

Script for "Stalin's Postwar Clampdown (episode 10: broadcast September 26, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): Last time we saw how Sara finally made it back from Siberia and had to scramble for a place to live because her barracks home had been destroyed by aerial bombing during the war. She joined her fellow citizens in their exhilaration over the USSR's victory, but dangerous political developments soon put a lid on her joy. The Soviet Union was having its own version of a Red Scare, as Stalin's regime tightened up after the war and displayed a paranoia much more lethal and far-reaching than that of our own senator Joseph McCarthy. Ominously, postwar state-sponsored antisemitism was bringing out the worst in many Soviet citizens and spurring a murderous campaign against the Jews. This was also the era of intense xenophobia and inflated claims of Soviet ingenuity: We invented the radio! We invented the electric light bulb!

Sara's workplace was not spared. She remembered how the director of the seismology institute, Vyacheslav Bonchkovsky, threw himself into the xenophobic swing of things at a meeting in 1952 by complaining about the institute's reliance on Greenwich Mean Time, the gauge by which seismologists all over the world calibrated earthquakes to a tiny fraction of a second.¹

Sara Mebel (SM): [In Russian] "I still remember one phrase. It surprised me so much that I still remember. He said, 'Why must we, the Soviet people, work on Greenwich time when we have our own Kremlin time?'"²

LB: Seismologists by definition are an international lot who need to collaborate, pool their findings, and chart seismic disturbances with precision. People at the meeting understandably responded with a stunned silence. Even for a big shot Communist Party member like Bonchkovsky, this was a bit over the top.

SM: "Only two people weren't afraid and said something in response."³

LB: One of them was Sara's good friend and colleague, a woman named Sara Kogan. Kogan tactfully pointed out how awkward it would be to operate according to a time zone out of sync with the rest of the world. Her argument won the day.

Bonchkovsky made another unpleasant appearance in our Sara's life, this time voicing freely his contempt for the Jews. They were both on some kind of temporary assignment at a seismological station in the Crimean town of Simferopol, around 850 miles from Moscow. Sara was with two female friends at a beach in nearby Yalta, and Bonchkovsky came up to them wearing nothing but his bathing suit.

SM: "We were also nearly naked."⁴

LB: This new level of informality evidently broke the ice and they all started chatting in a friendly way.

SM: "We were laughing about something. Ha ha, hee hee. Suddenly, he told a horrible antisemitic joke. He forgot that I'm Jewish."⁵

LB: Bonchkovsky looked at Sara and became embarrassed, but the damage had been done.

Antisemitism was back in fashion. Bonchkovsky's joke was just one of the ways Sara experienced the ugliness unleashed by the regime. The scariest was when the official Soviet newspaper *Pravda* announced in mid-January 1953 that a cabal of mostly Jewish doctors had killed the Communist Party chief of Leningrad a few years earlier and was plotting to kill other Soviet leaders. The headline read "Vicious Spies and Killers under the Mask of Academic Physicians," and it highlighted the doctors with Jewish names, linking them – and I quote - "to an international Jewish bourgeois-nationalist organization."⁶ Soviet enterprises fell into line by firing Jewish personnel. People on the street took full advantage of what looked like official permission to harass and assault their fellow Jewish citizens.

Sara had vivid memories of the so-called "Doctors' Plot" announcement. She told me she knew then it was a load of crap, and only a pretext for the regime to target Soviet Jews. How? I asked. How did she know? It's not like there was a free press that challenged the official story. This set Sara off.

SM: "Why do you think that trees are green? I don't know how I knew."⁷

LB: But she thought a bit more about this and then said that her friend Rafa Kugel must have told her because

SM: "he knew everything."⁸

LB: Sara's mother Gita was 66 at the time, and she got really scared. Not only was she Jewish with a past that involved marriage to a man deemed an "enemy of the people" for his own Jewish bourgeois nationalism, but she was a Jew in the medical field. Medicine was now deemed to be chock full of Jewish murderers. Thank goodness nothing happened to Gita, but Sara thinks that's only because Gita was a nurse-midwife, not a full-fledged doctor.

