The Tutor

A Short Historical Story

By Maryanne Peters

Our late Empress, Catherine the Great of Russia, was a remarkable woman. Much has been said of the fragile thing that once was when she was first brought to our great nation; that she was an ingenue, a china doll from civilized Prussia brought the burly heart of masculine state. But how could such a person survive in Russia. We all new how tough she was, and people say that she was a woman who learned to be tough. I know the truth. She was tough first, and she learned to be a woman.

Princess Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg was born in Stettin in Pomerania in the Kingdom of Prussia on the 2nd day or May 1729. Her father was Christian August of the family Anhalt – the family of the rulers of Germany in the Holy Roman Empire. But at that time there were more than 300 monarchs in the Empire, some rich, some poor. Sophie’s family were of the latter.

She received the education that was customary for a child of her status, from a French governess and tutors, but of the less expensive type. They may have put ideas in her head, but most of her ideas seemed to have from her heart, or other baser organs. But above all she was a rebel and what is called in German a *wildfang* or in Russian a *sorvanets* [tomboy]. She preferred playing with swords or toy soldiers, and got into trouble for wrestling with servant boys, and usually winning. She rode her horse furiously, with legs either side of the saddle as if she were a man. If people mistook her for one in her riding clothes and with her hair tied back, she would be pleased.

“I have no time for the dilly-dallying of women!” she would say – or so I am told. I never met her until the day she arrived in St Petersburg in early February 1744. I was assigned to lead the escort of her carriage from the borders of Prussia.

Much has been said of how delightfully feminine the young Sophie was when she arrived in Russia in just 15, but much of that, if not all of that, was down to Madam Amelie von Hagen. And it is her story that I seek to tell, as much of the story of my Empress. Amelie travelled in the same carriage as the princess, and I met her at the same time.

It was clear to me that Amelie was Sophie’s tutor on matters such as deportment, etiquette, hair, wigs and garments. Such servants are not unknown in Russia. There are members of the aristocracy who spend time isolated from society and need such assistance, but I had no idea of the extent of her labors until I got to know the so-to-be Catherine much better.

Amelie was German, I have no doubt, but beyond that I could not guess her origins. She spoke French as if she were French, and the Polish language too, and she spoke Russian. She was alarming clever, tall and strong, strikingly beautiful, and possessed all of the special graces that women aspire too. But the most unusual thing about her was that she was a man.

This was a fact that was unknown to everybody at the Russian Court except Sophie and Amelie herself, although she sometimes appeared to doubt it herself. And me, of course, because Amelie became my friend, and more than that.

But at first Amelie looked down on me as a mere army officer, although I was the younger son of an aristocratic family, my oldest brother a count. I heard her explaining to Sophie how ladies of refinement such as themselves should be kind to servants to encourage loyalty, but always ensure that such people know their place. Any soldier knows that he is a servant of his those in command, and officers like me understand how hierarchy works. I was not upset by her attitude.

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| Before we arrived into the city, Amelie asked that the carriage and entourage so that she might be able to arrange the princess’s hair. She would not arrive in a wig with a painted face, but just as she was later painted by Caravaque, with her dark hair half up and half down, eyebrows shaped and just a touch of rouge on the lips, and with her tenage bosom pushed up with what Amelie called “One of my special corsets”.  Sophie was pretty enough to do without too much dressing of the head, and Amelie said that she needed to impress the Crown Prince her natural beauty. Amelie said: “He will see that beauty of his children will come parentage rather than a paint pot”. |  |

Although I kept my distance, it was my task to guard my charge and so I overheard all of this, including the manner in which Princess Sophie rehearsed elements of her first meeting with her future husband, and the manner in which Amelie corrected her language, and her bearing, and even her gestures, as if none of this was coming naturally. Although I did not understand it, for a year or more Amelie had been patiently but firmly knocking the *wildfang* out of this young girl.

