

Script for “Beyond the Pale” (episode 2: broadcast August 8, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): Sara was born on March 11, 1919 in her aunt and uncle’s house in Gomel, a Belarusian town some 350 miles southwest of Moscow. At the turn of the twentieth century, Jews were more than half of Gomel’s population. When Sara’s mother gave birth to her daughter, the Bolsheviks had been in control of Gomel for some two months. Their Red Army was still fighting a broad coalition of anti-communist forces in what’s known as the Russian Civil War.

Sara was all of 12 days old when two military regiments mutinied against Bolshevik rule in Gomel, going after the town’s Jews while they were at it. Anti-Jewish riots involving looting, arson, rape, and murder – “pogroms” - were nothing new for the Jewish residents of the former Russian Empire. In fact, that’s what drove my grandparents to this country before World War I. Though full-scale violent attacks were unusual, antisemitism was very widespread, both among the majority of the population and the authorities when the tsar was in power before 1917. At the time of Sara’s birth, the World War had only recently ended, and now the Russian Civil War was creating social, political, and economic chaos. This was a pretty good pretext for antisemites, who blamed Jews for the current mess, to let loose against Jews throughout the former Pale of Settlement.

To escape the attackers in Gomel, Sara’s mother Gita ducked into a cellar with her brand-new baby and hid out with some other Jews for several days. (Sara doesn’t know whether Gita was down there with family members or with strangers – Sara didn’t even hear this story until Gita told it to her when Sara was in her 30s.) That cellar was cold – it was winter – Russian winter - and all Gita had to wrap them in was a *polushubok*, a short fur coat.

Sara Mebel (SM): “She opened [the coat] to put me at her breast. She closed it, and I cried. [Russian audio] Other adults were there – I don’t know who, and they screamed at her, ‘Shut her trap! Shut her trap!’ They were afraid we’d be heard.”¹

LB: So there’s Gita – hiding out with her newborn in some freezing cellar, doing her best to nurse baby Sara *and* keep her quiet so they and the people down there with them don’t get discovered. Then things got worse: Gita started hemorrhaging. She couldn’t get medical help, though, until it was safe to leave the cellar. By the time a doctor had been summoned, Sara’s mother had contracted a postpartum infection.

SM: “After that, my mother couldn’t give birth, and that’s why I have no brothers or sisters.”²

LB: The doctor was furious that no one had tried to stanch the blood. He wanted to know why someone didn't use something lying around, like a rag that had been used to wipe the floor. If there were ever a case of adding insult to injury, this was it. Gita was actually a certified nurse-midwife, and no doubt she knew quite well that a filthy rag would have made an infection worse, not better.

The pogrom and her subsequent illness kept Gita from registering Sara's birth with Soviet officials. But it's also possible that she waited because no one knew who was going to win the Civil War. Back then, a Bolshevik victory was far from a sure thing. The upshot, though, was that the date on Sara's birth certificate was one month after her birth: April 11, 1919, rather than the 11th of March, something else Sara didn't learn until she was an adult.

While Sara was still a toddler, her parents left Gomel for Saratov, a city on the Volga River. This was a schlep: some 750 miles east into Russia proper. They weren't just far from their families, they were now in a genuinely Russian environment. Though some Jews had started settling in Saratov during the First World War, it was still a very different world from the one the Mebels knew. I don't know why Sara's parents went there at that particular time. In 1921 and 1922, Saratov was part of a region that experienced a devastating famine in which some 5 million people died of hunger. Maybe the Mebels just wanted to be out of the western borderlands, away from their religious parents, away from areas vulnerable to anti-Jewish pogroms. Maybe Gita went there to work in a medical clinic? Maybe Sara's father, who had been trained as an economist, was doing something in Saratov on behalf of the Soviet authorities? I have no idea. Neither does Sara.

She only remembered one thing from Saratov. She thinks it happened when she was four years old. Sara was playing in a courtyard outside her parents' place when a Chinese magician came by.

