

Script for “Finding Family” (episode 12: broadcast on October 13, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): This is the final episode of “Sara’s Century.” It brings us – and Sara – to the end of one journey, her life in Russia, to the beginning of another, her life in the United States. Sara wound up far from home and everything she knew when she became a political refugee, but she also became part of an extended international family.

It wasn’t easy to build a bridge spanning so much time and space. When Stalin was in power, connections outside the USSR left Soviet citizens open to charges of disloyalty, even spying. Best to play it safe and close the door on relatives and friends abroad, especially if they lived in so-called capitalist countries. Sara admitted that,

Sara Mebel (SM): “[N]ot only were [Mama and I] not interested in our American relatives, we tried in every possible way to forget about them.”¹

LB: This made sense. Sara and her mother *already* had the equivalent of black marks on their dossiers because of Zalya’s alleged crimes. Under Stalin, association with anyone in a foreign country might have spelled the difference between being dubbed a *family* member of an enemy of the people and being targeted as one of those actual enemies.

But by the 1970s, the Soviet Union had moved on from the bad old days of Stalinism. Ordinary people, people who kept their heads down and didn’t challenge the system, usually weren’t getting thrown into prison or sent to labor camps for no apparent reason. It was, however, far from an open society – very far - and relationships with foreigners still brought unwelcome attention from the KGB, the latest version of the secret police.

Although it was probably a good idea for Sara to keep on ignoring the fact that she had American relatives, one of them reached out to *her*, and in so doing opened a tiny gap in the iron curtain and exposed Sara to a wider world. Let me explain this improbable, wonderful reunion.

Sara knew some relatives from her *mother's* side in the Soviet Union – her husband Vitya was one of them, as were his two nieces - but she had no contact with anyone related to her father. Though Zalya's five sisters and his brother Finkel were said to be in the United States, Sara and Gita had completely lost touch with these Mebels. The remaining brother Chaim had returned to the USSR from Germany when Nazism was on the rise, but after Zalya's 1934 arrest, he and his family left Sara and Gita to their fate. What Sara wrote in a 1977 letter wasn't 100% accurate, but it was nevertheless a reflection of her reality.

SM: “[I]n Russia I have not one relative on my father’s side.”²

LB: That remark was spurred by the bridge Zalya's nephew Leo managed to build between Sara Mebel in the USSR and the Mebels in the USA. Born in 1908, Leo was old enough to remember the relatives left behind when he fled the Soviet Union with his family in the 1920s and wound up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. As the son of Zalya's sister Sheyna Ester, he was Sara's first cousin. From his Harrisburg, Pennsylvania nursing home room in the 1970s, Leo tried to bring everyone back together before it was too late.

This was no easy task. It was still the Cold War. Needless to say, there was no internet; he couldn't just Google the name “Mebel” and wait for the results. Strange as it may sound, the Soviets didn't readily hand out information with the names and addresses of their population to foreigners – or even to their own citizens. Plus, odds were that the Mebels, whom Leo's family last saw in Belarus, perished in the Holocaust, along with nearly all the Jews who remained in the former Pale of Settlement.

But Leo hit pay dirt when he sent a letter to an organization with the right kind of politics and connections: the International Red Cross. Through them, he found out that a Sara Zalevna Mebel – Sara, daughter of Zalya! - lived in Moscow. The International Red Cross contacted the Moscow mayor's office on Leo's behalf and, miracle of miracles, there began the process that after half a century – half a momentous century - ultimately put Sara in touch with her long-lost family.

As Sara wrote in that same letter, she only regretted that

SM: “Mama is already no longer among the living. She would have been happy to find out about her husband’s sisters.”³

LB: Here’s how it happened at Sara’s end. The phone rang in her and Vitya’s Moscow apartment. At the other end of the line was someone from the Moscow mayor’s office. Sara needed to come in for an interview. As you can imagine, a summons to Soviet citizens from the authorities was terrifying, especially for someone with Sara’s past experiences. She didn’t want to go, but it’s not like she had a choice.

Vitya accompanied her – and that’s when they found out that a relative in the United States of America was looking for Mebels.

Things seem to have moved quickly from there - from a phone call to an actual visit. Leo wasn’t well enough to make the long trip to the Soviet Union, but his younger sister Sylvia, whose politics were very much on the Left, got right on this. She did what it took to get plane tickets and a visa, and in late 1977, off she went to communist Moscow.

