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Vladimir Rott
JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS

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VLADIMIR ROTT

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS

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*«Dedicated to the fond memory of those innocent parents
who were murdered and deprived of the opportunity
to raise their children to be decent people.
Grateful son»*

FOREWORD

From: Rina Benkovich <rina...@mail.ru>

Subject: Привет из Тольятти

Date: 2 February, 2015 2:46:32 PM EST

To: Vladimir Rott <viarott@sympatico.ca>

Good day, my dear Rotts! Today I had a curious encounter with a complete stranger, and I must certainly tell you about it.

A little man who said that he knew my husband very well and that he'd like to send his greetings stopped me on the street. Just in case, I asked him what's the name of my husband? But he ... forgot. Then he began to recall things, telling me what he did when he was working at the VAZ. The little man obviously wanted to chat. And then he said that he was hired to join the 38th department by A.Y. Gilbukh, and that the head of the department at the time was "Rott, Vladimir Franzevich, himself! Truly, a smart man!" At this point I tuned in, and asked for the name of my interlocutor. It turned out that his name was Alexander Ageev; he worked for you as an electrician. Upon learning that I knew you, he asked me to give you his greetings and wishes of good health.

Of course, it's unlikely that you would remember him. But he remembers you! And his are good memories, very warm! I thought that there was a direct analogy with a popular song: if people sing it, then the song turned out well. Here you have a simple man, one of the first repairmen, who remembers you well. I think you would be pleased to know.

Rina Benkovich.

The author of this letter—is an intelligent, educated and very kind woman—a veteran of the Volga Automobile Plant (VAZ). For more than 30 years, Rina had been a section editor of the Togliatti newspaper "Volzhskiy avtostroitel." Her husband, a young engineer in January of 1968, was hired as a foreman to the general machinery section of department №38—Department of installation and repair of the automatic machinery equipment for the production of engines and chassis of "LADA" cars. I was the head of that department.

—Thank you, Rina Markovna, for this touching message!

And I remembered this man. Alexander Ageev was a member of one of the first workers' teams created in our department. Yevgeny Kozlov headed this team,

FOREWORD

and they were often called—“The Guards of the 38th”. This was a close-knit group of highly skilled professionals, who were always directed to the assembly of the most complicated automatic equipment. Please, give them all my warmest greetings and best wishes!

We are really lucky people! We survived until today, keeping fresh in our memory those difficult and incomparable days of our lives—the era when VAZ was being born.

And this year—on August 15th, 2016—we will mark the 50th anniversary of the day when the Ministry of Foreign Trade of USSR and the FIAT corporation (Turin, Italy) signed a General agreement on cooperation in the field of car design, car plant design, and its construction—in the USSR, in the city of Togliatti.

Even more remarkable, the legendary chief engineer of VAZ—Yevgeni Artemovich Bashinjaghyan—is alive to this day. Having given his energy and talent to raise the technical level of mass production in the country, he is a great example for today's engineers.

Wishing a happy old age and good health to the creators of the Soviet automobile giant, to all that are still alive today!

And let's keep up the bright memory of all those colleagues who are no longer among us!

Chapter 1

MYSOVAYA STATION

From the late 19th 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 memoirs¹, 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 Róth 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...



Railway station at Mysovaya Station. Built in 1902. Demolished in 2011. Today – (2015) – they are finishing up the construction on the new railway building.

¹ Vladimir Rott. "IN DEFIANCE OF FATE." Book 2: "JOY OF DISCOVERIES".

In the first book of my memoirs, in the chapter «Iya Yaroslavskaya (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 his way from the Polish city of Biyaly (where the pogroms were starting) to Siberia, where the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad was underway. Many of his former neighbours 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 Guterman’s 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 19th 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 grave-stones 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 20th 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 Guter-mans 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.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 1

For many years, Moisey Solomonovich headed a highly successful team the 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-ko-peck 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 Manyá Tikhomirova's family a three-room apartment. After Manyá'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 Tikhomirovs 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 immigrating to Canada, he sent his belongings in a crate from Mukhachevo to the Tikhomirovs in Ulan-Ude.

The Tikhomirovs 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 the police report. 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."* 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 whom 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 Tikhomirovs 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 19th 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 Pyotr 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 also 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-M24». 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 Pyotr 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 Mi-sha, 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 19th 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 labour, 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 Trans-Siberian 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 368th 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 Biyalý of the Sudlice province of Poland—along with his neighbours, 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, Pyotr, 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, a tall, severe-looking man with an imposing mustache, wearing a felt cap, met us. 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 room-mates 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, *The 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. Pyotr 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, Pyotr'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 The 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]—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 could 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 Pyotr 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 Taisya,—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°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 Pyotr, 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*

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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 Róth 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

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 1



*Shlomo Chaim Guterman,
Irkutsk, 1896.*



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

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



*Moisey Guterman.
Prerevolutionary Mysovaya.*

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 1

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



Groom and Bride: Faibush (Pavel) Dvorkin (17 years) and Ita Guterman (18 years). Mysovaya, 1911.

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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.



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

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 1



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



Icebreaker ferry "Baikal". 1904.



Route of the icebreakers—ferry between Baikal St. and Mysovaya.

Loading icebreakers “Baikal” and “Angara”.





Guterman family. From left to right: standing Rachel and Ita. Middle row: Esther, Grandmother Hava, Isaak, Grandfather Slomo Chaim. In front—Children of Ita Dvorkin: Isai, Fruma (Tanya) and Boris. Ulan-Ude, 1923.



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



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



*Revekka and her son Yuri Tikhomirov.
Ulan-Ude, 2009.*

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 1



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

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



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*The Mysovaya branch of Russian Bank. Formely Korf—House (home of the Korf family).
Town of Babushkin. May 28, 2011.*

*Our first meeting in Mysovaya. From left: Vladimir Rott,
Taisya and Pyotr 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 Romakhova (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.



MYSOVAYA STATION



In front of a Mongolian yurt.

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



JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 1



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.

More than 100 years ago young tinsmith Shlomo Guteman 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.



Chapter 2

THE ROTT CONNECTION

Maybe it's only my imagination—though, in any case, I hope every elderly person gets to feel that way! — But it seems to me that the older I get, the more interesting life becomes. I may not have the energy I once had, but fascinating, educational, and sometimes even comical events and situations seem to be lining up to get my attention, to bring me joy, and to add some of the cheer and optimism that life requires. Such as the story I'm about to tell.

The reader already knows how much our lives, Iya's and mine, were enriched by our trip to Lake Baikal, to Mysovaya Station, where we traveled in search of answers to the question: Why did Iya's grandfather Schlomo Guterman move there from Poland in 1896? At Mysovaya, we made wonderful new friends: Taisya and Pyotr Chernykh as well as Marina Petrachkova, the talented editor-in-chief of the local newspaper, «Kabanskiy Dialog» (The Kaban Dialogue). Marina ran a story about the Canadian visitors who cared so deeply about a land so far away.

We went back to Toronto and started telling our stories of Mysovaya; meanwhile, on August 2, 2011, an email arrived from Marina Petrachkova, marked URGENT:

Vladimir Frantsevich, a good time of the day to you! Our paper has received a letter, which I am forwarding to you.

“Dear editors, I read an article in your newspaper about Vladimir Rott's visit from Canada and his presentation of a book about his father, Ferenc Rott. I work as an instructor at the Moscow Training Center of the Federal Fire Protection Service. I spent many years working for Moscow's fire service and am very interested in the history of firefighting, and at one point I decided to find out who invented the ROTT connector screw nut system and introduced it into Soviet firefighting practice. There's no information on this anywhere, just conjecture. And then I heard that this was an invention of Ferenc Rott, a Hungarian engineer who came to Russia to work here but was imprisoned and did not survive. I would very much like to find out from his relatives whether Ferenc Rott actually was involved in the invention of the ROTT screw connector, which was used for a long time in the fire service and also in the navy. If possible, please let me know how to get in

touch with his son Vladimir Rott, or forward my email to him along with my telephone numbers, home 8-499-xxxxxxx, mobile 8-903-xxxxxxx, email xxxxx@mail.ru.

Lt. Col. Vasily Ivanovich Petrov”

An excerpt accompanied the letter from the Soviet GOST manual of technical standards, «Connection Heads for Fire Equipment»:

«Hoses are connected to the fire engine ... and to each other (for transporting water over a distance that exceeds the length of a single sleeve) by means of standard metallic rotary-locking connection heads.»

Also enclosed was a copy of the document, «The Firefighters’ Rules of Service, 1940», in which we find the following detailed description:

«200. To connect the fast-joining Rott screw nuts, take the screw nuts in your hands, press them to each other and, overcoming the resistance of the rubber padding, turn the teeth toward each other, turning the right hand clockwise and the left hand counterclockwise; if the screw nuts will not connect, hold them between your knees with the plugs facing inward and, using knees and hands, overcoming the resistance of the padding, turn the teeth and connect the screw nuts; or, have the operation performed by two individuals who must each take a screw nut in both hands, then stand facing each other, put the screw nuts together and, putting hard pressure on the padding, turn and connect the screw nuts.

201. The screw nut of the rod should be connected to the screw nut of the sleeve in the same manner as the screw nuts of two sleeves. Each connector nut has a standard single piece of rubber padding.»



At first, I was simply overwhelmed by this onslaught of unexpected information. I remember this method of connecting fire hose sleeves from the hardship-filled postwar years and from my childhood in Bobruysk. We boys usually couldn’t cope with the task of separating the sleeves; we didn’t have the strength to squeeze the rubber padding hard enough to turn the screw nuts.

But “*Ferenc Rott*”? I knew about my father’s interest in new technology from my mother and my brother Yuzef, and from the technical journals left behind after his arrest in July 1938; but I had never heard a word about a screw nut used in firefighting... I came to the conclusion that while this connector might be known under the name «ROTT», it had nothing to do with my father. First of all, my mother and brother would have said something about it. Secondly, even if my father had wanted to keep his invention a secret from the family, the unwieldy Soviet system couldn’t have implemented it so widely in just a few years, between 1931 and 1938. Besides, it was only in 1936 that my father took the name Rott; until then the family name had always been Róth. But on the other hand, there was this line in the letter—“*this was an invention of Ferenc Rott, a Hungarian engineer who came to Russia to work here but was imprisoned and did not survive*”—, which seemed to confound all logic...

First thing in the morning on the next day, I was on the phone to Moscow. Out of old habit, I always try to take notes recording my conversations:

—Vladimir Frantsevich, *here’s the question: I’m very interested in your father’s life. But still, is there anything in your books (I’ve already ordered them both on the Internet) any sort of indication that this invention, which everyone calls «the Rott screw nut», belongs to your father?*

—My dear Vasily Ivanovich, *I am really impressed by how tenaciously you’re conducting your search! And flattered, of course. In the first volume of my memoirs I wrote, in detail, everything I know about my father. But unfortunately, I know very little. I was only three when he was arrested, and I never saw him again. For twelve years in the camps, until his death, my father wrote us letters. They didn’t allow him to write in Hungarian, and my mother couldn’t read in Russian. My nine-year-old brother read the letters and retold them in Hungarian to my mother; that’s what sort of correspondence it was. Until mid-1947, in the ninth year of his imprisonment, when my father was admitted into the camp hospital, not only did the letters make no reference to any kind of invention but my father never said a word about how he spent his days, what kind of labour he was doing... It was only two years ago that that we received information that he worked in the gold mines.*

Please tell me, Vasily Ivanovich, what makes you think that the author of this invention was actually Ferenc Rott?

—*See here, I have a friend who’s been collecting information on firefighters who were victims of repression. In the archives, he found your father’s file, Case No. 5592—right?*

I gave a start. Life had brought me one step closer to the horror of the reign of falsehood and terror that ripped poor Ferenc Rott from his family. Now I even know his case file number...

—*I didn’t know that. This is the first time I’ve heard this number.*

—*Here you go: your father was sentenced on November 1, 1938. Case number 5592. Article 68.*

—That's right, he was found guilty under Article 68,—I confirmed.

—Your father was exonerated on 27.03.1956... Born in 1898...

—That is correct."

—So, you see, this is your father. That's why I was interested. I spent thirty years putting out fires, and now I give lectures to firefighter trainees. There is an item known as «the Rott connection» in firefighting equipment.

—I'm familiar with that item. You see, I used to be the head of the assembly and repair section at the VAZ [the Volga Auto Plant in Togliatti].

—Did you know it was your father's invention?

—No! I had never heard of such a thing.

—So you're hearing it now for the first time from me?

—For the first time. But my father was a highly educated, skilled engineer. He came to the Soviet Union in 1931... He settled in Bobruysk.

—Bobruysk—yes, that's it! That's where he was tried. This information about your father is in my friend's book; it's going to be published next year.

—Tell me, Vasily Ivanovich, when was a patent or a certificate of authorship issued for this connection, or this screw nut—I'll just call it a screw nut?

—Now, you see, here's what happened. It looks like, after your father was arrested, the knowledge of this invention remained a sort of word of mouth thing among firefighters. You see, Vladimir Frantsevich, I couldn't find any evidence at the Patent Office or at GOST [the Technical Standards Office] that this was your father's invention. But from circumstantial evidence, it looks like your father invented this screw nut and brought it with him to the USSR—that is, he invented it abroad, where he lived... Where did your family live?

—In Hungary. In Austro-Hungary!

—There you go! It was from Austro-Hungary that he brought this connection head to Russia, and since the 1930s—well, there's no exact information on when it was first used, but already, in 1940, there was a textbook published that uses that term, «the Rott connection». So we can say that from 1940 to 1966, for 26 years, this screw nut was the main type of connector used in firefighting and also in the Navy. And it's still in use... Through all these years, you see, the term «the Rott connection» has survived in honor of your father...

—Vasily Ivanovich, I am at a loss; I don't know how to react to this news. It's too bad that my mother has passed away. She lived to be 100 years old. We have a fairly large archive at home; we have preserved it through Bobruysk, Tomsk, and Togliatti, and finally brought it to Toronto... But I have never looked at my father's notes from his years in Hungary. And in 2004 my wife and I brought our entire family to Russia. Gave our children and grandchildren a tour of the places where this or that one of us was born, visited Bobruysk, too. Much to my joy, we saw that the Lumber Mill still has the equipment my father ordered from Germany in 1938, before his arrest. He was in charge of ordering new machinery. For instance, lathes for making timber veneer. We still have colorful advertising brochures for these lathes in our home archive...

—Well, now you should take a closer look. Maybe something will leap out at you.

—Of course! I'll be looking with a different eye. I'll admit that I'm somewhat skeptical about this news, because I'm not a kid. I myself have seven author's certificates and two patents. I know what it is and how difficult it is to get one. So what we're looking at right now is not a question of priority but a strong desire to find out the truth.

—Vladimir Frantsevich, I want to know more and to tell others about the man who made such a huge contribution! Everyone just says, Rott, Rott, the Rott connection—but what is it, who is it? Here I am with my thirty-year experience as a fireman, I've heard it all but I never gave it any thought—who was he? Who was the man who invented this?

Then, two weeks ago, I was giving a lecture. I wrote on the board, in Russian, «the Rott connection». Then, this one student who has a higher technical education gets up and says, 'Sorry, you're spelling it wrong. The name of this connection should have only one T: Rot.' I said, maybe. He looked it up on the Internet. So it looks like we have a loss of the second letter. It's difficult to say «Rott» with two t's in Russian.

—Yes, it's a lost letter. You see, in the Latin alphabet, an H follows the T in my father's last name, but such a spelling doesn't work in Russian and so when he came to the USSR they gave him a second T. Actually, «Roth» is a fairly common German last name; it comes from the word «red».

—Aha! After my student expressed doubt about the spelling of the name, I dug up a big stack of reference literature, talked to all the veterans, from before or after the war—those who were still alive. Everyone kept saying, «I heard it somewhere... I read it someplace...»—but no one remembered any written confirmation. It doesn't exist! It looks like, when he was declared an «enemy of the people», they just pilfered his invention. It was never patented... Now, look, we have this institute, the All-Russian Science and Technology Institute of Firefighting. I contacted them, and they confirmed that the idea of this screw nut, this connection belongs to—they gave me a name—an engineer named Ferenc Rott. So you can be proud of your father—he was an outstanding inventor. To come up with such a connection for fire hoses!

—Vasily Ivanovich, I am most grateful to you! I appreciate your tenacity and your energy. Excuse me, but how old are you?

—I'm 52 years old.

—Well, then you're the same age as my oldest son! He's an architect.

—You see what kind of valuable genes are being transmitted in your family!

—We have no problems in that department, thank G-d. If I may brag, my wife Iya taught engineering design at the University of Toronto for 15 years.

—Oho!

—Iya and I graduated from the Tomsk Polytechnic Institute together, and she taught there herself—drafting geometry and technical drawing. Then, at the Poly-

technic Institute in Togliatti. And then, after we came to Toronto, she passed the exams and reached the rank of professor.

—Wow!

—As for our oldest son Sandor, he was born in Tomsk, got a degree in architecture in Toronto, then went to graduate school at Harvard...

—That's great!

—If you look up «City Center Las Vegas» on the Internet, you'll see a project that cost 10 billion dollars.

—Oho!

—This project was completed last year, on October 16. The underground parking garage alone has room for 18,000 cars...

—Wow!

—Sandor was one of the supervisors on that project. He was responsible for the working blueprints and the alterations. The architectural firm where Sandor works is in Toronto, and our son flew to Las Vegas almost weekly for four years. Once, he took us, his parents, along to give us a tour of the construction project as it was being completed.

Our daughter Ilona was also born in Tomsk. She's a computer science professor at the University of Toronto.

—Oho!

—And our youngest, Edwin, who was born in Togliatti, works in finance, for a well-known financial firm. All three are married, we have grandchildren... Everything's going well, thank G-d.

—Vladimir Frantsevich, I'm about to start working on an article about this. We have this magazine, «Pozharnoye Delo» [Firefighting], it's over a hundred years old, started publishing back under the Tsars... We've also got a «Fire Safety» Encyclopaedia that comes out once every five years. We're going to prepare a historical note about your father and include his invention in the next edition, definitely!

—Vasily Ivanovich, could you by any chance tell me in what patent class this invention would belong?

—You know, the thing is, there was no patent—it's just the GOST classification.

—GOST is of no help to us here. I need the class of patent! I'm sure one can find lots of interesting things among German patents on this matter...

—Here's the thing... A friend of mine has this old German book. He's a historian, has already written a book on the history of firefighting before 1917, now he's writing a second book, from 1917 to the present. He looked in that technical dictionary of inventions. Didn't find anything. It seems like it was your father who brought this connection head with him... or maybe invented it here.

—Could be. But we know nothing about that. Our family found itself in terrible, dire circumstances. Especially between 1938 and 1944. Without a father... Our mother lived in Nazi-occupied territory with two children.

—Oh, wow.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 2

—We're Jewish, you see. All the Jews in Bobruysk were shot, but the three of us survived. We were spared because we were officially Hungarian. We're of Hungarian Jewish origin.

—I see...

On the next day, I woke up to another email from Vasily Ivanovich Petrov. It included photos of five episodes from his service in Moscow's fire brigade. The message ended with the words, *"This is a small photo album, a gift from me to you. Good luck, and best wishes to the family of a great engineer!"*

Half an hour later, another email arrived:

"Petrov Vasily, August 4, 2011.

Sending you one of the first editions of the Firefighters' Rules of Service of the USSR, 1940, which has a mention of the «Rott connection» on p. 109 in a description of training exercises. There were no training manuals until then, so we can speculate that the Rott screw nut came into use sometime between 1935 and 1940; this is an official, government-approved edition. It was used by firefighting squads; there are only a few copies left in existence today. I only have an electronic version. In my next email, I'll send material from another training manual, from 1939-1940, which contains a detailed description of the use of the Rott connection, with a diagram. This manual, too, survives only as an electronic copy. Vasily."

While I was looking over the attachments to his email, our daughter Ilona stopped by on her way back from the bakery to bring over some fresh rolls. Iya told her what news Dad was poring over... Ilona immediately called her brothers, Sandor and Edwin, and tartly announced, *"Hey, guys, you won't believe what news has taken over our parents' home... It turns out that the clamps used for connecting fire hoses are known as «the Rott screw nut»! The government of Russia is going to pay us half a century's worth of royalties for the use of our grandfather Ferenc's invention!"*

Edwin reacted to the news with wary silence; Sandor, with uproarious laughter. *"All right, time for a family gathering! We have to decide how to divide our multimillion dollar fortune!"*

Fortunately, we didn't have to wait long.

"Petrov Vasily, August 5, 2011, 10:37 a.m. Moscow.

Good day, esteemed Vladimir Frantsevich! Our research suggests that I must have rushed a bit and didn't fully check out the information on the Rott screw nut. Yesterday I heard from N. Rogachkov, author of a book called «The Fireproof City», who also works for the Firefighting magazine. He informed me that his book contains first hand information from—a report from a Moscow fire chief to the mayor, informing him on equipment purchased by the city's fire service, including

100 «Rott screw nuts». This report is dated 1911. Therefore it seems likely that this screw nut was invented in the 1900's—probably by someone whose last name was Rott, but so far we have not been able to find out who he was or when he invented it. I asked Rogachkov to look in the German technical dictionary, which he has; if he finds something, I'll let you know for sure. So far the invention of the Rott screw remains a mystery; maybe it was invented by someone from your family, Ferenc's father or a relative. I'm sending a copy of the page from Rogachkov's book that mentions the fire chief's report on the purchase of 100 Rott screw nuts, as well as a copy of the cover; maybe you'll be able to get a hold of the book somewhere, it's a history of fire protection in Moscow from 1147 to 1917. My apologies for having misled you; I really wanted to believe that we had found the man who had invented such a simple and brilliant connection. I believe that only those who do nothing make no mistakes, and that we'll find the trail eventually. Don't be upset with me, please call and stay in touch. I have faith that sooner or later we'll find the truth, and record the name of another Rott. Vasily"

"Petrov Vasily, August 5, 2011, 5:20 p.m. Moscow

Vladimir Frantsevich, here is some more material from the 1940 training manual as well as material on the Storz connection in English; if you can, please translate it and send it to me, maybe it has information on where the Storz connection was invented so that we could use it as a starting point in our search for the Rott connection. That's all the material I have been able to find. All the modern textbooks refer only to the name of the item—sometimes spelled as Rot, sometimes as ROT or ROTT, sometimes as Rott; sometimes it's listed as «Rott» or the Rott screw nut. We'll keep 'digging.' I'll be waiting for the translation. Best of luck, Vasily."

When driving by the fire station nearest to my home, I decided—with these «revelations» still fresh in my mind—to come in and talk to some Canadian firefighters. It was a good time: all of the station's three fire trucks were parked, and I found some half a dozen firefighters seated on a long bench by the wall. I introduced myself as an engineer living on the next block and showed them the image (reproduced above) of three «Rott screw nuts».

Tim Wardley, a stocky fellow with a suntan, was the first to speak; his colleagues joined in. Two of them had been in the fire service for more than thirty years. The entire group was unanimous in telling me that they had never seen such a fire equipment connection; they felt it probably wasn't in use in North America. I asked them what the fire sleeve connection was called. None of them had ever heard of any other name except «the Storz» connection. I asked them to show me one, and they led me over to the still-damp sleeves hung out to dry on a beam high under the ceiling. The aluminum connector had obviously been in use for a while, but its interlocking parts opened and closed with ease. Even we boys in postwar Bobruysk could have easily opened one of these...

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Obviously, at some point in technological development, their «Storz» proved far superior in convenience and ease of assembly. This was genuine progress.

STORZ

connector. Here's what Wikipedia says:



Storz is a type of hose coupling invented by Carl August Guido Storz in 1882 that connects using interlocking hooks and flanges. It is sometimes referred to as a sexless coupling, because rather than having a male and a female end connected by screw threads, either identical end can be joined to any other end of the same diameter. This is also called hermaphroditic or two-way connection. Amongst other uses, it has been widely employed in fire-fighting applications.

...Guido Storz patented his coupling in Switzerland in 1890, and it soon became a standard for fire hydrants throughout much of Europe.

And, to conclude this tale: Google tells us, in a businesslike manner, that there still remains in the world a single supplier of the Rott connector: China, which manufactures three different sizes. “Orders for their manufacture must be for a batch of at least two hundred.”

Toronto, November 16, 2012.

Chapter 3

LETTER TO THE QUEEN

It will soon be thirteen years since the death of Mama Regina...
My dearest Mama! Our beloved Madame Rottikha!² “Baba Riza” for the others, and for me, forever, Anyuka! (Hungarian for “Mama”)



Regina and her family. Toronto, 1986.

Regina. Tomsk, 1970.

My mind still cannot accept the fact that you are dead and gone. I can still feel your presence next to us, among us. I still look at the date of June 11 with nothing but love, and still proudly tell people, “It’s Her 112th birthday!” For some reason, there are two photos of yours that always arise in my mind’s eye.

One is from Tomsk, from 1970; it was taken by a professional photographer. You look beautiful and resolute in that photo, your head held high. I remember that even you yourself liked the way you looked in that picture...



² “Madame Rottikha” [something like “Rott-woman”; “-ikha” is a Russian feminine suffix—tr.] was the respectful title the Lumber Mill workers and fellow barrack dwellers in Bobruysk gave Regina Rott, the foreign woman who didn’t speak Russian. The title stuck with her even after the state took away her husband and gave her a job no better than theirs—loading lumber on to freight cars.



The second photo is one of your last. We had already celebrated your 99th birthday. I am immediately, invariably riveted by your eyes, your thoughtful, intelligent gaze. It's as if you were here right next to me; something inside my soul stirs painfully and makes me want to reach out in spite of myself to embrace you—to feel once again your warmth, which nurtured me for so many years, which belonged to me, which was needed by your children, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren!

Mama, you have no idea how often we remember you. How we understand you better and better. After all, we grow wiser with years; life forces us to make hard decisions. My wife often repeats, *"What strength! What fortitude and wisdom Baba Regina had to have to survive in those conditions! To raise and educate two sons! It is so difficult... Baba is a hero!"*

More and more often, I heard similar comments from Ilona, your granddaughter, as well. She has three children, your great-grandchildren. They grow so quickly; they are almost adults now, the youngest will soon turn eighteen. Ilona, too, is starting to understand that to raise one's children is a person's most complex, most demanding mission...

You know, Mama, when I think back to my childhood, my thoughts always turn at once to that absurd and (on my part) unforgivable period from 1946 to 1950. Back then, my foolishness and stubbornness added so much grief to your woes and tribulations. How well I remember your face in those unhappy days! It was captured in that third photo of you—this one. I still remember the circumstances under which this photo was taken; I remember with what sadness and what inner turmoil you decided to have this photo taken. In those days—I think it was the summer of 1946—being photographed was the last thing on your mind. You were consumed by bitterness toward my father, your husband Ferenc, who had persuaded you to move to the Soviet Union—where fate plunged you and your children into a pit of privations, despair and hopelessness.

I have still-fresh memories of horrifying scenes from the three years of German occupation in Bobruysk that we managed to sur-



vive. As the German army approached, the local Soviet authorities quickly fell apart, and there was chaos, panic, looting...

...A one-legged man arrives at our barrack in a horse-drawn cart, axe in hand, and starts chopping at the door of the deserted apartment of our neighbors, a Jewish family that disappeared a few days ago. In your naïveté, you try to stop the robbery. I'm standing at your feet when the enraged marauder takes a swing at you...

...Human pandemonium reigns by the large vats embedded in the ground at the sugar plant: everyone is trying to scoop up liquid molasses with buckets tied to ropes. A woman falls into one of the vats and is drowning, but the crazed throngs are still scooping up molasses...

...The city's 20,000 Jews are rounded up and shot by the Nazis—but the three of us, you and I and Yuzik, manage to stay alive: you, my quick-thinking mother, persuaded our neighbor Lyuba Sinyavskaya to go to the German command center in your place and to get a passport that lists our ethnicity as Hungarian!

...The hunger and terror of the war years... We boys quickly learned to say, "*Pan! Gibb brot! [Sir, give bread!]*", and the German soldiers would respond by handing over a hunk of bread or a pot with half-eaten soup. I would joyfully race home, trying not to spill the precious soup, and then take back the pot after you'd washed it and track down its owner. Occasionally, some of the German soldiers would sit us in their laps, give us candy and pull out their wallets to show us photos of their families...

...A month of intense fighting for the liberation of Bobruysk, incessant aerial bombings and artillery fire... fires, dead bodies... the bodies of German soldiers whom you buried, asking other neighborhood women to help you out...

...The return of Soviet government; once again, we are "the family of an enemy of the people."

And then, something amazing happens: a letter arrives from Magadan, from Papa! He's alive! He's looking for us! He is still serving his sentence.

You wrote back, and two months later a second letter from Papa came in response to yours. He's happy that we survived the war. He tells us he's in good health, and asks to send him our photo. The hardships of your daily life left little room for such sentimentalism, but you decided to do something nice for Ferenc: "*Let him see how the lads have grown up...*" I remember that you were taken aback when the other women in the barrack told you to dye your hair, "so that your head of gray hair doesn't scare your husband". Out of our «Hungarian chest» came one the several beautiful dresses you had brought with you from Hungary, back in 1931; I had never yet seen you wearing it. And that was how this melancholy photo of you came into existence. It was pinned, along with photos of Yuzik and myself, over Papa's bunk in Magadan...

You were always the smart one, Mama. But there was one particular act of yours that turned out to be especially remarkable and life-changing for me. That

was when, in your effort to make sure I didn't end up as a street kid and a juvenile delinquent, you took all your savings and bought me a shortwave radio, a «Record 1949». What an event that was! The first postwar Soviet radio set! For me, it became a wireless miracle that opened a window into the world of the West, of Western culture and information.

Soon after that, at the age of fifteen, I decided that I wanted to write down the most interesting events of my life. This pastime met with your approval. And, believe it or not, I have been constantly keeping a diary ever since! More than sixty years have passed, but I still maintain this habit and try to write everything down as regularly and accurately as possible.

When I meet with readers, someone invariably says: There's so much factual material in your books, where does it all come from, do you actually manage to memorize everything?

In response, I always show them one of my first yearly collections of diaries, and tell them about your wonderful gift from my childhood—the radio. And then, finally, I show them a big fat notebook in which I currently record interesting present-day happenings. As an example, I ask the audience: does anyone remember how the Korean War ended? Everyone shrugs. If I'm addressing Canadians, I usually ask one more question:

—*Who remembers what happened on February 8, 1952?*

Once again, of course, a silence descends on the audience—followed by a flurry of excitement and a sea of smiles when I admit:

—*I don't remember it, either—but here's a note from my diary of February 8, 1952: "Listened to a BBC Radio program from London. Since February 6, there is a new queen on the English throne: Elizabeth II."*

And another thing. I will never forget how, in the days of our worst privations, you got a one-ruble note out of your wallet and sent me to the movies...

I was nineteen when I heard for the first time how beautifully, loudly, and infectiously you can laugh. It was in Tomsk, where you and I moved from the Bobruysk barrack—making a journey of 5,000 kilometers—to live with Yuzik in the room he had been given by the philharmonic. It was sheer paradise: the room had a central heating radiator. There was also a lavatory shared by three families, with a white porcelain flush toilet, and next to it a bathroom with a titan heater that required wood to burn. One morning I was trying to wake up Yuzik to make sure he wasn't late for work. I shook him, poked him, joked and teased him, tried to pull him out of bed... And that was when you burst out laughing! We were together, we were warm... We were happy!

It was a true family triumph when Yuzik³ invited the two of us to a symphony orchestra concert, and you showed up at the concert hall wearing lipstick!

³ My brother Yuzef Rott played first violin for the Tomsk Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra for 25 years.

My brother and I stared at you, mouths agape—but our eyes were shining with pride! It was your first true victory over Stalinism.

I think, too, of all the times I brought my friends—fellow students from the Polytechnic Institute—home on Sundays. After the meager rations in the residence halls, they were treated to the wonderful surprise of your dinner, with invariable fried potatoes, «chicken paprikash», and tea with a fresh poppy-seed roll. The next morning at school, the lucky guests would regale many others with their tales, and would say to me, “*What a beautiful woman, your Mama! And so kind!*”

I often tell my readers, Mama, that in the 43 years of your life in the USSR, your biggest joy and the biggest gift to you was the day when the top management of the Volga Auto Plant—which learned about my family situation and wanted to do something nice for me and reward my hard work—gave you a small private apartment in Togliatti’s New City.

I will never forget that night—Sunday, September 1, 1974—when Iya and I knocked on your door almost at midnight, and you asked, surprised, “*Why so late?*” In those days, your anxiety disorder was at high pitch, and you were taking a lot of pills, mostly Luminal, which made you sleep all day. At the time, decisive action was needed, and I said to you:

—*Listen carefully, Anyuka! You’re a smart woman. You’ll understand everything. Tomorrow, early in the morning, you and I are going to Canada, and we are never coming back to the Soviet Union. Iya and the children are staying here—until Friday. On Friday, a container arrives into which Iya is going to load up all of your things. Everything that’s still left of the possessions you brought from Hungary in 1931, Iya will send to Canada... Joe Weltman has sent money, and I’ve already paid off all the right people—I’ve even paid for the container.*

And then, our drama aboard the Air Canada plane! The almost empty 400-seat Boeing 747 was taking us from Moscow to Toronto. After takeoff I sat petrified, while you were beaming with joy at the attentions of two stewardesses who brought you hot coffee, sugar cubes, and cookies on a shiny tray covered with a napkin. When the pilot announced over the intercom that we were flying over Helsinki, my nerves gave out and I began to cry.

—*Sonny, —you said,—I feel like I’m going on my second honeymoon...*

Then, suddenly, you saw my face and asked:

—*Why are you crying?*

—*Mama! I lied to you. I didn’t pay anyone off... Iya chose to stay behind with the children, and I have no idea when we’ll see them again...*

You stared at me in terror; your eyes grew wide and bloodshot.

—*You fool! You idiot! How could you!*

And you began to cry along with me. Here were are, nine stewardesses, twelve passengers—and two of them are crying. The girls ran up to us and started asking what was wrong, what they could do to help us. I said there was nothing. But then I had a sudden idea and asked if they could somehow get

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 3

word to Toronto that you and I were flying in. I took a note with the Weltmans' phone number on it out of my pocket and gave it to one of the stewardesses.

A few moments later the young woman came back from the cockpit and said:
—*Mr. Rott, our captain just talked to Joe Weltman on the telephone. They'll be meeting you at the airport in Toronto!*

It was a difficult moment. I guessed what you were thinking. At the time, I was thirty-nine and a half years old. That was the exact age at which our Papa Ferenc was arrested by the NKVD, and his family never saw him again...

Mama, you were no longer with us when I wrote a fat book about our family. It started with the village where you were born and ended with the present, with our lives in Canada and the achievements of our children and grandchildren. One long chapter was devoted entirely to you. I titled it «The Best Years of Her Life». I tried to tell, with both optimism and honesty, the story of your last eighteen years which you spent at Baycrest, Toronto's oldest Jewish senior living center. Russian, Hungarian, and English-speaking readers have learned how, in spite of your old age and infirmities, in spite of long days spent in a wheelchair, in spite of the language barrier that left you unable to even ask an attendant to change your diaper, all of us did our best to make your life easier, to surround you with love, attention and care.

And how we tried to make each of your birthdays beautiful and special! Some of the birthday greetings you received still hang on the wall in our home library. On your 90th birthday, in accordance with Canadian tradition, Ontario



LETTER TO THE QUEEN

Premier Peterson and Governor General John Hnatyshin sent official greetings. On your 95th birthday, you received greetings from then-new Ontario premier, Bob Rae.

Canadians who turn 100 years old often receive birthday wishes from the Queen herself; after all, we are Her Majesty's subjects! After we celebrated your 99th birthday, each of us began to nurture the hope and dream that we would witness Baba Regina celebrate her 100th. All of us, your children and grandchildren, were thinking about it—but we refrained from voicing this dream out loud, out of superstitious fears. Once, I almost let something slip; lost in thought, I muttered, “*Where? What guests?*” but Sandor’s wife Manana heard me and cut me off in mid-word.

To our profound regret, our dearest Madame Rottikha, you did not live long enough to get the Queens’ letter. It was yet another cruel whim of fate: you did not even die a natural death. Nothing could have predicted such an outcome. Yes, you were old, but you weren’t suffering from high blood pressure, or diabetes, or any other life-threatening problems. Iya and I had gone to Hungary for a week, and the Filipino nursing home attendants must have forgotten my instructions to take it slow while feeding you. And a piece of chicken meat got stuck in your windpipe...

(Every year for the last several years, when I came with Mama to see her doctor at Baycrest, I would sign a “Do not resuscitate” order, so that if Mrs. Rott became ill or lost consciousness they would leave her in peace instead of sticking tubes down her trachea and torturing her with other painful resuscitation procedures.) Forgive me, Mama!

And now, Mama, look what your younger son was able to come up with.

Starting this spring, Canada, England, and many other countries had big and solemn celebrations for the 60th anniversary of Elizabeth II’s ascension to the English throne. The date of February 6, 1952 was often mentioned during colorful parades, concerts, and TV programs; they showed news footage from those days. Caught up in these festivities, I remembered that I had known about this event for a long time. In 1952, my «Record 1949» wireless brought me the news from London, and my 60-year-old diary preserved the memory. It had been part of my life, too!

I lay awake in my bed for a couple of nights, thinking. “*What if I were to... write a letter to the Queen? No, of course not. That’s all she needs right now, my letter. It would be great to send her my books... But how? I’m sure the Queen is going to get plenty of books. But I think that if she at least took a peek inside mine, she’d find a lot of interesting things... No, better not. It would be so complicated. But maybe I should try?*”

Two days of inner turmoil and pondering, yet again, the events of my past produced five pages of a heartfelt narrative for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In addition to congratulating her on the 60th anniversary of her coronation and telling

her briefly about my parents' lives, I told her about the «Record-1949» wireless and hearing the news of her ascension to the throne; about how touchingly my Canadian relatives, loyal subjects of Her Majesty the Queen, influenced and transformed my understanding of the Queen's role in the state; about the solemn moment when our family—Mama Regina, my wife Iya and I, and our three children—stood before a judge and took an oath of allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

I wrote the letter in Russian, then tried to get it translated into English as well as possible (there was a lot of drama involved), then cut it down considerably... And yet I still demurred at sending it. On the other hand, I was also nursing the naïve desire to somehow get both my books to Her Majesty along with the letter. I kept the idea to myself, but was looking for someone who could give me any kind of advice.

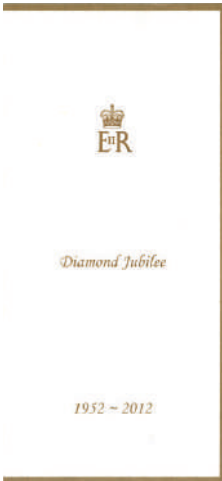
My children got wind of my idea; they were skeptical and tried to talk me out of it. After much effort and drama, I was able to get the email address of the former M.P. for our district, Joe Volpe, a fine man of boundless energy. Remembering our past acquaintance, I wrote to him asking for a meeting, but the answer/question I received was so dismissive that all I could do was thank him and apologize for bothering him.⁴ I gave up on the idea of sending my books to the Queen, and immediately went to the post office and mailed to London the letter only.

TV continued to show celebrations of the Queen's «Diamond Jubilee». I think I forgot all about the letter I had sent. But about ten days later, I discovered an elegant-looking envelope in the stack of mail I had just taken out of the mailbox. At first I was surprised, then taken aback: there was the seal with the letters «ER», and the postmark that said *BUCKINGHAM PALACE*.



⁴ Of course, I sincerely regret that Joe Volpe was not reelected to his seat in the last election. He is a member of the Liberal Party, which briefly made the mistake of choosing Michael Ignatieff as its leader. Joe Volpe did not realize that if he had run as an independent candidate, all the votes in our district would have gone to him.

LETTER TO THE QUEEN



Oh, my G-d! It was an ANSWER! They did answer, and so quickly too! My letter to London had gone out on March 1, and the reply was postmarked March 7.

I called Iya over, and we opened the letter with great trepidation.

The first thing we got out of the envelope was a colorful triple-fold booklet an open copy of which can be seen below. This is apparently the standard reply the Queen's secretariat sends in response to good wishes for the jubilee. On both sides of the booklet, there are photos of Her Majesty taken in different years. The text in the middle reads:

BUCKINGHAM PALACE

I send you my grateful thanks for the words of loyalty and support

which you have so kindly sent on the occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of my Accession to the Throne.

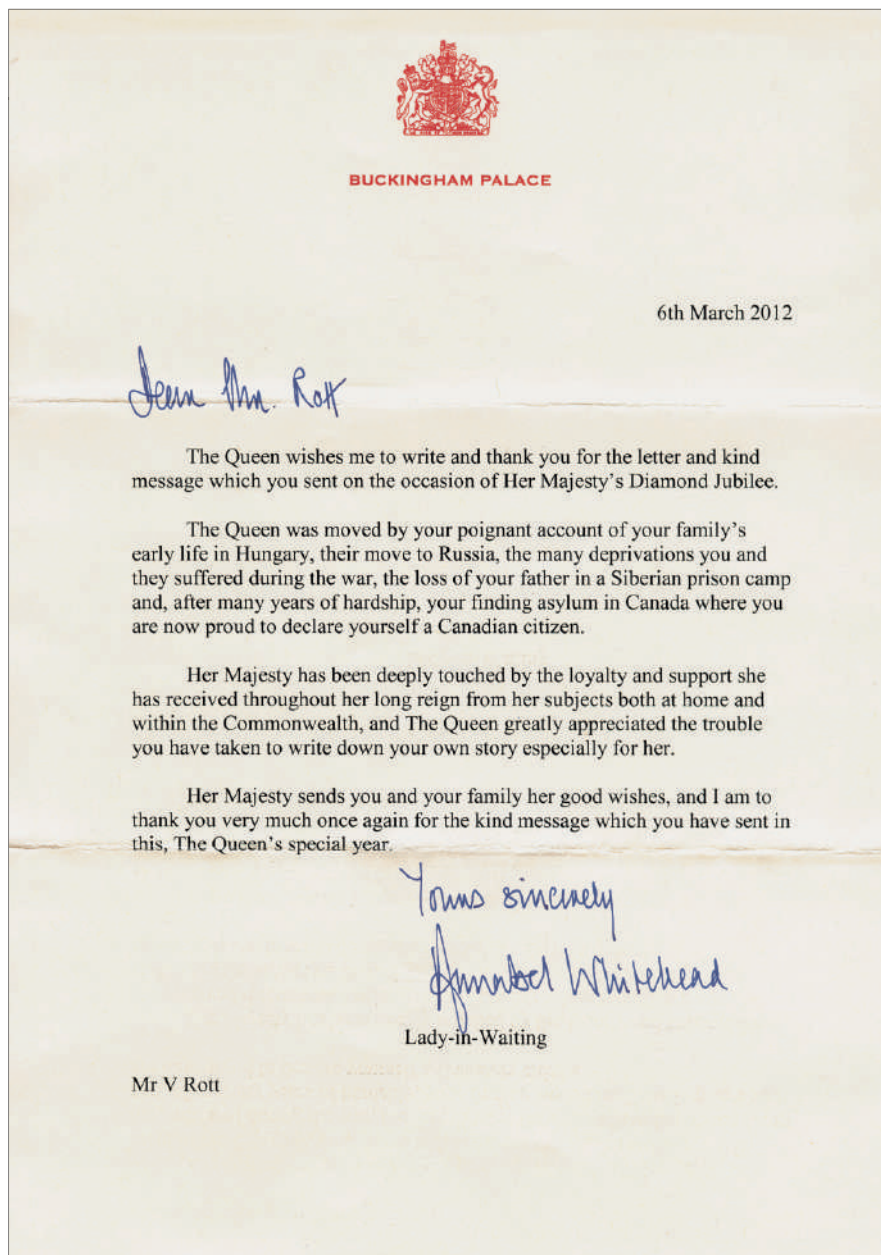
ELIZABETH R

2012



JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 3

And then, unexpectedly, yet another piece of paper with the Buckingham Palace emblem on it peeked out of the envelope! This time, it was addressed to me personally:



LETTER TO THE QUEEN

My beloved Mama Regina! We were so happy and excited to get this letter from London. It came too late for you, but it came. We will frame it and hang it on the wall of our home library next to your other birthday messages. First and foremost, this letter belongs to you. You are our leader and savior who inspired us on our life path. You are the Queen of our big and happy family. Thank you!

Toronto, September 28, 2012

Chapter 4

GÉZA

I knew very little about Mama Regina's childhood. It only began to be revealed to me step by step when my family and I were already enjoying life in the free world—when we were able to travel, meet with our many American relatives, and do some serious work on compiling the genealogical tree of my grandfather Hermann Spielberger.

While living in the Soviet Union in constant fear, my mother, smart woman that she was, took care to hide, even from her own children, the “secrets” of her youth: how her family made their living, how many brothers and sisters she had, where they had gone... We knew only that Mama had a younger sister, Jolán, who lived in Budapest, and that their mother and their brother Wilmos and his family had perished in Auschwitz.

The ten years it took to compile our genealogical tree gave us a sea of discoveries, emotions, joy, and pride. Gone was the feeling of loneliness that had haunted me since early childhood, when for many years it was just three of us in the Soviet Union: Mama, Yusef, and me. No aunties, no grandmas, no cousins... We were always alone, always afraid: we were the family of an “enemy of the people.”

The most remarkable discovery from the genealogical tree was the news that our Mama Regina had been the twelfth of thirteen children in the Spielberger family! She was about two years old when three older brothers, still young lads, left for America, hoping for help from the “American uncles”—Hermann's brothers. And we were stunned by the revelation that 32 members of this large family were deported by the Nazis from Garadna and other places in Hungary and later murdered in Auschwitz.

My grandfather's first wife Sára died in 1889. There was no Jewish cemetery in Garadna, and the enterprising Hermann turned a piece of land he owned, about half a kilometer from his house, into the Spielberger family cemetery where Sára was the first to be buried. Hermann has assumed that in the future, other family members would rest there as well. But it wasn't meant to be: more than a hundred years later, that cemetery has just two graves, Sára's and Hermann's. Some of his descendants became ash in Auschwitz; over a hundred others lie in Jewish cemeteries in the United States, in Toronto, and Budapest...

I have already told this story in my books. Now, I will add some details of life in old Garadna that can help us imagine, and humanize, the distant message from the man who lent his name to the title of this chapter.

The descendants of Hermann Spielberger whom we were able to track down gladly helped us, and were genuinely pleased to receive from us copies of the family tree. This fascinating document showed that most of my grandfather's thirteen children went on to have large families of their own. Only three—Géza, Hermina, and Jolán—had remained childless.

Jolán was the family's last, thirteenth child. She lived to be 85. Her first husband died in the Holocaust. Soon after the war she remarried, but she never did have any children.

Hermina was the seventh child. She died soon after she was born...

Géza Spielberger was the family's sixth child. He was only six years old when his mother Sára, Hermann Spielberger's first wife, died at 35 years of age. Before too long, the father took a new wife, 18-year-old Julia, who bore him two more children, Hermina and Zelma. But after six years, Julia could no longer put up with her husband's demanding, short-tempered, and intolerant disposition; she abandoned her family and ran off to America.

In July 1895, the kind-hearted and beautiful 22-year-old Fanny Friedenberg agreed to become Hermann Spielberger's third wife. She came to live in the same house in Garadna and added five more children to the already large family. Among them was my mother Regina, the next to the last.

The completion of the Budapest-Miskolc-Kosice railroad, which ran through Garadna, deprived the family of its main income from its longtime business: supplying horses for the stagecoaches on that route. Then, the family made alterations to the house—the front was separated from the back, and two of the four windows facing Garadna's main street were replaced with doors—and opened the town's first inn and a small store.

In 1910, Hermann Spielberger passed away at the age of 59. Fanny, his 37-year-old widow, was left to care for the family on her own. The eldest son, 25-year-old Géza, took over the business. Giza and Szerén were already married by then, but there were still several children at home: Ethel, 14; Margit, 12; Wilmos, 11; Riza, 10; and Jolán, 6. Besides, the married daughters, too, frequently needed financial support. The family sold a plot of land it owned. Hardworking, diligent in running the business, and a great help to his step-mother, Géza became a true head of the family, its provider. All the members of the family were grateful to him for the rest of their lives. I just remembered that, during my childhood years in Bobruysk, Mama Regina often spoke of her big brother Géza.

Drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I, Géza Spielberger fell in battle in Ukraine in 1915. From that moment on, 16-year-

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 4

old Wilmos became the mother's irreplaceable helper and the head of the business.

The reader will remember the terrible moment that I can see in my mind's eye. It's a spring day in April 1944. Fanny, our 71-year-old grandmother, is walking down Garadna's main street, gently supported by 45-year-old Wilmos. Walking by his side are his wife Elsa and their sons Géza, 14, and Egon, 8. They are walking through their hometown for the last time, under guard—being taken for transport to Auschwitz.



Postcard, 1928. Message: "Greetings from Garadna. The variety shop of Herman Spielberger's widow and a police station." In front of the store sits Fanny Spielberger, her son Vilmos and his wife Elsa.

My family and all the other descendants of Herman Spielberger whom we have found and who have gathered around us proudly and gratefully preserve the memory of the life and work of all the members of the clan—especially those who make up the older branches and leaves of our genealogical tree. Meanwhile, my readers and listeners help me feel boundless joy from the books I have written and the stories I have told recreating the memory of our ancestors' accomplishments.

The second hefty volume of my memoirs, «The Joy of Discoveries», was completed in November 2009. Then came the Hungarian and English translations; publication in three languages; packing the books and shipping them to many corners of the globe—from Russia's Ulan-Ude and Tomsk to Israel and

California. With Iya accompanying me, I started traveling around the world doing book presentations.

One such event took place on December 14, 2010 in Garadna, the town that had grown so dear to us in the last quarter-century. The director of the senior citizens' club, Marianna Paulo, and her assistants had, as usual, done a great job organizing the event. A large table in the club's main hall was laden with cakes and fruit. Most of the seats were taken. Marianna announced that she had been elected mayor of the village by a majority of the votes. She asked me to delay the start of my presentation by about fifteen minutes: "It's a big village, and it's already dark—too dangerous to ride a bike. People are coming on foot..."

Just then, a pleasant-looking young woman came up to me and whispered:

—*Mr. Rott, I would like to speak to you, but strictly in confidence...*

Though somewhat taken aback, I told her,

—*I'll have to sign a few books after my talk. Then I'll stay on and we'll have a conversation at leisure.*

Then, just as she was about to step away, I changed my mind.

—*Actually, we have another fifteen minutes. We can start talking now.*

She came closer and said cautiously, lowering her voice:

—*My name is Ibolya Barna... My papa told me that my grandfather, István Kuruc, was an illegitimate son of Géza Spielberger, who was killed in Ukraine in 1915...*

At first the meaning of her words didn't fully sink in. Then, it was like a bomb exploding in my head. "What did she say? Could this be some kind of hoax? Géza had a child? Who could have known? Who could have kept it hidden, and from whom? Was it something immoral? Shameful? What are you thinking, Vladimir! What happened to your brain? Don't you see that this is another Miracle in our lives! I'm looking at a girl who has Géza's blood flowing in her veins! If someone in this country, in this village admits to having even a particle of Jewish blood, this person has gone through some deep reflections, has crossed a Rubicon—has realized that nothing can be changed! This is our sister!"

I clasped her in my arms and called out:

—*Iya! Come here!*

My wife, who was sitting in the front row, came up and heard Ibolya say,

—*This is a miracle! I stopped by to see Marianna and happened to see a copy of your book, Joy from Sadness. I asked to borrow it. I couldn't put it down, read the whole thing in one night. I noticed that, as far as my personality, I have some things in common with your mother Regina.... No one in Garadna knows that my grandfather...*

That was enough for Iya to understand what was going on and who this young woman was. She, too, rushed to hug and kiss Ibolya, who continued in a quick patter:

—I wrote you a letter telling you all about myself. I thought, if I didn't get a chance to tell you everything at the event, I would at least give you the letter...

Just then, Marianna came up, somewhat surprised to see us in Ibolya's company, and asked me to start my talk. I was so excited and buoyed by the encounter that my presentation of «Joy of Discoveries» was filled with more jokes than ever, and even my Hungarian had suddenly grown richer and more fluent. There was a lot of laughter in the audience, and some people were literally crying from laughter. It turned out to be an unforgettable evening in Garadna, that distant village where our ancestors once lived, and where only five hundred people now remain.... People offered us warm thanks and left the club smiling. Gábor Bordás, our Hungarian friend, chauffeur and helper, who usually sits at the end of the hall next to a box with books at my presentations, came up to say that all six copies he had on hand had been bought. Several people also left their addresses and he promised to send the book next week.

That evening we had to go to Budapest, so we were only able to spend a few minutes with Ibolya. We had a picture taken as a keepsake.



The first meeting with Ibolya Barna. Garadna. December 14, 2010.

She did have time to tell us a few things. She first found out about her connection to our family from her father Gyula Barna, who recently told her, *“Not long before he died, my father said to me, ‘You should know that the father of your wife Maria was István Kuruc, the son of Géza Spielberger. István and I were friends, and he entrusted me with this secret.’”*

—I think it’s better if they don’t know about it in the village—Ibolya said,—but I will have to tell Marianna.