SM: "They used to walk around the neighborhoods."³

LB: I really don't know whether this person was Chinese. It's more likely he was ethnically Asian or Central Asian. Whoever he was, though, Sara was so taken with him that she started following him and she wound up in a completely different part of town. Her parents were terrified when they discovered she was missing and they contacted the police.

I asked Sara whether they had *phoned* the police, and she quickly corrected me:

SM: "What do you mean? There weren't any phones!"⁴

LB: Right. Apparently, her father went in *person* to the local police station. But in the meantime, someone her parents knew spotted little Sarochka trailing after the magician and they brought her home.

SM: “My mother grabbed me and started kissing me. We kiss. We hug. My father came back from the police and then he hit me so I wouldn’t run away again. This is my first memory of Papa.”⁵

LB: Sara told me this story without giving me any indication that this was a painful recollection. In fact, she had no anger or even regret in her voice when she mentioned being hit. The only thing that really seemed to matter was that she had had a father who was there and who worried about her. Having lost him when she was a teenager, Sara cherished every single memory she could conjure up of his brief presence in her life. Once upon a time, she had a papa. And then she didn’t. We’ll talk more about this.

Right now, I want to point out that these early conversations between her and her parents were probably in Yiddish. Like most Jews in Eastern Europe, Sara was a Yiddish speaker: not only was it her first language and the language they initially spoke at home, it was the language in the public nursery she went to in Gomel before they moved.

In those early days, language could be confusing. Sara told me how “funny” it was when she heard some children in Saratov use a Russian word to indicate a porch; used to hearing Yiddish, Sara knew very well that a porch was called a *ganik* – which she misremembered as a *khanik*. After having experienced so much antisemitism in her lifetime, Sara sounded sarcastic about this linguistic naivete she had as a little girl. At that point, Yiddish, Russian – they were all the same to her.

SM: “Very funny. Ha ha ha.”⁶

LB: Regardless, Sara would not only learn the dominant language - Russian – she would learn to speak it like a native-born Muscovite. As I mentioned last time, as a *homo sovieticus* she’d forget her Yiddish entirely.

When Sara was around five years old, her parents moved again. This time they went to Astrakhan, a town founded as a fortress by Ivan the Terrible in the mid 16th century. Astrakhan was also on the Volga River, but it was located some 500 miles south of Saratov, that is, even farther from Gomel. Sara didn’t know what prompted this move either, but she suspected it had something to do with the fact that her aunt, one of her mother’s siblings, was living there with her husband Lazar Belinkov, a rich fish merchant.

Wait. A rich fish merchant in the land of the socialist revolution? What happened to the communists? You could say that they won the Civil War, but they lost the battle for immediate socialism. In 1921, when the war was over, the Soviet regime was in so much economic and social trouble that its leader Vladimir Lenin got the Communist Party to agree to a transitional phase, a “New Economic Policy,” abbreviated in Russian as NEP. They would jump-start the stalled economy by allowing a certain amount of what they called “petty capitalism.” This gave the peasants, who were the vast majority of the population, the incentive to start growing food to sell at urban markets. It also meant entrepreneurial types could go into businesses that did not involve banking or major manufacturing; big industry and foreign trade stayed in the hands of the Soviet state. With his vocation in fish, Lazar Belinkov was evidently one of these entrepreneurs – called NEPmen after the policy. This mixed economy stayed in place until Joseph Stalin shut NEP down in 1928, putting all private businesses into state hands and consolidating peasant land holdings with the forced collectivization of agriculture.

I don’t know what happened to Uncle Lazar when the state took over the fishing industry, but it’s hard to imagine that he and his family weren’t hit hard financially at the very least. By then, they already had their share of tragedy. During the Russian Civil War, two of the Belinkov children were killed: a son and a daughter. The daughter –

SM: “I heard this from several people – she was unbelievably beautiful.”⁷

LB: Sara said that this young woman had been going somewhere on a train when she was gang-raped by soldiers who then threw her from the moving train.⁸ Sara didn’t know if the soldiers were from the Red or the opposing White Army, and she made it clear it didn’t matter.