Sara kept a photo that she labeled

SM: “the arrival of Sylvia in Moscow.”

LB: You can see pictures of the three of them in Moscow on the “Sara’s Century” website. Their meeting was amazing, but it must have been awkward – not only did they live worlds apart, they had no mutual language. When she was a child, Sylvia spoke some Russian, but she didn’t remember it. For their part, Vitya and Sara didn’t know English. In order to communicate with Sylvia, they brought in Erma, an English-speaking friend of Vitya. This didn’t go very well. Erma’s translating was far from what Sara expected – or wanted.

SM: [Russian audio] “And she says to me, “Do you know, Sara, what I just said? I said that generally in Russia, educated people know English.’ Oy, I was so embarrassed. Oy.”⁴

LB: Fortunately, Vitya and Sylvia realized they did have a language in common: Yiddish. They both knew Yiddish. Sara had completely forgotten her first language, but Vitya and Sylvia could now talk to each other without a snooty intermediary. Erma was sent packing. We don’t know what Sylvia, Vitya, and Sara talked about after that, but they evidently made a vital connection because Sara would treat that connection like a lifeline. Before and especially after the visit, she wrote long letters to Sylvia and other Mebel family cousins, despite the trouble it took her to find people (probably *not* Erma) to translate her words into English and help her read the responses when they came.

There was one person, though, she could communicate with directly: Sylvia’s son Bob, who was 23 years old at the time and studying Russian history in graduate school. She wrote a long letter to him on April 14, 1977 - before Sylvia’s trip - and it’s clear how badly she wanted him to understand her in her native – and only - language.

SM: “Is everything comprehensible to you in my letter? Maybe it is simpler to type? How is the handwriting? I really tried to write every letter of the alphabet carefully.”⁵

LB: In that letter, with its *perfect* handwriting, Sara described her parents to Bob, but when it came to her father’s fate, she was vague, giving an incorrect date for his death two years before she and her mother witnessed his arrest in Alma-Ata. She referred only to his “misfortune,” keeping the details sketchy.

SM: “My Papa (Zalya), the brother of your grandmother, worked as an economist. In 1934, he died far away from us.”⁶

LB: From her vantage point, of course, some things were not appropriate for long-distance communication. No doubt she suspected that the correspondence was being monitored. This was not paranoia; it was realistic, given the era and given the fact that she was married to someone whose son had notoriously defected in 1968. As Sara tactfully put it,

SM: “It is difficult for me to write about several circumstances regarding my father and my husband. I very much hope that at some point we will see each other and we can talk at more length and more openly.”⁷

LB: Though Sara remained guarded about those “circumstances,” this letter and the ones we have from her to Sylvia are nevertheless very earnest. She was extremely curious about who everyone was, what they did for a living, how they lived, and so on. She asked questions about her cousins’ well-being that showed how seriously she took whatever information came her way, congratulating Sylvia on the birth of her granddaughter, expressing concerns about Leo’s health, and referring to members of the whole extended family by name – as if she knew them already. As she wrote in that first letter to Bob about learning of the existence of so many relatives,

SM: “You simply cannot imagine how excited and happy I became.”⁸

LB: Sara really wanted to visit the U.S. and meet these people. It would have meant leaving the Soviet Union for the first time in her life, joining the select few of her fellow citizens who were allowed to witness life first hand in a capitalist country after World War Two. Sylvia tried to get Sara here, going through all the bureaucratic channels to secure the requisite official invitation. At her end, Sara filled out stacks of forms and waited anxiously for an answer. She clearly counted on coming. In several letters, she asked for help in choosing gifts to distribute among her American family. Did they want records? books with photos of Soviet cities? perhaps perfume?⁹

Sara explained the situation in a letter dated January 20, 1978, emphasizing as always how much she cherished their relationship and addressing Sylvia in the familiar form of the second person (*na ty*).

SM: “[W]hether I come or not is not dependent on me. But what I *really* want is that our acquaintance and our correspondence do not get interrupted. These things bring me great pleasure and I really value them, the more so because our acquaintance and meeting were so unusual. It is not often that relatives are discovered after 50 years, and that they get together despite the huge time gap and feel close to one another.”¹⁰

LB: Two weeks later, Sara reported in a letter to Sylvia that her request to travel abroad had been denied. The answer was *nyet* – and it did not go over well.

