

Script for “Enemies of the People” (episode 6: broadcast September 5, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): In the previous episode, we saw how Sara’s father, who’d been imprisoned in Moscow, was exiled to Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan where he was living like a free man. In the summer of 1936, Sara and her mother Gita decided to move the 2,000 miles away from their home to Alma-Ata so the family could all be together. But Zalya Mebel was arrested a second time. Sara and her mother were with him when the NKVD knocked on the door late at night, searched the room, and took him away.

That was it. He was gone. Sara took a train back to their barracks room in Krasnogorsk to return to school while her mother stayed in Alma-Ata for another couple of weeks to try and find out what happened to Zalya. When she got back, Gita had no news. Now, she and Sara had to cope with the emotional reality of their loss. They were still facing the predicament they’d been in since the first arrest: they had a close family member who was a political prisoner of the NKVD. After Alma-Ata, they had the added stigma of a second arrest. If there were some tiny possibility that the secret police made a mistake the first time, it wasn’t remotely feasible that a second arrest could be shrugged off as an error – even though this is what Sara firmly believed. But this, like her grief, she had to keep to herself.

They had another problem, albeit a more quotidian one. Without Zalya’s income, Sara and Gita were poorer than ever. According to Sara, one of the first things Gita did when she returned from Alma-Ata was inform their servant Dunya that they couldn’t afford to pay her any more. But Dunya understandably had no desire to go back to the boonies of the Russian countryside. She considered herself a member of the family. So they made a deal: in exchange for staying with them in that single barracks room, Dunya would continue to take care of the household *and* she’d find a paying job.

Dunya was all set to start work at a razor factory, but to get the job, she needed to pass some test on a razor’s chemical composition. This was a problem. Loyal, resourceful Dunya was, in Sara’s words,

Sara Mebel (SM): “almost illiterate. . . [Russian audio] I remember teaching her how to read the form. Dunya had to take the exam just to be able to put a stamp on something. That’s Russian stupidity.”¹

LB: Gita and Sara found the situation hilarious.

SM: “When [Dunya] wasn’t looking, Mama and I almost died laughing!”²

LB: Sara remembered much more about Dunya and the razor exam than she did about everything else that happened in the wake of her father's arrests. As I said last time, she didn't even remember when the second arrest occurred, thinking that in Alma-Ata she was a year or two younger than her actual age at the time.

SM: "I was already."³

LB: You were 15?

SM: "Maybe I was 16."⁴

LB: She was 17 in the summer of 1936, which means she still had one more year to go of school. She was a teenager. She went on with her life.

On the surface, everything seemed fine. Sara just kept her mouth shut about her father. Secrets for the Mebel family were, of course, nothing new. As we've seen, Gita kept many things about the past from Sara. So Sara went back to finish high school, and joined her classmates in the Stalinist form of don't ask, don't tell.

SM: "My comrades..."

LB: Yes, she used the Russian word for comrades: *tovarishchi*.

SM: "My comrades in school either guessed and didn't want to upset me, or maybe they thought that my parents got divorced."⁵

LB: I have the impression that Sara encouraged the second scenario. Divorce was not stigmatized, whereas counter-revolutionary terrorism was. Even though she was friendly with the kids in her class, she couldn't take the risk of sharing her terrible secret.

This is something I have trouble understanding. How can you be close to people without talking about something as deep and fundamental as the loss of your parent? Talk about an elephant in the room! But this, Sara reminded me, was their upbringing. She used the Russian word that indicates training, education, and nurturing. It was their

SM: "*vospitanie*."⁶

LB: Her avoidance of the subject of her father didn't prevent Sara from considering her classmates to have been her close friends, her "comrades." They knew each other pretty well. They all started together when the local school in

Krasnogorsk expanded from the sixth into the seventh through tenth grades. Sara and her classmates came in as the first cohort of seventh graders and they graduated together at the end of the tenth.

SM: "It was a really small class – 19 kids."⁷

LB: You remember exactly how many? I asked Sara.

SM: "Yes, and I'll tell you why. We had very good relationships."⁸

LB: I asked what else she remembered.

SM: "Girls and boys studied together."⁹

LB: I think she made a point of telling me this because the next generation of students was segregated by sex, thanks to Stalin who ended coeducation during the Second World War.

