

Script for “A Barracks Home” (episode 3: broadcast August 15, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): In the previous episode, we saw how Sara Mebel was born in the Belarusian town of Gomel in the middle of the Russian Civil War, when the communist Reds were fighting the anti-communist Whites. As was the case for so many towns in the former Russian Empire, control of Gomel bounced back and forth between the combatants. Its Jews paid for the political instability in the form of a pogrom that took place when Sara was just 12 days old. Sara’s parents left Gomel for Russia proper, taking her to Saratov and then Astrakhan in the Volga region of Russia’s heartland. But the Mebels moved again, in what Sara thinks was the year 1926, this time to Ostankino outside Moscow. When I asked her why, she told me she didn’t know.

Sara Mebel (SM): “Moscow’s the capital. Maybe my parents didn’t like Astrakhan?”¹

LB: Ostankino’s known now for its colossal TV tower and for a relic from Stalinist times, the grand-sounding Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy. (Russians call it by its Russian initials: VDNKh.) Today, Ostankino is just one more part of Moscow’s giant sprawl, but in the 1920s it was still very much a village. Sara explained,

SM: “Then it was a small place with small houses.”²

LB: The Mebel family lived in one of those small houses – a wooden one - in a single room with a new addition to their household, the servant Dunya, a peasant a little younger than her parents who apparently had a crush on Sara’s father, something that seems to have amused rather than threatened Sara’s mother.

I asked Sara what she remembered about those days, and she described one of her only memories, an outing she took with Zalya when she was around 10 or 11 years old. She giggled several times while telling me how she and her father rode a tram some five or so miles into the center of Moscow and spent some time in the capital together. Then Zalya deposited her at a stop where she could get on a tram back to Ostankino because he had business somewhere in the city. Sara doesn’t remember what kind of work he did, but she knew he had been trained as an economist. According to the web entry I found listing victims of Stalin’s Terror, he was a “*planovik*,” a planner, someone who helped draw up the Kremlin’s central economic plans.³ Zalya may have an economist, but he didn’t notice that his daughter had no money with her, not a single kopeck.

SM: [Russian audio] “It never even occurred to me that I could get on the tram without a ticket. I walked. In the evening my parents laughed about it. That’s all I remember.”⁴

LB: They laughed? A 10- or 11-year-old left by her father at a tram stop? She has to walk some five miles home by herself because she’s afraid to get on public transportation without paying? This sounds cruel, not funny, to my ears. But I think these were more innocent times, justified or not. Zalya clearly didn’t think Sara was in danger of any kind. Nor, evidently, did her mother. Maybe they wanted to see her grow up a bit, become more independent. In any case, just like when she told me how her father hit her the time she followed a magician to the other side of Saratov, Sara didn’t tell this story with any sign of bitterness. Nor did she ever – in all the time I’ve known her - say anything the least bit negative about either of her parents. She herself was laughing about the mix-up. Maybe it’s because she had so few memories of Zalya – and, ironically, I’m not sure they were all that reliable. Another story she told me had to do with the time he took her into Moscow to see the brand-new Metropolitan subway system.

SM: “My papa explained to me why it was built, how it was built, and so on. It made a very powerful impression on me because the first station I saw was really beautiful.”⁵

LB: Like her fellow citizens, Sara was proud of the Moscow Metro.

SM: “You know the Metro? There really are beautiful stations, right?”⁶

LB: Yes, the stations in the center of Moscow are amazingly beautiful, especially to someone like me who grew up using the subway in New York City. The Moscow Metro was one of the early Soviet Union’s greatest accomplishments. The first stations were decked out with cavernous ceilings, mosaics, marble walls, chandeliers, and sculptures. They were really grand - and they symbolized how Stalin and his regime were supposedly bringing everyone toward some bright socialist future.