There were other repercussions in the family, though. Mirra Belinkova, the wife of Gita's nephew Vitya, lost her job at a children's book publishing house. Vitya was also fired from his position as director of central accounting at the Ministry of Light Industry. Mirra and Vitya's son Arkady was already doing hard labor in a Soviet prison camp. Moritz Mebel, the cousin Sara lost touch with in the early 1930s, was then head of a hospital in the new Soviet puppet republic of Estonia. According to the journalist Mark Kurlansky in his book *The Chosen Few: The Resurrection of Soviet Jewry*, Moritz "was advised that it was only a matter of time until he was removed from his position in the hospital."⁹

SM: "When the Doctors' Plot began, [my boss] came up to me and asked me to stay after work.¹⁰ So in the evening, when everyone went home, I went to his office . . . He stood up and said . . . 'Sarochka, the First Section called me in today.'"¹¹

LB: She clarified that the "First Section" in her institute was a branch of the Soviet secret police and that it was headed by a woman. I told her this surprised me.

SM: "You think only men were doing this?"¹²

LB: This First Section rep started inquiring about her, demanding immediate answers about Sara's work and loyalty from Sara's boss Eugene Savarensky. The simplest thing for him to do would have been to take the hint and throw Sara to the wolves, but, instead, he stood up for her. He summoned Sara to his office, informed her about the First Section's inquiry, and asked for her help in drafting a letter that would save her job.

SM: "You need to understand what I knew then and what I know now. . . He was taking a huge risk! What if I went to the First Section and reported what he did to *them*?"¹³

LB: Together, they came up with a dazzling testimonial that lauded Sara's loyalty and academic contributions.

SM: "Even I myself laughed and said that there would be no scholarship in the USSR if there hadn't been a Sara Mebel!"¹⁴

LB: Thanks to her boss, Sara kept her position at the institute. Her cousin Moritz also wasn't fired. Benefiting them both, along with all the Jews under attack in the USSR, was a huge surprise.

SM: "The end of the story: Stalin died."¹⁵

LB: On the fifth of March 1953, Stalin suffered a stroke that may or may not have been helped along by some of his scheming cronies. Sara was not among the millions of Soviet citizens who sincerely mourned the death of their leader. But she went along with her colleagues at the institute to pay her respects at the funeral four days later, heading there down a narrow street by Moscow's Bolshoi Theater. The crowd was huge, and people were jockeying for position by pushing each other. That day, several hundred mourners were trampled in the crush. Sara wasn't hurt; she ducked under a big truck to wait out the crowd.

SM: "So I never got to say goodbye to Stalin."¹⁶

LB: She didn't sound at all broken up by this. Though before the war she had swallowed the propaganda about Stalin's greatness, her opinion had changed.

SM: "Deep down, I didn't like Stalin. I kept quiet about this, but I didn't like him. I don't know why. For me, he wasn't a person, but rather some kind of – I can't even say it in Russian – he was like some kind of god, a living god. And I didn't believe in god."¹⁷

LB: The Doctors' Plot turned her off even more.

SM: "After the Doctors' Plot, I was furious at Stalin."¹⁸

LB: When the newspapers announced a month after Stalin's death that the Doctors' Plot had been what they called a "mistake," Sara said she became hysterical for the first time in her life. Why, I wanted to know.

SM: "It was the feeling of liberation that the Jews weren't guilty."¹⁹

LB: It's not that Sara believed that the Jewish doctors were guilty as charged, but now she knew for sure.

Even though she claimed not to identify as a Jew, we have seen that Sara often distinguished between Russians and Jews, usually putting herself in the latter category. Her father's arrest and accusations against the Jewish doctors tarred Sara, her mother, and many of their friends and relatives with a brush that painted all Jews as disloyal. Ironically, antisemitism *increased* Sara's identification with other Jews, especially after a war with the Nazis.

And there was more to come. Over the next few years, there would be continued revelations about Stalin's atrocities, culminating in Nikita Khrushchev's so-called "Secret Speech" at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956.

SM: "It was secret, but even I knew about it. We told each other 'tu tu tu tu tu.' I remember how we were shocked. Was what he said really true?"²⁰

LB: Even after having lost her father and witnessed so many horrors, Sara still didn't know the extent of the regime's crimes. Until then, she hadn't fully grasped what had happened.

SM: "That's when I realized for the first time that my Papa's arrest wasn't a mistake. . . [I]f Khrushchev was telling the truth, it wasn't a mistake. It was the system."²¹

LB: Khrushchev's moves to vindicate Stalin's victims spurred questions about Zalya, but what did official rehabilitation matter to a family that had been irrevocably broken? This is when Sara's mother made it clear she wasn't interested in finding out his fate. She wanted the man, not the piece of paper.

Through it all, Sara continued at her job.