SM: “I am very distressed. I even burst into tears.”¹¹

LB: Permission for any Soviet citizen to visit the West would have been unlikely at this point in time. I imagine it was out of the question for the wife of Arkady Belinkov’s father.

Despite – or because of – the setback, Sara clung to her link with the Americans, corresponding with several Mebels and doing her best to stay in close touch. There’s an awful lot of verification of dates in the letters Bob kept, Sara always explicit about what she received from whom and when and what she herself dispatched, thereby demonstrating her reasonable worry about letters and packages going astray. When it came to Bob, she always used the formal address, writing to him *na vy*. After all, they hadn’t yet met. She would correct his Russian grammar and direct him to Russian-language publications pertinent to his interest in labor history. In the summer of 1977, she sent him a copy of *The History of Trade Unions in the USSR, Part One (1905-1937)*. Sara commented,

SM: “It, of course, is very basic and, like any political literature it is tendentious, but perhaps it will nevertheless be of some use.”¹²

LB: Along with *The History of Trade Unions in the USSR*, she enclosed a book to share with Sylvia on the town of Pushkin – and where Sara would move in the mid 1990s, and emigrate from in 2001.

What comes across in all these letters is how determined she was to maintain and deepen these new relationships - how much they meant to her. Her written voice reveals Sara’s intelligence, her warmth, and her liveliness, along with a caution that was second nature to someone who grew up not in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania like her cousins, but in Stalinist Russia.

Vitya died in September of 1980. We don’t have any letters that describe what must have been this devastating blow to Sara and the loneliness that ensued. I like to think that the knowledge of her new family in the United States brought Sara some comfort. It certainly helped when Bob arrived in Moscow two years later to do research for his doctoral dissertation. Like Sylvia, he became an intimate, someone who was soon addressed *na ty*.

As Sara tells it, Bob’s arrival was one of the sweetest moments of her life. It never took much prompting to get Sara to describe that first time she saw him. She loved telling this story – I’ve heard it from her many, many times. Her eyes light up and she gets this dreamy smile on her face. There he was, this tall, handsome young man with a great head of curly light hair who was unmistakably American. He was holding two bouquets, one in each hand. Sara was thoroughly charmed.

They saw each other often during the year Bob lived in Moscow. Sara treated him like a beloved nephew and he made sure that friends and colleagues who traveled to the Soviet Union in the ensuing years also made her acquaintance. To all of them, she was *Tetya Sara* (Aunt Sara in English). Suddenly, in her early 60s, Sara had an attentive young cousin on hand, along with an admiring circle of educated, Russian-speaking Americans. Her world had gotten bigger - and better.

In 1984 I was doing my own dissertation research in St. Petersburg – then called Leningrad - and it became my turn to join the group of foreigners who socialized with Aunt Sara.

Full disclosure about Bob and me back then: we were exes, having had a brief relationship that ended when he left for Moscow. But we remained good friends and colleagues, two of the three Cal Berkeley graduate students in Russian history who entered the program in 1979. Not only were Bob and I writing weekly letters to each other while I was in Russia, he was subletting my apartment in Oakland *and* he was taking care of my dog. As we learned later, our friends were laying bets that our romance would resume as soon as I got home.

Mark Steinberg, the third member of our Berkeley grad student cohort, was in the USSR while I was there, but in Moscow with his wife Jane Hedges. Naturally, they too became friendly with Aunt Sara, and Sara kept Bob apprised of their visits in her letters to him. In early 1984, Mark and Jane came to Leningrad for a few weeks, and at some point Sara was in town as well. Mark and Jane arranged for Sara and me to meet in a local restaurant. It was my turn to be charmed when I met this friendly, lively, and very attractive woman dressed neat as a pin, who had her long white hair gathered up in a perfect bun.

When I returned home that summer, as everyone suspected, Bob and I got right back together. When we got married two years later, we went to visit our Aunt Sara in Moscow in a sort of Soviet honeymoon. We brought Sara our wedding pictures, we stayed with her, and we treated each other like family. This closeness is what prompted her lengthy visits to us in 1988 when things opened up in Mikhail Gorbachev's USSR and in 1992 after the Soviet Union's collapse. We also went back to Russia several times, bringing our son Perry when he was an infant and again when he was seven years old.¹³ Sara became Perry's honorary grandma, his *babushka*. When she decided that she had to get out of Russia for good in the late 1990s, it made sense for us to ask her to move in with us. I talked about what drove her from her homeland and her fateful September 11th, 2001 flight headed for JFK Airport in the first podcast episode.

