

Vladimir Rott  
MYSOVAYA STATION



# Vladimir Rott

## MYSOVAYA STATION

In memory of those who have disappeared into  
the past, but who forever remain dear to us.



This book is a translation  
of the first Russian language version of

ВЛАДИМИР РОТТ

СТАНЦИЯ МЫСОВАЯ

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On the front cover: “Mysovaya Station’s Lighthouse  
on lake Baikal, built in 1900” – photo taken by Sophia Petrachkova.  
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Serena Posner.

Photos in the book provided by the  
Guterman Family archive, Peter Chernich and the author.

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## Foreword

“People stop thinking when they stop reading,” Denis Diderot once wrote. After working as a librarian for 30 years, I regrettably see more and more evidence of how right he was. No, this is not professional pique at the fact that in our age of computer technology the book has ceased to be an object of spiritual value; it is simply a statement of fact. Yet, when we pick up a book and read it, we willy-nilly look in it for answers to various situations in our own lives, try to make sense of our own feelings and actions. The more we read, the more discriminating we become in our selection of books, trying to read ones that attract and capture our imagination.

In April 2010, Vladimir Rott’s book, *In Defiance of Fate: Book One, Joy from Sadness*, recommended by a co-worker from the town library, captured my imagination at once. Vladimir Rott, of whom I had never heard before, shared the story of his family with a candor that I found quite moving. There was both pain and pride in his writing about his father, the Hungarian engineer Ferenc Roth who fell for the ideals of the Soviet regime, and his mother Regina, a loyal wife who followed her beloved husband from a comfortable life in Hungary to faraway Russia, to build socialism. The juggernaut of Stalin’s repressive machine crushed their happiness. After many years in the gulag, Ferenc Roth lost his life. Regina, plagued by injustice and uncertainty, held on by the skin of her teeth and went on living, giving up all hope of happiness as a woman, raising two sons, Yuzef and Vladimir, on her own. Despite terrible tribulations—the stigma of “the wife of an enemy of the people,” hunger, hardship, German occupation—she survived, stayed strong, and raised her sons to be good men.

Truly admirable is the love and tenderness Vladimir has borne his wife Iya throughout his life. In every word he writes about his wife, one can sense that Iya, whom he met back in their college years, forever captured the author's heart, becoming not only his wife but also his friend, his helpmate, his strong bulwark of support.

It is amazing that, despite all the twists and turns of his life, Vladimir Rott has always remained determined to preserve and rediscover the historical roots not only of his own family, but of his wife Iya's as well. I found out some fascinating facts from the book. It turns out that in the 1870s, Iya's grandfather, who came over from Poland to work on the construction of the Transsiberian railroad, lived with his family at Mysovaya Station where I live now. The name Guterman meant nothing to me, the people at the local museum had never heard of local residents by that name either. Finally, I mustered the courage to send an electronic mail to the author in faraway Canada with a request to tell me more about the Guterman family. That's how we established contact, and conversation with Iya and Vladimir became a vital necessity for me. We dreamed of meeting in person, of course, and on May 28, 2011 this dream came true.

The presentation of the book, *In Defiance of Fate: Book Two, Joy of Discoveries*—which deals with the Rotts' life in Canada—took place on the same day. Written in a simple and accessible style, beautifully illustrated, the book begs to be read in one breath, as it were. An unquenchable thirst for freedom and a determination to be individuals, the dream of a happy future for their children, an inner light of the soul and tremendous capacity for work—those are foremost among the qualities that allowed Iya and Vladimir Rott to become full citizens of a country across the Atlantic.

Once, in a telephone conversation on January 25, 2012, Vladimir suddenly said, "Taisya! I've written something about Mysovaya Station, just as I promised when we met." Excited, I ran to the computer, and even though it was a late hour, I read nonstop just as I had his books. I couldn't sleep for a long time, overcome by joy and bitterness at the same time. Bitterness because we who live here, by the Great Baikal, do not and will not

remember our history; we wreck our sacred places such as the devastated Jewish cemetery and many others. Joy because people who live on the other side of the globe remember and care about little Mysovaya, forgotten by the government of its own country and the local authorities.

I know that openness and sincerity in people is as rare a gift as inner freedom. Kindness and disinterested generosity are qualities that only strong people possess. And Iya and Vladimir Rott possess these qualities in abundance. Having traveled round the world, having friends in many countries, they still find the time to tell everyone about Mysovaya and its people. History goes on....

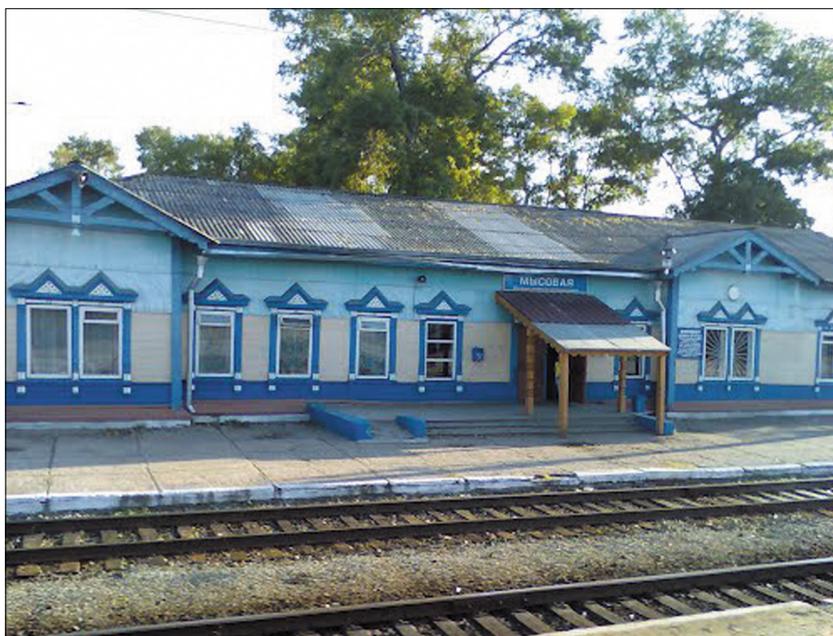
Taisya Chernykh, director of the library of the Eastern Siberia Center for Scientific and Technological Information and Libraries, Mysovaya

Dearest Rotts! To be honest, I started reading “Mysovaya Station” only out of respect for the two of you: what is Mysovaya to me, and what am I to Mysovaya? But once I started, I couldn’t tear myself away. I looked over the photos more than once with tremendous interest. Vladimir Frantzevich, you undoubtedly possess a literary gift that literally compels the reader to want to know what happens next. Your writing is so simple, so accessible that one does not have to cut through a thicket of words. Such “simplicity” is not something just anybody can manage; I know that all too well! But the most important gift you have received from God, and I’ve already mentioned this to Iya, is the gift of drawing good and decent people into your orbit. I’ve always believed such people were few and far between, so to some extent I wonder if some of these people were not always quite so good or so decent but became such after coming into contact with you, Vladimir Frantzevich, and with your wonderful wife. You make them want to be better people! The story of Mysovaya and the encounters that happened there—all this became possible, all this was saved from oblivion thanks only to your dedication and energy. Young people today call it *drive*. So all that remains is for me to congratulate you on this latest literary work! Incidentally, your “Book Two” is already living an independent life of its own.

