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KHRUSHCHEV--A PERSONALITY SKETCH

One evening in November 1957, Nikita Khrushchev arrived at a diplomatic reception in Moscow in a particularly buoyant and garrulous mood. A few months earlier he had overcome the challenge of the so-called antiparty group and he had just stripped Marshal Zhukov of his military and political powers. As Western newsmen clustered around him on that occasion, Khrushchev related a fable which tells a great deal about the man and his image of himself:

"Once upon a time," Khrushchev began, "there were three men in prison: a social democrat, an anarchist, and a humble little Jew--a half-educated little fellow named Pinya. They decided to elect a cell leader to watch over distribution of food, tea, and tobacco. The anarchist, a big, burly fellow, was against such a lawful process as electing authority. To show his contempt for law and order, he proposed that the semi-educated Jew, Pinya, be elected. They elected Pinya.

"Things went well," Khrushchev continued, "and they decided to escape. But they realized that the first man to go through the tunnel would be shot at by the guard. They all turned to the big, brave anarchist, but he was afraid to go.

Suddenly poor little Pinya drew himself up and said, 'Comrades, you elected me by democratic process as your leader. Therefore, I will go first.'

"The moral of the story," Khrushchev explained, "is that no matter how humble a man's beginning, he achieves the stature of the office to which he is elected.

"That little Pinya," he concluded, "that's me."

It is not clear whether the tale was meant as a parable approximating actual events, but it did reveal much about Khrushchev's mental reflexes; his consciousness of his humble origin, a frequently reiterated theme; his sense of personal accomplishment; confidence that his vigor, initiative, and capacity are equal to his station; jealousy of the prerogatives of that station; and a vry satisfaction with the cunning which had enabled him to gain the upper hand over a series of rivals who underrated him.

When Stalin died in 1953, Khrushchev was largely an unknown quantity outside the Soviet Union, seemingly a lesser-ranking figure than the better-known Molotov, Malenkov, Beria and Mikoyan. In the year or so that ensued he edged his way more and more onto the public stage but the picture he presented to foreign observers was not impressive--from all appearances he was an impetuous, obtuse, rough-talking man, with something of the buffoon and a good deal of the toadspot in him.

Before long, however, events would show that there was a great deal more to Khrushchev than the appearance suggested and that behind the exterior lay a shrewd native intelligence, an agile mind, drive, ambition, and ruthlessness. His own colleagues probably sold him short initially, but they undoubtedly knew from experience that he could not have escaped Stalin's murderous judgment if he had been witless or foolishly impulsive.

It now is clear that he had other qualities which had had only limited opportunity for expression under Stalin-- resourcefulness, audacity, a good sense of political timing and showmanship, and a touch of the gambler's instinct.

Humble Beginnings

Even without benefit of propaganda embroidery, the story of Khrushchev's rise to the Soviet pinnacle makes a model Communist success story. He was born in 1894 in the small village of Kalinovka, not far from where Great Russia meets the Ukraine, the son of a miner not long removed from the fields. His boyhood was spent in poverty and he recalls with pride that he worked successively as a shepherd and as a miner. He neither can nor wants to forget his humble beginnings and his speech is larded with peasant proverbs and even Biblical phrases which go back to that period. His origin is both a political asset and a point of pride with