Evidently it worked. But as I discovered it was less for “Crown Prince” Peter than for his mother – the Empress Elizabeth. Peter would never have noticed her demeanor was out of place, but the empress would have. Amelie had already made the judgment that this was the person Sophie needed to impress, and she guided her student carefully through this process, while remaining in the background.

I too, was in the background, with her.

I had spoken to her in French, as she spoke only that language with the princess, but in commenting on a brief exchange with a fellow officer in Russian, which I assumed that she would not understand, she addressed me in fluent Russian. She had been teaching Sophie the language and that was to continue in the years to come.

I felt that it would be improper for me to ask how she knew our tongue. But the mysteries of her just added to her allure. I am sure that she knew then, or soon after, that I was attracted to her and desired her immensely. Her response was to be alternately responsive and dismissive, in the manner of women, one of experience might say.

The truth is that I volunteered to remain on as part of the princess’s personal guard to be close to Amelie.

The wedding of Peter and Sophie, who took the name Catherine [Ekaterina] upon her conversion to the Orthodox faith, was always a certainty. It was a political necessity as part of “the Lopukhina Conspiracy” to bring Russia closer to Prussia and away from the influences of Austria, which were being championed by the then Chancellor to the Empress, Aleksey Besuzhev-Ryumin. The new Catherine was able to cement the alliance with Prussia but stay close to Austria too. They were married on 21st August 1745 a few months after her 16th birthday.

But in the marriage itself, Catherine was disappointed. Consummation did not occur until 12 years later. Peter was a child in the body of a man, interested only in games and drink, and having sex with women other than his wife. Catherine may well have thought about leaving Russia and seeking an annulment, which she would be entitled to under church law. But Amelie was for staying, and she persuaded Catherine that she had a role in helping to bring the enlightenment to Russia.

To a military man the French Enlightenment sounds like a potential revolution, but to the Russian church it was sacrilege. Central to the movement was the questioning of the established order – why one man should rule a nation, why the Church should rule human behavior – they even questioned the existence of God himself! Bu the central doctrines seemed to be good: Individual liberty and tolerance of others in the expression of their liberties.

“I am who I am and what I am,” Amelie would say. “Please do me the courtesy of allowing me to be myself”. I adored her.

Catherine was of the ruling classes and should have recognized that these notions ran counter to her understanding of the world order and of power. But it seemed as if Amelie was a tutor of more than her conduct but also of her mind. I have no doubt that it was Amelie who was behind many of the changes within the Court that she was building in her castle at Oranjebaum, St. Petersburg.

Amelie certainly had a hand in introducing Catherine to prominent opponents of her husband – people who sought to introduce reform of the system of government in Russia. Among these was Sergei Saltykov whom Catherine took as her first lover. She would later claim that Saltykov was the father of her son Paul, but that was only to infuriate his real father, who was Peter once he fiannly did his wife the favor of copulation. Anybody could see that Paul was Peter’s son – they were almost identical.

At the time of that first sexual liaison I made my first proposition to Amelie. I told her that I had a wife and young children in Novgorod, but I desired her as my mistress. She refused, but I could sense that she was sad to do so. That gave me hope, and I persevered. She had been at pains to point out to Catherine how she could avoid pregnancy, which would have been dangerous, so I pointed out that she could adopt the same precautions with me.

“I am incapable of having children,” she said to me.

A good soldier follows one simple rule: set your objective and achieve it. She was my objective. I may well have told her as much. I would not be put off.

“I am going to share a secret,” she said. “It will explain everything to you. But you must swear by your god and the blood of your children that you will keep this secret for as long as I live.”

She raised her skirts, and I discovered the truth. I could not believe what I saw. My first thought that it was some trick that she played to preserve her virginity. I smiled and told her that I did not think that it was real.”

“Take it into you hand, then,” she said.

It was as if I was holding a dagger that would pierce my heart. The handle was small and soft and warm, but it was pointed at me and I was in pain. But somehow I still held it. I was disgusted by it and yet I could feel it change in my hand. I looked at her face and she was gasping, as a woman might when in heat.