Rina Benkovich, journalist, Togliatti

What you did at Mysovaya Station is a true feat of the soul, of the spirit. It was fascinating to read Vladimir's artless, extremely candid story about the people whom fate has flung into those faraway places. And there is simply no measure to properly appreciate the worth of your noble deed: you gave love and warmth to wretched people who nearly sunk to a subhuman level—lost descendants of a once-large and blossoming branch of their great people.

Bella Kerdman, journalist, Israel



## Mysovaya station

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the great European migration to America began, ocean ships loaded with travel-weary passengers would enter New York Harbor and, having passed by the breathtaking Statue of Liberty, discharge crowds of penniless, excited fortune-seekers on Ellis Island, from where the majority of future Americans took their first steps in the land of opportunity.

In my second book of memoirs\*, I told the story of how, shortly after moving to Canada, Iya and the children supported my idea of creating a genealogical tree of our family. By then it was clear that most of the descendants of my grandfather, Hermann Spielberger, were living in the United States. We managed to find much of the necessary information on the Internet. The records of immigrants who entered the United States via Ellis Island, New York's registration office, are an amazing document. When reading the names of the new arrivals, their places of origin and their ages and professions, I often wondered what would have happened if my father and mother Ferenc and Regina Roth from Hungary, and Iya's grandfather Shlomo Guterman from Poland had gone West, overseas, instead of seeking their fortunes in the opposite direction, in the East...

In the first book of my memoirs, in the chapter "Iya Yaroslavkaya (Guterman)," I wrote:

*"In 1896, Shlomo Chaim Guterman, a Polish Hasidic Jew and a tinsmith by trade, with wife Hava and two children—Moisey and Ita—made*

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\* Vladimir Rott. "IN DEFIANCE OF FATE." Book 2: "JOY OF DISCOVERIES".

his way from the Polish city of Biyaly (where the pogroms were starting) to Siberia, where the construction of the Transsiberian railroad was underway. Many of his former neighbors at the time were starting a new life overseas. However, no one sent Solomon Guterman the schiff-card required for a sea voyage to America, and so he made it to Lake Baikal on his own by train and settled at the Mysovaya [Cape] Station. His trade as a tinsmith was in great demand, and the family prospered and grew. Over the next twenty years, they had ten children—the ninth of them Rachel, Iya's mother. Legend has it that in those days, Solomon Guterman even managed to take his family on a trip to Japan...

... Rachel Solomonovna recalled that when her family lived at the Mysovaya Station, she was enrolled in the only local school—an Orthodox Christian school—at the age of six. She became the top student in the religion class, known as “Divine Law.” One day, Shlomo realized that after the family said its brochas and after-dinner prayers, little Ronya would hide behind the door and cross herself. The next day at school, the priest told her, “Ronechka, you shouldn't come to my class anymore...”

... Soon after the birth of his tenth child, Shlomo Chaim Guterman and his family moved from Mysovaya to Verkhneudinsk (Ulan-Ude). Since 1780, that city had hosted winter and summer fairs that attracted huge caravans carrying Japanese porcelain, Chinese silks and Russian furs. Enterprising Jews started building warehouses and hotels in the city for merchants and guests attending the fairs. From 1880 on, Verkhneudinsk boasted an impressive Synagogue crowned with a round dome and a Star of David on its spire. According to the 1915 census, the city had a population of about 17,000: 14,500 Russians, 1,346 Jews, and only 79 Buryat-Mongols. Shlomo Chaim rented a place for his family two blocks from the Synagogue.”

That was the extent of my knowledge of Mysovaya Station, and I thought it was quite sufficient for telling the story of the Gutermans' early years in Siberia. The Russian edition of *Joy from Sadness* went on sale in Russia, my wife Iya's compatriots in Ulan-Ude received it with a great deal of interest, and I began to get warm responses and wrote answers. Then, on May 5, 2010, this message popped up on my computer screen:

*“Chernykh Taisya, May 5, 2010. Buryat-Mongolia.*

*Dear Mr. Rott, hello!*

*My name is Taisya. I read your book, **Joy from Sadness**, with tremendous pleasure and interest. In particular, it was a revelation to me to learn that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large family named Guterman lived at the Mysovaya Station (which is where I live and work as director of the technical library). To my great regret, I never even heard that name in Mysovaya.*

*After reading your book I went to the local museum, but they have no information, either. I know that there is an old Jewish cemetery at Mysovaya which, unfortunately, has been practically destroyed.*

*Forgive me, but perhaps you or your wife could write something more detailed for our museum about the Guterman family’s years in Mysovaya? Perhaps you have photos from that period? I think your notes and Xerox copies of the photos could become another page in the history of Mysovaya.*

*I hope to hear back from you. Good-bye.*

*Respectfully,  
Chernykh, Taisya”*

Iya and I were incredibly pleased by this letter—a living message from the Baikal, from a village that we thought had disappeared from existence as far as we were concerned, and which, in fact, was still huddled on the shore of that legendary lake. We immediately began to dream of learning more about Mysovaya from this reader... A few days later, having obtained a phone number, I heard, for the first time, the pleasant, low voice of Taisya Chernykh. We were divided by fourteen time zones, but it was at once clear that both parties were glad to get to know each other and willing to continue the acquaintance.

I asked Taisya to find out if there were any archives left. Perhaps some of the old-timers still remembered the houses or at least the district where Jewish families used to live? Perhaps there were some inscriptions left on the gravestones of the old Jewish cemetery....?

A few weeks later, we heard Taisya’s excited tale about the first results of her search. It turned out that there had been not one but several families named Guterman in Mysovaya. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,

the station had two Russian Orthodox churches and one Jewish prayer house. Surviving papers from the archives show that at the time, birth records used to indicate, among other things, the name of the moel who performed the traditional Jewish ritual of circumcising a boy...

The following episode from my book is also related to the life of the Gutermans at Mysovaya:

*“The older son, Moisey, returned to Poland before the Russian Revolution in order to find a bride. The most suitable one was his cousin Haya, whose parents arranged the wedding. Moisey headed back to Siberia, while Haya stayed behind waiting for her papers so she could move to Russia, and soon gave birth to a baby girl. Then came World War I and revolution. Haya crossed the border seven times with her baby, but each time they were sent back to Poland. Finally, one of her attempts succeeded, and Moisey’s family was reunited. Soon after that they had another daughter, Eva...”*

*For many years, Moisey Solomonovich headed a highly successful team of house painters. He married his eldest daughter, Maria, to one of his workers, Vasily Tikhomirov. They had two children, Isai and Revekka, who was just an infant of a few months when the war began. Vasily was drafted and killed on the front lines in the first month of the war.*

*One of the cold stone warehouse buildings from the old trade fairs (the Soviet regime had no need of these fairs...) became the new home of Moisey Solomonovich’s large family; he and his wife lived there to the end of their days. The family was considered fairly prosperous as long as Uncle Moisey was alive. The task of running the household fell to Aunt Haya, who also spent her entire life working as a security guard for the book warehouse next door.*

*One can tell endless stories about the unfortunate fate of this petite, kind-hearted, incredibly hardworking woman who found herself transplanted from the comfortable life of a Polish Jewish family into the squalor of Soviet Buryat-Mongolia. (It was only in Toronto that my wife Iya understood why her aunt Haya had never eaten meat in Ulan-Ude... The kashrut laws instilled since early childhood remained inviolable for her.)*

