

Script for “Losing Papa (episode 5: broadcast August 29, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): In the last episode we learned about Sara’s parents and the enormous leap they took from their traditional Jewish families in the Pale of Settlement. Zalya Mebel was a radical, a former member of the Jewish Marxist party known as the Bund. As a secular Jew, he’d gone to Palestine before the war to organize a kibbutz. Still, when he was in his 40s, the very thought that he’d eaten pork, the meat forbidden by Jewish law, was enough to make him sick. When he was arrested by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, he was living with his wife, his daughter, and their servant Dunya in the single barracks room that Sara called and always thought of as “home.”

The first time they took Zalya away, Sara was nearly fifteen years old. It was early in 1934, months before someone killed Leningrad party chief Sergei Kirov and the regime launched what became known as the Terror, when expanding circles of Communist Party members were charged with having conspired in Kirov’s murder and having taken part in other acts of treason. The Terror ultimately engulfed millions of Soviet citizens.

The fact that Zalya was arrested too early to be among the ranks of the alleged Kirov conspirators provided small comfort. When he was ultimately charged with a crime, his alleged misdeeds fell under the same counter-terrorism statute as those accused of the murder of Kirov. But, initially, he was apparently guilty of other crimes in the eyes of the state, probably related to his membership in the Bund and his prewar activities in Palestine. To an increasingly paranoid and repressive regime, Zalya’s radical Jewish past evidently raised questions about his loyalty to the Soviet homeland.

When I asked *Sara* about the reason for his arrest, she snapped back with,

Sara Mebel (SM): [Russian audio] “What kind of reason?”¹

LB: I pressed. “What did you think at the *time*? If he didn’t do anything wrong, what did that say about the government, or about other people who were being arrested?”

She couldn’t really answer this question.

SM: “I didn’t think about it . . . I was fourteen. I was in school. I had friends.”²

LB: She really didn’t know. At the time, she certainly didn’t tie the arrest to anything cooked up by Stalin and his henchmen. But she suffered.

SM: “It really hurt³.”

LB: And she stressed,

SM: “I never thought he did anything wrong. Never.”⁴

LB: It had to have been some kind of mistake.

Sara had no memory of the NKVD coming to their place in Krasnogorsk. She either blocked out the trauma of the standard late-night pounding on the door and subsequent search, or it never happened because they arrested Zalya while he was at work. But she remembered how he was held in Moscow’s dreadful Butyrka prison. Her mother Gita would visit him there, standing on line outside with other members of prisoners’ families in the hope that the authorities would let her see her husband and that the packages she brought for him – of food, maybe clothing - would be delivered.

Sometimes Sara went with her and was able to see her father. She recalled a big room divided by some kind of bars. When Zalya was brought in, Sara and her mother could speak to him, but always in the presence of a guard. Sara couldn’t remember how he looked, but she had a vivid recollection of how she felt.

SM: “It was horrible. I loved him. To see him and not be able to kiss him or hug him, that stayed in my heart.”⁵

LB: There was one bright spot in all this. One of the times Gita was waiting outside the prison, she ran into a former classmate from her all-girls’ high school: Maria Abramovna Kugel. Maria’s husband Victor Kugel, a journalist acquaintance of Sara’s father, was also in prison; he’d been arrested as part of the same case.

The Kugels! I got stuck on what I thought was their funny name. In Jewish cuisine, kugels are puddings made with noodles or potatoes. But this got lost in translation – or at least in pronunciation. Sara had no such association, so I explained to her about kugels and puddings. This still didn’t resonate. She patiently explained that the surname Kugel was different from the Jewish dish because it was spelled with the Russian letter known as a “soft sign” at the word’s end. The soft sign has no English equivalent, but it indicates a change in pronunciation: from a “KUH-gul” to a “Kuh-GEL” with some stretching of the last syllable. My bad.