I was curious about what it was like to be in high school in the 1930s. I had always imagined that Soviet schools were run like military ones, with stern, uniform-clad, attentive students who sat up straight and followed all the rules.

No, they were 20th-century teenagers and they behaved accordingly. Sara told me a funny story about a technical drawing class that was held on the school's second floor. The teacher was young, and he used to wear a long, untucked linen shirt known as a Tolstoy blouse with a big bow tied around the neck. An artist! A young artist! The perfect target for a bunch of obnoxious kids.

SM: "We decided to cut class one day, probably to go to the movies or something. Our whole class of 19 kids! I told you, we were good friends. All of us lowered ourselves down to the first floor by rope."¹⁰

LB: They cut class to go to a movie? They went out a window? They weren't afraid of the consequences? I asked if the school called their parents, only to be reminded that I was being a presumptuous American.

SM: "What do you mean? Who had a telephone?"¹¹

LB: Surely letters were sent home?

SM: "I don't remember. . . They probably yelled at us."¹²

LB: She was giggling about this in 2002.

SM: “I only remember how we laughed when we imagined what the tech drawing teacher would do when he came in and found an empty classroom.”¹³

LB: It’s hard to juxtapose this scene with Sara’s domestic reality. Eighth or ninth grade? Her father would already have been in Moscow’s Butyrka prison. The Stalinist Terror was well underway. And yet here was Sara with her 18 classmates dissing their poor teacher and cutting class by shimmying out the window down a rope. This wasn’t how I pictured the Soviet educational scene in the mid 1930s. But there it is. She and her friends hung out, they did things together like ice skating and cross-country skiing. They used to go dancing, and they did the fox trot, the tango, and something she called the Boston waltz.

I was really curious about boys and romance. “Who was your first love?” I asked Sara. I told her that when I was that age, I was what we used to call “boy crazy.” She conceded,

SM: “I thought a lot about boys, Laurie. But I’m not used to talking about such things.”¹⁴

LB: She wanted these kinds of intimate details to stay off limits. Similarly, she often refused to tell me the surnames of people she was talking about. For Sara, this was irrelevant information. Revealing it was like performing what she called a “striptease.” But she did tell me about a boyfriend she had in her last two or three years of high school. He became a pilot and he died after the war when he was flying some Soviet delegation to India. By then, he had a wife and two children.

SM: “I loved him. He probably loved me.”¹⁵

LB: And then she asked,

SM: “Do you want to know if we went to bed together?”¹⁶

LB: I did, but I couldn’t admit it, so I answered, “I’m not talking about sex. I’m talking about your dreams.” That was my shortcut in Russian for the kind of future she hoped to have. It’s not surprising that I didn’t get an answer more specific than

SM: “I very much wanted to be close to someone. Of course. I don’t know. Maybe we’ll talk about this another time.”¹⁷

LB: Sadly, we didn't. I could never bring myself to follow up the question of whether she and the pilot had sex.

I did, however, ask more about politics. I imagined that the school curriculum was chock full of communist propaganda. By my understanding, Marxist-Leninism was basic to whatever you studied, be it history or botany or razor manufacturing. The insistence on ideological training even became the butt of many Soviet jokes. One joke I heard when I lived in the Soviet Union described the oral exam of a medical student who was stumped by every single question about the bone structure of two skeletons she was shown. Only when one of the frustrated examiners asked her what she had studied in medical school did a light go on in her head.

Julia's voice: "Aha! These must be the skeletons of Marx and Engels!"

LB: I asked Sara what she learned about Marxism-Leninism and about the Bolshevik revolution. She didn't remember. If it was part of the curriculum, it didn't take.

SM: "Listen, Laurie, do you really think that at 13 or 15 years old I thought about revolution?"¹⁸

LB: My son Perry was 13 when we had this conversation. She added,

SM: "Your Perry, does he think a lot about the American War for Independence?"¹⁹

LB: He did not. These obligatory lessons also meant nothing to *her*, though Sara did recall that Marxism-Leninism, as well as the latest version of the history of the Communist Party, was taught at the institute she attended after she graduated high school. It was inconceivable to me that she didn't know or remember what I considered to be some of the most important aspects of Soviet culture in the 1930s. I asked what she thought of the huge propaganda campaign to motivate workers to push themselves past their limits. It was named Stakhanovism after Alexei Stakhanov, a miner who exceeded his production quota many times over.

