

**Script for “A Secular Generation” (episode 4: broadcast August 22, 2018)**

**Laurie Bernstein (LB):** In this episode, we’re going to look more closely at Sara’s parents. I’m intrigued by them, not only because they’re family but also because of who they are historically, where they fit into Soviet and Jewish history. Gita and Zalya Mebel were part of the generation of East European Jews who helped make the revolution in Russia and, outside of Russia, joined radical movements in Europe, Britain, the United States, and Palestine. Sara’s parents broke away from their traditional, religious Jewish families to join – and change - the secular and modern world. Even though Gita’s father studied Talmud all day and Zalya’s father was a rabbi, Gita and Zalya were atheists. When they were young, they put their faith not in God, but in socialism. Salvation wouldn’t come from living according to Jewish laws, but from reshaping the wider world according to the principles of social justice and equality.

In the handful of photos Sara brought with her to the U.S., there are three of her mother that blow me away. (They’re posted on the podcast’s website.) In these pictures, Gita looks like someone I would have loved to meet. This is not the sweet old lady in the photo that Sara kept in her Swarthmore room or the woman in Sara’s descriptions of Mama; this is the poster child for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century emancipated woman. This is your Jewish bluestocking. The adjective that comes to mind when I look at Gita is *formidable*. Let’s just say that when she was in her 20s and 30s, she looked like she did not suffer fools gladly.

In what seems to be the earliest photo, a young looking Gita is standing between two young mustachioed men, both around a foot taller than she is. I don’t know who they are, but neither of them is Zalya, so it’s possible that these were two of her brothers. Gita’s dressed in a dark coat with trim around the neck, and she has on a pair of wire-rimmed glasses that are a bit off kilter. Her hair’s cropped close to her head and parted in the middle. She’s most decidedly not some shrinking Victorian violet. She has an arm resting on each guy’s shoulder, which comes across as physically awkward because she’s so much shorter than they are. The two young men, who are clad very properly in starched shirts, jackets, and ties are looking off to the right. Gita, though, is staring straight into the camera. It’s like she owns the men *and* she owns the photograph. There’s no date, but we know it’s Gita because Sara wrote on the back,

**Sara Mebel (SM):** “My mama – Gita Mebel.”

**LB:** Another photo is a picture postcard dated 1916, which is three years before Sara was born. It looks like it was taken professionally - you can still see the

Romanesque pillars from some fancy photography studio backdrop. Gita's much more traditionally feminine here, dressed as she is in a white crocheted blouse tucked into a long white skirt and with her hair styled in a way that frames her face. Her right hand is behind her back. Her left is draped on an elaborate piece of wooden furniture that looks like a cradle. She's wearing a long necklace and a bracelet, maybe the one she sold for food around a decade later. Gita's still got those glasses on, though, as if to tell the viewer,

**Gita:** 'I read. I'm serious.'

**LB:** She looks dignified, poised, and even matronly - older than the 30 years she would have been at the time.

What a contrast this is to the third photo! There's not a trace of the matron here. In this picture, she's posing in a group with nine stern-faced young men, one other woman, and a little girl. Not only wouldn't I have known it was Gita if not for Sara's identification of her on the reverse side, if I hadn't looked closely, I would have thought this person wearing a dark coat and scarf, wire-rimmed glasses, and who has very short hair parted on the side that seems pasted across a broad forehead, was a skinny schoolboy. Yet this person has tiny hands and feet, and has on dark stockings and cute little lace-up boots with one-inch heels. She's looking right into the camera and, unlike the men, most of whom have their arms crossed or hands at their sides and are looking serious by frowning, she's leaning on her right fist. Her facial expression is hard to read. It could be boredom, it could be defiance, it could be amusement, and it could be saying, "Go on, make my day." She's nothing like the other woman in this group photo who's demure and feminine in a white blouse and styled long hair. Gita seems very different. As I said, she's someone I would have loved to meet.

And she's someone I wish I knew more about. The most important thing to keep in mind is that Sara lived with this woman from the day she was born in 1919 until the day Gita died at the end of 1973. After Zalya's arrest, for nearly 40 of those years, it was just the two of them. Mother and daughter not only lived together, but they lived together in a single room. Gita never stopped being a mother. After the war, when Dunya had moved on, Gita cooked dinner for Sara every night, reprising that three-course meal of soup, meat or fish, and dessert. Not only that, she also seems to have prepared the lunch wrapped in newspaper that Sara brought with her to eat at work. When Sara used the pronoun "we," she was always talking about herself and "Mama."