*Aunt Haya died in 1962, just at the time of my first trip to Ulan Ude. People went to pay their respects to her remains at the converted warehouse where the family lived, and where she now lay in the middle of the room in an*

*open coffin propped up on four chairs. The only thing I was entrusted with that day was to nail a small plate with the name of Haya Guterman to the small wooden post installed on her grave.*

*The first-cousin marriage of Moisey and Haya (whose mothers were sisters to each other) had disastrous consequences for the family: none of their children, or later their grandchildren, escaped some form of innate defect or inadequacy...*

*From the age of five, Iya started doing homework for Isai, whom the Soviet educational system kept in first grade for seven years even though he was mentally retarded from birth and his mind always remained at the level of a three-year-old.*

*As he aged, Isai became a famous "village idiot" around the town, but he was peaceful and harmless. He spent his days at the market hanging around the Chinese shoemakers who would ask Isai to watch their tools when they had to step away briefly; when they came back, they would always give him a 10-kopeck coin, and he would race home as fast as he could to give it to his mother. In the evening, Isai would run past the ticket collectors at the opera house, throw his padded jacket down on the floor at the coat check, and run up to the upper balcony, where he would listen to the opera, always standing up and peering from behind the column on the left.*

*Iya and Isai cared deeply about each other their whole lives. He never talked to anyone outside his family, but whenever Iya was in town on vacation and he saw her at the market, he would run toward her and lay his head on her left shoulder: "Aahhh... Iya is here!" And then he would run to his mother to go give her the happy news. He never accepted any gifts from anyone, unless he was told that it was "from Iya", and later on "from Iya's uncle."*

In the summer of 1966, during another family trip to Ulan-Ude, we saw Isai's cousin, Misha Guterman, to whom his mother Eva Guterman gave her own maiden name. A big six-year-old boy, he spent most of his time outdoors. He would sit down right in the middle of Stalin Street, next to his house, and block the traffic. The bus drivers knew him; they would come out and give Misha 10 kopecks, and then they could get back on the road while the boy ran to get himself some ice cream. Then he'd eat it and go back to his spot.

It was in those days that Eva Guterman, who was running out of energy caring for her disabled son, decided to give him up. She signed the appropriate papers, and the boy was removed from her home by a social welfare agency. That was forty-five years ago. For years, neither Iya nor any of the other relatives heard anything else about Misha; all trace of him had been lost. Soon afterward, Eva's life ended; she died in a fire that started from smoking in bed.

Isai's younger sister Revekka also spent many years in school, but she learned to read and write decently, actually gave birth to a boy, Yurochka, and worked as a cleaning woman at the printing shop of the city paper until retirement. The warehouse buildings became completely dilapidated, and the city finally gave Manya Tikhomirova's family a three-room apartment. After Manya's difficult illness and death, her daughter Revekka became the head of the family. She was left to care for her little son and two disabled brothers. She introduced a simple and convenient schedule in the household: there was only one meal a day, at five. The rest of the time, everyone slept or sat on the balcony. Vodka was always on the menu.

The tradition of helping the Tikhomirows was passed on from Rachel Solomonovna to us. We regularly sent them packages and money from Tomsk, Togliatti, and especially from Toronto. At our request, when our friend was emigrating to Canada, he sent his belongings in a crate from Mukhachevo to the Tikhomirows in Ulan Ude.

The Tikhomirows were the only ones among the Gutermans' relatives in Ulan Ude who were not afraid to maintain a correspondence with us. Revekka regularly answered Iya's letters and never failed to inquire about the health of Grandma Regina and my brother Yuzik. Iya always asked for Isai to write something for her, too, and the letter from them would often start with a penciled scrawl followed by Revekka's "translation": "Isai is sitting on the balcony, watching the trains go by, and waiting for Iya to visit."

On our first trip from Canada to Russia in 1992, I was able to make a fairly extensive video movie about Iya's and my stay with this troubled family of four. The footage I filmed not only shows their calm and peaceful life but is also filled with Iya's tender love and affection for each of

them, and for Isai a little more than the others. What stands out as well is the physical condition of Revekka's already grown son. Yura not only calmly and smartly helps me assemble the iron beds but reacts quickly and almost precisely to my requests to find and bring this or that tool, and speaks correctly and finely even though he never went to school.

A few years later, Revekka brought some "hot" vodka home from the market. The family drank it, and everyone got sick within twenty-four hours.... Isai and Vova's stomachs swelled quite badly. Revekka called an ambulance; but, according to her, when the medics entered the apartment, one of them said, "A couple of retards—why waste medicines on them?" Isai died the next day; Vova suffered for a month until he, too, passed away.

Revekka had no one left but Yura. Someone "helped" them trade their apartment for a single-room one, but even then they kept coming up short of money to pay for it. Meanwhile, the drunks from the nearby streets felt quite at ease at their apartment and pilfered anything that was to their liking. Activists from Ulan Ude's Jewish community regularly supplied Revekka and Yura Tikhomirov with food from the JOINT fund, while our charitable fund periodically covered their arrears for rent and utilities.

The Rachel Guterman-Yaroslavskaya Foundation for Medical Assistance to the Indigent Jews of Buryat-Mongolia has been in existence for eight years. The Foundation is sponsored by our entire family and by generous Jews in Toronto whom Iya and I ask annually for donations. In Ulan-Ude, this foundation is run by retired dentist Vera Gordienko, a kind, loyal, steadfast friend of many years to Iya and to her mother.

Just recently, in late February, tragedy struck the Tikhomirows again: Revekka passed away. Amazingly, Iya had a premonition of her death from Toronto... First thing in the morning, she called Vera in Ulan-Ude; Vera waited for their morning hours to come and made a call to the Tikhomirows. After several rings, Yura picked up the phone; in response to Vera's request to talk to Revekka, he replied calmly, "Mama is dead, dead..."

Vera rushed over to their place at once, and a slightly frightened-looking Yura opened the door. The usual stench of excrement and filth hit her

nostrils. It turned out that Revekka had been lying on the floor, dead, for nearly two days... Yura helped Vera place his mother's body on the sofa. Vera was shocked by his appearance: Yura was wearing a dirty undershirt and torn sweatpants—through the holes in them, she could see that he wasn't wearing any underpants—and had a rubber mule on one foot and one of Revekka's heeled sandals on the other. Vera found no other clothing in the apartment...

The medics who arrived in an ambulance declared Revekka dead but refused to remove the body and suggested calling the police. The policeman who showed up did not want to issue a death notice and instead began to draw up a report for investigators because, supposedly, "the toes of the deceased had been bitten off..."

An already stunned Vera became even more agitated. She grabbed her glasses, turned on the light and began to examine Revekka's feet. Her toes were short but they were all intact. She told the policeman to come and look: "What are you talking about? Her toes are all there!" Slightly abashed, the policeman agreed to write a report of natural death.

In the next two days, Vera and Sonia Vinevich (a distant relative) were able to visit all the offices, pay all the fees, and obtain all the necessary papers.