SM: "So I worked, worked, and worked."²²

LB: Though Sara lived in a world of corruption, venality, and periodic political terror, she also lived in a world that took women's work seriously. Their emancipation was judged by their contribution to society outside the household. Sara loved her job.

SM: "Every day there was something new. On one day, I would read something. On another day, I would monitor the seismograph."²³

LB: Even though she didn't have a degree, she was doing serious and meaningful work. By the 1960s, a former colleague was her boss. This was Vladimir Isakovich Keilis-Borok, a well-known scientist who wound up at UCLA in the late 90s and became famous for his claim that he could predict not only earthquakes, but elections, crimes, and terrorist attacks. Not everyone believes it was more than coincidence when he got things right, but he often got things right. Keilis-Borok was widely published, his articles appearing not only in Soviet journals, but journals in the West as well. I googled his name and found an S.S. Mebel – Sara! - listed among

the authors of a 1966 article translated in 1972 as "Computer Determination of Earthquake Focal Depth."²⁴

Sara got really excited about seeing her name in print on my computer. The coincidence of my finding this reference on the day of Keilis-Borok's 81st birthday – on July 31, 2002 - was enough to send her to the phone for a call with the number I found on the web.

Also among the authors on the article was a woman named Tamara Zhelankina. At the time the seismology institute switched over to computers, Sara and Tamara often worked together at Tamara's tiny Moscow apartment.

Tamara lived there with her husband and her mother, a barely literate woman who evidently was at hand when Sara and Tamara were doing calculations about where and when an earthquake took place, the location of its epicenter, and its precise intensity. They were using some new machine, and they often needed to redo their work.

SM: "Tamara would often say, 'Oy, I made a mistake,' and she would fix it. I remember how one day her mama said, 'Listen, Tamara. Why do you work? You only make mistake after mistake!' Tamara and I laughed a lot about this."²⁵

LB: Sara was working with Tamara when Sara had a much more serious misadventure that brought her into the crosshairs of the secret police. The two women often went to a scientific institute a few hours outside Moscow to use its computer. The institute was in a place called Chernogolovka, and it was involved in some kind of secret work. As outsiders, Sara and Tamara had to do their work at night, and even then they sometimes waited hours before they got access to the computer. They also needed a special pass - and Sara lost hers.

SM: "This was very unpleasant."²⁶

LB: When she went back to Moscow, she had to inform someone in her institute's First Section about the lost pass and get a replacement. Though Stalin was dead and the days of mass terror were over, censorship, repression, and fear were still very much in place in the USSR. After Sara reported the loss, a member of the secret police started harassing her, threatening to report her breach of security to the institute's director. How was anyone to know she didn't hand it over to a spy? What if she gave it to an enemy? She would be going somewhere, and there he would be, watching her and threatening her.

SM: "After a few times, I got angry. I am a dreadful person when I'm angry. Even if Stalin himself had stood there, I would have told him off."²⁷

LB: Sara basically told him to do whatever he was going to do, so long as he left her alone.

SM: "After that he stopped bothering me, and there were no repercussions."²⁸

LB: Sara was also put in a bad position when she apparently lost a seismogram with the record of a very powerful earthquake in the U.S. Her institute had expected to get a copy, but someone from the American station sent them the actual original, which was supposed to be returned.

SM: "You understand, the original can't be replaced . . . I used it and then I gave the seismogram to our lab assistant to take to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences."²⁹

LB: She was referring to *the* head of the main scientific organization in the USSR.

But the seismogram disappeared, something Sara learned when someone else from the secret police came to see her about its whereabouts. She told him how she gave it to the lab assistant named Shura.

SM: "He said, 'Well, think again. The seismogram's not there. Where is it?'"³⁰

LB: Then he brought the lab assistant in for questioning. Shura confirmed that Sara gave it her and that she would have then delivered it to the Presidium as ordered. But no, she had no receipt.

SM: "Imagine how scared Shura and I were."³¹

LB: Lucky for them, a secretary at the Presidium vouched for having gotten it. Someone eventually found the seismogram lying on the floor.

I know it doesn't sound like a big deal to us, but not only was Sara's job on the line, so was her freedom. What if she were in league with the Americans? What if she were deliberately trying to humiliate Soviet authorities?

Sara's other recollections about work take us back to those days in Cheremkhovo when she was required to "volunteer" to pick strawberries and drag carts loaded with coal out of the mines. As a member of the staff of the seismology institute, she had to take part in subbotniks on weekends and for lengthy summer periods.

