Introduction

If you had visited the quaint English village of Great Rollright in 1945, you might have spotted a thin, dark-haired and unusually elegant woman emerging from a stone farmhouse called The Firs and climbing onto her bicycle. She had three children and a husband, Len, who worked in the nearby aluminium factory. She was friendly but reserved, and spoke English with a faint foreign accent. She baked excellent cakes. Her neighbours in the Cotswolds knew little about her.

They did not know that the woman they called Mrs Burton was really Colonel Ursula Kuczynski of the Red Army, a dedicated communist, a decorated Soviet military-intelligence officer and a highly trained spy who had conducted espionage operations in China, Poland and Switzerland, before coming to Britain on Moscow's orders. They did not know that her three children each had a different father, nor that Len Burton was also a secret agent. They were unaware that she was a German Jew, a fanatical opponent of Nazism who had spied against the fascists during the Second World War and was now spying on Britain and America in the new Cold War. They did not know that, in the outdoor privy behind

The Firs, Mrs Burton (in reality spelt Beurton) had constructed a powerful radio transmitter tuned to Soviet intelligence headquarters in Moscow. The villagers of Great Rollright did not know that in her last mission of the war Mrs Burton had infiltrated communist spies into a top-secret American operation parachuting anti-Nazi agents into the dying Third Reich. These 'Good Germans' were supposedly spying for America; in reality, they were working for Colonel Kuczynski of Great Rollright.

But Mrs Burton's most important undercover job was one that would shape the future of the world: she was helping the Soviet Union to build the atom bomb.

For years, Ursula had run a network of communist spies deep inside Britain's atomic-weapons research programme, passing on information to Moscow that would eventually enable Soviet scientists to assemble their own nuclear device. She was fully engaged in village life; her scones were the envy of Great Rollright. But in her parallel, hidden life she was responsible, in part, for maintaining the balance of power between East and West and (she believed) preventing nuclear war by stealing the science of atomic weaponry from one side to give to the other. When she hopped onto her bike with her ration book and carrier bags, Mrs Burton was going shopping for lethal secrets.

Ursula Kuczynski Burton was a mother, housewife, novelist, expert radio technician, spymaster, courier, saboteur, bomb-maker, Cold Warrior and

secret agent, all at the same time.

Her codename was ‘Sonya’. This is her story.

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Whirl

On 1 May 1924, a Berlin policeman smashed his rubber truncheon into the back of a sixteen-year-old girl, and helped to forge a revolutionary.

For several hours, thousands of Berliners had been trooping through the city streets in the May Day parade, the annual celebration of the working classes. Their number included many communists, and a large youth delegation. These wore red carnations, carried placards declaring 'Hands Off Soviet Russia' and sang communist songs: 'We are the Blacksmiths of the Red Future / Our Spirit is Strong / We Hammer out the Keys to Happiness.' The government had banned political demonstrations, and police lined the streets, watching sullenly. A handful of fascist brown-shirts gathered on a corner to jeer. Scuffles broke out. A bottle sailed through the air. The communists sang louder.

At the head of the communist youth group marched a slim girl wearing a worker's cap, two

weeks short of her seventeenth birthday. This was Ursula Kuczynski's first street demonstration, and her eyes shone with excitement as she waved her placard and belted out the anthem: 'Auf, auf, zum Kampf', 'Rise up, rise up for the struggle'. They called her 'Whirl', and, as she strode along and sang, Ursula performed a little dance of pure joy.

The parade was turning into Mittelstrasse when the police charged. She remembered a 'squeal of car brakes that drowned out the singing, screams, police whistles and shouts of protest. Young people were thrown to the ground, and dragged into trucks.' In the tumult, Ursula was sent sprawling on the pavement. She looked up to find a burly policeman towering over her. There were sweat patches under the arms of his green uniform. The man grinned, raised his truncheon and brought it down with all his force into the small of her back.

Her first sensation was one of fury, followed by the most acute pain she had ever experienced. 'It hurt so much I couldn't breathe properly.' A young communist friend named Gabo Lewin dragged her into a doorway. 'It's all right, Whirl,' he said, as he rubbed her back where the baton had struck. 'You will get through this.' Ursula's group had dispersed. Some were under arrest. But several thousand more marchers were approaching up the wide street. Gabo pulled Ursula to her feet and handed her one of the fallen placards. 'I continued with the demonstration,' she later wrote, 'not knowing yet that it was a decision for life.'

Ursula's mother was furious when her daughter staggered home that night, her clothes torn, a

livid black bruise spreading across her back.

Berta Kuczynski demanded to know what Ursula had been doing, 'roaming the streets arm in arm with a band of drunken teenagers and yelling at the top of her voice'.

'We weren't drunk and we weren't yelling,' Ursula retorted.