But here’s the problem with Sara’s recollection: the actual subway trains didn’t start running until May 1935, more than a year after Zalya was put in prison. Maybe Zalya had some special access to the stations before they were open and before he was arrested? I asked Cal State Long Beach professor Andrew Jenks, who’s written on the Moscow Metro’s history, what he made of this. He pointed out that “the artwork was the last element to be added.” He also told me that the builders were “under intense pressure” to get everything done by the scheduled opening

date. In other words, it's unlikely that Zalya and Sara ever saw an elegant Metro station together. It sounds like she confused this trip with something that happened later – maybe a visit to the Metro with her best friend's older brother, a transportation engineer in Moscow who seems to have been like a surrogate father to Sara. It makes sense to me that some 70 years later, she would conflate these particular memories.

The Metro trip supposedly took place after the Mebels left Ostankino for the place Sara remembered as Krasnogorsk. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, this area was even farther from Moscow. Just outside the capital's outer ring road, Krasnogorsk is part of Moscow's giant exurbs now. But back then it wasn't called Krasnogorsk; it was just an area with a cluster of peasant villages, one of which was called Banki and another of which was called Pavshino. It wasn't yet connected to the center by Metro or tram or even by suburban railway, the so-called *elektrichka*. When I asked Sara if a suburban rail ran to Krasnogorsk back then, she looked at me like I was delusional.

SM: “There wasn't an *elektrichka!*”⁷

LB: Okay. To get there from Moscow, you had to get on a regular railroad train on its route northwest toward the Baltic country of Latvia. Then you had to ride for around 16 miles to the Pavshino Station. After that, you had to walk a little over a mile. If it was winter, you walked in the cold and snow and dark. If it was spring, you no doubt slogged through mud on unpaved streets. This was a serious commute if you had to be in Moscow on a daily basis – as Sara did by the year 1938 and, except for the war years in Siberia, until she finally moved to the center in 1957.

So the Mebel family exchanged their single room in a small wooden house a few miles from Moscow by tram for a single room in a large one-story wooden barracks much farther away. I don't know why, but the most likely reason is that the new location put them closer to Gita's job at a medical facility that was part of some giant state-run optical factory. In fact, when the town was incorporated in 1932, there was some talk about naming it not Krasnogorsk, but Optikogorsk.

The word for barracks in Russian is *barak*. Their barracks had a long corridor along which there were doors to each household's room. In the Mebels' room, there were two beds, probably a third folding one for Dunya, and an upright piano – a *pianino*. The family, including Dunya, ate together on what Sara said was a very pretty table with carved legs. (This table, along with everything else they owned, would disappear during the Second World War.)

Of course, there was also a samovar, those elegant contraptions designed for heating water. If you were from Russia, you had to drink tea, and you certainly

couldn't expect to have anything other than a kerosene burner - a "Primus" - or a wood-fueled stove for cooking. That's where the samovar came in. Samovars – "self-boilers" in the literal translation – contain a chimney that you fill with hot coals. The coals surround a chamber that you put water in, and they keep it hot for hours. The water comes out a little spigot. So you take a handful of loose tea and put it in a teapot with some of the boiling water, and you let this sit on top of the samovar, sometimes all day. When you want some tea, you pour as much of the concentrated tea as you want into a cup, and then you add more hot water straight from the spigot.

We have a samovar in our house that we inherited from my husband's mother, who – to remind you of the family connections – was Sara's first cousin. Her mother was Zalya's sister, a member of the Mebel family who emigrated from Belarus in 1925. She and three of their four children went to join her oldest son and her husband Rabbi Moses Etter in the United States, where the rabbi was brought to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania a year or two earlier to lead a local synagogue. Zalya's sister and the three kids, including my future mother-in-law, had to wait in Cuba until they were given permission to enter the United States. They schlepped that huge, heavy, brass samovar all the way.

The samovar that belonged to Sara's family had pride of place on a marble table in their barracks room, but it was only for decoration.