SM: "I heard the name, but I felt very distant from politics."²⁰

LB: And again – insistently,

SM: "I was 16, 17 years old!"²¹

LB: Surely her parents talked politics while Zalya was still at home.

SM: "They didn't in front of me. If meat was expensive, maybe they said something."²²

LB: We've seen how their janitor was arrested for remarking that meat was cheaper before the revolution. Complaints were a risky business, and of course you didn't want to burden your child with words that could bring trouble if they were repeated in the wrong company. But what about Stalin, I asked. Stalin? She didn't remember if they talked about him. I pushed. What did *she* think of him at the time? Did she think he was a great man?

SM: "Yes, I thought he was great. They talked about him from morning 'til night – in the newspapers, in magazines, on the radio."²³

LB: And then, without any prompting from me, she went back to the subject of Zalya.

SM: "I remember thinking that my father's arrest was probably a mistake. I didn't tie it to Stalin. They made a mistake, I thought."²⁴

LB: But she couldn't say this to anyone, and, as we'll see, the fact of the missing father had everything to do with Sara's decisions after she finished high school. Graduation at the end of the tenth grade marked the point at which a young person would start work, joining the great Soviet proletariat or, if tracked for white-collar jobs, going for higher education with a focus on a specific field. There were no schools of liberal arts in the Soviet Union; everything was designed for training in one direction or another.

When Sara graduated, she chose higher education and started studying at Moscow's Institute of Economic Planning. This pointed her toward a career choice that would have been along the lines of her father's. But she didn't finish.

SM: "I completed two years of classes, but left before the [final] third. Why? In the first place, I probably had a weak character."²⁵

LB: She added that the work was very hard and she had no friends there.

SM: "We lived outside the city. It was very far to travel."²⁶

LB: It was also a financial hardship for Sara to be in school.

SM: “Mama and I were very poor. Mama had a small salary.”²⁷

LB: But the fact that she had a father who was an enemy of the people clearly played the most important role. It kept her from becoming a Komsomolka, a member of the Komsomol, the Young Communist League. This was an almost obligatory step for a young adult in the USSR.

SM: “They kept hassling me, ‘Why aren’t you a Komsomolka? Why aren’t you a Komsomolka?’”²⁸

LB: Sara said that there had been no pressure in high school to join and that she wasn’t alone among her earlier classmates in steering clear of the Communist Party. But things were different at the Institute. She admitted that one of the reasons she left was because she was terrified of the public interview required of all Komsomol applicants.

SM: “In order to get in, I would have had to recount my biography at a huge meeting - in other words, talk about Papa. I didn’t want to.”²⁹

LB: I asked her what would have *happened* if she announced that her father had been arrested? On one hand, probably nothing. Sara cited for me a famous 1935 quote attributed to Stalin:

SM: “Children don’t answer for their parents.”³⁰

LB: Stalin did make *one* comment *one* time at *one* meeting about how ‘a son does not answer for his father.’ But this was never official policy – sons and daughters *often* answered for their fathers and mothers in Stalin’s USSR. Still, the phrase became part of what historian Sheila Fitzpatrick called “Soviet folklore.”³¹ It makes sense that the offspring of citizens who had been arrested as traitors seized on the words as a shred of hope for their own survival. Sometimes the secret police left them alone; other times they didn’t.

Sara certainly hoped the exemption of a child from a parent’s guilt was real. This meant she would have been off the hook at a Komsomol meeting. But on the other hand, she might not have been – and she knew this. And there was no way she was going to risk the humiliation. To tell Komsomol members about her father would have opened up the question of *why* he had been arrested. Even though she

knew her father wasn't guilty, she couldn't say such a thing in public because it would have amounted to accusing the NKVD of having made a mistake, and as she reminded me,

SM: "The NKVD never made a mistake."³²

LB: Plus, they took him *two* times, not just once. Double jeopardy... So Sara dropped out of the institute, her basic ticket to Soviet success. She also kept a couple of answers at the ready for people who would invariably ask her why she hadn't joined the Komsomol. If it was someone she knew and trusted, she would leave it at,

SM: "I don't want to."³³

LB: But if it was someone she didn't trust, she would give the standard humble Soviet excuse.