Ibolya lives in Garadna with her parents and her husband, and works in the financial management of a group of nearby villages. She said she would write us a long letter telling everything she knows. We parted with a promise not to lose sight of each other. As we said our farewells, Ibolya said, *“I’m very happy and proud that you and Iya had such a warm conversation with me...”*

About two weeks later, an envelope from Ibolya arrived at our Toronto address. It contained a letter two pages long, three family photos, a chart of family connections and birth dates, and even a sketch of their branch on the Spielberger genealogical tree. She turned out to be a smart, sensible woman. She addresses us as family—*“Uncle Vladimir and Auntie Iya,”* nothing else. With Ibolya’s permission, here is a translation of the main gist of her letter:

“Uncle Vladimir and Auntie Iya,

Your book, or rather the reading of it, gave me the ‘courage’ to ask my father (because I knew he knew) about the parentage of István Kuruc, my maternal grandpa. I had always known that my great-grandma, who had been employed by the Spielbergers, gave birth to him when she was unmarried, and there had never been any discussion in our family of who the father was. I have a feeling that your book fell into my hands for a reason. I accidentally saw Marianna’s copy; until then, I had no idea these books even existed. It was meant to happen, and it led to my learning the secret and getting acquainted with you, with your life and your relatives. It filled me with joy, because now I won’t have to spend my life without knowing this secret! From the genealogical tree in your book, I found out at last who my beloved grandpa’s father really was. There was a lot of talk in the village about the fact that he was a Jew, but I, his youngest granddaughter, never got a chance to speak to him about it—and, unfortunately, Grandpa passed away when I was 13. This was never discussed in our family, and as will often happen the person with the highest stake in the matter was the last to know. As I already told you, I’m not embarrassed about this because it’s completely beyond my control, it’s in the past and that’s just the way it happened. I was glad to see that you don’t judge me for these thoughts, you understand that I don’t want these things to become the subject of talk and gossip in Garadna. People have their own problems, let them take care of those.

Terézia Kuruc was my great grandmother who gave birth to a child out of wedlock. I remember that that's why my dear grandpa had a blank line in his birth certificate where his father's name should have been. (That's why he had his mother's last name.) I asked him once, when I was about ten years old, if he knew who his daddy was. He said he didn't. And maybe he really didn't know, but more likely, he didn't want to tell. I can understand that; he had no idea what the future might have in store for us, and so decided that it would be better for me not to know. Grandpa served on the frontlines in World War II, was a prisoner of war and, thank God Almighty, returned home safe and sound. He spoke a little bit of Russian and Polish; he was a smart man. As a child, I heard him tell many stories about the hardships he endured. I really regret that at the time, I didn't take the trouble to write down any of it, and now it's too late to change anything.

Take a look at the enclosed photos. Maybe you'll notice a resemblance between one of your relatives and someone from our family. We've already tried to find such a resemblance in the photos in your books.

I could never understand why I was so interested in the fate of the Jews or in their traditions, why I had such a desire to see Auschwitz. It's probably because, as folk wisdom says, blood is thicker than water, and I am now convinced that I am interested in all this because there is at least a small part of Jewish blood running through my veins, too. (I hope you won't find this comment offensive.) Please excuse me if I accidentally say, write, or ask anything that could be insulting to your people, if I hurt your feelings in any way... If it happens, it's only because of ignorance. Forgive me and, whenever it happens, please tell me how to do this correctly. I will learn quickly and never repeat the mistake.

Have you told your children about meeting me? What did they say? I hope they didn't think I was being pushy.

And now I say good-bye and wish everyone many years of good health, love, joy, and peace.

Hoping to see you again soon, Ibolya Barna, Garadna"

Géza's son István Kuruc and his wife Maria had three children. The youngest daughter, also named Maria, gave birth to Ibolya in 1977. Unfortunately, not a single photo of Géza Spielberger has been preserved; but István's features that are visible in the photo—the wide nose, the somewhat closely set eyes, the big ears—have some similarity to those of my grandfather's first wife, Sára. One cannot fail to notice the resemblance when looking at photos of Lajos and Móric, Géza's older brothers. My family has noticed this, too. So new descendants of Grandpa Hermann have been added to the genealogical tree.



One of the photos which was sent by Ibolya. This is Géza's son—István Kuruc (1906-1990) and his wife Maria (1912—1997).

Ibolya and I have started emailing regularly and talking on the phone; we gladly share news. Last September Ibolya gave birth to a baby boy who was given the name Mátyás; and, on one of our trips to Hungary, on November 21, 2011, Iya and I visited the Barna family. They have lived in Garadna for many years, in house number 66 on the Main street. They gave us a very warm reception. Two-month-old Mátyás was the center of attention. Ibolya, a wonderful, smart woman, has effectively become the head of this loving, close-knit family; one can see in her certain traits of the Spielberger genes.



István Kuruc and Mária (seated). Behind them are their children (from left to right) Terézia, József and Mária—Ibolya's mom.



This photo of István Kuruc was taken in 1943, before the Hungarian army was sent to the Eastern Front.

Ibolya's family showed us several postcards from her grandfather, then 38 years old. Field post delivered them in 1944 from Ukraine. It was from there that their great-grandfather, Géza, did not return 30 years earlier...

Mama Maria made a delicious supper. The aroma of real Hungarian village-bred chicken, masterfully enriched with spices, hung in the air. There were six of us grown-ups at the table, and we were quite surprised when Gyula, Ibolya's dad, assured us that a single rooster from the yard, freshly killed just before our arrival, had been enough for both the soup and the main course.

We liked Gyula very much: a simple, hardworking village fellow, a man of few words, smart and kind. A complete teetotaler. One can see the light of kindness and sincerity in his eyes. He spent many years working for a horse-breeding

business before he retired; now, he does some farming from his house. "*Gyula, how many chickens do you have?*" I asked him. He chuckled and replied, "*Don't know for sure. Maybe forty, maybe fifty... But if one of them goes missing, I'll notice at once!*"

Tea with a large chocolate cake and a sweet roll with nuts successfully capped off our time at the table. An unforgettable meeting!

I love telling my American and Canadian relatives about this marvelous meeting in Garadna. One has to see the reaction: initial surprise and even wariness quickly give way to delight. It takes them a while to recover from the shock: "*Would you believe that our wonderful Géza Spielberg, too, has descendants on this earth?*"

November 2012, Toronto



The first meeting with the family Kuruc—Barna. From left to right: Next to me sits Ibolya, Iya is holding the two-month old Mátyás, the Ibolya parents—Gyula and Mária Barna. Garadna. November 21, 2011.



The Ibolya Barna Family. September 2013.

Chapter 5

ANNUSH

I feel that I need to ask for forgiveness—but I haven't figured out of whom. I feel guilty because I have unfairly neglected in my books the descendants of the fourth child of my grandfather Hermann Spielberger—the clan of his daughter Giza, who became Giza Landsmann after marriage. Most of her descendants live in Budapest, but we never managed to establish a normal relationship with them. In 2002, when I brought some two dozen American and Canadian relatives to Hungary, I'm ashamed to say that we not only didn't invite the Landsmanns to our unforgettable Passover seder at the Pilvax hotel, but didn't even look them up and meet with them.

The reason is that, dependent as my family was on Joe Weltman, we were forced to respect the "loyalty zone" my cousin had invented, a zone zealously enforced and sustained by his difficult personality and inconsistent behavior.



Sixty year old Gizella Spielberger—grandmother of the large Landsmann family.

We had to abide by his naïve principle that our family had no right to get close to anyone who, for one reason or another, was at odds with him.

As for the Landsmanns, their refusal to accept many of us had its "logical" reasons, besides some of the innate Spielberger personality flaws that were shared by both sides. The poor working-class family, in which the father and the two younger brothers were tinsmiths, lived in the city of Gönc. In 1937, the head of the family, Éliás Landsmann, died leaving his wife Gizella with nine children. The war dealt the family a cruel blow: Gizella, four of her children, and her son-in-law Béla Weisz, husband of her youngest daughter Terka, died in Auschwitz. The other five children survived. Hardened by war's horrors and liberated by the Red Army, they sincerely embraced Marxism and Soviet



One of the earliest photographs of Gizella and Éliás Landsmann with their children. Behind them stand: Sándor, Gyula, Dezső and Annush. Seated: Éliás, Gizella and Rózsi. Standing in front: János, Terka and Irén. 1916.



Irén, Rózsi, Annush, Sándor, Gyula and Dezső—the children of Éliás and Gizella Landsmann at the grave of their father. April 6, 1944.

ideology and had successful careers. Our family in the Soviet Union became unacceptable to them as the family of an imprisoned «enemy of the people» (“If they arrested him, it must have been for a good reason...”), and their Canadian cousin, the successful businessman Joe Weltman, was nothing less than «a bourgeois enemy of socialism».

I wrote about one of them in the first book of my memoirs:

“In 1987 in Hungary, I first met my cousin János Láncoš. I had repeatedly sought a meeting with him before, on my trips to Hungary from the USSR; but I could tell that he was avoiding such meetings. Under “socialism,” he served for many years as the head of the famous IBUS—the Hungarian state bureau of foreign tourism—and I was an inconvenient relative, especially after I “forgot to return from Canada.” Now, he was retired and decided that it was safe to meet with me. Besides, his adopted son had just presented Dad with a surprise gift—a defection to the West on a tourist trip to Italy.

—In 1927–28,—recalled the emboldened János,—*I was a student at the heder in Miskolc and went to visit your parents, Riza and Feri, every week. I had dinner at their house. Riza would immediately start to lecture me on my manners. Now, Feri, he was a very kind, caring man. Do you know what the Spielbergers are like? The Spielbergers are people who love preaching to others!*

He may have had a point. Incidentally, János Láncoš’s real name was Ármin Landsmann, but in those days, when Hungary was in the midst of «building socialism», it was best to hide such names as well as one’s origins...

Looking through my diaries, I found a few more notes taken after that meeting: “...János walked from the bus stop to meet with us. He warned me over the phone that he only wanted to see me, and so the two of us sat down on a bench in the courtyard while Iya and Sabo watched from a window.”

János told me, “*We were poor, my father was a tinsmith... He didn’t like businesspeople. Grandpa Spielberger had the reputation of a feudal god in Garadna...*”

With some difficulty, I managed to persuade János to come upstairs to the apartment and meet Iya and the children. He liked everyone. I wanted to give him a copy of the family tree; he examined it with curiosity but would not take it with him. He asked me to say hello to Riza...”

Be as it may, we never did get close to the Landsmanns in those days. Years passed, János died, as did his three sisters and his younger brother, leaving their children behind. Joe Weltman was gone, too. No contact at all... But often, life makes unexpected corrections.

On November 14, 2011, Iya and I arrived in Budapest on a delayed flight. Our Hungarian friend and driver Gábor Bordás had been waiting for us at the airport for a long time—but was still ready to drive us right away to Kosice and Encs where I was supposed to have more presentations for my books.

Gábor gave me my mobile phone which he always keeps for me and which I used only when in Hungary, and asked in obvious puzzlement:

—*Vladimir, you have another female cousin in Budapest besides Jutka? I didn't know that!*

—*No, I don't!*—I replied confidently.

—*While I was waiting for you here, some woman has called your number three times. She wants to talk to you. Says she's your cousin. I told her you don't have one here, but she started insisting and left me her phone number. Her name is Edith...*

“Edith? Edith...” I started thinking. Must be one of the Landsmanns! Some thirty years ago, Joe Weltman had invited one of them to Toronto. It was Edith Varga, a smart, strong-willed young woman. It was from her, and later from her uncle János Lánkos, that we found out the details about their family for the genealogical tree. Her father, Sándor Landsmann, was one of Giza Spielberger's children who died with her in Auschwitz; Edith and her mother Margit (Klein) survived.

I immediately called and introduced myself. A deep female voice said:

—*Vladimir, I am Edith Varga. Do you remember me? We met when I was in Canada, visiting Joe Weltman. It's so funny the way it happened: I bought your first book at the store. We read it and liked it, but we couldn't find the second book for sale anywhere. We decided to contact the publisher. Yesterday, I went over and met with Katalin Mezey. She sold me the second volume and told me you were coming to Hungary today. She gave me your phone number...*

I was genuinely glad to hear from her. Scenes from the past came back in my mind... I said I was going to Slovakia and to northern Hungary and would be back in Budapest in a week; Iya and I would be staying at the Thermal Hotel, and would be delighted to invite her there for a cup of coffee—as well as any other family members she could bring.

That unforgettable meeting, full of warmth and genuine feeling, took place on November 23. At the appointed hour, four «strangers» approached us in the hotel lobby. They were Edith Varga, her 65-year-old son Peter, and her cousin Panni Zsombor with her husband István. Panni was born after the war when her mother Terka Landsmann, who had lost her husband in the Holocaust, remarried.

We invited the guests to our hotel room, got a good look at each other, looked at some photos. Edith had lost her husband three years earlier. Both her appearance and her personality had distinct similarities to many relatives across the ocean, especially Jeffrey Spielberger and Stephen Spielberg...

The atmosphere was so warm and pleasant that we didn't feel like going to a café, and I ordered room service from one of the hotel's cafeteria, where Iya and I were well-liked after many visits. Soon the door of our room opened, and a waiter in a tall white cap came in pushing a table-cart with



Meeting in Budapest. November 23, 2011.

four coffee jugs, laden with large helpings of fresh hot pancakes and cups of honey, whipped cream, and chocolate. It was a wonderful salute to our meeting. The most important thing was that both sides wholeheartedly agreed to never lose each other again.

Our families' next get-together happened on April 18, 2012—when, on another trip to Hungary, Iya and I rented a large bus, Edith brought seven people from the Landsmann family, and together we went to Garadna. The sheer number of events can give some idea of what a joyous and unforgettable day that was. We were greeted by Garadna Mayor Marianna Paulo and other townsfolk at the village club; visited the memorial to Hermann Spielberger, his wife Sára, and the 32 family members killed in the Holocaust; met and got acquainted with the Kuruc-Barna family—more Hermann Spielberger descendants we had tracked down; in the small town of Encs we visited and honored the family of Imre Kercsi, the late builder of the memorial; and finally, all of us together, attended a wine tasting in Tokai, followed by a wonderful dinner. On the way back, in Miskolc, we stopped at the Jewish cemetery on Mount Avash, where my other grandfather, József Róth, is buried. The Landsmanns had a wonderful time and offered heartfelt gratitude for this unforgettable day.



The descendants of Gizella Spielberger are heading over to see the monument of Herman Spielberger and his family. Garadna, 2012, April 18, Photo taken by Marianna Paulo.



The first visit by the family of Giza Spielberger to the graves of Herman and Sára. Garadna. 2012.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 5



*An amazing meeting of the descendants of three Spielberger children: Gizella, Géza and Regina.
Garadna. April 18, 2012.*



When we were leaving the cemetery in Miskolc, Edith Varga led us to another grave that she said was held in high esteem in her family. Approaching the white marble tombstone that peeked out from the thick shrubbery, we read the inscription: *Zoltán Klein, 1902–1986*. Edith told us an amazing story that affected us deeply, and which I decided I must share with my readers.

As I mentioned before, Éliás Landsmann and two of his five sons were tinsmiths. It took five years of training to master this trade. One of the sons, Sándor Landsmann—the future father of Edith Varga—married a girl from Miskolc, Margit Klein, in 1926. Soon after that, the family crew of tinsmiths admitted her brother, Zoltán Klein, as an apprentice. The young man worked hard mastering new skills. In the evenings, he often came to his sister's home for dinner.

A pleasant young man, he caught the eye of Landsmann's eldest daughter, 20-year-old Annush, who often saw him at work and at the dinner table at home. The story is that the two of them had a mutual attraction, but nothing came of it. Zoltán finished his training and had to go back to Miskolc, where he had a job offer.

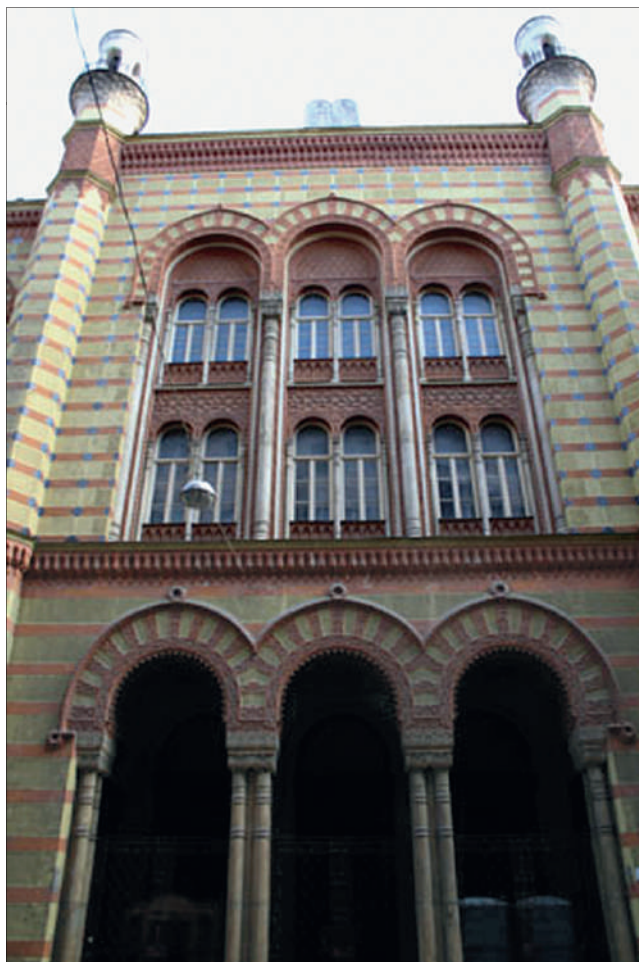
Sometime later in Miskolc, Zoltán met a nice girl named Regina and married her. They had three girls, one after the other: Zsuzsa, Kati and Éva. But before too long, Regina became seriously ill. For several years, the doctors tried to save her life. During that difficult time, the little girls stayed with relatives, in different homes. Then, World War II struck. By then, Regina spent all of her time in the Budapest hospital for tubercular patients, where she got regular visits from members of her large family—including Annush, who sometimes saw the grief-stricken Zoltán Klein at the hospital. By the fall of 1942, the hospital sent the hopelessly ill Regina home to Miskolc, where she soon died.

Several months later in Budapest, 37-year-old Annush, who lived with her sister in an apartment on Wesheleni Street, heard the doorbell ring. When she opened the door, Zoltán Klein stood before her agitated, with his head down.

—Take pity on me, dearest Annushka!—He said.—Marry me! I want to get my girls back together so that they have a real home, a real family...

Annush soon agreed. They were married in Budapest, in the synagogue on Rumbah Street. But the ceremony under the chuppah was barely over when a serviceman came in with a summons for Zoltán. Under military law, Zoltán Klein was being drafted and was to report to army barracks in Miskolc by midnight, for immediate transport to the Eastern front.

Chagrined, the newlyweds and the wedding guests hurried to the wedding dinner Zoltán's sister had organized in her home. They barely had time to eat before the newlyweds had to rush to the train station to catch the evening train to Miskolc. Zoltán Klein headed for the barracks...



The synagogue on Roombach Road. It was damaged in 1945. After decades of restoration work the first service was held in July 2015.

...In late August 1944, trains carrying Hungarian Jews were arriving at Auschwitz. One of those trains carried the heroines of this tale: Annush and the three girls. They had been among the prisoners of the horrible Kosice Jewish ghetto where my grandmother Fanni Spielberger and more than two dozen members of her family were kept in the building of a brick factory, without food or water, before being sent to their deaths. After the prisoners were unloaded from the trains, the camp guards immediately separated the children (who could have thought that they would be marched off to the gas chambers right away?) while the adults were herded into another column across the railroad tracks.

Eyewitnesses who survived the camp later recalled that Annush was incredibly agitated; she was shaking and crying, and kept wanting to run off and join the children. Someone tried to talk her out of it: *"Stay here! They'll put you to work, give you food... you'll have the strength to help the little ones..."*

But her reply was firm: *"No, I must be with them! I promised Zoltán I would take care of the children!"* And then Annush made a desperate dash from the adults' column, crossed the tracks—almost in a single bound—and ran to the children's column where she picked up little Éva in her arms.

The three sisters—three-year-old Éva, five-year-old Kati, and seven-year-old Zsuzsa—and their kind mother Annush, a 38-year-old virgin bride, died in the gas chamber—together...

Toronto, December 31, 2012

*Edith Varga at the grave of Zoltán Klein.
He was her mother's brother.*



Chapter 6

ZENA

On May 14, 2012, one of the most fashionable hotels in Miami Beach, The Fontainebleau, was especially brightly lit. Among the dazzled guests, one could often hear talk about the fact that the just-completed renovations of the hotel had cost 100 million dollars.

Thousands of guests had gathered on that day to celebrate a wonderful event: the wedding of Raizy Melohn and Julius Kuhl. Of all the decorations on that unforgettable evening, none were more radiant than the young, slender, good-looking newlyweds—though both of the mothers, too, looked remarkably young, beautiful, and elegantly dressed. It was hard to believe that the lovely Vivian Kuhl had just celebrated the marriage of the last of her five children, while the cypress-slender Ruchi Melohn was leading under the chuppah one of her nine... These two ladies' remarkable imagination and taste in organizing such a rich, beautiful, and joyful wedding event made it an indelible memory for all those who attended.



The Fontainebleau Hotel, Miami Beach, Florida, USA. May 2012.



The chuppah awaits the young couple. The Fontainebleau Hotel. May 14, 2012.



The Bride Raizy Melohn and her twin sister Hindy. On the left – Tamar and Shoshana Kuhl.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 6



Parents Vivian and George Kuhl lead their youngest son Julius to the chuppah.



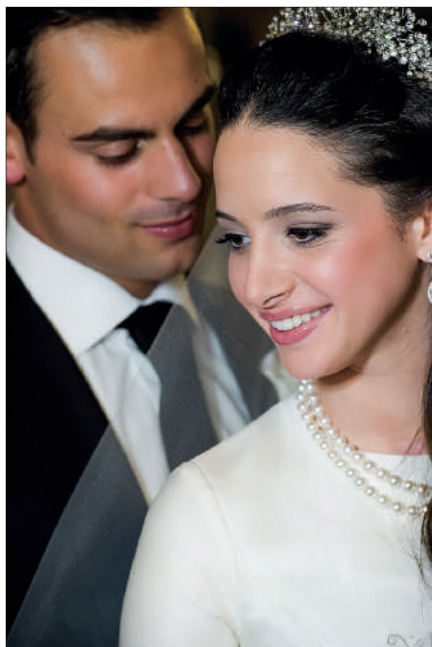
Beauties—the mothers of the bride and groom.



The chuppah—the main wedding ceremony.



Three happy couples: George and Vivian Kuhl, Julius and Raizy Kuhl, Ruchi and Avrohom Melohn.



Julius and Raizy, Mazel Tov! May G-d grant you great happiness!

Iya and I were guests on the Kuhl side. It was an Orthodox Jewish wedding where the men and the women sat separately. At the end of the festivities, when we were in the elevator going up to our room on the sixteenth floor, Iya told me that there had been a fascinating old lady at her table—a grandmother many times over, an immigrant who spoke good English and had lived in the United States for a long time. Her name was Zena. She was quite surprised to learn that Iya hailed from «Mongolian lands». In the course of their conversation Iya mentioned that her husband had written a book about our family history. When, in response to Zena's question about where she had met her husband, Iya calmly replied, "We were both students at the university in Tomsk," Zena's eyes suddenly opened wide:

—*In Tomsk?*

After a brief, stunned silence, she almost shouted in broken Russian:

—*I know Tomsk... I passed through Tomsk. It's been more than seventy years, but I still remember our address: Novosibirsk Province, the Ziryansky District, the Yaran Village Soviet...*

It turned out that when she was still a young girl, Zena had been deported from Poland to Siberia. By the end of the evening Iya had wanted to introduce us; but while she was looking for me among the men's tables, her new acquaintance had already left. "We didn't even exchange phone numbers," Iya said regretfully.

...January 2013. Iya and I are back on the sunny Florida coast. Zena, the heroine of this tale, is sitting in front of me. I bought a voice recorder just for today's meeting; it will preserve the story of the youth of our dear friend to whom we had grown close in the past eight months:

—*I know both families quite well from my New York days, both the Kuhls and the Melohns—we've known each other for fifty years. I now spend most of my time in Miami. At my age, it's not a good idea to make new friends, so I didn't particularly want to go to the wedding; but Mrs. Melohn politely insisted. When I learned that my youngest son and his wife would be there, I decided to go. So I came to*

the wedding. Everything is beautiful, everything is fine. Lots of familiar faces... "Hello! Hello!" I'm wondering who I'll be seated with. The Kuhls? The Melohns? Or maybe people from Miami? I'm looking for my table. Then my son takes me by the arm: "Mom, you'll be sitting with guests from Toronto." "From Toronto...?" He took me to my table, and not one familiar face! Usually people are at least a little acquainted with each other; this time, I didn't know anybody. I tried to talk to the woman to my left; she obviously had no interest in a conversation. The chair to my right was empty, and sitting further down was a pleasant-looking woman. She smiled at me. "No one is sitting here? May I sit next to you?" "Please! Please, come sit down." A nice, friendly lady from Russia. It was Iya.

We just couldn't stop talking! We had so much in common! It was like finding a long-lost friend! It was delightful! Now I tell all my friends how glad I am I went to that wedding.

—Zena, how did you manage to find us?—I asked.

—I remembered your name. Your wife said you'd written a book. I decided that I had to get my hands on that book, but how to do that? I called my old friend Tamara Ehrlich in Toronto and said, "You have to find these people for me! You have to! Whatever it takes!" The next day, she calls and says, "Don't worry, I found them. They're friends of my daughter's. I have their phone number." And so I called...

Iya and I were pleasantly surprised by this unexpected call from Miami, and much to our delight Zena asked us to send her both volumes of my memoirs. Then she called again to say that she had received the books, and sent the payment. Soon after that, in a lengthy telephone conversation, I heard a heap of compliments addressed to me, and I was pleased by her detailed knowledge of many episodes from the book. This time Zena asked me to send copies to her children in New York and in Israel, and immediately gave me their addresses. Our telephone contact continued, our friendly feelings towards each other grew, and this growing friendship sped up our next trip to Miami.

We already saw Zena last night. She invited us and our friends, Marat and Lina Gertsovich, for dinner at a small cozy restaurant where she told us a riveting story about the heroism of her mother, a talented and courageous woman named Gita Dominitz.

Zena, Bielsko-Biala. 1935.





Mom escorts Zena to her rhythmic gymnastics lesson. Bielsko-Biala. 1938.

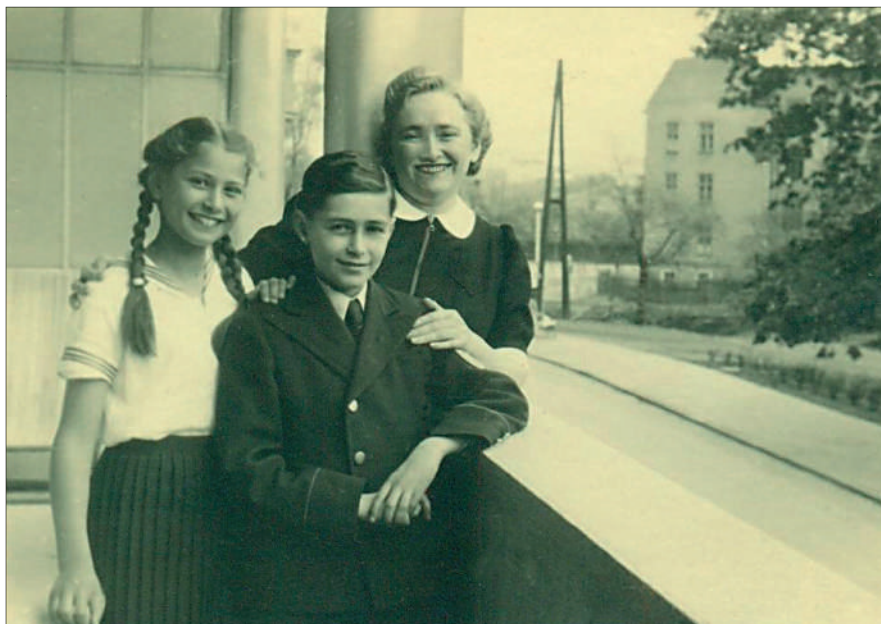
—I was born in Poland, in Silesia, in the city of Bielsko-Biala, in a big and happy family: my good parents, my two brothers and I, and our grandparents, aunts and uncles. Our family was full of good cheer, and fairly well-to-do. In the 1930s my elder brother attended a gymnasium, while my younger brother and I went to elementary school. My father was a businessman; he often did business



Zena and her brothers Mark and Leon. Spring 1937.

in London and traveled there. From time to time my parents took trips to London together.

In 1937, anti-Semitism in Poland began to grow. We lived close to Germany. All around us we could hear only German. There was German spoken in the streets, we



Zena, Mark and their mother. Spring 1939.

spoke German in our home... It was only in school that we were told, "If you hear someone in the street speaking German, correct them and ask them to switch to Polish..." That summer our parents went to London again. Father had business matters to take care of; Mother was visiting family (she had quite a few relatives who had been living in England for a long time). Mama also spent a lot of time looking for opportunities for our Leon to be educated in England; she didn't want him to continue studying in Poland. Her quest was successful. Soon after my parents returned from their trip, Papa took Leon to England where he left him to study at a public school in Brighton. My brother was quite upset about it; first of all, he didn't speak English, and secondly, he didn't know anyone at the new place. Mama's relatives were strangers to him, too; besides, they lived in London and he was in Brighton...

In the summer of 1938, Mama wouldn't let Leon come home for the summer vacation, saying that if he came back to Poland he wouldn't want to return to England after that. But everything turned out all right: he became fluent in English, and one of his classmates from Poland was also sent by his parents to attend school in Brighton...

In July 1939, we held a Bar-Mitzvah for my younger brother Mark; my older brother came back from London on his own and spent some time in our family circle. All of our family and friends went to the country—we had a large estate in a picturesque area—and had a wonderful time there. By then, there were rumors going around that Germany would soon seize parts of Silesia and the Baltic coast.

People were saying that all Germany needed was a part of Silesia and access to the sea. Mama said, "The Germans are coming to Silesia, Poland is raising an army... I don't want Leon to get drafted into the Polish army. He has to go back to London immediately!" At Mama's insistence, Papa took Leon back to England right away. They traveled via Berlin—and then, the day they arrived in London, the war began. Papa ended up staying there. He wasn't sent back to Germany because he'd been doing business with England for years and had money in a British bank. He was allowed to stay. Two days later German troops entered our town. The locals, who were all of German origin, welcomed them; there were tables set out in the streets laden with wine, cakes, and flowers. There was no fighting at all... As the Polish troops retreated, they managed to set off a single explosion and damage a tunnel...

A few days before the start of the war, our nanny took my little brother and me to stay with our father's sisters. Our two aunts lived not far from the town of Peremyshl. They owned an estate called Dubezko, one of the largest in that part of Poland. Everyone was convinced that Germany would only take Silesia and then we would be able to go home to Bielsko-Biala. Who could have thought that the Germans would end up seizing all of Poland?

On one of those days filled with rumors and confusion, when, still in Bielsko-Biala, Mama was looking for a way out and trying to raise at least some money, the news came that the last train was leaving for Krakow—our last chance to go east and reach us in Dubezko. Mama was able to get on that train. Her sister lived in Krakow, and Mama wanted to make a brief stopover and visit her. As the train approached the city, Mama started making her way toward the door when someone warned her that leaving the crowded carriage would be a big mistake: there would be no more trains.

Some time ago, Papa had given Mama a wedding present: a gold ring with a 5-karat diamond. She had always felt it was unseemly to display such wealth, and the ring always stayed on her finger with the stone turned inward. Now, Mama realized that to have such a ring in the current situation was actually dangerous. While the train stood at the platform in Krakow, she noticed a familiar-looking face in the window. It was a middle-aged Polish man who had sometimes visited my father on business. Pulling the window up, Mama called out to this Pole, explained who she was, handed him the ring and asked him to give it to her sister. The man promised that he would...

Mama reached Dubezko late in the evening. During the night we survived our first bombing raid, and in the morning our entire family, including aunts and uncles, headed east by wagon train. The Polish peasants who had been employed on our estate, prepared my uncles horses and carts. The idea was to get to Romania: "Romania is a neutral country, we can stay there until we get our papers from Papa and then we'll join him in London..." Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a treaty dividing Poland. No one could understand what was going on, the situation was changing very rapidly. Panic reigned. The wagon train moved

very slowly, traveling only at night. There were constant bombings... Mama was injured by a piece of bombshell.

The fall of 1939 was coming. In a cloud of thick smoke, we passed the city of Drogobych; all around it, there were burning oil rigs that had caught fire in the bombing raids. This was the Polish part of Ukraine. We stopped in a small town called Kalusz. Mama got off the cart and declared:

—This is as far as we go! Tonight is Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. We're going to observe the holiday!

—Tonight, you want to be religious?—Uncle started arguing with her.—We're trying to cross the Romanian border, and right now you want to be religious? Do you know anyone here? Who are you going to stay with?

—We'll stay with G-d!—Mama firmly declared.—My children and I! We cannot go further!

Mama brought us inside the entryway of a small house and said that we would spend the night there. And so we stayed. (Uncle left us, but he didn't get very far; he made his way to a village called Buchach, and just then the Romanian border was closed.) In the morning Mama found the local synagogue, and we went there. The Jews gave us a warm reception; an elderly couple agreed to put us up in their house. They moved to the kitchen and let us occupy the bedroom. We stayed in Kalusz for ten months; I even started attending school.

And then, 1940... The Germans were coming from the West, the Russians from the East; we had no idea who was going to take over. Meanwhile, Ukrainians wielding scythes started gathering outside Jewish homes, ready to kill the owners and seize their property. Then, thank God, the Russians came; good thing it was the Russians and not the Germans—otherwise the Jews would have been massacred right away. We were left alone, no one molested us. But! On the very next day, all the goods disappeared, the store shelves were empty. All we could hear was «ochered», «ochered», «ochered» (Russian for «queue» or «line»). We started standing in line for sugar and other food... We even started getting used to that situation.

Mama got a job in a butcher shop. Meanwhile, we decided to move back to German-occupied territory: "Our Grandma and aunt are in Warsaw, our relatives are back in Bielsko-Biala... We need to go back. There's nothing for us to do here, we've been stuck in this place for ten months as it is..." Mama even got the papers that would have allowed us to return to German-occupied territory. Just then, a letter came from Father. (In those ten months, after Mama wrote to London, we had established a regular correspondence with Father. Mail delivery was working, and Father knew everything that was going on with us.) Father wrote telling Mama to go to Lvov, where he had sent the necessary papers for us to get to England: "You'll travel through neutral countries, via French Morocco..."

Our cousin arrived from Bielsko-Biala to take us back, but Mama decided that we would not return and would instead get the papers in Lvov and join Father. It was Thursday, our cousin left and Mama decided, "Tomorrow is Friday. I'm

not going to Lvov the day before the Sabbath. I'll go pick up the papers on Monday." And then, on Friday—on Friday night—Soviet soldiers suddenly stormed in, searched our place. "Let's go!" We asked where they were taking us. "You'll be going to London," the soldiers confidently assured us.

At that time, they were making everyone get Soviet passports. The Ukrainians living in Kalusz had accepted them, but Mama refused: "What do I need Soviet citizenship for? I'm from German territory, and I want to go to London! My husband is in London!" Among the Polish people, there were also plenty of families that wanted to go to Krakow and other places now under German control. They, too, turned down Soviet passports.

Mama had kept all our money in one of the drawers. A soldier found it and pocketed it. During our stay in Kalusz Mama had bought warm clothing for all of us, had had warm coats made. We got dressed, took the pillows and blankets with us. The soldiers took us to the train station and loaded us into a railway car. It was a freight car, the kind normally used for transporting goods or cattle. They loaded about forty people into it. In one of the corners of the car, there was a hole in the floor; it served as the toilet. People would cover themselves with a sheet while using it. For three days, we were kept locked up. Townsfolk—both acquaintances and strangers—brought us food, water and dishes which they passed to us through a small window in the side of the car. Several times, they brought sugar; then, someone brought salt. Mama didn't notice and poured the salt in the sugar... I remember there was an old man sitting next to me with his son. The old man told me, "Move away, he's got lice." I had never even seen lice in my whole life—where could I have seen them?

On the fourth day, when our train, which consisted of ten or fifteen cars, finally began to move and slowly pick up speed, Mama saw a man running alongside the car trying to pass her a bottle through the window. "What do I need that bottle for? Wine? Why would I need wine?" She hesitated a moment, then took the bottle from his hands. It turned out to be sunflower seed oil. It sure came in handy!

A short while later we realized that the train was moving east. "East? How can that be? But Krakow and London are to the west! Where are they taking us?" There was agitation among the passengers, but no one to complain to—and so we kept moving toward the rising sun.

On one of those days my brother got sick—stomach problems, a fever... Mama wanted to make him some hot tea. It turned out that someone in our car had a primus stove and offered to let Mama use it. We had never used a primus stove in our lives. We poured in the alcohol, Mama started pumping the air...and then the primus stove exploded! Mama's entire body was enveloped by flames. Somebody grabbed a blanket and threw it over her. The fire was put out, but her body and her face were badly burned.

Mama was a very beautiful woman, a real beauty! And now, such terrible burns! They started putting sunflower seed oil on them. The train was accompanied by a

young Russian doctor who brought Mama some sort of ointment, black and foul-smelling.

I remember that, to relief the pain at least a little, Mama would beg one of the men in charge of the train, "Please, please leave the door of our car open just a crack, just a little bit, so that the air from the motion of the train would cool the injuries on my face." So they did her a "big favor" and left the door open a fraction, and Mama would stand for a long time with her face exposed to the cool air.

When the injuries started to heal, Mama's face was a shapeless mess. You have no idea... Her ears were practically hanging down. Her face looked like a mass of lumps. And my mother just kept praying... She was a deeply devout woman. She kept asking G-d, "Please, if You made me the way I was, restore me to my former looks once the war is over and I am with my husband once again. Do not let me remain a freak!" She was in such distress over it... And you won't believe it, but she got her looks back completely! Not a single scar! She was the same beauty she'd been!

She prayed, "I promise, Lord, I'll never complain. I'll never complain, just please don't let my husband see me like this... Please!" And Mama never did complain. Never! She always said, "Thank G-d things are the way they are! It could be worse!" My brother was always a whiner: "How could it be worse? What could be worse?" But Mama would rebuke him at once: "Please don't say that—it's a sin! Don't say it! Don't let G-d punish us even worse! It's a sin to say that! Thank God for this, as long as it's not worse..." An extraordinary woman. What an extraordinary woman! Superwoman!

Six weeks we spent on that train. There were countless stops; at each of them, beggars would run alongside the car pleading with us to give them something. Horrible poverty... At one stop, they'd offer to trade soap for salt, at the next stop to trade salt for soap—and then at the next one, the other way round once again. We had never seen anything like it. For six weeks we did not leave that freight car. Finally, on a gray and cloudy day in September, the train reached a dead end; there were no more railroad tracks. We were in Asino, a small Siberian town about a hundred kilometers north of Tomsk...

At that point in Zena's narrative, I was so stunned I accidentally pressed the recorder's "stop" button. What a small world it is indeed! Exactly fifteen years later, in September 1954, I arrived at the very same Asino station on a long train among hundreds of first-year students from the Tomsk Polytechnic University. In what had become a tradition throughout the country, we were to spend a month harvesting crops for «highly advanced Soviet agriculture»: without our help, we were told, the crops would get buried in snow. I will always remember the three-kilometer night-time «march» from Asino to Chulym river—almost at running pace, in the dark. Everyone had backpacks—except for me, wearing unforgettable cloth «athletic shoes» with no heels with thin laces looped from the heel to the ankle. Rott was too polite to grab a seat on the floor somewhere in the hold of the boat, and ended up shivering on the open deck the entire chilly night. Then we

rode in an open-body truck across roadless land to the village of Okuneyevo in the Zyryansky district of the Tomsk province. There, we saw some cabins that still had pig bladders stretched across the windows in lieu of glass...

And one more thing: for months now, I have been questioning Zena about the details of her story. She still has no idea how many kilometers they covered on the journey from Kalusz to Asino. "Maybe a thousand?" she muses aloud. In fact, it was a journey of about six thousand kilometers!



The journey in cattle car by train from the city of Kalusz to Asino took six weeks.
Author scheme—Professor Yuri Zhukov. Tomsk.

But let's get back to Zena's story:

—We were all unloaded from the cars, with everyone carrying their own possessions. Wobbling a little—we hadn't been using our legs for a while—we started walking toward the quay. The walk seemed endless. Finally we were loaded onto a small steamboat; we had to disembark several times so that the boat would be light enough to get through shallow waters and places where the river was clogged. I was sick, had a fever... From the river, we walked on foot to the village of Prokhorovka. It used to be a camp for prisoners; now, it was inhabited only by two foresters and their families. There were forty or fifty of us. Everyone was moved into a fairly small barrack with two rows of empty bunk beds; the women slept on one side, the men on the other. The next morning the adults were split up into pairs and each of them got a saw and an axe. They were put to work doing extremely arduous labor: cutting

down pine trees. A few days later, the Polish woman who was assigned to supervise the work told Mama, who could barely stand, “Sit down, Pani Dominicz—you don’t need to work anymore. I’ll team up your partner with someone else.” Many people quickly learned how to fish; somebody made a fishing rod for us, too. Remember how Mama got salt and sugar mixed up? She made people an offer: “I need one glass of salt for cooking; I’ll trade you two glasses of salt mixed with sugar which you can use for roasting fish.” And that’s how we got rid of our «sugar mix».

About three weeks later came the cold weather. The barrack had no heating... Everyone was told to pack up and taken to a settlement called Sukhoi Log. That was one of the most terrible hikes ever. For some reason we started out at dusk. Moments later, it was pitch dark—which was especially terrifying in the midst of a thick forest, the impenetrable Siberian taiga. The road was more like a forest path. We would hold hands or touch the person ahead of us so as to not lose each other in the dark. Many people would trip on tree roots, fall down, get up and keep walking. No one had any idea where they were taking us. We walked the entire night, then the whole day and another night. When I remember that passage, I can’t believe we survived that, too.



Professor Yuri Zhukov and the chief power engineer of the Tomsk region, Mikhail Jaworski (old friends from their student years in the sixties), have helped to restore the locations of the long-vanished villages.

Finally we reached the village. From now on, our address was, «Novosibirsk Province, the Zyryansky district, the Yaransky village Soviet, Sukhoi Log settlement». The settlement had a single street, lit up at night by three lamps on lamp-posts. On each side of the street, there was a row of simple log cabins, with moss stuffed between the round logs. Each cabin was divided into two rooms, each with its own window and door. At first, this settlement had been populated by kulak [former wealthy peasants] families—women and children only, no men. Those people had been deported to Siberia from other parts of the country. Now, they were joined by some three hundred Polish families from various parts of Poland. We shared a house with a family that had two teenagers; they occupied two beds, while Mama, my brother and I all slept in one bed. In the middle of the room was an iron stove in which a fire was constantly kept burning. There are some species of trees in Siberia that are very rich in tree gum; long burning splinters of wood from those trees were used to light the cabin—kindling wood instead of a lamp... The smoke would make our eyes water. Sometimes, we were able to get a little bit of diesel oil; a cotton wick dipped in it burned cleaner and longer. But most of the time, when we were inside the cabin, we sat in the dark. In the summer, of course, there were no dark nights; dusk would come and then, right away, it was dawn.

I got to know people easily and quickly learned to speak Russian. It turned out that our roommates had a lot of things. They would give me some clothes and I would go to the Russians and trade them for milk or sour cream...

Now, my brother and I worked as a team cutting timber in the taiga, where the greatest danger was getting lost in the forest. Many people got lost, and it wasn't every time that they sent out a search party on horseback. North of Tomsk, in winter, it's dusk all day long. I still remember how, when going off into the taiga, we would leave markings on the trees to find the way back. In the forest, we went only as far as we could see light between the trees... We learned how to use both the saw and the axe. The snow was so deep that when it melted away in the summer, it turned out that there were tree stumps almost our height in the area where we'd been sawing down trees.

We managed to build a small inner porch with a door by the entrance to our cabin. We used it to store firewood; with the doors opening inward, it was also much easier in the mornings to dig ourselves out of the snow, which fell so copiously overnight that it accumulated above window levels.

My brother was accepted as an apprentice into a carpenters' team, and he was able to make a double window in our room to conserve heat better. We also made our own skis: cut the wood boards, sharpened the ends, bound them up and bent them in boiling water...

Many people started losing their teeth. Only the three of us didn't lose any, because every night in the dark, before going to sleep, Mama would make us massage our gums with our fingers.

The first winter was especially hard; we suffered from cold and from hordes of lice that ate us alive. But the worst thing to endure was the hunger. Once, my brother started daydreaming aloud: "Wouldn't it be great, right now, to have a

slice of white bread with some sausage on top?" To this, several other boys retorted in a chorus, "Listen to him! Bread not enough, he wants sausage, too!"

How hungry we were! I still remember how I felt on days when I felt I would rather die than suffer constant, terrible hunger pangs. I prayed and prayed that, at least once in my life, I would get to eat my fill of bread. I didn't believe we would survive. More than seventy years have passed since then, but to this day my refrigerator is always stocked with plenty of bread. And my children know that bread is not something you just throw away!

Our life was unimaginably hard. First of all, having come from Poland, we couldn't believe that the Russians could be so barbaric and primitive in their ways—and that we had to get used to it. My mother would lament, "It's unbelievable—Russians will use the same knife to crush lice, cut bread, and scrape dirt off the floor..."

We befriended some village children. One of the boys had a beautiful dog, a Siberian husky, black with white spots. We spent so much time playing with it! Then one day, I came to see him, and—the horror! The dog was hanging over the threshold of the cabin. "What have you done to the poor dog?" "Well, I need a pair of mittens, so I figured I'd make me one..."

He needed fur for his mittens, and so he goes and kills his pet dog! Can you imagine such a thing?

Sukhoi Log was not very far from Yaransk, the district center, where the nearest post office and hospital were located. Once, late in the afternoon, my brother and I were making our way back from the post office pulling a sled with a package we had received. A horse harnessed to a large sled carrying a bale of hay, with a driver, passed us by at a trot. We decided to "hitch a ride" home. We caught up with the sled, attached our own little sled to a wooden hook sticking out from underneath the hay, and sat down next to our package. Just then the driver started whipping us. Scared and in pain, we tumbled in the snow while our sled with the package vanished into the dark...

When spring came, everyone started growing vegetables. We learned how to furrow the ground, how to loosen the soil, how to plant. And soon enough, the patch around our cabin was bright and green with new crops of scallions, carrots, dill and green beans; cucumber, tomato, and potato plants started to blossom.

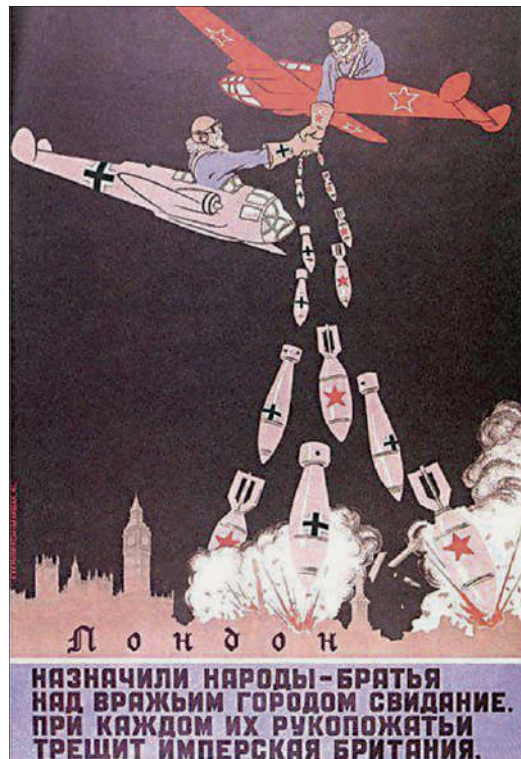
Amazingly, until the very start of the war, mail delivery functioned steadily. From Kalusz and Lvov, we got seeds, clothes—sometimes even food and money. Admittedly, at first, we would find pieces of brick and wood in the parcels we brought home; but then, we learned our lesson: we started opening the packages right there at the post office and sharing its contents with the postal workers.

Once, Mama actually got a postcard from her cousin in Belgium! We got several letters from Bielsko-Biala, from our nanny, who wrote, "I miss my little ones so much that I could walk to Siberia on foot just to be with you." Mama's letters, too, reached London, and Papa knew where we were and how we were doing. But we never got any money from him.

Like many Russians, the nurse at the hospital really wanted a watch. My uncle had once given me a lady's wristwatch which I always wore on my wrist, and one day Mama said to me, "Let's sell your watch. The nurse likes it, and it will be a big help to us. Don't worry, when the war is over and everything is back to normal, I promise you that the very first time I have money in my hands, I'll use it to buy you a new watch." Mama got six hundred rubles for that watch. We immediately bought milk, eggs, potatoes... Unfortunately, every time we would get at least a little bit of potatoes, they would always freeze. Mama used them to make pancakes that were practically inedible—they had a repulsive, cloyingly sweet taste. But if my brother and I refused to eat them or whined about our hardships, Mama would pointedly tell us, "If you can get used to it, then get used to it. If you can't get used to it, you're going to croak."

A week after my watch was sold, we parted with my brother's fancy suit made for his Bar-Mitzvah. And after yet another week, we were fed thanks to the dress I had worn for the first time on that same occasion—my brother's thirteenth birthday.

In 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. By then, the Polish government in exile, headed by General Sikorsky, had set itself up in England. In order to fight its country's invaders, it began to mobilize the remnants of the former Polish Army, scattered all over Europe and Asia. The Soviet government, still in shock from the sudden attack by its recent ally, Hitler, had to respond with a gesture of assistance to the Polish government in exile. It was an unprecedented instance when the Stalinist butchers allowed all Polish citizens who had found themselves in Soviet territory after 1939 to leave the USSR. The magnitude of the disgraceful hole that Stalin and his henchmen had dug themselves into is best illustrated by this "unjustly forgotten" 1940 Soviet propaganda poster.



Poster reads: "The brother nations have made an appointment over the city of the enemy. With each handshake, Imperial Britain trembles."

Zena continues her story:

—At the start of September 1941, we were told that Polish citizens were free to leave Sukhoi Log and cross the borders of the USSR—but they were not allowed to travel toward either Moscow or Leningrad. We were to make our own travel arrangements, at our own expense. The Polish community was in turmoil: How to leave? Where to go? How to get out of Siberia? Where to get the money for travel? Most people leaned toward going south, to Uzbekistan.

The local authorities in Sukhoi Log didn't want us to leave. They kept saying, "Don't go! We'll educate your children, train them to be pilots or doctors..." There were constant house searches and document checks. Those who didn't have proper papers confirming their Polish citizenships were not allowed to leave.

My mother always carried in one of her pockets a man's gold watch she had received as a gift from her father. My grandfather and Mama had been very close. He was very ill with diabetes, and Mama spent a lot of time at his bedside; several times, she even accompanied him to Vienna for treatments. Grandfather died just before the start of the war, and his grave is our family's only grave still preserved in Europe. That's why, after the war, the names of all our relatives who died in the Holocaust were inscribed on that gravestone. Shortly before his death, Grandpa had taken this watch off the job chain and given it to Mama. And now, here in Sukhoi Log, we found a peasant with a horse and a cart who agreed to take us to Zyryanka, with Grandpa's watch as his fee.

In Zyryanka, the driver left us on the riverbank, where we saw a small group of other Poles. Stripped tree trunks were floating downriver in disarray—they were floating timber. Here and there, in the falling dusk, one could see the silhouettes of timber rafters who ran and leaped nimbly over the logs, deftly clearing the logjams that kept happening. Someone made arrangements with the rafters, who agreed to put together a raft for our group by morning so that we could continue toward Asino down the river. Night came; it got chilly. While waiting for dawn, everyone gathered around a fire we made with pieces of wood collected on the riverbank. Suddenly, two burly men emerged from the darkness: "Who allowed you to burn wood? You have no right—this is state property!" "What are you talking about? They're just branches and twigs, we gathered them on the ground—just to keep warm..." "Doesn't matter! You're not allowed! This is the property of the state, you're not supposed to touch it!"

Finally we reached Asino. When we heard the first whistle of the train, Mama said, tears in her eyes,

—"Children, this whistle is the sweetest sound I've ever heard in my life!"

Everyone who had gathered at the station shared a common wish: to get out of cold Siberia and go somewhere warm, as soon as possible. I don't know where they got the idea, but the word on everyone's lips was, "Fergana! Let's go to Uzbekistan, let's go to Fergana!"

But how were we going to buy tickets? What could we pay with? My brother had an automatic pen and pencil set that one of our uncles had given him as a gift for his Bar-Mitzvah: a gold-tipped fountain pen and a gilded mechanical pencil from the well-known «Pelikan» firm. Mama persuaded my brother to part with

this «treasure». The «Pelikan» set was given as a gift to the train's chief engineer, and ensured that we got to Fergana with no further trouble. The recent long and arduous journey to Siberia was still fresh in our memories; this time, the trip in well-lit passenger cars took only two days, though this time, too, the train was mobbed by beggars and hungry people at every stop.

And so we made it to Fergana, where we developed a close friendship with the family of the very same Polish woman who had been the supervisor in Prokhorovka and had freed Mama from the hard labor of timber-cutting. Unfortunately I don't recall her last name, but she, her sister, and her husband helped us out a lot. What a nice family they were! Mama rented a room for us. The Uzbeks were very friendly toward us, and I still remember their delicious flatbread. We received special attention from Fergana's Jews, who brought us food and invited us into their homes. But then came an order: "You can't stay in Fergana anymore! You must leave immediately!"

A few people were able to stay; the rest were loaded into three freight cars which took off at a crawl... Two days later, they brought us to some dead-end stop in the middle of the desert and just left us there. Two men traveling with their families—Birnbaum, an engineer, and Klyamkin, a doctor—started to protest and demand that we be taken to a town. And that was one of the many miracles that have happened in my life: they agreed, a locomotive arrived... And that's how we ended up in the town of Kokand, from which we were dispatched to work at the nearby Stalin Collective Farm. You won't believe it, but there were three Stalin Collective Farms in that district!