SM: "Dunya did everything in the room with the Primus stove."⁸

LB: Dunya didn't like using the shared kitchen in the barracks. Clearly more competent than their former servant in Astrakhan, Dunya somehow managed to make soup every day on this one kerosene burner. She would also prepare some kind of dish with meat or fish and potatoes, and she made sure to serve something sweet, usually *kompot*, a syrupy dessert made from dried or fresh fruit. Needless to say, there was no refrigerator and no heat. Their room was kept warm by a wood-burning stove that Dunya fetched fuel for from an outdoor woodshed. Dunya also hauled water, bringing it inside from a well in large iron buckets. Then she would boil it – on that same Primus burner, I guess. The buckets were kept covered, and they stood on a small table in the corner of the room that served as their kitchen. There was no indoor plumbing.

To wash, they used something called a *rukomoinik*. This word translates as "washstand," but the literal translation is "hand washer." Rukomoiniks still exist – or at least they did in July 2002, which is when Sara described a rukomoinik to me after reporting she had just happened to see one on a Russian TV show.

This is how they used it:

SM: “A little bucket’s attached to the wall with a nail. You push on it and [cold] water comes out a hole in the bottom. That’s how we washed our hands.”⁹

LB: For actual baths, they went weekly to a public bathhouse. Public baths were part and parcel of Russian culture at the time because the great majority of people didn’t have running, let alone hot, water. Women and men bathed in separate facilities and, in the best-equipped places, went in and out of a hot sauna and a cold-water pool. Bundles of dried birch leaves were usually on hand so bathers could smack themselves with them, the sauna’s heat having opened the pores that were now supposedly releasing trapped impurities. There are still bathhouses all over Russia, though now that there’s indoor plumbing – at least in the cities - people tend to use them for the sociability and, especially in the men’s baths, for the vodka-drinking that’s part of the ritual. In the U.S., you can usually find a Russian bathhouse in areas where Russian emigrés are concentrated. On East 10th Street in Manhattan, there’s a place called the Russian Turkish Baths that’s celebrating its 125th anniversary. Near Philadelphia, and not far from where Sara is now living in a nursing home, there’s the Southampton Spa.

But back to the Mebels’ barracks and another aspect of no indoor plumbing: the toilets. Everyone used an outhouse several yards from the building that they had to walk to across some wooden planks. Sara didn’t like talking about toilets, but I had to know: “Was it dirty”?

SM: “Yes.”¹⁰

LB: It was dirty. Let your imagination go wild here and then realize you’re still envisioning a much nicer scene than that of the actual unheated privy used by dozens of people. You should also keep in mind that you’re not imagining how it smelled. I asked, “Did anybody come to clean it?”

This question sparked a detailed memory about Aleksei Ivanovich, their janitor neighbor who cleaned toilets for a living and apparently got around town on a horse. “Who paid him?” I asked. Sara reminded me (with some impatience),

SM: “Everything was government!”¹¹

LB: Of course. As for Aleksei Ivanovich and his wife, Sara stressed that they were Russian, that is, not Jewish, and

SM: “very, very simple people.”¹²

LB: But their children – there were five of them - had all kinds of doors open to them in the socialist motherland, and it sounds like Gita pitched in to help the kids along. Sara told me how much they loved her mother because Gita brought them books and read them stories. Two of the girls were around Sara’s age, and they became her good friends. When the German army was outside Moscow in October of 1941 and the state engineered a mass evacuation, Gita and Sara joined three of the daughters in Siberia.

Like Sara’s father, Aleksei Ivanovich was a victim of Stalin’s Terror. Unlike Zalya, he survived, returning home after the war. Aleksei Ivanovich’s crime was a remark he made that someone must have reported disparaging the ability of the great Soviet state to better the lives of its people. After his release, he confided to his family.

SM: “When his daughter was with us, she laughed and said how her papa, when he returned from prison, said, ‘*Vse ravno*. Whatever. I was telling the truth when I said that meat was cheaper *before* the revolution.’”¹³

LB: Despite Sara’s closeness with the daughters, it wasn’t until decades later that one of them dared tell Sara this story. Just as family members often lived by a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy when it came to family histories, acquaintances and even good friends rarely shared stories about arrests and other political misfortunes. It was just too dangerous, especially because if you claimed your arrested family member was innocent, you were implying that the omniscient state had, at best, made a mistake and, at worst, was committing its own crime of political repression. People were also terrified that their failure to report someone’s breach rendered them equally guilty. It often became a case of “I better inform on *you* to the secret police before you inform on *me*.” In Aleksei Ivanovich’s case, he either complained about the price of meat within earshot of someone who was afraid of being guilty by association or by someone with a big, deadly mouth.