Here's what I know about Gita's background. Gita Markovna (Gita, daughter of Mark) was born to the Soskin family in 1886 in the small Belarusian town of Petrikov. Sara never met any of her grandparents, but she knew that the Soskins

were very poor. Gita's mother ran some kind of little shop. She was the one who made the money - but not much.

**SM:** "My Mama said that when her mother made fruit preserves, she always said [Russian audio] 'God willing, we won't need it.' You know why? Because fruit preserves were given only to the sick."<sup>1</sup>

**LB:** Sara repeated this remark twice because she wanted to make sure I wrote it down correctly. Her grandparents were so poor that they had to ration out the jam. And they were so Jewish that when Gita's mother made the jam, she asked for God's help so that no one would actually need to eat it.

Gita's father Mark seems to have followed in the footsteps of centuries of Jewish scholars - men who lived a life of the mind and left the details of everyday survival to their wives.

**SM:** "My grandfather was a learned Jew. From morning to night, he sat and read the Talmud."<sup>2</sup>

**LB:** But he clearly put down his holy books on occasion: Gita had 11 or 12 older brothers and sisters. When she left for the town of Gomel to attend school, she lived with a sibling we've already talked about: her sister (whose name Sara didn't recall) and her sister's husband, the rich fish merchant Lazar Belinkov.

Gita was unusually accomplished for a Jewish girl from a poor family in the Pale of Settlement. She not only finished girls' high school - a *gimnaziia* - she studied medicine at a technical college - a *tekhnikum* - which is how she became a certified nurse-midwife. I wonder if the picture postcard where she's dressed in the white blouse and skirt was shot to commemorate Gita's graduation from this technical college. The fact that she had her hand on a cradle suggests that this was the case.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless, this was a woman who took herself and her career seriously. As Sara put it,

**SM:** "Mama always worked."<sup>4</sup>

**LB:** Except for the time she and Sara were evacuated to Siberia during the war, Gita spent her entire career at the hospital that was part of the giant optical factory in Krasnogorsk. She wasn't a doctor, but as a nurse-midwife, a *fel'dsher-akusherka* in Russian, she would have had a lot of responsibility with gynecology and obstetrics.

Although Gita was literate in Yiddish, she spoke "beautiful" unaccented Russian, and, according to Sara, she was

**SM:** “very smart, and I’m not just saying this because she was my mother.”<sup>5</sup>

**LB:** Gita was a modern young woman, but she was nevertheless straight out of the old world. She remembered the first time she saw a train – this was probably in Gomel. She told Sara how she had overheard a peasant girl tell someone who was also watching the train that there must be horses hiding inside the railway cars and making them move.

Gita loved to read, but this was not an easy feat for someone who grew up in a world without electricity.

**SM:** “Imagine how hard it is to read in front of a kerosene lamp!”<sup>6</sup>

**LB:** Gita’s vision, not so good in the first place, suffered in consequence. Hence, those wire-rimmed glasses. I don’t know when it was, but at some point electricity came to Gita’s household. Sara told me how her mother was so happy that she got up and danced on a table - she could now read by electric light. I could easily see the woman in these photos climbing onto a table and dancing not only with joy, but with abandon.

I mentioned that there were other people in that last group photo. Gita looks young, but she had to have been in her mid 30s. We know that because Gita was 32 when she gave birth to Sara, and Sara was already *literally* in the picture. She identified herself on the back of the photo by writing in Russian,

**SM:** “The little girl – it’s me – Sara.”

**LB:** She’s adorable. She’s wearing a short-sleeved dress, dark stockings like her mother, and shoes with straps across the top that resemble what we call Mary Janes. There’s what looks like a bow on the front of her dress *and* a big bow on her head, which has her bangs sticking out from under it that curl right above her big dark eyes. This kid is clearly not cowed by the adults or by the situation. She’s perched on some guy’s lap, and she’s leaning to the side. Like everyone else, she’s looking straight into the camera.

