

Script for "At the War's End" (episode 9: broadcast September 25, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): We left Sara and Gita living as wartime evacuees in their shared room in the Siberian mining town of Cheremkhovo. Sara was working as a controller in the branch of a meat-processing plant that made combs and buttons from animal carcasses. This left her at odds with the other workers, especially after she realized they were stealing from their workplace. But then Sara found a better job.

Sara Mebel (SM): "Understand, I was a Muscovite. I was pretty well educated."¹

LB: She became an inspector and, not long after that, a *senior* inspector for the state welfare agency under the Cheremkhovo town soviet. This put her in charge of determining the monthly subsidies for female evacuees whose husbands were at the front. Sara would visit these women in their household to gauge the extent of their need and then provide help however she could. Most of the women came to Siberia with their children, so Sara would do things like help mothers find spots for their kids in day care and school. She'd also make sure the families had heat, no small issue in Siberia. She explained,

SM: "Let's say there is a woman who has two or three children, but no fuel. We would visit the head of the coal mine and make sure she got fuel. It was a coal town. It was our responsibility."²

LB: It was in this capacity that Sara was subjected to what we call sexual harassment and she just called the act of a *svoloch'*, a word that can be translated as jerk, bastard, or worse.

Having promised one evacuee with several children that she would find fuel to heat their house, Sara went to the coal mine where the woman worked and spoke to the mining boss about getting her some extra coal. Sara asked me to picture the scene.

SM: "Try to imagine this: I was thin as a rail, I had big eyes, and I was terribly naïve, probably stupid. I went up to him and started saying, 'You have a woman working for you with three children. I was at their home. They're . . . very poor. Most importantly, they are really cold.' . . . I remember his answer: '*Nu*, bring them coal on a cart or a sled.'"³

LB: Sounding very accommodating, he let her know,

SM: 'It won't cost you a thing. You can do anything you want.'⁴

LB: But then, this young guy, this "*muzhik*," looked her right in the eye and said,

SM: 'Of course, *I* can do everything. I can even make live children.' (*Ya dazhe mogu zhivyykh detei delat'*.)⁵

LB: This confused me, so Sara asked me whether I understood how men make live children. It was a weird sentence in Russian and in English, and I was still lost. Sara who, as we've seen, hated talking about matters she considered intimate or unseemly, didn't appreciate having to explain.

SM: "How do you make live children?! On the bed!"⁶

LB: The guy's choice of words still confused me, so Sara repeated the live children remark and then asked me to stop the tape. I refused. She was really frustrated over my failure to understand and so she angrily elaborated.

SM: "He wanted me! I, too, didn't understand at first, even though I know the language better than you! When I realized what he was saying, I walked out."⁷

LB: And then again.

SM: "*Oy*, how I walked out of that office!"⁸

LB: I asked whether she said anything to him. Not a word, she answered.

SM: "What could I have said? [in Russian] What would *you* have said? . . . Was it possible to say, you're a bastard – a *svoloch*? That's the only thing I could have said. And slapped him."⁹

LB: To make sure I understood that last remark, she smacked her hands together. You can hear it on the recording. [The slap] But when the confrontation actually took place, she didn't scream at this guy and she didn't slap him. He was, after all, the head of the mine, and there was no one to report him to. But the woman got the coal and Sara didn't have to pay for the coal with sex.

As a social welfare inspector, Sara had access to documents that opened up some important doors. Her office distributed permission slips to so-called "Red

Army families” that entitled the bearers to purchase clothing, boots, and other items. It’s not like you could just buy things in Soviet stores; you needed official authorization. Sara also had passes that gave women and their families access to state cafeterias. No one ate well, but at least her clients didn’t starve. It would have been really easy to abuse her position to get extra food – after all, she was often hungry - but she wasn’t that kind of person.

SM: “I give you my word. Not once. I don’t have that sin on my soul.”¹⁰

LB: As we saw with the comb-stealing incident, Sara’s scruples were atypical. One time, the Chermkhovo soviet received a package of things that had been donated by the U.S., then the Soviets’ wartime ally. These were valuable items in an economy that paid little attention to consumers even in peacetime; during the war, clothing and household goods were even farther from the state’s production priorities. So the social welfare department heads organized a lottery for what was supposed to be some kind of fair distribution of the American donations. Staff and clients paid a nominal fee to get in the running, and then someone drew from a big drum numbered pieces of paper that corresponded to numbers pasted on second-hand coats, shoes, *tchotchkes*, and so on. Sara bought in and she came away with a pretty round pincushion, something she kept until she left Russia in 2001. But her colleagues in the soviet somehow drew numbers for much more valuable items.