Before we left for the collective farm, Mama said to my brother:

—Go back to Fergana, find our friends and ask if they were able, by any chance, to get the papers so that we could return there.

And so my brother went off to Fergana while we were taken to the collective farm. Mama and I were given a nice room, right next to the collective farm management office. The climate in that area is very hot, and at night everyone sleeps on the flat rooftops of the houses. We started working in the fields: harvesting cotton, carrying bags of soil.

I was teamed up with some Uzbek girls. They were so beautiful! The Uzbeks are kind people. I quickly started mastering the Uzbek language; I was already fluent in Russian.

In the evening, after returning from the fields, I would join a Russian team to mill rice. The girls would often invite me to have dinner with them and would let me take home the rice husks, which Mama would use to cook a very tasty soup. I remember once, a horse at the collective farm was killed in an accident, and Mama used some of the meat for soup. The soup wasn't bad at all, but it wasn't kosher; so, of course, Mama wouldn't eat it. She never ate non-kosher meat. A remarkable woman!

In the meantime, my brother was in Fergana. He had been gone more than a week, and there was still no word from him. We sent telegrams, and they replied that he had actually left a while back. We were worried, then scared: what if he was dead?

Then one day, an elderly Uzbek man showed up at the collective farm in a donkey-driven cart. He took a man's body off the cart and laid it on the ground. It was

my brother—barely alive. It turned out that he had been searching for us, walking on foot from one Stalin farm to the next, with no food. Finally, exhausted, he had collapsed by the side of the road, which is where the elderly Uzbek picked him up.

We spent eight months working at the collective farm near Kokand, where we made new friends. At some point there were five young Uzbek men who wanted to marry me. Then, one of them said that he was going to pay the entire dowry himself, he didn't want to share me with anybody. I had recently turned fourteen. My brother Mark and I were very close, he was always kind and caring toward me. Of course we had often quarreled when we were little kids, but now we couldn't live without each other; the hardships of daily life had brought us close. He was such a good boy! And then, all of a sudden, my brother says to Mama:

—Let's marry her off to an Uzbek!

Mama was outraged. "What are you talking about? You want to sell your sister?"

—Well, at least we'll have enough to eat! They'll give us rice, give us sheep and all sorts of good stuff... Right now we don't even have food!

—Stop talking nonsense! Sell your sister...! And what happens when the war's over? The whole family will be back together and your sister will stay here?

—No, no, we'll take her with us. But in the meantime, we'll have enough to eat!"

That was just one incident; nothing happened to me, of course. Meanwhile, it became clear that the only Polish families allowed to leave the USSR were ones with males capable of serving in the Polish Army, which was then being raised in Tehran. We were not in that category; my brother Mark was still a child... Many families were leaving and coming to say good-bye. Some made promises: "Don't you worry, Pani Raich, as soon as we've crossed the Soviet border we'll get word to your husband so he can help you get out."

One day we got a telegram from Yangiul, a town near Tashkent where the Polish Army had one of its headquarters. Mama was being asked to come in for an interview. She told us she was leaving and would let us know how things were going. At headquarters, she was accorded an unexpectedly warm reception:

—Pani Dominitz! Welcome! Good to see you!... Your husband in London, what does he do?

How could she possibly know? Who could he be in London? Just another Jew, that's all... Who else? But Mama kept her composure and confidently replied:

—He's a bigshot!

—You'll be on our next transport to Tehran!"

Mama expressed her thanks and, right away, sent a telegram to my brother and me: "Leave everything. Come to Yangiul immediately. Going to Tehran." And so we did leave everything, taking only one sack into which we managed to stuff our coats, two pillows, and blankets. Off we went to Yangiul. We arrived. The next day we lined up for roll call in front of the headquarters. They called out last names, but ours wasn't on the list. Mama ran to headquarters to find out why. We're not on the train, we have no housing, we're just sitting there by the railroad tracks. Mama comes back

with news: "They're not letting any Jews aboard the train. The Poles say the Russians won't allow it, the Russians say the Poles have forbidden it..." We're left behind...

My brother was really mad. He didn't want to stay with the Russians anymore. "If I have to stay here, I'd rather die!" Mama had some pure, 100-percent alcohol which she used as cleaning fluid, and my brother gulped it down. He slept for three days. He slept and slept, and when he finally woke up we were still there with the Russians. In the meantime, Mama went back to headquarters to ask:

—What's going to happen to us?

In response, she got another question:

—Why did you say you were Jews? You aren't supposed to say that you're Jewish!

—What do you mean? We are Jewish!

—But you aren't supposed to say it! You ruined everything... We don't know how to help you. This is the last transport that's leaving for a while, no one knows when the next one is going to be..."

We found out that Polish soldiers were trading bread on the local market. I went to the market and found one such soldier, but when I asked him to sell me some bread I was rather taken aback by his answer:

—Oh no! I won't take money from a sister, from a Polish girl! I'll give you this bread as a gift!

—Thank you very much—I said. But I want to tell you right away that I'm Jewish, I'm a Polish Jew. So if you don't want to sell your bread to a Jewish girl, don't sell it."

—No, no—it's not a problem! I'll be glad to give you the bread. Are you on the transport?

—No, I'm not—because I'm Jewish. We have to wait, maybe they'll have another transport and include us in that one.

—I'm here on my own, with no family—the soldier said.—I'll tell my commanding officer that I just met my aunt and two cousins, can they join me on the transport?

—Thank you so much!—I said.—You are such a noble man!

I took the bread, went back to Mama and told her what this Polish soldier wanted to do for us. Mama questioned me in detail—she was doubtful. But G-d was with us: just before the train left, they called our names. So there we were on the train, headed toward the Caspian Sea, to the city of Krasnovodsk. When we were already approaching Krasnovodsk, «my» soldier finally found us:

—No need to worry!—he assured us.—When I told my commanding officer I had met my aunt and her children and wanted them to be put on the train, he went to headquarters and then came back and told me I had nothing to worry about, he had seen my «relatives» on the passenger list. That's how I found out you were on this train.

And that was the last time we saw this wonderful man, «my» Polish soldier. He was an angel—a true miracle...

Mama kept racking her brain trying to understand how, by what miracle we had been added to the passenger list for the last train from Yangiul—how we had been able to get out of the USSR. Several more years passed until the day when

Papa told us in London: "The things I did! The places I went to help get you out of the Soviet Union! I sent telegrams to all the Polish headquarters... I knocked on the doors of every ministry of the Polish government in London, where they told me several times, "Yes, yes, we'll talk to Mr. Stanczyk and ask him to send a telegram to Yangiul to assist in getting your family out..." But they were just empty promises. Finally Papa went to the post office and sent a telegram to the Polish Army headquarters at Yangiul demanding that the Raich family be sent out "with the next transport," signed, «Minister Stanczyk».

It was also in London that Papa showed us two sheets of paper listing the contents of two packages he had sent to us in the Soviet Union: jackets, suits, overcoats, needles, thread, buttons, cuts of fabric... We never received any of that. The contents of just one such package would have allowed us to buy enough food to last several years, until the war was over...

And so now all the passengers settled down to wait on the shore of the Caspian Sea—there on the sandy beach. We were waiting for the steamboat that would be taking us to the Iranian port of Pehlevi. We had no possessions left except for that one sack into which we'd stuffed our coats and two pillows. My Mama was very concerned with cleanliness. Remember, she even had alcohol for cleaning. She always insisted—even in Siberia—that we should all bathe regularly, wash our hands, and do our best to get rid of lice. Some of the passengers had quite a lot of luggage. Right next to us was an affluent Polish family with two teenage girls, and they actually had a washbasin. Mama asked the lady of the family to borrow it so that we could wash our hair.

—I don't share items of personal hygiene with anyone else!—was the woman's curt reply.

As we waited for the steamboat, the passengers were warned that it had limited capacity and each family was restricted to one piece of luggage. Our neighbors had about a dozen suitcases and bundles, and when everyone on the beach was moved closer to the quay, the washbasin was discarded. Mama was overjoyed: "Now we can wash our hands, wash up, wash our clothes—keep ourselves clean!"

A couple of days later, the woman who had thrown out the washbasin came to us asking, "May I use the washbasin for a little bit?"

—Of course, of course!—Mama said graciously.

But I aggressively intervened:

—What washbasin? Which washbasin?"

—That's my washbasin!—fumed the item's former owner.

—It's not your washbasin! 'We don't share our washbasin with others!'—I replied viciously.

—Aren't you ashamed of yourself?—Mama lamented, almost in tears.—Where were you raised?

—I'm not going to let her have this washbasin, and that's final!—I told her angrily.—You asked her politely if you could borrow it, and she shot you down at once with, 'We don't share!'"

And I never did let her have that washbasin. We got a few more days' good

use out of it, but that precious possession, too, had to be left on the shore when we got on the boat. The steamboat was overcrowded beyond capacity; the passengers started coming down with typhoid fever, malaria, dysentery... People were dropping like flies from filth and disease. I came down with dysentery too. There were constant lines for the toilet... Next to us, there was a little girl who was very ill. They sent a doctor; he struggled to reach the sick child, climbing over heaps of bundles and boxes. My mother, who sat huddled by our rather ample sack, was in his way. "Whose is this? Whose is this?" the doctor yelled angrily, pointing at the sack. Mama didn't dare say a word. What could she do about that sack? Our pillows and coats were in it. Everyone remained silent, and the doctor picked up the sack and heaved it overboard. Now we were left with nothing at all..."

(It's just fascinating to listen to this story now, seventy years later! Zena, who's never really grown old, laughs infectiously as she recounts this episode from those tragic times.)

—We managed to survive all that. The steamboat landed in Pehlevi. I spent the entire time sitting by the toilet; the dysentery was so bad I couldn't step away. And how ill Mama was! She was almost constantly ill. She had lost half her weight during the time we spent in the Soviet Union.

In Pehlevi, an ambulance took Mama to the hospital. She wanted me to go with her, but I refused, telling her that if I left her side even for a minute at the hospital she'd end up being even more worried about me not knowing where I was. And I couldn't leave my brother alone in the refugee camp...

We spent several days in the city of Pehlevi, then went on to Tehran. One more tent camp. This one was under the protection of the Polish Army, but even so, living in a tarpaulin tent was hard: it was cold, rainy, damp, and we were sleeping almost on bare ground...

Once again, we got in touch with Father in London. He sent that he would immediately wire 50 British pounds to us. That was quite a large sum of money at the time. Mama was delighted: we were no longer poor! We started meeting new people, looking for a place to live... But when Mama went to the post office to pick up the money, she came back very upset: they had only let her have five pounds. "The Persian government doesn't allow wire transfers of over five pounds," they told her.

The man who had agreed to rent us a small room was from Czechoslovakia; his wife was an ethnic Armenian, born and raised in Persia. She only knew how to cook Armenian food. Now that we couldn't pay rent, the master of the house told my mother, "You can stay and live with us, but just you, no children. You'll look after our children and teach my wife to cook European dishes." They had three little girls. Mama had never taken care of small children; our nanny had always done that. Mama didn't even know how to hold a baby or a toddler, let alone how to bathe one or change diapers. Nanny would bring her the child for a feeding and then take it away. Cooking and baking in the kitchen for an Iranian family and looking after their children was quite a difficult job for Mama.

My brother was sheltered by the Jewish family of a local pharmacist. Mark slept and ate in their house; during the day, he washed glassware at the pharmacy. I couldn't find a place to stay and didn't know what to do. My mother was a kind and mild-tempered woman who easily got to know people and was always willing to help. One of her new friends told her that she had brought a message from the Soviet Union for a Russian family living here in Tehran. They were nice people and they needed a housemaid. Both husband and wife were working, their older daughter was in college, and the younger one didn't want to keep house, so they were looking for help.

—Please,—I said to Mama's friend,—don't tell anyone else about this. Take me! I can be their housemaid! I want this job!

—They want a woman, a grown woman. They've got a lot of work to do around the house.

—I'll do it!—I pleaded.—I'll do anything they tell me to do! Please, take me to them...

And I started to cry. Mama's friend took me to see the woman of the house, who saw me and was dismayed. "What's this? She's just a child, and so skinny..."

I was almost fifteen years old at the time. I started begging and bawling:

—Please! I beg you, please! I have nowhere to go, no place to live... Please, try me out! Try me out! Just let me try! If I can't handle the job, you can always fire me later...

The woman's daughter Mina, a sweet and kind-hearted girl, stepped in:

—Take her on, Mama! I'll stay home and help her out.

And they took me on. They turned out to be wonderful people. They didn't tell any of their friends I was their hired help—just «a relative from Europe». They never once spoke a harsh word to me. They got me out of the refugee camp and gave me shelter. I could eat anything I wanted. They were very kind to me. The husband in this Jewish family was from Russia, the wife from Germany.

Still, I had to work hard. There were six rooms and two loggias. Every day, I had to turn over the bed-sheets, cook, do the laundry and the dishes, sweep the fallen leaves in the yard—lots of leaves—and make the beds, and carry fresh water into the house. There was no vacuum cleaner, and every room had wall-to-wall Persian rugs, which I had to clean with a small hand-held brush every day. Cleaning house, washing, cooking, cleaning the rugs... The kitchen downstairs, the bedrooms upstairs... Every day, I had a very heavy workload. If I had a free minute, the mistress would say, "Take a bed-sheet—if it's worn out, cut it down the middle and stitch the edges together."—"But I don't know how..."—"I'll show you."

And I would sew the two halves together and lay on the stitching...

There was just one thing I didn't understand: why the bed-sheets had to be turned over every day. But that was the order: "Turn over the bed-sheets every day! Turn them over!" "Why am I supposed to do this every day? What for? All right, I'll do it... On all the beds, but not on mine. I'll do just fine without it..."

And then came my fifteenth birthday. End of the year, the holidays, Christmas time, festivities. Everyone got lovely presents: cologne for one daughter, a box of

chocolates for the other, a wine bottle for someone else. And for me, a little box as a gift from the tenants who lived on the veranda. I was upset: "I live with them, and this is all I get... Why?"

But when I opened my little packet, it turned out to contain the best present of all: a beautiful little box with a zipper lock containing a fountain pen, a pencil, and a real, large pearl. A wonderful present! And then, the mistress asked, "Have you turned over your bed-sheet?"

—I turn over all the bed-sheets!—I parried confidently.

—Have you turned over your bed-sheet?—She repeated the question.

—How do you know that I didn't? It's my birthday today, that's why I didn't turn it over. I'll do it before doing the laundry...

—But I told you the sheets need to be turned over every day, didn't I? What does your birthday have to do with it?

I started to wonder why she was so insistent. I went and looked under my sheet, and what do I see? A red barrette, a pair of gloves, a sweater... everything I could have dreamed of! I was incredibly moved. They were wonderful people, and I will be forever grateful to them.

My mother made inquiries and found out that there was going to be a transport taking a thousand children to Palestine, and we were included in it. There were some adults coming along, too: parents, doctors, organizers. We were going to be taken by rail from Tehran to the Persian Gulf. When we were leaving for the train station, my mistress said to Mama, tears in her eyes, "Please take good care of my child." They were such kind people.

I was closest to their elder daughter, Mina. We were friends. (Later on she would visit me in Israel.) We were already boarding the train when I saw Mina coming down the platform. She had come to spend a few more minutes with me. Then, after the train had started moving, I found money in my coat pocket...

On the way to Palestine, the government of Iraq would not let us cross their territory, so when we reached the Persian Gulf coast in Iran we got on a boat for a journey to Pakistan, to Karachi, where we spent some time in a refugee camp. In Karachi, we boarded a British warship equipped with minesweepers. Our unforgettable six-week voyage in the care of friendly and kind English sailors started by going out into the Indian Ocean. Soon we passed Aden and, after going down the entire length of the Red Sea, arrived at the Suez port, from where we were taken by train to Atlit. It was a small town near Haifa where the British had set up camps for immigrants to Palestine.

There was no regular train travel in Palestine at the time. Our extraordinary train from Suez to Atlit was called «The Children of Tehran». At each stop, it was met by large crowds. Passengers were pelted with questions: "Have you by any chance met so-and-so? Have you seen...? What city are you from? Did anyone, by any chance, mention so-and-so? Have you come across the last name...?" At the time, the British were trying to prevent the mass immigration of Jews to Palestine, so it was mostly Polish soldiers who met our train. One of the Polish Army's recruitment centers was in Palestine, and as a result, that was where many Poles

from the Soviet Union ended up. Everyone wanted to know what had become of their loved ones. There were several joyful chance meetings.

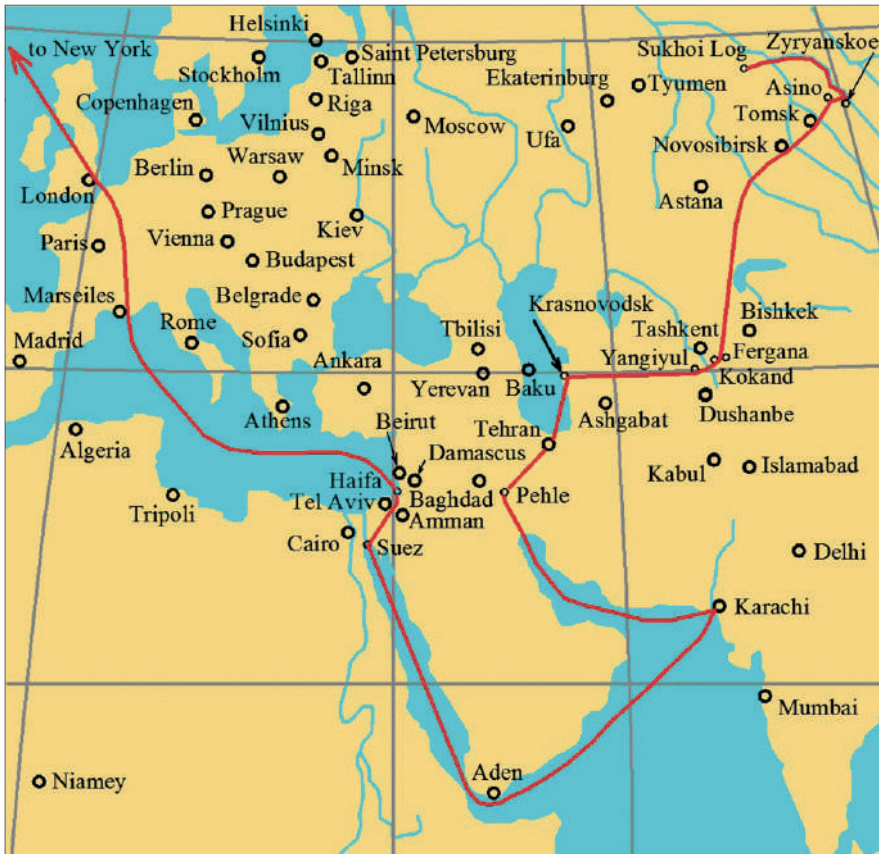
In Uzbekistan and in Iran, we had received money from our Papa by wire transfer. It had been a long time since we'd had any handwritten letters from him. And lately, whenever Mama mentioned to someone that her husband was in London, she'd always get the same reaction: "Bombed to the ground! Not one person left alive! Everyone's dead!" This frightened Mama terribly. "What if he was already dead? What if he had left someone money and asked them to send it to us?" Then, when we were at the refugee camp, Mama somehow got word that a distant relative of Papa's who lived in Jerusalem had received a letter from him, from London. Mama was agitated: "I must go to Jerusalem! I must see that letter!" We left the camp and walked toward the nearby road. A bus appeared on the horizon; soon, it stopped at the signal of Mama's raised hand and picked us up. The overcrowded bus was on its way to Jerusalem. The passengers eyed us curiously. It was February 1943; many people had never seen refugees from the camp before. Mama could barely keep up with the numerous questions. One of the passengers turned out to be a Polish man, a member of the Jewish brigade of the Polish Army that was being raised here. It turned out that he also shared Mama's last name and was a distant relative. He said he was going to Jerusalem to visit family and would gladly take us to the home of Papa's cousin who had received the letter.

We got to Jerusalem, stopped by the House for New Arrivals. It was very cold and raining constantly. We found our relative's apartment, but there was no one home. Our travel companion took us back for the night. It was Friday. In the evening his wife came to visit, bringing two candles and two freshly baked chalas. And that was how we celebrated Sabbath.

A day later, our namesake escorted us once again. This time the addressees were home. Mama read the letter and was overjoyed. We started corresponding regularly with London, and Papa began sending us money. I remember that on one of those days, Mama and I were walking down a street in Jerusalem. Mama stopped at the window of a jewelry shop and told me to follow her, and we stepped inside. I couldn't believe it when Mama pointed to the display window and said, "Pick a watch! I promised you... Pick any watch you like!" I still remember how overwhelmed I was with joy and pride.

It wasn't until June 1947 that we finally saw our Papa again. Until then, the British wouldn't let him go to us and wouldn't let us come to London. It took four years before Papa was finally able to come for us in Palestine and take us back with him to England. After the end of the war, his business in London wasn't going very well, but the ring... (!)

That was when I interrupted Zena, reminding her that she hadn't said anything yet about what had happened to the ring that was mentioned earlier—the ring with a five-karat (or even larger) diamond that her father had given her



The path from the village of Sychoi Log to London was even longer. It took seven years...

Author scheme—Professor Yuri Zhukov. Tomsk.

mother as a wedding present. You may recall that in 1939, on a railway platform in Krakow, Zena's mother had given that ring to a Polish acquaintance and asked him to give it to her sister.

—Little did Mama know that in those very same days, her sister and her family were also being taken east to the Soviet Union. My aunt had somewhat better luck on her journey than we did: she spent the war near Samarkand and was allowed to return to Poland in 1947. Imagine Auntie's surprise when, just then, Mama's emissary with the ring found her in Krakow! He turned out to be a very decent man; he had been searching for her all those years to deliver the ring. In 1949, my aunt took it with her to Israel where she moved permanently. Soon after that, one of our relatives made a trip to Israel, and she brought the ring back with her to London and gave it back to the family.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 6



London. Summer of 1947. The Dominitz Family is together again.

By then I was already married and living in America. Papa's affairs were going badly. "No," said Mama, "I won't wear it. For what occasions? It's so expensive! I can't put it in a safe either, because we don't have a safe. And I don't want to just keep it at home. I don't need it..."

One day, Papa took the ring and sold it. Instead he bought a ring with a three-karat diamond. Mama liked it and promised that she would wear this new ring. The money that was left over was enough to buy a house for us, as well as real estate, which Papa soon sold and bought more. By and by, he became a prosperous London businessman once again. My parents came to visit me in New York for my sons' Bar-Mitzvahs...

To my great regret, I've lost both my parents already—but my two brothers are still alive. We're very close! Thank G-d, we've always been a very close-knit, wonderful family! I am happy beyond measure. I'm blessed! And my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren surround me with love and care in my old age.

—Zena, tell me more about your nanny.

—Our nanny was a true professional expert in caring for newborns. She came to our home when our first child was born. That was my older sister, who was born in 1920; she died at the age of seven. Then came my brothers: Leon was born in 1922, Mark in 1926. I was born in 1927. When I was three years old, Mama decided that she didn't need a nanny any longer. "I have a maid, a cook, a laundry maid... I don't need a nanny. The children are in school already." I was already attending nursery school.

Nanny went to work for another family, but almost every day she was calling Mama and crying, crying... "Madame! I'm washing babies' diapers and I have tears in my eyes. I miss my little ones! I can't go on without them!" Finally Mama said, "All right, you can come back." And she stayed with our family until the very start of the war. Remember, she was the one who took my brother and me to the Dubezko estate, which belonged to my Papa's two sisters who had married two brothers.

By the way, after ten years of marriage, one of these couples had a little boy, right at the start of the war. His affluent parents were well-known in the area; they employed hundreds of people on the estate. When the Nazis started deporting the Jews, the boy's mother gave the child to a Polish family that worked for them, asking to keep him safe until they, the parents, came back. But they never did come back; they perished in one of the death camps. That boy grew up in a Christian family and had no idea that he was a Jew. Who knows if he's even alive today... After the war, the sister of one of my uncles came back. She knew the boy had been left behind; she made every effort to find him, made inquiries, but no one would help her or tell her anything. The boy was lost...

Nanny stayed in Poland. She was very glad that the children weren't with her during the war; she later admitted that she wouldn't have been able to save them. Nanny became the superintendent of the building that housed our apartment. She watched over it throughout the war. There were German officers quartered in the apartment. Everything in it stayed in its place, in perfect order.

Then, after the war, the Poles came and looted it—there was nothing left. Nanny, by then an elderly woman, ended up in an old folks' home in West Germany. She knew that my father was in England, and managed to track us down. By then I was living in New York, but my mother, father, and brothers were happy to hear from her. Mama immediately sent her a sponsor's invitation, and after that Nanny would come to London every summer and spend two or three months living with my parents. There were no small children there, but she was always a welcome guest. Sometimes, I visited with my own children. Nanny was a true member of our family; everyone loved her. If someone bought a new fur coat, the old one immediately went on Nanny's shoulders... She only spoke German, and in summertime everyone in the house willingly spoke that language. She was a very kind German woman who had given her entire life to caring for children. Remember what she wrote to us in Sukhoi Log? "I miss my little ones so much that I could walk to Siberia on foot just to be with you." And that's how we have always remembered her.

I have no words to convey how beautiful Zena looked, how her face lit up with joy, and confidence, how proudly and happily she smiled when she finished this riveting tale of her past. Once more, I bow to the memory of her mother, Gita Dominitz, who was able to raise such a daughter. Zena sees nothing but good around her, nothing bad; she never says a mean word about anyone. Friendly and intelligent, she spreads joy and passion for life to everyone around her. Thank you, Zena!

April 2013



Iya and Zena on the balcony of Zena's apartment in Miami Beach, Florida.



Marat and Lina Gertsovich, Iya, Zena and Vladimir Rott. Florida. January, 2013.



Jerusalem. April 8., 2016.

Chapter 7

THE MOBILE

It was the weekend. I was tired after a week of hard work and felt like taking an after-lunch nap, which I rarely do. This time, however, I quickly dozed off—only to be awakened by the ringing of my mobile phone, which lay on the bedside table. I usually only get business-related calls on that phone: someone needs emergency repairs. This time, however, I was courteously greeted by an employee of the «ROGERS» company, which provides our phone service. He said he was a customer service representative and was calling solely to see if he could do anything to provide a client with better service. Pleased by this offer, I admitted that I had two issues of concern that I'd like to settle:

—Look at our phone records,—I said in a confidential tone.—My wife and I have been retired for some time. She hardly ever uses her cell phone and is quite insistent that we should get rid of it altogether. We pay about 25 dollars a month but more often than not she doesn't make a single phone call. She spends most of her time at home, reads a lot. The only time she needs a phone in her handbag is when she goes out shopping or to a doctor's appointment, or stays somewhere longer than she planned. In that case, I may call and ask if she needs help of any kind. But fortunately, so far, that happens very rarely. In the last three months, she has only turned on her cell phone twice. For all intents and purposes it's an emergency phone.

—And one more problem,—I continued.—The battery of the fairly old «SAMSUNG» mobile phone that I use has become so worn out that I have to recharge the phone every day. Is there anything you can do to help?

The courteous customer service rep agreed that 25 dollars a month was too much to pay for a «dormant phone», and offered to find out at once what he could do.

—It will take a couple of minutes,—he said.—Stay on the line, I'll be right back.

He put me on hold, and as I listened to the hold music I began to worry: *“What if the battery in my cell phone runs out? I won't even be able to hear his answer...”* But the service rep quickly returned and cheerfully told me that he had been able to run through various lease options, and starting next month my wife's monthly bill would be reduced by four dollars and seventy cents! I sincerely thanked him. *“As for the matter of your battery, Mr. Rott, I will put you through to one of our technicians right now.”*

A moment later I heard the pleasant voice of the female technician. I gave her my «SAMSUNG» model number and told her that I would be fine with simply replac-

ing my phone with a new one, but only as long as the new model still had large keys. A sliding lid would be good as well—then I could use the phone with just one hand.

She looked in the catalogue and replied: *“That’s a very old model, the batteries for it are no longer sold... But please stay on the line, Mr. Rott, and in about three minutes I’ll give you the number for the store that still stocks batteries for that model.”* I was about to tell the young lady that my battery was running out and she might have to call me herself, but just then I heard the “sleep mode” music. *“The battery! It’s running out!”* I panicked, threw off the blanket, jumped out of bed and grabbed the phone battery charger from the shelf, but its wire turned out to be tangled... I hurriedly tried to untangle it but it wasn’t working.

For the first time in forty years of life in Canada, I cursed at the “inconvenience” of the American standard which requires all electrical wall outlets to be 10 inches from the floor. The only way I could quickly recharge the phone without putting it down was to lie down on the floor. So there I am on the floor waiting for the technician and listening to the hold music while thinking, *“What if Iya comes in and sees my lying on the floor in my pajamas with a phone at my ear?”*

But it turned out to be a good decision. The sounds of classical music continued for another five minutes if not longer. Finally, the technician with the pleasant voice came back: she had found an electronic store in Toronto that still stocked the battery I needed. I didn’t have enough words to express my gratitude to this wonderful lady from the «ROGERS» firm.

In the end it turned out that the battery I needed had spent too much time on the shelf... and my problem ended with the purchase of a new «SAMSUNG» model, with a lid that unfortunately doesn’t slide upwards but flips open. As a goodwill gesture, «Rogers» let me have this phone for free.

While I patiently lay on the floor waiting for an answer, the phone vibrated slightly and the words «RUBEN CELL» lit up on the screen. “He’s calling me on a weekend, could it be something urgent?” I wondered. I didn’t want to risk taking the call while waiting for the technician to answer; however, I once again appreciated the convenience invented by the geniuses of electronics: Caller ID, which allows the name and number of the person calling to show up on the phone screen. This brought back the memory of an annoying incident I would now like to share.

It happened at the start of 1984. Our family was getting settled in Canada. Iya had started teaching at the University of Toronto. Our children, Sandor, Ilona, and Edwin, were studying diligently. We started traveling as a family. My company, «Six Fix Services Ltd.» was picking up speed. Ruben Carreiro, the 19-year-old Portuguese immigrant I had hired as my assistant—a boy who had grown up in a poor, hardworking family of eleven—was diligently learning from me how to make various electric and mechanical repairs. He has been working by my side for over thirty years now; during that time, he has become a father and grandfather, and can now successfully run the business when I am away.

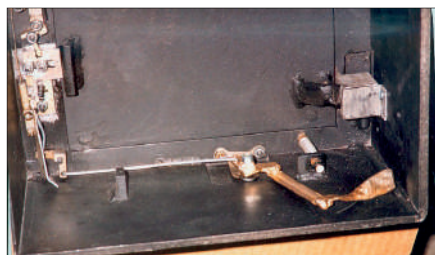
JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 7



Six Fix Services Ltd. doesn't only do electrical work, they also:

increase the capacity of the cities water supply; piano delivery and assembly; design, fabrication and installation of city water-operated powered devices to open a sliding roof; design, fabrication and installation of custom made "invisible" safes.

Ruben Carreiro.



The inner workings of the locking mechanism for a custom made "invisible" safe.

One evening, our home telephone rang. (There were, back then, no mobile phones or wireless receivers.) I picked up the phone and identified myself. But there was silence at the other end, and my “Hello, hello!” remained without a response. The caller held the phone but said nothing, though I could hear his heavy breathing. After a minute’s waiting, I heard short beeps.

To my surprise, the same thing happened the next evening. I was cursing, my family members were just bewildered. On the fourth day we noticed that when our «silent type» put down the phone, there was a peculiar «click» in it, like an electrical discharge. The children had to do their homework, Iya came home from work tired, and now we had this annoyance to deal with every night. I asked a policeman I knew if he could help. “Give me his name,” he said, “and we’ll find him and punish him.” Easier said than done—how could I possibly find out his name? The calls continued every two or three days.

Finally it occurred to me to turn to «BELL CANADA», at the time the monopoly that provided telephone service all over the country. I asked them for the number of the customer who was so unceremoniously disturbing our peace. The telephone company employees understood my concern and made me an offer:

—Mr. Rott, it would be extremely difficult to find out this man’s phone number, and without your help it’s virtually impossible. So, if you agree, here’s what we suggest. Write down the telephone number you will use to notify us (I wrote it down). Any time this person calls, don’t hang up. Just put the receiver down on the table and let us know you’ve got the customer ‘on hold.’ If you don’t have a second line at home, call us from a neighbor’s telephone. After your signal, we’ll be able to see the number of the violator you’ve got on hold—but, unfortunately, only one digit of the seven-digit number at a time.

I had to agree to do this «detective work». Then, evening after exciting evening, my family waited impatiently for the «right call». But, as if on purpose to frustrate us, it was a week before the next, now-anticipated call appeared from the «silent breather». But everything worked perfectly: Sandor picked up the phone, listened, and gestured to indicate that it was «him». I took the phone, once again shouted “Hello! Hello!” into the silence, and then put the receiver down on the table. Then I ran across the street and knocked on the door of our neighbor, a nice young doctor from South Africa. The doctor’s wife let me use the phone and listened in amazement to my lengthy conversation. And that was how «BELL CANADA» determined the first digit of the mystery number: a six!

With time, our desire to catch the «bandit» started to fade, in large part because the calls starting coming less and less often. It took six weeks before we could find out five of the seven digits of the number we were searching for: 636-54... We were rubbing our hands in anticipation of the conclusion of this suspenseful hunt, when suddenly, the calls ended abruptly.

By then, my company, which specialized in repairs of electrical and mechanical equipment, had contracts with a dozen residential high rises in Toronto;

one of them was a 19-story building at 6030 Bathurst Street. I've already explained why this building in northern Toronto has been known as «The Russia Hotel» among immigrants from the former Soviet Union for the last forty years or so; to this day, some 90 percent of its tenants speak Russian.



Immigrants from the Soviet Union in Toronto have found for themselves "Hotel Russia".

One day, Ruben and I arrived to do our work at this building, where a strict, very organized superintendent handed us a list of apartments and a list of problems that needed to be fixed. *"Be especially careful and on your guard at this apartment,—The superintendent warned, pointing to Number 605 on the list.—The tenant is a very mean guy, one 'Colonel Konev.' He's a sick man, spent two months in the hospital. Just got back last night. Everyone on the floor heard him yell at me, threatening to report me to the landlord and demand my dismissal because the refrigerator and the electric range in his apartment aren't working!"*

When I knocked on the door and got no answer, I opened the door with the master key and shouted loudly, as required, "Electrician!" Again, no one answered. We were struck by the horrible smell, the filth and the mess in the apartment: clothes, shoes, pieces of newspaper scattered all over the place. We were surprised to see four manually operated wheelchairs of slightly different design sitting in the dining room amidst all this chaos. There were piles of dirty dishes on the kitchen counter and in the double sink. The door of the

refrigerator was wide open, there was a light-bulb burning inside and spoiled food on the shelves. We were lucky: as soon as I turned the knob of the thermostat, the refrigerator started working. Somebody must have turned it off.

The range took more work: two of the four elements weren't working. We looked for malfunctions and scraped off the dirt with a screwdriver, then started looking inside at the wiring. Just then, a tall man, stark naked, appeared behind us coming out of the bedroom. We had never yet seen such a thing. Our startled "Hello!" went unanswered. That was the tenant, Mr. Konev, whom we were seeing for the first time. Stooping slightly as he leaned on his walker, he peered into the refrigerator and slammed its door shut with visible irritation, then looked us over with a scowl and walked away, leaving us with an indelible memory of a bony naked butt and a low-hanging scrotum...

Ruben was replacing the burned-out contact set for one of the elements of the range; meanwhile, mindful of the fact that Iya was leaving for the university at noon, I used the wall phone in the kitchen to call home. Iya gave me the phone numbers of two more people who had called with requests for repairs and told me what had come in the day's mail.

We were just finishing the repairs on the range when we heard someone knock discreetly on the front door. The tenant, who was in the bedroom, either didn't hear or didn't want to come out. The door opened slowly and we saw a tall young black man who was carefully pushing in a new wheelchair. He smiled, said hello and told us, keeping his voice low:

—*The superintendent was going to come up with me so I could deliver this wheelchair, but then he remembered that you were here working in the kitchen and said that you would let me leave this wheelchair for Mr. Konev.*

—*Knock on the bedroom door,*—I suggested helpfully.—*Mr. Konev is in there.*

—*Oh no, I don't want to trouble him. My boss only wanted me to deliver it.*

—*Could you explain to us what's going on here? There are already four wheelchairs at the apartment. Are you here to replace one of them?*

—*No,*—the messenger said confidentially.—*Mr. Konev is a very difficult man. He's always unhappy, always complaining... Always giving our company a hard time: "This wheelchair's no good! I don't like it! Give me another! Take it away! Replace it!"*

After these words the messenger smiled again, pressed a finger to his lips and slowly backed out the door. Ruben looked surprised, and I felt ashamed. It was obvious that the tenant of this apartment, "the esteemed Mr. Konev," was one of the small but repulsive number of émigrés from the former Soviet Union who have suddenly found themselves in the Free World with its infinite will to help suffering people but are unwilling and unable to see or appreciate true generosity. These worst specimens of homo sovieticus are incapable of joy or gratitude, and instead of appreciation they respond with rudeness, greed, boorishness, meanness, whining and complaining. They're always unhappy...

That evening at dinner, I heard something interesting from Iya:

—*You know, Vadya, this morning when you called to find out if there were new requests for repairs, and when you finished talking, I heard the same 'click' in the phone that we heard when that 'silent breather' used to call. At first I was shocked and thought I was probably mistaken, but it was just too similar...*

The next morning, agitated, carrying in my pocket the sheet of paper with «the one that got away»—the partial number 636-54...—I stood, with Ruben at my side, at the open door of the apartment occupied by the superintendent of «The Russia Hotel», asking him for the phone number of Apartment 605: “We need to check that Mr. Konev’s refrigerator is working properly.” The superintendent leafed through a big notebook with phone numbers, found the right number, wrote it down on a piece of paper and handed it to me. Inside the elevator that took us up to the sixth floor, we looked at the just-obtained paper. The number written on it was 636-5467. I hadn’t realized it at first in the heat of the moment. I took the note I had brought from home out of my pocket and looked at it: 636-54... My spine was tingling. *“It’s impossible! Why? How could it be?”*

No one answered when I knocked on the door of Number 605, and we boldly entered. I announced myself loudly. Still not a sound. The bedroom door was ajar, and Ruben carefully peered inside; no one there! There were just four wheelchairs in the dining room... Mr. Konev must have been taken somewhere in the fifth one, perhaps for a doctor’s appointment or for physical therapy.

Just «to be on the safe side», we looked inside the refrigerator. It was working. Using the kitchen phone once again, I called home at once. *“Iya! Listen for the click!”*—I said happily and hung up, then called back right away. *“It’s him! It’s him!”*—my wife said triumphantly.—*What a creep! Why would a man do such a thing?”*

We had found him! But now what? What was I supposed to do with the information? After all, the calls had stopped a while back.... Still, I decided to call the telephone company.

—*Mr. Rott! Unfortunately I have no news for you.*

—*But I have news for you!—I said proudly.—Write down the number: 636-5467! Now, find the address at which this number is installed...*

About 40 seconds later, the phone company clerk said, “6030 Bathurst Street, Apartment 605...”

—*And now I will give you that customer’s name!—I said quickly.—Konev, Yefim Konev!..*

—*That’s right! You got it, Mr. Rott! Konev... That’s amazing! Congratulations! You’re an extraordinary man, Mr. Rott! How many months did we try to puzzle this out? I will definitely tell my supervisor about your call. It’s been a pleasure working with you...*

Needless to say, we got no more calls from that number. After about two weeks, we got a letter from the telephone company management which informed us that

«BELL CANADA» had sent Mr. Konev a letter warning him that using his telephone for the purpose of harassing the Rott family was completely unacceptable. He was also warned that if another incident of this nature occurred, his telephone would be disconnected and he would be prosecuted.

We were also informed that the company had received a written reply from Mr. Konev's son, who wrote that he couldn't believe his father would do something of the sort and couldn't imagine why. Konev Jr. explained that his father was a very sick man who had spent many weeks in the hospital. In any case, he had explained to his father how unacceptable his behavior had been.

Thus, everything was resolved to mutual satisfaction. The incident was over, but for a long time I still couldn't get over it. My family and I kept racking our brains: *How could this have happened? What made this ailing old man select our phone number, out of all people, and torment us so persistently? Could it have been someone else using his phone? But for such a long time...?*

I gradually started to forget the whole thing. But every time we were called to 6030 Bathurst, and especially whenever we saw the increasingly frail Konev being delivered to the front entrance by a special bus—and even more so when we had to work in his apartment—the hurt and resentment came back. I couldn't stop thinking, *"Here I am meeting Konev and saying hello to him as usual... and he has no idea who this 'Mr. Fix-It' who does his repairs with a young assistant really is..."*

The situation was made all the more comical by the fact that, with my gregarious nature, I could have struck up a conversation with the man or even asked him something; but, especially in those years, I had to carefully hide the fact that I spoke Russian. I communicated with Ruben in English; with the superintendents, and with many tenants as well, I used Hungarian. Sometimes our émigrés ventured to ask, *"Vladimir? That's a Russian name, are you Russian?"* I would briefly and bashfully, affecting a heavily accented Russian, *"Vengerski! [Hungarian]"* and my interlocutor would nod and acknowledge, *"That's what I thought..."*

I started concealing my background and origins from Russian speakers from the start—from the moment when I «forgot» to return from Canada to the Soviet Union, when Soviet diplomats made two trips from Ottawa to Toronto trying to get me back, and when my wife brought me «regards» from the Kuibyshev KGB which assured her that they would «get their hands on Rott» no matter what.

The «comedy-drama» of Konev's phone calls began in spring, and he was forced to stop his games a couple of months later; but the question of why he chose to play those «games» with my phone still wouldn't leave me. Meanwhile, the old man was being wheeled out on the porch and taken away by a special bus more and more often.

The old wisdom says that no bad deed can remain concealed forever. And in our «adventure», too, the answer eventually found me—and from completely unexpected quarters. In late fall, Iya and I were having dinner at my brother Yuzef's on some sort of family anniversary. During the conversation at dinner, his wife Svetlana said that she was getting a new job after working for several years as a home attendant for the disabled and the elderly at the Jewish Agency.

Remembering how difficult things had been for Yuzef and his family at the start of their life in Canada and how hard it had been for Svetlana to find a job, I got worried and started asking her why she was undertaking such a step. As my sister-in-law gave me a detailed explanation, I was struck by one comment:

—*You know, Vova, I used to like working as a home attendant, I'm used to taking care of old people, but now I'm getting tired of them. Some of them are so demanding and so mean: 'Don't do this, don't do that... Why did you buy this? Why is it so expensive? Don't leave yet, it's still early...' And some can be really disgusting, like that... Konev guy...*

Seeing my surprised expression, Svetlana clarified:

—*I always had a such hard time getting him in the bath, and then he'd try to feel me up while I was washing him. Just wouldn't leave me alone...*

My mouth agape at this, I asked her half-jokingly:

—*So who did you dump him on?*

—*Actually, you know her! It's Emma, my friend, the immigrant from Ukraine. Remember her? I introduced you at Yuzik's birthday party? A nice woman... Came here without a husband... She'll take any work. Remember, the one that had a toothache?*

Yes! I remembered! Now, I remembered. Emma, a pleasant, still-young woman. She had some sort of dental problem, but didn't have the money for the dentist. I decided to talk to Dr. Teresa Magus, who had been our family dentist for many years, and ask her to give this woman the maximum discount...

At the time, I had promised Emma that I would talk to our dentist and told her to call me in a couple of days. The grateful Emma pulled a notebook out of her purse, opened a blank page and handed me the notebook and a pen to write down my number. I wrote, in large letters, *Vladimir, 782-31...* and gave the notebook back to her.

So that was it—the answer to the puzzle. One fine day, the bored Mr. Konev had obviously gotten hold of his home attendant's notebook and, seeing the number for a «Vladimir», had decided to «get him» to the best of his ability. He may well have regretted that he didn't take things further...

Unbelievable! The ease with which the retired Colonel Konev was able to «mobilize» a whole army of players in this drama!

January 18, 2013

Chapter 8

THE TIMER

I have lived in Canada for nearly forty years. Our family belongs to the Torath Emeth Jewish community, united by the Orthodox synagogue located on Viewmount Avenue. We live about a mile away from the synagogue: half a block of our Shelborne Avenue, then left on Bathurst Street and, after six short blocks, right on Viewmount Avenue, which starts here and continues to the modest building of our synagogue on the far corner. The entire preceding block, between Viewmount Avenue and Hillmount Avenue, is occupied by the large building of the Bialik Jewish Primary School and the staff parking lot in front of it.

On Saturdays and holidays, I walk to the synagogue for the morning service; on weekdays, I drive. The school administrators allow the members of our synagogue to park their cars in the school lot during non-school time. By 8 a.m. the morning service ends, and the school lot fills up with the teachers' cars.

The school has about a thousand students, and the stream of cars taking them to and from their classes from all over Toronto creates a huge amount of traffic twice a day. Some two years ago, in an attempt to bring at least some order to the movement of these cars around the school, the city put up a sign making it illegal to turn from Bathurst Street onto Hillmount Avenue between 7 and 9 a.m. Enforcing this rule required the presence of a police officer who would sit in his car outside the school near the intersection every two or three days and fine drivers making the forbidden turn. I too got caught once, soon after the sign was installed. I started to lament that I was in a hurry to make it to the synagogue by seven, that the rule was new and that according to my watch, there was still a couple of minutes left until the fine took effect... The officer gave me a stern warning but let me go without a fine.

The people in charge at our synagogue have long been in the habit of asking my advice on technical matters as an «engineer/repairman»; sometimes, they also ask me to repair or install electrical equipment. For instance, I installed the new energy-saving timers that automatically switch the lights inside the synagogue on and off at a preset time. These timers are especially important on the Sabbath and on holidays, when Orthodox Jews are forbidden to do any work, including lighting a fire or turning electricity on or off. It is also my job to set these timers for the proper time. For instance, on Saturdays the morning

service starts at 9 a.m., and the lights inside the halls are usually turned on at 8, and so on.

This year, the celebration of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah 5773, fell on Monday September 17. The holiday morning service started at 8 a.m. Enjoying the morning sun and the warm weather of Indian summer, I was walking to the synagogue at a leisurely pace. Turning on Hillmount Avenue, I waved hello from a distance to that same police officer, who was looking noticeably bored that morning. The dispatcher who had sent him to that spot to do his usual job of catching violators must have forgotten that it was a Jewish holiday. There was not a single car to be seen anywhere near the Bialik School; it was dead quiet.

Together with my arriving fellow congregants, I went up the steps to the lobby of the synagogue, hung up my hat at the coat check, took my tallis out of the locker, wrapped it around my shoulders and headed for the main hall. I opened the middle door—and stopped in my tracks. The hall was filled with members of the congregation who were quietly praying in the half-dark with no light.

I walked hurriedly to the electrical control panel on the wall next to the doors and opened the lid of the timer. The time indicator was on «8», but the trigger of the timer was still in the «cocked» position, ready to go on and activate the lights at any moment. I have been taking care of this timer for ten years, and it has always dutifully turned the lights on and off according to the settings; but I had never needed to know what its window of precision was—that is, by how many minutes it could be ahead of or behind the preset time.

In the past, there had been unexpected situations when the timers didn't work for one reason or another, leaving the hall in the dark. Usually, this meant that there had been a power outage during the night. On a few occasions, it was because the synagogue staffer in charge of housekeeping matters had forgotten about daylight savings time or failed to ask me to replace a worn-out part.

In the early years, I used to show «heartfelt enthusiasm» and move the trigger into the «ON» position with my finger after opening the lid of the panel, then fix the problem after the end of Sabbath. However, my very patient and tactful fellow synagogue-goers began to make delicate hints that, while Jews are permitted to do some generally forbidden things on the Sabbath in emergencies—put out a fire, help a sick person, rescue someone in an accident—manually moving the trigger of a timer does not count as such an exception. Turning on the light on the Sabbath, even for a large gathering at the synagogue, requires asking a non-Jew for help.

From then on, having understood the justification for this prohibition, I would go down to the synagogue's banquet hall and ask one of the waiters or kitchen workers to come up with me and push the trigger of the timer at my direction. If there was no banquet that day, I or one of the other “technicians”

would dash out of the synagogue and look for a passerby on Viewmount Avenue. Sometimes, there aren't any. Then we have to hail a passing car; if it stops, we make sure that the driver isn't Jewish, then explain the situation and ask the driver to come into the synagogue for a moment and turn on the light. Sometimes we have to go further, to Bathurst Street, and look for somebody there.

Here's how events unfolded this time. My watch showed 8:06; the accursed timer was supposed to switch on any second. My confidence gradually turned to panic. *"A full synagogue... Rosh Hashana... What if the timer is stuck and it's not going to work?"* In my agitation, I even came up to Rabbi Ochs, who was seated in the front, and cautiously asked if I should manually flip the switch myself. After all, *"It's the New Year... a hall full of people..."* But the rabbi smiled sheepishly and shook his head no.

In an instant, I was standing on Viewmount Avenue. As luck would have it, there was no one around except for a few black-hatted figures moving toward the synagogue—not the pedestrians I needed. A car went by, but the driver ignored my waving. Bathurst Street was deserted as well: no passerby, no cars. That's what it's like to live in a Jewish neighborhood in Toronto—on a holiday.

At a loss, I stood there frantically trying to find a solution and glancing anxiously at the windows of the synagogue's main hall: *"Maybe that damned timer has finally tripped on!"* But no, the windows were still dark. Suddenly, the yellow color of the police car parked at the other end of the Bialik School caught my eye. On a different occasion, I would not have had the nerve to do such a thing—but now, panic proved stronger than logic. I ran up to the open window of the cruiser and started explaining the problem to "my" policeman, asking him to come with me inside the synagogue. At first, he couldn't figure out what I wanted from him. Then, all he said was: *"Turn the lights on? But that's so simple!"*

I agreed and assured him that it was even simpler than he thought.

—But today is the Jewish New Year! It's an Orthodox synagogue, and on this holiday none of the people inside are permitted to touch the light switch...

To my indescribable joy, the officer understood that his help was of great importance. He locked up the cruiser, and the two of us took off walking in front of the long façade of the school building. On our way to the synagogue, I continued telling my companion about the Jewish tradition; meanwhile, Jews who were running late for the holiday morning service would slow down, stop and gape at us, wondering just: *«What Mr. Rott could have done to get arrested on Such a Day...?»*

As we came up to the electrical panel, I was seized with anxiety once again, but now for the opposite reason: *"What if the timer clicks into position by itself just now?"* But everything went well: I pointed to the trigger of the timer, the

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 8

officer pressed it, and the main hall of the synagogue filled with bright lights. The people who stood around us gave heartfelt thanks to our «savior», some shook his hand. I offered my own sincere gratitude to «my» policeman and walked him from the doors of the synagogue to the sidewalk.

During breaks in the holiday service, many people came up to me, smiled and shook my hand. *“That’s our Mr. Rott! Got a policeman to turn on the lights!”*

On the next Sabbath at the synagogue, Moshe came up to me and asked tartly:

—*Vladimir, did you make sure to ask the policeman if his mother might have been Jewish?*

November 2012

Chapter 9

YOM KIPPUR 5773

On Saturdays and on Jewish holidays, when I walk to the synagogue, I nearly always meet my friend, the cheerful and energetic Hershy Weinberg, walking fast in the opposite direction on the other side of Bathurst Street. He is hurrying to another small synagogue not far from our home. He always smiles at me, even when he's still far away, and waves to me across the street. We exchange bows and go our separate ways, having given each other an instant dose of good cheer.

I know his son and son-in-law, and I know that they are an Orthodox religious family that strictly observes all the Jewish traditions and the precepts of the Torah. Incidentally, these precepts forbid carrying anything in one's hands on the Sabbath except for religious books and the tallis. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with these traditions, I will note that even the keys for a car one uses to drive to the synagogue on Friday before sunset and to drive home on Saturday after sunset cannot be carried in one's pocket. Those keys are left in various corners of the synagogue, on tables and on benches.

Mostly, however, I remember Hershy as a good and caring son whom I saw on Bathurst Street for many years walking arm in arm with his father, a tall, pleasant-looking elderly Jew in a black coat and a large hasidic fur hat. And I remember him, too, from the big Jewish weddings where Hershy always stands out for his skill at dancing a vigorous Ukrainian gopak to the merry klezmer music.

The Weinbergs own my books in English and have read them all; just recently, I gifted them with a copy of «Mysovaya Station», published as a separate booklet. There was no one home, and I left the book in the mailbox. After a couple of days, Hershy, who paid an unexpected visit to our synagogue, came up to me and thanked me warmly for the surprise in his mailbox.

Time went by, we still exchanged greetings across Bathurst Street, but I could sense that he hadn't read «Mysovaya Station» yet. Otherwise, being the sensitive man he was, he would have certainly told me about his impressions of the book which told the incredible story of the fate of a poor Jewish family in faraway Siberia. A few days before Yom Kippur, I ran into Weinberg somewhere; we exchanged a warm handshake, and he thanked me once again for the gift of my latest book. I asked if he had had a chance to read the story yet.

—*I'm sorry*,—he said apologetically.—I haven't had a chance yet. I've been very busy, but I will definitely read it. I like your books.

And then came the day this story is about: Yom Kippur 5773, the Day of Atonement. The most difficult, the most dramatic of all the Jewish holidays. Twenty-five hours of a very strict fast when one is not allowed even to drink a drop of water. A long day spent at the synagogue praying for forgiveness, mercy and help. The beautiful, dramatic melodies of the Hebrew liturgy; the many-voiced singing.

