

## SONYA

By GISELHER WIRSING

*Dr. Wirsing is a well-known German author. This sketch about Sonya was written in a Russian town in which his regiment happened to be stationed. However, his story is not about the war. It begins at a small Russian market and ends in Hollywood, and it describes the career of a Soviet girl.—K.M.*

**M**Y friend Helmut and I had a few hours' leave and decided to go to the market. A dense crowd was moving among the stalls displaying apples and melons, tobacco and cabbage, old coats and caps. And between the stalls sat begging musicians and fortunetellers with packs of cards or with guinea pigs that pulled letters of fortune out of a basket.

Quite by chance we met Sonya at this market. Her cheeks were glowing with excitement. She was just selling a pair of elbow-length white kid gloves to a sly Armenian dealer. Real kid gloves, like my mother used to have when she went to a full-dress ball before the Great War. At the last moment she would pull out a very long, mysterious box from the innermost recesses of her wardrobe. In it lay the white kid gloves, of which she always only put on one, gaily waving back at us with the other until the coachman slammed the door of the carriage. It was gloves like these that Sonya was selling. Helmut, who was already acquainted with her, was immediately roped in on the negotiations. Then we watched her as she used her proceeds to fill a large basket with a lot of grapes and all kinds of household objects and finally even a whole kilogram of soap. She asked us to accompany her home.

I had seen Sonya the day before on the stage of the German soldiers' cabaret. She had worn a long black dress, which had made her look her best. Her voice was remarkably beautiful. She sang a curious mixture of melancholy folk songs and modern hit tunes. She had carried a bouquet of red roses. The roses were

made of paper. Unfortunately, they always crackled when Sonya tried to emphasize her emotions by a gesture. But Russians love paper flowers, some preferring them to real ones. It is the naïve person's love for the artificial.

We finally followed her through a malodorous backyard covered with rubbish to an amazingly tidy room. It was a big, almost empty place with carpets hung on the walls, framing a real monster of a sideboard. It is a good thing for the inhabitants of the Soviet Union that the people of prewar Russia built furniture apparently intended to last for centuries. According to Soviet standards, Sonya was living in an elegant drawing room. She disappeared for a moment to return with the samovar and some tea-cups. In our honor she had changed into a European summer dress, put on a big straw hat over her curls, and placed a colored woollen shawl around her shoulders with which she juggled around as if it were a silver fox while she began to serve us. This is her story as she told it to us:

Her father had, before the Revolution, been a professor of botany at the University of St. Petersburg and, if one may believe his daughter, an authority in his field. He was not dismissed but, since he remained under suspicion as a bourgeois, he was banished to the University of Alma Ata on the borders of Sinkiang. It was there that Sonya spent her childhood.

"When I was twelve years old," she told us, "I knew that it was impossible for me to stay with father. After all, he was a bourgeois, although he was so

much afraid that he didn't dare object to the Soviets even in his thoughts. I realized that as the daughter of a bourgeois I could never become anything but a manual worker. But I didn't feel like washing the laundry for the Kalmuck Soviet commissars we had down there. For I had already been allotted to that work. For a whole year I made my preparations. Then I ran away one night from my father. I don't know what became of him. I never discovered how long he remained alive. I could not risk writing to him—it might have compromised me. Anyway, I didn't want to have anything more to do with him; it would only have meant going back to the laundry."

Somehow or other she got through to Samara, where she succeeded in entering a Soviet school. Someone paid the school fees for her which are required from the seventh class up, i.e., for those who wish to continue school beyond the age of thirteen. From Samara she managed to get to Moscow. And not only that—her girlish dream which she had already had in Alma Ata of going on the stage came true. As she claimed to be a proletarian child, she was sent at state expense to a dramatic school.

Sonya joined one of the ruling cliques in the Soviet theater world. She was allowed to appear a few times in Moscow, probably only in minor roles, and one day she was transferred, against her will, to the provincial theater of Rostov. There she appeared in *The Merry Widow* and other light operas. At the same time she became the mistress of a powerful commissar of the NKVD, as the GPU was then called. Now she had all the advantages on her side. Although her salary was only 500 rubles, little more than that of an average worker, she could buy in the NKVD shop and did not have to resort to the black market. In this GPU shop she got more for one ruble than at the black market for fifty. For the women of the ruling class, this shop had imported goods for the eternal feminine warpath; among these were the kid gloves which she had now sold.

In her matter-of-fact way, Sonya told us about the "wealthy proletarians" and "Soviet capitalists" who had summer residences in Kislovodsk in the Caucasus, in Sochi on the Black Sea, as well as near Moscow. The important thing, she said, was to maintain your proper place within these circles. This was not always easy. There were many candidates, few roles on the stage, and even fewer commissars of the NKVD.

We asked Sonya what she had thought of the fate of the masses, who had not been able like her to buy in the NKVD shops or who, when they were sick, were not taken care of by an NKVD hospital. She only shrugged her shoulders. "Most people," she replied, "are just unlucky. I wasn't." She made it very clear that she had no intention of being unlucky now. A year ago she had appeared in Sochi—whither the theater had been evacuated from Rostov after the German advance into the Ukraine—before a British commission. Now she was acting for Germans. So what was it that mattered in life? Success. In spite of her Russian blood, Sonya is as hard as nails, a cold-blooded calculator. Too cold for that which she really wants to be . . . .

When we had left, it went through my mind that I had really heard Sonya's story quite often. The milieu was a different one, but it was always the same story. I remembered the many little bars and drugstore counters in Los Angeles and Hollywood. Sonya's American sisters sat there. Once they had run away from their small-town homes, they thought day and night about how they were going to get to the top. And when you asked them what was the most important thing in life, they would toss back their permanently-waved locks, a little defiantly, and say: "Success, darling, only success!"

These people from the twilight nations of the East and the West rise to a sudden brilliance, flutter around the light, and then sink back into oblivion with singed wings. Without solace.