SM: "I don't think I'm worthy."³⁴

LB: This was apparently the go-to answer for anyone who avoided Party membership. It implied that one was working on becoming worthy and, when the cherished goal was reached, one would of course join up. Sara supplied me with the sarcastic punch line, the one she couldn't say, for how long she expected it to take before she was worthy of joining the Communist Party.

SM: "A hundred years."³⁵

LB: I pushed: How did all this affect you? What would Komsomol membership have meant? Sara replied more seriously,

SM: "I would have been like everyone else. Being outside kept me separate. Almost 100% of young people - almost everyone was in the Komsomol."³⁶

LB: For her, this wasn't about socialism or Stalinism.

SM: "I didn't think about politics. I just wanted to be like everyone else."³⁷

LB: But Sara's withdrawal from the Soviet path to upward mobility and inclusion didn't block *all* the negative consequences of having a father who was an enemy of the people. As a Soviet citizen, she constantly had to fill out forms, all of which asked for information about her "social origins," a category that was central

to a regime that always invoked the notion of class war. Sara fudged her answers on these when it came to Zalya, referring to her father as a clerk, rather than as an economist.

SM: “Better that he was some kind of minor bureaucrat.”³⁸

LB: No doubt she lived in fear of discovery. As for her mother, Gita also found a way to skirt the issue. She would simply tell people that her husband was in “free exile,” omitting the minor detail of that second and final arrest. Didn’t people guess the truth, I asked Sara. This provoked an uncharacteristic expression of outrage.

SM: “How could they know? [She spits] Foo! To hell with them!”³⁹

LB: But the consequences were very real. Her mother became toxic socially. Friends cut off contact for fear of guilt by association. Except for their relationship with the Kugels, they

SM: “were completely alone.”⁴⁰

LB: Even two of Gita’s brothers in Moscow abandoned them. I asked Sara to tell me more about this, and she admitted that the estrangement was mutual.

SM: “Mama was proud, and they were scared. No one was guilty.”⁴¹

LB: Chaim Mebel, Zalya’s brother who had recently escaped Hitler’s Germany with his wife and two kids and who had reunited with his brother’s family in Moscow, dropped Sara and Gita like hot potatoes. Sara had no contact with them until she was in the U.S. and we found Chaim’s son in a Google search. (I’ll tell you more about that family reunion in a future episode.)

Even though Gita suffered socially, she fortunately wasn’t fired from her job. Sara was also able to find work when she quit the institute. Her first application was for a teaching assistantship at an art school where someone she knew worked as a teacher. Sara went to visit, and her acquaintance there took her into a classroom where they encountered

SM: “a totally naked man.”⁴²

LB: Sara apparently hadn’t been warned that this was a life drawing class. She decided that her teacher acquaintance was

SM: “a moron.”⁴³

LB: It was time to look elsewhere.

Gita stepped in. A doctor at her hospital had a relative who was the temporary director of the USSR Seismology Institute of the Academy of Sciences, a venerable institution that had recently been moved to Moscow from Leningrad. With the director’s help, Sara got a job as the low-level laboratory assistant for one of those people whose full names she was reluctant to supply. She referred to her by her name and patronymic, Natalya Agapovna. Natalya Agapovna was a figure straight out of Russian history, having been taught by Prince Boris Golitsyn in the pre-revolutionary era at St. Petersburg’s Higher Women’s Courses.

Not acquainted with the wonders of Google, Sara had no idea how easy it was to come up with a surname for someone Russian Wikipedia identifies as one of the founders of Soviet seismology. It was Natalya Agapovna Linden, born in 1887, who served as a mentor to the young woman she affectionately called Sarochka.

SM: “[S]he was a wonderful teacher. As we say, she was a teacher from God. That Natalya Agapovna taught me everything, not only taught me about seismology, but about how to work. Everything I know about seismology I know from her.”⁴⁴

LB: Sara started as a lab assistant. At some point in her career trajectory, she became a senior lab assistant, and then an engineer. By the time she retired, she had worked herself all the way up to the highest level - and she did it without joining the Komsomol and the Communist Party, and all without finishing her higher education.

