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Lana Peters dies at 85; Josef Stalin's daughter, author

The Soviet dictator's only daughter embarrassed the ruling communists and caused an international furor by defecting to the U.S. during the Cold War.

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Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's daughter, whose defection to the West during the Cold War embarrassed the ruling communists and made her a bestselling author, has died. She was 85.

Lana Peters — who was known internationally by her previous name, Svetlana Alliluyeva — died of colon cancer Nov. 22 in Wisconsin, where she lived off and on after becoming a U.S. citizen, Richland County Coroner Mary Turner said Monday.

Peters' defection in 1967 — which she said was partly motivated by the poor treatment of her late husband, Brijesh Singh, by Soviet authorities — caused an international furor and was a public relations coup for the United States.

But Peters, who left behind two children, said her identity involved more than just switching from one side to the other during the Cold War. She even moved back to the Soviet Union in the 1980s, only to return to the U.S. more than a year later.

When she left the Soviet Union in 1966 for India, she planned to leave the ashes of her late third husband, an Indian citizen, and return. Instead, she walked unannounced into the U.S. embassy in New Delhi and asked for political asylum. After a brief stay in Switzerland, she flew to the U.S.

Peters carried with her a memoir she had written in 1963 about her life in Russia. "Twenty Letters to a Friend" was published within months of her arrival in the U.S. and became a bestseller.

Upon her arrival in New York City in 1967, the 41-year-old said: "I have come here to seek the self-expression that has been denied me for so long in Russia."

Peters said she had come to doubt the communism she was taught growing up and believed there weren't capitalists or communists, just good and bad human beings. She also had found religion and believed "it was impossible to exist without God in one's heart."

In the book, she recalled her father, who died in 1953 after ruling the nation for 29 years, as a distant and paranoid man.

"He was a very simple man. Very rude. Very cruel," Peters told the Wisconsin State Journal in a rare interview in 2010. "There was nothing in him that was complicated. He was very simple with us. He loved me and he wanted me to be with him and become an educated Marxist."

Peters said her identity was far more complex than simply switching from Marxism to capitalism.

"People say, 'Stalin's daughter, Stalin's daughter,' meaning I'm supposed to walk around with a rifle and shoot the Americans," she recalled in a 2007 interview for the documentary "Svetlana About Svetlana." "Or

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they say, 'No, she came here. She is an American citizen.' That means I'm with a bomb against the others. No, I'm neither one. I'm somewhere in between. That 'somewhere in between' they can't understand."

Peters' defection came at a high personal cost. She left two children behind in Russia — Josef and Yekaterina — from previous marriages. Both were upset by her departure, and she was never close to either again.

Reared by a nanny with whom she grew close after her mother's death in 1932, Peters was Stalin's only daughter. She had two brothers, Jacob and Vasili. Jacob was captured by the Nazis in 1941 and died in a concentration camp. Vasili died an alcoholic at age 40.

Peters graduated from Moscow University in 1949, worked as a teacher and translator and traveled in Moscow's literary circles before leaving the Soviet Union.

She was married four times — the last time to William Wesley Peters, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright. They were married from 1970 to 1973 and had one daughter.

Peters wrote three more books, including "Only One Year," an autobiography published in 1969.

Her father's legacy appeared to haunt her throughout her life, though she tried to live outside of his shadow. She denounced his policies, which included sending millions into labor camps, but often said other Communist Party leaders shared the blame.

After living in Britain for two years, Peters returned to the Soviet Union with her daughter Olga in 1984 at age 58, saying she wanted to be reunited with her children.

Her Soviet citizenship was restored, and she denounced her time in the U.S. and Britain, saying she never really had freedom. But more than a year later, she asked for and was given permission to leave after feuding with relatives. She returned to the U.S. and vowed never to go back to Russia.

She went into seclusion in the last decades of her life. Her survivors include Olga, who now goes by Chrese Evans and lives in Portland, Ore. Peters' son Josef died in 2008 at age 63 in Moscow, according to media reports in Russia. Her daughter Yekaterina, who goes by Katya, is a scientist.