Sara was still incredulous about what happened to her friends’ father.

SM: “Can you imagine what it meant to arrest an uneducated man for such a remark?”¹⁴

LB: If she hadn’t heard this story directly from the daughter, she wouldn’t have believed it. Even as late as 2002, when Sara and I talked about this, she still hadn’t fully grasped the randomness and extent of the mass arrests in the 1930s. Sara speculated,

SM: “Maybe they were told to arrest a certain number of people in Krasnogorsk?”¹⁵

LB: As incredible as that may sound, she was onto something. There’s actually something called an “Operational Order 00447” dated July 30th, 1937 that was issued by Nicholas Ezhov, the chief of the secret police, then known as the NKVD, that established numerical *quotas* – goals, really - for arrests and executions. This top-secret document was revealed to the public in 1992, when long-suppressed documents about the Stalin years were being released. Ezhov came up with some nice round numbers of people to be arrested, most of whom were destined for prison camps, but many of whom were explicitly slated to be executed. In other words, in this document, the number of 250,450 that was established for both categories *preceded* any actual crimes committed, real or imagined, and they varied according to the different regions in the USSR.

By the late 1930s, Soviet citizens – in factories, on collective farms, and, yes, in the police apparatus - knew very well that state numerical goals were designed to be exceeded, not simply met. Consequently, Ezhov’s projections for arresting and murdering so many Soviets lowballed the number of people who were actually hauled in by the NKVD, a few of them lucky enough to be released - like Aleksei Ivanovich - but tens of thousands who were not.¹⁶

Though details about the Stalinist Terror were available by the end of the 1980s, Sara clearly didn’t know as much as she might. She took her first trip outside the Soviet Union in 1988 when Mikhail Gorbachev loosened things up, including allowing ordinary people to travel internationally. She stayed with us in Poughkeepsie, New York during her month-long visit. We got hold of a Russian-language version of a long-censored memoir for Sara: *Journey into the Whirlwind* by Gulag survivor Evgeniia Ginzburg. I remember how tears were streaming down Sara’s face as she read how Ginzburg, a good communist who was never part of any opposition to Stalin or his policies, was nevertheless arrested, brutally interrogated, placed in solitary confinement, and eventually dispatched to a Siberian labor camp. No doubt it was devastatingly painful for Sara to read about the horrors that her father may have faced during his own experience in the whirlwind. No wonder Sara idealized her family’s life in Krasnogorsk.

Let’s go back to that single barracks room containing Zalya, Gita, Sara, and Dunya. To me, it sounds like a sad existence. They lived on top of each other. Life wasn’t easy. They don’t seem to have had much money. Sara remembered how Gita took her one good piece of jewelry – a gold and platinum bracelet – and sold it to get cash to buy food. Yet Sara insisted that they were fine.

SM: “I don’t remember being poor while Papa was with us.”¹⁷

LB: She adored her father. She adored her mother. When they were all together, they were a family, they were whole. For Sara, this was a joyful, not a deprived, childhood. For Sara, this crowded barracks room was home. She didn't call it a barracks; she didn't call it an apartment; she didn't even call it a room. She called it by the Russian word for home:

SM: "*dom.*"

¹ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

² From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

³ From <http://lists.memo.ru/index13.htm>

⁴ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁵ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁶ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁷ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

⁸ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

⁹ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

¹⁰ From transcript of July 23, 2002 conversation

¹¹ From transcript of July 23, 2002 conversation

¹² From transcript of July 23, 2002 conversation

¹³ From transcript of July 23, 2002 conversation

¹⁴ From transcript of July 23, 2002 conversation

¹⁵ From transcript of July 23, 2002 conversation

¹⁶ This refers specifically to the numbers from Operational Order 00447.

¹⁷ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002