Everything looks a little strange on that day. People even walk to the synagogue more slowly than usual, wearing unaccustomed footwear made from cloth, rubber or plastic. Shoes worn on that day cannot have even a trace of natural leather: *one is not supposed to cause pain to anyone, even to «that» animal.*

So here I am, ambling to the synagogue for the morning service. At a distance, I see my friend Weinberg and wave to him. But suddenly—what is this? My Hershy takes off running and makes a risky crossing to my side of the street, looking around cautiously as he braves two lanes of two-way traffic rushing up and down Bathurst Street. He presses his tallis holder to his chest with his left hand while holding out his right hand to me. We exchange a firm handshake.

—*Do you know what I've got here?*—he asks slyly, pointing a finger to the space behind the tallis holder.

I spread my arms in complete ignorance.

Hershy carefully moved aside the upper corner of the tallis holder, and behind it I saw my Mysovaya Station with the red searchlight on the cover.

—*I started reading it yesterday and just couldn't stop,*—he admitted, confidentially and warmly.—*I'm going to finish it now!*

And he went on his way to his synagogue.

November 2012

Chapter 10

HOME STEREO

It seems to me that the main cause for sleeplessness among elderly people is anxiety over the proliferation of «final plans». For instance, the older we get, the more often we catch ourselves thinking: *“I’m not going to leave any junk behind me!”* *“There’s no way I’m going to allow my children, relatives, or garage sale hunters to rummage in my old underpants, shoes, kitchen dishes and toiletries!”*

But of course it’s easy enough to say that to yourself; on the other hand, only a few of us have the willpower to actually throw away an old jacket, or shoes that are «actually still quite good», or an «only slightly damaged» bathroom shelf. How many homes in Russia still have a collection of records from the «April Factory» and still-functional record players from the old-time Soviet manufacturers? Of course, our «reserves» are vastly exceeded by vast American stockpiles of «RCA» vinyl discs and elegant «Victor» gramophones.

When packing for her departure for Canada, my dear wife Iya brought with her from Togliatti not only all the big «reel to reel» bobbins with unique recordings of our very own «Big Band»—the Tomsk Polytechnic Institute Pop Music Ensemble—but also all of our vinyl records, as well as the small audiocassettes for portable sound recorders that were just then becoming fashionable. These were not particularly high-quality home recordings and copies of recordings of performances by our beloved Alexander Galich, Bulat Okudzhava, Edita Piekha, and Nani Bregvadze. In Canada, too, former compatriots brought us records as gifts.

In the very first month after my family’s arrival, I decided to «keep up with fashion» and picked up the cheapest home stereo at the popular and affordable «Canadian Tire» store. This humble Chinese-made beauty—actually «Made in Hong Kong», back then—became a real treasure for our family, quickly supplemented by a separate 45- and 33-RPM record player.

In addition to the radio set with the two separate speakers, the stereo had a moveable microphone and a dual-deck tape recorder for small audiocassettes. This allowed us to have audio recordings of memorable events in our family: the voices of Grandma Regina, of Joe Weltman and of some of our guests; my brother Yuzef playing the violin; 13-year-old Edwin reading the Torah at his Bar-Mitzvah; Ilona playing at city piano competitions. How many of our friends in Russia rejoiced in those days when we sent them audiocassettes from Toronto with copies of «TPI band» concerts and recordings of world-renowned masters of jazz!

Over the early years of our life in Canada, when each person in our family was increasingly preoccupied with his or her career, our interest in the home stereo dwindled rapidly. My wife was virtually the only person who continued to listen to music. When Iya fussed in the kitchen or did the housecleaning before leaving for work at the university, there was always music playing at full blast: beloved arias from opera classics, recordings of our student orchestra, or the captivating melodies of Broadway shows.

And so it happened that, after the first five years in Canada, Iya was the only one who remembered what and how to «press and turn» on our home stereo.

As computers appeared, and compact discs came in their wake, the school friends our children brought home marveled more and more at how «ancient» our musical equipment was. After that, our children would drop more and more insistent hints that «it's time to throw away all this old junk»! But we parents simply could not bring ourselves to do it. For thirty years, our Home Stereo served our home faithfully, but there finally came a time when it started ailing badly. The audio recorder heads were the first to go. We started to think about buying a new recorder—one that, of course, would also have to play compact discs. Our children made snide comments—and then, for over a year, we saw more and more sheepish smiles from salespeople at music stores when making such an «antiquated» query.

In the second volume of my memoirs, I wrote about Victoria Gimelshtein, who sent me a moving response to «*Father's Letters*» after reading them. I found her, we got to know each other and became good friends. Victoria's husband Leon became a family friend as well. Gimelshtein, citizen of Odessa, has now been a Canadian engineer and entrepreneur for many years. He is a talented designer and machine manufacturer, but even more important, he is a sensitive, kind, and gentle man and a wonderful friend.



The Gimelshteins—Victoria and Leon.

Leon heard about our problem. On the morning of my 75th birthday, there was a heavy pounding on the door in the morning. “*Why is someone kicking the door instead of using the doorbell?*” We opened and saw a smiling Leon “Lyonechka” Gimelshtein, a former, carrying a huge box. He had managed to buy a new Home Stereo, also Chinese-made but «Made in China» this time, and he had brought it over as a gift. Our new «long-coveted beauty» had not only an unforeseen

microphone but everything we needed: a dual-band radio, a record player, two audio recorders, a three-slot compact disc carousel, and even a remote control for the entire system!

Once again, our home was alive with the sound of «our» music! For almost a week, we played music every night and enjoyed it. But after a few days, the first breakage happened: the «ON/OFF» button got stuck inside the frame in the «Off» position. If it had been in the «On» position, then at least we could have turned it on and off by plugging and unplugging the cord, but this way...it simply wouldn't turn on. I spent an entire Sunday morning figuring out how to open the frame of the Stereo, got it open and diligently glued the switch back into place. Another week passed, and the system went silent again... Once again I got it open, used my tester to look for the break in the circuit, and finally realized that my knowledge of electronics wasn't enough to revive the set one more time. Two repair shops gave virtually the same answer: *"It's not cost-effective for us to undertake the repair of such a cheap and complicated machine."*

What to do? Maybe listen to the kids and throw the whole thing out? But that would be a pity... Most importantly, of course, Leon was not supposed to know about the breakage. He would get upset and start going from repair shop to repair shop, or buy another Home Stereo... And so we kept our mouths shut.

In July 2012, Iya and I went on a weeklong auto tour of the American states near the Canadian border. In Cleveland, Ohio, we spent several days visiting old friends from Tomsk, Elena and Mikhail Tolkachev. We thought we'd try our luck and find some adequate replacement for our Stereo—one that would play both records and CDs. Mikhail was glad to take us to nearby stores, but the salespeople's faces expressed nothing but surprise: "Who buys such things today?" In picturesque Glen Falls, New York, where we were just as warmly received for several days by Janet and Michael Spielberger, our cousins also took us to the right stores. In the last of them, the saleswoman found something similar in the catalogue and helpfully gave me the email address of a firm where I could order it from Toronto...

Time went on. Nothing happened. Leon and Victoria often came to visit. The Stereo remained silent, and we didn't say a word: the last thing we wanted to do was upset Leon!

One evening, my old friend Marat Gertzovich told me that some Russian guys who had recently opened an electronic repair shop in the northern part of Toronto had done a very good and inexpensive job of fixing his laptop. The very next day, there I was, cautiously and hesitantly taking «my problem» out of a plastic bag. Much to my relief, the master, Dima Yakovlev, and his two assistants were not scared off by the size of the «patient»—just surprised. They asked for a couple of days to «poke around inside». Imagine my shock when, the very next day, Dima Yakovlev called and said, *"Come on over and pick it up—it's ready!"*

The repair shop was more than ten kilometers away, but I was there in the blink of an eye. The guys gave me a demonstration of the Stereo's various functions. Everything was working perfectly.

—*How much do I owe you?*—I asked guardedly.

—*Thirty dollars!*—was Dima's modest reply.

—*Thirty?*—I repeated.

—*Yes, thirty,*—Dima confirmed.—*We were lucky—we quickly found the broken wire.*

—*No you don't, guys—this is not the way I do business. Twenty for each of you is the least I'm going to pay.*—I said and handed Dima sixty dollars.—*You figure out who should get how much.*

Dima politely thanked me and walked out with me, carrying the Home Stereo to my car and loaded it inside.

And so, the Home Stereo is back. It can even play vinyl records, including the ones bought in Tomsk ever so long ago...

There is stands, ready to play—but its would-be listeners are busy and old, and don't have time to listen. But on the other hand, how can a thing like that be thrown away?

And so, there we are—getting old and antiquated, but still soldiering on!

February 2013

Chapter 11

ALEXANDRA KATHERINE

Of all the joys that awaited our family after moving to free and hospitable Canada, one of the most precious has been the revived tradition of full family gatherings for a Saturday dinner.

We made this «discovery» almost forty years ago, after a brief stay at the home of my cousin Joe Weltman. Since then, the ever-growing Rott family has gathered every Saturday at our comfortable home, where hospitality awaits everyone, along with an abundance of delicious dishes lovingly and skillfully prepared by the mistress of the house, my dear wife Iya. “*Mama, your restaurant is the best in the world!*”—our children often say.

Many people may find my unbridled enthusiasm over Saturday dinners somewhat strange, but I also have a «strange» past behind me. I have no memory of our family—Mama, Papa, my brother Yuzik and myself—having dinner before 1938, when our father was taken away from us (I was three years old at the time). After that, until I was nineteen, Mama Regina had to worry constantly about just being able to feed us, in addition to all her other worries. Not to mention that our tiny room in a barrack didn’t even have enough space for a table—never mind sitting down for a family dinner! In my student years in Tomsk, Mama would wait around all day to feed my brother and myself. Nor did anything change when Iya joined our family. Regina still ran everything in the kitchen and served food to everyone as we came home. In Togliatti, Iya, the newly «liberated» woman of the house, set up a certain family meal ritual for the children; but I was almost never home, toiling day and night at «building socialism»—that is, on the production of the Soviet Lada car.

In the past forty years, our expandable dinner table has received guests in all sorts of combinations. First, it was the six of us: Iya and I; our children, Sandor, Ilona, and Edwin; and Mama Regina, who lived nearby on her own. In 1986, our family dinners were joined by Dr. Paul Posner, an affable young man whose marriage proposal Ilona accepted. Five years later they gave us the good news that they were expecting a child, and our lovely dark-eyed granddaughter Ada came into our lives. Our world bloomed in many colors. Less than two years later, Ada got a little sister, the charming Serena.

In 1993, Sandor’s Georgian bride, the beautiful Manana, took her place at the table next to him. Soon, they got married. Here’s what Mr. Federico Peretz



The traditional New Year family photo. January 1, 2011.

Friedberg, the renowned and esteemed businessman and art patron, said to me about their unforgettable wedding: *"Believe me, Rott, I've been to many weddings, but I have never seen such a celebration, so much general rejoicing!"* In March 1995, Sandor and Manana became the happy parents of a big-eyed little girl named Audrey, joined by the restless, swarthy little «Georgian», Gabriel, in October 1996. Meanwhile, in June 1995, Ilona and Paul decided to give their two daughters a baby brother, a sweet little blond-haired boy named Adam.

Iya and I were truly happy. And Baba Riza, who had by then celebrated her 95th birthday, gazed proudly and lovingly at each of her five grandchildren each Sunday at Baycrest, shared her ice cream with them, and kissed each of them good-bye.

In July 1997, our son Edwin married the gentle blue-eyed Englishwoman Claire. It was about them that I wrote in «Joy of Discoveries»:

"More than ten years have passed since then. Our darling Claire decided to become an economist and got her degree from the University of Toronto after six intense years of studying in the evenings. They live in their beautiful new house, both have good jobs. And on Saturdays, when our entire family joins Iya and myself for dinner, they all look at Edwin and Claire and see that there is true love in the world!"



Audrey—12 years. March 13, 2007.

All five of our grandchildren were growing up quickly. Each was developing his or her unique character and individuality. It's amazing how much they love each other. Thankfully, there has never once been a harsh argument among them in our home, or any hurt feelings or grudges. They need each other. And we cannot get enough of watching their mutual kindness and affection.

In 2004, all of us together—Iya and I, and our children and grandchildren—made a «voyage into the past», visiting Bobruysk, Minsk, Ulan-Ude, Tomsk, Togliatti, Moscow and Warsaw. Our grandchildren were seven to twelve years old at the time. And they all came through for us during this challenging but fascinating trip. What a joy it was to watch when, at our hotel in Warsaw after the trip was over, all five grandkids would only allow Claire to wash their hair! Another amazing thing: all five, realizing that Edwin and Claire didn't have any children yet, had enough delicacy and enough warmth to give «Uncle Edwin» and «Auntie Claire» extra hugs and kisses. Meanwhile, all of us tactfully watched Edwin and Claire, who had been married for over ten years and adored their nieces and nephews.

And then, miracle of miracles! The Almighty heard our prayers. An excerpt from my diary:

“October 30, 2010. Saturday evening. Ilona had to fly to California today with a report to the state’s transit agency on the use of computers in improving transportation services, so the family dinner had to be moved back to last night (Friday the 29th). The Sandors and the Edwins agreed. It was a wonderful Friday evening. I was the first to get back from the synagogue. Sandor and Manana, Claire and Edwin, and Ilona and Adam arrived right away; Paul was delayed at work. Serena wasn’t feeling well and stayed home.

All the children were delighted to see my just-published book, the hefty «Joy of Discoveries», a copy of which I gave to each of the families. They looked it over, Sandor beamed as he sang its praises. Dinner was excellent. We were soon joined by Paul, who had been «on call» for two days and hadn’t gotten any sleep. He got a bite to eat and was about to go home when Edwin said, in English, “Wait a minute, I want to tell you something! We have good news!”

Everyone listened with bated breath as Edwin announced.

—We’re going to have a baby!

There were cries of joy as everyone rushed to hug and kiss the beaming parents-to-be. “Sixteen weeks!”—said Claire.

The joy was indescribable. Iya and I were tearing up. Thank G-d! A true miracle, a long-awaited miracle! Pray to G-d that it all goes well. Thirteen years of waiting...”



Prospective parents waiting...

“April 5, 2011. Scared and worried sick. Our darling Claire is at the hospital. Her tummy already gave us a «warning» last Saturday. Audrey, Adam and Gabriel felt it carefully, looking for movement. Then, suddenly, a «bump» protruded right under Audrey’s hand. Frightened, Audrey yelped and ran off to the bedroom.

Edwin called this morning to inform us that Claire’s blood pressure had gone up the previous night and the doctor had wanted her hospitalized. They’ve been waiting all day today. We’ve been told to stay away. Ilona couldn’t resist and ran over to take a sandwich to her brother. She told us Edwin and Claire were very displeased that she came. Iya explained to Edwin, “Please don’t take offense—it’s just the way we are!” (Later, it turned out that this was simply a

peculiar reaction from the new parents, overwhelmed as they were by the arrival of such a long-awaited child.)

The baby, a girl weighing in at 7 pounds and 3 ounces, ALEXANDRA KATHERINE ROTT was born on April 6, 2011. The labor was difficult, and the doctor wanted Claire to stay at the hospital a while longer. Iya and I rushed over. Claire, looking beautiful but very tired, told us—“*Sorry, I was trying to hold out till April 8, but it happened a bit earlier.*” *That was the best, most coveted gift for Iya’s and my golden anniversary.*



*A Hungarian gypsy orchestra at the 50th wedding anniversary of Vladimir and Iya.
Toronto. 2011.*

For the banquet to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our wedding—Iya and I were married in Tomsk on April 8, 1961—I invited the Hungarian Gypsy orchestra where my brother Yuzef had once started his musical career in Toronto. Our Jewish community usually employs the services of klezmer musical ensembles; for most of the guests, this was the first time they ever heard the unique performing style of Hungarian gypsies. The fiery two-hour performance of these virtuoso professionals captivated everyone. The male and female bands whirled in an almost continuous dance. No one wanted to leave. Many moments from this celebration were captured on video by our son-in-law Paul.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 11

Our sixth granddaughter changed our lives completely. The five older grandchildren now felt like near-adults, almost grown young men and women. All of them, of course, had already grown taller than their parents. And now, looking at cute, lively little Alexandra as she grows before our eyes, we can see and rejoice in what a wonderful stage of life this is—early childhood, which is already over for our older grandchildren. In turn, Manana and Ilona—to say nothing of Iya—literally melt with tenderness when they look at the little one and smother her with hugs. The older grandchildren aren't far behind.



ALEXANDRA KATHERINE





Summer 2011.

Claire and Edwin call their daughter Alex. At first, the happy parents' nickname for the baby was "Monkey"; but she soon became too old for such a moniker.

From birth, Alexandra has had a grey little knitted cap with a red pompom, known in the family as "Monkey's hat". Of course, this nickname will stick to that cap forever, and its young owner won't find out about the origin of this nickname until she grows older. She loves the "Monkey's hat", an indispensable clothing item that she has to wear every day, accepting no substitutes. One day, the red pompom



"Monkey's hat".

fell off. Iya and I got quite a fright when, in the middle of a snowstorm, there was a sudden knock on our front door shortly before midnight. We opened to see a snow-covered Edwin, cap and red pompom in hand. *"Sorry to come so late. We've got a disaster! A certain someone will not put on the cap without the pompom in the morning and will refuse to go to nursery. Mama, please help and sew it back on!"*

Because her parents are extremely busy, little Alex has been attending preschool since she was ten months old, in true «Spartan» style. Her dad brings her to preschool in the morning, her mom dashes over first thing in the evening to bring her back home. Both pay careful attention to forming the character of their offspring, who is already showing a great deal of determination, persistence, diligence, and focus. We are all amazed by her accelerated development. Alex knows exactly what she wants and how she wants it, in a way that none of our older grandchildren ever have, and it's not easy to distract her from something she's set her sights on. She wasn't even one year old yet when, on one of our Saturday night dinners, we heard her speak her first word: "More!" She wanted more noodles which she had picked out of her soup and stuffed in her mouth with her little hands. This moment was made more poignant when Manana discovered that at Alex's nursery the caregivers had been teaching them a few words in sign language even before they taught them how to speak, and that all along Alex had been giving the sign language word for "more" by pressing together the fingertips from both of her hands together.

Her next "More!" elicited even bigger guffaws. In the Sabbath tradition, everyone at the table replies with a chorus of "Amen!" when the head of each family at the gathering holds a silver goblet of wine, blesses the grapevine, takes several sips and passes on the goblet to his wife, who also sips the wine and passes it to her children, in order of seniority. Everyone in our family likes the sweet Italian Muscat wine Bartenura, with a 5% alcohol content. After saying the blessing, Edwin sipped the wine and passed the goblet to Claire, who passed it to her daughter. Alexandra, who had already observed the others doing this, instantly downed the rest of the wine and declared, "More!" Everyone found this hilarious, and Gabriel, who was standing next to her, quickly poured a little more wine in the goblet, which she immediately gulped down as well.



"More!"

At subsequent gatherings, it was Edwin who poured his daughter more wine to general merriment, but after a few weeks the parents thought better of it and put an end to this entertainment.

Alexandra turned out to be a wonderful child. From the moment she was born, her happy mother and father knew no sleepless nights. The little one sleeps peacefully from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. behind the doors of her cozy bedroom, hardly ever waking in the middle of the night.

The first thing her parents taught their daughter was to say “hello”.

In Italy, in the mountains of Tuscany, there is a cozy villa called «Agriturismo La Petraia», which has a small hotel, a restaurant and a farm. It belongs to Mr. Michael Grant, the co-owner of the finance firm for which Edwin works in Toronto. The villa in Tuscany has a large office space, and Mr. Grant spends several months every year in Italy where he maintains regular communication with his Toronto office. Employees can also have a work retreat in Italy—that is, spend several weeks at the villa with their families while working at the office there.

In July 2012, Edwin and Claire went for such a work retreat with 15-month-old Alexandra. No ticket was



20 months...

needed for her. In the hope that the airline would give them a special bassinet for the toddler, the parents made sure to get seats in the front row immediately behind the wall that separates the toilets from the cabin. However, the Air Canada flight attendant told them: “Your child is too big. She might roll out of the bassinet when you fall asleep, so we can’t give you one. You’ll have to hold her in your lap.”

And so, for the duration of the seven-hour flight to Italy, Claire held her daughter in her lap, hoping she would finally fall asleep. But no such luck! Everything around Alexandra was new to her. She had never yet been put to sleep in her mother’s lap—but that’s a minor detail. She had never yet had so many «guests» in her bedroom! What’s more, many of them gave their sweet little fellow traveler friendly smiles as they passed by. In response, the obviously bewildered girl greeted each passenger who passed by with a loud “Hello!”, remaining wide awake the entire time. Taken by surprise, the passengers would return to their seats and exchange impressions before going back to sleep: “*What a sweet, friendly child!*” You should have seen Claire’s face when, many days after her return to Toronto, one of us would ask half-jokingly, “*How did your flight to Italy go?*”



Happy Birthday—2 years!

She receives her first letter...



In March 2013, when little Alexandra was not yet two, her parents decided to take her with them to Jamaica. They flew from Toronto to Montego Bay and went to passport control. Edwin handed in the three passports while Claire was standing by with their daughter in her arms. The border control agent took each passport and stamped it with the date of arrival, picking up the youngest visitor's passport last.

—*What is your name?*—he asked suddenly, not expecting an answer.

—*Alexandra Rott!*—the little tourist replied clearly. The Jamaican border control agent just stared at her, eyes and mouth wide open. In fact, she had learned this a long time ago at the nursery, where the teachers had been saying from day one, “Alexandra Rott’s cot,” “Alexandra Rott’s locker.” But Mommy Claire had not known until that moment that her daughter, not yet two, could say her name. The surprise made her burst into laughter. “*Come along—I have no more questions!*”—said their stunned Jamaican «host».

The happy family quickly reached their hotel where they got a room on the ground floor. The front wall of the room had large sliding glass doors behind which the calm ocean was shining in the bright sun. Overjoyed, all three quickly changed into bathing suits; the little future swimmer had her arms outfitted with inflated lifesaver pads. Having opened the doors, the happy parents stepped out on the beach, leading their daughter by the hands, and walked toward the ocean in the hot sand. Suddenly, a loud wail made everyone on the beach shudder:

—*Monkey’s hat!*

No force in magical Jamaica was capable of stopping the inconsolable wailing of Alexandra Rott except for the «skill» of her parents, who immediately

returned to their hotel room with their daughter and decorated her head with that same irreplaceable woolen cap with the red pompom...

And one more excerpt from my diaries:
—*Children, look what we brought you today!*—said the teachers at Alexandra's nursery and put a colorful Russian matryoshka nesting doll on the table in front of the kids. "*Do you know what this is?*"

—*Mat-ryosh-ka*,—Alexandra Rott spoke out confidently. The teachers gaped at her. How could they know that just two weeks earlier, when our granddaughter had her second birthday, Iya and I gave her a matryoshka doll which Alex immediately learned to take apart into five component dolls and which she has been taking with her to bed ever since....



Jamaica. Ready to swim in the ocean...



Celebrating Baba Iya's 75'th birthday.

In early June, we celebrated Baba Iya's 75th birthday. Our family and guests, thirty altogether, gathered in a small restaurant on Eglinton Avenue. The warm and cozy atmosphere was broken up only once by a tearful outburst from Alexandra Katherine. Her mother quickly neutralized it by giving the child an iPad, which she handles with enviable skill and uses persistently and often, obviously preferring it to a hundred other wonderful children's toys in the house.



"I-Pad".

Recently, Claire told us this story:

—*It's almost eight, time to put the child to bed. I loudly announce: Alexandra! "Milk time!"*

—*Oh no, mommy!—replies the family's pride and joy.—No «Milk time»—«iPad time!»*

October 16, 2013, Toronto

P.S. While I was writing the next chapter of this book a year and a half had passed. In my diary I found a couple of entries regarding the rearing of our youngest granddaughter. I will share them with the readers:

"February 22, 2014. Today was a normal Saturday. Baba Iya was ready and very well prepared. Ilona was in Italy, Ada in Montreal, Claire stayed home to do some housework—every evening they both come home from work late, bring their daughter home, and the day is nearly over—all of the rest came for lunch. Of course the blossoming Alexandra Katherine was the centre of attention. She is most in love with Serena and Gabriel. She is growing up very fast. She was already able to reach the chocolate on the kitchen table, but right away went over to ask her dad—what would he say?... Edwin wrapped the chocolate up in a serviette "let's take it home, mommy will tell us how much you can have."

Slowly her character is appearing. A couple of weeks ago all three of them came for lunch, the parents told us this «episode», Claire gave her daughter a piece of cake into her mouth. Alex immediately took it out and threw it on the floor. Her mom saw this and was very upset, even to the point of tears... Edwin immediately put his daughter into «timeout» in the corner. She stood steadfastly silent, no intention of apologizing, but after a bit she needed to go

“pee pee”. Even at our house, when the parents were telling us about this episode, Claire’s eyes were glistening sadly.

And here is another episode. This Saturday, when their family was getting ready to leave Alex «rebelled» against her normal custom of giving hugs to each of her numerous relatives. She was starting to give out embraces but then changed her mind. Manana was the last one to receive a hug before Alex «changed her mind», when it was Baba Iya’s turn Alex flat out refused... I have a sore left knee, and Edwin gave me a lift to the synagogue for the evening service. I told my son that Baba Iya will put on a brave face, but the hurt will remain in her heart... and if someone asks her: “How is your little one?” then Iya will no longer break into a heartwarming smile and effusive praise but will simply remain silent.

After Shabbat, I came home in my car and heard from Iya:

—About twenty minutes after you left I heard a knock at the door. I opened it and there stood Alexandra and Edwin. The little one smiles and says: “Baba, I am very sorry!”

Edwin told me that after I got out of the car he talked with his daughter:



New Years, 2014.

ALEXANDRA KATHERINE



Ballet lessons. 2015.

—*Alex, I am very sad that you hurt my mother so badly... she is always preparing soup and noodles (pasta) and compote for you... and you were so mean to her... we need to go back and you need to say sorry to Baba.*

—*“No!”—came the resolute response from our future generation. But two minutes later, at the intersection of Marlee and Glencairn, she said to her father:—“Let’s go back... I want to say sorry and give her a hug!”*

Chapter 12

NUGZARI AND GIYA

How swiftly time flies! My wife Iya and I usually keep close track of important family dates, but this time... This time, we were surprised by an early morning call from our daughter Ilona: "*It's the first of June! Sandor and Manana's twentieth wedding anniversary! Happy anniversary, everyone!*"

We were chagrined by our memory lapse, but no one was as surprised as Manana: "*Deda! This isn't like you at all! How could you forget such a thing?*" There were many other events and anniversaries around that time, which is why the Manana-Sandor date completely slipped our minds.

It's difficult to imagine that today, our family would have found as much energy or resourcefulness as we did in late 1992 and early 1993. Back then, we were able to mobilize and join our forces to carry out an amazing project: to find a young woman who could become our daughter and our eldest son's wife.

I try to find the right word to describe that unforgettable event: An idea... A fantasy.... A project... A dream... A battle... An adventure... An exodus... An epic... A vision... Not one of those words fully reveals the meaning of the miracle that happened. Nonetheless, I prefer "The Project."

The incredible events of those days are recounted in detail in *The Joy of Discovery*, the second book of my memoirs, in the chapter "Manana." This time, I want to tell more about two unexpected and dependable helpers who came through for us when we needed them most to help our Project come true. They are Nugzar Beniashvili and Giya Kobilashvili.

It all started with a suggestion from Mama Iya, who said to me, "*When Abraham was old, he dispatched a servant to the land of his fathers to find a bride for Isaac, Rivka. Maybe we should try the same thing. Ask Boris Beniashvili if he knows another girl like Inga back in Georgia who could be right for our Sandor...*"

After that, things snowballed. Borya made calls to Tbilisi, found a suitable girl—Manana, the daughter of his cousin Dodik (David Davitashvili)—and invited her to come to Toronto for a visit. Of course, parents and daughter alike rejected that idea... After that answer, I asked Borya to find out if the young woman's parents would agree to have us come over and visit them in Tbilisi for a couple of days. I must admit that it was a while before we were able to get Sandor's approval for such a journey...

It was late 1992. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia too was facing chaos and want. Almost teetering on the brink of civil war, the young nation was getting used to independence. Traveling there now required a visa. In order to obtain one, Dodik asked us to send our photos. Back in those days, faxing was the most accessible method of communication. I wish the reader could see our pathetic photos delivered by fax; they gave Manana's entire family quite a scare.

—*Borya, who are these people, anyway?*” Dodik inquired apprehensively. *“Are they even Jewish? She looks Kazakh, or Mongolian...”*

Boris reassured them as best he could. They, in turn, asked him to keep the whole thing a secret. It was out of the question for anyone in Georgia to find out about our visit—let alone to find out that we had come over for match-making purposes and gone back. At the same time, Borya asked his brother Nugzari, who lived in Tbilisi, to give us a proper welcome and help us in any way he could.

We got word from Georgia that we should use Air Georgia, the recently launched airline that operated flights between Frankfurt and Tbilisi. When I called the company, a man with a heavy Georgian accent answered. He explained that there were flights from Frankfurt once a week, every Friday at 7 p.m. He put our names on the passenger list, but warned us that there was no advance booking of tickets and that airfare had to be paid in cash just before departure.

At this point, I'll quote an excerpt from *The Joy of Discovery*:

“Tbilisi, November 1, 1992. It's long past midnight. Iya is trying to get some sleep, but I can't sleep. I feel the need to write down at least something about the great swirl of events happening around us...”

“My G-d! To think that we're in Georgia!”

First, a few words about our arrival. On Friday after lunch, we arrived in Frankfurt. After taking Galina to her terminal, from which she took a Lufthansa flight to Moscow, we went to the information desk to find out about boarding for Air Georgia, but the women at the desk shrugged helplessly: they had never even heard of such an airline. I did not lose my presence of mind: I still had enough Soviet-style logic to realize that the people at the information desk have only the information they are given.

We started asking the airport security personnel. One of them looked at our passports and told us that we needed to go to the American Airlines counter, where Georgia-bound passengers usually gathered. We headed there at once, but it was still early and that area of the terminal was empty.

By 6 p.m., potential passengers had started to arrive. We had already seen some of them while waiting in other areas of the terminal. At 6:30, the door behind the counter opened, and a young man with a briefcase came out. He was immediately surrounded by the more aggressive passengers who started handing him money. The agent checked their names against his list, took the money

and put it in the briefcase. At some point I was able to push my way through to the front of the crowd. He found us on the list. All of our traveling companions were very pushy and spoke Georgian. We stood out in this crowd, and they mostly kept away from us. The passengers grew very loud when, after 9 p.m., the agent announced that the plane's arrival was delayed. By midnight, a hush of tense anticipation had fallen over the crowd...

Later, during the flight, one of the Georgians who did engage us in conversation told us about the cause of the delay. It turned out that the regular arrangement under which the flight from Tbilisi usually landed on a military air base in Sochi where the soldiers refueled the plane for cash had not worked for some reason. The pilots had managed to make arrangements with the Turks, and they had to fly to Istanbul for refueling.

But what a flight it was! First of all, in the absence of boarding passes or assigned seats, the people with the sharpest elbows were the first to board. The plane was filthy, with no water in the toilet. "No smoking" and "fasten your seatbelts" signs lit up, but no one paid any attention to them. People were talking loudly, standing in the aisle and walking around. Many were smoking, or holding open wine bottles and glasses. Four people were "visiting" with the pilots in the pilots' cabin. When our fellow passengers learned that we were "Russian Canadians" on our first trip to Georgia, I was forced to drink a full glass of Georgian red wine as my "key to Tbilisi."

Several people, one after another, expressed curiosity as to whom we were visiting in Tbilisi. I replied that we were going to see a friend, David Davitashvili. I already knew that Manana's father was a well-known watchmaker in Tbilisi, known to the entire city; but the cover story had to be maintained, and so I hemmed and hawed and told them I wasn't sure what my friend did, which left people puzzled and suspicious...

By the end of the flight, we started getting worried: Who was going to meet us at the airport? How would we recognize each other? The flight arrived in Tbilisi with a seven-hour delay. After a rather peculiar baggage pickup, in which passengers had to take down their own luggage from the back of a truck, someone came up to me from behind, touched my shoulder and asked, "*Vladimir?*" I turned around and saw an elderly gray-haired man. "*Dodik?*" I asked, and then we clasped each other in an embrace.

We were immediately approached by another man who turned out to be Nugzari Beniashvili, Boris's brother. They had spent the entire night at the airport, worrying and wondering why the flight was so late. We got into the Lada that was waiting for us; Nugzari's friend Giya, his chauffeur and bodyguard, sat at the wheel. He too greeted us with a warm smile. A few minutes later we learned that Giya was a major on the police force; he had a handgun on his belt and an automatic rifle lying on the front seat. At that time, chaos and disorder in Georgia was probably at its worst since the fall of the USSR.

After leaving the airport, we found ourselves in pitch-black darkness—not one light anywhere. A few minutes later, two men emerged from the darkness and stood in front of our car, each pointing a rifle straight at us. They came closer. Recognizing “our” major, they bowed courteously, smiled, and allowed us to go on our way.

Several times, we saw strange-looking large crowds by the roadside in the dim morning light. Nugzari explained that these people were waiting for a bus or hitchhiking to get to work; yet another throng, he said, was a bread line waiting for the bakery to open.”



Getting acquainted with the Georgian table: David, Iya, Manana, Svetlana, Gia and Nugzari. Tbilisi. November 2, 1992.

A full account of our meeting with Manana and her family, of their amazing Georgian hospitality, of our “bride-show” with its excitement and tears, and of the many other things that made our “Project” so joyful and unforgettable, can be found in the above mentioned chapter in *The Joy of Discovery*.

In the years that have passed since then, I have met with Nugzari Beniashvili and his lovely wife Nana many times. In 1995, they moved to Israel where they now live in the town of Naharia; they have found good jobs, and adore their granddaughter. Nugzari, who’s got quite a head on his shoulders, started his career in his new country as a simple worker—and rose to head of production for an Israeli firm that manufactures equipment for the pharmaceutical industry.



Manana Davitashvili and Iya Rott. Tbilisi. 1992.



Walking through Tbilisi: Nugzari, Vladimir, Rabbi Moshe Janashvili—Uncle Eteri Beniashvili, David Davitashvili, Iya and Manana.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of our unusual first meeting, Nugzari told me many interesting things, which I recorded in my notes.

—Nugzari, can you tell me more about your friend Giya, the one who came with you to the Tbilisi airport in October 1992 when you picked us up?



Visiting Nugzari and Nana in Nahariya.

—Sure, Volodya! Major Giya Kobilashvili was a good friend of mine. In 1987 I used to take my son Gocha to a Georgian folk dancing school. Giya used to bring his little daughter Ketis to that school, and that's how we got to know each other. After getting a degree in law from the University of Tbilisi, he started working as a police detective. Unfortunately, in 2000, Giya was killed at the age of 45; he gave his life to the cause of bringing law and order to a new independent Georgia.

At that point, in 1992, he helped us out big time. My brother Borya asked me to give you whatever support I could during your visit. It was a dangerous time, no one was willing to come with me to the airport. We didn't tell you anything back then, didn't want to scare you... That night Giya was at a wedding. That's where I got him and asked him for help.

First, he and I mapped out all the roads we needed to take. He didn't come to the airport alone; he had a squad of five other men with him. They guarded us at the airport. They had two cars. When we got into my car, Giya signaled his guys, and for some time they drove sometimes in front of us, sometimes behind us. Then they left. Giya raced the car at top speed. Otherwise, who knows how things would have turned out..."

—Nugzari, what time did Giya arrive at the airport with his men? I remember that our flight to Tbilisi was seven hours late. You and Dodik waited at the airport all night.

—That's the thing, the guys came with us, around 11 p.m., and sat there patiently till morning waiting for your flight to arrive, and I was upset that they were wasting so much time because of us...

—What do you know about Giya's family?

—His mama, Ana, is still alive. She lives in a village called Norio, with the family of her youngest son, David, who is now also deceased. Giya's wife, Manana Kakhabrishvili, lives in Tbilisi with her daughter Ketik, who is now 31. The daughter graduated from the Shota Rustaveli College of Arts, she specializes in art therapy. Giya's son Zviadi, 29 years old, has followed in his father's footsteps. He also got a degree in law from the University of Tbilisi and became a detective on staff with the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

—Nugzari, back then you chauffeured us around Tbilisi for two days. Was there any kind of security tailing us then, too?

—No, we didn't have any security. Giya kept calling me several times a day and offering help, but I refused.

—Nugzari, I'll never forget how, the first morning we stayed at Dodik's place, when we were asked to join them at the table, you appeared in the doorway out of breath and carrying two long baguettes. Thank you for that, once again!

—Yes, that morning a friend of mine helped me buy bread directly from the bread factory! No such luck the next day. That was a hard time; it was virtually impossible to buy bread. People would line up outside bread shops at dawn and sometimes the line would turn into a melee.

Here's how I managed to get bread on the second day of your stay at Dodik's. I went to the bread store early in the morning. Huge throng of people, the line's about a hundred meters long, everyone is looking irritable and tired, and the bread hasn't been delivered yet. I ran home and put on my best suit, a white shirt, and a tie, picked up my briefcase and went back to the store. Just then, they were opening the gates to let the bread delivery truck through. So I come up to the gates, take a deep breath and shouted in a commanding voice, "I'm from the city government! We're going to let the women and children go first! Then everyone else, in order of the line!" There were two security guards, both armed, standing at the gates. I told them to stay next to me the whole time. Then I went up to the counter and made the announcement again. People were afraid of commanders... They started letting the women and kids through, while the others waited patiently. Many people openly thanked me. I asked to see the store manager, a middle-aged woman came out. I explained the situation to her, in the same authoritative voice. At once, she said loudly, "I think that for such help, the man from city government should also get a loaf of bread without standing in line!" And that's how I got you bread for your second breakfast...

And another memory from Nugzari:

—When Manana was leaving for Moscow where she was going to catch the flight to Toronto, I was the one who drove them to the Tbilisi Airport in my car. Suddenly, Dodik asked me:

—Nugzari, what do you think of Vladimir?

—I thought about it and replied, 'My brother Borya said to receive him like a brother! That's all I can say about them.'



Nugzari, Boris and Tsiala Beniasvili with their loved ones at the wedding of Gia Gogadze and Irma Beniasvili—the daughter of Nugzari and Nana. Ashdod, Israel. 2005.

And the result is that Sandor and Manana have a beautiful, close-knit family and have been together for twenty years! Their beautiful daughter Audrey is starting classes at Queen's University in Kingston in September, while "our little Georgian," her 17-year-old brother Gabriel, is graduating from high school this year. He has already outgrown his parents and is a head taller than all of his nearest relatives.

Meanwhile, my literary labors were pleasantly rewarded with a letter from a woman in Sri Lanka. Here is a part of it:

"Dear Mr. Rott:

I read both volumes of your memoirs with great interest. I am a doctor by profession, my husband is a doctor too. This year, our only son also became a doctor. I enjoyed the book very much, but the chapter, 'Manana,' struck a particular chord. My husband and I were quite worried because our 20-year-old son doesn't seem to be interested in girls... We had no idea what to do. Well, now we know!"

Toronto, July 2013

Chapter 13

OMUL

This word has appeared in my tales before. Omul is the name of a rare species of fish found only in one unique, magical body of water: Lake Baikal. The local Siberian population knows and loves this delicious fish, and passengers on the Transsiberian railroad have long made it famous far and wide in every corner of Russia. Mention “*stinky’ pickled omul with boiled potatoes*” to a Russian, and most people will immediately break out in a big, beaming grin. For ages and ages, and until recent Soviet times, locals at every train station near the Baikal would rush to the railway cars as soon as the train pulled to a stop and offer the passengers boiled potatoes and omul. The prices were moderate, and the passengers were hungry. Salted fish always goes well with the invariable glass of vodka that gets downed in fairly large quantities on the road. It is, after all, a long journey... Today, rapid trains cover the distance between Moscow and Vladivostok in eleven days; in my student years, that trip took fifteen full days.

“Stinky omul” refers to a special way of pickling the fish, which gives it the peculiar odor of food gone slightly bad. This is the type of pickling that’s especially popular with most people in the Baikal region. The beautiful, silvery white fish normally weighs about a kilo and is about 40 centimeters long. But today, when our friends complain about unbridled poaching, omul is usually caught before it’s fully grown, so it’s virtually impossible to buy it in its regular size.

I first heard the word *omul* when I brought my beautiful wife Iya into our family. Missing her mother, Ulan-Ude, and Lake Baikal, Iya would often sigh, “Oh, omul...”, “Mmm, omul...”, “How I’d love some omul!” (Of course, in retrospect we know we know that our firstborn, Sandor, was conceived right away, and the future mama could have really used some pickled fish. Back then, however, Mama Regina and I didn’t really understand my wife’s cravings...) Fortunately, she didn’t have to wait long. Within a month, a package arrived from Ulan Ude: Iya’s mother Rakhil Solomonovna had lovingly sent her some omul.

I have never lived in Hungary but have been there many times. Starting with my first trips there as a Soviet engineer, plus for the duration of forty years of life in Canada where I have run into children of the land of Kossuth

and Liszt almost every day, I have never managed to figure out whether or not Hungarians like or even eat salted or pickled fish, or at least herring. I have never seen herring at the homes of any of my numerous kinfolk in Budapest. At modern Hungarian hotels in recent years, they have served several different kinds of herring for breakfast, but they are ordered only by guests from abroad.

It was not an easy decision to bring smoked salmon—sliced and beautifully vacuum-packed—from Toronto to Hungary for the first time. We solemnly presented it to our regular driver and helper Gábor Bordás and his wife Anikó, at whose place her sister Ilona Kercsi spends almost all of her spare time, as a token of gratitude for all the good things they have done. The reader remembers how close these people have been to us—starting with the construction of the Memorial in the village of Garadna, when the twin sisters were just ten years old, and through the compilation of the genealogical tree of Hermann Spielberg's descendants and equally important family events that took place on Hungarian soil. On the last day of our two-week stay in that country, these masters of Hungarian cooking invited us to their home for a traditional dinner. Everything was going wonderfully; but when we asked how they liked the smoked salmon, our hosts exchanged somewhat sheepish looks, and finally Gábor made a frank confession: "*What were we supposed to do with it? We didn't know. We put it in the oven, baked it... It was really no good.*" Of course Iya and I were chagrined, but we didn't stop there...

On our next trip to Hungary, we gave the exact same present to our wonderful friend, our "banker and concert guide," Éva Orosz. You should have seen how joyfully she exclaimed, "*Lazanc!*" (i.e. salmon). She accepted our gift, and a week later told us that she had thrown together a special lunch for her friends, who greatly enjoyed the salmon sandwiches and sent us their sincere and generous compliments. Meanwhile, in Toronto, every Saturday after the service at our synagogue, all the members of our community have a glass or more of whiskey, cognac or vodka and enthusiastically devour schmaltz herring, or smoked herring in oil. Many of them can trace their origins—recent or distant—to the country whose emblem might as well bear the famous *Soup Guljas* and *Csirke Paprikas*... So, do Hungarians love herring or not?

And now, back to May 1961.

Iya brought the package with omul home from the post office. She waited for me to come home from work, and together we held the grand ceremony of the opening of the package. The smell that wafted from it made Iya smile. I merely "made note of it." Meanwhile, "her imperial and dictatorial majesty of my youth," Mama Regina, immediately grabbed the box of omul and put it out on the balcony. The verdict was clear: she was not going to tolerate the smell of "putrid fish" in "her" home.

True, we generally didn't buy salted fish, but at that point, my mother's gesture came across to me as little more than an expression of hostility to the young woman who had "stolen away her son." And to think that in those days, we still had fresh memories of postwar Soviet days when our family, like our neighbors in the barracks, rejoiced if we got anchovies on our rationing cards. The tiny fish, no more than 7-8 centimeters long, was delivered in large wooden barrels where it was mixed with lumps of salt. We would rip off the head with our fingers and gladly eat up the anchovy, innards and all.

In 2004, our entire Canadian family, with children and grandchildren, made the unforgettable journey to the Russian and Belarusian cities that we hold so dear. During our visit to Lake Baikal, our Buryat-Mongol friends organized a superb dinner, dominated by the best kinds of omul prepared in a variety of ways: hot-smoked, cold-smoked, fried, lightly pickled, baked in a pie... The table was decorated with a metal tray on which there lay a large stuffed pike with a huge head and an open mouth. This feast in a humble restaurant on Lake Baikal was one of the highlights of that magical tour. But not one of our five grandchildren, whose ages then ranged from eight to twelve, tried a single one of the dishes. They returned to Ulan-Ude hungry and admitted to their parents, *"That big fish head on the tray had such scary eyes we were afraid to take anything from the table..."*

I cannot say enough about the role of Taisiya Chernykh and her husband Pyotr in Iya's and my visit to Mysovaya (Cape) Station. Not only did this visit reveal previously unknown events from the past to our family, but my story about this unusual town on Lake Baikal, published in three languages, was warmly received by readers. New plans began to form.

To show our appreciation, Iya and I invited the Chernykh's to visit Hungary, see some of the notable sites of my ancestral land, and take part in the presentation of the Hungarian edition of *Mysovaya Station*.

After overcoming a number of unexpected obstacles, our "Mysovites" got a green light for the flight to Budapest. I warned them twice, *"Travel light! Iya and I don't need any gifts for ourselves. Travel with half-empty suitcases, which you can fill up in Hungary with some things that could be useful to you. We'll introduce you to many of our friends, so if you want to give them a good present, the best thing would be some kind of Siberian souvenir—for instances, chocolates in boxes decorated with Buryat-Mongol motifs."* Taisya promised to bring a dozen boxes...

After the joyful meeting at the Budapest airport, when we boarded the minibus Gábor had rented, we noticed that the Siberians' suitcases were filled to capacity. Three hours later, we made it to northern Hungary and settled at the nice motel in the town of Forro, next to Garadna and Enc (already familiar to my readers). *"We're staying here only two nights, so there's no need to unpack," I suggested. "Just wash up a little, and in ten minutes we'll go down to the restaurant for dinner."*

It wasn't even two minutes before there was a knock on the door of the motel room Iya and I occupied. The Chernykh's stood at our door, beaming and holding a small authentic wooden barrel with steel hoops.

—This is our gift to you—Baikal omul! Our son Valentin managed to buy it in Irkutsk!

After a moment of joy, Iya and I were sobered and even scared by the magnitude of the problem we were now facing: **OMUL from Baikal, net weight 2.5 kilos, Maloe Sea variety, salted, uncut. Store for 3 months at temperatures -4 C to -8 C. WARNING: Long-term storage at subzero temperatures only. Do not turn on the side. BAIKAL PRODUCT Company.**

“What are we going to do with it? We can't eat it here in Hungary, and there isn't even anyone here to eat it with us. If we give it to someone else, we will offend our Siberian guests for life and for no good reason. They won't let us bring it back to Canada—it's fresh fish. They'll confiscate it at customs... Besides, how can we transport this barrel in a suitcase without turning it on the side? And where are we going to keep it frozen for two weeks?”

It was a real cause for concern, but our desire to serve this souvenir at our Saturday family dinner in Toronto grew stronger and stronger. Ilona Kercsi, who met us in Forro, agreed to take the barrel home to Encs and store it in her freezer for two days. From there, our “treasure” migrated to the minibus when, after Garadna, we set out early in the morning for a cross-country trip to the south of Lake Balaton.

We were to spend the next three nights at the four-star Europa Fit hotel in the town of Heviz, and there was little hope of storing our barrel in a refrigerator. From the moment we got on the road, our driver, Gábor, started grumbling, *“It smells already... Who's going to eat this? Let's throw it out!”* I did my best to convince him that he was wrong. Then, Gábor made a sudden turn off the Miskolc-Balaton freeway and headed straight for Budapest, to the house where he lives—where he cleverly found our barrel a home in his own freezer. That was where the omul “hibernated” for the remainder of our stay in Hungary.

On the day of our departure, Gábor arrived at our hotel at half past five in the morning and proudly and solemnly handed our “baby” over to us—the omul which we had, by then, completely forgotten. Iya carefully wrapped the barrel in several layers of plastic bags and hid it in our largest suitcase in a pile of dirty laundry...

Of course, we had some nerve-racking moments by the baggage carousel at the Toronto airport—but fortunately, the familiar fellow in uniform with the doggie trained to sniff out forbidden food in passengers' luggage were busy somewhere else just then...

To store the barrel of omul, we turned on the backup fridge that usually stands unplugged in our basement.

“What luck! We’ve actually brought it home! But what are we going to do with it now? Maybe it’s not worth the risk... The barrel traveled from Irkutsk to Moscow with no refrigeration... and then to Budapest... And then all the time spent waiting for boarding... It’s a little scary. We won’t serve it to the kids. But maybe we’ll try it ourselves?”

One evening, we invited the most experienced “fisherman” in our circle—my old friend Marat Gertzovich, along with his wife Lina—for the “trial by fire.” We unpacked the wrappings to find a nice-looking, elegantly crafted little barrel: curved pieces of good-quality wood held together by two steel hoops. The lid was carved from a single piece of wood and opened easily. The fish in the barrel turned out to be inside a tied plastic bag. Of course, that’s made for a souvenir. Usually, salted fish is kept directly in the barrel.

What surprised us most was that the fish was quite small, no more than twenty centimeters each. The smell was quite manageable. I got two omuls out of the bag. Marat set about skinning and cleaning them with the skill of a pro, assuring us that the content of the barrel was quite edible. He took the first bite, which emboldened us to do likewise. The fish was delicious, but there wasn’t much. We didn’t get out any more.

And then the waiting began. Everything went well, with no ill effects...

Two weeks later, Iya invited not only the Gertzoviches but two other immigrant couples, close friends of ours, for “omul tasting.” Marat and Lina came early and masterfully cleaned six little fish. The boiled potatoes were still steaming when our guests were finishing off their pieces of the Baikal souvenir, praising it to the skies. Only after that did Iya serve the soup.

Now, we were seized with an irresistible urge to feed the rest of the omul to its closest “family”—our children and grandchildren. But this turned out to be easier said than done. Iya wanted the entire family at the table, but we just couldn’t make it work: first our granddaughter Ada couldn’t come over from Montreal, then Ilona was away, then Serena was ill, then...



*Iya with a gift from friends from Baikal.
Toronto, 2013.*

Here's how it went. The Chernykhs brought the omul to Hungary in April. I write this on Sunday, September 8. Yesterday, nearly the entire family was able to gather for the Sabbath dinner. The day before, Iya cleaned the remaining three fish, attractively laid them out on a plate under rings of juicy white onion, soaked in sunflower seed oil.

—*Children! Finally, I have lived to see the day when I can treat you all to real omul from Lake Baikal!*” Iya announced solemnly—and then the bowl of steaming hot potatoes arrived, followed by the plate with slices of omul.

“On command,” each person at the table took a piece of omul and started eating it conscientiously with top-quality potatoes...

Not a single face expressed so much as a flicker of enthusiasm...

“Bastards!”

September 2013

Chapter 14

THE YANKELEVICH CHOCOLATE

One of the presentations of my book, *The Joy of Discoveries*, in Israel was held on December 21, 2010 in the town of Kiryat Yam. As we were getting ready for the event in the auditorium of the Immigrants' Club on Tabor Street, Iya and I were setting up the books when an elderly couple came in—they were the first to arrive—and rushed straight toward us.

—Hello, dearest Vadim and Iya!—they greeted us loudly and warmly.

At once we found ourselves in their embrace. Then, straining to remember, I said candidly,

—I'm sorry, but I can't remember where we've met?

—You don't know us! We've never met! But we 'devoured' both of your books with such pleasure!" This admission was followed by a stream of compliments. "We've brought you a box of chocolates—it's for your grandson Gabriel.

—Many thanks! We have five grandchildren—this will be a treat for all of them.

—No, no—we want you to give it to Gabriel. We were so deeply moved by the story of how he offered to pay for his sister's ballet lessons!

Yes, my new fans—Oscar and Lyuba Yankelevich, formerly of Kharkov—had been really paying attention when reading my memoirs! They even remembered this excerpt from my diaries:

"September 7, 2003. Audrey (8 years old) attends a children's ballet school, which has Russian teachers. The other day, the school director announced that weekly lessons are being canceled and from now on the school will only offer lessons four times a week—obviously, at higher cost. The parents held a family council at which Manana said:

—Audrey, if you want to take ballet, I'm willing to pay for four lessons a week, but then we'll have to drop swimming, karate and skiing lessons. We don't have enough money to pay for all that.

The lengthy silence that followed was suddenly interrupted by Gabriel (7 years old), who was lying on the couch nearby.

—Audrey, if you want to take ballet—I got a lot of money for Hanukkah, I can pay for you.

Manana said their son's offer just took their breath away."

We brought the box of chocolates back to Toronto and, on the nearest Saturday, handed it to Gabriel, who opened it at once and, like a true gentleman, shared it with all of us as his parents watched proudly. I immediately called the Yanklevich's in Israel and told them about the "fate" of their sweet gift.

Last year, I did another presentation at the same Russian-Speaking Readers' Club in Kiryat Yam—this time, for *Mysovaya Station*. When I saw Oscar and Lyuba's beaming faces in the audience, I made a small detour to tell the story of their chocolates and introduce my heroes. A big round of applause got them on their feet. It was a wonderful moment.

I write this in the summer of 2013. Gabriel will turn seventeen in October; our beloved "Georgian" is already the tallest in our family, at nearly six feet tall. In late May, we found out that Gabriel's parents had given him a big present: he was joining a group of 150 Toronto high school students for a six-week tour of Israel.

Then, I got a burst of inspiration. "That's great! What a stroke of luck! Gabriel has to meet the Yankeleviches and hand them a box of chocolates 'in response'! There'll be enough joy to spread around to all involved."

I weighed the possibilities for such a meeting. For Gabriel to leave the group even for a short time was out of the question. A few days later, I called my old friend Ari Safo in Israel.