SM: “I retired with the title of senior engineer.”⁴⁵

LB: She thinks she was only one at her institute to have made it to senior engineer without having completed her degree. Sara’s “Labor Booklet,” an official document that tracked her job history, attests to Sara’s rise through the Institute’s ranks.

I asked what she remembered about her job before the war, and she told me how difficult things became when Stalin issued a decree with stiff penalties for lateness. Sara referred to it with the word “ukase,” a word more often used to indicate something decreed by a Russian emperor. At the end of 1938, as part of an attempt to impose more discipline on the labor force, the regime criticized – and I quote - “shirkers, idlers, and self-seekers.” Management was to fire anyone who was absent without a valid reason and was to reprimand employees who were late for work or added time to their lunch breaks or went home early. Three times in a month and you were out. Four times in two months and you were out. As of 1940,

criminal penalties awaited people who arrived more than 20 minutes late for their job.

Sara had a three-hour round trip commute between Krasnogorsk and the seismology institute, and she had to leave time for delays on public transportation and for bad weather. She was proud to inform me that, nevertheless, she was never late. She admitted, though, that the threat was

SM: “horrible.”⁴⁶

LB: It also helped that there was always a bed for her at the apartment in central Moscow of their good friends, the Kugels. She could stay over whenever she liked.

Sara was so eager to tell me two stories about the lateness decree that she wrote them down in anticipation of that day’s interview so as not to forget. One was about an important scholar at her institute who made a big show of his daily arrival. She got up to show me the way he would pace by the front door.

SM: “He wasn’t tall, and he walked with a cane. He would arrive a few minutes early, and walk back and forth by the entrance, checking his watch.”⁴⁷

LB: Only when it was exactly the time to start work – on the dot - would he enter. Sara giggled.

SM: “Not a second earlier.”⁴⁸

LB: She had another story about the decree involving a professor at the institute who wore a uniform at work. This, too, cracked her up.

SM: “One time he overslept and he was absolutely terrified of being late.”⁴⁹

LB: She interrupted this story to describe how at that time men wore white long underwear as pajamas, instructing me to look up the English equivalent of the Russian word to make sure I got everything right. This professor was in such a hurry that one day he showed up in his long underwear.

SM: “He put on his black greatcoat over his pajamas, that white shirt and those white drawers. He stuffed his clothes in a briefcase, put on his shoes without socks, and showed up at our institute just like that.”⁵⁰

LB: But more soberly, she commented in relation to his panic,

SM: “Can you imagine how terrified people were because of this new decree?”⁵¹

LB: In June 1941, Sara was making plans to start learning English. On June 22, she heard an announcement on the radio about something important coming up. It was a Sunday. Sara, who was lying in bed, feared that the regime was about to issue another decree, one that would extend the length of the workday. She said this to her mother, who of course in their single room was right at hand.

SM: “Just when I wanted to study, we’ll have to work even longer.”⁵²

LB: But the radio announcement had nothing to do with the workday. It was a proclamation that Nazi Germany, their ally since the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact, had just attacked the Soviet Motherland. Next time we’ll talk about the war and Sara’s and Gita’s harrowing evacuation to Siberia.

¹ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
² From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
³ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
⁴ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
⁵ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
⁶ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
⁷ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
⁸ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
⁹ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
¹⁰ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
¹¹ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
¹² From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
¹³ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
¹⁴ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
¹⁵ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
¹⁶ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
¹⁷ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
¹⁸ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
¹⁹ From taped conversation of July 22, 2002
²⁰ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
²¹ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
²² From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
²³ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
²⁴ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
²⁵ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002
²⁶ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002
²⁷ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002
²⁸ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002
²⁹ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002
³⁰ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia," *The Journal of Modern History*, v. 65, no. 4 (December 1993): 758.

³² From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³³ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³⁴ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³⁵ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³⁶ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³⁷ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

³⁸ From transcript of July 20, 2002 conversation

³⁹ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

⁴⁰ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

⁴¹ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002

⁴² From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

⁴³ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

⁴⁴ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002

⁴⁵ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

⁴⁶ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁴⁷ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁴⁸ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁴⁹ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁵⁰ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁵¹ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁵² From taped conversation of July 28, 2002