This incident took place either before Sara was born or when she was just a tiny baby, but as she said, this was what she *heard*. It was part of the family’s story that was revealed gradually – and begrudgingly - over time. Her mother Gita, like so many others who survived Stalinism, guarded their history very carefully; she learned to keep secrets in order to survive. In general, it was simply safest to *not* ask and to *not* tell because one’s class background, one’s political and social affiliations, and, yes, one’s family – immutable circumstances of the past, could spell trouble down the line. It wasn’t until 1954, the year after Stalin died and Sara was already in her 30s, that Sara, who needed new identification, saw her original birth certificate. Not until then did she learn that her official birthday was a full month *after* she’d been born. Not until then did her mother explain *why*, *finally* telling her about the pogrom and how they had to hide out in the cellar.

That's also when Sara found something else out about the past: People close to her father called him by the nickname "Zalya," but his real name was Solomon – except that it wasn't. It turned out that he was identified as "Zalman" on her birth certificate. Zalman and Solomon are almost identical in Yiddish and Hebrew, but not in Russian – which brings us to all those Russians names that can be so confusing to non-Russians. Russians are addressed formally not as, say, Mr. Putin, but by their first name and a middle name based on their father's first name - their patronymic. So Putin is Vladimir Vladimirovich: Vladimir, son of Vladimir. All along, Sara had been Sara Daughter-of-Solomon. Now, she was Sara Daughter-of-Zalman. Now, not only did she have to go through the bureaucratic slog of changing all her official documents, she had to take stock of a new name and a new history.

Sara learned something else about her birth from another family member, one of the surviving children of Uncle Lazar and his wife. This was her cousin Victor Lazarovich Belinkov – nicknamed Vitya. He's important in Sara's life because she *married* him when she was in her 50s.

Vitya was 23 years older than Sara, old enough to have been a young adult when she was born. He added his contribution to her story after they were married. That's when he told her he'd been there! He was in the Gomel house when Gita gave birth to Sara, probably in a room right next door. "Interesting," I said to Sara when she told me this.

SM: "No. It's not. It's not interesting to me. It's painful."⁹

LB: This early intimacy, this early connection, clearly didn't make Sara happy. But Vitya's revelation is what led her to conclude - long after the fact and after her mother was already dead - that Gita had been living with the Belinkovs in Gomel. This was news; her mother also hadn't made that clear. Were the Belinkovs the people in the cellar screaming at Gita to shut the baby's "trap"? I don't know, but it's certainly possible.

Like Sara, I heard about all this in bits and pieces, and so I had to puzzle everything out for myself because she never put the picture together for me or, it seems, for herself. I think she was embarrassed by the whole business of how close the families were at one time. She certainly didn't harp on the fact that her only marriage was to her first cousin. She also didn't tell me something I learned on my own: her mother, Vitya, and Vitya's first wife are all buried *together* – with some woman I've never heard of - in a Moscow Jewish cemetery. They share a single gravestone. And even though Gita lived with the Belinkovs in Gomel, and even though Sara's parents appear to have moved to Astrakhan because these same relatives were there, Sara didn't remember seeing them and she insisted they weren't close to her family. Her parents, she said,

SM: “were much more educated.”¹⁰

LB: This is no doubt true, but I wonder whether the families grew apart later - because of troubles Lazar, our wealthy fish merchant, ran into when Stalin ended NEP and nationalized the economy. After 1928, the official talk was of “class war” and taking down the capitalists. Whatever the actual situation, aside from the early 1970s when Vitya came into Sara’s life, his family didn’t figure into her memories. Sara certainly doesn’t remember him being in Astrakhan - by then Vitya, already an adult, was living in Moscow with that first wife.