Yet Sara, whose Jewish training, as we’ve seen, was spotty, got this wrong. The pudding in Russian is *also* rendered with a soft sign at the end. It too is a *kugel*. Maybe Sara didn’t know the Yiddish word for pudding and she only knew the Russian one, *myach*. Then again, maybe puddings just weren’t part of her diet. After all, it’s not like they had an oven.

Be that as it may, there was Maria Kugel waiting outside the Butyrka prison, and this was the beginning of a beautiful, lifelong friendship.

SM: “What happiness it was that we met Maria Abramovna at Butyrka!”⁶

LB: Maria was part of a very prominent family. Sara characterized her own as “simple” by comparison. Before the revolution, the Kugels owned a summer home – a *dacha* - in the Crimea. Victor’s relative, the late Alexander Kugel, was a well-known theater critic before and after the revolution. The family also knew Nina Mukhina, the widow of the famous tenor Leonid Sobinov and the sister of someone who became a very famous artist, Vera Mukhina. If you’ve ever seen the logo for Soviet-era movies, you’ve seen Vera Mukhina’s iconic giant statue of a male worker and female collective farmer. Initially made for the 1937 Paris World’s Fair, the statue was then moved to the Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy in Ostankino. In other words, the Kugel family was part of the Russian and Soviet *intelligentsia*.

But Victor Kugel was evidently deemed to have dangerous Jewish nationalist tendencies. Known as a “Jew and a half” because he was so tall,⁷ Victor published works on the so-called “Jewish question” and was linked with the militant Zionist Zeev Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky, another secular Jew from the Russian Empire, founded the Jewish Legion that fought for the British during the First World War against the Turks in Ottoman-ruled Palestine. Jabotinsky became a key figure in the push for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state. There’s a photo of him in St. Petersburg before the war in which he looks very chummy with none other than Victor and Maria Kugel. In the photo, Victor is wearing a pair of spectacles and he’s sporting a thick dark mustache. One of his hands is resting on Maria, who’s snuggled up against him. They’re sort of smiling, and she’s right next to Jabotinsky himself, who’s stretched out in an armchair in what looks like someone’s living room. As I said, they seemed chummy.

Sara believed that Victor had been sentenced to hard labor in a camp in Russia’s far north. She recalled that Victor’s family had received official notice of his death. She exclaimed,

SM: “He felled trees in the forest. Do you understand? He was a refined intellectual. He soon died.”⁸

LB: The website with the list of Terror victims provides a different story about his fate. It says that Victor Rafailovich Kugel was convicted of counter-revolutionary activities on January 9, 1938 under Article 58 of the Soviet criminal code, sentenced to death, and shot on March 29th.⁹ Perhaps his family knew and

didn't tell, or perhaps they didn't know anything. One more Soviet story shrouded in misinformation, secrets, and lies. Regardless, his widow Maria and her two children, Rafa and Maimi, were left behind, like Sara and Gita, to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives.

SM: "That family became very dear to us. To me, Maimi Kugel was a sister. Our mamas were also very close."¹⁰

LB: The Kugels, however, were much better off financially. This meant they continued to live in their private apartment on Tverskaya Street in the center of Moscow. A few years ago, Tverskaya Street addresses were among the top 10 most expensive real estate markets in the world. Sara called their place very nice

SM: "by Russian standards."¹¹

LB: I'm not sure why the remaining Kugels weren't yanked from the top of the Soviet social ladder. Maybe it's because Victor and Maria's son Rafa, who worked as an engineer, was irreplaceable at his job. Judging by the number of books he has written, he was a key figure in the Soviet Union's state-run transportation industry. Sara believed that his salary alone was enough to support his mother and younger sister.¹² She idolized Rafa, describing him as handsome, with broad shoulders, and tall,

SM: "as tall as Bob."¹³

LB: My guess is that it was actually Rafa, the transportation engineer, who showed Sara around the Moscow Metro when it first opened and that, over time, she got confused and remembered having been there with her father.