Revekka Tikhomirova's funeral was held, with appropriate dignity, on the evening of the second day after her death. On the same day, a granite memorial stone was installed on the grave. None of this would have been possible without the huge and sincere help of Vera's two sons: Anton, a long-distance truck driver and a highly skilled auto mechanic, and Sergei, a major in the Russian Air Force. All expenses were covered by our family in Toronto and Lyubov Semenova in Moscow, a cousin of Iya's.

Our unselfish helpers now had to deal with yet another problem: the fate of forty-five-year-old Yura. He could not take care of himself, had stayed cooped up inside the apartment for many years, and urinated and defecated all over the place. When Vera suggested that he should go to the hospital, Yura stated that he was in perfectly good health and wasn't going anywhere. But when Vera said, "You need treatment," Yura smiled, clicked two fingers against his neck and agreed, "That would be good."

*Sblomo Chaim Guterman,  
Irkutsk, c.1896.*



*Sblomo Chaim Guterman,  
Mysovaya, c.1898.*



*Hasidic Jew from Mysovaya —  
Moisey Guterman — Is ready to go to  
Poland to find a bride. c. 1908.*



*Moisey Guterman holds his younger sister  
on his knee — Rachel, future mother of  
Iya Rott. To the left sits their older sister  
Ita. Standing — Moisey's wife,  
Haya Mirl. Mysovaya, 1912.*

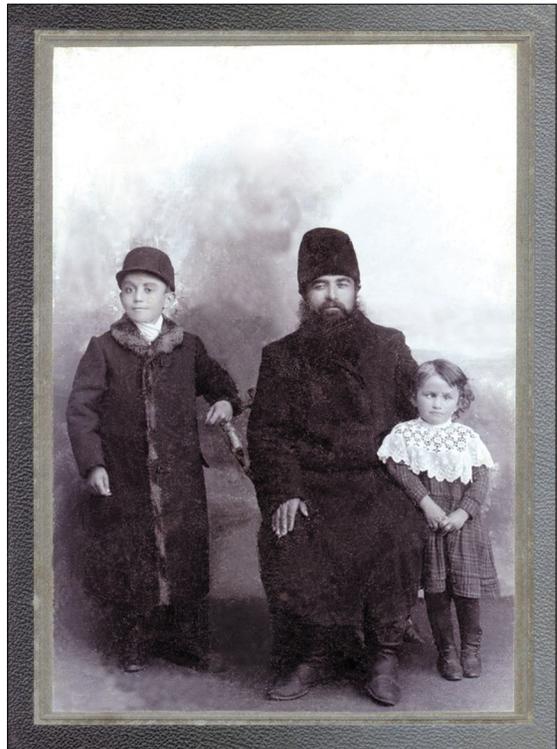
*Moisey Guterman.  
Prerevolutionary Mysovaya.*



*The Mysovaya Station photographer  
was able to find even such a costume for  
Moisey Guterman.*



*Guterman sisters — Rachel and Esther.  
Mysovaya, 1914.*



*A Tatar neighbour, a friend of the  
family, and Guterman children  
— Isaak and Rachel.  
Mysovaya, 1913.*

*Moisey Guterman's daughters  
— Manya and Eva.  
Ulan-Ude, 1932.*

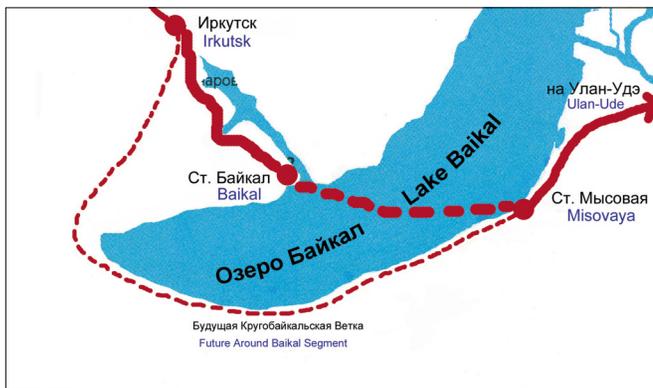


*Haya Mirl Guterman with her daughter  
Esther, who died in early childhood.*



*Icebreaker ferry  
"Baikal". 1904.*

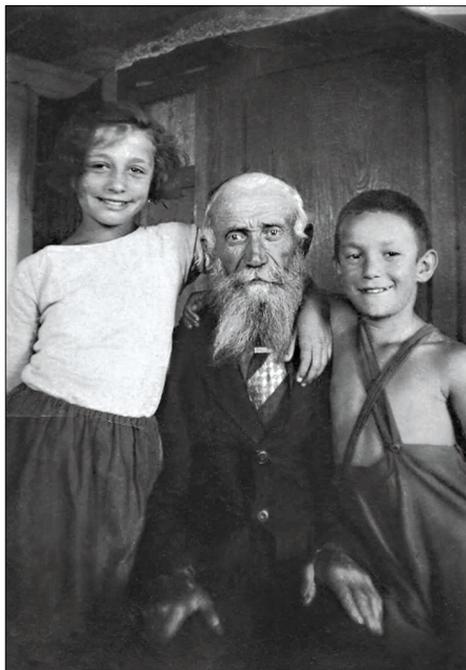
*Route of the icebreakers-ferry  
between Baikal  
and Mysovaya.*



*Loading  
icebreakers  
"Baikal" and  
"Angara"*



*Haya and Moisey Guterman  
with their first grandchild — Isai  
Tichomirov. Ulan-Ude, 1937.*



*Grandfather Shlomo Chaim Guterman with  
grandchildren — Fruma Dvorkin (Tatyana)  
and Marks Guterman. Ulan-Ude, 1936.*



*Moisey and Haya Guterman with daughters, grandson and son in law — Vasily Tichomirov.  
Ulan-Ude, 1937.*



*We have arrived at Lake Baikal. May 28, 2011.*



*Mysovaya Station — today known as the town of Babushkin. May 28, 2011.*



*Buildings of the Group Home in Mysovaya. 2011.*



*Bank. Town of Babushkin. May 28, 2011.*



*Our first meeting in Mysovaya. From left: Vladimir Rott, Taisya and Petr Chernykh, Iya Rott, Larisa Gavrilina and Vera Gordienko. May 28, 2011.*



*Visiting the Town of Babushkin's Museum. Director of the Museum Klavdia Yakovleva (second from left) and tour guide Ludmila Romakbova (in the centre). May 28, 2011.*



*There are no words to describe this unexpected discovery of cousin Misha Guterman.  
Babushkin Psychoneurological Group Home. May 28, 2011.*



*A few of the kind caretaking staff of the Babushkin Group Home. May 28, 2011.*



*An unforgettable visit.*



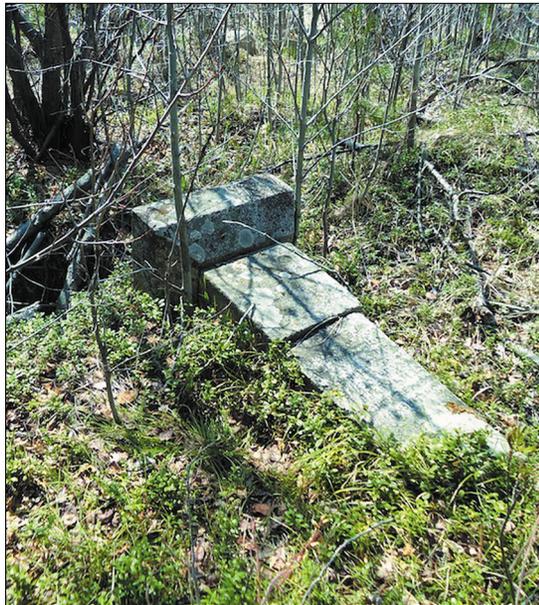
*In front of a Mongolian yurt. Leonid Viktorovich Seliverstov (in centre),  
the Director of the Group Home. May 28, 2011.*