So in Astrakhan, Gita, Zalya, and Sara apparently lived separately from their relatives, the Belinkovs - along with a servant named Marussya.

A servant? That may come as a surprise, too. Yes, not only were there successful capitalists like Lazar Belinkov in Soviet Russia during the 1920s, people who weren’t even rich had servants, then and even afterwards. Despite legal gender equality and claims by the state that the revolution had “emancipated” women, domestic chores still fell almost exclusively to women at the same time that women were expected to earn an independent living. For families in towns and cities, someone, rarely the man, had to shop. Someone had to stand in queues in order to procure food and necessities, usually on a daily basis because so few households had refrigerators. Someone had to prepare food on a wood stove or a kerosene burner. Someone had to fetch water and wood because so few households had plumbing and heat. Someone had to watch children when they weren’t in day care or school. Someone had to keep things in some kind of order. In almost all cases, that someone was a woman, either a grandmother, the legendary *babushka*, or, if there were no grandmothers at hand - which was certainly the case for the Mebels in Astrakhan - that someone was a female servant. These women tended to be peasants desperate to get out of the countryside, who would live not only in a house or apartment with their host family, but often in the very same room. The servant Marussya lived with the Mebels in their Astrakhan apartment; another peasant, Dunya, would live with the family when they moved to the outskirts of Moscow a few years later.

As an old Russian saying goes, someone has to make the soup. Once again, that “someone” was invariably female. Soup was a staple of Russian cuisine, and the best way to stretch meat and whatever other food was available. *Borshch* made with beef and beets, *solyanka* made with sausage and pickled cucumbers, and *shchii* made with beef and cabbage are typical Russian soups, and they’re all delicious, especially with sour cream on top. But Marussya, Sara explained,

SM: “was a peasant girl who was in the city for the first time.”

LB: Gita had to teach her how to cook – and it appears that Marussya needed a lot of training. This is how Sara described her mother’s – admittedly brief – soup-making instructions to Marussya:

Gita: ‘Here is a piece of meat. You wash it. You put it in a pot. You throw in a carrot and onion, and you let it boil.’

LB: Pretty simple, right? Maybe not. The first time they left Marussya with her soup-making responsibilities, there was no soup waiting for them when they came back home. Marussya complained to Gita:

Marussya: ‘You didn’t tell me to add water!’¹¹

LB: Another time, Sara’s parents bought a huge watermelon, Astrakhan apparently known for its watermelons. The family went out. When they returned, only a tiny piece of the watermelon was left. Sara remembered her mother saying,

Gita: ‘Marus! Why’d you eat so little?’

LB: Marussya missed the sarcasm. She answered,

Marussya: ‘I didn’t want any more.’¹²

LB: When I asked if they were living in a private home at the time, Sara set me straight.

SM: “Don’t imagine that it was our private house! There were lots of people there. There *were* no private homes.”¹³

LB: She said they lived on the second floor of a building in some two-room apartment. Sara and the other kids in the building would play on the balcony and on an outside staircase. In their apartment, Sara had a bed in a room that opened onto her parents’ room. (I don’t know where Marussya slept – probably right near Sara.) They had light, but Sara didn’t remember whether it was from a kerosene lamp or electricity. She described how she would fall asleep to the comforting sound of her parents’ voices.

Just across the street was a place Sara called

SM: “the best candy store in Astrakhan. I still remember – the Sharlau store – a French name, probably.”¹⁴

LB: It's still there. I googled "Sharlau Astrakhan," and was directed to a photo on Trip Advisor of an old, still elegant, peach-colored palatial structure decorated with pillars and huge windows. The photo was titled "Historical Coffee Shop," and the address of the place was Lenin Street, #9, Lenin Street becoming the name after Lenin's 1924 death of whatever road was located right in the center of most Soviet towns and cities the way Main Street would be in the U.S. When they lived in Astrakhan, Gita would give Sara money for candy, and then she would watch out the window while Sara crossed the street to Sharlau.