The apartment on Tverskaya Street sounds like a palace relative to the Mebels' place. It consisted of four rooms, including a small one for a servant, a big kitchen, and private bathroom with indoor plumbing. Sara could use *their* shower instead of washing at the public baths. And once Sara started working in Moscow, there was always a place for her to sleep when she didn't want to schlep all the way back to Krasnogorsk.

SM: "I had my own bed there . . . For me, it was a second home."¹⁴

LB: They loved the Kugels, but Sara and Gita nevertheless leapt at the chance to leave Moscow entirely when they found out that they could join Zalya in the place he'd been exiled to: Alma-Ata (now Almaty), the capital of the Soviet Republic of

Kazakhstan, around 2,000 miles southeast of Moscow. Sara thinks this was in the summer of 1934 or 1935, but published NKVD records show that it was in fact 1936, when the Soviet Terror was already in motion. This means that Zalya was in custody at *least* a year longer than Sara remembered. What a joy it must have been for him to be released from the Butyrka prison into circumstances that were paradisiacal in comparison.

SM: “He lived in a private apartment in which he rented a room. He worked - I don’t remember where. He was a free man, but he had to report to the police at regular times.”¹⁵

LB: There were apparently other prisoners in similar situations. Restricted to areas far from Moscow, they rented places to live, found jobs, and kept the police apprised of their activities. In Alma-Ata, so long as Zalya didn’t leave town, he was relatively free.

The way Sara tells it, as soon as summer vacation came around, she and her mother headed straight for Kazakhstan. Zalya was waiting for them.

SM: “He met us at the train station... I remember how happy I was when he came to meet us.”¹⁶

LB: Then he took them to a room he was renting in someone’s apartment. They were together for a month, the length of Gita’s vacation. Sara remembers two things about Alma-Ata. One was that running alongside the city streets were irrigation ditches, urban canals that brought water down from the nearby mountains.

The other was how clear it was that they all belonged together. Her parents came to a big decision. Gita and Sara would move to Kazakhstan permanently. They would return to Moscow, but only for Gita to quit her job and do whatever else it took for them to leave. They were a family.

But the Soviet state wasn’t done with Zalya. This is how Sara described his second arrest.

SM: “It was the last evening before we were supposed to leave. We went to bed, and late in the night suddenly there was a knock at the door. [She knocks to show me.] Several men, I don’t know how many, came in - I don’t remember what they were wearing - but I remember how they opened the cabinets, how they were searching the room for something. Of course they didn’t find anything.”¹⁷

LB: By “anything,” she meant anti-Soviet literature or other evidence of counter-revolutionary activities.

SM: “They took Papa.”¹⁸

LB: Sara said that she and her mother never heard from or about Zalya again. They had no idea where the NKVD took him. They never learned when he died, where he died, or how he died. They didn’t know whether he was executed right away or whether he was dispatched to a labor camp where he died from starvation or from cold or from any other number of horrors. They knew nothing.

His wasn’t the only re-arrest that night. While the police were searching his room, Zalya indicated to Sara that she should warn some men in a house next door that a sweep was underway. Strangely, no one stopped her, and she was able to leave. But when she noticed that the neighbors’ lights were on, she realized that other searches and arrests were taking place simultaneously. This explained why no one stopped her; it was too late to warn *anyone*.

Gita sent Sara back to Moscow on their scheduled train, but Gita herself stayed in Alma-Ata for two more weeks, trying to get some answers. None came. Returning to Moscow to join Sara, she tried for some time to get word about her husband – without success.

SM: “At first she tried to find out. But she found out nothing. And then of course she stopped.”¹⁹

LB: I really didn’t understand. I pushed: “During the war?” Making it clear how naïve it was of me to imagine that the German invasion didn’t stop their world from spinning, Sara answered,

SM: “During!?”²⁰

LB: “After?”

SM: “After, no.”²¹

LB: We talked about this in 2002, 66 years after the NKVD re-arrested Zalya. During that time, her father existed only in her and her mother’s memories. Hers is a fuzzy story; its parts don’t fully add up. Of course, the two arrests and the disappearance are facts, but the timing of everything and what Sara and her mother knew – and when they knew it - are less clear. When I tried to clarify these things, Sara became uncomfortable.

