

Vera C. Bouteneff – An Appreciation by Her Son Peter, on the Occasion of Her Funeral  
November 10, 2019

Princess Vera Sergievna Troubetzkoy was the daughter of one of Russia's most celebrated and storied families. Born in exile, in Clamart, France in 1926, she grew up with her three siblings under very humble conditions. It was the reality of many exiled Russians: former landowners who now drove taxis and worked in factories. Though they never stopped grieving over what had become of Russia and the tragic travesty of Communism, they wore the ups and downs of history lightly. They were titled, but never entitled. She often quoted her grandfather who said that nobility never implied anything like privilege; it only implied responsibility and service to others.

### **Early Life**

Her family valued education highly; she and her siblings were exceptionally bright (though she never thought of herself that way). She was educated at the Sorbonne. She and her family lived through World War II in Paris, through invasions and exile within their own country. In 1948 she married Michael Bouteneff, a young man from her extended family. Their marriage was one of deep mutual love, with of course much of the push-and-pull of two rather strong-willed people. They started a family in France, emigrated in 1953 to America. French, Russian, and English were all intermingled languages in the household, and my mother's English was spoken in a charming accent that we children would mimic, regularly and mercilessly.

Her life with my father was defined by their loving commitment to their four children. And especially for the last twenty or so years of my father's life, it entailed her constant care for him in his struggles with lung disease. But in all of the adventures, the travels, the joys, as well as the hardships, the two carried deep faith, commitment to their principles, and a powerful sense of humor that had them and us laughing out loud a good amount of the time. She, with my father, raised four children: Alex, Tania, Manya, Peter, and my mother especially played a role in raising six grandchildren Eugene, Katia, Pete, Kristina, Michael, Elizabeth, and three great-grandchildren, Serge, Maxime, and ...Vera.

When Vera first arrived in America, she worked with my father at a match factory, and also as a housecleaner. They both worked their way up the ladder. In my mother's case, after several years in the 1960s as a substitute teacher, she came

to the Ursuline School in New Rochelle, NY, and taught French and Russian there for some thirty-five years.

### **Father Arseny**

After my father's death in 1992, she entered a new phase of her life, and I'd like to highlight one of its most notable features. One day, as she was caring for her dying sister Tatiana, friends brought her a book from Russia they thought Tatiana would enjoy: Отец Арсений. She read the book, and was never the same again. As she read, she kept telling us its stories, with such enthusiasm that it made it difficult for us to even take them seriously. Her enthusiasm could sometimes be too much to take! Nevertheless, she persisted. She became seized with the conviction that the English-speaking world needed this book. So she translated it. And if we hadn't listened enough to the stories as she told them, she gave us rough drafts of her translations – partly because she actually needed our help to bring them into publishable English, but I think she also hoped to “convert” us, especially the less churchy ones in her family, to the spiritual glory that the book exuded.

She was right, about the English-speaking world needing this book – Father Arseny quickly became one of the all-time top selling books of SVS Press. The breadth and the depth of the reaction stunned her. The amount of gratitude she got over the ensuing decades, the letters, many of which were from prisoners, telling her about their changed lives, was overwhelming. Father Arseny was and is a cherished gift to the world, and my mother Vera was its messenger to the New World.

### **Mother**

Yesterday a cousin told me “Your mother was probably one of the most widely loved people who ever lived.” True. And she loved so many people, so much! But the number of people who loved her shouldn't be such a surprise – let's review some of her qualities:

- Her wisdom – practical and unpretentious.
- Her Christian faith – deep, unstinting, and never overly-pious.
- Her sense of humor – Oh my God she was one of the most humorous people ever. Oh the laughter we all shared!

- And with that, her sense of *fun*. She wanted, whenever possible, for things to be entertaining.
- Her open-mindedness, and her willingness to rethink things – and with that her constant curiosity. She never, ever stopped being open to learning. Her face was always registering something new – such that she was notoriously difficult to photograph.
- And also, her inner discipline. She would often tell herself: “He распускайся!” Which means something like, “Don’t let yourself slide. Get a grip!”

So, this totally unpretentious, but deeply wise, dignified, humorous and fun-loving person – yes she was widely loved and widely loving. And I’ll say more: She was a mother to us, her four children, but she was a mother to a great many people. To many of you here. She filled that role of nurturing, caring, and unconditional love, that mothers fill. She was a friend, companion, and support to you. She gave you advice. You hadn’t always asked for it; sometimes she gave it to you anyway. And then the next day she’d ask me – “What do you think, should I have given vat advice?”

We had in her an absolutely unflinching support, truly unconditional love. And advice – usually solicited — and pretty reliably *excellent* advice, useful, creative, out-of-the-box ideas of how we might climb out of a tricky situation, or achieve something impossible, or do something ...fun.

### **Sunset**

In her last couple of years, as her physical and mental strength began to fade, a couple things were happening at the same time for us, her children. One was that she was, unconsciously, weaning us off of our dependence on her – because we did depend on her practical wisdom so much. But another thing was that, as her mind would “loosen up,” as it were, and also as she turned her own thoughts to her coming death, we were able to have the most intimate, yet simple, disarming, open conversations imaginable, about life, love, death, God. God gave us all that profound gift, and I’m grateful for it, constantly.

And now, I suppose as a mercy, God took her before her mind and body gave way much further. It was hard enough for her already, to have that sharp-as-a-tack mind begin to go a bit loopy sometimes. So God spared her any further indignity,

and left us – yes, mourning her with profound sadness — but primarily with this sense of the deepest gratitude for her life and the copious and great gifts that she gave us.

The last words of her grandfather, the renowned religious philosopher Eugene Nikolaevich Troubetzkoy, were among the most beautiful ever. He ended his earthly life with the words, “Open the Royal Doors! It is time for the Great Liturgy to begin!” Somewhat akin to that, Vera’s grandson Eugene called her just a few days ago in early November, just a couple of days before her death, and she said, “Eugene! Tonight they are reading the 12 Gospels! That means that Pascha is coming soon!” And lo, her own Pascha, her Passover from life to death, and from death to life, is here.

Glory to God!