*At the lakeshore of Lake Baikal. May 28, 2011.*



*Taking a stroll in the Group Home yard. Misha Guterman gets a hug from Vera Gordienko and Iya Rott. May 28, 2011.*



*Ruins of the old Jewish cemetery in Mysovaya.  
End of May, 2011.*



*Visiting Yura Tichomirov at the Psychiatric Hospital of the City of Ulan-Ude. May 29, 2011.*



*Yura Tichomirov (Guterman) at the Group Home at Mysovaya Station. November, 2011.*



*More than 100 years ago young tinsmith Shlomo Guterman ran from pogroms in Poland to Mysovaya. Fate brought his fourth and fifth generation ancestors — Misha and Yura — to this very same place... September 29, 2011.*



Apparently, the boozers who came over to their place would often use this gesture as a hand symbol for getting drunk [*which is also known in Russian slang as "getting treatment"—tr.*].

On the day Yura was taken to the psychiatric hospital, Vera kept worrying about surprises. She walked arm in arm with Yura—a tall, stout, handsome man—toward the ambulance that waited by the entrance to the building. Just in case, her sons Anton and Sergei waited nearby in a car, ready for anything unexpected.

It was with some reluctance that the hospital admitted such a difficult patient: hands and feet covered in crust, no control over bodily functions, blackened and wobbly teeth that had never been brushed. A change of footwear, clothing, and underwear was needed immediately. Vera and Anton undertook the huge task of visiting Yura at the hospital on a daily basis and bringing him home-cooked food, sweets, adult diapers and cigarettes. These good people will always have our boundless gratitude.

Two months later, when Iya and I came to Ulan Ude and came to the hospital to see Yura, he knew who we were and where we were coming from—in fact, he was waiting for us. His skin was clean, he had lost weight and was walking more easily, but the deplorable condition of his teeth can hardly be described. In his 45 years, he had never once seen a dentist... Much to our joy, Yura was able to clearly state his name, his mother's name, and his home address and telephone number. We strongly suspected that this unfortunate man had been born with normal mental faculties but, sadly, had grown up and lived among the retarded...

The question arose of expeditiously transferring Yura from the psychiatric hospital to one of the republic's special facilities for people like himself, for permanent residency.

But the transfer ran into a glitch. After his mother's death, Yura automatically became the owner of Revekka's apartment. A distant relative who had never paid even the slightest attention to the Tikhomirows until then wanted to get her hands on the apartment and started trying to become Yura's legal guardian. From Toronto, Iya sent a letter to the republic's Department of Social Welfare, explaining the gravity of the situation and asking that Yura be transferred to a special facility.

And now, back to the present theme of Mysovaya Station. In late May of 2011, Iya and I flew into Tomsk from where we started our two-week tour of several Russian cities, promoting the second volume of my book—*Joy of Discoveries*. When we headed to Buryat-Mongolia, we decided that we had to visit Mysovaya Station. We really wanted to find the answer to the question: Why did Iya's grandfather Shlomo Guterman decide to settle in that particular spot when he journeyed from Poland to Siberia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century?

When we were still in Toronto, I informed Taisya Chernykh that we wanted to visit them, to hear her stories about her town on location, and also to see the ruins of the Jewish cemetery. Taisya and her husband Petr immediately suggested that we stay at their place. I thanked them and said that because of our busy schedule we could stay with them only one day and would return to Ulan-Ude for the night. Taisya asked what she should make for dinner, but I asked her to choose a decent restaurant and make reservations for dinner where we could invite not only the two of them but any close friends they wanted to bring. Taisya replied at once that there was no suitable restaurant at Mysovaya. "Not to worry! Fresh-salted Baikal omul with boiled potatoes—what food could be better than that!" I reassured Taisya. "We'll think of something," she promised.

On May 28, the long-awaited day came at last. Early in the morning, at the entrance to the five-story building where Vera lives and where we had stayed the entire three days of our sojourn in Ulan-Ude, Anton was waiting for us in his white automobile. We were barely able to remember and recognize it as the famous Soviet Volga-24. Masterfully restored by its capable owner, it looked brand new.

With two hundred kilometers of the drive to Mysovaya behind us, we finally saw the boundless expanse of Lake Baikal, with a few remaining ice floes still floating on its surface. The sky was cloudless; the one- and two-story buildings of a typical provincial Russian town gleamed brightly in the sun.

Western readers may be interested in a few facts and figures regarding the Baikal. This lake is located 5,000 kilometers east of Moscow and 3,000 kilometers west of Japan. It is 636 kilometers long and 48 kilometers wide;

it is also, at 1,620 meters, the deepest lake in the world. Three hundred and thirty-six rivers flow into it; only one, the Angara, flows out. Lake Baikal contains 20 percent of the world's freshwater, more than North America's five Great Lakes together.

We were met by Taisya and Petr Chernykh, who looked younger and more attractive than we had imagined. Their adopted daughter Erszena was with them as well; she at once began to film a video of our visit. Their apartment had just undergone thorough renovations which our hosts had been in a hurry to finish by our arrival; the completed work was a fine example of the "European-quality renovation" popular in Russia today.

Moments after we had met, Taisya said suddenly, "Vladimir, you probably noticed that I haven't written to you in the last three months or so. It wasn't computer problems. I felt a little bit at a loss because I wasn't sure how you'd react to my sudden discovery. It turned out that there is a Guterman in our town—Mikhail Guterman. He's 51 years old. He has been living here for many years, in a special facility... I've seen his papers and checked them against the information in your book. He's your relative—the son of Eva Guterman."

"My G-d! It's our Misha!" Iya exclaimed and began to cry.

We were in shock. None of the Gutermans had seen Misha in 45 years. Everyone thought he was long gone... We just stood there in silence. The shock was not simply that Misha had been found, but that one of these special residential facilities was here in Mysovaya. Taisya told us that she had gone there to see a friend who worked at the place and accidentally overheard a nurse mention the name Guterman when talking to a co-worker. It made Taisya pause and think: *That name was in the book!* A few days later, she was shown Misha's file from which she learned the name of his mother, Eva Guterman. In the same file, she saw a paper Eva had signed giving up her son. There was another paper from the school, with the principal attesting that M. Guterman was "unteachable." An attached record of the inspection of Eva Guterman's apartment stated, "Dirty and very squalid..."

Of course, we wanted to go to the special facility right away and see Misha, but Taisya already had a program for the day: first, we were expected

at the town museum; then, I was to speak at the book event at the town council; and only then would we be taken to the special facility.