Sara identified someone else on the back of this photo.

**SM:** “Papa.”

**LB:** This is one of the two pictures we have of Zalya. He’s in the front row center, and he’s dressed in a suit, with a white shirt and a tie. Like the other men, he looks very serious. His hair is dark, it’s wavy, and it’s parted on the side. He has a

shadow above his lip that may have been a thin mustache. What I find fascinating is that not only is he *not* sitting next to his wife, neither he nor Gita is the person holding little Sarochka. They seem to have had no interest in presenting themselves as a couple or as parents. For a man, for Zalya, to claim ground as an individual was nothing odd, but it strikes me as pretty gutsy for Gita to have posed so autonomously. She didn't need to be someone's mother to count – at least not for that photo.

It's understandable that Sara, who hadn't seen her father in 65 years, didn't remember Zalya very well. As I said, she didn't even know where he worked. This is what she knew, supplemented with a few things I've found out from other family members. Zalman Mebel was born in 1886 or 1887 in the Belorussian shtetl of Chechersk (now called Chachersk). Zalya had two brothers, Chaim and Finkel, and there seem to have been five sisters, one of whom, to remind you, was my husband's grandmother. Presumably, she and - for sure - her daughter, my mother-in-law, were also born in Chechersk. It's good they left. The entire former Pale of Settlement fell into German hands after 1941 and the Jewish residents in each and every village and town were rounded up and mowed down by the Nazis' mobile killing units, the *einsatzgruppen*. One century after Zalya's birth this area became – and has remained - highly contaminated because of the meltdown in the nearby Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

Zalya's father, who was therefore my husband's great-grandfather Lev Mebel, was a rabbi. His mother tended the house. Like Gita's parents, they too died before Sara was born and so she never met them.

When he was young, Zalya was a Social Democrat, a Marxist-oriented socialist, but not a Bolshevik. Like many left-leaning Jews, Zalya was a member of the Bund, the socialist party that emphasized the importance of Jewish culture and the Yiddish language in a socialist society.

Sara, incidentally, told me that her mother never talked about his time in the Bund, but that Gita gave her this information "later."

**SM:** "When I was completely grown-up."<sup>7</sup>

**LB:** Bund members weren't religious, but they recognized that their fellow Social Democrats weren't addressing Jewish workers' concerns and special circumstances. Those "concerns" and "special circumstances" most often stemmed from Jews' shared experience of antisemitism.

Before the First World War, Zalya left for Palestine and helped organize a kibbutz, a farm run according to egalitarian principles. He returned to Belarus, then still part of the Russian Empire, to fetch Gita, who was his betrothed. But the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 put a stop to those plans. Zalya never took

Gita to Palestine. Later, when the wars ended, either they couldn't get out or, more likely, as secular Jews, they believed in the egalitarian order the Bolshevik Revolution proclaimed to be on the horizon. Meanwhile, Zalya's sisters were all leaving for the United States. Bob's grandmother was among them when she followed her rabbi husband to the Jewish congregation in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The communist regime wouldn't have been friendly to them, and I presume that aggressive anti-religious campaigns made it clear that they had no place as religious Jews in the secular Soviet Union.

I'm guessing that during World War I and perhaps also during the civil war that broke out in Russia in the revolution's wake, Zalya was drafted in the military. He certainly doesn't seem to have been in that cellar after Sara was born. But that may only be because Sara didn't ask, Sara wasn't told, or Sara simply forgot.

I understand why Gita wasn't very forthcoming about Zalya's past. It became dangerous to be associated with the Bund and to have been in Palestine. Sympathies of that sort came to be construed by the Stalinist regime as treason, as indications of "Jewish bourgeois nationalism." Marxists with deviationist pasts like Zalya were vulnerable. By the mid 1930s, all long-time socialists of any stripe, including Lenin's comrades in the early days of Bolshevism, were likely to be on the chopping block of the Terror. For Zalya, it appears that his early connection to the Bund and Palestine was fatal.

Sara never joined the Communist Party, the surest ticket to climbing the Soviet social ladder, but what about her parents? She wasn't sure. My sense is that if Gita and Zalya had been Party members in the 1920s and early 1930s, they would probably have been proud to let her know of their role in the socialist vanguard. It's also likely that they would have had access to better living conditions.