“Let go, or turn me and fuck me,” she said.

I squeezed it just once more, or maybe three times then I turned her around as she raised her skirts again, and she pulled from her anus a small plug of polished ivory with a brass ring, and I saw the entrance to her, pink and winking at me.

I made love to her right then and there, although it was not love when I entered. It might have been anger or frustration, so it was violent. But as I felt her close on me, and I swelled within her, and we both spoke in those animal voices that come from within, at some point it became love.

Amelie did become my mistress, and I became hers. And by that I became Catherine’s too.

Catherine knew of her tutor was not a woman in the sense of God’s creation, but by all art and all other measure Amelie was twice the woman of any others of her adopted sex. Who better to reign in the manly impulses of her *wildfang* pupil? Who better to teach her how to be a woman? Who better to advise her upon beauty and presentation and also upon the weaknesses of men.

Catherine had been well taught. She played upon those weaknesses. She used all of the sexual methods to control the men in her life. Call it feminine guile learned for the master (or mistress) of those skills, but backed with Catherine’s own masculine trait – fierce determination to rule.

We were all willing plotters in her plans to depose her own husband and become Empress of all Russia, even before Peter took the throne as Peter III of Russia.

His mother, Empress Elizabeth died on 5 January 1762 and Peter was crowned by the Patriarch on the same day. The church were in his camp for a while. It is odd to say it, but Peter was regarded even by them as not being Russian enough, and being fascinated with the west. Odd because he was of Russia blood whereas Catherine, who never lost her German accent, was considered more Russian in culture and temperament.

That was her masculine side, for Russia is a masculine country. What wife would think of usurping her husband from his crown by force of arms? Only Catherine. She thought and planned and put her team together.

Amelie was close to her and I was close to Amelie and loyal to Catherine, so I was party to many of their exchanges.

“You have the power of courage and the power of intellect,” Amelie told her. “But add to that the power of sex. Men are swayed by the first two, but slayed by the third.”

Catherine used her sexual attraction, and sometimes her body, to secure all that she needed. As Amelie said, she had powers beyond any man. She was not Catherine the Great then, but I think that we both knew that she would be so enough.

But our plans needed to be accelerated when Peter arrested one of her co-conspirators. We were compelled to act then and there, and we did. Catherine had a dress modelled on the uniform of my regiment – the Ismailovsky Regiment. I escorted to address my fellow soldiers which she did with force.

I had heard it said that just two centuries ago Queen Elizabeth of England addressed her soldiers in the same way: “I have the body of a woman but the heart and soul of a warrior king”. Nobody doubted it. As Amelie said, she had tutored her in being feminine but the fighter that Sophie had been remained.

Peter III was arrested and forced him to sign letters of abdication in Catherine’s favor. Her actions shocked the world. Then eight days later Peter III was dead. He had reigned for only six months. Although close to the new Empress I do not know who might have assassinated him, although many wished to win the favor of their ruler. Or maybe there was no murderer. The official cause of death following an autopsy was “A severe attack of haemorrhoidal colic and an apoplexy stroke”.

It is now well known by wat deeds she acquired her epithet. She was an incredible woman, and over time she had no further need of such close attendance by her tutor in things feminine – my Amelie.

Which is just as well, because when my wife died I had a family in need of a mother, and I asked Amelie whether she would be that, and my wife too.

“I never thought that this could be possible,” she said. “My answer is yes – a thousand times yes”.

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| Catherine the Great of Russia died on 17 November 1796. My beloved Amelie left this world earlier that year. The Empress wrote to me of her sadness in her own illness. That sadness could have been little when compared to that of her husband and her devoted children, raised with the love that sure only Amelie could give, but I received it warmly.  I feel that in some way my lover and wife, had played an important part in history, in making Catherine the woman that she was. It was sad that my wife could never be the woman that she wanted to be, but as tutor she may have made one the finest women of all time.  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2021 |  |