One of the staff's obligations had them cleaning their building before Soviet holidays. Another had them harvesting potatoes in late autumn from a collective farm just outside Moscow. This meant everyone, from the lowly lab assistants to the senior engineers, had to dig in the frozen ground with their hands. Sara said she ruined hers as a consequence. But in the lean days after the war while Sara was away at a farm, her mother could use Sara's ration card and collect double rations – for oil, meat, cereal, bread, and potatoes. Sara not only got fed pretty well at the farm, she would come home with a supply of potatoes and carrots.

Sara actually had fond memories of her and her co-workers' subbotniks at the collective farm. She was still young after the war – in her late 20s, early 30s - and she and other members of the staff would have fun together. Sometimes they would have parties at night, dancing the foxtrot, waltzes, and tangos – never folk dances, as she clarified a bit indignantly when I asked.

SM: “We were urban. We didn't folk dance in Moscow.”³²

LB: They would sleep on the floor of the peasant huts, sometimes for several days at a time, once for an entire month. Water? It came in a bucket from a well. Toilet? Not surprisingly, it was outside. Anticipating my invariable question, Sara added,

SM: “There was no toilet paper.”³³

LB: As for their hosts, they would stay in a separate room, sleeping in peasant fashion on the stove. Sara and her co-workers don't seem to have socialized with them. So much for ties between city and country folk. Soviet educated urbanites and collective farmers may as well have been from different universes.

Sara told me a story she thought would help me understand the extent of the cultural difference. It had to do with a research visit in the 1960s by some of her co-workers to Israel.

SM: “When they returned, we had a meeting at the institute and they told us their impressions.”³⁴

LB: They were evidently delighted at what they saw, especially on an Israeli kibbutz, one of the agricultural cooperatives that dominated the Israeli countryside, thanks in part to socialist-minded Jews like her father. (If you recall, Zalya helped organize a kibbutz in Palestine before the war.)

SM: "I remember one question. Someone asked, 'What's a kibbutz? Is it anything like our collective farms?' The answer was this: 'I don't know whether it's like a collective farm or not, but every place the *kibbutzniks* live, there are very many books and records.'³⁵

LB: Sara added,

SM: "I want to tell you that I never saw one book in the collective farms. We're not even talking about records."³⁶

LB: I thought I had caught her up here. So how did you play music when you danced, I asked.

They brought their own phonograph...

Sara was expected to continue doing unpaid labor until she retired in 1974. Another job had her and her co-workers working at Moscow's produce supply depots, giant storage lockers where they would sift through the produce and throw out the rotten fruit and vegetables. This was great – they got to eat oranges, for them a rare and way-too-expensive treat. Going through the mounds of potatoes was less pleasant. I asked Sara whether she and her colleagues resented having to do all this. If they did, they kept it to themselves.

SM: "No one had the courage to say that."³⁷

LB: I told her how incredulous my colleagues would be if we were told we had to go harvest potatoes. She acknowledged that this all sounds strange.

Even stranger was the nightmare Sara faced when she and her mother paid for an apartment in Moscow and weren't allowed to move in. Next time we'll hear that story, along with the circumstances of Sara's marriage to her cousin Vitya Belinkov, the years of her life she identified as the very happiest.³⁸

¹ The first time she mentioned a name for this individual, she called him "Kharin," but when Sara recounted the story about the antisemitic joke in Simferopol, she referred to Bonchkovsky and added how he was "that same communist who suggested we stop working according to Greenwich time." From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

² From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

³ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

⁴ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

⁵ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002

⁶ A translation of the article can be found in <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/vrach-ubijca-e.html>. Accessed September 3, 2018

⁷ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002

⁸ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002

⁹ Mark Kurlansky, *A Chosen Few: The Resurrection of European Jewry* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994), 148.

- ¹⁰ A draft of this document was among Sara's papers. It was signed by Eugene F. Savarensky.
- ¹¹ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
- ¹² From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
- ¹³ From taped conversation of August 1, 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 9, 2002
- ¹⁸ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
- ¹⁹ From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
- ²⁰ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ²¹ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ²² From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ²³ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²⁴ The article was translated from the journal *Vychislitel'naia Seismologiya* no. 1 (Moscow: Nauka, 1966): 10-30, and published in *Computational Seismology*, eds. V.I. Keilis-Borok and E.A. Flinn (Boston: Springer, 1972): 16-24.
- ²⁵ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²⁶ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²⁷ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²⁸ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²⁹ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ³⁰ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ³¹ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ³² From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
- ³³ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ³⁴ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ³⁵ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ³⁶ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002
- ³⁷ From taped conversation of August 9, 2002