Sara was under the impression that her parents were not fully on board with the Bolsheviks' politics and policies.

**SM:** "I think they knew a lot and did not accept very much of it."<sup>8</sup>

**LB:** If her mother had been a card-carrying member of the Party, she would have faced even more problems after Zalya's arrest. At the very least, Gita would have been asked to denounce him publicly. She probably would have been expelled from the Party in some humiliating public ceremony; she probably would have lost her job; and there's a reasonable chance that she would have been arrested at some point as well. It's possible that Gita never told Sara about troubles at work, but Sara certainly would have known if her mother was fired - or worse. I pressed Sara for more details about her parents' political views, but this only made her angry. She asked whether Bob's and my son Perry, who was 13 at the time we had this conversation, knew what we thought and how we felt.

**SM:** “Besides that you love him and hug and kiss him, does he know your soul? Does he know what’s in your soul? And 70 years from now, do you think he’ll know?”<sup>9</sup>

**LB:** When I protested by saying that I was honest with my son, she was skeptical.

**SM:** “I don’t remember those kinds of conversations with Mama. I don’t know how honest you are. If you took a lover tomorrow, it’s unlikely you would tell him.”<sup>10</sup>

**LB:** Touché, though this wasn’t on my agenda and it still skirted the point about how little she knew of her parents’ political views. Yet there were some facts she took for granted, like her grandparents’ traditional Judaism. When I asked whether Zalya had been bar mitzvahed, she sounded indignant at the very thought that I would think he wasn’t.

**SM:** “He was the son of a rabbi . . . He was born in 1886! Of course he had a bar mitzvah!”<sup>11</sup>

**LB:** But Zalya seems to have rejected his religious upbringing. He and Gita didn’t celebrate Jewish holidays and they didn’t observe Jewish dietary laws. They also didn’t raise Sara as a Jew. Even though her first language was Yiddish and she knew she was considered Jewish, when I asked her what being Jewish meant to her, she answered,

**SM:** “Nothing.”<sup>12</sup>

**LB:** Though Zalya was an atheist and a former member of a Marxist political party, old habits apparently die hard. He still wouldn’t eat pork, the meat singled out as “unclean” in Deuteronomy and absolutely forbidden by Jewish religious law.

Gita told Sara about the time she got caught feeding Zalya pork without his knowledge. Sara didn’t recall the episode, but she remembered her mother’s admission of terrible guilt for deceiving him.

Meat of any kind wasn’t easy to come by in the 1930s, so it seems reasonable that if pork was available, you bought the pork. In any case, Gita or Dunya added it to the family’s diet. At one dinner, Zalya noticed something odd on his plate. He pushed it away and he declared,

**Zalya:** ‘This is pork and I won’t eat it!’

**LB:** Gita told him he was wrong. Dunya confirmed. He was wrong! But he still refused to eat. Gita then informed him that there had been pork in the dinner from the *previous* night, not in today's.

**SM:** "My papa got up, left, and threw up."<sup>13</sup>

**LB:** There was no logical reason for Zalya to avoid pork. He wasn't a religious Jew. I'm sure he thought he had left all that behind. Zalya was fully secular. He had truly become a *homo sovieticus*. And yet, he was a rabbi's son; his aversion to pork went so deep that his entire body rebelled.

The only other memories Sara had of Zalya were from the period after he was arrested in 1934, held in Moscow's notorious Butyrka prison, and then exiled to Kazakhstan. The secret police arrested a man known as Solomon or Zalman Mebel, but to Sara, he was always "Papa."

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<sup>1</sup> From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

<sup>2</sup> From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

<sup>3</sup> This was recorded before we had access to a handwritten autobiography in which Gita wrote that she graduated in 1910.

<sup>4</sup> From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

<sup>5</sup> From taped conversation of July 22, 2002. The comment about Gita's "beautiful" and unaccented Russian is from the taped conversation of July 23, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

<sup>7</sup> From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

<sup>8</sup> From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

<sup>9</sup> From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

<sup>10</sup> From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

<sup>11</sup> From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

<sup>12</sup> From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

<sup>13</sup> Sara's story about Zalya and the pork is from the taped conversation of July 22, 2002.