Sara lived in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania with Bob, Perry, and me for more than two years. During her earlier trips to the U.S. and after her emigration, Sara finally got to meet and spend time with the Mebel clan about whom she learned so much through all those letters. She visited Sylvia and my father-in-law in Florida. She met Bob's brother and his family. Leo died in 1984, but she got acquainted with another one of his and Sylvia's brothers. She met their son and his family, along with other cousins from Bob's generation. She met *their* children, more Mebels, more cousins still.

Another reunion awaited her. This was with the son of Zalya's estranged brother Chaim, the one who left Germany for Moscow in 1932 with his wife and two children in tow. Sara hadn't seen this cousin since Zalya's first arrest, when she was 15 and her cousin was all of 11. After that, their family stopped acting like one.

We found him not long after Sara came to live with us. I was introducing her to the extraordinary power of computers and the worldwide web, and I asked whether there was anyone in the world she would like to look up. Sara didn't hesitate. She came up with a name at that point I'd never heard before: Moritz Mebel.

Moments later, I learned several things from Google about this person, including the fact that he was a distinguished surgeon and that he was known in the medical community for having carried out the first successful kidney transplant in the Eastern bloc in the 1960s.

This hit awfully close to home. I myself had a kidney transplant not long before Sara arrived. Like my mother who died from this illness, I have polycystic kidney disease, a condition that sent me into renal failure in my 40s. I am alive and well because of Bob. In 1999, he donated a kidney to me, the quintessential gift that keeps on giving. So there we were, just a couple of years after the transplant, learning about the existence of a cousin who was a famous kidney transplant surgeon.

In German, the word for this is *Schicksal*. In Russian, it's *sud'ba*. It's *besherit* in Yiddish. It was truly fate.

The home address and phone number of Dr. Mebel in Berlin were available online. We got a German-speaking friend to make the call. “Was this the house of Dr. Moritz Mebel?” It was. “Did he remember a cousin named Sara Mebel?” He did. Our friend passed the receiver to Sara and Sara spoke to her cousin Moritz – in Russian, of course – for the first time in 70 years. There was so much to catch up on – and Moritz followed up the call with a letter that Sara answered on July 25, 2002.

Addressed to Moritz and his wife Sonja, the letter is amazing and I want to close our podcast series with a close look at how she represented herself to them. Unlike her letters to Bob and Sylvia in the 1970s and ‘80s, this one was written from the United States, without fear that the secret police were searching for signs of disloyalty. What we see here is a less censored story, but one that Sara nevertheless crafted carefully and diplomatically so as not to call out Moritz’s family for abandoning her and Gita, but also to make it clear that they contributed to the pain and isolation she had experienced over the years. Sara had her pride, and it showed in terms of what she left out *and* some of the digs she put in.

She began by ruing how much of her history had been lost to time, faulty memory, and ignorance.

SM: “I don’t know how to begin. What do you want to know? Would you want to find out about my parents and my life? Will I be able to describe briefly my long, long life? I know so little, and I hardly know my own prehistory. Plus, my memory is bad, and there is no one left to ask. It would have been better to remember Mama’s stories. But it’s useless to be bitter about that now.”¹⁴

LB: Then she told him about the official and unofficial dates of her birth, about the pogrom in Gomel when she was a newborn, and about the confusion over whether her father was a Zalman or a Solomon. These subjects were pretty straightforward, but matters got trickier when she had to account for the space that opened between their families.

SM: “I remember that in the early 1930s, Papa’s brother from Germany suddenly appeared - that this brother arrived with his wife and two children. It appears that our families got together.”¹⁵

LB: That would have been Chaim, his wife Fanny, Moritz, and his sister Susi who was a couple years older than Sara. What she didn’t mention - though she made sure to tell me - was how she still remembered the present they gave her. To me, she said,

SM: “They arrived from Germany and they gave me a gift I recall to this day: a very beautiful pink wool blouse. In Russia – in Moscow – we had nothing like that. They lived better in Germany.”¹⁶

LB: My sense is that Sara was all too aware of her family’s poverty relative to that of these European Mebels. She was not going to reveal to Moritz that their gift had been so memorable. She simply closed out the paragraph in the letter with a terse and noncommittal statement about the breach.