The town museum consists of three fairly small rooms filled with a great variety of items that illustrate the geography and history of the Baikal region and the events of the Revolution and the war years. The museum collection is a wonderful monument to the generations of enthusiasts who put it together, people who cherish the past of their tiny region lost amidst the boundless vastness of Siberia. Museum director Klavdia Yakovleva and tour guide Ludmila Romakhova gave a warm reception to the guests from Canada. They spent over an hour telling Iya and me about the majestic lake Baikal and the small extension of land from its shore known as Mysovaya (the Cape).

The settlement that arose on the cape in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century was also called Mysovaya, and then, since 1902, Mysovsk. One of the old buildings still has on its walls a tin plate of the Russia Insurance Society, dated 1827. The settlement also served as a transit point for convicts sentenced to hard labor, on their way to Siberia; a special transit jail was built in 1866. By and by, the settlement grew; businessmen who made money transporting goods started coming here. Shops began to open. Slaughterhouses were built to slaughter the cattle, up to 27,000 heads of which were brought annually from Mongolia.

On May 17, 1891, the first rail of the Transsiberian Railroad was laid in Vladivostok. Simultaneously, the construction of its western branch started in Chelyabinsk. In December 1899, the eastern and western branches were joined at the 368<sup>th</sup> kilometer west of Mysovaya. The Siberian transcontinental railway started to function, except for its southern section that was most difficult for the builders—the section between Baikal Station and Mysovaya Station. This was a narrow strip between the mountains and the shoreline, where eventually about 70 tunnels had to be cut in the granite and a multitude of bridges had to be built. It took another six years to complete this difficult 300-kilometer section of the railway on the Baikal shoreline. In the meantime, our builders found a unique solution.

Freight cars loaded with goods were transported from Baikal Station to Mysovaya Station on a 100-meter-long icebreaker ferry, *The Baikal*, built to

special order in England at the Armstrong Shipyard in Newcastle. This icebreaker-ferry was delivered in a disassembled state via a northern sea route, via the Karsk Sea and then the Yenisei and Angara rivers, to Lake Baikal where it was put together - fastened by rivets. The rail tracks of the ferry's lower deck held up to 25 two-axle railroad cars. The upper deck had cabins with a capacity of 200 passengers. When the water was clear, the ferry took three and a half hours to cross the lake; in winter, it could break through ice up to one meter thick. Soon, the *Baikal* icebreaker was joined by the *Angara*, delivered from England in similar fashion. Each ferry transported 150,000-200,000 tons of goods every year. In summer, a multitude of small private vessels as well as several steamboats crisscrossed the Baikal. In winter, when the ice grew too thick, rails tracks were laid along the surface, and horses would pull railroad cars carrying goods from Baikal Station to Mysovaya, whose population by then was over five thousand.

So that was why the shrewd tinsmith Shlomo Guterman from the city of Biyaly of the Sudlice province of Poland—along with his neighbors, including namesakes and perhaps even relatives—ended up at the distant Mysovaya Station in Siberia.

And now, back to our own stay in Mysovaya (now a town called Babushkin). The cozy auditorium in the fairly small town hall building was filled to capacity when we arrived. My tale of the history of our family over a period of nearly one hundred years—from Mysovaya to Toronto—found an attentive and sympathetic audience. Meanwhile, I kept thinking, “Look where fate has brought Iya and me this time! Look where we are today: in Mysovaya! Yet another miracle!”

I remember that time passed by very quickly, and then we were walking with Taisya, Petr, and a few of their close friends down a narrow street that brought us to a cluster of two-story buildings of gray brick. This was the Babushkin Psychoneurological Group Home. At the entrance, we were met by a tall, severe-looking man with an imposing mustache, wearing a felt cap. Taisya introduced him as Leonid Viktorovich Seliverstov, director of the group home. We were led down long, clean corridors. Pleasant-looking, neatly dressed young women stood at the doors of each ward and greeted us with smiles. Our hearts rejoiced at the knowledge

that people with such kind, honest faces worked at this institution which was entrusted with such difficult tasks.

It was a fairly long walk. Finally there was a whispered, “This is Misha’s room,” and then someone said loudly, “Misha, you’ve got company!”

Through the open door, we saw four beds. A tall man sat hunched on a chair by the farthest bed on the right; when he saw the commotion by the door, he began to hurriedly put on his new running shoes. One of the nurses led him toward us. It was Misha! We were stunned by his resemblance to his mother, Eva Guterman. He had her face! Iya tearfully pressed Misha’s head toward her, and he stood silently, his face buried in her shoulder—just like Isai had done... At our request, Taisya had bought a box of chocolates ahead of time, and now she slipped it into Iya’s hand. Misha grabbed the box and went quickly to hide it in his bedside stand.

We were escorted to the meeting room at the end of the corridor and left alone with Misha. After a moment’s silence, Iya was the first to speak. She explained to Misha who we were and told him we lived in Canada. Misha told us he didn’t remember his Mama. “Now Isai, I remember him well!” he added.

“Misha, you look just like your Mama,” I told him, “and you’re a very nice-looking young man.”

He bragged about his new white-and-blue running shoes and pointed to the name “Guterman,” written on each shoe in black marker. We asked him at once if he knew how to read. “I can’t read,” he replied, then slipped a hand in his trousers pocket and pulled out a rolled-up paper. One of Misha’s roommates had written a note for him, with no spelling errors:

*“Guterman. Leaf tea, 2 packs; lard; sausage; beverage, 1 bottle; sunflower seeds; mustard; garlic, 3 cloves; wafer cookies; gingerbread cookies; condensed milk, 2 cans; chocolates.”*

We were slightly taken aback. I put the note in my pocket; then, at the end of the day, I gave one of the young men who accompanied us a few dollars, and a couple of days later he kindly delivered “our reply” to Misha.

After we spent a short time with Misha, a few photos were taken, and then it was time to say good-bye. Misha was led away, in the direction of his ward, but our ears still rang with his final quiet, confidential request: “Take me with you...”

The director of the facility, Taisya, and several other people were waiting for us on the front porch. They were going to take us to dinner. On our way, I asked Taisya which restaurant she had chosen and where it was. To my surprise, she replied, “We’re having dinner right here—at the group home.” Imagine our amazement when, after rounding the corner of one of the facility’s buildings, we came up, led by the director, to a pretty Mongolian yurt standing in a far corner of the courtyard. Curious, we went inside. Yes, that was where our dinner was waiting. We were told that this yurt, usually folded and stored, had been set up especially for our visit... I have often mentioned in my memoirs the kindness and the extraordinary hospitality of the Russian people. And there it was once again, this time on Buryat-Mongolian soil! Our hosts’ friendly faces attested to the fact that they were all descendants of Russians, Mongols, and people of many other local and non-local ethnicities who had come to Siberia to build their future on Lake Baikal, at Mysovaya Station.

Inside the yurt, two tall, nice-looking female cooks and one of the women’s daughter were briskly working at the lit gas stove. We sat down at the long, beautifully set table. Drinks and cold cuts had been served already. Among them, we smelled the familiar smell and saw the silvery glitter of the coveted—especially by Iya!—famous Baikal omul. The hot boiled potatoes to be eaten with it were served right away.

Group home director Leonid Viktorovich Seliverstov was the first to speak. From his very first words, it was obvious that this severe, mustachioed Siberian man was an intelligent and caring boss and a kind and loving father to the patients, whom the directors and the staff never call “the sick people” but only “the people in our care.” What a meaningful phrase that is! Ninety-six wonderful staffers of the Babushkin Psychoneurological Group Home provide round-the-clock care and comfort for 223 residents, most of whom are in a work therapy program where they do useful work according to their ability—and always for pay—on an almost daily basis.

