



## The birthday party

**Lyudmila Alexeyeva, doyenne of Soviet campaigners for human rights, died on December 9th, aged 91**

SINCE THE phone had been clamouring all day with people offering congratulations on her 90th birthday, Lyudmila Alexeyeva was hardly surprised to receive an official message at her Moscow flat. She was much more surprised to see walking in, smooth-faced and smiling, Vladimir Putin, with a large bunch of flowers. "I'm grateful to you for all you have done over these many, many years for such a huge number of people in this country," he said. And sat down on one of her blue armchairs, close and friendly.

He had almost come to pay court to her, the grandmother of the human-rights movement in Russia, as she slyly called herself; a veteran of *samizdat*, protests, arrests and harassment over 50 years. From the mid-1960s she had held up placards reading "Respect the Soviet Constitution!" Yes, respect the law: what was written, what could be appealed to, against injustice. Back at the start, as she told the president now, she had asked herself how many years of prison, or exile, she would get for it. And once she had co-founded the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) in 1976, to monitor Russia's compliance with the Helsinki accords, she had indeed been forced into exile for 16 years—until she returned, still fighting. This man who sat facing her, almost knee to knee, looked respectful enough. But she had not stopped agitating since, in 2000, he had come to power. She was not the stopping type!

The offices of MHG, for example, now contained a room where, every evening, unregistered groups came to hold meetings. From 2009 she helped organise the Strategy-31 movement, which demonstrated regularly for freedom of assembly. (She turned up once dressed as the Snow Maiden in a long blue coat with stars, and a muff, and got arrested.) In 2012 she was asked to join the president's advisory council on human rights. It made him look good, of course. And she, as an ardent lover of Russia—which he could not have doubted as he sat there, among all her blue-on-white Gzhel china and Vyatka dolls—was happy to agree. In 2015, though, she left the council over the new law that called any NGOs, including her revived MHG, "foreign agents". Ancient as she was, she had sat outside the Duma for hours, placard in hand.

The fact was that Vladimir Putin had disappointed her. Russia was often unlucky in its leaders: unlucky because there were no checks and balances, and the people had no power. She had once wanted to be an archaeologist, carefully probing her country's past, a conventional girl with regulation braids. But she was propelled into activism by disgust that Stalin treated the masses who had won the war, poor folk like her father, killed at the front, as if they were dirt on his boots. Khrushchev brought a brief thaw, but in Brezhnev's time the people were cowed into silence again. She would often meet other dissidents at Pushkin's statue in the square named after him, the poet she so loved to recite. Much writing, though, was banned as "slander", and the *Chronicle of Current Events*, banged out on onion-skin paper on her secret typewriter, was the only true source of news. Precisely because she had known real tyranny, she knew that this president—nervily perched at the edge of his chair, while she reclined—was no tyrant. She had persuaded him not to close the Chechen refugee camps, and not to expand the definition of treason, by tactful engagement. "So, Vladimir Vladimirovich, you don't agree? Let's talk some more."

But he kept backsliding on democracy and human rights, as if he thought they didn't matter. That showed even in the presents he had brought her. One was an engraving of her birthplace, Yevpatoria in Crimea, when she had criticised his annexation in 2014 as "shaming" to Russia. The other was a painted plate of the main building at Moscow State University which, as a student, she had been forced to help build in Stalin's time. He had brought champagne too, though in fact they drank hers, as it was better. To sip good stuff with an ex-spook echoed the way she had disarmed KGB men in the old days, at her frequent interrogations. She would buy small snacks, delicacies then—a ham sandwich, an éclair, an orange—and eat them very slowly, to unnervise her questioners.

Now, as she chinked glasses, she used the moment to press another case. She had spoken up for Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader, and denounced the "awful political killing" of Boris Nemtsov, with the same fervour as when, in the 1960s, she had campaigned for the writers Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky: briefing foreign reporters on their show trial, slipping money to them in prison. After all, the law was still being flouted. In this "modern" Russia too, no politically motivated trial ended in acquittal. So she brought up Igor Izmestyev, a lawmaker, sentenced to years in jail for funding a criminal gang. She believed him innocent, and sought a pardon for him. "I am asking you, the president, to be a charitable Christian," she said. "I will consider it," he replied.

She knew, she added, that he kept his word. If he was using her with his flowers and champagne, she would use him. Besides, she was an optimist. Things were ten times easier than they had been. Under her, human rights had gained legitimacy in state institutions; even the police knew about them. She trusted in the young to keep momentum going and to spread the word wider, to the masses. They could do worse than adopt that simplest slogan, "Respect the Constitution!" and hang it round their necks, as she had. It was a life-preserver, of a sort. It could save the Russian people, in the end. And as she told Vladimir Vladimirovich as they sat together, "to save just one person is already such great joy." ■