SM: “But in 1934 our relations ceased.”¹⁷

LB: That Chaim’s family kept their distance is understandable. Coming from what was now Nazi Germany, they were already under a cloud. What if they were spies? What if they carried some capitalist infection with them or, worse, some lethal Nazi ideological contaminant? (The fact that Jews were unlikely transmitters of Nazism often escaped the hyper-vigilant NKVD.) Moritz’s parents were already in danger and their position would have been much worse if they stayed close to the mother and child of a known enemy of the people.

Moritz, I later learned, gave his own version of the family’s estrangement to a German journalist several years before his contact with Sara. My husband and his colleague Marion Faber wound up publishing an English translation of these interviews in 2007 called *A Life on the Left: Moritz Mebel’s Journey Through the*

Twentieth Century. In it, Moritz reveals that when they arrived in Moscow, his family was already in the crosshairs of the NKVD. At one point, the secret police summoned his father to ask about another cousin who also fled Germany. No doubt making things worse for the family was his mother's cancer. She died in 1936, the year of Zalya's second and final arrest.

Moritz recounted to the journalist how one night his father, along with an aunt and uncle from his mother's side of the family, sorted through their old photographs. They were so terrified of the association with Zalya that they destroyed his pictures, along with those of two other family members who had disappeared during the Terror.¹⁸

But Sara didn't know any of this when she wrote to him and she certainly didn't remember knowing anything about what the other Mebels endured in the 1930s. She was a teenager back then. It must have felt horrible on top of everything else to lose this link to her father and to know that she not only had an aunt and uncle right there in Moscow, but two cousins around her age. She had no siblings. She and Gita had no one but the Kugel family. Even if Chaim's abandonment of them made logical sense, that doesn't mean it didn't hurt.

After dangling the line in her letter about how their "relations ceased," Sara turned to some family background - how her father took that trip to Palestine before the First World War and how he returned to pick up Gita, but had to stay in Russia because of the outbreak of war and, later, revolution. She said she had no knowledge of where her father went to school or of what he did for a living. Then she came back to more painful matters, telling Moritz the story of Zalya's two arrests and how the NKVD came for her him in Alma-Ata.

SM: "For what, no one knows."¹⁹

LB: She wrote about how her mother, a trained midwife, worked in medicine her whole life. Sara wrote down the exact date of her mother's death - December 5, 1973. She underlined it and she even spelled out how old his aunt Gita was when she died.

SM: “Eighty-seven years and two months.”²⁰

LB: If we didn’t know already how deep a loss that was, here was more evidence of its impact.

Sara revealed that she kept some track of Moritz and his sister during their long separation. This was all news to me at the time. She wrote,

SM: “In 1973, I understood for the first time that I still had a cousin Moritz and a cousin Susi. This is how it happened.

“Mama was sick and I called a private doctor. This nice, middle-aged woman came. She said that this was the second time in her life when she had encountered such a rare surname. The first time, it was her fellow student at the medical institute, Moritz Mebel. Mama responded that this was the nephew of her late husband. We found out from this doctor that Moritz lives in Germany, that he’s a very prominent doctor, and many other good things. And then I happily forgot about ‘the Germans.’”²¹

LB: Sara didn’t bother to explain why they were so easily forgotten or why she never tried to contact them. She had already made the distance clear by dubbing them “the Germans.” She would repeat this reference and also mark the distance between herself and her U.S. family in her next sentence.

SM: “I was reminded of ‘the Germans’ a second time, in 1975 when the Americans were searching for me through the Red Cross...

“In the very first letter I received from America, there was the question: ‘What do you know about your uncle Chaim?’”²²

LB: (I presume this was a letter from Leo.)

SM: “In my answer, I said that I knew a little bit. But I became very interested. And here it helped to have such an unusual surname.”²³

LB: Sara then told Moritz about the next time his name came up.