SM: “And then I see that everybody who works in the town soviet is winning really good things. A coat, a blouse, a dress. And I get a pincushion!”¹¹

LB: It then came to her that the drawing had been fixed in advance. As she put it,

SM: “I was the only fool.”¹²

LB: Sara had another taste of how officials abused their power and connections after the war, when she was already back at her job in Moscow.

SM: “I had absolutely nothing to wear.”¹³

LB: To buy clothes, Sara needed some kind of official authorization. It was nearly impossible to get this, and so Sara usually wore her one nice article of clothing, a long-sleeved black silk dress with lace trim around the scoop neck. She was so determined I get a sense of what it looked like that she stood up to demonstrate the cut and design, and then she had me look up two Russian words I

didn't know: *muara*, which I learned was moiré or rippled silk, and *kruzhevo*, which was Russian for lace. She was very proud of that dress – to her it represented the height of fashion.

SM: "It seemed so chic then."¹⁴

LB: She had this stylish dress to wear because of her own form of connections. It was a hand-me-down from a relative whose journalist husband was allowed by the regime to travel abroad. Of course this meant he had access to items that never ever appeared on Soviet shelves, including this black silk dress. When his wife tired of wearing it, she gave it to Sara.

SM: "I didn't take that dress off for an entire year – I didn't have anything else to wear."¹⁵

LB: The institute's deputy director had recently been brought to Moscow from Leningrad. He had a girlfriend at the institute who sported all kinds of beautiful clothes, a sign that the deputy director was sending permission slips her way. Sara was usually timid, but every now and then someone pushed her buttons, especially when she perceived something as *really* unfair. One day she was walking up a staircase at their institute and she ran into this guy.

SM: "He taps me on the shoulder and says, using the familiar form, 'You! Why do you always wear that dress?'"¹⁶

LB: That did it.

SM: "Everything poured out. . . I said, 'You give permission slips to *some people* every month, but for all the time that I have worked here, I have never gotten one. That's why I wear this one black dress!'"¹⁷

LB: Not long after this incident, Sara received authorization to buy a skirt.

SM: "That's how we lived!"¹⁸

LB: Before we bring Sara back to Moscow, I want to share a couple more stories about her experiences in Cheremkhovo. Like other white-collar workers in the Soviet Union, she was expected to go on *subbotniks*, days involving unpaid manual labor, often at collective farms in the countryside. This extra work was lauded as evidence of townspeople's ties with the Soviet peasantry and overall

enthusiasm for socialism, but in reality for most people it was a major drag - it was volunteer work that hadn't really been volunteered for.

While she was working for the Cheremkhovo soviet, Sara took part in her share of subbotniks, one time joining other staff members a few miles outside town for strawberry picking. A truck drove them to a bright red field covered with strawberries so plentiful that Sara filled a whole bucket in just a few hours. She brought some of the berries home for Gita to make jam. Because the amount of sugar they received for their ration cards wasn't nearly enough to sweeten and preserve the fruit, Gita boiled sugar beets with the strawberries, making a jam that Sara remembered as the tastiest she ever ate.

During a less pleasant subbotnik, she had to "volunteer" in a coal mine for a month. Along with several co-workers, just one other woman among them, Sara went into the mines and lugged to the surface carts that male miners working deep underground had filled up with coal. While she was there, she slept in a filthy railway wagon and had nowhere to wash.

More time as a volunteer miner surely lay ahead if she stayed in Cheremkhovo. Naturally, she and Gita were *desperate* to return to Moscow. But this couldn't happen unless the Red Army started winning the war. Once again, I asked Sara what she thought about the war more generally because it seemed tangential to all these stories about her life in evacuation. This provoked an emotional response that told me how wrong I was.

SM: "Because of the war, we had to leave [Moscow]. Because of it, I lost my friends. Because of it, I became poverty stricken."¹⁹

LB: I was still surprised that Sara didn't seem engaged with the bigger questions, with issues outside her own personal life. She quickly reminded me that her memory was episodic. I had asked about *her life* during the war and she was supplying me with the bits and pieces she remembered.