—Ari, *I need your help. Our Gabriel is going to travel around Israel with a group of high school students. When they stay overnight somewhere close to your place, could you pick up the Yankeleviches in your car and take them to see my grandson? They live somewhere near you. You remember, they're the elderly couple with the chocolates. I'll need you to take a photo of the moment when Gabriel gives them a box of chocolates. I realize that the group will be under tight security to ensure that they're safe on their trip, but I'm sure they'll be allowed to meet with relatives in Israel.*

Gabriel and his friend Jessy in Toronto before flying to Israel.



—No problem,—Ari assured me.—I'll do it.

My "chocolate for chocolate" idea made Sandor's whole family smile. Then, Manana grew wary: *"What was this side trip being planned for her baby boy?"* I assure the parents that Gabriel wouldn't have to go anywhere: Ari Safro, whom they all knew, would bring the Yankeleviches to him in his car. The next day, Manana got in touch with the organizers of the Canadian trip and made inquiries.

—Deda, they told me that tour members will be allowed to meet with relatives in Israel, but they also warned me that the program is going to be very intensive—they'll be leaving on excursions every day right after breakfast. The only good time to see the kids is in the evening, after six, in the short time between their return from the day's excursion and dinner. The nearest point to Kiryat Yam will be their stop in a kibbutz not far from Lake Tiberias, where they plan to stay five nights. Gabriel will have to call the Safros from there and suggest a good day to meet.

Gabriel entered his email address in Israel into my computer, took the Safros' phone number with him, and left for his tour.

Then came the tense waiting. Our grandson was supposed to be at the kibbutz already. I started to get a bad feeling that my plan was going to fail...

I called the Safros. It was still early in the evening, but Sima, Ari's wife, unexpectedly told me, that "he's sleeping." I called again the next morning and heard my friend's uncertain reply:

—You know, Vadim, it's a forty-minute drive, and I don't feel great about driving at dusk... and besides, I'm supposed to pick up my grandson from kindergarten...

—Why didn't you tell me? We've already lost two days! Just take a cab and go! I'll come over in October and pay you back for everything.

A day later I received a copy of Gabriel's email to the Safros, the content of which was confusing and alarming: *"Uncle Ari, I'm not at the kibbutz during the day. We only get back from the excursions after 6 p.m. Gabriel."*

The next day's email left no doubt as to the outcome:

—Vadim, please tell Gabriel I can only come to see him during the day, between 2 and 3 p.m. Ari.

So the plan had fallen through! Of course I was very chagrined. I could only imagine how upset my grandson had to be, after he had so confidently assured me that he would definitely fulfill my request. The Canadian high school student had already left the kibbutz, visited the Golan Heights, and gone on to the Dead Sea, but I was still feeling bad for Gabriel. I wished I could reach him on the phone and say, *"Gabriel, forget about it! Don't feel*

bad—it's not worth it! It wasn't up to you... Besides, I already have another plan, for the Yankeleviches; I'll try to organize it when Baba Iya and I go to Israel in the fall."

Here's the "backup plan" I came up with. I really wanted to write a sweet story about the Yankeleviches' chocolates. It's too bad that I wasn't going to have a photo of Gabriel handing them the box. What a pity! But what if I got Gabriel's cousin Irakly to give it to them? That would make for a good shot!

Manana's sister Lyalya had moved from Georgia to Israel with her family several years earlier. Her son Irakly (Ika) had visited Toronto in the summer of 2010, and we all marveled at the resemblance between him and Gabriel. Of course I wasn't going to caption the photo, "*Gabriel gives the present...*" I could always come up with a more neutral caption that wouldn't draw the readers' attention to the issue: for instance, "*The astonished Yankeleviches receive their surprise gift.*"

Once I had envisioned such a turn of events, I decided to see what Irakly looked like now. I called Lyalya in Israel and asked for her son's mobile phone number. Irakly was at work—he has a temporary job at a sanitary products store—and was quite startled by my call. He told me he couldn't talk at the moment and asked me to call late at night, after work. I asked him if they had Skype, which I would "vastly prefer to use." That's what we agreed on.

It was already around 11 p.m. in Israel when Irakly appeared on my computer screen. I was actually taken aback for a moment: he looked so much like Gabriel! Then, after a short while, it was Irakly's turn to be surprised when I asked him to stand up. "Oh my G-d! He and Gabriel are almost the same height, too!"

Calmly and confidentially, I shared my troubles with Irakly. I told him about the Yankeleviches, the kind elderly couple from Kiryat Yam, and their gift to Gabriel; about our old family friend who had let us down after promising to help the Yankeleviches meet with Gabriel; about Gabriel's likely distress

Cousins: Gabriel Rott and Irakli Nanikashvili, 2014.



over not being able to carry out his promise to me... I concluded by asking Irakly to find time for me in the fall, when Iya and I visited Israel, so that I could get a cab and take him to Kiryat Yam to meet the Yankeleviches. Irakly heard me out and was understanding, but he wasn't sure we could plan so far ahead.

Irakly also told me that the high school students from Toronto would stay in Tel Aviv for their last week in Israel. Gabriel would be allowed to leave the group and spend the Sabbath with Irakly's family in Lod, as long as they brought him back to Tel Aviv to rejoin the group immediately after the end of Sabbath. Gabriel would also be allowed to stay with them two nights, Thursday and Friday.

Days were passing; I had no contact with Gabriel. Of course, I felt bad about burdening my "still fledgling" grandson with such a complicated mission, the failure of which was certain to upset him. Gabriel is, after all, a very soft-hearted and sensitive boy by nature, always ready to respond to a call for assistance. On Saturdays, he and Ilona's son Adam are always the first to help set the table for dinner at our place—ahead of all the girls—if Baba Iya hasn't set it yet.

When our children Sandor, Ilona and Edwin were young, Iya and I tried to refrain from bailing them out of difficult situations that required restraint, responsibility, quick thinking, and independence; but trying to instill the same qualities in our grandkids was nearly hopeless. Not only are we separated from them by the unbreakable wall of their parents; there's also the fact that boundless love for one's grandchildren dulls an oldster's will and persistence more than any of the ailments of old age...

Finally, the last week of the Toronto high schoolers' trip to Israel came. I decided that on Thursday night, when Gabriel arrived for his overnight stay with Irakly's family, I would call them and tell my grandson, "Gabriel, I know our plan has fallen through...but please don't feel bad about it! After all, we tried... And I already have another plan which I will put in motion in October when I come to Israel. Don't worry! We love you and we're waiting for your return to Toronto!"

But I did have another "*Grandpa Vladimir gene*" as a backup plan. I wasn't completely sure I would do this, but I was hoping to. If Gabriel started the conversation by expressing regret that he hadn't been able to hand over the chocolates, I would reassure him, tell him to forget about this failure and explain my plan for a "roundabout way." And then, I would say another thing: "*However, if I were you, as a Rott, I would take a taxi tomorrow morning, ask Ika to come with you, and visit the Yankeleviches in Kiryat Yam...*"

I really wanted to speak this line to Gabriel, but my dear grandson was ahead of me! I finally got through to them; Irakly's sister Irina picked up. She gave the phone to Gabriel, and instead of "Hello" or "How are you doing?", this is what I heard:

—*Deda! We're taking the train tomorrow morning!*—Gabriel declared confidently.

—*This is what you decided? You're going?*—I asked, not believing my ears.

—*Yes! Ika and I, we're both going.*

—*Well, thank you! You're a real Rott. This is a wonderful gift to me!*

I asked him to put Irakly on, thanked him for helping out, and told him:

—*Take a taxi! I'll pay for everything!*

He replied: "*Don't worry, Uncle Volodya! Everything will be fine!*"

Starting with that evening, it was another day of suspense and anxiety. "*The time difference with Israel is seven hours... They should be up by now... Who's going to drive them to the train station?... They should be in Kiryat Yam by now... And it's Friday! What time does Sabbath start? They're clever boys, surely they'll figure it out... I'm at the end of my patience. I should call, but... I'm afraid of some kind of 'surprise'...*"

At noon, Israel time, I finally decided to call the Yankeleviches. "*If the boys did make it, they've left by now. At least I'll get half the story...*" The merry voices of Oscar and Lyuba started with a complaint: "*We waited for them, we cooked all this food, both Russian and Georgian... served wine... but they just stayed twenty minutes and didn't touch anything, just had some juice. But what handsome young men! Such good kids! So kind! They've brought us so much joy... Thank you!*"

The day was drawing to a close when I called Irakly's mobile phone. "I'm sure Lyalya is annoyed that I 'ruined the boys' day...' It's already 4 p.m. Israeli time; if everything went well, they must be back." It was Gabriel who answered:

—*Hi, Deda!*

—*Gabriel! How did your trip go?*

—*Oh, we're still on the train... We've still got two hours to go!*

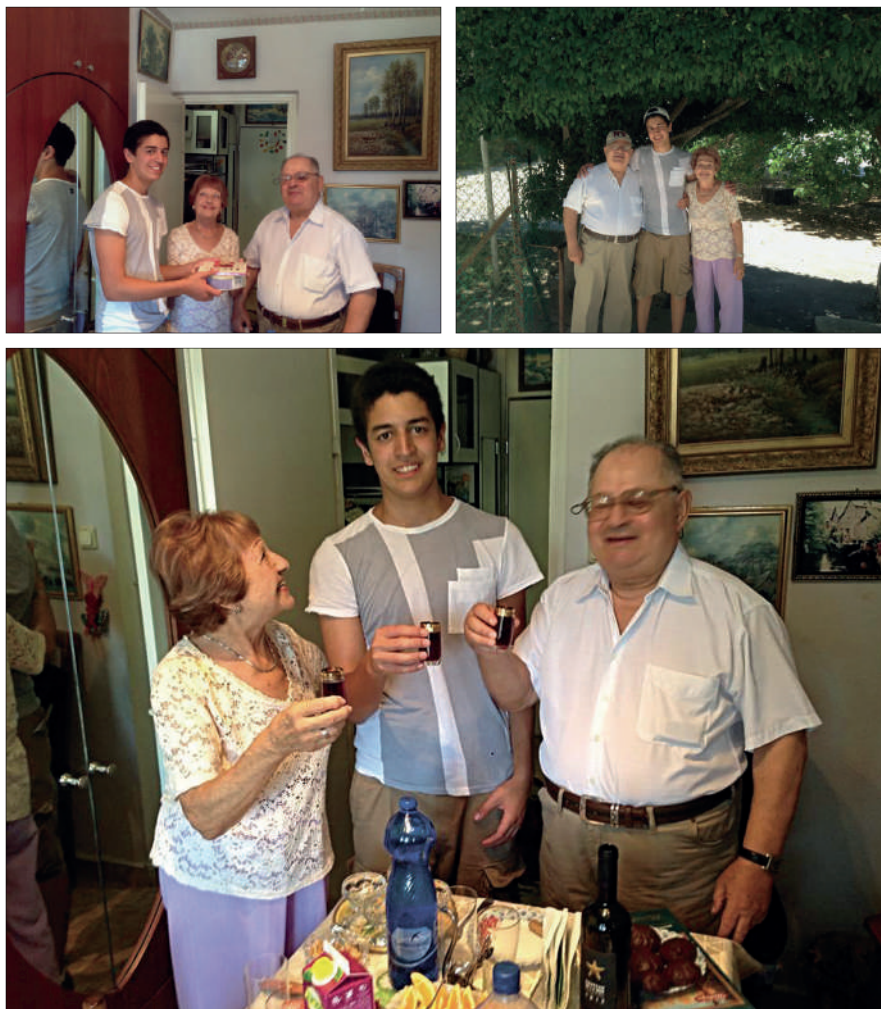
—*But where's Ika?*

—*He's sitting right next to me... Sleeping!*

Some time later, we found out about it in more detail.

Irakly:—*Our trip to Kiryat Yam went fine, but we were still late. And when we got there, we spent some time looking for a store to buy a box of chocolates.*

We thought it over carefully and decided that taking the train was the fastest way. It's Friday, everyone's in a rush... lots of car accidents... roadwork... We had to change buses twice in Kiryat Yam, and four times near Haifa... We didn't want to get a taxi, though—it would have been too expensive.



*Gabriel's meeting with Oscar and Lyuba Yankelevich. Photos taken by Irakli.
Kiryat Yam. 2014.*

Yankelevich: *Irakly saved us all. Gabriel doesn't speak any Russian, just English and Georgian. And we only speak Russian and Yiddish. So Irakly translated for us and took pictures. What a great guy!*

Gabriel: *Deda, Ika and I had such interesting plans for that free day, and instead we ended up spending the whole day on trains and buses. But, Deda, I'm really glad I was able to fulfill your request!*

And me? I'm proud of our grandson.

THE YANKELEVICH CHOKOLATES

I will conclude this touching tale with a letter from the Yankeleviches:

“Our dearest Volodya and Iya! You have made us very happy. We have such wonderful memories of this meeting. Two dashing young men! Not only did they warm our hearts, but the sun was shining brightly. Now, it’s very rainy and windy. Thank you for thinking of us. Please write, we’ll be glad to hear from you. Love and kisses, Oscar.

Kirya Yam, December 13, 2013”

Toronto, December 18, 2013

Chapter 15

THE GAVRILINS

Naturally, at our age, my wife Iya and I have long been in a “coming home from the fair” mode. As long as our health is tolerable and the children have good news, we catch ourselves thinking more and more often, “How beautiful is life, after all! How many wonderful and unforgettable events are behind us!”

...1996. After a tour of Morocco, Iya and I are on our way to Hungary. A transfer in Rome. The huge airport bus with multiple doors is taking us to another terminal. It stopped for a moment—and suddenly, there was a loud shout, in English, from the open window of another bus that had stopped right next to ours:

—*Hello, Professor Rott! I was in your class in Toronto!*

Iya looked and saw a former student of hers who had taken her course in draft geometry and engineering design. They smiled at each other. The student just had time to say that he was flying home to Hong Kong for his vacation, and the buses went their separate ways.

Something similar happened on another occasion. At passport control in Frankfurt, we were waiting in a short line at the third window when a voice rang out from the line three windows to the right:

—*Hi, Professor Rott! I used to be your student!*

We were startled, like everyone else around us; but Iya instantly recognized her “clumsy giant” from Israel and greeted him with a warm smile.

And now a few stories from my own “treasure trove.” In 2007, the Volga Auto Plant (LADA) publishing company released my book, *Father's Letters*. Iya and I flew to Togliatti for an unforgettable presentation of my first book. By then, a quarter century had passed since I had appeared on the stage as part of the factory's comedy club team. Now, on one of the evenings, my former stage colleagues who were still living the “funny life” invited Iya and me to the factory's Culture Center for a new generation's tournament of wits. Among them was Oleg Yanchenko, one of the factory's best funny men in his day but also a capable manager in our Shop No. 38 (the equipment assembly and repair shop which I headed, and which employed 1,500 workers); he had been in charge of maintenance for the auto part size control devices. Over the course of the evening Oleg told me that after the show, he

was going to introduce me to some auto factory employees who wanted to meet with me.

Imagine my joy and surprise when this is what happened. After the end of the show, Oleg took us to an unoccupied office in the Culture Center, asked us to wait and stepped outside. A few moments later he came back with five young men:

—*Vladimir Frantsevich! Allow me to introduce these people. This is so-and-so, the head of Shop 38-1. This is so-and-so, the head of Shop 38-2.” And then the same for 38-3, 38-4 and 38-5.*

I was confused for a moment, but then realized what was going on. “*That’s my very own Shop No. 38—it’s been split into five shops, and I’m looking at their head managers!*” I was tempted to come over and hug each of them, but stopped myself:

—*My dear colleagues! This is amazing—such an honor for me! Thank you! I will remember this meeting for the rest of my life. Ask me any questions you want!*

—*Vladimir Frantsevich, we have no questions for you. We just came to get a look at you. Vladimir Rott is a living legend for us! We heard so much about you...*

And now, on to the summer of 2013, Hungary. On this trip, we had invited our new friends from Mysovaya Station, Taisiya and Pyotr Chernykh, to join us. We’d been touring the country in search of ideas for restoring dignity to the ruins of the old Jewish cemetery in their small town. We had been together for four days and had just arrived at Lake Balaton. There we are standing in the lobby of the Europa Fit Hotel; I’m getting the room keys. Suddenly, a loud voice behind my back:

—*Vladimir Rott*

I turned around but didn’t see any familiar faces among the many people milling about. Suddenly, a tall, pleasant-looking young man spread out his arms and, smiling, squeezed me in a tight hug. I strained my memory trying to figure out where I’d seen him before and who this fellow looked like. There was something very familiar about him...

—*Evgeny Gavrilin!*—He helped me out.

Oh my G-d, of course! The son of our Tomsk “brother,” Anatoly Gavrilin! And what a resemblance to his mother Larisa! There are many mentions of this couple in my books. Our friendship has lasted over half a century, since the start of our student years. How good to see that their children are proud and worthy successors to the older generation’s accomplishments!

Evgeny immediately introduced us to his beautiful wife Tatyana. And this is what he told us:

—*This is the first time we’re away from home without the kids—we’ve left them in the care of Tanya’s parents. We’ve already been to Paris and Vienna, now we’re*

headed to Budapest. We stopped in this town (Heviz) because we remembered my parents' nostalgic oohs and aahs and their travel photos when they came back in 2002 from a trip to Hungary at your invitation. I stop at the two best hotels in every town to compare them...

Evgeny Gavrilin, the son of my dear friend, lives in Yekaterinburg with his wife Tatyana and three sons, ages four to nine. Some time ago he graduated from the Moscow Steel Institute and did research in powder metallurgy at the Urals chapter of the Academy of Sciences. Tanya is an economist by training. At present, Evgeny is in wholesale food delivery. Such a dynamic, successful young couple!



Meeting in Budapest: Vladimir Rott, Eugene Gavrilin, Iya Rott and Tatyana. Gavrilin in front of the main entrance to the legendary Hungarian Operetta Theatre. 2013.

Two days after Lake Balaton, we ran into them again. This time it was in Budapest, at the legendary Hungarian Operetta Theater, where Iya and I had invited our guests from Lake Baikal, the Chernykhs, for a performance of Franz Lehar's famous operetta, *Gypsy Love*. During intermission, the theater's foyer was filled with noisy, laughing, happy people. Suddenly, the young Gavrilins appeared from the crowd and beamed at us. They didn't understand a word of German, but were still enjoying the show very much. Evgeny insisted that we meet at their hotel the next day.

When we had met in Heviz, we had advised them, among other things, to make sure to visit one of Budapest's attractions, the New York café. And now, they surprised us. They had gotten a room at the Boscolo, an old luxury hotel that had become even more elegant after a multimillion renovation recently completed by its new owners; the New York café, which we had recommended, is located on the ground floor of that very hotel!

In 1960, during my first visit to Hungary, my cousin Jutka and her husband, who were showing me around Budapest, had parked their Volkswagen Bug next to that legendary café and had taken the liberty of coming inside with me, just to take a look at all that beauty. But that three-day stay in the Hungarian capital, just like the entire trip, were filled with all sorts of "wonders" for me, and my memory didn't retain everything. In my subsequent trips to Hungary from the Soviet Union, I had brought Iya with me, and then the children as well. On those trips, my Hungarian aunts and uncles always raised some money from their modest pensions to help out two Soviet engineers, which was very sweet of them—but they didn't have the wherewithal to take us even once to "Café Hungaria," as the authorities quickly renamed it back then, for a cup of coffee... But ever since the magical day in the summer of 1970 when my Canadian cousin Joe Weltman slipped a roll of uncounted Hungarian bills in my hand, we started going to the Café on each visit—especially once we started coming over from Canada.

On the next day, Evgeny and Tatyana were waiting for us in the lobby of their hotel. They took us to their room and showed off its qualities. In terms of both beauty and comfort, it could definitely be called a luxury room. After a brief visit, we all went downstairs to the New York Café.



Budapest. The New York Hotel; now—«Boshkolo» and the famous «Cafe New York».



The fine dinner we enjoyed at this high-class restaurant was a memorable one for all of us. When the waiter brought us the bill and Evgeny picked it up, I told him that I wanted to pay the entire amount or at least help out, especially since Chernykh's were our guests from Siberia. To this, Evgeny gave a confident and final reply:

— *What are you talking about, Rotts! You spent so much and did so much for my parents that it's a great joy for me to have you as my guests today!*

Iya and I were genuinely happy for our friends Anatoly and Larisa Gavrilin. They can be proud of their children. To think where we started and how far we have come!

When, as a Tomsk Polytechnic Institute student in 1956, I first came to a rehearsal of the institute's amateur big band with middling accordion-playing skills, the band already had four accordion players. Conductor Boris Pichugin turned me down but asked if I could play any other instrument. That was how I became the orchestra's first violin. Meanwhile, Anatoly Gavrilin, a lanky blond first-year student, was quickly recognized as a musician who not only stood out on the Tomsk college scene but also captured the attention of audiences in other cities where we toured. For more than half a century, there could be no concert at the Tomsk Polytechnic without Gavrilin's unfailingly virtuoso accordion, and school veterans couldn't imagine anyone else playing wartime songs at their gatherings.

In the terrible years of Stalinist repressions, Soviet students—like the rest of the population—were not in the habit of talking about who their parents were and where they were from. It was a common thing at the university for young people from families exiled to Siberia to report to the NKVD on a monthly or even weekly basis. My somewhat different situation always made my fellow students suspicious and distrustful: *How can this be? From Hungary, and he doesn't have to report?*

And so it was that Iya and I knew nothing personal about the Gavrilins. In the summer of 2000, we invited Anatoly and Larisa to visit us in Canada. After a day rich in activities including a trip to Niagara Falls, when we were enjoying a warm evening in our cozy backyard, Anatoly relaxed and, after so many years of friendship, finally told us his story.

"My grandfather and his four sons lived in the Saratov region, in a village called Baltai. They owned a single horse, so in 1933 they were targeted for "dekulakization" as well-to-do peasants and deported to the Kuznetsk coal-basin region, to work on the construction of the coal-mining town of Karaganda. My mother's family—four sisters and a brother—was split up and sent from the Orenburg region to Arkhangelsk, Chikment, and Karaganda. My parents met and married in 1936, and had four children; I was the eldest. Father never told us anything about himself or his childhood...

We lived right next to the factory club. The club had a bayan (Russian accordion), which was stored at our place for safekeeping for the night. My father, who knew how to play a Saratov-style harmonica, also learned how to play the bayan. Sometimes, I would do a bit of "jamming" as well. After the war, our neighbor Sergei Kandrashov came home with a «Hohner» accordion he had gotten in Germany. The moment I saw this instrument for the first time, I fell in love with it forever! Sergei started playing dance music at the club in the evenings. I loved his playing.... I took lessons from him for about a month. When I turned eight, Father bought me a quarter tone accordion. While waiting for Father to come home from work, I would stand by the entrance gate and play various melodies on the accordion.

In 1947, I won a competition in Karaganda and was included in a group that was to travel to Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, for a republic-wide



The instrumental ensemble from the «Big Band» of the Tomsk Polytechnic Institute: (from right to left—Anatoly Gavrilin, George Vorobyov, Vyacheslav Danichev, Valentin Trofimov and... Tomsk. 1960.



On one of their tours around the country. In the foreground: (right to left), Igor Podkovko, Vyacheslav Danichev, Anatoly Gavrilin, Vladimir Yampolsky and Mayor-pianist Leopold Linkevich. (Both photos were taken by Nikolai Golovko).

competition of amateur performance groups. Father wouldn't let me take my quarter-tone with me; he was worried about "The Black Cat"—the gangs of thieves and robbers who were running amok in many parts of the country in those years. The leaders of the delegation nonetheless decided to take me along, hoping to procure an accordion for my performance.

We changed trains in Novosibirsk, and had to wait all night for the train to Alma-Ata. I was ten years old, I was tired and sleepy. I decided to lie down and sleep on the floor. To let my feet rest, I took off my shoes and put them next to me. When I woke up in the morning, the shoes were gone. "The horror! They would have stolen the accordion, too!" I had small feet. The woman who headed the delegation made the rounds of the train station's vending stalls with me and was able to buy me cloth shoes—otherwise I would have had to travel in just my socks.

Once we got to Alma-Ata, we started getting ready for the competition. I rehearsed the Dunayevsky Waltz from the movie «The Circus». On the third day, I was supposed to perform at the Alma-Ata opera and ballet theater. A theater staffer was there playing his own accordion and he let me borrow it. The first rehearsal went well; everyone saw I could play. On the second day he gave me his accordion again. Then, on the third day, the owner of the accordion didn't show up. Obviously, I couldn't perform "bare-handed"; the competition was a bust. I went home, and my father said, "*See what a good thing it is that I wouldn't let you take the accordion!*"

In the postwar years, when I was already in my last years of school, I became a regular musician at our factory club. That's what they wrote: "Dancing tonight! Starts at 8 p.m. Anatoly Gavrilin playing." Most of the people who came were women. They loved to dance up a storm, the old-fashioned way. Once, they gave me some sort of red fermented ale to drink. I got sick, and after that my mother wouldn't let me play at the club anymore. But I still played at all the school dances.

I graduated from the Karaganda Middle School No. 17 with a silver medal.

—*I'm going to college in Moscow!*—I told my parents.

—*Don't go. They'll never admit you,*—my father said confidently.

—Why not?

Father said nothing. I went and applied to the Bauman Higher Technical School. "*A silver medal? We'll admit you with no entrance exam. But you have to go through the credentials commission first.*" And then it was: "*Who are your parents? Where are you from? When did you arrive? Come back tomorrow for the answer.*" They turned me down...

I came back to Karaganda and got a job as an electrician at the electrical shop at the Central Treatment Plant. All my classmates went to Tomsk, got into college. I asked them questions. Then, in 1955, I went there myself. Got admitted with no exams, started studying in the department of power and electrical engineering. Finished the first semester with no problems. On the winter break, I went home, picked up my accordion, and at spring of 1956 came to see Pichugin..."

Along with his musical accomplishments, Anatoly is also an engineer; he went to graduate school, defended a dissertation, and became assistant professor, senior professor, and then dean of the Industrial Power Supply chair. In 1979, he was chosen to head the university's trade union committee, and from 1989 to 2012 he was the director Correspondence-course Learning Institute at the Polytechnic University.

We're just as close to Larisa Gavrilin, who turned out to be from Iya's hometown. Her mother had been a student of Iya's mother's, Rachel Solomonovna, and the two girls had been at summer camp together.

After graduating from school, Larisa (then Antusheva) spent two years learning a «working trade», as was required at the time; then, in 1961, she moved from Angarsk to Tomsk and began studying in the chemistry and technology department at our university. Once, she came to a band rehearsal to try out as a soloist. For whatever reason, Anatoly wasn't there on that day. At the next rehearsal, I told him about the «cute newbie» who had showed up. Ever since then they've been together, and their «instrumental/vocal ensemble» has been one of life's finer pleasures for us for over half a century. The Gavrilins never refuse a request to «do a number.» Their contribution to Tomsk's student culture is priceless.

Their son Evgeny was born in 1965. Then, in 1973, came the latest addition to the family: a girl named Katya, now respectfully known as Ekaterina Gavrilin, chief state customs inspector, 1st grade, at the Tomsk customs post.

In 2012, Evgeny, Tatyana and their entire family made a surprise trip from Ekaterinburg to Tomsk for Anatoly's 75th birthday party at the House of Scientists, attended by a large number of friends. That was the greatest of joys for my friend, a wonderful musician and human being.



THE GAVRILINS



Anatoly Gavrilin 75 years. Tomsk. 2012.

Dearest Anatoly and Larisa! You play so well together; keep singing for us for years to come!



Gavrilins and Rotts. Tomsk. 2012.

Toronto, January 20, 2014

Chapter 16

59 YEARS LATER

I'll start with this entry in my diary:

"December 21, 2011. Saturday. Toronto.

This is one of the true miracles fate has granted me at the age of 77. Today I made a call to Belarus, to a nursing home near Minsk, to wish a happy 96th birthday to Nikolai Nikolayevich Vdovin, my beloved physics teacher. It was he who, in September of the distant year 1949, heard the desperate plea of my long-suffering mother Regina and brought me, a truant and a shirker, to class 6B in which he was the class guide, made me class leader and steered me masterfully toward the path of a future engineer.

Nikolai Nikolayevich's wife, Zinaida Petrovna, is also alive. She is 94. She is my dear Russian language and literature teacher who, once upon a time, doubted that ninth-grader Vladimir Rott could have "written by himself" a lengthy take-home essay on Leo Tolstoy's «War and Peace» which consisted of retelling the entire novel in what I now admit was pitifully bad verse. As a grownup, I myself never cease to be amazed at the youthful ignorance, poor taste and arrogance that allowed me to turn in «poetry» of such quality. But on that faraway school day, I was actually miffed at Zinaida Petrovna for failing to appreciate my work—even though she gave me the highest grade for the essay...

It was Zinaida Petrovna who picked up the phone:

—What a darling you are! Thank you for remembering us. Kolya and I are so grateful to you. You are so attentive...

In the very next moment, an impatient Nikolai Nikolayevich had taken over the phone:

—Vadim! Dear boy! Our entire home, every floor, is reading your 1,200 pages. We've got a waiting list... And how nice, you mentioned us 26 times in the first book and 38 times in the second!

After graduating from high school in 1954, I, like most of us, lost touch with my former teachers amidst the hectic pace of daily life. Our family was already living in Canada when, in 2000, my school friend Tamara Khoroshun, with whom I had never stopped corresponding, suddenly wrote to me, "Vdovin, the physics teacher, is still alive! He and his wife are both living in a special category nursing home, the Republican Boarding House for Veterans of War and Labor." Then, three years later, at the Zhdanovichi village not far from Minsk, came the

fairy-tale moment when I, accompanied by Tamara, approached the threshold of the room where the legendary old couple now lived.“

“May 16, 2003. Minsk-Bobruysk.

The meeting with N. N. Vdovin turned out to be fantastic and truly unforgettable. After driving around for a long time looking for the house, the driver finally got there and even led us to the second floor and to Room No. 25. A moment later, two cheerful, lively, energetic old folks came trotting toward us. I did not tell them who I was and warned Tamara not to tell them, either. Nikolai Nikolayevich peered at me intently. A couple of times, he said, “I don’t know. I don’t remember.” He went back to the room to fetch his glasses and peered at me again. I showed him the photo of our class in 1951, which I had brought with me; Nikolai Nikolayevich examined it, mentioning everyone by name. At last he exclaimed excitedly, “You’re Vladimir Rott!”

Whereupon there was much gushing, hugging and kissing. Our joy was boundless. Tamara Khoroshun and the driver stood silently, staring in amazement at the scene before them. In the years that have passed, Zinaida Petrovna’s appearance has changed so much that I didn’t recognize her until the end of our meeting.

I showed family photos, told them about myself. I reminded them of the “class leader” and of the “essay in verse.” They had long forgotten all this, and now they laughed merrily as they listened to my reminiscences. Zinaida Petrovna repeated several times, “You were always special, you always stood out among the class.” I recalled several episodes from my physics classes, and Nikolai Nikolayevich kept smiling and hugging me.“

“September 7, 2003.

In late August, Jeff Goods, the host of the morning program “Fresh Air” broadcast on CBC radio on weekends, asked listeners to send in reminiscences about their teachers by the start of the school year. I decided to write about my physics teacher, Nikolai Vdovin. I wrote the story at once, and our son Sandor, who dropped by to visit his parents, translated it into English right away. Then we emailed it to the CBC.

On Saturday, August 31, in a program dedicated to teachers, they read beautiful, edifying letters from listeners on the radio. I started doubting myself: “They’re not going to like my story. Too much information, too little heart... They won’t accept it.” And then yesterday, on September 6, I woke up at 7:20 a.m. without an alarm. I remembered that “Fresh Air” was on, ran to the dining room and pressed the recording button of the Music Center. Literally five minutes later, Jeff Goods started reading “My Teacher of Physics.” There were only a few minor cuts. This was great! Thank G-d, I got another chance to tell people about my Mama and my Teacher of Physics! Hurray!

As I write this today, I am 79 years old; my heroes at the Belarus Home for Veterans of Labor are also older, but, thank G-d, still alive! Nikolai Nikolayevich is still vigorous but is losing his hearing. Zinaida Petrovna’s eyes have grown very



Not far from Minsk. Meeting my former school teachers: my physics teacher—Nikolai Nikolaevich Vdovin, 88 years old, and my Russian language and literature teacher—Zinaida Petrovna, 86 years old (married to my physics teacher). Belarus. 2003.

weak; she is bedridden and needs her husband's help to get to the bathroom. I recently called my physics teacher to wish him a happy 98th birthday. He picked up the phone and asked jauntily, *"Who's speaking?"* But he couldn't make out a single thing I said and finally told me he was handing the phone over to Zinaida Petrovna. He asked her at once, *"Tell me, who is that?"* As always, they were happy to hear from me. They still recognize me and remember me. She immediately repeated to him the news I gave her. She complimented me; I asked her about their daily lives. She complained about her rapidly worsening health. At the end of the conversation I said, *"Nikolai Nikolayevich, you're still so mentally alert, both of you! Hold on for another couple of years... and we will come over for the celebration!"*

—Vadim, my dear boy! That's something I can't promise... It's a hard struggle.—Replied my beloved physics teacher.

The memory of my teachers, and the story I just told, came back to me because of a different event that has enriched the past two years of our lives. In the summer of 2012, during a telephone conversation when we reminisced about our youth and our school friends, the same Tamara Khoroshun said in passing, *"By the way, Vadim, you know something—Volodya Maron is still alive..."*

I fell silent for a moment. “Maron? My Maron? Volodya?” That name had not crossed my mind for about fifty years!

—Tamara, how do you know him?

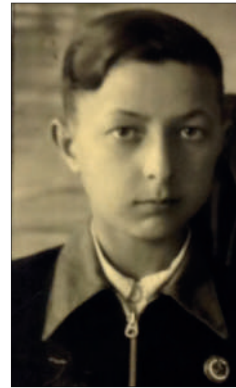
—Maron? Who doesn’t know Maron? He and his wife, Svetlana Yegorovna, were the best physics and math teachers in Bobruysk for years! I knew her better, a very nice woman. They were among the last to emigrate to Israel, they live in Nazareth now. A friend of theirs still lives in Bobruysk—I know her well and she always gives me the latest updates on them...

—Do you think you could get their phone number from her? That would be great!

Volodya Maron had been one of the most remarkable people in our class. Like many of us, he had no father. His father had been killed in the war near Leningrad in 1942. Volodya, his brother and his mother had survived as evacuees on the other side of the Volga, where his mother worked as a nurse’s aide in a small town. In sixth grade, Volodya became our school’s chess champion. Three years later he won the Bobruysk chess championship and got a prize from the «Spartacus» republican athletic society; in another year, he also won the citywide checkers championship.



School Champion Vladimir Maron,
6-th grade.



Vladimir Maron,
7-th grade.

We had another classmate who was an outstanding athlete, Abram Zelikman. In ninth grade, he already played soccer for the Bobruysk all-star team. Abram was especially good at penalty corner kicks, which nearly always sent the ball “burrowing” into the other team’s net. It made the fans ecstatic. It was also thanks to Abram that I first heard about the “holy Sabbath.” Those were the years of unfeeling atheist propaganda—the Soviet regime’s obscurantism war on religion about which we schoolchildren knew nothing at all. No matter how

distraught the city team was, no matter how Abram Zelikman sobbed his heart out, his father, whose head was always covered with a hat, never allowed his son to play in a match held on a Saturday. Now I know that he was an ordinary observant Jew; but back then, our indignation knew no bounds...



My classmates Abram Zelikman, Vladimir Maron. Bobruysk. 1952.

Scenes from a distant past, from our wonderful school years—the years of our youth—began to fill my mind. I cannot say that those were easy or carefree years. In addition to the daily load of challenging studies, we were surrounded by the cruel reality of the absurd Soviet system—and the more we read books by smart and honest writers who weren't on the "recommended" list, or listened to foreign broadcasts that managed to get past the powerful Soviet jamming devices, the easier it was to realize that the Stalinist dictatorship which ruled our lives was stuck in a dead end.

After Tamara told me about Maron, I immediately told Iya, and she remembered seeing a few mentions of the name in my first book. I didn't remember this myself. I opened *Joys from Sadness* and began to look... Found it!

Here's an entry from my diary, made in early spring of 1953:

"April 4. There are some joys in our life after all! I'll try to describe everything from the beginning, though I'm very excited and happy. During one of the breaks, I came up to the cafeteria attendant to buy a bagel. The attendant told me there



Classroom 7A of Secondary School №1. Bobruysk. 1951.

had just been news on the radio: the doctors and professors have been cleared of all charges, while their accusers have been arrested. I was so beside myself with joy I didn't know what to do. I raced to class. The first person I told about this was Vova Maron, with whom I'd already had a conversation about the doctors' innocence. He was glad to hear it, too...

At 2:30, I ran home to share the happy news with Mama. Together, we listened to the roundup of central newspapers from Moscow and heard the statement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs with our own ears. That was really something! "All the professors have been found innocent and released. Their accusers will be prosecuted... The doctors' self-incriminating confessions were obtained under torture... The 'chief witness' Lidya Timashuk is to be stripped of her Order of Lenin."

Mama and I were going insane; we didn't know what to do. It was almost unbelievable for Moscow Radio to broadcast such things. Such phrases as "Prime Minister Churchill" and "President Eisenhower" are now spoken in calm tones. Is it possible that we will actually see changes in our lives?

...The Western radio stations are saying that the Soviet government has been taking unexpected steps toward rapprochement with the West, and has been responding logically and positively to its latest offers...

I shared today's news with our neighbors on the barrack porch. They were all shocked and started saying that they had never believed in the doctors' guilt anyway.



Classroom 9A of Secondary School №1, Bobruysk. 1953.

And here is another entry, from the fall of the same year, 1953:

"October 2, 1953. Hello, diary. I have been away from you for almost a week. Six days ago, we tenth-graders were taken to the village of Sychkovo, about ten kilometers from town. We were quartered in the homes of the collective farmers, under the supervision of the physics and gym teachers.

I stayed at the house of a peasant woman named Grinyak, along with Viktor Kovalkov, Volodya Maron, and Zhorik Podolsky. We lived as a commune, eating, sleeping and working together and inseparably. We had a very good and merry time over those six days—a real collective! We worked in the potato fields, in teams of three. Each team was supposed to harvest 45 16-kilo bushels of potatoes a day, a norm we met without much difficulty.

After two days spent in the potato fields, my roommates and I were assigned to the task of drying the grain, with a lot less supervision than in the fields. We took a lot of breaks and played cards, but we still winnowed over 10 tons of grain. Our school also harvested 25 tons of potatoes.

From what we've seen, it seems like the collective farm system is about to collapse everything is in complete disarray: the bosses are drinking, the people don't care about their work and collect only the potatoes lying on the surface. They don't take good care of anything, they destroy things... and if you make a comment about it, they reply, "So what? It's collective farm property...!" The collective farmers get paid very little, so they don't show up for work at all—instead, we get bused in to do their work.

For food, we got an unlimited supply of potatoes every day and half a liter of milk per person. Once they gave each of us a chunk of lamb, which our hostess used to make soup. We all slept on the floor, using straw for our bedding. It was a merry time—we didn't want to go back.

Today, we bought a bottle of liqueur and a bottle of wine for dinner as well as some canned meat. We got out all of our provisions, and had a drink with our hosts to our country experience...

Mama was overjoyed to see me again. In the evening, Viktor and I climbed over the lumber factory fence, evading the vicious guard dogs, and washed up in the shower room of the plywood shop. We hadn't had a chance to bathe once during our stay at the collective farm."

"May 5. (1954) ... Yesterday at school, my classmates and I were issued summons to the draft board office. We went there this morning. It turned out that we were summoned in order to assess our fitness for enrollment in higher military schools. Amazing but true: of the 15 people summoned, only Volodya Maron and I were quite healthy and fit. The rest weren't even allowed to complete the medical inspection. The commission was headed by some captain, a Hero of the Soviet Union. He called me in. "Hello," I said. "Hello, take a seat." "Thank you." "Name? Date of birth?" I stated my reply. "Where do you want to go?" "College." "Oh no you don't, sonny! That's not going to happen. It's a draft year—you'll go to aviators' school." "But comrade captain, I don't want to go to any kind of military school!" "Oh, you don't? Well, then you can get drafted into the army as a private!" "Fine, then I will." "You can go." And that was the entire conversation... I don't want to be a career officer, and besides, no mandate commission will allow me into a military school... But, of course, the captain needs to make sure he meets his target for the draft."

These are the events of our distant youth, preserved in my diary, of which Volodya Maron was a part. Two days later, I was calling Nazareth. The telephone number Tamara Khoroshun gave me turned out to be the home phone number of the Marons' son, Sasha, to whom I tried to explain—not very coherently, since I was too emotional—what I was looking for. Finally, he understood and gave me his father's phone number.

The moment I heard the voice in the phone, I was stupefied: Volodya's voice hadn't changed! It sounded more mature, perhaps a little aged, but it was still the same familiar voice, with clear diction and a slight sing-song inflection.

—You know, Vadim,—he told me at once,—several times, I read long articles in Israeli papers, written by the journalist Bella Kerdman, about Vladimir Rott and his family. I even thought, 'He's got the same last name as my classmate Vadim Rott.' And then, in the last article, I saw your photo with a bike and realized that it was you, Vadim Rott. But I had never known you as 'Vladimir'!"

What an amazing event! We had heard nothing of each other for half a century. What joy! We tripped over each other as we hurried to say as much as we could about the years that have passed, about our wives and children... We reminisced about many of our classmates, and finally ended up tittering like two silly old men over the “merry pranks” that seemed the height of genius to us in those distant years of our youth. Volodya remembered a lot more of them than I did.

Our regular geography teacher was often substituted by a teacher from another school, one Bolbas—a bad-tempered nervous man who oozed hatred for his pupils. The “collective” brain of our hard-to-handle class soon figured out the level of his knowledge of the subject, which was clearly inadequate for us, and each side in this war “took a defensive position.” Most of the time, he would have us color contour maps and mark state borders. Those who did not have contour maps had to draw them themselves as part of their homework. We did this unwillingly and often came to geography class empty-handed. One day, Bolbas arrived to class with a large roll of contour maps and proudly unfurled them before us. At first we were taken aback; then, we quickly realized these maps couldn’t possibly be free of charge. A merry hustle-bustled ensued as money was being collected, people were walking around the class and giving change... I don’t remember who it was that first announced the money needed to be broken into small change. I instantly dashed out of class and ran off to get the money changed. The cashier in the “brick store on Lenin Street” not far from our school looked reluctant, but still complied with the request of the eight-grader—almost a grown man—who then dashed back to class and triumphantly dumped the entire sum on the teacher’s desk in brass coins of 1, 2, 3, and 5 kopecks. The soundless curses and swear-words on the moving lips of the geography teacher could be easily read by each “hooligan” in the class.

Back in those days, the Soviet system fostered and encouraged informers at every level. Imagine our surprise when we found out that Bolbas kept a separate notebook in which he recorded each student’s misbehaviors and “inappropriate” comments. Then, his letters with excerpts from this “diary” would arrive at our parents’ workplaces. How many times did my poor “Rot-tikha” shed tears at staff meetings at the Lumber Mill when these letters—and not just from Bolbas—were read out loud, and Mama could not say anything because of her poor Russian—which, however, was good enough to understand the complaints about her son...

Volodya Maron’s mother Rosa Borisovna worked as a cashier at the city department store. She was a Communist Party member, and Bolbas and his colleagues would send their complaints to the department store Party Committee. I will never forget how Maron’s eyes sparkled when one day, in eighth grade, Bolbas went out of the classroom during the break, leaving his “diary” under the class register. Volodya immediately grabbed it, tucked it under his shirt and, surroun-

ded by a gaggle of jubilant boys, ran out into the yard and headed for the wooden booth that served as the school toilet. The separate sections for boys and girls each had three holes in the seat. Volodya tossed the diary into the hole in the middle, and some other quick-thinking lad flung a brick on top of it. The “historic document” sank into the muck. At the next lesson, of course, the class was very quiet. That was the way we were...



The Maroon Family in Israel. I received this photo from Volodya soon after.

It turned out to be a long conversation; neither of us wanted to stop. We started discussing the possibility of a meeting. Volodya said that his health did not allow him to fly. I admitted that the fact that we had found each other had increased my desire to come to Israel as soon as possible and to see him. We met in late October of 2013.

As always, Iya and I started our trip to Israel with Naharia, where we spent two pleasant days with my cousin Mari Nemschitz. Her husband Vili's health has deteriorated badly. In addition to a bad case of diabetes, he has also suffered kidney failure, and Mari takes her husband in for dialysis three times a week. Yet there was a time when Vili was a strong, tireless farmer in the moshav She'ar-Yashuv in the Golan Heights. From early morning to late evening, he tended to hundreds of apple trees in his orchard, which he couldn't harvest on his own, and he therefore had to sell the entire crop on trees.



Mari and Iya light Shabbat candles. Nahariya. October, 2013.

Our family first visited Israel in 1982, literally a few weeks after the gangs of the hoodlum Yasser Arafat, trained to lieutenant's rank by the Soviets and abundantly supplied with Russian weaponry, shelled Northern Israel with their Katyusha rockets. Arafat quickly quieted down after getting his hands slapped, but one of the rockets hit Vili's barn and all of his six cows were killed. Vili's daughter, twelve-year-old Yael, was badly injured in the explosion; a rocket fragment tore a piece of flesh out of her leg. In those days, all of the world's papers published a photo of Israeli primeminister Menachem Begin at the bedside of a wounded girl in the hospital. That girl was Mari's daughter.

Every evening in the fall, Vili hopefully waited for a fortunate occasion when an Arab Druze from one of the neighboring villages would take a look at the fruit-heavy trees and offer his price. After some brief bargaining, the deal would be sealed with a handshake, and a few hours later the Druze's entire family, complete with little kids and grandmothers, would arrive in the garden and stay there for several days until every single apple was taken down from the trees and every fallen apple was picked up from the ground.

On our first trip to Israel, Vili was able to sell his apple crop the next day after we arrived in She'ar-Yashuv. A few years later, a similar deal was made under almost identical circumstances, after which our dear, kind Vili wrote in his letters, "*Vladimir, try to come over in the fall... Your visits always bring me luck—I manage to sell my crop very quickly.*"



Visiting moshavnik Eyal Nemshits—Marie and Willy's son. The Golan Heights, at Moshav Sha'ar Yashuv, Israel, 2013.

A cab from Naharia raced Iya and me toward the affectionate embraces of Volodya and Svetlana Maron. They live in Nazareth-Illit, the Jewish district of that ancient and legendary town. We drove up to the town and suddenly found ourselves in green alleys of mighty trees through which we could glimpse the light yellow walls of two- and three-story stone houses, none of them looking like each other. It was difficult to even see the house numbers. The driver called the Marons and asked for help in finding their house, and a moment later a tall, lanky man appeared from the greenery of enormous bushes and headed toward us with a rapid gait. I wanted to recognize him instantly as “my Maron,” but his height made me unsure, even though his face was starting to “correct” my memory. I dove out of the car and rushed toward him. In his vigorous embrace, I immediately felt and understood that it wasn’t the remnants of old photos that drew us to each other but the still-living memories of our experience-rich, reckless, inventive postwar youth.

An agitated Volodya brought us to his apartment and happily introduced us to Svetlana, who waited by the entrance. How interesting: our wives had never seen each other, and the wheel of time had left major marks on all our faces, and yet there we were standing and smiling at each other, and I was looking at my friend’s wife and thinking, “What a beautiful girl this charming, slender lady used to be when she was young!”

We were given a beautiful, warm reception. Despite an abundantly laden table, our gracious hosts kept running off to the kitchen to get more food. But the appetizers and the delicious dishes took a back seat to our desire to talk, to ask questions, and to remember the long-forgotten events of our youth. I hadn't even known that Volodya had graduated from the Vitebsk Pedagogical Institute, had become a physics teacher and married Svetlana (who went on to become a math teacher), and that this talented couple had been among the best teachers in the Bobruysk school system for more than a quarter century.

It is a measure of their professionalism that, after coming to Israel and learning Hebrew, they have been tutoring many young people for college entrance exams, giving them extra lessons in math and physics. Volodya proudly showed us a copy of a high school physics textbook just published in Russia of which he is the author.

After dessert, there was another emotional moment at the table. I reached into my travel bag and got out a folder I had brought from Toronto with the last letters our school friend Abram Zelikman had sent me from New York. I have all of his letters in my home archive, but I only brought the last ones.

After graduating from medical school in Leningrad, Abram spent a number of years working there as a gynecologist, then emigrated to America, where he worked hard to pass more than twenty exams and get a license to practice. He and his family were doing well; his sons were grown up, his wife had a successful career in banking. But then, terrible tragedy struck: Abram died suddenly of a brain tumor... I finished reading the last lines, and we sat in silence for a long time, honoring the memory of our unforgettable classmate.

The hospitable Marons would not let us sleep in the living room where they had quickly set up a folding bed next to a large sofa. It was our hosts who slept there, letting us have their bedroom for the night and literally forcing us not to deprive them of the joy of hospitality.

After breakfast, we spent some more time on their spacious, well-tended veranda basking in the generous morning sunlight. An incredibly beautiful view opens from that veranda: the neighboring houses drowning in greenery, and above them, the endless, cloudless blue sky.

Iya and I left the Marons filled with delight at the joy they take in life, and at their boundless love for Israel and for their marvelously beautiful city, Nazareth-Illit. Now, we have added one more route in Israel to our travels: the home of Volodya and Svetlana Maron.

Has it really been 59 years?

Thank you, fate!

Toronto, May 23, 2014

59 YEARS LATER



Meeting 59 years later. Israel, Nazareth-Elite, October, 2013.



Svetlana and Vladimir Maron.

Chapter 17

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

A Chronicle of Events

Mysovaya Station, a short book I wrote and the contents of which I summarized at the start of this volume, was first published in Russian in March 2012. A few months later, English-speaking and Hungarian audiences also had an opportunity to read my tale of Babushkin, the distant city on the other side of Lake Baikal which I preferred to call by its old name: Mysovaya Station, or “Cape Station.” It’s a name more easily associated with a place where a railway intersects with a large body of water.

For several centuries, caravans from China and Mongolia journeyed to the port on Lake Baikal, to the cape—*mys* in Russian—protruding from the lake-shore. (Hence the names Mysovsk and Mysovaya Station; Babushkin is the current name of the town.) Here, the goods were unloaded and transported across the lake by boat, or by horsepower across the ice in winter. That is why, until the completion of the Baikal section of the Transsiberian railroad, Mysovsk was one of the largest ports on the Baikal—an important and busy commercial center on Siberia’s map.

In 1907 Mysovsk had 5,000 residents, 1,600 of them Jews. Their numbers grew 37 percent between 1905 and 1917—even though many documents attest to the forcible removal of Jews (“too close to the Chinese border”), to harsher measures restricting them to allowed locations, to bans on land ownership and operation of even minor industrial enterprises.





At the Mysovaya station you can still see carvings of a Star of David on the decorations of the ancient wooden houses once owned by Jews.

The connection of our Guter-
man-Rott family to Mysovsk began
in 1896, when my wife Iya's grandfa-
ther Shlomo Guterman, escaping the
pogroms, moved from Poland to Lake
Baikal with his wife and two children.
I found a line in a newspaper from
those times saying that in those parts,
"Jewish hatters and tanners had no
rivals." And Grandpa Guterman was,
in fact, a tinner. Here, the Gutermans
had eight more children, next to last
of whom was Rachel Guterman-Yaro-
slavskaya, Iya's mother. Four of the
children died in infancy and were
buried in Mysovsk's Jewish cemetery.
In 1912, Shlomo Guterman's family
moved to Ulan Ude.



*Iya's Mama—Rachel Solomonovna
Jaroslavskaya—born in Mysovaya
in 1908.*

By the end of the 20th Century there was not a single Jewish family left in Mysovsk, and it's no surprise that the younger generation may doubt whether any Jews ever lived in this town. That is why visitors to the town's local history museum who open the guestbook completed by 1960 will be intrigued by this entry from an unknown author, complete with spelling errors and clumsy style:

"There used to be a Jewish church in our town, their word for it was synagogue. They used to pray to God every Saturday because Saturday is their Sunday, they prayed standing on their feet and there were benches around, every adult had a little book and each would read for himself, they kept very strict quiet and allowed only those who could behave to come to the prayer. They had a priest who was called a rabby, they had their own cemetery too, that was across the Mysovka river about two kilometers away, the cemetery had a good fence and a gate, and there was also a little house, a chapel. The cemetery was not guarded. If somebody died rich or poor, they were taken for burial in a black hearse, it was drawn by horses and was painted black...they'd have the burial, dig the grave. The ones that were rich got stone memorials with nice inscriptions carved on the stone, when the revolution came the locals took down those memorials to use the stone for foundations when they were building their houses. Now that place is overgrown and you can barely see the graves..."

"Taisya Chernykh, Mysovaya: Vladimir, Iya, hello...! I found some interesting information. Here's what Lilia Kalymina, the author of several books on the history of Jewish life in the Baikal region, reports in her book, The Mysovsk Jewish Prayer House, 1909-1912: 'The members of the board of the Prayer House are: Peasants from the Posolsk community, Mordukh Brodsky and Yakov Smolyanin; Mysovsk townsmen Elia Suzdalnitsky, Weivel Boxer, Abram Pozin, Irkutsk townsman Elia Yeger. Candidates for the board: Kansk townsman Eive Abo Itzkovich, Biyaly townsman Shlyoma Guterman, Irkutsk townsman Mordukh Sapozhnikov.'

I sent her an email, maybe today I will find her phone number and call her. While working on her books, she visited archives and will be able to give some sort of information."

I replied to Taisya and thanked her for the news. I told her Iya was excited to see her grandfather, Shlomo Guterman from the town of Biyaly, listed among candidates for the board of the prayer house—and was so "puffed up with pride" she was even threatening to stop cleaning the house or cooking dinner.

