ranks of the secret police, presented one side of himself to Agnessa. But she recalls that he "brutally shut me out" of his work life. In the book's Appendix A, the minutes of a July 25, 1937 meeting led by Mironov, published by the Tomsk KGB in 1999, chillingly rationalizes the murder of so-called enemies of the state. And finally, in January 1939, Mironov was arrested, and their apartment in Moscow's elite House on the Embankment, ransacked, with five of the six rooms sealed off. Only in 1958 did Agnessa learn the official date of Mironov's death—February 22, 1940.

If Mironov represented Soviet ideals gone bad, his cousin Mikhail Davydovich, Agnessa's third husband, kept his moral compass. Thirteen years older than Agnessa, he

experienced the horrors of war during his military service in World War One. They married in 1941. Agnessa compares the two men: “Mirosha and I were merry comrades, playful like little children...[Mikhail Davydovich] was like a beloved father, teacher, and I deeply respected and revered him for his knowledge, his talents, his wisdom” (139).

In 1942 Agnessa fell to the nadir of her Soviet existence when she was arrested and sent to the Gulag, where she was imprisoned until 1947. Much later, she discovered that her arrest was not because of Mirosha, but because of denunciations by venal neighbors. Her medical training and a relationship with a doctor helped save her, but she was still lucky to survive the starvation, random cruelty, sexual intimidation, and overall brutal conditions.

Men especially suffered during the famine and in the camps, as Mironova observed during her medical training in the Ukraine, and later during her imprisonment. Mikhail Davydovich, arrested in 1944, was sentenced to five years in the Gulag. As he prepared for his release in 1950, he was re-arrested and given an additional ten years. Released in 1956, three years after Stalin’s death, he was one of the lucky ones. But he died in 1959. Agnessa stayed in their Moscow apartment until her death in 1981.

Agnessa’s memoir is enhanced by commentary by her adopted daughter Agulya, and by Mikhail Davydovich’s daughter Maya. Most importantly, this remarkable life story was the result of the dedication of the Memorial human rights organization volunteer Mira Yakovenko, who listened to her friend’s stories, and shaped them into a compelling narrative.

There is one error in the timeline. The Constituent Assembly was dissolved in January 1918, not November 1917.

The English edition of *Agnessa* has been meticulously translated by Rose Glickman in a clear labor of love. This is a very valuable work, which richly portrays the “roller coaster of Soviet history,” placing a woman’s personal narrative in the context of the massive political changes in Russia and the Soviet Union.