The director told us that Misha Guterman was very fond of gardening and always tended to the flower beds. Now we understood why his face and neck were so suntanned.

The residents earn up to 1000 rubles (35 U.S. dollars) a month, which they use to buy candy, cookies, cologne, and other items. The group home has its own vegetable gardens, a pig farm, a cow farm, and hothouses, where the residents work a few hours a day and which supply most of the group home's food.

Mr. Seliverstov told us that farming saved the group home during a critical period after the collapse of the USSR, when all state funding was discontinued for a while.

The dinner served in a real Mongolian yurt, with a wide variety of delicious dishes, and the atmosphere of this unforgettable banquet moved us deeply.

In the yard outside one of the buildings, we saw a strange line of about twenty men who stood huddled against each other and waited patiently for the man in the front of the line, who was smoking a cigarette under the watchful eye of a male nurse standing nearby. "We don't want them to accidentally burn themselves or burn a hole in their clothing," the director explained. Much to our joy, we saw Misha, standing a short distance away from the men. He rushed toward us at once, and we asked, "Do you smoke, too?" "No!" he replied resolutely. Iya and Vera hugged him and cuddled him. Once again, he said, "Take me with you..."

"We can't take you with us, Misha. We live far away from here..."

"Far away? Really? Did you come in a car? Is that your car?" Misha pointed toward Anton's white Volga, parked at some distance. Anton nodded... A year has passed since those events, and I still can't forgive myself for not thinking to ask Anton to give Misha a ride.

We were approached by a young staff member who turned out to be the group home's choirmaster and also oversaw its musical programs and concerts. Of Misha, he said, "He's quiet, obedient, likes to work, likes to ask questions..."

From the moment of our arrival in Mysovaya, we were constantly accompanied by journalist Marina Petrachkova, a very nice woman who

constantly took pictures of everything and scribbled energetically in her notebook. It turned out that she was the editor in chief of the local paper, *Kabanskiy Dialog*. Shortly afterward, her detailed account of our visit to Mysovaya ran in the paper.

Marina gave us copies of the last four issues of her paper, though we didn't get a chance to look at them until two weeks later, when we went to Hungary for some time off after several more book events in Moscow and Togliatti. The *Kabanskiy Dialog* was a pleasant surprise for Iya and myself: while each edition was only a few pages long, the paper was rich in content and dynamic, with bold and interesting debates and well-written articles; everything was enjoyable to read, even the ads. We brought these papers back to Toronto to proudly show our friends what talented people lived in the faraway Baikal region.

The visit to the group home was an incredible experience. When saying good-bye, we did not have enough kind words to express our admiration and gratitude to its kind, caring and patient staffers. We asked Seliverstov, the director, to tell us what steps we should undertake to get Yura Tikhomirov transferred as quickly as possible from the psychiatric hospital in Ulan-Ude to the group home in Mysovaya. When leaving the facility, we saw Misha once again—this time, standing by an open window on the second floor and waving good-bye to us. “Be well, Guterman, Iya’s 51-year-old nephew! You’re family now; we’ll be back!”

Before leaving, we walked down to the Baikal one more time and took a few group photos by the shore. On our way there, I remembered the old Jewish cemetery and asked Taisya where it was. She replied, “We found the cemetery, but we’re not taking you there. Petr and I went down there yesterday and took pictures... but then we found 29 ticks on ourselves! I’ll send the photos by email.”

Dusk was about to fall. Anton was at the wheel of the Volga, racing at high speed, while Iya and I pondered and relived the day’s events. What a twist of fate! Grandfather Shlomo Guterman came here over a hundred years ago and had eight children whom destiny scattered all over the world, and now his descendant Misha Guterman was living out his days here... And now, we are praying to G-d to bring yet another

“Guterman”—Yura Tikhomirov—to this place. Something mystical? Or simply fate?

Anton got us back to Ulan-Ude in good time. I slept badly that night, and then called Taisya in Mysovaya first thing in the morning.

“An immense thank you for yesterday! Thank you for your finds, and for making the arrangements. And also, Taisya, a separate thanks to you for not taking us to the Jewish cemetery. Yesterday was a Saturday. We Jews aren’t supposed to visit cemeteries on the Sabbath—we’re not supposed to disturb the dead.”

“To tell you the truth, Vladimir, I knew that. I read it in your books, and Petya and I decided that we weren’t going to take you to the cemetery. There were no ticks, I just made that up. And I will send you photos of the cemetery...”

Her words moved me to tears. Upon returning to Toronto, I found an equally moving letter in my electronic mailbox:

*“Chernykh Taisya, May 29, 2011. After the meeting.*

*Iya and Vadim! I know you are still on Buryat soil, but I still want to tell you what’s in my heart and on my mind. Yesterday, you came here to Mysovaya, and when you left you took a piece of our hearts with you, Petr’s and mine. Our friends came over today (some of them were with us yesterday, some were not), everyone watched the video, we talked about our meeting and shared our impressions. Where we used to say, “Our long-distance acquaintances Iya and Vladimir Rott,” we are now finally able to say, “Our dear, beloved friends Iya and Vadim.”*

*Thinking over yesterday’s meeting moment by moment, we regret that perhaps we didn’t anticipate everything, perhaps we did some things wrong or failed to ask or say something that needed to be said (and perhaps you were too tactful to say anything). If this is so, we beg your forgiveness.*

*We thank God, and thank you, for the hours we spent together!*

*May the Lord keep you and help you in all your affairs and projects; may he give you and your family good health and optimism for many years to come.*

*Thank you for being in this world!”*

On the same day, another email arrived:

*“Petrachkova Marina, May 28, 2011. The meeting in Mysovaya.*

*Good day to you, dear Vladimir Frantzevich! This is Marina Petrachkova, editor in chief of the newspaper Kabanskiy Dialog. I am most grateful to fate for allowing me to meet you and your esteemed wife Iya Borisovna! I wish I had had a chance to talk to you about some issues of concern to me, but perhaps you can answer my questions in your letters when you have time. When listening to you today, I applied many of your life experiences to myself and found, in your tale, the answers I sought. Now, holding your books in my hands, I believe that they too will give me affirmation for what I have been searching for my entire life. A complicated relationship with a mother—a strong and domineering woman, but still MAMA! A husband’s sudden death, survival with two children under our Soviet system. Is happiness to be found in creative fulfillment, or... And that’s how it goes over the course of a lifetime. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you and yours strong Siberian-quality health, a long life, and many more meetings that will give you an impetus for more books and for all your wishes to come true!*

*Respectfully yours, Marina Petrachkova.*

*P.S. If you need photos of our time in Mysovaya, I will gladly send you everything I have.”*

On the third and final day of our stay in Ulan-Ude, Anton and Vera took us to the new cemetery in the morning to honor our loved ones: Uncle Grisha and Aunt Sonya Chernov, Revekka Tikhomirova. It is a mixed cemetery with no special Jewish section, but it is remarkably well-tended and orderly, with clearly demarcated rows of graves and asphalt-covered paths. Then, we went to the city psychiatric hospital to see Yura Tikhomirov. It was good to see a tall, well-groomed, rather pleasant-looking young man enter the meeting room. To Vera’s surprise, Yura was brought there alone; before that, he had usually been accompanied by one of his roommates. We greeted him with a hug. Yura was able to clearly state his last name, his date of birth and his home address. We were struck by how greedily he devoured the huge portions of food that Vera had brought not

only for him but for the other men in his ward. We were finally able to persuade him to stop eating and take the food back with him. While he ate, Yura often adjusted his teeth with his fingers; he had no more than eight of them left, all of them wobbly...what a sight! He stuffed the long boxes with teabags into his pockets even more eagerly than the packs of cigarettes Anton had bought for him.

