Script for "Wartime Moscow" (episode 7: broadcast September 12, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): On Sunday, June 22, 1941, while Sara was lying in bed, she took notice when someone on the radio said something about an important broadcast ahead. Sara fully expected to hear that the government was going to lengthen the hours of everyone's workday, and she complained to her mother that this would mess up her plans to study English. But she learned something else entirely.

Sara Mebel (SM): [in Russian] "Suddenly, there was this terrible announcement that Germany attacked us! 'Brothers and sisters!' – that's how they addressed us."[1]

LB: Although Sara didn't mention him by name, the speaker was People's Commissar of Defense Vyacheslav Molotov.[2] Yes, he of Molotov cocktail fame who in August 1939 signed the notorious Non-Aggression Pact with the Nazis, paving the way for Germany to attack western Poland in the first act of the Second World War. In turn, the Soviet Union got eastern Poland and the nod to reincorporate other areas of the former Russian Empire that had been independent since the end of the First World War. Sara actually misstated Molotov's first words, remembering them as more genial than they were. Though he avoided addressing his millions of rapt listeners in a communist fashion - as comrades - he didn't go so far as to call them "brothers and sisters." Molotov actually began by speaking to the "Male citizens and female citizens of the Soviet Union!"

Molotov: [excerpt from Molotov's speech available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUt5is12ClQ]

LB: It's smoother in the Russian. Here's Julia Zavadsky with a translation of the beginning of Molotov's speech, starting with its call to Soviet citizens.

Julia: '*Grazhdane i grazhdanki* of the Soviet Union! Today at 4 o'clock a.m., without any claims having been presented to the Soviet Union, without a declaration of war, German troops attacked our country, attacked our borders at many points, and aerial bombed our cities . . . This unheard-of attack upon our country is a treachery unparalleled in the history of civilized nations.'

LB: Sara described how people in her barracks came outside from their rooms and looked at each other in shock.

SM: "I remember one thing as though it happened yesterday."[3]

LB: The young man who lived in the room next door to them was a newlywed, and he was in the middle of carrying in a couch he had just bought. Someone yelled at him,

SM: "'War, war with the Germans!' He dropped the couch and stood there with his mouth open. They took him into the army after a few days. I don't remember what happened to him, but I still remember how he dropped that couch."[4]

LB: Although Sara's friend Rafa Kugel had confided to her that war was coming, 22-year-old Sara hadn't paid attention. She was, in her words, foolish.

When it came to the wider world, Sara just wasn't engaged: she didn't read newspapers and, despite - or *because* of - her father's loss, she didn't follow politics. Of course, after the invasion, hiding from reality was no longer possible.

But even if Sara *had* read the paper, she would still have had no idea about Germany's crimes in occupied Europe. Although the Kremlin had railed against Hitler and his Nazis for most of the 1930s, as soon as the Non-Aggression Pact was signed, it became forbidden in the USSR to criticize Germany. It was also forbidden even to whisper about the possibility of war. No wonder everyone one was in shock.

Stalin himself was *also* flabbergasted by Germany's attack. He was so undone that he disappeared for more than a week, which is why it was Molotov, not Stalin, who made the June 22nd announcement. It's not that Stalin ever really trusted Hitler, but he was so intent on making use of the time he had bought through their pact to build up Russia's *own* war readiness that he refused to believe they had run out of time. Stalin kept chalking up intelligence he received about an imminent attack to provocateurs who wanted to break the alliance with Nazi Germany. Here's an example: he ignored the spring 1941 German publication of a phrase book that instructed soldiers how to say things in Russian like, "Hands up or I'll shoot!" and "Surrender!"[5] Needless to say, these weren't phrases designed for friendly tourists.

Once Stalin regained his grip, the USSR went into full-tilt war mode. One part of the defense strategy involved deporting people of German origin, now regarded as potential traitors, out of European Russia. Sara had a former high school classmate of German origin who lived with his uncle's family, and they were among the first wave of deportees. He informed Sara and several other friends that they were being sent away. She recalled how scared he was.

SM: "His ultimate fate I don't know, but I remember those big terrified eyes. He was probably sent to Siberia."[6]

LB: During and after the war, Stalin continued this policy of what we now euphemistically call ethnic cleansing: deporting and punishing entire national groups for some of their members' actual collaboration and for all of their members' potential collaboration.

