

Purge for Power

"Face of a Victim," by Elizabeth Lermolo (Harper, 311 pp. \$3.75), is a new first-hand account of aspects of the Great Purge of 1934 that made possible the consolidation of the present police state in the USSR. Here it is reviewed by Professor Sidney Harcave of Harpur College, author of "Russia, A History" and other books.

By Sidney Harcave

A NEWLY published personal narrative by Elizabeth Lermolo, the wife of a former officer in the Czarist army, provides a new version of episodes that are basic to an understanding and interpretation of the last two decades of Soviet history. "Face of a Victim," as her book is called, tells about the assassination of Sergei Kirov, on December 1, 1934, and its aftermath, the Great Purge. The consolidation of the present police state in Russia began during the various phases of this purge, some of which have never been completely and satisfactorily reported. If, as the Kremlin alleged, the murder of the heir presumptive to Stalin's post was part of a far-reaching conspiracy to destroy the regime, it may be concluded that the hardening of the repressive features of the system was the expected reaction of a one-party dictatorship to a threat. But if, as many now believe, the killing was the planned prologue of a bloody drama written and directed by Stalin for the purpose of eliminating all real and potential rivals and critics, it may be concluded that the establishment of personal power was the most significant, if not the only, aim of the regime.

To date, the great lack has been in trustworthy information; hypotheses have been plentiful, vital facts few. The many accounts by alumni of Soviet prison camps have left little doubt of the Government's ability to manufacture evidence at will, but there has been a need for "inside" information provided either by highly placed victims of the purge or by highly placed purgers. Alexander Orlov, an ex-NKVD chief, was among the first to offer such information in regard to Kirov's death. His account, published in 1953, is one of the most detailed available; but its usefulness is limited by the fact that it is based largely on what he was told rather than on what he saw and did.

Mrs. Lermolo was an eye-witness of and a participant in many aspects of the Kirov case. As such she has a special claim to attention. In "Face

A prize-winning poet's reflections on her fellow poets and their works.

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is a notable collection of her favorite essays. Phrased with elegance and precision, they reveal her special predilections among the modern poets, including Eliot, Auden, Stevens, Louise Bogan, William Carlos Williams, Pound and Cummings. Nobody else today tells us so much about the language of poetry as Marianne Moore, and from her intimate knowledge she richly illuminates their writing.

In addition, there are excursions into other arts, as in her perceptive tributes to Pavlova and Henry James, and a vivid reminiscence of the epoch-making days of *The Dial* magazine, of which she was so vital a part. This is a book to be treasured by all who prize fine writing or cherish the art of poetry.

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of a Victim" she describes dramatically her arrest on the ground that she was acquainted with the assassin Nikolayev, her interrogation first by Stalin and later by lesser lights, her refusal to sign a false bill of particulars, and her eight-year tour of incarceration in the special type of prisons known as political isolators. If her narrative did nothing more it would teach the reader a great deal about the Soviet conception of "legality."

Although the book contains only a little about the Kirov case itself, it does offer certain details intimately connected with it, details that the author had to glean from hearsay, just as Orlov had to glean his. En route to and in the political isolators Mrs. Lermolo conversed with many who, as victims or victimizers, figured importantly in the case and therefore became fellow prisoners. From them she learned enough to cause her to give up her original picture of Nikolayev as a slightly deranged young man who had shot Kirov for personal reasons and to see him as the unsuspecting instrument of Stalin's lust for power.

Her informants were in a position, as were those of Orlov, to know most of the relevant facts. Mrs. Lermolo and Orlov did not recall the same details about all incidents related. Despite the differences, however, it is important to note that both agree on many major points and both see the Kirov killing as a Stalin-engineered episode.