SM: “It wasn’t until the 1980s that I found out from a newspaper that Moritz had been at the front [during the war] and that he had been chosen as a member of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences.”²⁴

LB: Sara didn’t add that she had held onto a clipping that proclaimed Moritz’s induction into the Academy. (It’s on the website, and you can see how she wrote the word “Chaim” in Russian by Moritz’s name.) Sara was proud to be the cousin of a war hero and a celebrated physician, but she wasn’t going to go on about it any more than she had – especially in light of a nasty experience involving Moritz’s older sister. In her letter, Sara made it clear that Susi Mebel had treated her very badly. This too was news to me.

Sara told Moritz about an acquaintance who put two and two together and told her he encountered a relative of hers. Like Moritz, Susi was living in East Germany in the 1980s, and her work apparently brought her to Moscow on occasion. But the next time she came to town, when their mutual acquaintance tried to get the cousins together, Susi wasn’t interested. Sara wrote to Moritz,

SM: “[S]he didn’t want to see me.”²⁵

LB: Sara didn’t need to elaborate. The message about Susi’s rejection of her came through loud and clear.

Sara gave me a more complete and even uglier version of the story. Their mutual acquaintance described to her how Susi had shaken her fists in the air and exclaimed, ‘I don’t want any sort of relatives.’²⁶

Given the prevalence of antisemitism in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, it is possible that Susi was trying to avoid contact with other Jews. But maybe she was

worried that this cousin Sara would just exploit her greater access to material goods. Just like in the 1930s, things were still better in Germany, even in East Germany. Whatever the reason, Susi's refusal to see Sara was another blow.

SM: "And then I again forgot about you both."²⁷

LB: Yet that wasn't really true, judging by the speed with which she came up with Moritz's name when I described the wonders of the worldwide web. She kept her enthusiasm to find him under wraps in the letter. Apparently, *I* was responsible for the recent search.

SM: "And then it wasn't until 2001, living with Bob and Laurie, that I searched for you on the internet. This was Laurie's idea. I don't understand anything about these new machines."²⁸

LB: She was more forthcoming when she confessed to him how nervous she had been when they first spoke on the phone.

SM: "Why? I don't know. Maybe because I never had any real relatives? Maybe because I didn't know how to handle the conversation?"²⁹

LB: Maybe because there was so much left unsaid? Maybe because she didn't know whether she could trust him? Maybe because so much hurt and loss couldn't be dismissed as water under the bridge?

Sara left talk about herself for last, writing a few words about her life, her career in seismology, how she was evacuated during the war, and most importantly, developing a version of the story why she left Russia for the United States. She explained that after Vitya's death,

SM: “I was completely alone. I decided to move to Pushkin outside St. Petersburg in order to live together with Vitya’s niece and her husband. Then this niece got it into her head to emigrate to her sister in America.”³⁰

LB: She said nothing about antisemitism and her own fears. Nor did she mention that Vitya was her first cousin and that this made the niece – and the niece’s sister in America – her cousins as well. She only wrote,

SM: “I wasn’t very attached to that new family.”

LB: But more poignantly, Sara described how hard it was to choose to emigrate from Russia.

SM: “I really didn’t want to leave. I was not at an age where one could so drastically change one’s life . . . I thought a lot about whether to go – or not to go. But having been left completely alone since 1982 was also horrible. And then I got a letter from Bob and Laurie: ‘Don’t worry. Come, you’ll live with us.’ That’s how I wound up in America.”³¹

LB: She clarified that this “Bob” was the grandson of her and Moritz’s aunt Sheyna Ester and then she summed up her current life.

SM: “I now live well and peacefully, though I really miss Moscow and my friends, who are already gone. I alone am the long-lived one.”³²

LB: And in closing, she added,

SM: “It’s a pity that our acquaintance has taken place so late. Perhaps we would have been not only relatives, but friends.”³³

LB: Moritz did what he could to repair the damage. He made plans to come visit us in the states, but then his wife Sonja became sick and they couldn't travel. Still, he called Sara regularly, and they remained in contact by phone until it became impossible to talk because of Sara's increasing deafness.

It was too late to get as close to Sara as he might have liked. But Bob was also a Mebel. Moritz and Sonja welcomed Bob, Perry, and me with open arms a couple of years later when we visited them in Berlin. We arrived by train. Waiting for us at the station was an anxious-looking older couple, each one holding a bouquet. When they recognized us, they cried and they hugged us and kissed us like *we* were the long-lost relatives. I guess we were.