My book *Mysovaya Station* told readers about the fate of a Jewish family on Lake Baikal; about smart and talented engineers, artisans and business-

people in 19th Century Russia who so successfully settled the vast uninhabited plains of Siberia. But most of all, my kind-hearted readers and listeners agree with my conclusion that “*the people of Mysovaya Station are saintly people*”—people who, in our time, did everything they could to bury a Jew in accordance with Jewish funeral ritual, even though there wasn’t a single Jew anywhere nearby.

As far as I know, there have been no big changes in the life of this small provincial town in Siberia since the summer of 2011, when we first visited Mysovaya and I published my book about it. Nothing new except for intensive demand for the second edition of *Mysovaya Station*, printed in Irkutsk this time. We have established telephone and Internet contact with Petr and Taisya Chernykh, which has brought us close.

These good people began to visit the Babushkin Psychoneurological Group Home almost every week to see Mischa Guterman—our 54-year-old “teenager,” Iya’s cousin—and bring him gifts.

“Taisya Chernykh, March 3, 2012. Mysovaya. Vladimir, Iya, hello! Today is a special day: Mischa has introduced us to his girlfriend Lena, whom he is dating. They visit each other and say that they’re in love. We spent some time with them, went out for a walk together. Photos are attached. The one in which there’s a guy you don’t know, that’s Volodya Petrov. He was one of the patients that helped dig Yura’s grave and bury him. He’s more or less lucid and can hold a coherent conversation. He told us Mischa misses Yura, sometimes has fits of temper. But generally Mischa is holding up well, he’s in a good mood, sociable; treated the other patients in his ward to the sweets and fruit we brought. He tells them he’s working and will soon get a ‘bonus.’ As always, he handed us a list of requests for our next visit, for food and other things; he had the list ready by the time we got there and gave it to us as soon as we came in. When we were out walking, patients came up to us and asked about Canada. It looks like Mischa is now a ‘Canadian’ in their book. As for Mischa, he asks us at the end of every visit, ‘Take me with you to Canada.’ Lena has started calling us ‘Papa’ and ‘Mama.’ And that’s our news.”

About three weeks later Taisya reported sad news. Mischa is very upset because Lena is now “friends with another boy.” And here’s the latest news on the subject. On one of Taisya’s recent visits to the group home, Mischa’s buddies told her he was still sad that Lena doesn’t want to be his friend anymore. The supportive Taisya tried to defuse the situation as best she could:

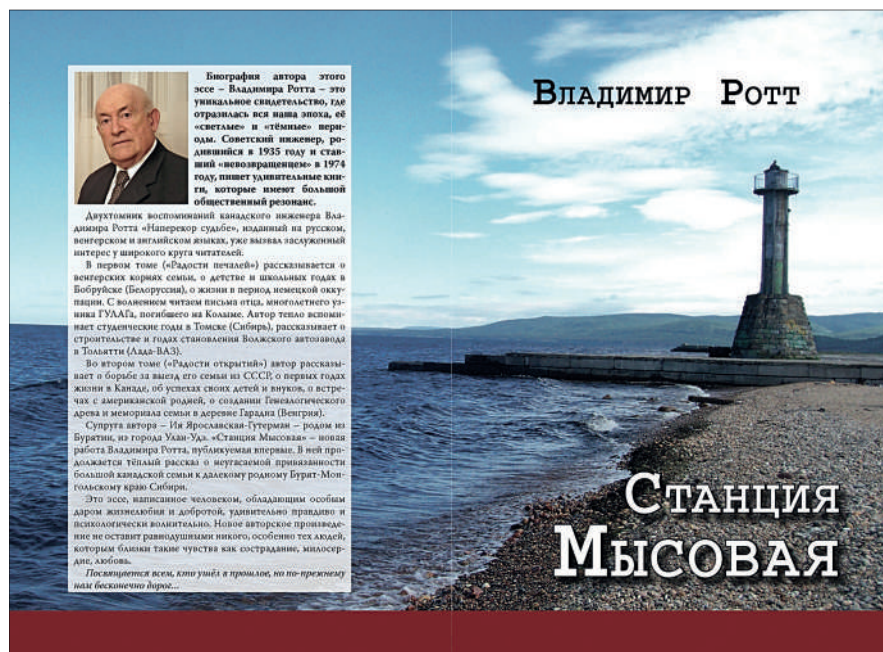
—Mischa, Lena probably got mad at you because you always brought her just one piece of candy?”

To that, our rejected “peacemaker” gave a candid reply: “Well, I want them for myself!”

Our phone and computer communications with Mysovaya became a regular part of daily life when, suddenly, new events appeared on the horizon. Three neighboring countries—China, Mongolia, and Russia (specifically, the Buryat-Mongolia region)—embarked on some intensive activity to attract international tourism to their sites. To that purpose, they decided to recreate the route of the once-unique Tea Road and make it fit for travel.

As part of this project, a film crew from the republican TV studio, headed by the talented TV journalist Vladimir Zharov, came to Mysovaya from Ulan Ude in September 2012. This group searched diligently for materials related to the 300th anniversary of the Tea Road.

Baffled by such a request, the Mysovaya administration sent the TV crew to the local history museum. The museum staffers, too, were somewhat at a loss in dealing with this topic, but they made a suggestion:



Expanded cover of the book «The Mysovaya Station», 1st Edition. Kemerovo. 2012.

— Why don't you take a look at this recently published book by Vladimir Rott, a Canadian writer? He mentions some interesting facts about life in old-time Mysovaya.

While leafing through the book, Zharov noticed a photo of a toppled gravestone.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



—Where's that from?—The TV journalist asked, surprised.

—Those are the ruins of an abandoned Jewish cemetery,—explained the museum director.—It's in the woods, about two and a half kilometers from town..."

The TV crew immediately got in their jeep, found the cemetery, saw the ruins, and shot a short clip. This clip was shown on the evening news with commentary by Vladimir Zharov:



—We are preparing to mark the 300th anniversary of the Tea Road, but look at the condition of the graves in which the people involved in those events are buried! Dear descendants, help put your family's memory in order!

Among others, this news broadcast was seen by Taisya Chernykh, who had spent several years looking into the possibility of at least some sort of restoration work on the abandoned Jewish cemetery. Now, she sent a similar query to the Mysovaya administration, but the town's mayor refused to do anything, citing the lack of funds. That was when Taisya decided to turn to "her Canadian friends, the Rotts" for advice.

When I posed the question to the Rabbi at our Toronto synagogue, Mordecai Ochs, he was initially skeptical: *"An abandoned cemetery in the taiga... There are no more Jews living there... Why disturb it? Who's going to visit?"* I replied that it wasn't my idea and that local activists who aren't even Jewish had asked me for advice. That was when the Rabbi thought about it and "lit the first spark": *"It would be a good idea to at least fence that cemetery off..."* My first idea was a metal fence. *"But that's so expensive! We could end up having to ask donors for as much as \$100,000! And besides, it will take one night for the fence to be taken down and sold for scrap metal. A wooden fence would be easier... but then, come winter, it will be taken apart to use the pieces for firewood!"*

In the meantime, back in Mysovaya, a group of enthusiastic "volunteer builders" had already formed. Taisya and Petr Chernykh were joined by their son Valentin and his wife Svetlana, and their two boys, who lived in Irkutsk, some 300 kilometers away from Mysovaya. The Chernykhhs began to visit the cemetery and gather any information they could get their hands on.

In April 2013, an event was held in Budapest for the Hungarian edition of my book, *Mysovaya Station*. Iya and I invited Taisya and Petr



The leading builders of the Memorial—Valentin and Svetlana Chernich and their two children.



Heroes' Square, Budapest. April, 2013.

The announcement of the forthcoming presentation of the book «The Mysovaya Station».

Chernykh, who brought with them some interesting documents. One of them was a letter to me from the mayor of the Babushkinskoye (Mysovaya) municipal unit, Victor Anatolyevich Laryushkin, who thanked us for our interest in “initiating some action on the problem of the abandoned Jewish cemetery” and pledged, “I am ready to assist, in any way I can, the chairperson of the Jewish Memorial Cemetery charitable society, T.A. Chernykh, and yourself in reviving the memory of our town’s Jewish residents.”



MEGHÍVÓ

Az Írók Alapítványa - Széphalom Könyvműhely
tiszteltetl meg hívja Önt
és minden kedves érdeklődőt

VLAGYIMIR ROTT
irodalmi estjére

2013. május 7-én, kedden 18 órára
a Magyar Írószövetség Klubjába
(1062 Budapest, Bajza u. 18. I. emelet).

Az íróval beszélget
MEZEY KATALIN
kiadóvezető.

Közreműködnek:
IYA ROTT,
TAISYA CHERNYKH
és **PETR CHERNYKH**



The presentation of the book at the Writers' Guild Club of Hungary. Budapest. May 7, 2013.

The mayor also expressed regret at the acute shortage of funds: "Various organizations, entrepreneurs, and private citizens have helped restore the historical monuments in the town center; however, the installation of a bust honoring the Hero of the Soviet Union B.S. Bystrykh has been stalled because of financial difficulties." Nonetheless, the friendly disposition of the head of the town encouraged us to continue our audacious quest for the Memorial.

We obtained an official notice from the republic's Forest Service confirming that "the Jewish cemetery located on the grounds of the Babushkinskoye municipal unit does not belong to the Forest Fund," while Mayor Laryushkin informed us in a separate letter: "The land on which the old Jewish cemetery is

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located belongs to the Babushkinskoye municipal unit. The administration of the Babushkinskoye municipal unit does not object to the reconstruction of the old Jewish cemetery or to the construction of a Jewish memorial complex on its territory.”

It is difficult for my Western readers to even imagine what bureaucratic barriers we had to overcome, how many endless, corruption-infected agencies of today’s Russia we had to brave to finally get permission to build “something” even on the grounds of an old, abandoned Jewish cemetery in the vast expanse of Siberia. We are deeply grateful to the authors of these two documents, which allowed us to quickly get our bearings and channel all our energy into creating our modest but heartfelt gift to the memory of the past.

It was a pleasure, as well, to read the thank-you note addressed to Iya and myself by the staff of the Babushkinskoye town library, thanking us for my books, which were quite popular with readers. Equally heartening was the letter from Nina Vladimirovna Moroz, the head of the town Department of Registrations, who promised to continue helping us “locate historical materials about the town of Mysovsk and its Jewish citizens.”



Northern Hungary—The village of Garadna. Visiting the Memorial to my grandfather Hermann Spielberger and the 32 members of his family who perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The Memorial was erected in 1987 based on the project of our son—architect Sandor Rott. Behind Taisya stands the Mayor of Garadna—Marianna Paulo. Over my shoulder, in the red blouse is Iboya Barna—a representative of my uncle Géza Spielberger, one of the twelve brothers and sisters of my mother—Regina Spielberger.

The ten days of travel in Hungary not only brought us closer to the Chernykh but also gave us a chance to visit some old cemeteries, find out about their structures and traditions, and start making preliminary plans for our work. It was there, in Hungary, that we got the idea of fencing off the cemetery in Mysovaya with a symbolic fence of concrete posts standing about two meters apart.

“Taisya Chernykh, May 12, 2013. Vladimir, Iya, hello! We have returned from hospitable Hungary with its blooming chestnut trees to the gray early spring of Buryatiya. It’s cold, there’s still snow in places, but green grass is starting to show. There are no leaves on the trees yet, but lots of buds. There’s been drizzling rain mixed with snow.

People keep stopping by to ask about our trip. We tell them and show pictures, so we haven’t had a spare minute; we haven’t even unpacked our suitcases yet, and tomorrow we’re going back to work. Everyone is admiring Hungarian views and listening to our stories, mouths agape.”

“Taisya Chernykh, May 14, 2013. ...Petya and I spend our evenings reliving our trip all over again, and during the day we tell anyone who will listen about this amazing and beautiful country, its architecture, its cities, its customs; about the fact that our little Mysovaya has been made famous in Hungarian newspapers; about the Memorial in Garadna, about the generous and hospitable Ilonka and her beautiful daughters Aniko and Ilonka; about the reliable and stoic Gábor; about Annushka and her embroidery; about Marianna, the mayor of Garadna, and her village; about the beautiful and smart Éva Orosz and the witty jokester Éva Hunics; about the intelligent, cultured, and warm Spielberger-Landsmann family; about the elderly but still-active engineer Sabo; about the friendly Manzi; and more, and more, and more. God bless them all and keep them healthy. Of course, we also talk about you, who have given us this opportunity to see Hungary and its people. Hugs, Tasya and Petya.”

“Taisya Chernykh, May 21, 2013. ...I know we were supposed to get you the information on how many headstones there are by May 20, but we haven’t been able to get to the cemetery. The snow has melted but there is so much water that it reaches the top of one’s rain boots and flows over. It’s been raining the past few days and it’s been very cold. Right now the temperature is +6 [Celsius].”

“Taisya Chernykh, May 25, 2013. ...It’s dreary, cold, rainy! How wistfully and tenderly we remember Hungary with its chestnut trees in bloom! Meanwhile we’re freezing like a dog, it’s drizzling, the trees are still bare, but the green grass has started to come out, about a centimeter high. They’ve turned off the heating and now it’s cold everywhere: at home, at work, and in the streets.

Petya and I spent the night at the library where I work; the non-working radiator burst from the cold, and about a thousand books got flooded. We

had to rescue them. Our project is stuck because of the bad weather, but the forecasts are promising an end to rain and then, as soon as we can get to the cemetery, we'll get everything done. We need to set up Yura's memorial, too. Our work in the vegetable garden is also stalled because of the rain..."

Such letters from Taisya certainly made me have second thoughts. Nonetheless, after returning from Hungary, the entire "construction crew"—all six members of the Chernykh family—set about making our project happen. Of course they had to hire help for the most labor-intensive parts of the work, but the vast bulk of it came from the hands, and the hearts, of this tight-knit family. No words can do justice to the talent, hard work, decency, and enthusiasm of this unique Siberian "construction company."

Having undertaken such a project, we realized that we were facing many uncertainties and that many surprises lay ahead; we were concerned that our plans might be far removed from reality. I will never forget how overjoyed I was when in early June, an email arrived from Valentin and Svetlana Chernykh, with the modest subject line, "The corners of the cemetery." Attached were these four photos. These were the real, actual corners of our cemetery!



A persistent search revealed the location of the four corners of an ancient abandoned Jewish cemetery of Mysovaya Station.

Over the two centuries of its history, the old graveyard had become so overgrown that it was difficult to determine the real perimeter of its grounds. The old documents with information on the cemetery couldn't be found in the archives. But then the Chernykh's had an idea. Back when the cemetery was first founded, the ground allotted for it was in a marshy area. In order to reduce the subsoil water levels, the clever creators of the cemetery dug a deep ditch around it. The Chernykh's were able to find remnants of that ditch in some places among the trees and shrubbery. They marked the boundaries of the cemetery.

More from my archives and diaries:

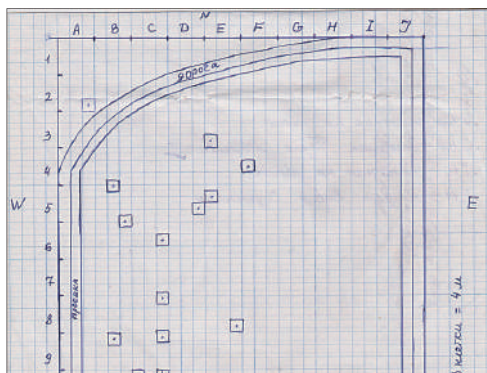
"Chernykh Taisya, June 16, 2013. ... We have called, and Valentin has visited, every company in Irkutsk in search of marble or granite for the sculpture. No one has a piece 2.5 meters long, but at one of the firms they told Valentin that they'd let him know by the 21st if they would be able to get one and give him a price and time estimate. In Slyudyanka, the government company at the marble quarry has shut down, and the private entrepreneur who is handling this isn't answering his phone. I'll have to go see him in person.

Petr has made the molds for the posts, but he hurt his arm a little while working in the vegetable garden and now the work has stalled. Same with the map of the cemetery that you are so eagerly awaiting.

For some reason, everything we undertake turns out to be so complicated. If it's not one thing, it's another. Beside, it's planting season for our vegetable garden; there just aren't enough hours in the day. At work, too, there's always some emergency.

Please don't be mad at us, we're really trying! Hugs, Tasya and Petya."

"Toronto, June 18, 2013. What joy! Dearest Chernykh's, we have finally received from you the first sketch of the cemetery plan! Tasya, Petr, Valentin, Sveta! Thank you all! We thank the parents for Valentin, Valentin for the Plan, the Plan for the Jews, and the Jews for our headaches. I have faith that it will bring us joy. Looking at your draft, I now have a much clearer picture of our 'object' Several suggestions:



Our first sketch of an abandoned cemetery, overgrown with centuries-old trees, among which are found only 14 surviving felled gravestones.

1. *It seems to me that the vertical line of the plan is definitely pointing north, aligning with the compass. In that case, the direction of the foundation pit for the cement slab should be turned 20 degrees counterclockwise. Then, the monument will be facing toward Jerusalem.*

On the other hand, if the creators of the cemetery built it at a different angle, then rotate the entire drawing by the same degree. In that case, the plan will always look slanted on a vertical sheet of paper.

2. *If it's difficult to correct the Plan's "3 squares=4 meters" scale, let it stay this way, but it will always be an inconvenience for you. From the very start, even for a working draft, it's much easier to draw a grid on a scale of "one square=one meter" with ink on a sheet of thick paper (if you have no drafting paper). The squares can be of any size you want. In that case, a grave 2 meters in length will take up two squares. And you can show the direction of the graves in relation to the axes right away. With time this will be clarified, and you can simply erase or correct pencil drawings on thick paper.*

3. *The letters refer to the vertical coordinates of the Plan, but at this point they are superimposed over three squares (4 meters). On a different scale there will be more letters, and that's fine. On the other hand, if you choose a "one square=two meters" scale, the width of graves will be shown as a half-square. The drafting paper used for the Plan can be easily folded in two, you'll get used to it quickly. The squares on the plan you sent today indicate nothing of the grave's size or direction, only the point of proximity...*

4. *Each grave and gravestone should be designated by its coordinates if possible, e.g., "S10."*

I've written a lot, I'm sorry... I should have specified this from the start. I do have good news: today, a certain generous man told me that the stainless steel plates, the engravings on them, and the bolts to screw them on will be his gift to our Project."

"Taisya Chernykh, June 23, 2013. ...Our project is moving along slowly and with great difficulty. Sometimes I feel like succumbing to despair because it's impossible to get even the most basic things from our bureaucrats, but then I remember your words: 'Tasya! We'll have to swallow bigger melons than that!' and then I calm down and soldier on.

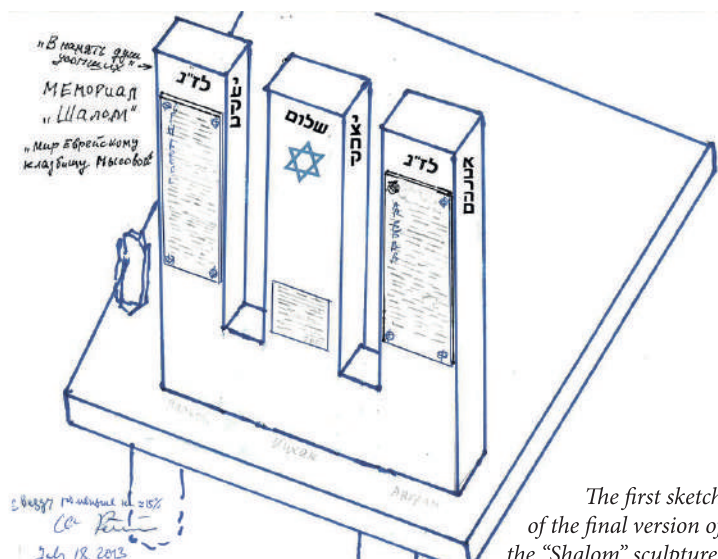
Petya and Valik (Valentin) have lifted two more headstones at the cemetery and read the following inscriptions:

—Sara Abramovna Levitina. Died, 1921. Age 38.

—Korf, Leonty Isayevich. Died, August 23, 1928. Age 72.

Now I spend two hours every day (they don't allow me access longer than that) looking over documents in the archives of our state registry. Maybe I'll find something."

I wanted to have some sort of structure of solid granite as the main symbol of the restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Mysovaya. The initial idea was to have a tall obelisk of some kind, but I really didn't want to "compete with Napoleon," who, back in his day, brought granite obelisks from the cemeteries of Ancient Egypt to Europe. Thus, I gradually switched to the idea of "three obelisks" bearing the names of Jewish forefathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The three obelisks were quickly transformed into a wonderful symbol: a sculptural composition shaped like the letter "III", which is present in both the Hebrew alphabet ("Shin") and the Russian alphabet ("Sha"). It's the first letter of the word Shalom, which means "Peace," "Greetings," and "Tranquility." That's precisely what we wanted to bring to those buried at the cemetery. That's why we called our project the Shalom Memorial.



The first sketch of the final version of the "Shalom" sculpture.

The sculptural composition Shalom was going to stand on the front edge of a large horizontal cement slab 25 square meters in size. The fragments of old headstones that were already being collected outside the cemetery grounds were going to be placed on this slab. Obviously, only those headstones whose proper location on the graves from which they were once removed would be place here.

When I showed the Shalom project to my family, our son Sandor, an architect, pointed out that the cement slab and the memorial could eventually sag because of their huge weight, so the slab would definitely have to have "legs"

below—at least four reinforced concrete vertical piles buried in the ground about one and a half meters deep.

“Toronto, June 24, 2013. My dear Chernykhs! I can see that your idea of building a ‘letter’ of reinforced concrete is the most sensible and the easiest for us. I am sending a sketch for a wooden formwork that will allow you to obtain the sculptural form we want. Here’s some advice:

1. Don’t economize on steel rods when assembling the formwork for the concrete slab and the vertical piles sunk into the ground. The slab should be 12 to 15 centimeters thick.

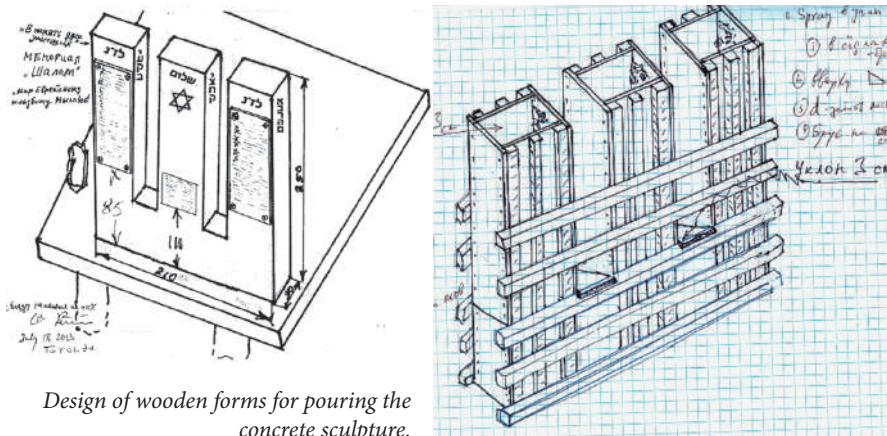
2. After pouring the cement for the slab, several of the formwork’s steel rods must be left protruding from its surface in the location where the Letter is going to be installed. The formwork for each of the three vertical pillars of the Letter will then be welded onto these rods.

3. In each pillar, install only four vertical rods of the formwork at the corners of the square section. At the center of the pillar, between the rods, there must be enough space left for the vibrator to pass through. The rods must be outfitted with wire jambs so that they don’t touch the walls of the plywood formwork.

4. Since we’ve decided to make the main sculpture from concrete, it would be good to have a recess 2-3 centimeters deep under each of the granite plates with the inscriptions. However, this will complicate the assembly of the formwork, so it’s possible to do without that if the steel wires protruding from the cement for the suspension of the plates are made longer.

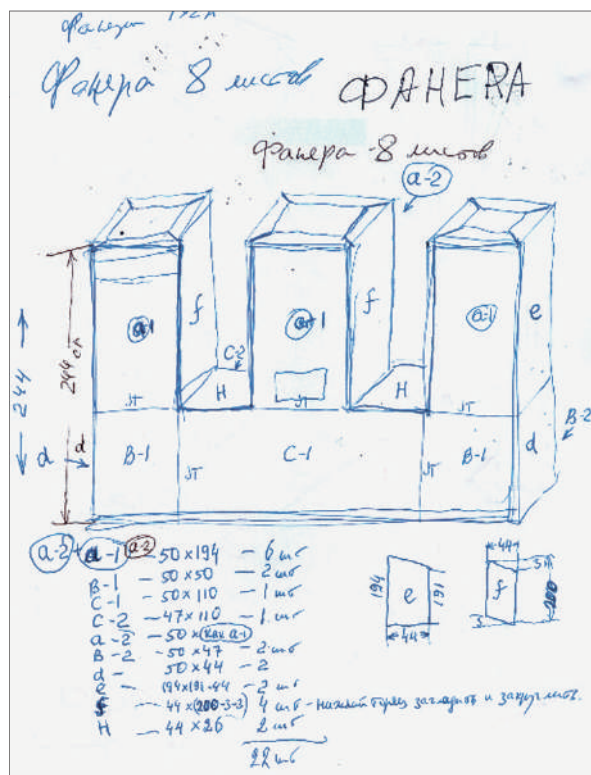
5. To avoid air pockets in the concrete, start pouring it from the central pillar. It will be ideal when you see the level of cement mix rising in the side pillar.

6. When pouring the concrete, constantly fortify the mix with an electric vibrator. I suggest having a spare vibrator handy, as well.



7. For the formwork, get the thickest plywood you can find. (In Canada, I would have chosen plywood 19 millimeters thick.) It would be good to scour the front side of the plywood (the one that will touch the concrete) with sandpaper and then cover it with silicone spray. Then, the surface of the concrete will be smooth.

8. I am sending you sketches with the dimensions of each plywood part and the place where it should go when assembling the formwork. My advice is to assemble the front and back walls of the formwork first, then connect them with the side panels. When putting in the fortification bars, please take into account the increase in the pressure of the cement mix on the lower areas of the walls.



Sketches of blank pieces of plywood, from which the frame-work will be assembled.

9. Have some artisan's shop cut the parts for the formwork from plywood sheets using a lathe. Don't even think of doing this manually at the construction site.

10. When installing the formwork, don't be afraid to use a level. Before pouring the cement, I would suggest securing the vertical formwork with temporary wooden ridgepoles and slanted props.

11. You will need strong ladders and thick boards on which you can walk while pouring the cement and moving the vibrator."

Valentin Chernykh, a construction engineer by trade, has been supporting his family in the turbulent situation of present-day Russia by arranging deliveries to restaurants and other dining establishments. Two or three times a month, he would come with his family to Mysovaya, leaving his work in Irkutsk behind. By then, Valentin, with his knowledge and energy, had firmly established himself as the «Chief engineer» and «Chief worker» of our «construction company». His beautiful wife Svetlana, who by his side was not only the «Assistant of Chief engineer», but also took charge of the «departments»: cleaning and washing of the grave-stones, finishing and painting of other built elements, horticulture, media and IT and many others... Their 12-year-old son Vladislav turned out to be a patient, hardworking and smart assistant to his father. The youngest Chernykh—four-year-old Vadim, who spent entire days with this team of hard workers, had no choice but to follow their example. That's why in many photos of the construction site, one can see him loading up a wheelbarrow with a shovel, or sweeping up the trash, or putting some paint on the newly installed concrete posts.



Our dear builders—Valentin Chernykh and his mother—Taisya.

On each of the three pillar of the letter «III», the names of the forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were going to be inscribed in Hebrew. My old colleague Sylvaine Miller, a cantor at our synagogue who is also proficient in computer design, agreed to help me. He not only selected the right Hebrew script but printed to scale a mirror image of

the words I needed, which I forwarded to Valentin in Mysovaya. The Hebrew letters came with a missive:



The mirror image of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, sent from Toronto, from which will be cut the wooden model of the future letters which will be cast in concrete.

“Dear Valentin! Here are the «words» that need to be set in concrete; therefore, the further technique of their making requires special attention. On the sketch of the sculpture, I showed their appearance and location. With this letter, I am sending their mirror image (!). This is a complicated task, so here is my advice.

1. Each of these letters should be printed on such a scale that each letter would be 5 centimeters high (without the “tails”). After that, each letter can be cut from the contours.

2. You’re going to have some carpenter cut the letters from plywood. Make sure that, first of all, the carpenter paints the selected sheet of plywood on one side only, and applies the contours of the letters to the unpainted side. The painted side will become the back of every cut-out letter. Each letter should be fastened to the plywood of the formwork with the painted side facing the formwork.

3. Each word should be set in the concrete 10 cm away from the upper edge of the pillar. It will be good if, before the concrete is poured, the letters fastened to the formwork with thin nails can be covered with silicone spray.

4. The order of letters in the words on the formwork has to be the same as the order in my “mirror” letter.

5. The circle around the Star of David must be 20 cm in diameter.”

“Taisya Chernykh, July 2, 2013. ...Yesterday, as planned, I went to Kabansk. The trip was one big disappointment: first of all, I didn’t find anything; secondly, I was disappointed in the people who had promised help. Why is it that, after 55 years on earth, I still haven’t learned to read people and continue to trust those who lack integrity? Everyone wants to get their hands on some money without doing anything, and then to gripe about it. It’s painful to deal with this... I’m going again in a few days, since I still haven’t had a chance to see everything. The heat in Kabansk is up to 30 degrees [Celsius]; here, it’s 15 C. While digging around the Internet, I’ve come across some very interesting and useful information. 1. The archives in Chita have record books from the synagogues and prayer houses of the Trans-Baikal Region; I’ll address a query there, since Mysovaya was part of that region. 2. I’ve found some information on the Gutermans, though I don’t know if it has to do with our people.

We’ve hardly spent any money. I only paid 800 rubles to the people who came with us to the cemetery a few times, helped turn over the stones and so forth. I asked the photographer to return the 1,000-ruble advance payment for future photos, since he didn’t do anything.

We’re trying to do what we can, but it’s all moving along very slowly.”

Once the proper boundaries of this 200-year-old, thickly overgrown cemetery were established, the Chernykh set about clearing the perimeter of the grounds. With their hired assistants, they cut a clear swath one and a half meters wide on all four sides of the cemetery. Removing the trees and the shrubbery and uprooting old tree stumps was hard work that required axes, chainsaws, pick-axes and winches.

Simultaneously, concrete posts were being set up along the cemetery’s perimeter to mark its territory.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL





The clearing of a continuous pedestrian walkway around the cemetery.

“Taisya Chernykh, July 12, 2013. ...In recent days, I have been able to find out a few more names from the records preserved in the archives in Ulan-Ude and in Mysovaya. I have sent queries to the archives in Chita and Irkutsk, now we have to wait for answers. Also talked to some people of Jewish descent who live here in Mysovaya. All of them are willing to talk and tell stories about their

family history; all of them tell me that no records have been preserved because the elders kept their background a secret; they all keep asking what I want this information for and how much I'm getting paid for it.

After several such conversations, I feel broken and drained. Mysovaya is a small town, rumors travel fast, and get embellished too. It's amazing how greedy people can be. We don't talk about the Jewish cemetery because we're afraid that someone might mess it up, so I tell everyone that I'm looking for this information for a complete history of Mysovaya.

Galina Dontsova, a granddaughter of the Yeger family, told me a story she had heard from her father. During the construction of the old city government building in Babushkin, graveyard slabs taken from the Jewish cemetery were used as part of the foundation. This was done in plain view, many townsfolk saw it happen. Her father secretly removed the slab from his mother's grave, took it to the town's Russian Orthodox cemetery, and put it there. Galina promised to show us this slab, which she said had sunk into the ground by now. But maybe there's an inscription that remains, I'll have to find out. The old city government building has been torn down but its foundation still stands. Petya and I went over there but we couldn't see anything on the outside. We'll have to clear the remnants to see anything. Maybe there are some inscriptions left.

I went to see Petya's doctor; he told me that there's no terrible diagnosis (hurray!), but it's a difficult situation; he's prescribed treatments, so we'll get him treated. He strains his arm too much at work, and at home too, and then groans all night because the pain is so bad. He doesn't want to leave his job even though they drop hints (we've got a terrible unemployment problem, and there aren't enough jobs for young people), because we won't be able to pay back our loans on a retirement pension. The people who had agreed to help him with the cement posts asked for a huge sum of money after they got an earful of local rumors about our generous financing from abroad, so we had to part with them.

(Here, Taisya was trying to tell me as delicately as possible about an unpleasant incident the details of which I later learned and will later describe.—V.R.)

It's just one problem after another, but I try to stay strong. I'm sure we'll carry out our project! How can we not? Of course there are times when I start bawling because of all the greed and insensitivity I run into; but then, it's another day and another battle. We can do it!

Please write and tell us how you're doing. How's Manana? Our telephone still isn't working, they tell us all their electricians are on vacation..."

"Toronto, July 31, 2013. Still keeping my diary in yet another new notebook. As a temporary bookmark, I'm using a brand new Canadian 20-dollar bill which was given to me by a 14-year-old girl from Ulan-Ude, Dasha Rizvanova. Her parents

sent her to Toronto for two months to study English. We got acquainted some ten days ago when Dasha tracked us down to deliver some presents from Ulan-Ude, from several people including Vera Gordienko, the executor of the Rakhil Guter-man-Yaroslavskaya Fund which we created twelve years ago in memory of Iya's mother.

Dasha also conveyed to us her mother's request to give her a tour of one of the synagogues in Toronto if possible. After dinner on that same evening, the very first time we met, I drove Dasha back to the place where she was staying; on our way there, I was able to show her Toronto's three largest synagogues. Among other things, Dasha was amazed by how readily and courteously the security guards at each of those synagogues let us in in spite of the late hour, opened the doors, and lit the chandeliers in the main halls. I explained to the surprised Dasha that the guards had extended this courtesy to us not because "Mr. Rott is such an important person," but because they value their work and enjoyed the opportunity to show the beauty of the temple to a lovely teenage girl from Buryat-Mongolia (I had told them all about her).

On that second visit, Dasha showed Iya how to download e-books to her iPad for free. I told Dasha about our plans in Mysovaya and showed her the sketches. Later, after dinner, when she and Iya were busy in the kitchen, she heard me talking on the phone in the next room, calling various friends, telling them at length about my project—the Shalom Memorial on Lake Baikal—and asking them to help financially in any way they could.



Our guest from Ulan-Ude Dasha Rizvanov getting acquainted with the beauty of Toronto, by climbing onto the roof of the 24th floor. From this view at the center of the city can be seen Lake Ontario, which at this point has a width of about 40 km. On the opposite shore of the lake is the US state of New York and the city of Rochester, and to the right of it—the city of Buffalo.

In the evening, I drove Dasha back to her place once again. As she stepped out of the car, she said, "Wait a minute, Uncle Vladimir, I'm going to fetch something for you" and ran off. All right, I thought, so the child wants to give me some sort of souvenir. Then she comes back and hands me a 20-dollar bill.

—This is my contribution to your project.

—Dasha darling, I can't take this from you. Your Mama gave you this money for expenses. I won't take it!

—But I can spare it. Take it! And with that she ran back into the house.

Such a gesture of kindness, from a 14-year-old girl from Buryat-Mongolia! On her own initiative! I called her back and said, "Well, if that's how it's going to be, then you've got to write your initials on this bill." And she did.

Today, I got an email from her parents. "Thank you! For everything you did for Dasha. Is there anything we can do to help your project?" Soon after that, there was a call from Dasha's father, Ravil Rizvanov. He's an engineer who works for the railroad. Her mother Irina works at a bank. I can tell that both of them have closely read my books..."

The Chernykh's made arrangements for the reinforced concrete posts which will fence off the cemetery to be poured behind the tall fence of their country house, "far from prying eyes." Petr and Valentin made three sets of wooden forms. The concrete mix was poured into the forms to make five posts at once, with a steel rod placed in each section. They bought bags of cement in a local household goods shop, brought in the sand, cut the steel rods. A couple of days later, the truckload of posts was delivered to the cemetery grounds in a rented vehicle. That, in brief, is how the posts for the fence were manufactured. However, our volunteer builders were already about to encounter their first problem...

Petr Chernykh could not take time off from his day job for the railroad, so he usually had to leave his work on the Memorial for evenings and weekends. Two assistants were hired to help with making the posts; Petr tested the technique with them, they filled the first five molds, and then Petya went off to his job at the railroad office. By the end of the second day, twenty posts had been completed, and at that point the two hired assistants unceremoniously declared:

—We're not going to do any more work for the Yids for that kind of money! We want double pay.

It's painful to hear such a story. It's especially distressing that this should have happened in modern-day Russia, in modern-day Mysovaya—a town that, for centuries, had the reputation of being a tolerant place where different ethnic and religious groups lived together in harmony and mutual respect. Most of the local population was always employed in jobs related to the railroad; but today, virtually every sector of the railroad is in private hands. The

newly minted owners are interested in profits first and foremost, which is why many jobs are being cut, many support services are being terminated, and suburban routes which operate at a loss in any country and are always publicly subsidized are being shut down. Unemployment and alcoholism are growing at alarming rates. And at such a time, one encounters people who make these sorts of statements.

Upon hearing this, the resolute Taisya paid the “assistants” for two days of work and said good-bye to them right then and there. But it turned out that that wasn’t the worst part...

About three days later, I made a late-night phone call to Mysovaya; when I asked what was new, an agitated Taisya, who had planned not to tell me about this incident, suddenly blurted it out.

—*We’re having some problems, Vladimir... I don’t want to talk about it. Don’t you worry, it’s our fault and we’ll cover the losses.*—With that, she fell silent.

—*Where’s Petya?*—I asked, alarmed.

—*He’s right here. He doesn’t want to talk. He’s in bed... he’s too upset...*

With all my heart, I tried to persuade Taisya and then Petr as well that any problem or loss they encountered was our loss, that I wasn’t their “Canadian sponsor” but an equal friend and partner in a venture of tremendous importance, and it would always be easier for us if we shouldered all the burdens together. Finally, they agreed to tell me...

Petr hired a truck, and he and the truck driver started loading the first batch of concrete posts when they realized that fifteen of the twenty posts immediately broke in half, barely hanging from the iron rods. “*They left the empty bags, stole the cement and sold it to get money for booze,*” was Petr’s immediate conclusion. When they tracked down the “first assistants” and asked them what happened, the men hung their heads and mumbled:—“*It’s that kind of cement...*”

Of course, nothing like that ever happened again. The concrete posts poured with the help of the new assistants no longer broke from their own weight. They managed to install the posts with no spades and no digging. Petr made a special hand-held drill that was used to drill a deep crescent hole in the ground into which the bottom of the post was inserted. Altogether, 144 posts were made and installed around the perimeter of the cemetery; after the installation, they were carefully painted with the loving hands of Taisya, Svetlana and their two boys.

“Taisya Chernykh, August 9, 2013. ...Regarding the map: we’ll take the scale into account and revise it. Some topographers we are—we have to learn everything on the fly. Should the map indicate the parts of gravestones (slabs, pedestals) that we have found?”

The foundation pit has been dug based on a calculation of 20 degrees.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



Fabrication and installation of fence posts.

It's really good to know that there are people in Canada who support the project. Unfortunately, we can't say the same for our fellow citizens in Mysovaya.

After talking to you, I feel more relaxed. Thank you for being so understanding; I get so tired, not so much physically as morally, and sometimes feel outright despair: with their typically Russian 'whatever happens, happens' attitude, people often let us down, go back on their promises, and often don't seem to understand that this isn't just 'the Chernykhs following their whim and trying to make some money' (that's what they say in Mysovaya) but a historical memory that was destroyed, and is now being restored and will live on for their children. Hugs from us all. The Chernykhs."

"Toronto, August 15, 2013. Last night in Mysovaya, they worked until midnight pouring the concrete pad for the Shalom sculpture. Almost at midnight their time, Petr and Valentin appeared on Taisya's computer screen via Skype, dirty, unshaven and exhausted. They were barely able to speak. It turned out that the 'mighty' cement truck couldn't back up all the way to the edge of the foundation pit in order to pour the cement mix directly into it. Its way was blocked by a small mound of earth which it couldn't climb up. The cement truck got there at 4, tried to back up and couldn't. Valentin and Petr, with four other men assisting them, quickly built a primitive, improvised wooden stretcher on the spot; then, without pausing for rest, they hand-hauled 9.5 tons of cement mix and poured it into the formwork of the foundation pit. By midnight the cement pad had been poured and smoothed over; it was covered with cellophane for the night.

A few days earlier, they had followed Sandor's advice and poured nine concrete piles into the ground which are meant to reinforce the stability of our structure. The concrete mix was blended by hand on the spot. "

In my book *The Joys of Discovery*, I told the story of David Turk and his father Philip who, once upon a time, bought our "limping" firm «Ferrum Metal» of which I was a co-owner. After changing the firm's name to Gallery Specialty Hardware Ltd., they turned it into a flourishing and fairly well-known company with an international reputation. For me, the firm's new owners always remained good and caring friends who were always willing to help whenever I needed some sort of technical assistance. In the chapter about them, I wrote:

"When we were on our way to the welding station, David told me proudly, 'Mr. Rott, I just came back yesterday from Dubai, where I attended the opening of the world's tallest skyscraper, the 828-meter high Dubai Tower! Each of the 1,000 doors of this building has locks, piano hinges, and kick-plates manufactured by our company.'"

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



Preparation and the pouring of the concrete pad.

In early June, I tackled the question of making a stainless steel plate, 20×30 centimeters with a thickness of 12 millimeters, for the Mysovaya memorial. This plate was going to be attached to the central pillar of the letter III (sh) and would have the names of the Memorial's creators engraved on it. Of course, I had naively imagined that this heavy plate was definitely going to be made in Siberia, where "entrepreneurship was now in full bloom just like in the rest of Russia" and where private companies needed such orders like air.

But the first thing that happened was that Valentin Chernykh told me he had contacted several companies in Irkutsk, only to be told that they couldn't find such thick stainless steel anywhere. They offered to make it out of brass and assured him that engraving was no problem.

Our good and close friend Rina Prokhorova, a former classmate of Iya's in the mechanical engineering program at the Tomsk Polytechnic Institute who went on to become the head of the technology bureau at a Krasnoyarsk factory—and had been forced into retirement, in accordance with the new tradition, the day after her birthday when she reached retirement age—found enough free time to "give me the good news." After searching for several days, Rina found a firm in Krasnoyarsk that could cut a stainless steel plate of the size we needed—but they had never heard of anyone engraving on stainless steel. At first, I agreed to have Rina mail the plate to Irkutsk where Valentin would take over. But when they started asking for clarifications—"We only have two kinds of lettering...", "What's the minimum depth you need?"—I started having doubts. In the end, I didn't even ask for the price and decided to have the plate made in Toronto.

That was how I returned to David Turk's firm in search of the material I needed. He had already made several decent-sized donations to our Fund. Now, I told him about the news from Buryatiya and the work in Mysovaya. David was delighted by our project. He immediately took a checkbook out of his briefcase and wrote a check for 1,000 Canadian dollars to the Torath Emeth Charity Fund.⁵ I hugged him and thanked him warmly for such a generous gift.

This time, I asked him to cut and sell me a stainless steel plate of the required size the front side of which would have to be polished after taking a 5-millimeter bevel off each of the four edges. I also said that, in setting the price, his calculations should include the fact that after the engraving was completed, their firm would also have to weld four stainless-steel mounting bolts onto the back of the plate. After a moment's thought, David Turk told

⁵ The charity fund of our synagogue, the Torath Emeth Jewish Centre through which, according to the established rules, we raise money for our Rachel Guterman-Yaroslavskaya Fund for medical assistance to indigent Jews in Buryat-Mongolia.

me solemnly, “Mr. Rott, Gallery SH Ltd. will cover the cost of the material and cut and engrave the plate for free. It will be a gift from the company.” This generous act of a true gentleman almost left me speechless...



A steel plate with the names of the founders of the Memorial. Stainless steel 12 mm, weight 7.5 kg.

A few days later at work, I was handed a hefty package with the finished plate. I waited to open it until I got home, where Iya and I opened it together. “Thank you, David!”

Now, we had a new problem: how do we get our “new treasure” to Mysovaya? Ship it by mail? But what if it gets lost?

I have a diary note on a related subject:

“... We sent Taisya a letter package with medicine by certified mail with delivery confirmation. The post office accepted the package on August 12 and assured us that it would be delivered in 10 days... On August 28, the tracking service notified us that the package had been sitting in Moscow for five days. Meanwhile, Taisya had started making almost daily visits to the local post office,

only to hear the same answer every time: 'Not here yet.' On September 13, the tracking service informed us that they had received a notification: 'The package has been at the post office since September 4. No one has claimed it. The administration of Post Office No. 671230, Babushkin.'

Iya and I were in a hurry to get to the Kol Nidre—the first prayer of Yom Kippur—but we still decided to wake Taisya (it was 7 a.m. her time) and tell her.

—I'll make a run to the post office, but surely it can't be true. They would have sent me a notice,—Taisya tried to assure us. Then, she rushed to the post office.

—We don't have it!—the postal clerk snapped confidently.

—Yes, you do! I got a call from Canada...

—No, we don't!

—You'd better start looking for it, or else let's call Canada together! It's an international package, they paid for delivery confirmation... You'll be in big trouble!

Reluctantly, the postal workers went to check the storage room filled with packages. They looked and looked... and finally found the letter package in about ten minutes.

—Why didn't you send me a notice? It's been sitting there for ten days!

—We didn't have time! We were busy with the elections.

(Those were the elections in which all of Russia's government services and offices were given strict orders to «ensure a majority for Putin».)"

There you have it. And that was just a letter package. This time, we've got a seven-and-a-half-kilo "bomb." How many times is it going to get opened? Who's to say it isn't going to be used for scrap metal? It's stainless steel after all. What a headache!

And then I had a burst of inspiration. "Dasha! She's still in Toronto. We can ask her—maybe she'll agree to take it with her?" The girl agreed right away. I gave her 100 dollars in case they made her pay for the extra baggage weight.

Diary entry: *"On August 29 in Ulan-Ude, Dasha Rizvanova, carrying a heavy backpack and accompanied by her mother, delivered the plate to Vera Gordienko, who will ask her son Anton, a long-distance driver, to deliver it to the Chernykh in Mysovaya when one of his hauls takes him in their direction. The mother and daughter also gave Vera the 100 dollars which hadn't been spent."*

"Toronto, August 31, 2013. Today turned out to be a turbulent but unforgettable day: over in Mysovaya, they poured the concrete for the letter III. Valentin told us yesterday that they were getting ready..."



"Transportation Department"—Toronto—Ulan-Ude—Mysovaya.

Taisya has been very ill for three days, with blood pressure 190 over 110. Since morning, we haven't been able to reach any of their four mobile phones: 'This number is unavailable...' (Landline telephones in Mysovaya haven't been working for more than two months: the wires have been stolen and sold to the Chinese for scrap.)

In the morning, we somehow managed to reach Taisya on the first try. All she had for us was sad news: 'I'm in bed, feeling very sick. Couldn't go to the cemetery. They're pouring the cement today... Tomorrow they're taking me to Irkutsk to see the doctors...' And with that, we lost the connection. Skype wasn't working, either.

Apparently mobile phone service in the Baikal region works better at night, so we were finally able to reach Valentin at the cemetery.

—We've poured it! We're just about to head home,' he said. They'd had help from three hired hands. One of the first problems arose when they realized that because of the haste, the plywood parts made by the carpenter had not been marked with letters; as a result, the assembly of the formwork turned out to be very time-consuming and nerve-wracking. Furthermore, the carpenter had carved one of the Hebrew letters without realizing that the outline for the letter had been turned upside down. Luckily the mistake was spotted in time to cut out another letter. The indentations underneath the granite plates had not been made... The cement was delivered at 4 p.m. It was a hot day—30 Celsius—and

a hot wind was blowing. Both of the vibrators worked at full speed. Svetlana, 12-year-old Vladik, four-year-old Vadim, and two dogs from the two families accompanied the men to the construction site. The formwork is going to be left standing for six days. For now, they'll just cover it with tree branches (left from when they were clearing the grounds) so as not to catch the eye of any curious strangers.

I thanked them and congratulated them.

Half an hour later, I was able to reach Taisya:

—Tasenska, darling! Congratulations! Victory is yours! It's done!

—Yes, Vladimir! They came home after midnight, completely worn out. The dogs were the first to collapse from exhaustion...

—Good night to you all, and congratulate the boys for me. Well done!"



"Taisya Chernykh, September 14, 2013. Vladimir Zharov just left after giving us two DVDs and the text of his article. I'll send it today. It's obvious that he's a remarkable man—intelligent, educated, prudent, well-versed in history. He's very easy to communicate with. He'll be back from his business trip Monday, i.e. on the 16th, and will stop by then. We're planning to meet with Mayor Laryushkin to discuss our project."

"Taisya Chernykh, September 14, 2013. ...I haven't gone to receive the money yet—on Friday, I couldn't get on the local minibus (too many people), and yesterday and today there was too much urgent work.

The weather has been pleasant; not very warm, but at least no rain or wind."

"Taisya Chernykh, September 18, 2013. ...Just got back from Kabansk. Got the money—130,425.13 rubles. [that's \$4000 — V.R.] I know you called, Valentin told me. He also gave you the latest update about the sculpture. Otherwise no news, waiting for the kids to come over for the weekend. Hugs, Taisya."

"Valentin and Svetlana Chernykh, September 21, 2013. Mysovaya.

Hello, Vladimir Frantsevich and Iya Borisovna! We apologize for not being able to carry out your request to make a photo record of our work on pouring the sculpture, but we had to adjust to circumstances that were often beyond our

control (no hands to spare, no camera or video recorder handy, sometimes simply no time, people not wanting to be photographed because they weren't presentably dressed, etc.). We're sending several video files and photos from the last two days. (Some of the photos have a black dot in the middle; that's where our camera lens was damaged.) We tried to put our entire souls into this work. Maybe you'll find that we made some mistakes. But God knows, we really tried to do the best we could; whether we succeeded, you be the judge. The letter III in the photos looks like it's not uniform in color; that's because we just finished fixing up small defects and the paint is still wet. When it dries, everything will be monochrome and we think it's going to look good.

Sorry we started fixing the defects without talking to you about it first, but according to the weather forecast Mysovaya is about to get several days of rain mixed with snow, which has already started (you can see it clearly in the last photos and videos). That's why we had to go to Mysovaya a day early, on Thursday.

We're continuing with the installation of the posts and clearing away the trash—ours and others—from the paths. We collect the trash and haul it away regularly.

We're sending you photos of the reverse sides of the three gravestones (we have finally been able to turn them); maybe you'll be able to read some additional information off them.

The ground for Yura's grave has been delivered—you can see that in the photos. But the gravestone hasn't been installed yet. Weather permitting, we'll do it very soon.

The photos of the Kasimovs' house and the next house may not be very good, but they're as good as our 'technology' can manage.

We understand that it was often difficult for you to work with us, but we tried to do everything as you wished and suggested. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

With profound respect, Valentin and Svetlana Chernykh.

P.S. When you sent us the pay (for which many thanks!), you forgot to deduct your preliminary expenses on us."





The concrete caste of the letter “III”!

We looked with joy and excitement at these first photos of the completed sculpture made after the removal of the formwork. Victory! Well done, Chernykhs! I made full-page printouts of the photos and carried them with me all the time, showing them to our sponsors. They could see they were supporting something worthwhile.

Among the photos they had sent, one caught my attention. “What’s this plaster work? What for? With high-quality plywood and silicone spraying, the surface of the poured cement should have been even and smooth.”

The very first time we talked, I asked the Chernykhs about this. They tried to explain, reluctantly and not very coherently, that *“it didn’t turn out well in some places, so we had to fix it up.”* They’re good people, the Chernykhs; they didn’t want to upset me in any way. I could sense it and didn’t ask again.



What is it?

It was only about six months later that I got the real answer, which caused great distress to Iya and me. It’s unbelievable what our dear builders had to deal with! Here’s what happened. When they finished the difficult task of assembling the formwork, it was already dusk. The cement truck was standing by waiting. They turned on the generator, took care of the lighting, started pouring the cement. For better-quality cement, the mix was carefully compacted with an electrical vibrator. It was already past midnight when the work was completed. The generator and the shovels were hidden away in distant shrubbery. Tired but satisfied, our builders called it a night.

But imagine their dismay when, returning to the site early in the morning, they saw that someone had been there during the night and had punched holes in the formwork of each pillar using some sharp object, possibly even a crowbar. As a result, part of the still-fresh cement had spilled on the ground while the rest had begun to harden. They had to make an emergency trip to town, buy cement, pour the mix and start fixing the damage.

It was only on January 8, 2015 that Petr and Valentin calmly explained to us why the entire sculpture had to be plastered and painted. That is why the photo sent by Svetlana Chernykh makes a very different impression today.

Because of all those trips to the cemetery across bad terrain, the aluminum transmission case of Valentin’s Nissan-Cefiro cracked. It had to be towed to the welding shop using Petr’s Daewo-Espero. The crack was repaired, but the oil



Fixing the damage...

still leaked a little. In order to take a good look at the car from below and fix it up, our skilled masters built a trestle with an entry ramp at their summer house instead of using a service pit. Both Petr's and Valentin's cars needed major repairs several times.

The hardest part of the construction project turned out to be the daily trek across the countryside, with the terrible state of the roads and the mud that made it impossible for cement or gravel trucks to pass. I think several photos will expand the reader's horizons on this subject.



