Script for "A 'Palace' and a Husband" (episode 11: broadcast October 3, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): The USSR was a much less scary place after Stalin died, but the press was still censored, dissent was still dangerous, and though she was thriving at work, Sara was still living in a single room with her mother in a Krasnogorsk barracks with a shared kitchen and no indoor plumbing. Her round-trip commute to work remained three hours. It's no wonder that Sara and Gita leapt at the chance to get an apartment with its own kitchen and bathroom in a brand-new building. But after putting money down, making regular payments for five years, and even working on the weekends to help get the building ready, they weren't allowed to move in. The story of trying to get a real apartment was something Sara called "one of the worst tragedies of my life."

Thus began a peculiarly Soviet saga involving bribery, meetings with big bosses and Communist Party members, threats, and ultimately a brazen night-time break-in.

I had a lot of trouble understanding how it was possible to pay for an apartment and then not be allowed to live in it. Didn't they have receipts? Didn't anyone keep a record? How come no one cared about receipts? Sara got really upset when I asked her these questions. They *had* receipts, but that didn't matter.

Sara Mebel (SM): [In Russian] "Laurie, you won't be able to understand this because you don't understand Soviet life! It's incomprehensible to you. I am recalling this and I'm starting to cry. For a year, Mama and I were tortured!"[1]

LB: Here's what happened. In 1952, the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences announced it was going to put up cooperative apartments to help its Moscow staff during what was a terrible postwar housing shortage. As a worker at the seismology institute, Sara was considered part of the Academy and so she had the right to one of the new apartments. But there was a big catch – she needed to come up with a 2,000-ruble deposit. It may as well have been a million. She and Gita

had no savings. They spent every kopeck they earned. But encouraged by their friend Maimi Kugel, they went for it anyway. They filled out an application for a place and they hoped for a miracle.

SM: "Then, Laurie, a miracle occurred! A miracle occurred!"[2]

LB: They won the lottery! The communist regime indeed sponsored a lottery, a fund people were obligated to pay into at work. Newspapers published the list of winners and, like so many of their fellow Soviet citizens, Sara and her mother regularly checked to see if they were among the lucky ones. Chances were very slim, but you never knew. One day, right around the time they applied for the apartment,

SM: "Mama was looking at the newspaper's list of winners and she said that, as usual, we hadn't won a thing. This was nothing new for us."[3]

LB: That page of newspaper then went to one of its other uses, this time as the wrapping for the lunch Gita made for Sara to bring to work. (Yes, Sara's mother still made lunch for her adult daughter.)

SM: "So I went to work and it was time for lunch. I unwrapped what I had brought, and I started to eat."[4]

LB: That's when she saw the list of winners on a page her mother hadn't looked at carefully enough. They had won. They had won 2,000 rubles, just what they needed for a down payment on the apartment. Sara was ecstatic.

SM: "And that's how I became a member of the cooperative for the first time."[5]

LB: But the buildings - there were to be three of them – still had to be constructed. Over the next five years, Sara and around another thousand co-op

members put in hours on the weekend to do things like clean up the construction site, wash windows and floors, and carry out trash. This was okay - at the end, everyone was getting their very own place to live. Gita and Sara even knew which 12-square-meter apartment was slated to be theirs. She described to me everything that awaited them.

SM: "[A] big room . . . very nice, with very big windows; a kitchen; a small hallway; and what we call a 'sanuzel' - a shower, a sink, and a toilet."[6]

LB: She knew I'd appreciate the toilet part.

SM: "After the barracks, this was a palace. For me, for Mama, this was a palace."[7]

LB: It's hard for us to imagine how much Sara and her mother looked forward to this move. That they would still be sharing one room was never an issue; they would have their own place.

But in 1957, after those five long years of waiting, their names suddenly vanished from the list of owners. Just like that, they lost their apartment, their "palace." Receipts were meaningless, and there were no records of the payments they had made. It was as if they had never paid anyone a kopeck.

SM: "You can't imagine what kind of nightmare this was."[8]

LB: As it turned out, more than a dozen other would-be apartment owners – almost all single women and their mothers - were in the same predicament.

The building's assistant director, a man named Afanasyev, evidently just scratched from the list those who hadn't paid him a bribe. It was no coincidence that he picked the poorest and most vulnerable.

So Sara went to see this man, this "*diad'ka*," this "little uncle," as she called him, and she explained the problem. Speaking to her rudely - in the familiar form of

address - Afanasyev said Sara and her mother could get a permission slip tomorrow, but only if they took a room in what Soviets called a communal apartment. These kinds of shared living arrangements, based on some official's placement of total strangers in separate rooms within one apartment, tended to be anything but communal.