'Who are these teenagers?' Berta demanded. 'What do you mean by hanging around with these kinds of people?'

'"These kinds of people" are the local branch of the young communists. I'm a member.'

Berta sent Ursula straight to her father's study.

'I respect every person's right to his or her opinion,' Robert Kuczynski told his daughter. 'But a seventeen-year-old girl is not mature enough to commit herself politically. I therefore ask you emphatically to return the membership card and delay your decision a few years.'

Ursula had her answer ready. 'If seventeen-year-olds are old enough to work and be exploited, then they are also old enough to fight against exploitation … and that's exactly why I have become a communist.'

Robert Kuczynski was a communist sympathizer, and he rather admired his daughter's spirit, but Ursula was clearly going to be a handful. The Kuczynskis might support the struggle of the working classes, but that did not mean they wanted their daughter mixing with them.

This political radicalism was just a passing fad, Robert told Ursula. 'In five years you'll laugh about the whole thing.'

She shot back: 'In five years I want to be a doubly good communist.'

The Kuczynski family was rich, influential, contented and, like every other Jewish household in Berlin, utterly unaware that within a few years their world would be swept away by war, revolution and systematic genocide. In 1924, Berlin contained 160,000 Jews, roughly a third of Germany's Jewish population.

Robert René Kuczynski (a name hard to spell but easy to pronounce: *ko-chin-ski*) was Germany's most distinguished demographic statistician, a pioneer in using numerical data to frame social policies. His method for calculating population statistics – the 'Kuczynski rate' – is still in use today. Robert's father, a successful banker and president of the Berlin Stock Exchange, bequeathed to his son a passion for books and the money to indulge it. A gentle, fussy scholar, the proud descendant of 'six generations of intellectuals', Kuczynski owned the largest private library in Germany.

In 1903, Robert married Berta Gradenwitz, another product of the German-Jewish commercial intelligentsia, the daughter of a property developer. Berta was an artist, clever and indolent. Ursula's earliest memories of her mother were composed of colours and textures: 'Everything shimmering brown and gold.[1] The velvet, her hair, her eyes.' Berta was not a talented painter but no one had told her, and so she happily daubed away, devoted to her husband but delegating the tiresome day-to-day business of child-

in her own stories, and she wrote of herself in the third person, a young woman achieving great feats through determination and a willingness to take risks. Of one character she wrote: 'She had overcome the physical weakness of her childhood, she had toughened up and was strong.' Her little sisters called her 'Fairy Tale Whirl'. Her diary reflected the usual sulky teenage preoccupations, but also an irrepressible optimism. 'I am in a bad mood,' she wrote. 'Grumpy and growling, I am a hot-head, a cross-breed with a black mane of hair, a Jew's nose, and clumsy limbs, bitching and brooding … but then there is blue sky, a sun that warms, drops of dew on the firs and a stirring in the air, and I want to stride out, jump, run, and love every human being.'

The year Ursula's formal education ended, Hitler launched the Munich beer hall putsch, a failed *coup d'état* that turned the future Führer into a household name and landed him in prison, where he dictated *Mein Kampf*, the Nazi bible of bigotry.

Absorbing her father's political instincts, shocked by the human degradation she had witnessed, appalled by fascism and entranced by these swirling new ideas of social equality, class war and revolution, Ursula was drawn inexorably to communism. 'Germany's own Socialist revolution is just around the corner,' she declared. 'Communism will make people happier and better.' The Bolshevik Revolution had proven that the old order was rotten and doomed. Fascism must be defeated. In 1924, she joined the Kommunis-

tischer Jugendverband Deutschlands, the Young Communist League, moving into the ideological home she would occupy for the rest of her life.

She was sixteen years old. Like other communists from affluent families, Ursula played down her privileged background. 'We lived much more modestly than one might have supposed,' she insisted. 'One great-grandfather sold shoelaces from a barrow in Galicia.'

Ursula's fellow young communists came from all corners, classes and communities of Berlin, united in a determination to overthrow capitalist oppression and usher in a new society. In that heady atmosphere, friendships bloomed swiftly. Gabriel 'Gabo' Lewin was a middle-class boy from the suburbs. Heinz Altmann was a handsome apprentice, whose urging had given Ursula the 'final impetus' to join the party. These were the young footsoldiers of German communism, and Ursula was thrilled to be one of them. The May Day demonstration of 1924 left her with a lifelong appetite for risk. The bruising from the policeman's truncheon eventually faded; her outrage never did.

At weekends, the Young Communist League ventured into the countryside to explain Marxism–Leninism to the German peasantry, who frequently responded by setting their dogs on the youthful evangelists. One evening, in Löwenberg, north of Berlin, a sympathetic farmer allowed the group to sleep in his hayloft. 'That evening we were particularly cheerful,' Ursula wrote. 'As soon as we lay down, someone began to imagine