

Script for “Introduction to Sara’s Century” (Episode 1: broadcast August 1, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): In the summer of 1995, I was in St. Petersburg, Russia with my husband Bob Weinberg and our six-year-old son. We were subletting an apartment for a couple of months so Bob and I – we’re both Russian history professors – could do some research in St. Petersburg’s main library and archives. My husband’s elderly relative Sara Mebel, whom we call Aunt Sara, was living in a nearby town, and we went to visit her after we got to Russia. Her place was right near the local tourist attraction, a magnificent palace built in the 18th century for Catherine the Great.¹ Sara’s apartment, two crowded rooms she shared with a married couple, was quite the contrast. Sara was then 76 years old and not only was she suffering from all kinds of health problems, she was living on a pension that, thanks to inflation, wasn’t worth a whole lot anymore. We’d become really close to her in recent years, and we were worried about how she was doing.

Things were pretty bad all around. Russia was a shadow of its former Soviet self. Gone was the great socialist empire lurking behind the so-called “iron curtain.” With the strict censorship from Soviet times lifted, newspapers, magazines, and TV shows were outdoing themselves with ugly revelations about the communist regime – how ruthless repression was on the agenda from the very start; how the Soviet leadership brutalized and starved the country’s peasants - especially the ones in Ukraine; how the dictator Joseph Stalin imprisoned millions of his fellow citizens and was responsible for millions of deaths; and how state-sponsored brutality persisted even after Stalin died. The contemporary media were also going to town with exposés on problems the Soviet-era press usually pretended didn’t exist: violent crime, sexual assault, domestic violence, prostitution, drug addiction, poverty, homelessness.

As for the economy, it was in free fall. All but the few rich men who figured out how to profit from communism’s collapse were reeling from the inflation, from unemployment, from unpaid wages, and from the overall chaos resulting from replacing a planned state economy with an ostensibly free market. And in charge of all this was a government led by President Boris Yeltsin, a former communist whose booze-filled antics were a national disgrace.

These were scary times. But when Bob asked Sara how *she* was holding up, she looked at him and answered,

Sara Mebel (SM): “Fine. There is no famine and the Germans aren’t invading.”²

LB: Not only did Sara Mebel live through famine in the 1930s and a German invasion a decade later – the infamous “Operation Barbarossa” - she was born just a few days before a deadly attack in her town against the Jews – a “pogrom” – and her mother had to hide for several days with newborn Sara in a freezing cold cellar. When Sara was in her teens, her father was arrested by Stalin’s secret police. He was exiled to Kazakhstan, rearrested, and after that, he disappeared entirely. Sara never saw him again and she never found out what happened to him – when he died or even how he died. Because her father was considered an “enemy of the people,” on top of the pain of her loss, she faced public humiliation and narrowed options for her education and her future.

World War II brought more horrors. When the German army was just outside Moscow in 1941, Sara, along with her fellow Muscovites, had to flee the Soviet capital. While she was waiting for the train that would take her from Moscow to faraway Siberia, German planes bombed the train station. She ran for cover, only to come back and find that someone had stolen all her luggage. With nothing left but a light coat to keep her warm, Sara traveled in a freight car all the way to Siberia just in time for a long Russian winter. She spent most of World War II safely distant from the Nazis and the battlefield, but she struggled with the cold and she was often left hungry. After the Red Army’s victory, right on the heels of the Nazis’ attempt to kill every Jew in Europe, she had to contend with postwar attacks on Soviet Jews by Stalin and his regime.

Sara made it through all this. After Stalin died in 1953, she settled into a more stable and typical Soviet existence, but by middle-class U.S. standards, her life was far from easy – she had to stand in queues for food and goods; she had to fight the authorities to live in an apartment she paid for and supposedly owned; she went through more painful personal losses; and she was always aware that the regime censored what she read and could subject her to some kind of punishment if someone thought she got out of line.

But in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed. To be sure, there was no famine and the Germans weren’t coming, but the Soviet safety net that provided health care and pensions for retirees was no longer solidly in place. Even though government repression had been lifted, Sara still had something to fear because open antisemitism was again on the rise. Loud, prominent voices were blaming the Jews for everything going wrong in the present and for everything that went wrong in the entire past. Sara became afraid. She was feeling old, frail, and vulnerable.

So in the late 1990s, just before Vladimir Putin came to power, Sara applied for political asylum in the United States, closing out her plea to American authorities by saying she feared that her life, which began with a pogrom, would end in one.