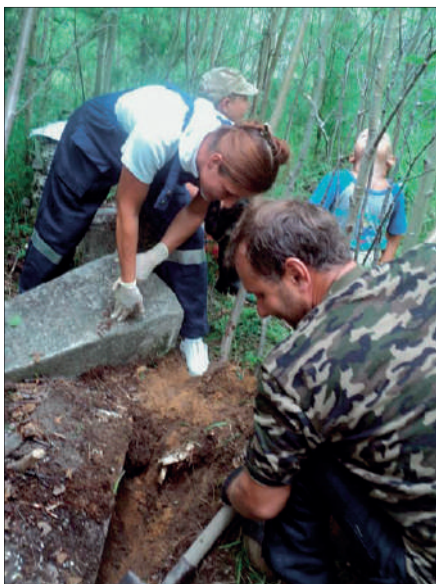


Impassable mud...

The old Jewish cemetery had been almost completely destroyed and looted. Of several hundred gravesites, only 14 gravestones—probably the heaviest, or the least attractive—had remained; but even they, every single one, lay on the ground face down. Some of the graves had been dug open by looters, and the edges of their sunken gravestones were visible in the pits.

Valentin and Petr Chernykh had raised up each gravestone into a vertical position, using hoists. Svetlana washed off the mud and took photos. That was how we found out the names of the deceased. The photos of the inscriptions, in Hebrew, were sent to us in Toronto, where the experienced expert Harry Kipper tried to read the barely legible symbols. This highly educated man, an economist by training, was a sincere well-wisher who always found the time to restore every gravesite inscription as best he could.





THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



Inscriptions on the grave-stones made in Hebrew, photographed and sent to Toronto, where expert Harry Kipper tried to decipher and translate them into Russian.



We also started to think about events to mark the opening of the Memorial. Judging by the pace of the construction work, we decided that we would be able to have an opening at the start of summer, once passably warm weather set in. I called the Chief Rabbi Levi Kaminetzky, at whose invitation I had made a trip to Tomsk several years earlier to present my book, *The Joys of Discovery*, at their beautiful, newly restored synagogue. We had been friends ever since, and they regularly send us reports on the celebrations and other events held at the synagogue. This time, I asked Rabbi Kaminetzky if he could find the time the next summer to come to Lake Baikal and preside over the opening ceremony for the Memorial we were building on the site of an old Jewish cemetery. Much to my delight, Levi Kaminetzky not only agreed to come but immediately gave me a date: Tuesday, June 17, 2014.



The Chief Rabbi of Tomsk—Levi Kaminetzky and the synagogue in Tomsk.

Taisya sent out invitations for the opening. One of the first to respond positively was the chief Rabbi of Irkutsk, Aaron Wagner. Then came enthusiastic replies from Hungary, from our friends whom the reader knows from my previous books: Éva Orosz, the recently retired director of a branch of «Budapest Bank», and Ilona Kercsi, the head of the business department of one of Budapest's leading television channels. The invitation to the Lake Baikal event

was also eagerly and joyfully accepted by Katalin Mezey, a Hungarian poetess and the owner of the Széphalom Könyvműhely publishing house which had published my books.

Oleg Barbas, from Israel, also confirmed his attendance; he had been pleasantly surprised to find the name of his great-grandfather in the list of burials we had been able to compile. Everyone was moved by the gift Oleg brought for the memorial, a silver-plated Tzedakah box for charity collections.

One of the descendants of Grandfather Schlomo-Haim, his great-granddaughter Sholomit Guterman (Tumasyantz), a prominent Moscow economist, not only agreed to travel to Buryat-Mongolia but also actively worked to publicize our project in Moscow and to find funding for it. We are most grateful to her for her energy and for her success in the first half of her endeavor.

Of course, we did not forget to invite our faithful old friends from the Tomsk Polytechnic Institute; unfortunately, we have been “going down the hill” for a long time now, and our ranks are thinning... In Ulan-Ude, Vera Gordienko and Louisa Maltseva took charge of the preliminary list of expected guests and arrangements for travel, lodging, permission to enter the border region of Kyakhta, etc.

Our college friends happily told us they were coming; but as the date of the opening approached, many of them fell silent. We started getting one melancholy piece of news after another. And so, when Vera and Louisa asked impatiently, “*So which ones of them are coming?*”, I would now answer sadly, “*Whoever doesn’t die will come!*” In the end, there was only one: retired radio engineer Yuri Dolgikh, who came from Omsk by train. For all twelve days of our unforgettable stay in Buryat-Mongolia, he lifted our spirits with his warmth and his songs.

The painstaking work of retrieving the names of those buried in the cemetery began simultaneously with the construction. Unfortunately, at a time when archives around the world are fulfilling their lofty humanitarian mission—to carefully preserve documents from the past and facilitate access for those who want to see those documents, guiding them in their search—the state archives in Putin’s Russia have returned to dark Stalinist days, once again hiding behind iron locks: “It’s all classified! Close it off and don’t let anyone in!” Here, too, proper credit is due to the tremendous energy and hard work of Taisya Chernykh, who managed to find most of the burial list we had compiled in the archives. We had been able to read about ten names on the gravestones.

My colleague Michael Mann, the president of the Mann Group Design company in Toronto, designed for us a color flyer in Russian and English which I started sending to friends in different countries, asking them to help track down names for the cemetery on Lake Baikal. Our daughter Ilona also sent out this information to friends.

СОХРАНИМ ПАМЯТЬ ст. МЫСОВАЯ



Станция Мысовая Транссибирской железнодорожной магистрали расположена на берегу озера Байкал. Два года назад, посетив эту небольшой сибирский городок, мы узнали о находящемся там старом еврейском кладбище, последнее захоронение на котором было в 1937 году, а известное нам самое раннее - относится к 1825 году. К сожалению, уцелевшие надгробные камни лежат на земле, перевернуты, большинство камней уже отсутствует, из многих могил выросли столетние сибирские кедрры. ... Среди пяти тысяч жителей Мысовой, несомненно, сегодня еще живут дальние потомки евреев.

Бурят-Монгольское телевидение, готовясь отметить 300-летие «Чайного пути», побывало в Мысовой, засняло и показало кадры с заброшенного еврейского кладбища. На просьбы: «Уважаемые потомки, помогите привести в порядок память о ваших близких!» первыми откликнулись заведующая технической библиотекой станции Таисия Черных и ее супруг Петр, сотрудники участка обслуживания железной дороги. Они обратились за помощью в возглавляемый нами Фонд имени Рахлея Гутермана – Ярославской, который на средства спонсоров из Торонто уже десять лет оказывает постоянную помощь пожатым и больным евреям Бурятии.

Совместными усилиями мы приступили к сооружению Мемориала «Шалом» на память покоящихся на этом кладбище. На двух плитах черного гранита будут выгравированы их имена.

На сегодня восстановлены гранитная кладбище, по сторонам которых прорублены просеки и заканчивается установка ограждения белого чистого камня из бетонных столбовидов. В юго-западном углу территории кладбища залита большая бетонная плита, на которой, кроме скульптуры Мемориала, будут установлены надгробные камни, сохранившиеся за пределами кладбища. Расположение могил, которые они когда-то принадлежали, определить уже не удастся.






Конечно же, самым трудным является выявление имен погребенных. Каждый лежащий надгробный камень приходится поднимать лезвием, отмыкать лицевую сторону и фотографировать. Надписи, сделанные на иврите, пытаемся прочесть в Торонто. За полгода напряженных поисков в архивах Мысовой, Улан-Удэ, Иркутска и Читы на сегодня удалось выявить следующие имена погребенных:

Абрамович Леопольд Семенович (1904-1922) Арден Александр (1846-1911) Бельская Ева Феликсовна (1929) Бардан Илья ... (1929) Будко Павел Иванович (1847-1935) Варфоломей Николас ... (1912) Гольман Борис Моисеевич (1893-1919) Гольман Израиль ... (1906-1924) Герц Нина Марковна (1828-1936, 108 лет) Герц Исidor Моше (1874-1933) Герц (Косов) Франц ... (1911)	Забелюцкий Яков Абрахамович ... (1828) Забелюцкий Яков ... (1901-1927) Израиль Абрахам Хаим Готтесман (1848-1906) Израиль Соломон Эфраим Абрахамович (1873-1922) Израиль Исидор Моисеевич (1899-1913) Израиль Софи ... (1920-1934) Каган Пинхус Шломо (1853-1911) Корф Баса Абрамовна (1855-1920) Корф Ципора Абрахамовна ... (1911) Корф Давидович Исаак (1856-1920) Корф Григорий Хаимович (1907-1912)	Лейкина Сара Абрамовна (1898-1921) Датина Рэйта Шапиро (1873-1913) Левин Григорий Абрамович (1865-1932) Левина Хана ... (1873-1923) Левин Александр Михайлович (1923-1930) Максимова Илья ... (1898-1923) Найрмен Василий Абрамович (1845-1922) Нисенштейн Мария Абрахамовна (1866-1922) Робертсон ... (1825) Рувин Солом Феликсевич ... (1910) Скорфин Михаил Давидович (1867-1912)	Скорфин Михаил (1846-1924) Тарнопольская Екатерина ... (1847-1923) Тришлер Андрей ... (1925) Улицкий Меир Абрамович (1865-1923) Улицкий Зехун Абрамович (1876-1937) Улицкий Анатолий Абрамович (1834-1937) Улицкий Нахман Абрамович (1891-1937) Фридман Марсел ... (1895-1925) <i>Могилы женщины Симона Шломо Хаим Гутермана.</i>
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ЗАИНТЕРЕСОВАНЫ ПОИСКАМИ ИМЕН ПОГРЕБЕННЫХ, ВЫ ПОЛУЧИЛИ БОЛЬШУЮ ИНТЕРЕСНУЮ ИНФОРМАЦИЮ ОБ НИХ СЕМЬЯХ, НАПРИМЕР:

- 1. АБРАХАМОВИЧ ЛЕОПОЛЬД СЕВЕНОВИЧ 1898 г. РОЖДЕНИЯ, ЖИТЕЛЕМ КОТОРОГО БЫЛ ГОРНОСТАВРОПОЛЬСКИЙ РАЙОН, ЗАПИСАН В СПИСКЕ ПОЖИВШИХ НА ТЕРРИТОРИИ НАШЕЙ.
- 2. БЕЛА АБРАХАМОВИЧ ЛЕОПОЛЬД, КАКИХ КАКИХ ЗАПИСАН В СПИСКЕ ПОЖИВШИХ НА ТЕРРИТОРИИ НАШЕЙ.
- 3. ТАМА АБРАХАМОВИЧ ЛЕОПОЛЬД, КАКИХ КАКИХ ЗАПИСАН В СПИСКЕ ПОЖИВШИХ НА ТЕРРИТОРИИ НАШЕЙ.
- 4. ИСАИ АБРАХАМОВИЧ ЛЕОПОЛЬД, КАКИХ КАКИХ ЗАПИСАН В СПИСКЕ ПОЖИВШИХ НА ТЕРРИТОРИИ НАШЕЙ.

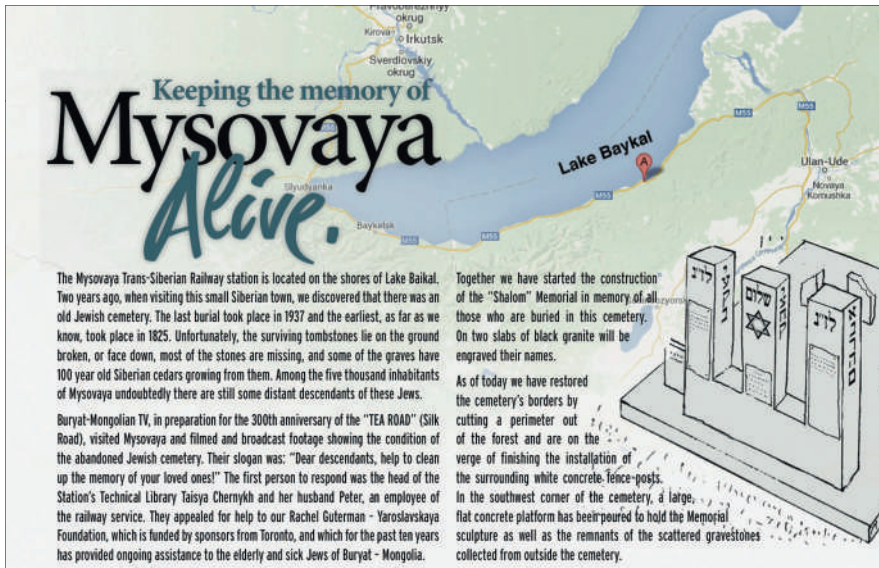
Мы надеемся, что кто-то из прочитавших эту информацию сможет подсказать нам имена еще кого-нибудь из их родственников или знакомых, кто мог оказаться захороненным на еврейском кладбище в Мысовой.

Желающие материально поддержать строящийся проект мемориала «Шалом» или получить дополнительную информацию, могут обратиться:

Ротт Владимир и Ия – vioratt@sympatico.ca / Черных Таисия – taya2109@yandex.ru



Flyers announcing the construction of the project in Mysovaya, were placed in newspapers in Canada, America, Russia, Israel and England.




Keeping the memory of Mysovaya Alive.

The Mysovaya Trans-Siberian Railway station is located on the shores of Lake Baikal. Two years ago, when visiting this small Siberian town, we discovered that there was an old Jewish cemetery. The last burial took place in 1937 and the earliest, as far as we know, took place in 1825. Unfortunately, the surviving tombstones lie on the ground broken, or face down, most of the stones are missing, and some of the graves have 100 year old Siberian cedars growing from them. Among the five thousand inhabitants of Mysovaya undoubtedly there are still some distant descendants of these Jews.

Buryat-Mongolian TV, in preparation for the 300th anniversary of the "TEA ROAD" (Silk Road), visited Mysovaya and filmed and broadcast footage showing the condition of the abandoned Jewish cemetery. Their slogan was: "Dear descendants, help to clean up the memory of your loved ones!" The first person to respond was the head of the Station's Technical Library Taisya Chernykh and her husband Peter, an employee of the railway service. They appealed for help to our Rachel Guterman - Yaroslavlskaya Foundation, which is funded by sponsors from Toronto, and which for the past ten years has provided ongoing assistance to the elderly and sick Jews of Buryat - Mongolia.

Together we have started the construction of the "Shalom" Memorial in memory of all those who are buried in this cemetery. On two slabs of black granite will be engraved their names.

As of today we have restored the cemetery's borders by cutting a perimeter out of the forest and are on the verge of finishing the installation of the surrounding white concrete fence-posts. In the southwest corner of the cemetery, a large, flat concrete platform has been poured to hold the Memorial sculpture as well as the remnants of the scattered gravestones collected from outside the cemetery.



Of course the most difficult thing is to identify the names of buried. Each overturned gravestone was lifted by winch, it was washed and the front was photographed. We attempted to read the Hebrew inscriptions in Toronto. During the past six months of intense research in the archives of Mysovaya, Ulan-Ude, Irkutsk and Chita we have been able to identify only the following names of the buried:

Almonovich, Leo son of Solomon (1894 - 1922)	Zabotnik, Yehuda son of Abba Chaim (- 1925)	Lindfina, Sara daughter of Abraham (1880 - 1920)	Selerman, Michael (18 days - 1920)
Barbar, Aaron son of Yehuda (1849 - 1923)	Zabotnik, Yehuda... (1861 - 1927)	Lubina, Sifra daughter of Ezer (1877 - 1917)	Tertshakova, Kalmarina (1847 - 1920)
Beiskape, Geyla daughter of Fella (- 1929)	Itchenich, Abba Chaim son of Gedaliah (1840 - 1904)	Levitz, Gershon son of Abraham (1865 - 1922)	Tratschek, Andre (- 1925)
Brudach, Ilya (- 1926)	Itchenich, Zoyso son of Abba Chaim (1871 - 1922)	Lustig, Chana (1877 - 1923)	Uchitel, Yulian son of Alper (1865 - 1933)
Barbe, Gersh son of Yehuda (1847 - 1925)	Itchenich, Yosef son of Yosef (1899 - 1913)	Lustig, Alexander son of Michael (1923 - 1930)	Uchitel, Esther daughter of Abraham (1876 - 1937)
Barbe, Yanga daughter of Isaac (- 1922)	Itchenich, Sonia (1920 - 1924)	Makulsky, Ilya (1848 - 1924)	Uchitel, Aundry son of Abraham (1914 - 1937)
Gedman, Berach son of Mele (1847 - 1932)	Kogor, Israel son of Isaac (1857 - 1921)	Mattupovich, David son of Abraham (1845 - 1922)	Uchitel, Nadia daughter of Abraham (- 1937)
Gedman Israel (1908 - 1921)	Korf, Baqya daughter of Abraham (1853 - 1926)	Nichtsover, Maria daughter of Abba Chaim (1866 - 1920)	Falk, Muthy (1864 - 1924)
Yaqser, Ilya son of Meir (1828 - 1924, 108 years)	Korf, Gittel daughter of Abba Chaim	Rabinovitch (- 1925)	Four infants from Family Shomo and Hava Guterman
Yaqser, Yosef son of Ilya (1814 - 1912)	Korf, Levan son of Isaac (1856 - 1928)	Ruzitski, Stefan son of Philip (- 1930)	
Yaqser, Prada (Black)	Korf, Gershon son of Chaim (1914 - 1919)	Selerman, Menachem Mendel son of Shad David (1867 - 1920)	

WHILE DOING THIS RESEARCH WE HAVE AMASSED A GREAT DEAL OF VALUABLE INFORMATION ABOUT THE FAMILIES OF THE INTERRED. FOR EXAMPLE:


1. FENOVICH, ABBA CHAIM SON OF YEHUDAH DIED IN 1904 AT THE AGE OF 46 YEARS. HIS CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN:
1. FENOVICH, SARAH SON OF ABBA CHAIM, WIFE RIVA, SON ABBA CHAIM BORN IN 1901, SON ISRAEL, THE DAUGHTER RITA, YIP.
2. FENOVICH, LEON SON OF ABBA CHAIM, WIFE CHANA BAULA, DAUGHTER RITA, SON DAUGHTER ESTHER, YIP.
3. FENOVICH, LEONAH SON OF ABBA CHAIM, WIFE LEAH, DAUGHTER RITA, THE SON JUDITH, YIP.
4. FENOVICH, REZEL SON OF ABBA CHAIM, WIFE RUTH, SON ABBA CHAIM, DAUGHTER YIP.
5. FENOVICH, ZEL SON OF ABBA CHAIM, WIFE ESTER, SON YIP.
6. FENOVICH, SERVEY SON OF ABBA CHAIM, WIFE HANNA, SON SERVEY, THE DAUGHTER SONIA, YIP.
7. FENOVICH, JOSE SON OF ABBA CHAIM - IN THE YEARS 1909-1912 MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF THE HADASSAH SYNAGOGUE.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES TO HISTORY OF THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY FROM THE CITY OF KARKAS IN THE PROVINCE OF TIBET. THEY WERE ALL MERCHANTS.

We sincerely hope that someone who is reading this information can provide us with the names of anyone else of their relatives or friends who may be buried in this Jewish cemetery in Mysovaya.

THOSE WHO WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, OR TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT THIS MEMORIAL "SHALOM" PROJECT PLEASE CONTACT:

Vladimir Rott and Iya - viarott@sympatico.ca / Taisya Chernykh - taya2109@yandex.ru



On Saturday October 5, I came to the synagogue in the morning and was taken aback when many people came up to congratulate me. Before leaving home, they had had a look at the fresh issue of The National Post, Canada's largest newspaper, which had a color photo of Iya and myself and a full-page article about me, about our family, and about the construction project on Lake Baikal. I hadn't expected such fast work from the reporter, Joe O'Connor, and the photographer Peter Thompson, who had only just, on Thursday, spent

a morning at our home getting acquainted with our past and present. The newspaper's website also featured a gallery of color photos on the events in Mysovaya.

We were profoundly moved by the very first response to the «*National Post*» article. It was written by a remarkable woman named Paulina Zelitsky:

“Dear Vladimir, October 5, 2013 z.

It was a very special moment for me to discover your work in two volumes «In Defiance of Fate». It is a very similar feeling to suddenly meeting after dozens of years of exile a dear old friend.

Myself, I defected from the Soviet Union in Gander, Nfdl in May of 1971. Actually, according to the Gander immigration authorities I was the only crazy defector from anywhere to jump the plane in Gander on my own with two very young children. The reason I was risking my life in such a dangerous way was because I had to make a choice between becoming a KGB informer and honey trap or to escape with my children.

I read an article about you in the National Post and thought that you might enjoy the book my husband Paul Weinzwieg and I published on Amazon about the very personal ways my father Volf Zelitsky brought me up as a Jewish girl in Odessa which allowed us to resist the despotism of the totalitarian state.

*We also live near Toronto and would like to send you a copy of both Volumes of our book **The Sea is Only Knee Deep** describing this period and my experience. To that end, please let me know if I could send you an electronic Kindle version which in my opinion is the best for using references; or if you would prefer a printed copy. In such case, I would need your address to send it to you.*

Best regards,

Paulina Zelitsky (e-mail and phone) ”

Of course, it wasn't long before Paulina and Paul were guests at our home. We started to meet with them, to read their book, and to listen to the incredible details of the story of this graceful, very intelligent woman who had accomplished something almost unbelievable. Their book is impossible to put down, just as it's impossible to breathe when one imagines the situation in which a five-year-old boy races across an airfield, away from his mother. “Edik, wait! Edik, stop!” his mother shouts frenziedly, running after him and clutching little three-year-old Ernest to her chest. But Edik is not going to stop, not for anything: he and his mother have rehearsed, again and again, the scene in which she will wordlessly point him in a direction and he will run that way, pursued by her shouts to stop. The KGB agents escorting the Soviet liner had not had

anything in their training to prepare them for this. For that matter, the Canadians, too, were simply stunned by what was happening.

The woman who was running away from the Soviet Union at Gander Airport was a marine construction engineer. And it happened at a most interesting time: having gotten burned in Cuba and removed its missiles from «the Island of Freedom», the Soviet Union—«The Fighter for Peace in the entire world» had immediately undertaken a new secret project: the construction in Cuba of an underwater harbor cut into granite, where Soviet submarines carrying all categories of missiles could enter and dock...

The following week, also unexpectedly for us, two more English-language newspapers published in Toronto, The Jewish Tribute and the Canadian Jewish News, ran our flyers and wrote about our project in Siberia.

Of course, I did not expect the English-language coverage to help track down any names of people buried in the cemetery. However, what happened in the aftermath of the National Post article was both surprising and heartening. The newspaper received several letters from readers who wanted my address so that they could donate to our Mysovaya project. One Toronto man, a certain Mr. Joseph Abramski, sent a letter to the newspaper and enclosed a \$25 check made out to me.

And here's the story of another man who wrote to the newspaper, Mr. Bennett Little, the head of a company in Montreal. He told me that his wife's parents had come to Montreal from Russia in 1860, while his own father fled from pogroms in Siberia in 1905 (I don't know what city he lived in), leaving his business behind; he and his family first traveled to Harbin in China, then to Ellis Island in New York, and finally reached Canada in 1906. Bennett is fluent in the two main Chinese languages, Mandarin and Cantonese. He not only sent me a check for \$180 but also enclosed a copy of a letter he had sent to a group of his friends. Here it is.



The children have grown up, gotten educated, and have become independent, and Paul Weinzweig and Pauline Zelitski live on a farm near Toronto, writing books and, among other things, providing shelter and care to sick, homeless, and old dogs. Toronto. 2015.

From: BenLittle@B...

Date: October 16, 2013 4:59:34 PM GMT-04:00

To: ...18 addressyes

Subject: Oct. 16/13 very worthwhile charity

I heard about this gentleman and his wife a few weeks ago through an article in the National Post and resolved to get in touch with them. It wasn't easy and I finally contacted the reporter who graciously offered to send my email to them, protecting their privacy and leaving it up to them whether they wished to be contacted. Finally, today, they reached me and we had a nice talk which ended with him promising to send me an email, which he did subsequently follows. (Attached.)

Everyone knows that I don't normally solicit or suggest charitable causes as I prefer to give quietly and as anonymously as possible. But this—many of us came from people who emigrated out from some place similar so let this be as a beacon for all those places that have vanished.

Thanks for your consideration and, if you could also forward the email to others, that, too, would be outstanding.

Bennett

In case readers are wondering, I will say that of the nine people to whom Bennett sent this letter, only one—Gregory Bordan—responded, sending a cheque for \$75. Of course we are always sincerely grateful to everyone who helps us, and even to those who sincerely want to help. Fundraising is a hard job; you have to put a lot of strength, nerves, and patience into it, and then you can get somewhere.

“Taisya Chernykh, October 22, 2013. ...Sorry about the delay in mailing the expense reports. We got a computer virus and had to wait for a specialist to fix it, hence the delay.

This morning I finally met with the mayor; I just got back from the cemetery, where we also went together. I can tell you all about it over Skype, or is it better to write?”

(My notes after the Skype conversation.) *“When she came to see him, Laryushkin made a scene right away. «It was my idea to restore the cemetery, anyway! I've been talking about this for three years!» Taisya fearlessly calmed him down (they're former classmates, after all). When he saw the majesty of the Flyer, he didn't even understand right away what it was and what it was for. In the end, he drove by to pick her up and they went to the cemetery together. He passed by the posts without commenting, but a little while later he asked, «Where did you get*

those? In Ulan-Ude or in Irkutsk?»—«We made them here in Mysovaya!»—«Who made them?..»

He asked for an astronomically high price for the Kamaz gravel trucks to rebuild the road to the cemetery—something like \$1,000 per vehicle. Finally he declared, «Our entire city budget is 7 million rubles. Let Rott pay for the road!»

The sight of the cement foundation of the memorial stunned him. «When did you manage to do that?»

Taisya advised him, «Don't wait. Write letters to the higher-ups, ask for assistance...» He was extremely irate at the fact that the date, June 17, had already been set without coordinating it with him...

Taisya said: «If you don't build the road, they'll walk across the mud. But they'll still come!»"

There was another issue that worried me as well. Even before we started the major work, I told the Chernykhs over Skype that I couldn't imagine doing the opening for the memorial unless we set up a couple of portable toilets nearby. They said nothing to that; but, being the sort of people who take everything seriously, they added this to the list of essentials. A week later Taisya admitted that it was impossible to obtain this item either in Mysovaya or in neighboring towns. In another couple of days, I got an encouraging message from her: "Finally met with our mayor, asked him for help with our most difficult problems. Among other things, he asked, *«What does Rott want toilets in the woods for?»* I said to him, *«It's not about Rott wanting toilets; it's about Rott wanting all the details of our project to be at the highest modern level!»*" Those words heartened me: so the Chernykhs and I were seeing eye to eye.

Valentin undertook a massive search in Irkutsk. And he actually did manage to find something. One firm asked for «50,000 rubles for three-day rental of four toilets which it "didn't have as yet," plus extra pay for the driver...» Then, they said confidently, *"My advice is to buy from us two Eurostandard toilets 26,000 rubles each and service them on the spot with a special truck provided by your town, it will be cheaper. And another plus—you'll always have these toilets handy for any future event."*

I scratched my head for a few days at the thought of such prices—but then I got some good news from Ravil Rizvanov. He told me that the Social Welfare Ministry of Buryatia had promised to issue two portable toilets for one day, for the price of 3,000 rubles, along with a crane-equipped truck that would deliver the toilets from Ulan-Ude to Mysovaya. I was overjoyed and walked around all day filled with excitement at this news.

Almost at midnight, Baikal Time, I got the Chernykhs on Skype. «Fortunately», they had only just come from the cemetery where they had had another day of hard work on the construction site. Burning with impatience, I quickly

blurted out my happy news—and then almost fell off my chair when I heard Valentin's answer.

—*Vladimir Frantsevich, this is not going to work! We don't have roads... If that truck gets out here, the moment it gets off the federal highway, it's going to get stuck in the mud and we'll have to run around looking for a tractor to pull it out. And if it unloads on the asphalt-covered federal highway, then what are we going to do? Lug the toilets to the cemetery on our shoulders? And what are we going to do with them after the opening? No, this is no good.*

The Chernykh's were right. We begged and pleaded endlessly with one government office after another about fixing the road to the cemetery and about portable toilets. In case it didn't work out, I quietly agreed with Petr and Valentin on a contingency plan: if worst came to worst, they would dig a small pit the day before the opening, set up four poles around its edges, and use dark plastic sheets to make an improvised tent with an opening flap on one side. Then, after the opening, they would dismantle this structure right away.

But back to our search for the forgotten names from the cemetery in Mysovaya. One of the first responses was a phone call from North Carolina, from Lyudmila Shakov and her husband Alexei Orlov—my teachers and advisors, my mentors, selflessly and infinitely devoted to the cause of preserving Russian-language culture in America. They praised our flyer and suggested some practical steps for placing it in Russian-language newspapers and magazines. They also gave me some contact numbers.

In New York—where the world's oldest Russian-language newspaper, «Novoye Russkoye Slovo», closed a few years ago after a hundred years of publication—the editor-in-chief of the weekly Reporter, Vladimir Chernomorsky, agreed after some haggling to print our flyer for \$250.

The owner of the Israeli news company «Novosti nedeli» [News of the week] turned out to be more «decisive» and asked for \$1,000 at once; but his assistant Lyudmila was more kind-hearted. She heard me out attentively as I explained my motives and requests, went “back and forth” between us a couple of times, and then told me: “*He said that in addition to the main paper, he'll also run your ad in our other three publications—Secret, Luch [Beam], and Echo—and will only charge you \$500 for everything.*” I agreed.

Several publications turned me down, citing lack of space.

But there were other experiences too, such as my encounter with Alla Kadish, the editor-in-chief of a Russian-language paper that comes out in Toronto under the name «Gazeta Plus» — an encounter that moved me to tears. I have already told my readers that, as a result of my life experience, I can show stoicism and endurance if someone is nasty to me, or even hits me; but if I receive or see some human kindness, I simply cannot hold back tears. And this was one of those moments.

“Toronto, October 11, 2013. ...Called Gazeta Plus a few days ago... The editor-in-chief, Alla Kadish, listened to me graciously and asked me to show her the material. I immediately sent her the flyer. Here are some excerpts from the conversation that followed:

—No problem. We’ll print it in the newspaper and in our new color magazine, «Russian Week».

Alla Kadish, Editor-in-Chief, Gazeta Plus, Talk Show Host, Radio Plus. Russian Info-trade Ltd.

*—Dearest Alla! I am deeply grateful. How much do I owe you? Best wishes,
Vladimir Rott.*

—Nothing, we don’t charge for printing such information. — Alla Kadish.

*—Tremendous thanks! It’s good to know that such Allas, and such newspapers, still exist.
Vladimir Rott.”*

Something similar happened at «Panorama», a Russian-language newspaper in Los Angeles. Alexei Orlov was not mistaken when he told me they had a very kind and knowledgeable editor, Irina Parker. I liked her from the moment we first spoke: she was courteous and sensitive. After our conversation, I immediately mailed her the flyer and accidentally sent it out in both languages.

Here is our correspondence which began on October 16:

*—Dear Irina Parker, I was discussing the Russian part of our flyer. Thank you for your attention.
Vladimir Rott”*

“Vladimir, our publisher doesn’t mind running your material, not as a flyer but as a full page in the paper. Is that all right with you, and when would you like it to run? Our paper is a weekly, published on Wednesdays.

*With kind wishes,
Irina Parker”*

*—Dear Irina,
Of course a full page would be best and most effective. What will I owe you? As for when, as soon as possible. We are making an all-out effort to collect the names of the people buried in that Jewish cemetery. In addition to*

the 40 names we already have, we got two more the other day after the page appeared in the Israeli Weekly News! As far as your newspaper, the timing is not super-urgent, but the sooner people see it, the better, so they can spread the word about our search.

Thank you very much for your desire to help.

If you do run the page, please send me two copies of the newspaper so I can give them to the Mysovaya museum.

Be well,

Vladimir Rott.

—Does it work for you if we run it in the next issue, which comes out on October 30? And then run it again in the November 6 issue?”

—My dear Irina, of course it works! Wonderful! I’m deeply moved by your efficiency and integrity!

If I have to pay you, please write to me and please wait until November 22 when I’m back in Toronto.

With deepest respect,

Vladimir.

—Vladimir, our publisher can run your page for free once, and a second time for \$300. If you are willing to pay (only for the second time), please let me know, and I’ll put you in touch with our advertising department.

Best wishes, Irina.

—Dear Irina! When I write the story of the Memorial, I will definitely mention the noble and humane gesture of «Panorama», one of the very few papers that printed our page for free. Nonetheless, please go ahead and do the second printing, I’ll pay with my VISA card. I understand, of course, that you gave me the lowest rate. And one more question: Will the page be in color?

Once again, many thanks! I’m leaving on my trip Thursday. Please send two copies each.

Best wishes to you!

Vladimir Rott

—Dear Vladimir, thank you for the kind words. We’ll send the papers when they come out. As for the payment, please call Naum Turetsky, at the same number that you called me. Unfortunately the page won’t be in color; we’ve already sold all the color ads, and it will be very expensive for you to pay for an additional four pages in color (you’re probably familiar with the technology).

Best wishes, Irina.

That trip I mentioned was Iya and me leaving for another unforgettable tour of Israel, after which we were going to spend a week in Hungary. I'm mentioning this only to describe an experience I had on that trip. That time, I had four book events planned with Russian-speaking readers and two with English-speaking audiences. This time, I was talking about my book «My-sovaya Station» and about our dramatic plans to restore the memory of the people buried in an old, abandoned Jewish cemetery in Siberia. The reader can imagine my deep attachment to this project for which I had already spent over a year begging for a trickle of donations—not to mention my energy and my own financial contributions. Of course there were people willing to give, but they were mostly people who gave to many causes, all the time. And yet here, four times, I faced an audience of 30 or 40 not very old people who had been given refuge by Israel, who heard me tell my story in Russian and shared in its emotions—but not one person offered anything, or even asked how he or she could help. This brought to my mind Lenin's famous speech which we learned off by heart in University, «*What is Soviet Power? And what did it give to the people.*» To tell the truth, I already know what to expect and no longer get upset about this, but I do always feel regret. "Will they all die without ever realizing how rich they were?"

My next event was at «Orthodox Union», a popular, well-run, always crowded Jerusalem club for seniors where I gave my presentation in English. My allotted time was up—I had been given just 45 minutes—and they were rushing me, since the people who had arrived for the next event were already waiting by the doors; but just then, a member of the audience approached me and handed me a 50-shekel bill. "You can use that." An elderly lady behind that man silently gave me two twenties...

When I returned to Toronto, I immediately made the call to Los Angeles. In a whisper, Irina advised me to tell Naum Turetsky a "sob story." Then she said, "*Stay on the line. I'll talk to him first and remind him what this is about, and then I'll connect you.*"

Naum Turetsky said at once, "We'll charge you \$250." Without wasting any words, I gave him my VISA card number. Then, we got into a conversation, and what a conversation!

—Born in Belarus in 1947... No, not related to that one (Mikhail Turetsky, the director of a wonderful vocal band). We had a lot of people with that last name in our town... Came to America with my younger brother. Mama also came, she died after living with us in Los Angeles for 12 years. My older brother was four when the war began. My parents sent him to live with his grandma and grandpa in the country. My father, a field doctor, went off to war. My mother, a nurse, stayed safe in Cheboksary. My older brother was killed along with the old folks. Father spent the entire war on the front lines... I remember how in 1953,

when they arrested the doctors, Papa gave Mama instructions for what to do if he got arrested...

Before he died, Papa told us that his last wish was to be buried next to Mama. It took my brother and me three years, and a lot of money and health, but we did manage to get Papa's body exhumed, to bring him from Belarus to California, and to have him buried next to Mama!

How could I not weep when I heard those words? And my own father, Ferenc—where does he lie?

A Jewish newspaper in England and several papers in Russia, including some in the Lake Baikal region, also printed our flyer for free. Altogether, we were only able to track down another 59 names; but we rejoiced at each of those names, and each of them gave us new strength and inspiration. At the same time, Taisya managed to unearth previously unknown information about many forgotten residents of Mysovaya Station: where they were from, what they did, what property they owned, who they married, who their children were...

"Chernykh Taisya, January 23, 2014. Vladimir, Iya, hello! The reality of our lives is such that, somehow, there's always room for problems while the positive moments are few and far between. Somehow we always find ourselves dealing with various difficult situations, and any good news or pleasant encounter makes us happy. Today, for instance, a Mysovaya resident named Natalia Razuvayeva came to see me, she works for the railroad as a senior electrical mechanic for communications. She brought a copy of «Pyatnisa» ["Friday"] No. 43 in which our flyer was printed. She was quite surprised to see the name of her grandmother, Burbo Feigi, on the list of people buried in the Jewish cemetery. Even though Mysovaya is a small place and you'd think that everyone knows everything about everyone, she had heard nothing when you were in town and had never seen your book «Mysovaya Station» (even though it was sold in the local bookstore, at the post office, etc.); she also knew nothing about the Jewish cemetery and hadn't been there in 30 or 40 years. We had a long conversation. Of course I told her about the way I got to know you, about your trip to Mysovaya, about your books, about your determination and actions to preserve the memory of the past. She was stunned. She told me she wanted to do anything she could to help (not financially). I'm very glad! I asked her to write down anything her family remembers."

But we also had a different kind of experience. The painstaking work of compiling and double-checking the final list of names to be given to the stonecutters who would carve them into the granite was almost done. Taisya already had some information on one of the men buried in the cemetery, David Moiseyevich Ruzhin. She knew his wife's name was Leah and that they had

two sons who were born in Mysovaya (Gersch in 1909, Iosif in 1913), but she did not have the dates of David Ruzhin's birth or death. We received information from Israel that a woman with the same last name worked at the town library in L., in the Kabansk district. It was a long distance from Mysovaya to L., so Taisya called a friend who lived in that town and asked her to find this woman and ask her if she knew anything about David Moiseyevich Ruzhin. But when Taisya's friend contacted the woman in question, she took great umbrage at the inquiry:

—Yes, I'm Ruzhina. My husband's grandfather is buried in Mysovaya. But what's all this for? Why delve into those Jewish roots? I don't want any inscriptions!

What a slap in the face that was to us. A man had been buried, his name had been almost forgotten. We had undertaken to restore his name—and a member of his own family wanted his very memory erased! Yet if the Chernykhs remain in good health, they will continue to dig up the good works of many people who have been resting in that cemetery for centuries and write fascinating stories about them.

Taisya asked me what we should do. When I posed the question to Rabbi Mordecai Ochs, an esteemed scholar whose advice was always wise, his answer was plain: "*Mr. Rott, if his family objects, you must not write his name...*" That upset me very much. We had put so much love and energy into every particle of this project, as had the Chernykhs! We had restored his name, and now we couldn't write it...

It was just around then that Kurt Rothschild, the president of the international Mizrachi organization who is already known to my readers, came back from Israel on one of his regular visits to Toronto. This spry 94-year-old fellow who had spent most of his life in Toronto and had only moved to Jerusalem two years earlier had raised billions of dollars to help Jews and Israel over the course of his life. On this visit, he was once again making the rounds of his wealthy donors telling them about his latest needs and projects, and I, out of old habit, chauffeured him from the synagogue to his office after the morning service.

I told Mr. Rothschild about my troubles: about Ruzhin, his relative, and Rabbi Ochs's opinion. Kurt Rothschild was silent for a moment; then he said:

—*Let me think until tomorrow...*

I thought the old man would forget about his promise, so the next day when I drove him to the office once again I did not remind him about it and we talked about other things. But life taught me another lesson. We are so naïve sometimes. We just can't imagine that the elderly Mr. Rothschild, despite his advanced age, could still remain an extraordinarily conscientious and intelligent man, or that he would keep his sense of duty until his last breath. Iya and I had seen the evidence of this many times.

It was the same case this time. He was growing older with each visit and could no longer walk without a cane; he had just told me that it was midnight by the time he came to see the last of his donors the night before, and when I came to the synagogue at 6:30 in the morning he was already there in a small group being instructed by a young rabbi; and now, after the morning service, we were in my car when he said:

—I've been thinking about your question from yesterday, and here's my advice: Write the name in Hebrew letters.

That advice left me stunned. I fell silent and did not say another word. Distracted, I spent half a day mulling this over. *"Should we really do that? Why? What for? We'll write all the names in Russian and one in Hebrew? But what good is that going to do? For whom? No! No!"* Then, finally, I made a firm decision.

The next morning, I approached the rabbi and said:

—Rabbi Ochs, I know your opinion. Meanwhile Mr. Rothschild is suggesting we write the name in Hebrew. I've been weighing this situation for a while. My whole life, my childhood, my Bobruysk days have taught me this: think it over, make a decision, and if you believe you're right, fight for it! Who is this woman to forbid us? We're paying tribute to the past, to ancestors. She will never come to this cemetery—but we have found the almost forgotten name of a man who is buried there, and we want to preserve that name among the others who lived in Mysovaya. The name of David Moiseyevich, like those of all the others, will be rightfully and proudly carved into the granite!

Rabbi Ochs peered into my eyes, then smiled and said confidently, "Ha tsalach!" ("Good luck!"), and firmly shook my hand.

The Irkutsk company «Zavod Kamnya» ("Stone Factory") had the names we identified engraved on thick polished slabs of black granite. The opening of the Memorial was scheduled for the summer of the following year, but we really wanted to print a postcard that we could give as a memento to all those present on the day of the opening ceremony, and for that we needed a photo of the actual sculpture.

It was early April. Valentin and Petr Chernykh had to be especially skilled and careful to deliver those priceless 140-kilo granite slabs from Irkutsk to Mysovaya. After waiting a long time for suitable weather and for the Federal Highway to be cleared of snow, they delivered them without a hitch. Then they tried, with two assistants, to get the slabs from the Federal Highway to the cemetery on a sled across roadless ground—but the sled kept sinking into the deep snow mixed with mud. Finally, Petr managed to set up a wide, thin sheet of steel, and the boys hauled the first slab over to the cemetery by dragging it over that sheet—only to encounter an unpleasant surprise...

In late August, when the formwork for the letter «III» was being filled with concrete, long steel pins were welded to the internal steel carcass. The ends of

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

these thick threaded rods were supposed to protrude from the concrete and support the granite plates, which were going to be hung on them and affixed with nuts. What they saw was difficult to believe: all the steel pins protruding from the concrete, every single one, had been either sawed off or simply broken off. Some mean-spirited vandal must have been looking for thrills... Upset as they were, the boys could do nothing except haul over the second plate, then go back to town for an electrical generator, drag it to the Memorial through the snow and mud, drill in the concrete, and put in anchor fasteners somewhat lower instead of the broken pins.

Already in a rotten mood, the boys had to mount the granite plates just to take several photos for the future commemorative postcard. After that, the plates were taken down, brought back to Mysovaya with great care, and put in storage until the opening of the Memorial.



JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 17



Transport and temporary installation of granite slabs.



“Chernykh Taisya, January 20, 2014. ...My trip to the bank in Kabansk yesterday turned out to be a waste of time. Before going, I called them first and asked if a money transfer had been made to my name. They said, come on over. When I got there and wanted to pick up the money, there was some sort of glitch. They said some man had called and asked about the money transfer. Then they said, «Call tomorrow». I called today and spoke to an operator named Svetlana. I didn’t like her response: «The man who called asked if the transfer had actually been made within the system». However, I remember that yesterday she mentioned a specific transfer for me and I asked her about that. She said, «You misunderstood». I didn’t want to press further, realizing that she wasn’t going to say anything else. This may be some sort of banking inspection. The money hasn’t arrived, and I feel really bad that you’re going to have to spend your time and energy on straightening out this situation. Take care of yourselves! Hugs.”

“Chernykh Taisya, January 24, 2014. Vladimir, Iya, hello! Everything is all right. The business we’ve been talking about in the past few days has been concluded successfully.”

That was Taisya letting me know that my attempt to wire 2,000 dollars to another addressee in Irkutsk via «Eastern Delivery»⁶ («E.D.») had been a success. But that was the last time this money transfer company assisted our project.

⁶ The name has been changed to avoid unnecessary prosecution.

“Chernykh Taisya, March 4, 2014. ...Today, the trip to Kabansk to take care of our business was a success. Of course, I had to get Irina involved early on, and even later there were many issues. As a result, I left home at 11 a.m. and came back at 6:30 p.m., and spent a huge amount of money on the taxicab too, since the car waited for almost 5 hours. Had to miss my medical treatments, but at least I took care of everything. Couldn't have done it without Irina's help.

Respectfully yours, Taisya.”

(That was when I turned to «Cashtelx»⁷ instead of Eastern Delivery to make a money transfer to Russia; they quickly and easily delivered three essential delayed transfers of 1,000, 1,500, and 2,500 USD. Taisya paid 2,000 rubles for the cab. They gave her 36,000 rubles for the 1,000 transfer; she took the rest in dollars.)

We got so busy wiring money on a regular basis for Memorial-related expenses and for aid to the old folks in Buryat-Mongolia that our main money transfer service of many years, the hidebound «E.D.» had grown jittery about the terrorism and violence of our troubled times, grew suspicious and flagged our transfers as related to the drugs or arms trade. For three ill-fated months, time after time, the money we had worked so hard to raise as quickly as we could was returned to us by «E.D.» after a week's wanderings—and after our recipients had travelled in vain to pick it up across tens of kilometers of Siberian expanse, only to be warily told by Russian bank clerks, “We can't give you the money, «E.D.» won't authorize it.”

In vain did I plead with «ED» agents and customer service representatives, send pleas and complaints to the company's headquarters in Colorado, send them my detailed personal data, expense reports, and drafts and sketches for the Memorial that was being built by a team of enthusiasts. Nothing worked. A representative would look into the matter, find that everything was clean, and call to congratulate me: “The money is ready for pickup.” I would immediately get the message to Taisya or to Vera Gordienko. They would rush to receive the money...but then something would go wrong again, and two days later we would get another call from «E.D.» in Toronto: “Take your money back, we can't make the transfer and we can't tell you why.”

Two or three days later, yet another representative would call us with good news: “Congratulations, it's all taken care of—no problem! Tell your recipients they can get the money.” But all we got for our good deeds, and for the considerable transfer fees we paid to the giant corporation, was more sweet talk. The money would come back to us again. Adding insult to injury, at the end of each fruitless conversation, the well-trained representative—perfectly aware that the caller was seething with indignation—would revert to a dulcet tone and recite, like an automated recording, “Thank you for doing business with Eastern Delivery! Can I help you with anything else?”

⁷ The name has been changed to avoid unnecessary prosecution.



Panorama of the far edge of Mysovaya Station.

I was at the end of my rope. It was especially embarrassing to explain these problems to our Siberian friends, who were pulling off genuinely miraculous feats every day and were baffled by what was going on with the money. After ten years of using «E.D.»'s services, I had to say good-bye to them forever!

Two days later, I went to Cashtelekh on a friend's advice and found smooth, courteous and caring service, with no more problems in delivering money for completing the construction of the Memorial. I keep many things in my personal archive; one of its newest additions is a thick folder of documents recording our depressing battle for a good cause—the battle with the bloated giant «E.D.» whose employees are trained to be certain that they are always right...

“Chernykh Taisya, April 15, 2014. Vladimir, Iya, hello! I spent all these days knocking on door after door, trying to get some sort of forward movement on the question of the roads. Had a visit today from the deputy chief of the administration of the Kabansk region for questions of social welfare, Olga Vasilievna Kulaga, to whom I talked on the phone before and then wrote a letter (remember, I told you about her a few days ago). She and the Babushkin Council of Deputies chair Ekaterina Aleksandrovna Averina came with me today to look at our problematic road to the Jewish cemetery. What they saw left them shocked and thoughtful, since we couldn't drive even 50 meters along the main road from the federal highway and then walked about 20 meters along the shorter road. After that it's nothing but muck, with deep snow along the edges. They refused to walk all the way to

the cemetery in such awful conditions. I showed them photos of the cemetery and the memorial; thankfully, I always carry them with me in a folder. We talked for a long time and finally came to the conclusion that the potholes on the main road will have to be filled with gravel. No one knows who will be doing this or when. They said, we'll think it over and decide. And that's where we left things off. That's our news for the day. Respectfully, Taisya."

As I work on this material, I cannot stop marveling at how busy and active we were in those days, how many questions we tackled. After all, we were ironing out not only the plans for the opening of the Memorial but the detailed program of the subsequent ten-day trip covering the Great Tea Road and many amazing historical sites. Here are a few documents just to give the reader a taste of what we were doing.

"Maltseva Luisa, April 25, 2014, Ulan-Ude. Dear Vladimir and Iya! I met with Alexei Tivanenko at the National Library. In the mid-1990s, he and I worked in the same office of the city administration. After that, our paths crossed at many events related to regional history, and we have remained on friendly terms. I told him about your plans and showed him the book Mysovaya Station and the 'Keep the Memory' flyer. Then we went up to the third floor to see Natasha Stefani. We'll



Louise Maltsev.

move the meeting with readers at the library to June 22 (a Sunday). She wants to invite college students, and that's more convenient on a Sunday (it's finals time). Alexei will gladly join us at Mysovaya and Barguzin. He showed me the commission materials; he spent a month in Hungary and gave many talks there. He'll tell you himself. His phone number is 68... He's a well-known regional historian and the author of several books; he went down to the bottom of Lake Baikal when the Mir expedition was doing its work. All the best, Luisa."

For the last fifteen years our trips to Buryat-Mongolia have always been brightened by meetings with a good family friend and a wonderful person, Luisa Aleksandrovna Maltseva. She is a passionate enthusiast and devoted educator, a well-read and immensely knowledgeable writer, a tireless visitor to many of the republic's libraries, schools and clubs where she faithfully delivers unforgettable presentations on history and literature to her audiences. We are grateful to Luisa Aleksandrovna for her contribution to our project and her participation in planning and conducting the Buryatiya tour.

"Chernykh Taisya, April 26, 2014. Vladimir, Iya, hello!

1. Finalized the date and time of the event at the Kabansk library: it's scheduled for June 19, 11:30 a.m.

2. Finalized the plans for our visit to the Kabansk museum on 6/19.

3. The distance from Enhaluk to Kabansk is 92 km, i.e. it's a 1.5-hour trip.

4. Called Irina Rizvanova about spending the night in Maksimikha on the way to Barguzin, since, according to Tatyana Filippova (the director of the Barguzin Museum), the 25 people who are planning to be on that trip can only stay in private guesthouses. Luisa Aleksandrovna (I also talked to her today) says there's an inn there. I'll have to clear this up.

5. According to Luisa Aleksandrovna and Irina, neither of them is taking care of the hotel arrangements for Kyakhta. Is Filshin going to do that, or someone else?

6. Everyone must have an eye on us now, even the national archives: the agreement to transfer the Jewish book from our records department to the Jewish community has been annulled, on the pretext that such documents must be kept for 100 years.

7. Rizvanov and Barbas, as well as Paley and the Irkutsk rabbi, are planning to come in early May—just when the work at the cemetery will really get going, weather permitting. Yesterday we got a lot of snow—30 centimeters—and today everything is melting and there's water everywhere, so I don't know how they'll get to the cemetery, since the thaw will start later over there.

8. I'm sending a sketch of the invitation. If everything is correct, let me know and I'll print them and send them out right away, since our post office doesn't work very fast. Of course, the printed version will have more spaces.

Respectfully, Taisya."

"Alla Feldman, May 15, 2014. Moscow. Hello, dear Taisya!

Thank you very much for the invitation. My husband and I would really like to participate in the opening of the memorial, but unfortunately we won't be able to. Work and other commitments will not allow us to leave Moscow even for a short time.

Heartfelt congratulations to you, Vladimir Rott, and everyone who has helped bring this important project to life on the opening of the Memorial. This event will no doubt add an important page both to the history of the settlement of Siberia and to Jewish history.

Respectfully, Alla Feldman" [editor-in-chief of the Moscow-based Jewish weekly, Golos Iakova, "The Voice of Jacob"]

"Chernykh Taisya, May 18, 2014. Vladimir, Iya, hello! Today Petya did not go to the cemetery; yesterday he worked with a fever, and he's still running a high fever today, so we went to visit Mischa. He's in good health and is being his usual self: showing off his new sneakers, complaining that his slippers are torn, etc. As you know, he's not going to work these days: he doesn't feel like it and is being a bad boy, keeps threatening to bite somebody. Then we went to Yura's grave, looked around, put down some stones. All is well.

Respectfully, Taisya."

"Toronto, June 8, 2014. (Letter to Moscow to Sholomit Guterman [Tumasyants])

Dear Svetlana! Thank you for the archive materials. We also have something on Novomeisky, on gold prospecting in the Transbaikal region and on salt mining on the Dead Sea. We are close to Fanya Novomeisky, Iya's former classmate, who now lives in Petach Tikva...

The opening is in a week, but today we have sad news. Last week in Mysovaya, after 11 p.m., vandals struck again at the Jewish cemetery and damaged two of the Memorial's poles with an iron crowbar. It's the second time this has happened... We are trying to get the damage repaired. There's no one to ask for help. We'd hire security guards, but only hopeless drunkards are available and willing (to sleep on the job and get paid for it).

We urgently need serious help and protection from the Authorities at all levels. We're just about to get started on the installation of the plates with the names, which are still being kept in storage. The builders in Mysovsk are feeling very low...

We send our desperate plea to every kind soul: Help!

Vladimir and Iya Rott, Toronto, Canada"

Reply from Sholomit: "This is what needs to be SHOUTED at Tulokhonov tomorrow."

On May 2, two Jeeps arrived in Mysovsk with visitors for Taisya. In one of them, Alexander Paley, chairman of Buryatiya's religious Jewish community,

was bringing our new helper from Ulan Ude, Valery Barbas, once the head of the republic's construction industry. This energetic retiree had to be chauffeured despite the fact that he had his own car; he had been waiting for a car insurance policy for over six months. I was told that in today's Russia, all private insurance companies have been abolished. Just like in Soviet times, there remains only the state insurance monopoly which is buried in paperwork and has people on waiting lists for months—but you can't get behind the wheel with no insurance. The second jeep, with a chauffeur, was carrying Irkutsk's chief rabbi, Aaron Wagner. Taisya told me the story.