When she *first* told me about Zalya's arrests, she said she couldn't remember how long she and her mother thought he might still be alive. She told me that for a long time, she held onto her hope that Papa would magically reappear – like their janitor Aleksei Ivanovich, who had also been arrested, but was sent back home. During one conversation, she said that as early as 1937 she was sure he was dead. But just a few days later, she said that during the Second World War, between 1941 and 1945, she and her mother would imagine he would be waiting for them when they returned from their evacuation to Siberia.

SM: "Sometimes we'd say how wonderful it would be if we came home and Papa suddenly appeared."²²

LB: Then she had a revelation.

SM: "Now I think that perhaps – don't write this down!"²³

LB: I wrote it down.

SM: "Maybe Mama already knew he was dead and she didn't tell me. Only now does this occur to me. Maybe she already knew! I say this because she spoke of him so rarely. To figure this out at such an advanced age for the first time!"²⁴

LB: Sara was really surprised.

SM: "Maybe she didn't want me to suffer. But of course I held onto hopes of his return. I never thought of that before!"²⁵

LB: To Sara, the withholding of such important information was a sign of her mother's love and strength, of how her mother had been trying to protect her from a painful truth. To me, the story was fuzzy because Gita never brought it into focus.

After Stalin's death, during a period known as "de-Stalinization," the Soviet regime released millions of political prisoners from the labor camps, acknowledging their persecution and innocence. Hundreds of thousands of the people who were executed or who perished in the camps were posthumously "rehabilitated," and their families had the opportunity to learn what happened to them. Gita, however, demurred.

SM: "I only remember something [Mama] said frequently: 'I don't need a piece of paper. I need the man (*chelovek*).'"²⁶

LB: There *was* a piece of paper somewhere, though. Its revelations are on the Russian website I mentioned earlier that lists victims of the Terror. One entry names the “planner” Solomon L’vovich Mebel, a Jew born in Chechersk in 1887.²⁷ (Incidentally, this is one year later than the birth year Sara remembered.) There’s nothing about the arrest in Moscow, but there’s a date for the second arrest, the one in Alma-Ata: August 15, 1936, a year or even two past when Sara thought she and her mother went to visit him. She would have been 17 at the time, older than she remembered. It says that he was arrested by the Administration of the Kazakhstan NKVD and sentenced by a special meeting that took place on January 31, 1937. Like so many of Stalin’s victims, Zalya was convicted under Article 58 of the Criminal Code, the law governing counter-revolutionary activities. The court sentenced him to five years in a “corrective labor camp.”

There is no date of death, but we have to assume he didn’t survive those five years in the notoriously brutal Soviet Gulag.

The web entry says that the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan acknowledged Zalya’s innocence on November 27, 1963. This was ten years before Gita’s death. It’s hard to imagine that she was notified of this and she didn’t inform Sara. Surely she would have shared the fact of Zalya’s official exoneration. But would it have done Gita any good to find out what exactly happened to her husband after the second arrest? Probably not. As she said, she wanted the man, not the piece of paper.

¹ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

² From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

³ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁴ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁵ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁶ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

⁷ This nickname is mentioned in Joseph B. Schechtman, *The Life and Times of Vladimir Jabotinsky: Rebel and Statesman* (S.P. Books, 1986), 94.

⁸ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

⁹ Victor Kugel’s sentence and death are from <http://lists.memo.ru/index11.htm>.

¹⁰ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

¹¹ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

¹² Naomi (Maimi) Kugel worked as an engineer in a Moscow automobile factory. From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

¹³ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

¹⁴ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002

¹⁵ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

¹⁶ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

¹⁷ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

¹⁸ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

¹⁹ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

²⁰ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

²¹ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

²² From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

²³ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

²⁴ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

²⁵ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

²⁶ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002

²⁷ Reference to Zalya's second arrest, sentence, and exoneration from <http://lists.memo.ru/index13.htm>