Also applying for asylum was the Jewish couple she shared her apartment with. Sara was all too aware that she was a burden to them, and she knew she had

no real place in their household. During a painful international telephone call, she cried her heart out to Bob and me, and we told her she could move in with us.

The three of them left Russia on – of all days! – September 11, 2001, boarding a Finnair flight to New York. There was 82-year-old Sara flying somewhere over Europe and suddenly there was an announcement in English and Finnish, neither of which language she understood. But she could see from the other passengers’ faces that something terrible had happened. The plane turned around in midair and, instead of landing as scheduled at JFK airport, newly closed because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it flew to Helsinki. When the U.S. government finally allowed flights from abroad back in, she got on another plane and resumed the trip that took her away from Russia forever.

On the day Bob and I picked her up in New York City, smoke from the World Trade Towers was still rising over lower Manhattan. We drove on the Belt Parkway toward JFK airport and we watched – and we could even smell - the smoke. We picked Sara up at the international terminal and drove her some 125 miles to her new home: the former dining room we’d converted into a bedroom on the first floor of our house in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. She was thousands of miles from the country she’d lived in for more than 80 years. In every way imaginable, she was a stranger in a strange land.

Sara’s been in the United States ever since, and she’s been an American citizen since 2008. It’s been very tough for her here: she’s diabetic, hard of hearing, and she’s learned only a few words of English. Most of all, she has felt lonely and isolated. For the last eight years, she’s been cared for in a Philadelphia nursing home. She is now 99 years old! Even though her memories have faded and even though worsening deafness makes communication even more difficult for her, she’s still amazingly sharp, funny, and capable of being loving and generous.

This podcast is going to be about her. It’ll take us through some very painful stories, along with – I promise you – stories that are not so painful. Sara had a lot of joy and satisfaction in her life. She wasn’t fully orphaned – she had a loving mother. She had meaningful relationships with friends, she experienced romance and love, and she felt the pride of a Soviet citizen who watched Russia change - from a place where you cooked on a kerosene burner, washed yourself in a bucket, and went to the bathroom in an outhouse you shared with your neighbors, to a Russia with gas stoves, showers, and private flush toilets. She watched it change from an empire where most Jews lived in crowded, poverty-stricken villages and towns – the “shtetls” where her parents and my grandparents were born - to a country where all doors were at least theoretically open to Jews. She watched it change from a place where sayings like “a hen is not a bird, a woman is not a person” and “the more you beat your old lady, the tastier your soup will be” were all too common. She watched it change from that to a socialist regime that at least proclaimed the equality and

emancipation of women. Finally, Sara watched it change from a USSR that got its ass kicked by those invading Germans in 1941, to a victorious nation that drove the German army all the way back to Berlin, called the shots in eastern and central Europe, and stood alongside the United States as one of two world superpowers for decades.

Sara was there for it all and fittingly, in a life shaken by the tremors of history, she had an interesting, fulfilling career as a seismologist who recorded and studied the world’s earthquakes. So even though the Soviet regime was the cause of so much heartache in Sara’s life, it also brought her opportunities that never before came the way of little Jewish girls, this one the granddaughter of Rabbi Lev Mebel, who happened to be my husband Bob’s great-grandfather.

This was a family of traditional Jews from the Pale of Settlement, the western part of the Russian Empire where Jews were required to live until the fall of the tsarist regime in March of 1917. Wars and revolutions in the twentieth century brought epic changes to Jews in the Pale, and Sara is one of those Jews whose life was dramatically altered. I wouldn’t say that hers was a typical Jewish story, but it’s also not that uncommon. If you need a mental picture, think “Fiddler on the Roof,” and then take Tevye’s family into whatever lay ahead when they all left their village of Anatevka for different destinations and different futures.

I interviewed Sara about her life the summer after she moved in, partly to get the family history straight, but also because I thought her story really needed to be told. Her life spanned an entire century and to me it showed how the highest and lowest points of that century’s history affected – even transformed - a single individual. She was a member of a vanishing breed, what we historians dubbed “*homo sovieticus*” or the “new Soviet person.” Sara and other people with a fundamentally Soviet identity had experiences and a worldview very different from Russians born in the last 40 years and, of course, from ours. Her remark about life being fine when the Germans aren’t coming and there’s no famine is quintessentially that of Soviet citizens who gauged their wellbeing in terms of whether or not the wolf was at the door.

