



# Catherine I: Empress of Russia

## From Rags to Riches

David Green – Nov 4<sup>th</sup> 2009

This is a true rags-to-riches story, both literally and figuratively. The origins of Catherine are obscure to say the least; she was born, probably in 1682, in either Ringen in present day Estonia, or Jakobstadt, Latvia. In any case that area was under Swedish rule as the province of Livonia. Born Marta Skowronska, she was the daughter of Samuil and Elisabeth. Her father was of Polish origin and probably Catholic; it is surmised that he was an escaped serf who took odd laboring jobs such as grave digging. In either 1684 or 1685 both of her parents died of the Plague, leaving Marta, one of 5 orphans, to be brought up by an aunt, a difficult task and one of which she divested herself as soon as possible by giving Marta to Ernst Gluck, a Lutheran pastor in Marienburg.

Ernst Gluck was the first man to translate the Bible into Latvian, thus he was well known, an educator (although he seems not to have practiced on Marta as she was illiterate all her life), and well connected. In fact she was a servant, but one to whom was ascribed remarkable beauty - we have no portraits of her from her youth, but later developments bear this out. The pastor's wife, troubled by the presence of a beautiful servant and her son managed to arrange a marriage for Marta to a dragoon in the Swedish army, variously referred to as Johan Cruse or Johann Rabbe. The marriage lasted 8 days, at which point the Swedish troops were withdrawn from Marienburg. The good pastor offered his services as a translator to the triumphant Russians and he removed, with his household, once more including Marta, to the camp of Field Marshal Boris Sheremetev.

Thus began the meteoric rise of Marta. Anecdotes and rumor have her passing from the bed and service of Brigadier General Bauer (supposedly presented in her underwear) to the Field Marshal himself and finally sold to Prince Aleksandr Menshikov, the best friend of Tsar Peter the Great. There has been substantial speculation as to the Prince's motives. He probably purchased Marta and then trained her as an ally; in

1703, when she was 21, he engineered a meeting between Peter and Marta and soon after she became his mistress. The Prince, quite unusually in those times, loved his wife and probably acted simply so that he would have a conduit from the Tsar, indeed the foursome often traveled together and the Prince remained a friend to her (and she to him!) Her relationship with Peter was cemented two years later when she agreed to convert to Orthodoxy and changed her name to Yekaterina Alexevna, Catherine in the Latin alphabet.

Peter was an uncouth giant of a man, 6 feet 8 inches tall, stubborn, strong-willed and inclined to set his own precedent. Stories abound of his dissipation and boorishness while traveling in Europe, indeed, he was turned out of lodgings in Amsterdam. He did succeed in creating the Russian Empire and brought his subjects at least closer to civilization. In 1707 Catherine and Peter were secretly married and had 9 children together, only two surviving childhood. Peter had built a great port on the Baltic, St. Petersburg, and made it his capital. Much can be learned of his character by the fact that, while the palace was being built, he and Catherine lived like peasants in a small log cabin.

Due to her unfailing support of him, and his enduring love, Peter and Catherine were married a second time, this time officially, in 1712, in the glorious cathedral in St. Petersburg. Peter both conquered vast swathes of land to add to Russia and inaugurated changes in the government structure so that ministers were appointed on competence rather than aristocratic lineage - making the old order somewhat peeved. Catherine provided advice and support, often acting as a buffer between his advisors and his volatile temper. In October 1722, Peter declared the Tsardom to be an Empire ( the third largest after the British and Mongul Empires) and Catherine was declared Empress of All Russia; a far cry from the orphan of slaves.

In 1724 Catherine was crowned Empress-Consort which effectively made her heir to the throne. Shortly after husband and wife quarreled over a charge of nepotism and corruption that Peter accused her of; two of her friends, William Mons and his sister, although competent had been selling contacts with the Russian court. Peter dealt with it by executing William and exiling his sister, Catherine wouldn't speak to him for a couple of months as a result. The coronation may have been in anticipation of his death as it occurred the following year, January 1725. The 'old guard', basically the aristocracy of Russia called a meeting of the Privy Council to determine the new ruler but Catherine's old friend and mentor, Prince Menshikov, arranged a coup by the army and Catherine was proclaimed Empress. Various, somewhat suspect, documents came to light to prove her claim, discovered by recently elevated commoners.

In fact she probably had less power as a single ruler as most important decisions were made by Menshikov and the Supreme Privy Council. She did, however, continue her late husband's policies, establishing the Russian Academy, pressing for reform and fighting against corruption. Sadly she only reigned for another two years although her reign provided for legal precedent for women's rule allowing her daughter Elizabeth and then Catherine the Great to assume the throne. She died just 43 years of age having squeezed in a truly remarkable life. In an attempt to preserve the nobility of the throne, her humble origins were declared a state secret, one of the reasons why there is so little documentation of her early life.

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Published by David Green