In general Mrs. Lermolo complements Orlov to a significant degree; but two hearsay reports do not equal one factual account. More solid evidence than is now at hand must be found before the riddle of Kirov's death is finally unraveled. Perhaps we shall never know more than we do now. If such be the case, "Face of a Victim" will be one of the two or three most important sources upon which to base a verdict. In any case, the book is valuable as a well written presentation of personal experiences and of a hypothesis that demands consideration.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S
KINGSLEY DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 1103)
MEMOIRS OF
CATHERINE THE GREAT
(Edited by DOMINIQUE MAROGER)

The Grand Duke I cannot say that I either liked or disliked. I believe that the Crown of Russia attracted me more than his person. He was sixteen, quite good-looking before the pox, but small and infantile, talking of nothing but soldiers and toys.

LIVES AND TIMES

Fists Over Misfortune

"Somebody Up There Likes Me,"
by Rocky Graziano, with the help
of Rowland Barber (Simon & Schuster. 375 pp. \$3.95), is the autobiography of an East Side hoodlum who fought his way up through the fighting to respectability.

By James Kelly

MESSRS. Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Dickens (he for a literary reason) would have lined up with the critics who have been fascinated by "Somebody Up There Likes Me." Why? Because at last we have an answer to the Body vs. Mind controversy. It is specialization by two people: one (Rocky Graziano) to supply the body and do the living; another (Rowland Barber) to handle the mental part and file a report. This blood-soaked "autobiography" of a fist-happy East Side hoodlum whose right hand was good enough to see him through three stretches in reform school, four man-size prisons, the middleweight championship of the world, and a dividend career as television comedian and family man sets up a literary landmark. Eminent fictioneers such as Dickens on poverty and prisons, Lardner on boxing, Burnett on gangster mores and seamy politicians, and Spillane on Hammerheaded violence are made to look pretty pallid beside the real thing.

Using two sets of eyes and ears, we now get a good view of the world from the bottom of the cage. What it's like to be permanently on the lam from truant officers, probation officers, goons, cops, and a population of creeps too stupid to be anything but legitimate. What it's like to live with a drunken father and deranged mother in straits where the tough kid Rocco must start each day by stealing fuel and food. What it's like to hit first or get hit first, needing to be the toughest, needing most of all the sweet music of "Come on, Rocky!" We listen: "I'm like a pistol loaded and cocked. . . . Anybody hurts me gets busted in two and dumped in his own blood." A cop looks down: "This neighborhood won't be any good until you're dead, you wild, no-good little greaseball. I look in your eyes and I see the devil himself." And we believe.

Where mobsters and fighters are concerned Mr. Barber supplies his intuition of essence backstopped by Mr. Graziano's words, action, and (if you will) music. What emerges is a slice of recent social history, a portrait where the rawest colors barely do justice to the subject. Certainly the embroidery shows through, but the reader can be grateful for it. If our Tough Guy, in his sustained bravado and bluster, sometimes sounds like a Walter Mitty with muscles nobody should be surprised. That's what he is. The principal characters are headed for Sing Sing, the electric chair, a messy sidewalk death—or (a minority) Madison Square Garden. The pinhead philosophy, zoot-suit morality, and abysmal ignorance of this punk set are both indictment and tribute for a system which produces and digests its members.

THE story opens as Rocky is about to catch Sugar Ray Robinson's right to the jaw, the blast which rings down the curtain on his fight career. It was a long road to here: the bare-knuckle street and prison fights, the countless amateur bouts, the three bloody title brawls with Tony Zale, the workouts with rubber hose and billy. Stealing. Steaming. Bullying. Rocky drafted and sent to Fort Dix, the most naive private soldier in history. He flattens a corporal who asks him to pick up a cigarette butt, knocks over a captain who chews him out, goes AWOL, really earns his way to a dungeon at Governor's Island, a dishonorable discharge, a year at Leavenworth. Ironically, it was the "thinking year" at Leavenworth that turned the corner for this twenty-two-year-old and made him decide to go straight. After being sprung he became an ambitious fighter and husband (Rocky's romance with his sister's friend is one of the most poignant and satisfying notes on turbulent young love to come along in quite a while). And, except for one publicized final brush with the D.A.'s office and the New York State Boxing Commission over an alleged bribe, Rocky has stayed on the side of law, order, and Martha Raye ever since.

This is a book for any reader looking for action, with some good sports photographs included. But anybody who likes to see a human being fighting upward will enjoy it, too.