SM: "I don't know what to say. I wanted Moscow. I wanted us to live like we did before the war - except with Papa, of course. I can't say. I don't know what I felt then."²⁰

LB: I get it. Her life had been on hold. She added,

SM: "I also missed a boy I really loved, the one I went to school with. He was a pilot at the front. . . . When I got back to Moscow, he was already married."²¹

LB: Wait. She had a boyfriend? I realized she was talking about the young man she had mentioned at another time, someone she had been with in high school who died in a plane crash after the war when he was already married with two kids – the one she teased me about when she asked me if I wanted to know whether they had had sex. I never asked and she never told, but during this conversation she said,

SM: “That was my first love. I still remember him to this day.”²²

LB: Oh! They broke up *because* of the war. She had been pining for him the whole time, and she expected to be with him if and when the war ended. But while Sara and her mother were in Siberia, he had gotten married.

Sara didn't go into how this felt, but it must have been a devastating blow. It sounds like he was The One. When the war ended, Sara would join millions of other Soviet women in facing a demographic crisis caused by the enormous number of male war deaths in the Soviet Union. Though there is debate over the numbers, it is estimated that around 27 million Soviet citizens died during the war, some 14% of the total population. Most of them were men. As of 1946, that left seven men for every 10 women. For Sara's generation, it was very difficult for women to find husbands. This was on top of the trauma of Nazi atrocities, and of injuries, losses, displacement, and homelessness.

The war cost Sara her home. While they were in Cheremkhovo, their friend Maimi Kugel informed Sara and her mother that the Krasnogorsk barracks was bombed. All that was left was a pile of rubble. Everything they had was gone – the tables, the chairs, the dishes, the samovar, the objects of their life that might still conjure up their beloved Zalya. To add insult to injury, some of their things were stolen while they were away. After the war, Gita recognized their table with its beautifully carved legs at someone's private apartment and she spotted their table with the marble top for the samovar at somebody else's.

But all this awaited the return to Moscow that Sara and her mother wanted so badly. To go back, they needed to get back something for which official permission was required, not an easy process. As was so often the case, the Kugels stepped in. The Kugel family had already returned to Moscow from evacuation, and now Maimi, who was Sara's age, went to work on their behalf. Maimi had to fill out an endless pile of forms, as well as schlep back and forth between offices in Moscow and Krasnogorsk. One time she went the full 15 miles on foot. But Maimi got the papers signed and forwarded them to Cheremkhovo. Sara and Gita were able to quit their jobs and buy their train tickets.

I never got a date for this from Sara, but an entry in her Labor Booklet, the record of her lifetime of paid employment, says she was given permission to leave work on November 9, 1944. I don't know what happened to the sisters Shura, Valya,

and Maria – whether they stayed a lot longer or whether they left soon after. Regardless, they too would have come home to the destroyed barracks.

When Sara and Gita headed out, they didn't have a whole lot of luggage, but they did bring a jar of clarified butter, along with a huge bag that once held a feather bed but was now full of potatoes they harvested in autumn 1944 from their plot of land. A local factory dehydrated them, and Sara and Gita expected to eat those dried potatoes with the butter during what they imagined would be a very long train trip back to Moscow. They expected a lengthy trip, but they didn't expect what confronted them at the train station.

SM: "Getting on the train in Cheremkhovo was horrible. Our tickets said wagon number so-and-so, places number so-and-so. But when we got to the wagon, the attendant blocked the door and said 'I won't let you in. My wagon is overfull.' He sent us to another wagon. So with all of our things, with that bag of potatoes, we went to another wagon. But the attendant there wouldn't let us in because our tickets were for the other wagon."²³

LB: This was messed up. The train was about to leave.

SM: "Imagine the nightmare!"²⁴

LB: Sara and Gita rushed back to the first wagon, but the attendant still wouldn't let them board. Gita was arguing with him when someone came to their rescue and handed the guy some money.

SM: "That was the first time in my life there was a bribe paid on my behalf."²⁵

LB: They thanked their benefactor and boarded the train, only to find that their wagon had *plenty* of available spaces. This reminded me of the signs posted on the front doors of Leningrad restaurants in the 1980s telling would-be customers that there were no tables available. But the restaurants were never full; in fact, they were always empty. How did I know? Because my fellow "capitalist foreigners" and I figured out pretty quickly that if we pretended we couldn't read the Russian sign, we could get fed. We would walk in, take a seat, play dumb, and ask in English for menus. It worked every time. If you are wondering why restaurants would turn away business, the best answer is an old Soviet joke with the punch line, 'they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work.' It was way easier for the restaurant staff to discourage customers and steal the food for themselves. But back to Sara.