At the same time, she and her fellow citizens had expectations of their government; *homo sovieticus* took certain things for granted. Say what you will about the communist regime of the Soviet Union, but it did ensure that most Soviet citizens had their basic needs met: they expected free health care and free higher education; doctors who would visit them in their apartments; state-funded vacations; plentiful jobs; and a safety net at the bottom of everything. The loss of her father gave Sara reasons to question the system, but she never became a dissident, a real enemy of the state – although her stepson would - and she never challenged core socialist ideals about equality and social justice. Sara was a loyal Soviet citizen

who only lost her faith when the government failed her by leaving her feeling unprotected in her old age.

Part of becoming *homo sovieticus* entailed ceasing to be *homo iudaeus*, ceasing to be a Jew. Even though Yiddish was Sara’s first language, at a young age she went down a seriously assimilationist road, and Russian became the only language she spoke and understood. Not having been given any religious training from her atheist parents, Sara didn’t know from Jewish holidays or Jewish beliefs. She completely lost touch with the expressions, the traditions, and the culture of generations of her Jewish forebears. Because Russians dominated the Soviet Union politically, culturally, and linguistically, by default, and like millions of others, Sara essentially became Russian - or at least some kind of Soviet hybrid. Here’s a telling example: even though she wasn’t a believer, when Sara wanted to ward off bad luck, she’d cross herself as though she were a congregant in the Russian Orthodox Church. There you have it: all the paradoxes of Soviet-style socialism in one individual.

Sara didn’t consider herself Jewish, but strangely, she was sure that everyone else considered her Jewish. But when I asked her why she thought people considered her Jewish, she didn’t mention either of these things; she just turned sideways so I could look closely at her profile while she indicated with her index figure some huge protuberance that I realized was how she saw her nose. What a double whammy of internalized and real antisemitism: all the disadvantages of being Jewish with none of the perks. All of the *mishegas*, none of the joy.

Before we go on to look more closely at Aunt Sara’s life, let me just briefly introduce myself: I’m Laurie Bernstein, and I’m a history professor at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. I met my husband Bob Weinberg in 1979, when we were both graduate students in Russian history at Berkeley.

I started interviewing Sara a few months after she moved into our house. I recorded our conversations on cassette tapes while I sat at my computer and simultaneously transcribed and translated them. I intended to write a biography of Sara, but the story actually became autobiographical. It’s become *my* story too and the story of *my* family. I’m going to do my best to do justice to all of us with this podcast.

Let me warn you: it’s a far-from-complete account. There are gaps in chronology and narrative because I didn’t think to ask certain questions or Sara didn’t remember or Sara didn’t want to talk about some things. There are inconsistencies because some days Sara would censor herself and tell a story a particular way - and then on another day she’d forget the earlier version and change it to something more detailed. Or vice versa. Sara also simplified her answers to make sure I, with my far-from-perfect knowledge of the Russian language, to make sure that I fully understood what she was telling me. By the same token, my Russian

wasn’t fluent enough for me to craft complicated questions. I’m still amazed at Sara’s patience with my mistakes and my inarticulateness. And of course there are the vagaries of time and her flagging memories of events that happened decades earlier. At this point, she doesn’t even remember doing the interviews and she doesn’t remember a lot of what she told me. In fact, recently I entertained Sara by retelling *her* one of the stories from her childhood.

So what I’m going to do in this podcast series is tell you what I know about Sara’s life. My friend and colleague Julia Zavadsky - thank you, Julia! - is going to bring us Sara’s voice. With just a couple of exceptions, everything Julia says will be a direct translation of something Sara told me during our recorded conversations. Bob’s and my stories about Sara will also figure in the podcast. What we’ve witnessed and what we’ve learned about her understanding of this country have given *us* an ongoing education about what it means to be an immigrant, especially an elderly one, and about the cultural clash between Russians and Americans. A lot of these stories are pretty funny – like the time Sara insisted she saw elk in our suburban Philadelphian backyard even after we told her they were actually deer.

SM: “Why would there be deer so close to a city?”³

LB: In any case, what we’ve got here is my rendition of the story of her life based on the experiences of my family and according to the memories Sara shared with me. But even to her they seemed unreal, far away. As Sara also put it,

SM: [Russian audio] “Maybe I made this up. But no one could make something like this up.”⁴

¹ The palace was initially commissioned by Catherine I, expanded at great expense by Empress Elizabeth, and then redone by Catherine II (the Great).

² Recollection of Bob Weinberg

³ Recollection of Bob Weinberg and Laurie Bernstein

⁴ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002