All that money and all that work for Sara and Gita to share a bathroom and kitchen with people they didn't know? This was *not* going to happen. Sara reminded Afanasyev that they had signed up for their *own* apartment, and they expected to get it. But he wouldn't budge. This is the point in our conversation when Sara lost it because I kept asking about receipts. But this was their reality. It was, as Sara cried to me,

SM: "Soviet life."[9]

LB: Afanasyev supplied Sara with an explanation that brings to mind what we call a Catch-22. Because Sara lived outside the capital in Krasnogorsk, the Regional Soviet of Moscow couldn't approve the move. She couldn't move to Moscow because she didn't live in Moscow. Yet they had taken her money. Sara tried using logic.

SM: "I say to him, when I signed up for the apartment in 1952, you already knew this."[10]

LB: She explained how she had worked at the construction site on her days off, how she had made a huge down payment, how she had made payments for five whole years! She wept. She yelled. He was unmoved.

Sara went to argue with him many times, showing up at his office and pleading her case. He would listen - and do nothing.

Meanwhile, some of the people who had been stricken from the list were back on and *they* were getting their apartments, probably because they ponied up the requisite bribe. The ones still left out in the cold got together and formed, in

good Soviet fashion, what they called a "collective." The collective went to the head of the Communist Party Committee of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences with their story. The big shot communist listened and agreed – this was a disgrace! But he claimed there was nothing he could do. Sara and the others threatened that this left them with no choice but to go to the very top. They would write to the Central Committee of the Communist Party itself! The big shot pointed to the ceiling and said, "Do you think they don't know?"

SM: "He wasn't even embarrassed to say this. So we walked out."[11]

LB: Then they took another tack. They went to see another muckety-muck, this one at the Moscow Municipal Soviet. When they started yelling at him, he fled his office.

SM: "We never saw him again."[12]

LB: I thought this was funny. Sara did not.

By this point, Sara and Gita had already notified the Krasnogorsk authorities about vacating their barracks room – they *had* to move. Sara sought help from Afanasyev's boss, the director of the building cooperative. He was in charge, he was part of their institute, and he had already moved into one of the new buildings. This man accompanied Sara to the Moscow *Regional* Soviet, the government body that said she couldn't move because she lived outside Moscow, where she argued that her residency had never been a problem before. Why now? She told the Soviet about the years of volunteer labor, about the big down payment, and how she made payments for five whole years.

SM: "Some lady, some female bureaucrat from the Regional Soviet, says to me, 'For you, everything is about money, money!'"[13]

LB: I don't know if that was an antisemitic crack or just a way to avoid acting on Sara's behalf. Regardless, the Regional Soviet did nothing to help.

Then Eugene Savarensky, Sara's boss from the institute, stepped up, the good guy who already went out on a limb for her during the Doctors' Plot. Savarensky got her a meeting with an acquaintance who happened to be the head of Moscow University. This person was very high up in the local hierarchy. Not only did he run the university, he was a member of the Moscow Municipal Soviet. But even though he admitted Sara was in the right, he couldn't – or wouldn't - help.

SM: "Now you understand why I said that something that could have been so wonderful was a tragedy. You don't know how horrible it is to feel like you're banging your head against the wall."[14]

LB: Finally, explicitly *off the record*, a co-worker told Sara that the director of the cooperative said they should just occupy their apartment. Forget the preliminaries. Their place was empty, it was just sitting there. Brilliant! And so Sara and Gita decided to go for it, to move in without permission. Some co-workers from the seismology institute – "the boys," as Sara called them - got hold of a truck and drove it to Krasnogorsk. They loaded up Sara and Gita's things, drove back to Moscow, and pulled up near the new building's entrance. It was after dark.

Sara had friends from the institute in the building, Volodya Keilis-Borok and his wife Lusya Malinovskaya. They joined the conspiracy.

SM: "It was a scene!"[15]

LM: Volodya and Lusya lured the building's doorman from his post by promising to pay him to hang a mirror in their place. With the entranceway clear, Sara, Gita, and the boys snuck up a stairway to the apartment's location on the second floor. There they found wooden boards nailed across the front door. They pried them off. But the door underneath was locked.

After all that doom and gloom in telling me this story, Sara started laughing.

SM: "I joked that it was too bad there were no burglars among my friends."[16]

LB: So one of the guys fetched a locksmith.

SM: "[The locksmith] was sure he had been summoned by bandits. He was really afraid, but he still opened the door."[17]

LB: They moved in. The deed was done. Some neighbors across the hall heard the commotion - and invited them all in for tea. As for the doorman, when he found out what happened, he threatened to nail boards across the door again, but Sara stood her ground and he backed down.