SM: "In contrast to the month it took to get out to [Siberia], it only took three or four days to get home."²⁶

LB: They didn't really have a home, but they were, as always, welcome at the Kugels' apartment. Gita went back to work at her clinic and, eventually, she and Sara moved into a vacant room in a stone house alongside Gita's medical clinic in Krasnogorsk. Sara described this place for me.

SM: "It had water, heat, and a toilet - that you love so much."²⁷

LB: That situation was temporary until Gita's institute found them a new place to live. It was in another Krasnogorsk barracks that had the two of them in one small room sharing a common kitchen with the other residents. Gita, ever the mama, did the cooking and, like their former servant Dunya, she rejected the shared kitchen in favor of the kerosene stove they kept on a small table in their room. Sara slept on a folding bed. The toilet? Like the place they lived before the war, it was outside. As for Sara's co-workers from the seismology institute, they returned from Tashkent, Uzbekistan in December of 1944. Sara's mentor Natalya Agapovna Linden got Sara her old job back in the beginning of 1945.

SM: "I was either a lab assistant or, more likely, a senior lab assistant."²⁸

LB: The Labor Booklet documents that she was rehired as a "senior lab assistant" as of February 20, 1945.

SM: "The war was still going on, but we had the sense that we were going to be victorious."²⁹

LB: She vividly remembered the joyous celebration in honor of the Soviet victory in the war. She lit up when she told me about the May 9th, 1945 parade in Moscow.

The date was as ingrained in her memory as July 4th is in ours. Just like we refer to the fourth, she called it "the ninth," presuming I'd know what she was talking about.

SM: "*Oy*, Laurie! The feeling of joy - I can't begin to describe this."³⁰

LB: Sara and her mother spent the night before the parade at the Kugels' apartment, and then they went with Maimi and her older brother Rafa to Red Square. Rafa hoisted Sara on his shoulders to keep her safe in the huge crowd.

SM: “The people – what can I say? – people who didn’t know each other hugged and kissed and cried and laughed, danced, hugged and kissed the soldiers. Several women were just weeping. It is impossible to describe . . . What a happy day it was!”³¹

LB: They had won the war. Help from the United States, late in coming, barely registered in the Soviet population’s sense of the victory. The Soviet Union lost 27 million people, but it defeated Nazi Germany and liberated Europe. To many in and outside the USSR, this justified every horror Stalin had inflicted on his people.

Everything seemed to be on the up and up, but Stalin’s suspicions would again hold sway. The USSR had won the war, but the economy was a mess. Some 25 million people were homeless. Around 1,700 cities and 70,000 villages had been hurt or totally destroyed. Stalin’s allies – the U.S. and Britain – were making moves that made him really nervous. Plus, we had a scary new weapon, the atom bomb. Not long after World War II ended, the Cold War began.

Stalin initiated a clampdown that reflected his fear of threats, real *and* imagined, against the USSR’s position and his own power. A cultural backlash started even before the war’s end. Arrests for perceived subversion increased, one of which involved Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who would become known as one of the Soviet Union’s greatest dissident writers. The secret police also came for Gita’s great-nephew, the grandson of the former fish merchant Lazar Belinkov. Twenty-two-year-old Soviet press correspondent Arkady Belinkov was sent to a prison camp in 1944 on the charge of writing anti-Soviet literature. Arkady was given a death sentence, but two prominent authors went to bat for him and the sentence was commuted. He would spend 12 years in the Gulag and, when he was freed in an amnesty after Stalin’s death, his health had already been ruined. I’m mentioning this because Sara married his father just three years after Arkady died.

Not long after Golda Meir, representing the brand new state of Israel in 1948, visited the Soviet Union and received an ecstatic welcome from Soviet Jews, Stalin began a campaign against them, especially writers and intellectuals of Jewish origin. To the regime, Jews’ enthusiasm for Israel made their loyalty to their socialist motherland seem highly questionable. Vilified as ‘bourgeois Zionists’ and ‘rootless cosmopolitans,’ Jews became the target of outlandish accusations like how they spied for the Nazis during the war. In a reprise of the Terror of the late 1930s, Jews were arrested, tortured, and murdered at the hands of the secret police. Rumors abounded about an imminent mass purge, especially after the press publicized what it claimed was a plot by Jewish doctors to kill the Soviet leadership. It’s no wonder Sara and Gita were terrified.

SM: "For me, the story of the Jews began . . . at the time of the Doctors' Plot."³²

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- ¹ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
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 - ⁴ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
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 - ¹⁸ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
 - ¹⁹ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
 - ²⁰ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
 - ²¹ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
 - ²² From taped conversation of July 23, 2002
 - ²³ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
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