The war was on. When a German aerial bombardment hit Krasnogorsk, Sara was in the barracks.

SM: "Mama worked a late shift, so it was nighttime. . . I was home alone. The bombing began. I was still just wearing my nightshirt. I was so scared! Remember how I had two girlfriends, the janitor Aleksei Ivanovich's daughters? I ran to them and we all went together into the cellar. *That* I remember."[7]

LB: The regime started evacuating the civilian population from Moscow to get them out of harm's way not long after the invasion. Though this was not punitive like the deportation of the ethnic Germans, it was still a chaotic process. Some two million people were sent east and, when possible, put to work on behalf of the war effort. But Sara was among the people who remained behind with her fellow Muscovites, all of them now also involved in war-related activities by choice or by fiat. Sara's seismology institute became just one more site of military production. As a member of the staff, Sara joined the assembly line in the repair shop to make machine parts. She was soon bumped up to a white-collar job.

SM: "[T]hey transferred me to work in control. I would sit there and check to see if there were any defects on the machine parts. This was after I myself had worked to make the parts."[8]

LB: Air raids became part of daily life. The radio and public address system would warn of a coming attack and, with the aid of the police, people would do their best to rush to safety. Sara spent entire nights in the Moscow Metro, which had been dug deep into the earth and now doubled during the war as a bomb shelter. Toting suitcases, valuables, bedding, and food, Muscovites would hunker down for hours until they heard the all clear. Sara described how crowded and terrifying it all was.

SM: "There were always lots of people there. . . I remember how the children would be crying."[9]

LB: And then, sure that I was going to ask a question about something she thought totally irrelevant, Sara added,

SM: "As for where they went to the bathroom, I don't remember."[10]

LB: I don't think I was going to interrupt this particular story, but now I was curious. I restrained myself *this* time.

Until the end of 1942, the Red Army was mostly in retreat. Leningrad, Russia's northern capital, was under a deadly blockade as of September 1941. The Germans were occupying more and more towns and cities in European Russia, including the area where Sara's family was from in the former Pale of Settlement. In the western Soviet Union, Nazi mobile-killing units slaughtered at least 1.3 million Jewish civilians.

As for Moscow, Germany's army was dangerously close as of October 1941. The seismology institute staff was sent to Tashkent in the Uzbekistan Soviet Republic, but Sara didn't go with them. She stayed put, awaiting her mother's evacuation notice. They were still in Moscow as late as October 15th, which is when Stalin issued an order for the evacuation of the Soviet leadership. Sara showed me an official document she still had with a date on it.

SM: "This tells me that we were still in Moscow as late as the 16th of October. Then they invited Mama to evacuate."[11]

LB: Gita and the entire workforce of her hospital and the optical factory in Krasnogorsk were to travel some 1,700 miles east to the Siberian city of Novosibirsk. Sara would go with them.

She and her mother packed whatever they could carry, staying under some established weight limit and bringing clothes, documents, and all their money.

SM: "Probably not much."[12]

LB: They left behind everything else they owned in their barracks room – the furniture, the dishware, the samovar, their photographs – everything that was connected to the family they, with Zalya, had once been. All this would vanish while they were gone.

SM: "When we came back, nothing was there, not even the barracks. It was probably bombed."[13]

LB: Their trip did not have an auspicious start.

SM: "We went to the train station and a terrible bombardment started, a really bad one. Everyone ran for cover."[14]

LB: When the aerial bombing stopped, and Sara and Gita came back, their luggage was gone. It had been stolen.

This left them with a few items and the clothes they had on. Let's just say these were not designed for the Siberian winter already underway. Sara was wearing a white knitted shawl and a light autumn coat. The one saving grace was that they had kept their documents on their person. These were literal lifelines for evacuee food rations, housing, and work.

SM: "So we got on the train."[15]

LB: They rode the 1,700 miles in a freight car that had been retrofitted with two rows of planks and one stove in the middle for heat. People slept in three layers, some on the floor and some on the planks. I asked Sara what it was like.