Gradually, the other people who couldn't get official permission for their apartments also found a way in. Like Sara and Gita, they were living there illegally, and the situation was nerve-wracking. Gita, who retired from her job when they moved to Moscow, would hide when she spotted anyone with a uniform outside their window.

SM: "[S]he would sink down in her chair so as not to be seen."[18]

LB: Moscow authorities were very much aware of the situation, and so the Municipal Soviet dispatched an investigator, a young law student from Moscow State University. Sara remembered his name because they became friendly after the whole mess was over.

SM: "Nikolai Nikolaevich Ikonikov."[19]

LB: Nikolai Nikolaevich listened to the squatters' stories. Deciding that they were in the right, he informed the Moscow Soviet accordingly. The Soviet finally gave Sara and the others official permission to live in the apartments they already occupied and already owned. In a communist version of a mortgage, Sara paid for

the place in full over a 15-year period with a monthly rate based on changes in her salary. As for the "little uncle" Afanasyev, he was arrested not long afterwards for embezzling construction money to build a house in the country, a dacha.

When my husband Bob met her in 1982, Sara was still part of the co-op, but she was living in a different – a bigger - apartment, one with a bedroom *and* a living room, that she moved to with her husband Vitya Belinkov. But that was only after Sara's mother died in December of 1973.

Before we talk about Vitya, I want to pause to remember Gita Mebel, the little Jewish girl who left Russian Belarus to join the modern, secular world as a midwife and socialist. Judging by the pictures we have of her, she was a spitfire. Judging by what Sara told me, she was also a devoted and loving mother. Revolutionary changes in the Russian Empire gave Gita the chance to live like no woman from her world had ever lived, but the Soviet regime also took its toll when it devoured her husband. She was always Mama to Sara, but she was a force in her own right. Her death left Sara utterly bereft. She lost not only her mother, but her entire family.

SM: "I was like a crazy person."[20]

LB: They had lived together, almost always in the very same room, for Sara's entire 54 years. When Gita died, Sara was alone. But this is when cousin Vitya started visiting - *a lot*. What began as condolence calls on his part turned romantic pretty quickly. At first, Sara was against the whole thing; he wasn't only her first cousin, he was old enough to be her father.

SM: "You know why I married him? Because Sara and Lusya forced me to!"[21]

LB: Her girlfriends Sara Kogan and Lusya Malinovskaya told her she was a fool not to go for it. Kogan even said, "What are you, a young girl? What are you afraid of?"

Sara went into the relationship reluctantly, but she soon found what

SM: "I think was the greatest happiness of my life."[22]

LB: Vitya, whose formal name was Victor Belinkov, has appeared several times in these episodes. Just to remind you, he was Gita's nephew, the son of the rich fish merchant whose family lived in Astrakhan when Sara's family moved there in the mid 1920s. Vitya was more than a generation older than Sara, old enough to have experienced life under the tsars; old enough to remember World War I; old enough to have served in the Red Army after the revolution; and old enough to feel the horror when two of his siblings were killed during the Russian Civil War. As we have seen, Vitya was also old enough to remember being in the house when his cousin Sara was born.

Though Sara informed me he was born in 1901, she was wrong. It says 1901 on Vitya's gravestone, but his own signed statements and the official documents Sara kept give 1896 as his birth year, making him a full 23 years older than she was. Vitya was actually 78 when he got together with 54-year-old Sara. He was much closer to her mother in both age and sensibility. Yet he wasn't too old to make Sara happy and to provide her with the kind of romantic companionship and financial security she had never known.

Gita's death was one in a series of Vitya's recent losses. The first was his sister Zhenya, who died suddenly in Leningrad in 1968. Vitya's son Arkady found out and got hold of Sara, asking her to inform his father, who didn't have a phone at the time. Sara went over to deliver the terrible news personally and found Vitya home alone. He wanted to know why Sara had come.

SM: "I said that I came because Arkady asked me to."[23]

LB: He jumped to the conclusion that something happened to his son.

SM: "He was a crazy father."[24]

LB: Understandably! As I said in an earlier episode, the Stalinist regime sentenced Arkady Belinkov to death in 1944 for a novel he had written that was deemed critical of the state. The death sentence was commuted when two prominent Soviet writers successfully intervened on his behalf, but Arkady was imprisoned in a labor camp until 1956, when he was finally given amnesty and released. He became a well-respected literary critic and writer – there's a list of works by him on the podcast's website. In 1968, probably not long after his Aunt Zhenya's death, Arkady and his wife Natasha went for a work-related trip to Hungary and the two of them escaped to the West. To protect the family, they didn't even tell Vitya they were planning to defect - which means they never said goodbye.