“You like tea, Yura?”

“Yes, I love it!”

“How many teabags are you going to put in one glass?”

“All of them! Chifir...I like chifir!” [*extremely strong tea brew with a mild narcotic effect—tr.*], he replied with a chuckle.

“But why did you put one of the boxes in your pants?”

“Well, I *am* a Jew!”

I am writing this on January 2, 2012. Half a year has passed since that meeting. Vera and her sons in Ulan-Ude, Iya and I in Toronto—we all did everything we could do make Yura’s life at the psychiatric hospital more bearable. On September 28, after Vera had paid for the transportation, Yura was transferred from Ulan-Ude to the special group home in Mysovaya. The journey took a toll on him: he was already quite weak when getting into the car, and almost unconscious when they arrived. Taisya told us that in the first several days Yura couldn’t even sit up in bed, but the care and effort of the group home staffers began to bear fruit.

Misha Guterman was particularly happy at this turn of events. He finally had family: “My Yura!” Soon enough, they were seen walking in the yard together.

Taisya told us how movingly Misha greeted her every time she visited. “And now let’s go see Yura!” he would say, taking Taisya with him and giving some of the candy she had brought. Much to our joy, Misha had begun to see Taisya as an inalienable part of the family he had gained. Now, she was the one to whom he directed his confidential request: “Can you please take me with you to Canada?” Of course, he was convinced that “Canada” was somewhere close by, maybe just a block away...

In late December, after yet another visit to the group home, Taisya gave us the good news: both cousins were doing well and had enjoyed her

gifts; Yura was settling into his new life at the group home and taking walks...

And then all of a sudden, on December 27, a call from Ulan-Ude woke me up in the middle of the night. It was Vera, who was crying. "Vadya! They just called from Mysovaya... Yura is dying. Internal bleeding... They said nothing can be done to save him!" Then, early in the morning (the time difference is 14 hours), there was another call, and Iya heard Vera say, "Yura is dead..."

At first, Iya and I were too stunned to do anything but sit there and cry. Then I called Taisya. She and Petr were crying too. It was quite a blow to them. They had gotten the news from Vera, only days after they had visited the group home and left the two cousins in seemingly good health and good spirits.

"My dear Tasya," I said. "Fate has found the two of us and bound us together forever. Let us think of poor Yura's exit from this world as fate's decree rather than a tragedy. We did everything we could to make things better for him. Perhaps you could try to do one last thing. It would be a holy thing to bury Yura at the abandoned Jewish cemetery in Mysovaya. That's where Shlomo Guterman's four children who died in infancy in 1900-1910 were buried. In the photos you sent, all the headstones have fallen down. The city government probably won't let you bury him there, but it's worth trying. And if that doesn't work out, then try to have Yura buried in a grave apart from the others. Why bury a Jew next to a Christian or a Buddhist in Mysovaya when it's not done anywhere else in the world?"

Taisya promised she would try to do everything right.

A few minutes later Vera called again. "The group home called, they're asking what sort of Jewish burial rituals they should observe." An unexpected question of the utmost importance! The rabbi of our synagogue in Toronto was rather taken aback when I presented him with such a heap of questions in this unexpected situation. As a result, I asked Vera to tell them the essential minimum: the grave should be dug so that he can be buried facing Jerusalem, that is, southwest; the coffin with the body should not be opened; when the casket is lowered into the ground, a green pine twig coiled into a ring should be placed inside...

On December 29, we were told that several group home residents had spent two days digging the grave under the supervision of work therapy instructor Olga Rubtzova. The temperature was close to  $-27^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the ground was frozen solid about a meter deep, a bonfire had to be kept burning constantly...

*“Chernykh Taisya, December 30, 2011. Mysovaya Station.*

*Iya, Vladimir, hello! Today, at 14:30 local time, we buried Yura. I feel sad and ashamed to tell you this; please forgive me, but we were unable to fulfill your request and have Yura buried in the Jewish cemetery. The area where the cemetery used to be has been thoroughly dug up, there’s nothing there but pits and ditches. Our “smart” local government gave that piece of land to an organization to build a sewage treatment plant for the town, without giving any thought to the fact that this is a place of historical value, or that it is a crime and a sacrilege to walk over people’s remains. So instead Yura was buried in the local cemetery that serves as the burial ground for all patients from the group home. The grave was dug apart from the others, at some distance. Yesterday at 19:00, I got a call from senior nurse Tugarinova at the group home; she said that in the morning Yura’s body would be taken for the autopsy, and then the funeral could be held.*

*As I told you before, Yura was in good health and good cheer until very recently, and then died after just four or five days of illness. For some reason he couldn’t swallow, said it was very difficult. They gave him treatments: shots, IV fluids, and so on. But ... alas. The autopsy results state that the cause of death is still unknown. The stomach was removed for follow-up analysis, but the results will only be available in February.*

*Misha cried a lot when he learned about Yura’s death. He kept saying, “He won’t be back anymore!” In spite of being feeble-minded, he was able to understand that Yura had been family and that he was gone forever. We spent a long time calming him down, and didn’t (on the advice of the doctors) take him with us to the cemetery.”*

Iya and I wept, both when we got this email from Taisya and later when she told us the full details of Yura’s funeral. The grave was dug in a separate

corner of the cemetery that serves as the burial ground for residents of the group home. From the grave, one can see the Baikal; the lakeshore is about a hundred meters away. The wonderful Chernykh, Taisya and Petr, found a list of Jewish burial customs on the Internet. The reader can imagine what we felt when they told us about it: a coffin of simple wood without paint; a small hole in the bottom of the casket, so that he would be “closer to the earth”; the naked body was wrapped in a linen shroud; everyone present took part in filling the grave—each person would throw in three shovelfuls of earth, then stick the shovel in the ground for the next person to take; but there was no one to read the Kaddish. They even served hardboiled eggs at the modest funeral repast...

It will soon be a month that I have been reading the Kaddish for Yura in Toronto. Over these days, I have told the story of this funeral again and again. And the reaction is always the same: the people of Mysovaya station are saintly people!

And this is the end of my tale about this small town full of people with big hearts.

As I look back at the years of my life that I have recounted in my books, I have only two words to convey my feelings to the reader: Happiness and Joy. What happy years have been granted to Iya and me by the Almighty, by our parents, and by fate! How would our lives have shaped up if Ferenc Roth from Hungary and Shlomo Guterman from Poland had headed to the West, seeking their fortunes in America, instead of going East, to Russia? How sad is the endless string of tragedies they endured...and yet, if they had not made the choices they did, we would not be here, happy and grateful as we are!

Toronto, January 24, 2012  
Canada, North America

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