SM: "What do you think?! Sometimes you ask very strange questions! It was horrible, of course! . . . Imagine how many people there were! . . . We're talking about one room full of a lot of people."[16]

LB: For some of the way, Sara slept next to some man,

SM: "some *muzhik*."[17]

LB: Muzhik is the word for male peasant, but Sara tends to use it for any man who doesn't strike her as well behaved, as what she would call "cultured." Their intimate sleeping arrangement could not have been pleasant.

During Stalin's Terror, the regime commandeered freight cars to transport prisoners to forced labor camps. Conditions on these trains were extremely inhumane, with the men and women packed into the cars and denied sufficient air, food, and water. Deaths along the way were not uncommon.

Although Sara and her fellow human cargo traveled with relatively more comfort, their situation was still far from ideal. For one thing, they were sitting ducks for aerial bombers.

SM: "We frequently stopped between stations because of the bombs."[18]

LB: When there was a raid of some kind, the freight train would stop and just sit. The train also tended to avoid actual stations, which meant there was nowhere for the evacuees to buy anything and replenish their supplies. Food was scarce all around. Nobody brought along enough for what turned out to be a month-long ride. Sara and Gita had ration coupons for bread, but these only helped if the train stopped at stations that actually sold it. They also needed water, and the only way to get water was by scooping up snow from the ground and letting it melt. The people in her car also became plagued by lice.

SM: "We were all scratching ourselves."[19]

LB: Sara wrote the Russian plural down for me – *vshi* - to make sure I understood. Imagining that I was unfamiliar with lice, she added,

SM: "It's a kind of insect. It happens if people don't wash and they don't change their underwear."[20]

LB: Lice were actually common in my son's suburban elementary school, products not of spontaneous dirt accumulation, but simple contagion. In any case, when Sara's train final arrived in Novosibirsk, the evacuees learned that no one had made arrangements for their housing. They had nowhere to go. This meant that the freight car occupants had to sleep in the Novosibirsk train station for two weeks while local authorities scrambled to try and find places for them to live. Then things changed, though not for the better.

SM: "Suddenly, one day, one of the factory bosses came and said, 'Comrades, there is nowhere for you to live in the city. So, if someone has the chance to go somewhere else, you have permission to go.'"[21]

LB: This wasn't good news. Sara didn't tell me how she felt at the time, but it must have been dreadful. It's winter. There's a war on. She and her mother are in Siberia. They've been left on their own and they have nowhere to go.

Sara and Gita decided to contact Aleksei Ivanovich's daughters, their friends from the Krasnogorsk barracks. They, too, were in Siberia, having been evacuated to a village near Irkutsk. This was not close by; it was another 900 miles east, but Sara and Gita had no options. They managed to contact the young women, probably by telegram, and they actually got a reply – a much-needed and welcoming one. Their friends wrote,

SM: "'Come to Cheremkhovo. . . We'll meet you there.'"[22]

LB: Cheremkhovo was a small mining town around one hundred miles from the city of Irkutsk. Homeless and desperate, Sara and Gita headed for Cheremkhovo on another train, an actual passenger one this time. They rode for what Sara thinks was a couple of days.

SM: "So we arrived in Cheremkhovo, we got off the train, and no one was waiting for us! Well, what can I say? It was earth shattering."[23]

LB: There they were, in some Siberian mining town with no idea about what to do or where to go. Once again, Sara and Gita had to camp out, this time in the Cheremkhovo train station. As evacuees, they were entitled to rent-free housing, but it took several days before Gita got help from the local town council, the "soviet." Finally, they were directed to a room in a wooden, single-story hut – an *izba* in Russian - that belonged to a local woman named Anna Grigor'evna.

Anna Grigor'evna wasn't really happy to have two lodgers plunked down by the authorities to live rent free in her tiny house, and she made this clear right up front. As more and more evacuees wound up in Cheremkhovo and were also placed in people's houses, she softened her attitude. Relatively speaking, it wasn't so bad to have been saddled with a woman and her adult daughter – at least they didn't have a baby with them. At least they could work and help the household, like gathering wood for the stove that was their sole source of heat for the Siberian winter. Just to give you an idea of the weather, at present the average Cheremkhovo temperature in January apparently runs a high of three degrees and a low of minus 11. That's Fahrenheit.

Anna Grigor'evna was well off by Soviet standards. In fact, Sara referred to the family as "kulaks," the epithet slung by the regime at the peasants who resisted joining collective farms. Not only did they have their own hut in Cheremkhovo, but their very own cow. Still, there was just one other family member available to help out: Anna Grigor'evna's 18-year-old son Vasya who worked in the local meat-processing factory and was responsible for supplying water to the hut from a nearby well. The husband was not around, another son was at the front, and a third son was in prison, Sara quickly making it clear that he was a *real* criminal, not a political one. Sara had no idea how Anna Grigor'evna earned a living, but it was clear she didn't have a paying job. Maybe she sold milk from that one cow. Maybe Vasya made enough money. One thing she did for sure, though, was keep her hut spotless.

SM: "When Mama and I walked into that unbelievably clean house, we were ashamed of being so full of lice and filthy."[24]

LB: Even though they had gone to the public bathhouse several times while they were staying in the train station, they were still dirty – and lice were crawling through the seams of their clothes. Of course, there was no running water for a shower at their new living quarters.

SM: "We dropped off our stuff and decided to go back to the baths. . . And then something horrible happened."[25]

LB: On the way, they encountered some drunken men – "muzhiks" - on a horse-drawn sled who managed to run right into Sara's mother.

SM: "Not deliberately – accidentally. That's important."[26]

LB: Gita, who was in her mid fifties, fell down and broke her leg. The men in the sled just kept on going.

SM: "Imagine my horror. We're in an unfamiliar city. It's already dark. I'm alone, and there is Mama with a broken leg."[27]

LB: They were near the public bathhouse, the one place they were familiar with, so Sara ran over and cried, begging the manager for help. He located a horse-drawn sled and driver to take them to a local hospital.

SM: "There *are* good people in Russia."[28]

LB: Gita was admitted into the Cheremkhovo hospital, at which point the doctor insisted that Sara go home. Home? She had only been at Anna Grigor'evna's briefly, and she had no idea where it was. It was already dark out, daylight being in short supply during the northern winter. The driver of the sled was kind enough to drive Sara around, but it was only when he brought her back to the train station that she could remember how, earlier that day, they had made their way on foot to the hut. When she finally arrived at their new home, her eyes red from crying, Sara was greeted by her new landlady with an angry question.

SM: 'Where's your mother?!'[29]

LB: But upon learning that Gita was in the hospital, Anna Grigor'evna came around, giving Sara fresh milk to bring to Gita, along with that reliable Russian staple, potatoes.

SM: "She had a whole lot of potatoes."[30]

LB: Sara had not thought about this part of her history in a long time and she admitted that the recollection was painful.

SM: "I am very upset. I remember. Of course, you can't imagine – an alien city, not one familiar person. It's dark outside, Mama's lying in the snow, and I am a child. Imagine how horrible this was."[31]

LB: I told her I couldn't. I didn't remind her that she wasn't really a child when it happened - she was 22. But it's clear that being in a family that consisted of just her and a mother intent on protecting her as best she could always left Sara feeling like a child of some sort.

SM: "It was horrible. But okay, we made it through. We survived everything."[32]

LB: She couldn't remember how long Gita stayed in the hospital, but she did remember how anxiously they kept waiting for a word from Aleksei Ivanovich's daughters. Wasn't their invitation why they were in Cheremkhovo in the first place? Sara told me that in the hope of hearing from them, she went to the post office every single day for nearly a month. Nothing. On the day she declared,

SM: "This is the very last time I'm going,"[33]

LB: a letter from Valya, the youngest of Aleksei Ivanovich's three daughters, arrived. Valya was on her way to Cheremkhovo! Next time we'll talk about the women's reunion, Sara's month in a remote Buryat village, and the life she and her mother built for themselves in Siberia during the war.

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[1] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
[2] This is incorrect: Molotov was in fact Commissar of Foreign Affairs at the time.
[3] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
[4] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
[5] Described in Harrison E. Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* 2nd edition (New York: Da Capo Press), 58-59.
[6] From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
[7] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
[8] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
[9] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
[10] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

[11] From taped conversation of July 28, 2002
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