I wondered whether there was any kind of vehicular traffic, but Sara made it clear how misguided I was, something she had to do very often.

SM: "If it were dangerous, my mother wouldn't have let me go out like that."¹⁵

LB: Okay. There were no cars, but as I soon learned, there *were* horse-drawn carriages. I tried to find out more about her life in Astrakhan. Did you have a bathroom, I asked? Sara really hated it when I asked questions she thought were irrelevant and intimate – like questions about personal hygiene and sex - but she thought about this:

SM: "If we were on the second floor and had to run downstairs for the bathroom, I would probably remember that."¹⁶

LB: Sara's other memories of Astrakhan make it clear that her parents wanted her to grow up as what Russians call a "cultured" member of society, someone who conducted herself politely and appropriately, and who was well versed in Russia's cultural treasures - its art, music, literature, and, of course, the ballet. When local authorities brought the famous prima ballerina Yekaterina Geltser to Astrakhan for a solo performance, Sara's parents took her to the theater. Sara remembered that Geltser danced a Polish folk dance known as a mazurka.

SM: "I even remember her costume. She was in something blue, and there was white fur around her ankles and wrists."¹⁷

LB: Sara's parents also brought Sara to their friends' place to listen to Moscow's broadcast of the opera "Eugene Onegin." This was the first time Sara remembered hearing a radio. The broadcast was part of the Soviet state's attempt to spread culture on a mass basis. Just as her parents wanted Sara to be properly educated in Russian art and culture, the regime was trying to spread art, culture,

education - *and* socialism throughout the Soviet Union via radio programs and many other means.

In keeping with their personal plan for Sara's cultural advancement, Sara's parents had her start piano lessons when she was in first grade. Sara doesn't remember if they had a piano in Astrakhan, but they would get one when they later moved to their place near Moscow. She told me about going to her piano teacher's birthday party in Astrakhan.

SM: "Mama bought a big bouquet of flowers for me to give to her. Another student and I – also a girl, my girlfriend – we went there in a horse-drawn carriage. There weren't any taxis or cars. Together, each of us with our bouquets, rode to the teacher's."¹⁸

LB: Sara remembered one less pleasant event from her Astrakhan days. She called it

SM: "a genuine tragedy."¹⁹

LB: What happened was a classmate accused her of stealing a pen. I pointed to a ballpoint pen to make sure I heard her correctly, and, looking at me like I was born yesterday, Sara quickly made it clear that it wasn't a ballpoint pen – there *were* no ballpoint pens. The missing pen was the wooden kind with a metal tip you would have to dip into ink after every few words. These were apparently the only writing instruments available at the time: there weren't even pencils. The Soviet Union's first pencil factory actually didn't open until 1926, and then only with the help of the American industrialist Armand Hammer, who, incidentally, was the great-grandfather of the actor Arnie Hammer.

Sara was in the Astrakhan school when the only writing implements were the cumbersome wooden pens. Being accused of stealing one caused Sara so much distress that Gita even considered transferring her to another school. Fortunately, the missing pen turned up and Sara was exonerated. She used an expression for this that became a big part of the Soviet vocabulary because so many people were wrongfully accused of crimes and were only cleared after they were already dead or had spent years in forced labor camps.

SM: "I was rehabilitated."²⁰

LB: Her father was recorded among the ranks of the rehabilitated, but only posthumously, more than 25 years after Sara and Gita saw him for the last time. In the next episode, we'll look at what happened when Sara and her parents moved to

an area near Moscow, living together with a different servant in one barracks room in the place Sara never stopped thinking of as “home.”

¹ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

² From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

³ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

⁴ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

⁵ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

⁶ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

⁷ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

⁸ Victor Belinkov's version of the story is more reliable: he said his sister was thrown from a ship.

⁹ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

¹⁰ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹¹ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹² Sara's stories about Marussya are from the transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation.

¹³ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁴ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁵ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁶ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁷ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁸ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁹ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

²⁰ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation