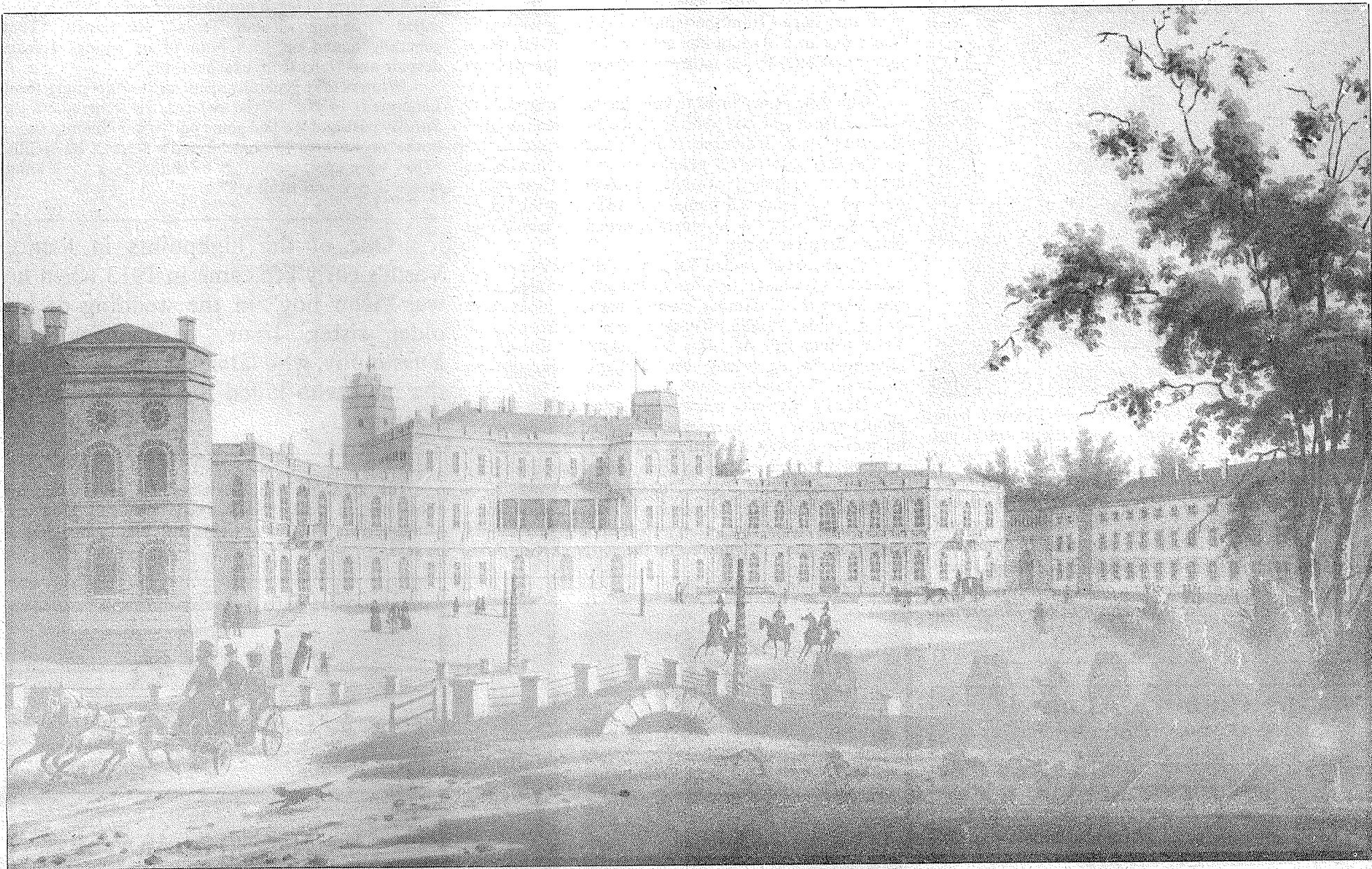


the Country Almanac



Vol. XVIII No. 48, Nov. 28, 1984

The independent newspaper for Woodside, Portola Valley, Sharon Heights, Atherton, Ladera, Stanford Hills and Menlo Park 851-0200



GATCHINA—"THAT LITTLE HOUSE"—near St. Petersburg was the royal palace where *Vasili Romanov of Woodside was born. Nephew to Tsar Nicholas II, Prince Vasili of Russia was raised with the royal family until their life fell apart during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.*

Growing up royal in imperial Russia

BY MARION SOFTKY

"I was born in Gatchina—that little house—it only had about a thousand rooms," says Vasili Romanov of Woodside.

The nephew of Tsar Nicholas II was born to the imposing title: His Highness Vasili Romanov, Prince of Russia. Now he is plain Mr. Romanov and lives quietly in a Woodside cottage with his wife, Natasha.

She also was of the Russian aristocracy, although not royal. She was born Princess Natalya Golitzin and had a "marvelously happy" childhood in a country estate outside of Moscow until the 1917 Revolution. "Then comes the debacle and everything collapses and we're off and running," she says.

His escape from the Revolution at the age of 10 was with the royal family in a British battleship. The H.M.S. Marlborough was sent by King George V to rescue the Empress Marie, the Tsar's mother and sister to Queen Alexandra, the Queen Mother of England.

Her escape was to the east, riding boxcars off and on for three years, just ahead of Revolutionary armies, until

her family finally reached Harbin in China. "It was terrifying. I still shudder when I remember it," she says.

The Romanov's modest cottage seems an imagination away from the opulence of the world's last great medieval empire in its last days. Only a few mementos and icons in the modest living room suggest the sumptuous past. The walls are lined with pictures and

Mrs. Romanov is preparing for the Russian Orthodox Christmas bazaar in Menlo Park Dec. 1

photographs of beautiful people, mostly long since gone. A wiggly white Maltese terrier named Tofu greets visitors, and a parade of cats demand dinner from the soft hearted Mrs. Romanov.

At this season most surfaces are covered with makings for arrangements of dried leaves and flowers twined with delicate silk flowers that Mrs. Romanov is preparing to be sold at the annual Christmas Bazaar of

the Russian Orthodox Church at 1220 Crane St. in Menlo Park on Saturday, Dec. 1.

Vasili Romanov talks of a life which can hardly be imagined by modern-day Americans. He brings the clear, accepting vision of a small child to the people and events of the greatest private and public drama of the century—the collapse of Imperial Russia and the Bolshevik Revolution.

In simple words he talks about the unfortunate last Tsar as his "loving uncle." Empress Alexandra was "a very charming beautiful lady who was my aunt who smelled very good when she kissed me." His playmate, the tragic Tsarevich Alexei, whose hemophilia helped bring down the great Russian Empire, he describes as "a real gay little fellow, a real boy." And he remembers the Dowager Empress Marie, called by Kipling the "Sea King's daughter," as his beloved "Amamma," remembering he was her favorite grandchild.

CROWING UP ROYAL

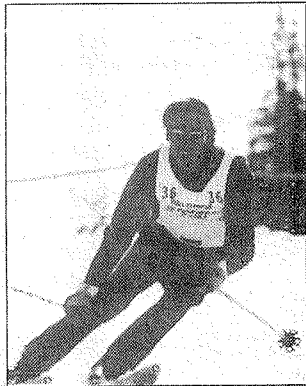
His Highness Prince Vasili of Russia was born July 7, 1907, as the seventh child of Grand Duke Alexander

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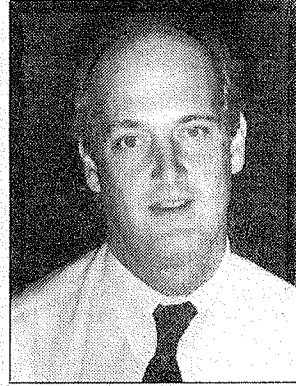
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TSAREVICH ALEXEI (lower right) posed with four of his cousins, during a sled ride in the royal park near St. Petersburg in 1915. Enjoying one of the periods of health between agonizing bouts of hemophilia, Alexei is joined by four sons of the Grand Duke Alexander and the Grand Duchess Xenia, sister of the last Tsar, Nicholas II. Standing behind on the left in the round cap is Prince Vasili Romanov, who now lives in a cottage in Woodside. Photo taken by a tutor appeared in the *Illustrated London News*.

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Remembering the opulence of

Continued from Page 1

and Grand Duchess Xenia, sister of Tsar Nicholas II. "That's plenty of sevens," he comments with a quick smile. (Now he is 77.)

For ten years little Prince Vasili had a happy childhood, typical of his class and sheltered from the ominous event closing in on the royal family. He particularly loved Ai-Todor, his father's estate on the Crimean Coast. Here gardens and fruit trees and vineyards sloped from the family mansion down to the Black Sea in a Riviera-like setting. On a point was a lighthouse built by his father, an officer in the Russian Navy.

The little prince loved to help his mother by picking off dead roses and seed pods while she collected the day's roses to arrange in different rooms. He also loved to row on the lake and collect pebbles on the beach with his brothers to be dipped in candle wax to make them shine. He enjoyed riding his ponies and hiking in the larger "deer park" where wild animals, including moose and bison, wandered loose.

Up the coast toward Yalta was the Tsar's beautiful palace of Livadia famous for its exquisite gardens. That was where the "infamous meeting between those three evil geniuses," Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill (The Yalta Conference in 1945) was held. His underlying bitterness flaring briefly, Mr. Romanov repeats with emphasis, "Infamous—don't forget that."

During his early years, there were always lots of people around—his parents and beloved grandmother, his mother's ladies in waiting, and his father's aides de camp and other friends who often took time out to play with—or scold—the Grand Duke's youngest son.

Because of the Revolution Prince Vasili never "graduated" from the nursery to the more formidable control of tutors. "I never got there, thank God," he

comments. In the nursery his closest associates were often servants—nursery maids and men servants, the old woman in charge of the laundry who joined in card games, and the Crimean Tartars—"wonderful people"—who handled the horses.

Specially loved by the children was the English nana who raised all seven. He remembers that she often threatened to go back to England when he didn't behave or when she tried to teach him to read English from a book called "Reading without Tears." He recalls, "That generally ended up with both of us crying—I from despair and Nana from exasperation."

Winters they generally spent in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) in one of the palaces. He remembers the Sunday parties. "We had some parties for children at our house or we'd go to some friend's house," he recalls. "They were great gatherings of children—I don't know where they found them all."

One of the highpoints in Prince Vasili's early life came in 1913 when he was "icon boy" in the wedding of his older sister, Irene, to Prince Felix Yussoupov, who later became famous as the man who killed the demonic monk Rasputin.

The Tsar, his "Uncle Nickie," he would often see about once a week. "He was a fantastically kind and gentle person. You felt at home with him immediately," he says.

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the last great medieval empire

When he and his brothers played with the little Tsarevich, who was three years older than Vasili, they were instructed to play very carefully. Sometimes it was not easy to be gentle. "Alexei didn't take any notice of his horrible disease," he recalls, knowing now the agonies suffered by the little boy as uncontrolled bleeding built up pressure in his joints. "We were always conscious not to be rough with him but he would like to be rough like any boy."

One of the highpoints in Prince Vasili's early life came in 1913 when he was "icon boy" in the wedding of his older sister, Irene, to Prince Felix Yussoufov, who later became famous as the man who killed the demonic monk Rasputin.

"Rasputin was a despised person, but he had the incredible power to stop the hemophilia," explains Mrs. Romanov. History documents how Rasputin's hold over the Empress, because of this power to help the little Tsarevich, spilled over into government and hastened the collapse of the Empire. "Without Rasputin there could have been no Lenin," Alexander Kerensky once wrote.

On the wedding day Prince Vasili and his family drove in a golden coach drawn by four white horses to the Anichkov Palace, where his grandmother lived. A guard of honor rode in front and behind the carriage through cheering crowds.

At the palace his ordeal began as the procession wound through "countless rooms" to the church. "I was a very important boy with the icon, and I was right in front," he recalls.

"My sister was on the arm of the Emperor. Then going through many rooms with people standing there bowing and scraping, I could only see their stomachs.

"Whenever we came to a place where I didn't know which way to go, the Emperor would push me with his knee in the right direction."

After the ceremony, the little prince, in high excitement, ran around the tables drinking the remains of the champagne in the glasses. Getting into the car afterwards, he stumbled—to the great amusement of everyone present.

He concludes, "That was my first salute to Bacchus."
(Next: Revolution)



VASILI AND NATASHA ROMANOV of Woodside pose as they are today with their Maltese terrier, named Tofu because she is white. Mr. Romanov was born in 1907 as Prince Vasili of Russia, nephew to Czar Nicholas II. Mrs. Romanov

was Princess Natalya Golitzin; she was raised outside of Moscow until her family escaped the Revolution by riding boxcars across Siberia. Photo by Carol Ivie.