For Moritz and Sonja, Soviet power and control of the Eastern bloc had been lifesavers. Moritz was a dedicated communist, though one with a critical attitude toward Stalin's regime. In their apartment, he had a bust of Lenin on his desk and a picture of Che Guevara hanging on the wall. He assured us that as much as he remained a Marxist, he wasn't naïve about the Soviet past. "You know," he said, "Stalinism was not Communism." We agreed.

But where did our cousins take us after we arrived? Not to former Communist Party headquarters, not to the numerous memorials of socialism and socialist leaders in what had been East Berlin, but straight to a place that represented something of the Mebels' shared history: to the Berlin synagogue that dated from 1866. Plundered during the Nazi era and bombed during the war, it had been restored after the two Germanies were reunited. Moritz and Sonja were proud of its majesty, and they walked us through the sanctuary and adjacent museum. Then they took us to meet their daughter, her husband, and their two grandchildren, a new German-Jewish dynasty.

A happy ending for our story? In part. I wish, though, that this happy ending extended to Sara. Her emigration from Russia brought her together with what was left of her family, but it didn't bring an end to Sara's loneliness. Language in particular has remained an ongoing barrier. You may recall that the outbreak of war more than 60 years earlier put an end to Sara's plans to take English lessons. Sara

never studied English and she was not able to learn a new language in her 80s with the added disadvantage of hearing loss.

Despite our devotion and how she had her very own room with bay windows overlooking the woods at the edge of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania as well as her own bathroom, we could not compete with her real home, the single crowded barracks room she once lived in with Mama, Papa, and Dunya. Sara was too old to feel American, she was too Jewish to feel Russian, she was too Soviet to feel Jewish, and she was too alienated to feel Soviet. A stranger from a strange land in a strange land.

In 2004, Sara moved to subsidized housing in Philadelphia, and then in 2008 to her nursing home in northeast Philly. A proud U.S. citizen, she has thus far voted in three presidential elections. Sara turned 99 on March 11, 2018 and tolerated the annual birthday party we threw for her. A few weeks later, Bob and I visited her and she, as always, seemed happy to see us. But at one point she turned to Bob, asking him,

SM: “Why is your Russian so good? Did your parents speak it at home?”³⁴

LB: She knew he was someone close, but she had forgotten why. We drew her a family tree, showing the branches between Zalya and his sister Sheyna Ester, and then the next generation with her and Bob’s mother. Then we told her the story of the peasant Marussya and the time in Astrakhan when Marussya tried to make soup. Sara supplied the punchline.

SM: “Marussya forgot to add water!”

LB: I promised to come by and play her the tapes we had made. This podcast is my gift to her, just as her loving friendship has been her gift to me and mine.

SM: [Russian audio] “Well, okay. Well, what. Is that enough? Yes? Because I don’t know anything more.”³⁵

-
- ¹ Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ² Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ³ Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ⁴ From taped conversation of August 22, 2002
 - ⁵ Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ⁶ Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ⁷ Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ⁸ Letter to Bob Weinberg of April 14, 1977
 - ⁹ Letter to Sylvia and Bob Weinberg of December 28, 1977
 - ¹⁰ Letter to Sylvia Weinberg of January 20, 1978
 - ¹¹ Letter to Sylvia Weinberg of February 4, 1978
 - ¹² Letter to Sylvia and Bob Weinberg of August 16, 1977
 - ¹³ This is an error: Perry was actually six.
 - ¹⁴ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ¹⁵ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ¹⁶ From taped conversation of July 24, 2002
 - ¹⁷ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ¹⁸ *A Life on the Left: Moritz Mebel's Journey Through the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Weinberg, trans. Marion Faber, in *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies*, no. 1805 (April 2007): 14, 21, 23. The German original is Hans D. Schütt, *Rot und Weiss: Gespräche mit Moritz Mebel* (Dietz Vlg Bln, 1999)
 - ¹⁹ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²⁰ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²¹ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²² Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²³ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²⁴ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²⁵ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²⁶ From taped conversation of July 26, 2002
 - ²⁷ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²⁸ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ²⁹ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ³⁰ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ³¹ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ³² Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ³³ Letter to Moritz and Sonja Mebel of July 25, 2002
 - ³⁴ Recollection of Bob Weinberg and Laurie Bernstein
 - ³⁵ From taped conversation of August 22, 2002