That was still to come. When Sara was at the apartment, she realized she couldn't bear to break the news about Zhenya's death.

SM: "I said, 'Calm down. Arkady only wants you to call him.'"[25]

LB: Vitya called, learned what happened, and went to Leningrad to bury his sister. He used to bring this incident up after he and Sara were married to tease her about how she had chickened out on delivering the bad news.

More grief followed. Arkady, whose health was destroyed during all those years in the Gulag, died in New Haven, Connecticut during heart surgery in 1970. That same year, Vitya's wife also died.

And now Gita was gone. Within a five-year period, Vitya Belinkov lost his sister, his beloved son first to emigration and then to death, his wife, and his aunt.

He and Sara weren't close. Vitya may have been there when she was born, but she had no memory of meeting him before the Second World War. She only got to know him when she moved into the co-op in the late 1950s, and then only as her dutiful older cousin who also lived in one of the Academy of Sciences buildings. On occasion, he and his wife would drop by to visit Sara's mother.

But now, this kind man, a widower, the distinguished former director of Central Accounting at the Ministry of Light Industry, was helping Sara get through her grief. On his birthday in late 1973, he called Sara at work and asked if she was

busy. She wasn't. At this point, they were still using different forms of the word "you" to speak to each other. He was her elder, so she addressed him in the polite form, *na vy.* She was a younger cousin, so he spoke to her in the familiar form, *na ty.* He asked if he could come by. She said yes.

That was the night. He stayed over. I asked at which point they started speaking to each other in the familiar form of the word you – and Sara laughed. After that birthday night, they started making plans to be together. But first, she made a confession to him.

SM: "You know, I can't cook."

LB: Gita always cooked for Sara, and I can confirm Sara's assessment of her cooking skills. In the 1990s, when things were really hard under president Boris Yeltsin's economic shock therapy, I was in Moscow and I asked Sara if she had enough to eat.

SM: "Don't worry. I can always make potatoes."

LB: This was true. Although the Soviets lived in a land where potato peelers were unknown, like most of her fellow citizens, Sara knew how to get the peel off a potato quickly and efficiently with a knife. We have seen that she knew how to dry them, as she and Gita did when they left Siberia during the war. She also knew that you could boil potatoes or you could fry them in sunflower seed oil. But when I suggested to Sara that she might want to change things up by adding chopped onions to her fried potatoes, she protested.

SM: "But, Lorichka, the onions would burn before the potatoes were done cooking."[26]

LB: In her lifetime of potato-growing, potato-harvesting, potato-drying, potato-eating, and potato-cooking, it had not occurred to Sara that you could wait a few minutes and *then* put the onions in.

Vitya didn't care that Sara couldn't cook, marking himself as a very unusual Soviet male.

And so they began living together immediately, Sara moving into Vitya's two-room co-op apartment. Even though the relationship began so prosaically, Sara only having considered it because her friends pushed, she came to love him. They were evidently very compatible. When Lusya visited them a few days after their first night together, she grabbed Sara and whispered to her she had the impression they had been living together for a hundred years. Sara and Vitya only fought once in their relationship, Sara claimed, over whether they should move to another apartment. After that, they agreed never to argue again.

They registered their marriage with the authorities after a year in order to share the apartment legally. At first, Sara was embarrassed by the very idea.

SM: "It seemed to me that I was so old -- and he was 18 years older than I was!"[27]

LB: Really 23. . . . But she went through with it. Sara and Vitya were married on January 15, 1975. Carrying flowers and gifts, their friends Sara Kogan and Lusya Malinovskaya accompanied the couple to the Soviet registration bureau.

Vitya died just five years later. Sara cherished their time together. She had love and companionship, and she was with someone who didn't hesitate to tell her the truth. At Vitya's side, Sara became more informed and more privately critical of the regime. She also saw a marked improvement in her material situation. By becoming Vitya's legal spouse, she was able to inherit his apartment. It's an apartment Bob and I got to know well, thanks to an unexpected family reunion.

Vitya was living with Sara when she received a strange summons to the Moscow mayor's office. She had no idea what it was about, but this was another moment that would change her life. As a result of that summons, she reunited with

the long-lost Mebels, both in the U.S. and Germany. We'll talk about that in our next and final episode.

---

[1] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[2] From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
[3] From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
[4] From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
[5] From taped conversation of August 1, 2002
[6] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[7] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[8] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[9] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[10] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[11] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[12] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[13] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[14] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[15] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[16] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[17] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[18] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[19] From taped conversation of August 2, 2002
[20] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
[21] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
[22] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
[23] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
[24] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
[25] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
[26] The story about Sara and the potatoes is from a recollection of Laurie Bernstein.
[27] From taped conversation of August 22, 2002