“There was horrible mud in Mysovaya on that day. Both of the jeeps got stuck right away, virtually the moment they left the Federal highway. We had to walk to the cemetery on foot through the mud. Wagner wouldn't even look at me. I can understand... He walked behind me, but I could hear him grumbling in indignation and disbelief: ‘Why did Rott have to throw away his money in such a naïve way? We could have built a children's playground in Irkutsk, put up a post and nailed a plaque to it saying «Built with the money of such-and-such sponsors...»

Wagner only looked in my direction once when he asked, «How did you determine the boundaries of the cemetery when there's a huge monument lying over there?»—and pointed to a big stone on the other side of the road. I replied that this was one of the heaviest headstones which they once tried and failed to drag away farther. Finally we reached the concrete-paved ground. I told them about the things that still needed to be done, including the toilets. To that, he remarked with a chuckle, «I wouldn't build them in the woods...»





Rabbi Aaron Wagner, of Irkutsk, becomes acquainted with the situation in the Mysovaya cemetery...

When we got out of the mud, we wanted to sit down somewhere and have a conversation. I suggested that we go to my office at the railway library. That was where we went. Rabbi Wagner was the first to speak:

—I have a confession to make. When I was on my way here, I fully expected to find that nothing has been done and that the money has been wasted for nothing, or maybe even pilfered. I expected to have to tell Rabbi Kaminetzky and Mr. Rott that there's no purpose or point in coming here. But I was wrong. What I saw is incredible. In such a place, with such roads, you managed to build that! Taisya, you're not Jewish but you have shown such deference and care for our past, for the Jewish community that used to live here. I offer you my sincere thanks and apologies for failing to appreciate you properly. I promise to do everything I can for the opening; I'll take care of the minyan [the required minimum of ten male Jews for the prayer] and the kosher food."

"Chernykh Taisya, June 7, 2014: Vladimir, Iya, hello...! I'm sending photos of today's work done by Petya and the boys—yet another clearing, the longest one, is ready. The sand is very heavy after the rain, the road has really «gone bad» and of course they've had a very difficult time."

Thank you, Taisya, for this joyous message! What invaluable results! Along with the rest of their labors, our heroic builders spent an entire year clearing a

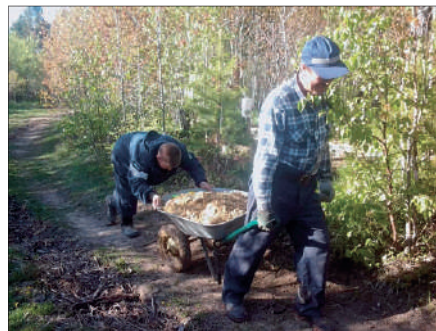
THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

path that would allow people to walk around the cemetery. What part of that work could be called easy? Cutting down the trees, removing the stumps and roots, making and setting up the posts, painting them, and then, finally, this: bringing in yellow sand and spreading it over the entire newly created path. In the photos, one can see the final look of the fence and the path around the cemetery grounds.

After the opening of the Memorial and before the snowfall, I heard from Taisya several times that most visitors to the cemetery happily followed the suggestion on the plywood arrow nailed to a tree next to it:

«Walk the roundabout way—take some good luck away».

When I came up with this line, I thought it would be a good and heartwarming expression of human kindness and solidarity for visitors to the cemetery in Mysovaya.





THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



The completion of the pedestrian walkways surrounding the entire cemetery.

With the advent of spring, work on every aspect of the Memorial project became even more intensive. The restoration of the byroad leading to the cemetery was one of the most complicated tasks on Taisya's endless list of cares. The 300 meters of track from the Federal Highway had long fallen into complete disrepair and needed to be made usable for wheeled transport. At one point we actually thought that, for opening day, we'd have to borrow or buy several dozen pairs of rubber boots for the guests....

It was also essential to have the cemetery grounds sprayed for ticks at least twice by opening day. Not surprisingly, if you look at any of the photos illustrating this narrative and taken on days without snow, you will see that even in the summertime heat, all our builders wore thick clothing and had their heads covered with caps or kerchiefs. This was absolutely necessary for protection from the thousands of Lyme disease—and encephalitis-carrying ticks that appear on the grass and the shrubbery as soon as the snow melts away. On April 26, the local news said that 53 tick bites had been reported in the Kabansk district in just the last three days.

And now, on to the story of «the miracles»... The older I get, the more I believe in Miracles, in unexpected strokes of luck, in help from the Almighty who suddenly gives us an idea or a solution for a problem, after which life continues to march on to new heights that you are prepared to conquer with a song.

We, too, had miracles. Indeed, the very idea of building this Memorial and the activity on its construction can be regarded as a miracle, judging by the enthusiastic responses of its sponsors and others who found out about it. Let's look at some of its elements:

The chief rabbi of Tomsk, Levi Kaminetzky, agreed to come to the opening of the Memorial. When I asked him to pick a date that would work for him, the rabbi thought a moment and then said, "June 17." What a miracle! June 17! I have remembered this date for 60 years as the day of the 1953 uprising in Berlin. How many people think of it with gratitude!

From that moment on we sped up the pace of our work even more and put in some extra effort on every front—and in the end, we did it.

First, at the suggestion of Natalia Valerievna Gavrikova, the Kabansk district health service sprayed the cemetery grounds against ticks twice. Then, Taisya—and all of us—acquired a wonderful new helper, Valery Barbas. This 73-year-old retiree who had spent his career running Buryatia's construction firms had been convinced, for some reason, that his grandfather was buried in the Jewish cemetery in the town of Barguzin, and had always assisted that cemetery in every way he could. Then, Valery learned from the press about our effort to identify the Jews buried in Mysovaya, and among those names he saw Barbas, Aaron Yankelevich, 1848-1921. (That was his grandfather!) With-

out delay, he traveled from Ulan-Ude to Mysovaya, found Taisya, thanked her from the bottom of his heart for this find, and became a devoted supporter and helper of our project.

And then, another miracle! All of us did our best to make sure that there was at least one more or less solid road to the cemetery by opening day. Barbas became the main activist for the road construction. The local authorities increasingly listened to our concerns and to the publicity the Memorial was getting. A week before the opening, Taisya learned that the Timluysk Cement Factory would send them three truckloads of gravel—90 tons—if she paid for one of them. Taisya paid right away, but there was a delay of some kind...

Two days later, on the evening of June 13 (the opening was scheduled for June 17), Leonid Viktorovich Seliverstov, a member of the People's Hural (parliament) of Buryatia, and Alexei Aleskandrovich Zhilin, first deputy chief of the administration of the Kabansk district, assisted by administration chief Sergei Vitalievich Savvateyev, accomplished something amazing. As a result of their many days of efforts to help our project, not only did the first gravel trucks arrive at the cemetery, but a road scraper came over from Kabansk, 80 kilometers away, and went to work right away moving and pounding the unloaded cement with its mighty wheels immediately beyond the edge of the federal highway. Valery Barbas, who ran around the roaring machinery like an excited little boy, kept thanking and cheering on the drivers. The work was finished by midnight. Barbas offered especially warm and heartfelt thanks to the driver of the road scraper, who immediately vanished into the darkness, setting off on his 80-kilometer return trip to Kabansk.

A miracle! We received 350 tons of gravel that evening—and 260 of them turned out to be a gift to the Memorial from Vladimir Mikhailovich Batyshev, director of the private firm Sigmatech. Huge thanks to everyone! Now we had a road to the cemetery. In just four days, four large buses would drive single file along the fresh gravel of the road to the Memorial, carrying the excited guests to our celebration. But more on that shortly...



Valery Barbas

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 17



Valery Barbas was a participant who witnessed a miracle, when overnight mud was turned into a dirt road—when 350 tons of rubble were delivered and evened out.

The reader may not believe in miracles, but here is the tale of yet another Miracle we had. Two days before we were to fly out of Toronto, Taisya called. Here is our conversation.

—Vladimir, a man came to the library today. He introduced himself: Anatoly Ryabchun, deputy director of the Psychoneurological Group Home. They had apparently gotten a call from the higher-ups in Ulan Ude: “Do whatever you can to receive ‘Rott’s delegation.’ Invite them to dinner, take photos... Let them write something in the visitors’ book.”

I showed him the program in which absolutely everything is planned in detail and a visit to the group home is not scheduled. He started trying to persuade me: “We’ll get Mischa too, give him a shave, dress him up and bring him to the opening...” I explained that your entire schedule had been coordinated with all the places you’re visiting, down to the last ten minutes; that you’ll be arriving in Mysovaya at one just like all the other buses and going to the «Snezhny» Club where there are only bathrooms, you’ll have just enough time to freshen up... and then the opening ceremony for the Memorial starts at one. I also said that lunch was impossible since you require special meals which have already been ordered from a local restaurant, and after lunch you are immediately going to Enhaluk where you’ll have dinner and rest.

—Well done, Taisya. You said all the right things. Of course it’s a pity that we won’t be able to visit them, but we’ll be extremely busy, and we’ve got lots of people on the bus, too...

—Wait, Vladimir, I’m not done. Ryabchun said, “Take another look at your schedule. Maybe there’s something you can change? If you agree to visit us...we undertake to resolve the issue of portable toilets...” When I asked how they’d be able to deliver them when there’s no road to the cemetery, he replied, “That’s our concern. Either we’ll carry them by hand, or we’ll dig some temporary ones. I’ll come over in a couple of days. Talk to Rott, maybe you’ll work something out?” “I’ll talk to him,—I promised.—He’s in charge of these things. But we can’t change the schedule.”

How about them apples? Our portable toilets are about to fall out of the sky. I couldn’t sleep that night and kept thinking it over. “Maybe Iya and I can skip lunch after the opening of the Memorial? We’ll leave everyone there and make a dash to the Group Home... But what about the Hungarians? We ought to take them along, but they need to eat... And besides, they don’t speak Russian. So that’s out... Maybe everyone else can go to Enhaluk after lunch, and we’ll join them later somehow? No, that’s no good...”

And then, fortunately, I came up with a way! My solution came as quite a surprise to Taisya...

The plan was for Iya and myself to fly from Toronto to Moscow by Austrian Airlines, with a stop in Vienna where we would be joined by Éva Orosz and Ilona Kercsi, arriving from Budapest. We would spend several days in Moscow staying at our friend Nina Slezko’s, do some sightseeing and go to museums and

theaters. On Monday, June 16, we would arrive in Ulan Ude on an early-morning flight, joined by Sholomit Guterman. We would check into the «Buryatia» hotel, the gathering point for guests from other cities. There, we would quickly freshen up, after which Vera and Anton Gordienko would take us to two cemeteries: first, to pay our respects to the graves of Iya's mother Rachel Solomonovna Yaroslavsky and her relatives, then to the graves of Vera's parents, Aunt Sonya and Uncle Grisha Chernov. After that, we would have dinner at Vera's.

The plan was that at 9 a.m. on June 17, two large buses would depart from the «Buryatia» Hotel to Mysovaya (the town of Babushkin). One of them would carry 45-50 Ulan Ude residents; the other, visitors from other cities and more people from Ulan Ude. By 1 p.m., they were to arrive at the «Snezhny» Club in Mysovaya. Buses from Kabansk and Irkutsk were due to arrive there as well. After a brief first meeting with the Chernykhs and other friends from Mysovaya, we would go to the cemetery.

And here's what I came up with: we absolutely had to visit the Psychoneurological Group Home, so «our» bus would leave the hotel at 8 a.m. and go directly to the Group Home, where we would have one hour for the visit. The second bus, as planned, would collect the attendees from Ulan Ude and leave the hotel on the original schedule, at 9 a.m., to go to «Snezhny» on its own.

The Group Home administrators were quite pleased with my decision—and our celebration of the opening of the Memorial was graced by two modest but clean and proper portable toilets set up near the gathering. This was a priceless surprise gift from Alexander Romanovich Khutakov, the director of the Psychoneurological Group Home, and his deputy Anatoly Ivanovich Ryabchun. The two white washstands with stacks of neat towels standing next to the toilets attested to the presence of true elegance in the midst of the Baikal taiga.



"Some temporary comfort in the Baikal taiga!..."

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

My dear reader! It seems to me that by now, you and I have labored mightily, and if you are still afloat and haven't drowned in this sea of information, it is time to move on to the story of the opening of the Memorial. The photos below attest to the fact that everything proceeded as planned. There we are in Moscow's Theater Square, with the Hungarian women and Pyotr Slezko—grandson. At the home of the hospitable Nina Slezko, we received another visit from the chief engineer of the Volga Auto Plant, Evgeny Artemovich Bashindzhagian, and his heroic wife Valeria Sergeyevna, and were able to embrace them once again.



*Russia began for us with a tour of Moscow.
A joyful meeting at Nina Slezko's with Eugene
Artemovich Bashindzhagian and his wife.*

On a bright and sunny morning, we arrived in Ulan Ude. On the airfield, Éva Orosz from Budapest, Iya Rott (Guterman, from Toronto), Sholomit Guterman (Tumasyants, from Moscow), and Ilona Kercsi (from Budapest) are greeted warmly, but with incomprehensible words in Russian lettering. As we exited the terminal, we were nearly crushed in the arms of our Ulan Ude partners.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 17

At the cemetery: Rachel Solomonovna Yaroslavskaya (Guterman) departed this world at the age of 56; her 76-year-old daughter Iya never misses a chance to fly to Ulan Ude to visit the beloved grave and keeps saying with regret, *“Oh, if only my mother could see our six grandchildren and our life in Canada for just a moment!...”* Our first dinner in Ulan Ude, which brought much joy both to the guests and to the gracious hosts: Vera Gordienko, her sons Sergei and Anton, and their families.



We have arrived in Ulan-Ude.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



*Paying respects at the
grave of Iya's mother—
Rachel Solomonovna
Jaroslavskaya.*



*Vera Gordienko's family
hosts our first supper.*

The program on June 17—the day of our arrival in Mysovaya, the assembly of all the guests, and the opening of the Memorial—was extremely intensive, so it could not include a

visit to the Babushkin Psychoneurological Group Home; however, in order to see Misha Guterman, I planned to arrange for us to get permission to bring him to the opening ceremony for a couple of hours, with an escort from the group home. This had been discussed ahead of time with Vera and Anton Gordienko. So the initiative of the group home administrators which had resulted in such a big change in our schedule was a great idea. As we approached the group home and looked out the bus windows, we saw two nice-looking young women, in Russian and Buryat ethnic costumes, who were greeting us with bread and salt; next to them was an equally nice-looking young Buryat man who turned out to be the group home's new director, A. R. Khutakov. Then, the unforgettable reception began. It was a warm day. All the residents of this unhappy institution had been allowed to come outside, where we saw them kicking around some balls or just lazing about in the sun.

We were all brought inside the large hall where a beautiful table was served. There was a board on the wall with photos from our previous visit. We got a chance to see classes for various activities: drawing, embroidery, drawing on Baikal rocks, making small figures of nerpa seals who live in Lake Baikal. We left a donation for the group home and bought some samples of works made by its residents.



THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



Visiting the Psychoneurological Group Home.

The reception was very warm and hospitable, but unfortunately our time was limited. They got Mischa ready, dressed him up and gave him a nurse to accompany him. Anton gave him the front passenger seat in his new gray BMW while the three women sat in the back. Anton smiled and asked, "Mischa, how do you like the car?" After a moment he got Mischa's reply: "The white one was better..."

Amazing! Mischa remembered the white Volga car in which Anton had brought us to Mysovaya three years earlier and in which we regrettably did not think to take Mischa for a ride.... It was painful for me to hear this story. Once again, Mischa's answer confirmed Iya's and my depressing suspicion that all of Moisey and Haya Guterman's mentally retarded descendants had been born with only slight disabilities but had been left to themselves, without proper medical care or education...

How can I tell the next part of the story without tearing up? We were told that when the nurse came to pick up Mischa and go to our celebration, he shook hands with his friend Volodya and said: "Going away to Canada..."

Our bus was the last to arrive at the Snezhny Cultural Center. The Ulan-Ude folks from the second bus were already strolling along the Baikal shore while the guests from Irkutsk, including the two rabbis in black hats, stood by their bus. Rabbi Levi Kaminetzky and community president Boris Romatsky had flown to Irkutsk and then got a ride to Mysovaya from some locals. The bus from Kabansk stood in the parking lot along with several cars. On the front steps of the Cultural Center, we saw a group of tall women wearing beautiful long blue folk-style dresses. That was the local folk singing group Kalinushka, which has been led for several years by Anatoly Nikolayevich Popov. He also accompanies the singers on an accordion.

The moment we came out of the bus and took our first step, the accordion struck up a tune and the vocalists broke out into loud song: "Greetings, good people! Welcome, good people! Dearest, dearest, dearest friends!"

The soloist who stood at the center of the group came down the steps and greeted us. "Welcome to Siberia, welcome to Lake Baikal! We natives are happy



A long-awaited dream coming true—giving Misha Guterman a ride in a car.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

to greet you!” And she welcomed us with the traditional «*Bread and salt*»—a tray with an enormous bread loaf and a small salt bowl on top. Those standing nearby tasted a bite. The group performed two new songs written by its leader.



Meeting with bread and salt in Mysovaya at the House of Culture “Snow.”

The Mayor of Babushkin (Mysovaya), Viktor Anatolyevich Laryushkin, who was standing next to the singers, stepped forward and greeted us as well.

—Allow me to congratulate you on this remarkable event which you have organized here in our land. To welcome you to our Baikal region, to wish you the best of everything. May you find friends, may you find family and loved ones here... I can tell you from the bottom of my heart, it's difficult to properly appreciate what you have done. What you've done is a great event, not just of local importance; it's an event of national importance in Russia! Because the mission with which you came to us is a noble one, and, G-d willing, you will be shown the gratitude you deserve. A huge thanks to you, and a bow of respect, from our people at Lake Baikal!



Mysovaya's Mayor Victor Anatolyevich Larushkin welcomes guests.

I replied, *"Thank you for the kind words you have spoken! We will never forget them!"*

Next to greet us was Leonid Viktorovich Seliverstov:

—From myself personally and from the deputies of the People's Khural,⁸ I welcome you! You have truly come with a holy mission: to remember the departed, to pay respects to those who, unfortunately, cannot be with us today... This is, with no exaggeration, a great mission! You found the time and put in the effort to come from distant countries to this place where your ancestors are buried...

⁸ The parliament of Buryat-Mongolia

Addressing the assembled locals and visitors, I said:

—...Taisya looked up all the laws on the Internet, and you carried them out. You wanted, out of the goodness of your hearts, to bury a Jew according to Jewish tradition even when there wasn't a single Jew around! Be proud of this! Make this place more beautiful than Moscow! More beautiful than Switzerland! You have the opportunity. All you need to do is mobilize your talent and remember that you are living for yourselves and your children. Then, this place will become a place for pilgrimage. People will come here in an endless stream. Be well, and may G-d keep you! You stand tall on this earth!

A guest from Moscow, Sholomit Guterman (Tumasyants), spoke next. She read greetings to the attendees at the celebration from Russia's chief Rabbi A.S. Shayevich, from the Russian Jewish Congress president Yu. Kanner, from the president of the European Council of Rabbis, from the Moscow Rabbinat, and from the Israeli Ambassador in Moscow.



Our comfortable rest at the Snezhny, the “Bread and salt” welcome, the performance of the vocalist group and the spontaneous rally were made possible by the help and attention of the Cultural Center director Lyubov Anatolievna Mustafayeva, for which we are deeply grateful to her.

From the lot near the cemetery, covered with gravel for cars and buses to park, the guests and the Mysovaya locals slowly walked in a long single line, in an unforgettable flow of humanity, toward the Shalom memorial we built—the sculptural ensemble and the fence around the cemetery, with a convenient footpath.





In the footage filmed by the talented Vladimir Zharov, who recorded our celebration on video, there are striking moments of that endless flow of humanity, confidently marching forward to see and open a monument that carries upon its granite the names of nearly forgotten men and women. Much to our joy, around 150 people arrived for the event.





Guests at the opening of the Shalom Memorial: On the left—Viktor Ivanovich Kolmynin—His Eminence the Bishop of the Protestant branch of the Christian Church of the Siberian Federal District of Russia. On the right—Professor Alexei Vasilievich Tivanenko.



JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 17



Beside A.V. Tivanenko and V.I. Kolmynin are Vladimir and Iya Rott, Canada, U Don Su, Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of South Korea, Éva Orosz and Ilona Kercsi, Hungary.



I was one of the first to approach the monument. But “approached” says so little! In faraway Siberia, I was about to face something huge, something that had not existed before but was born of our labors and fantasies... I was a little nervous, but as I came closer I was both moved and stunned. I thought I knew everything about the Memorial, but my beloved Chernykhs—Valentin and Svetlana, Taisiya and Pyotr—had managed to surprise me. The color of the painted concrete posts appealed to me at once; but the neat, concrete-paved path to the monument lined with freshly planted flowers—that was a Surprise! That was Genius! That was Love for our creation! Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart!



I cannot describe my feelings when, at the same time, I heard gasps of surprise and exclamations of delight and admiration coming from many people as they came near the still-veiled monument that arose suddenly among the greenery of the trees.



The Head Administrator of the Kabansky region, S.V. Savvateev, welcomes guests.

Taisya, Olga Rusinova and I were standing on a temporary stand, which was covered with a carpet, and were awaiting the arriving guests.

The first to speak was Olga Rusinova, a university dean and one of Ulan-Ude's most learned experts on Judaism, an educator who had helped revive Buryatia's Jewish community a decade ago along with Elena Uvarovskaya and Lyudmila Kovalchuk. She said:

—My name is Olga Rusinova. Guests from Tomsk, from Omsk, from Hungary, from St. Petersburg, from Toronto, from Israel, from Ulan Ude, from Irkutsk...! So many places are represented here. The ashes of people who died and were buried here knocked on one man's heart—not a local man, but a Canadian citizen. On the Internet, they refer to him as a Russian Jew of Hungarian background. Today, we have gathered here to honor the memory of the departed. Today, we are reconnecting the broken threads of his history!

And now, I turn over the floor to Taisiya Akramovna Chernykh.



Olga Rusinova opens the festival.



Taisiya Chernykh welcomes guests.

—The people who are buried here," said Taisiya, "have done so much for our town! Together with all the others, they built the Kyakhta tract, one link in the Great Tea Road. They opened tannery shops, brick factories, stores, inns... We are still using the fruits of their labors. I showed you the Korff house. The house that the merchant Korff once built for his family still serves us; it now houses the offices of Rosbank, while Korff is buried here, and we still have his gravestone. Our task is to preserve it for posterity.

I would like to thank those who crossed such distances and came here from Canada, from Israel, from South Korea... I would like

to thank those who came here from other regions in Russia: from Moscow, from St. Petersburg. I would like to thank the representatives of the Rabbinate. Thank you so much! I would like to thank those who took part in our project, those who helped us, with words or with deeds. And I would like to thank those who refused to participate: they provided a demonstration of their attitude toward history.

But above all, of course, I want to thank Vladimir: a Canadian businessman, a well-known writer, a member of the Hungarian Writers' Guild, Vladimir Rott and his wonderful wife Iya Rott, a professor at the University of Toronto—without them, none of this would have happened! They were with us every moment, every minute, every second. We spent hours talking on Skype and on the phone, spent hours discussing everything that was being done here. We were worried because we, as Russian Orthodox Christians, did not want to interfere with the traditions of another faith; we worried that we might do something wrong. That's why we consulted them at every step so that, G-d forbid, we wouldn't damage this holy place.

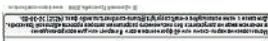
My thanks to everyone who came here today, whether you live nearby or far away. And my thanks to the head of the administration of the Kabansk District, Savvateyev.

S. V. Savvateyev said, "First of all, tremendous respect to the people who were the first builders of Mysovaya Station. Kabansk country welcomes you all, from different lands and regions of the world—all those who came to attend such a remarkable event, the opening of the Memorial. Thanks to all of you, we are here today celebrating a holiday of Unity. I think that our descendants, all future generations, will honor history and remember today's event and their ancestors. Thank you!"

Taisya and I stood on opposite sides of the monument and began to remove the white covering. And at that moment, there was another Miracle. In ancient Jewish tradition, solemn ceremonies are always accompanied by the sound of a horn, the shofar. The white covering had almost come off the sculpture, and at that point there was the loud sound of a horn! A moment later we realized that it was the whistle of a train passing nearby along the Transsiberian Railroad. A train whistle! Was it not the sound of a horn proclaiming victory? It was a greeting for our Memorial!



The opening of the Memorial. During the unveiling a loud whistle was heard by all. It was a salute from a train speeding by on the Trans-Siberian Railway.



Next, it was my turn to address the gathering.

—Esteemed guests! (I also thanked the Hungarians for coming, in Hungarian.) Iya and I are very happy to be here today. It makes one want to be alive, to continue to create and rejoice with you! Your republic, your wonderful land has given birth to many fine and famous people. I won't talk about them, but I do want to say that one of your people is my wife, Iya! I joined my life to her's 53 years ago... And I want to tell you that among all your heroes, you can be proud of her, because she has come a very long way.... She came to Canada and was convinced that all she'd be able to do in Canada is sweep floors and clean toilets, because she wouldn't be able to get any other job... But she did learn and once again became a university professor, at the University of Toronto! She has taught several thousand students, graduates who remember her... She is a hero of your republic! That's what your people are like! And this is one hero I know very well.



It is amazing to have a family like that of Taisya Chernykh! There is no amount of money, no amount of gold that can pay for their labor. Just look around. We're standing here in a large space, and the idea was that headstones from the cemetery scattered all over the town and embedded in the foundations of buildings are going to stand here and that we wouldn't be able to match them to the location of the graves where they once stood... We got concrete delivered, nine and a half tons of it... The cement truck got stuck over there—and it wouldn't budge! There isn't a single cement truck in all of Buryatiya that could have pulled up closer and poured the concrete right into the framework... And then our heroes quickly fabricated simple wooden carriers and by the end of that evening they moved all of the cement, all nine and a half tons of it! And that's just one example...



And there were also the heavy granite plates that came from Irkutsk. The Chernykhs and two assistants dragged them here from the federal highway and hung them up... (And that was just to make a photo of the Memorial. We really wanted each of you to receive, on this very day, the commemorative postcard we are about to give you as a gift!) And then they took everything down again and dragged those slabs back to town, over impenetrable mud, to store them until today's celebration...





My dear friends! As long as this Memorial stands on this land, in Buryat-Mongolia, I think this land will grow and prosper, because this is only the beginning. This shows that you and I value the past because we really need a good future, and a good future is built from an excellent example!

Just look: Shlomo Guterman came here in 1896, and here is the last headstone we put up. That's for his great-great-grandson Yura Tikhomirov, whom you buried in strict observance of Jewish tradition! And over there is Mischa Guterman, who lives in your town—one of Shlomo Guterman's descendants. Also with us is Oleg Barbas, he has flown in from Israel because the name of his great-grandfather, Aaron Yankelevich Barbas (1846-1921), is carved into this granite. And just look how many residents of Mysovaya have discovered their roots today! Raise your hands...

Mr. Seliverstov, Mr. Zhilin, Mr. Savvateyev! You've done everything you could to make this road happen. You didn't just build a road, you built the



start of a future highway! Develop your land, and you will be doing something useful for your countrymen, your children and grandchildren. And you will not need federal aid because you have plenty of your own money!

Russia has always been known for her kindness and hospitality. I know this from my own experience. I lived in Bobruysk during the war. Twenty thousand Jews were shot before my eyes, but we miraculously survived: my older brother, our Mama, and I... I still remember how our Russian neighbors never sat down to eat before bringing a bit of lard, meat, or fresh sausage to the poor family next door: "Madam Rottikha" and her children. Those were Russian people!

Unfortunately, at one point, kindness and generosity were forgotten in Russia. This country lived through an extremely trying period of time. Russians were forced to unlearn kindness. I remember that a student in our group in university in Tomsk, Viktor Parkhomuk, lost his mother. He was so poor that we indigent students didn't know how to help him. I started raising money, asking the guys for donations of 3 or 5 rubles. We raised enough for him to buy a ticket and go to Prokopievsk in time for his mama's funeral.

And then, they called me in to the Komsomol committee and really let me have it—I almost got kicked out of university: "How dare you ask for money! In our country! As if we can't do without handouts! Go give the money back!" And so I went and gave it back... The trade union committee gave Parkhomuk 120 rubles and he went to the funeral.

That was then... Now, such things should not happen. I learned from the Jews in Toronto that the more a person gives—he never gives, he only receives! Think about it: sometimes, you give a coin to a beggar in the street... and then you will feel that you are the one who received a gift!

Here's how it all starts... (Here, I asked Dasha, a girl in the crowd, to come forward and stand with me.) I started raising money for this project in Toronto. I keep calling Taisya, together we keep trying to make calculations: How much more money are we going to need? How much do we need for next month? I keep calling sponsors and asking for help. Just then, we had a girl from Buryat-Mongolia visiting at our house in Toronto—her parents had sent her to Canada for the summer to learn English.

(Then, those in attendance heard me describe the episode which the reader will recall from an earlier part of this chapter in which Dasha donated 20 dollars to our project and refused to take it back—and, at my request, wrote her initials on that Canadian bill.)

I picked up my travel bag and pulled out a transparent plastic sleeve in which that 20-dollar bill was visible. I handed it to Taisya and said:

—Taisya, this is a memento for your museum! But that's not all. Look at this stainless steel plate! A Toronto firm made it for the Memorial. It is priceless! It weighs seven kilos... so, how were we supposed to get it to Mysovaya? And then,

this girl put it in her backpack and, with no argument, took it with her to the Trans-Baikal region! Thank you, Dasha. No one will ever forget this!

Here is your foundation for kindness! A foundation so that you can make things grow! Not just pine trees but fruit trees, too! A foundation so that things can change. So that millions can come here and book rooms at hotels and resorts ten years in advance! So that your fame can echo throughout the land and so that people can say, 'There are many good places, but this place... They do things on a grand scale, Russian-style!'

The Chief Rabbi of Irkutsk, Aaron Wagner, was the next to speak.

—*Today, in accordance with tradition, we must do everything right. We'll read the Tehilim, we'll say the Memorial prayer and the Kaddish. When the Memorial prayer and the Kaddish are read, it's like a moment of silence. Of course we should say 'Amen,' but we should also reflect. Think about it: we are here in this place which seemed to be long forgotten by everyone... But as we now see, it won't be forgotten anytime soon! Even standing here in this cemetery, we can say, Am Israel hai! We are alive! They wanted to destroy us, and they couldn't. Even here—we are in faraway Siberia. We've come here from every corner of the Earth for such an occasion. Because, in the greater scheme of things, there are no big or small occasions for the Almighty. And so, Vladimir, tremendous—tremendous thanks to you! And to you too, Taisya—tremendous, tremendous thanks!*



Chief Rabbi of Irkutsk Aaron Wagner.



Chief Rabbi of Tomsk Levi Kaminetzky.

I was here a month and a half ago. I was convinced that we would have to bring a box of rubber boots to the opening. The roads were horrible... they were simply non-existent.

And now, I will introduce the Chief Rabbi of Tomsk, Levi Kaminetzky:

Rabbi Kaminetzky:

—I will read a prayer for all who are buried in this cemetery. Take note that there are 59 names listed on these granite slabs, but there are about 400 people actually resting in this cemetery...

Rabbi Kaminetzky read the prayer and then went on.:

—When we are in such a place, we must remember that when we say a kind word to someone or share something that is dear to us with others, we do not count on being paid back—but someone always makes thing happen in such a way that our good deeds come back to us. To give back—that is the purest, most genuine, sincerest kind of charity. Look at Vladimir's soul. It was here... For three years, from morning to night, he gave himself completely to this project...

A group of Jewish men read the Kaddish (the memorial prayer). Then, Rabbi Wagner spoke again.

—A memorial is a symbol of eternity, of eternal memory. In Israel right now, there is a very nasty, sad situation unfolding. The entire country is praying for the

three soldiers who were captured... So today we should use this holy moment and pray for those boys so that they come home in peace and so that real peace comes to Israel and to the rest of the world.

Levi Kaminetzky recited a prayer; after that, Rabbi Wagner suggested, “*Let us read the Psalm of David in honor of those buried here.*”

Rabbi Kaminetzky read the Psalm of David, and Rabbi Wagner said, “*Now let us honor the departed with a moment of silence and lay down small stones...*”

Many guests began to reach out, looking for horizontal surfaces on the sculpture to put down the stones. It turned out that there were very few of them: two between the stelae of the letter «III» and two on the upper borders of the granite plates bearing the names of the dead. At that point, I announced loudly:

—*I invite everyone to follow the advice in the inscription that hangs here on a tree: walk along the path around the cemetery to pay the final honors to those resting here. The first burial that we know of in this cemetery was in 1825...*

It was both unexpected and moving to see a fairly large group of people march together, single file, along the still-freshly cleared path bordering our cemetery.

The film journalist Vladimir Zharov managed to find the time to ask some of us questions. Valery Barbas was the first to talk to him on camera.

Zharov: *What do you think, what just happened here?*

Barbas: *It is a day of remembrance for our ancestors, of the descendants reclaiming their memory! After all, we had practically forgotten our lineage, which is unforgivable for anyone, and for Jews most of all... Respect for one's parents, for one's ancestors is one of the most important commandments, yet I, much to my shame, gave no thought to this matter when I was young; but now, my relatives and I have decided to start restoring these commandments. We will not stop with this. We'll have to clean up the grounds, get the headstones in order. If we get a map, we'll put them all in their proper place. If not, we will at least clean up.*

Zharov: *Barbas, Valery...?*

Barbas: *...Izrailevich.*

Zharov: *Your grandpa is buried here? On your father's side?*

Barbas: *Yes, my own grandfather... On my dad's side...*

Zharov to Dasha Rizvanova: *Dasha, what were you feeling when you decided to come back and bring the money?*

Dasha: *I just wanted to... Because Iya Borisovna and Vladimir Frantzevich are very caring people. And I just wanted to do something for them... from my heart.*

Zharov: *Dasha, what do you think happened here today?*

Dasha: *I think everyone put their soul into this.... Everyone got some kind of good energy. And I think everyone will leave here in good spirits.—Rizvanova Daria, Private School No. 14*

Zharov also posed the same question to me: *Vladimir Frantzevich, what do you think happened here today?*

Vladimir Rott: *A true miracle happened! We have all kinds of dreams... But every time a person dreams of something and that dream comes true, that too is a miracle from G-d! When I first came to this country, I saw... It was great! Iya even got jealous because I really liked all the Buryat women. We'd be walking down the street and I wanted to kiss every one of them! It hurt her feelings—"How can you just like them all?"*

The miracle has happened, and here we are today, all of us... What an event! Look here, we got this idea... Zharov brings up the issue of the 300th anniversary... Taisya decides, "We have to do something!" And now, we're all here. There are so many faces here today! Happy, glowing faces! And the weather! It's G-d's way of congratulating us on such an achievement!



Vladimir Zharov conducting interviews.

I want to say, "Republic of Buryatiya! You are a wonderful country! You live in a wonderful place. I have known you for 53 years—you are capable of hard work. Taisya and her family have shown what they can do! They wanted something, we helped them, and they did it! So, Buryatiya, be proud of your wealth! Preserve it! Increase it! And you will have abundance because you are so full of remarkable people!"

Zharov to Taisya Chernykh: *You probably watched people gradually start responding to what was happening here?*

Taisya: *We started it.... Just my family... Constantly, day in and day out, we worked in this cemetery. Of course when the locals noticed that we were coming here every day, they started asking and showing interest: Why are we coming here, what for? And, little by little, we created what you are seeing today... We're very happy about it!*

Zharov: Was it difficult to change people's views? Some probably asked why you'd want to do this?

Taisya: Yes, we got those comments, and phone calls... Nasty stuff. People said hurtful things to our faces. They would ask: How can we, as Christians, get involved in this?

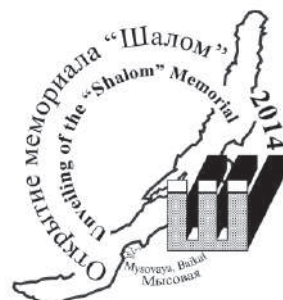
But I believe that there is only one G-d! He brought us close to these people, he wanted us to get to know them for a reason. And that's why we did this. To do something, to restore something that was lost—that's a holy, noble task. Without the past, there can be no future. That's why we did this!

(I am Chernykh, Taisya Akramovna. I work as a librarian at the technical library of Mysovaya Station of the East Siberian Railroad.)



Iya and I and the Chernykh's left the cemetery last. We, too, walked around its perimeter and took this photo for the memories.

The official part of our celebration was over. The locals began to walk away while our out-of-town guests started taking their seats on the three buses. The Chernykh's approached everyone who was leaving, whether on foot or by bus, and handed each guest a white plastic bag with a logo of the Shalom memorial. This logo was designed by Sandor Rott as a gift to our project. Inside each bag was an open souvenir postcard both sides of which are shown below.



*The logo of our project.
Designer: Sandor Rott.*

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



МЕМОРИАЛ "ШАЛОМ"

Мемориал "Шалом" воздвигнут на руинах старейшего еврейского кладбища. Удалось восстановить имена 55 погибших.

Мемориал сооружен в честь основателей станции Мясоев, организаторов Великого Пути и строителей Транссибирской железнодорожной магистрали.

Организаторы и авторы проекта - Владимир и Яна Ротт (Торонто, Канада).
Исследования и архивные поиски - Татьяна Черныш (г. Москва, Россия).
Строительство мемориала - семья Петра и Валентины Черных (г. Москва, Россия).

ОТКРЫТ 17 ИЮНЯ 2014 г.
 Озеро Байкал, Станция Мясоев (г.Бабруйск).
 Россия, Сибирь, Бурятия.

"Shalom" Memorial

The "Shalom" Memorial was built on the ruins of an ancient Jewish cemetery. We were able to identify the names of 55 of the deceased.

The Memorial was erected in honor of the founders of the Miasovaya Station, the pioneers of the Great Ice Road, and the builders of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

ORGANIZERS AND PROJECT DESIGNERS - Vladimir and Yana Rott (Toronto, Canada).
RESEARCH AND ARCHIVAL SEARCHES - Tatiana Chernysh (St. Moscow, Russia).
MEMORIAL CONSTRUCTION - Peter and Valentin Chernich (Moscow, Russia).

OPENED JUNE 17, 2014
 Lake Baikal, Miasovaya Station (Babushkin).
 Russia, Siberia, Buryatia.

Commemorative postcard of the opening of the Memorial.

Each bag also contained a copy of the new edition of *Mysovaya Station*, a decent salami sandwich, a bottle of water, a bottle of juice, some fruit, a box of cookies and a chocolate bar. All the contents of the packages, including the fresh bread rolls and salami, had been brought from Irkutsk by Valentin Chernykh; Svetlana Chernykh and two of their friends from Mysovaya had managed to make the sandwiches and put together the packages two hours before the opening. Iya also brought each of the rabbis a large box of hand-made kosher chocolates which we had ordered from a company in our part of Toronto.

The town of Babushkin, which we stubbornly continue to call Mysovaya Station, has a single restaurant, and it has a properly “historic” name: “The Pub.” Its owner, Olga Slabozhanina, did her best to prepare an excellent dinner for the passengers in the fourth bus, reserved for the Memorial’s builders and enthusiasts—Taisya’s helpers who lived in Mysovaya. The town’s mayor, V.A. Laryushkin, was also our guest.

When, still in Toronto, I was helping Taisya come up with a menu for our meal at The Pub, she had one serious concern: “*What are we going to drink? How much vodka should we bring?*” I didn’t understand what the problem was and replied, “*We visitors don’t need vodka at all. As for the local guests, everyone can order as much as they like when we sit down at the table...*”

Then, Tasya explained it more accessibly: “*I made arrangements with the owner of the restaurant to bring our own vodka—it’s cheaper for us. They sell many kinds of vodka here, but how can we find out which ones are safe to drink?*” However, everything turned out fine; people drank vodka and the dinner was wonderful.

After the opening of the Memorial, we moved on to the next part of our project. As a reward for their excellent and successful work, the working team that built the Memorial went on a tour of Buryat-Mongolia. We traveled to Kabansk, Enhaluk, Maksimikha, Barguzin, Ulan-Ude, Novoselenginsk, Novodesyatnikov, and Kyakhta, which had once been points on the Great Tea Road; we visited their sites of interest and saw the places where Jews had lived at the time of the active tea trade.

To our great regret, Pyotr Chernykh’s main job with the railroad kept him from joining us. The passenger list for the bus that took us on this trip consisted of the other Chernykh’s (Taisya, Valentin, Svetlana, Vladislav, and little Vadim); Iya and Vladimir Rott; the Hungarian guests, Éva Orosz and Ilona Kercsi; Sholomit Guterman, from Moscow; Oleg Barbas, an Israeli; Yuri Dolgikh, a retiree from Omsk and our friend from our student days; and, finally, the enthusiastic and indefatigable helpers from Ulan-Ude: Vera Gordienko, Luisa Maltseva, Irina and Ravil Rizvanov and their daughter Dasha, Aleksandr Palei, Olga Rusinova, and Svetlana Fishbuch.



Our tour of the places along the Great Tea Road.

Vera Gordienko's son Anton and his wife Svetlana were also added to our list. I have already described their good deeds in my books. This time, at Anton's insistence, they accompanied our bus every day in their BMW to ensure the safety of our journey on the long roads.



Anton and Svetlana Gordienko.



Anton and Svetlana Gordienko. In the courtyard of their house are three huge Kamaz trucks and a gasoline tanker, which are operated by Anton and his assistants. The multi-talented Anton pieced together all of these machines from scraps purchased from landfills.

We will also remember for a long time the wonderful farewell dinner that Svetlana and Anton organized for our entire group at their spacious two-story mansion. They had quite literally built that house with their own hands, while the three KAMAZ trucks and the enormous tanker truck parked in the yard had been assembled by Anton himself from parts bought from junkyards on army bases. Our best wishes go to this gifted young couple, who are also caring parents to two little boys—even while Anton spends most of his time as a lost-distance truck driver, delivering goods all of the Trans-Baikal region in his own trucks or with the help of other drivers, while Svetlana and her assistants run a beauty salon.

We spent two nights and one day relaxing in the magically beautiful village of Enhaluk and strolling in its vicinity, on the endless sandy lakeshore. We even got a chance to dip our feet in the hot water of a local spring. It's a good thing we brought warm jackets with us; while it was mid-June, the days were still cool, and in the evenings it was definitely too chilly to go out without a jacket. The next morning, after taking our time to breathe the fresh air of Lake Baikal, we reached the district center, the town of Kabansk.

The Kabansk regional history museum, currently housed in the former mansion of the merchant Edelman, has some interesting exhibits on local subject matter. This is where we first got acquainted with data on the economic development of Russia and the Trans-Baikal region before the revolution of 1917.



The former mansion of the merchant Edelman, which is now a museum of local Kabansky regional lore.

In my time, Soviet economic data always began with a comparison to 1913. In this regard, Russia today has changed. The museum's tour guides expertly presented the numbers for gold prospecting, coal mining, land cultivation and grain harvesting in the late 19th century, before the Russo-Japanese War, and before 1917. They also offered a detailed account of the successful business ventures and the charitable work of the once-renowned Jewish family, the Edelmanns.

I listened and thought to myself, *"If the October Revolution and the Soviet regime had never come to this place, this little town today would be no different from similar Canadian towns—just as well-tended, just as affluent, and with the same problems..."*

The museum tour guide also showed us a unique folio: a thick book sewn together from two books of an 1838 menologium (*monthly calendar of saints*), which belonged to a large local family, the Astrakhantsevs. This folio is remarkable because for decades, starting in the mid-19th Century, all the members of the Astrakhantsev family used the calendar's blank pages for a diary to record events happening in Russia and around the world, unusual natural phenomena, and family news. Thus, it describes the details of a tragedy that struck in 1861, when an earthquake caused a large part of the lakeshore, with buildings and people, to sink into the Baikal. The bay formed as a result is known as the Sinkhole.

The book also contains an account of a visit to the Kabansk area by the Grand Prince Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov, heir to the throne and the future Emperor of Russia.

The volume bears a touching inscription: *“Descendants! This is a book about Astrakhantsev family members who came into this world and left it. There are only small bits of the past here. Do not judge the departed harshly, we wrote as we thought and as best we could.”*

We had an unexpected pleasant meeting with Alexei Alexandrovich Zhilin, the deputy governor of the Kabansk region, who had been a source of invaluable help for our project. He had not been able to attend the opening of the Memorial but actually tracked us down at the Museum just to say hello.



The head of the district's administration A.A.Zhilin spotted us at the museum.

The diary of the family Astrakhantsev, recording events from the mid-19th century.





When I had an event for my latest book at the Kabansk city library, it was good to see more than a dozen familiar faces in the audience. They were members of the town's delegation who had been in Mysovaya just two days earlier for the opening of the Memorial. Now, we got acquainted better and had this photo taken to commemorate the day.



We enjoyed three unforgettable days in Ulan-Ude. Various levels of local administration had greatly appreciated our gift and contribution to the cultural heritage of Buryatia and, in turn, tried to help our group of enthusiasts to learn as much as possible about the city's history and cultural landmarks. They made available an additional multi-seat bus in order to accommodate a large group of Ulan-Ude's Jewish community members travelling to the community of Babushkin, for the unveiling of the Memorial; they showed us the local ethno-cultural centre, "Atzagat", as well as the ethnographic museum; and they invited us to the "Commonwealth of the Hearts" gala. It was the final performance in a competition that showcased national talents of the People's Republic of Buryatia. So many dances, so many songs! In particular, the artists captivated us with their diverse and colourful costumes.



THE SHALOM MEMORIAL



Council Square—the central square of Ulan-Ude. The sculpture “Head” was installed in the square in 1970 on the 100’t anniversary of the birth of Lenin.



A walking tour highlighting the Jewish history of Verkhneudinsk (re-named in 1934 as Ulan-Ude) was memorable thanks to the beauty of some of the houses on the Great Nikolaevskaya street (now Lenin street). One of the most photographed buildings in the city is a house formerly owned by a prominent merchant—N.L. Kapelman. “At the beginning of the 20th century businessman Naphtali L. Kapelman built a two-storey stone house with atlantes. In 1907 the building was constructed in the shortest possible time, between June 2 and October 5. It housed the dental office of Dr. Zubovskaya, its ground floor was leased to Xing Tai Lun’s tea shop, as well as to “Modern”—a confectionary store, and a coffeehouse owned by I.E. Tsygalnitski. In September 1912 a business partnership called “The Commerce and Industry Bureau and the Commission Office of N.L. Kapelman and G.I. Vinevich” was registered at this house. It was engaged in the production and sale of lumber.”



The house of Naphtali Kapelman—House with Atlantes.

The Jewish community of Verkhneudinsk grew in the second half of the 19th century. Initially, the exiles—who later were granted peasant and petty bourgeois society status—formed the core of the local Jewish community. Starting in petty trade, the descendants of exiles as well as retired soldiers became the founders of eminent merchant families.

In the 1880’s the first synagogue was built in Verkhneudinsk. According to the first general census of 1897, 11.2% of the city population was Jewish and



The house of S.I. Rosenstein (16 Sukhe-Bator Street).

that number increased to 20% by 1909. Jews constituted 38% of the merchant class and 43% of the wealthy landowners.

In 1911, Verkhneudinsk had only 16242 inhabitants, 13771 of whom were Russian Orthodox, 1242—Jewish, 388—Muslim, 382—Roman Catholics, and 84—Buddhists. In 1915, 83.4% of industrial output in Verkhneudinsk was produced by Jewish businesses. Their products were of high quality, and received awards at various fairs and exhibitions. "... Flour from the milling plant belonging to Naphtali Kapelman won a silver medal at the first West Siberian exhibition in Omsk in 1911". "Confectionary plant of Paisach Rozovsky received the top award—«Grand Prix», as well as a gold medal, at the World Fair and Exhibition held in Brussels in 1910".

Let us continue with the tour of Ulan-Ude.

With great interest our guests from other cities and countries viewed the multi-residence two-storey wooden house №15 on Kirov Street and its decrepit, pitiful back yard, crowded with small individual sheds as well as a stand out of a communal wooden outhouse, divided into four cabins. From this house nearly 60 years ago—a seventeen-year-old Buryat girl, Iya Yaroslavskaya, forever left her hometown for Tomsk, to write entrance examinations to the Polytechnic Institute. The house had not changed much, and a couple of old tenants recognized and happily embraced their former neighbour...



Even up until today the wooden two-story apartment building at 15 Kirov Street is fully occupied, where Iya used to live and from which she left 60 years ago to go to Tomsk. The yard of the house.

From here Iya led us on a heart-warming tour of Ulan-Ude's Opera and Ballet Theater. On the way, she showed us a two-storey wooden building, her former music school, where as a little girl she started to take violin lessons and spent many an unforgettable hour playing in the school symphony orchestra. I can not express in words the joy and excitement with which my wife led us on tour of the theater building—ininitely magnificent for our family—where from an early age our “momma and bubbie” Iya encountered her fairy-tale world of music and opera arias. We found the theatre proudly waiting for us freshly painted and renovated.





The Opera and Ballet Theatre of Ulan-Ude, built in 1952.

The next memorable visit took place when our friend and city guide, Louisa Maltseva, led us to the Jewish Community Center of Ulan-Ude — nowadays called the “Jewish Cultural Charitable Foundation Simchat Chaim”. Founded by the “Joint Jewish Distribution Committee”, it is currently headed by Anna Amazgayeva. Here they manage the funds from the “Rachel Guterman-Yaroslavskaya Foundation”, for which our family collects money from donors in Toronto.

Volunteers of the Center warmly welcomed us, we talked about their achievements and concerns, and they answered our questions. We were handed a letter of appreciation on behalf of the Administration of Buryat national government (which you can see in the photo below), and afterwards we got treated to lunch.

A member of the local Jewish community, Larissa Parkin, took our group to a monument dedicated to victims of political persecution during the 1930's—1950's, which was opened in Ulan-Ude in October 2007 (sculptor—V.B. Bukhayev). The sculpture, installed on a granite pedestal, depicts a mother and child. In the background, there are sharp spears and barbed wires. The inscription on the pedestal reads: “To Victims of Political Repressions.” The monument stands in front of a building with a commemorative plaque: “During the 1920's, the Cheka, OGPU, and NKVD [Soviet State security services] offices were located here.” Note the granite plaques bearing the names of the victims: they were installed on the initiative of the Republican Association of Victims of Political Repressions. Larissa Parkin is a board member of the Association. In the 1920's — 30's 20 thousand people were arrested in Buryatia, of which 4907 were shot.



A monument to the victims of political repression from 1930–1950.

During this visit to Buryatia, I was invited to meet up with the readers at the Republic State Library. I am infinitely grateful to the library staff, who poured their best effort into organizing that meeting: they set it up in the newly built elegant library space; they put up the information about the meeting on the library website well in advance; and made a slideshow about my books and media publications that was shown on multiple screens during the meeting; and they also created an exhibition based on my book, «In Defiance of Faith». And we received the best sound service possible.

It was inspiring to see little flags of Russia, Canada, Hungary and Israel—proudly announcing the make up of our delegation—during the meeting on the table next to the podium. The main part of my presentation was about the Shalom Memorial that was completed and had just opened at the Mysovaya station. A slideshow about our construction near Lake Baikal turned out to be a great addition to the program. A talented Svetlana Chernykh managed to prepare it during our visit, and we used it at the end of our meeting with the readers at the National Library.

Just like during our previous visits, the get together of Iya's former classmates — the 1955 graduates of the 1st and the 3rd Secondary Schools in Ulan-Ude—was quite memorable and fun. The eyes of these elderly, silver-haired grandparents shone with joy and happiness. Unfortunately, only 12 people were able to attend that meeting.

The ATV — the National television channel repeated a half-hour video recording of my interview several times. Before the start of the live broadcast Vladimir G. Banchikov — the anchor — placed in front of me six written questions that he wanted me to answer. “*I will both read the questions and answer them, too?*”—I asked, surprised. “*No. I’ll be asking them...*” — He assured me.



A meeting with readers at the National Library of the Republic.



A thank you letter from the Government of the Republic of Buryatia.

Imagining the viewers — the people of Buryat-Mongolia that I have truly loved for many decades—I felt a surge of inspiration and a great desire to tell the legendary countrymen of my dear wife, Iya Bazyrovna, as much as possible about our lives and endeavours. The half-hour broadcast, during which the anchor did not interrupt me once, flew by in a flash. I recall how I was touched when Vladimir Banchik said at the end of the interview: “*Vladimir Franzevich, when you next come to visit our Republic, I wish to personally welcome you at the airport...!*”



In the village of Novoselenginsk we visited the Museum of the Decembrists. The friendly and knowledgeable senior guide and her assistant led us from one room to another, vividly describing the everyday lives as well as the multifaceted educational activities of the heroes from the Senate Square, exiled to Siberia for years after their failed uprising. We felt the atmosphere of that bygone epoch even better by going from the museum to the old house of the merchant Startsev (“*A.D. Startsev: commercial advisor, merchant of the 1st guild. The son of the Decembrist N.A. Bestuzhev, brought up by Selenginsk merchant, D.D. Startsev*”). On the veranda of the house young women dressed in traditional colourful costumes, delighted us with pryaniki (ginger cookies), vatrushki (round buns stuffed with sweet cheese) and hot tea from a samovar.



Novoselenginsk. Tea in the old house of the merchant Starchev.



Near the town of Kyakhtha we left the paved road and, after driving for about a hundred kilometers through an off-road forest-steppe (which will also be remembered for a long time) we finally made it to a large village of Novodesyatnikovo where the Old Believers* live [Old Believers, or Old Ritualists separated from the Russian Orthodox Church]. In the second half of the 17th century their ancestors



were outlawed and exiled from Russia after they unsuccessfully protested against and rejected reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church introduced by Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich and Patriarch Nikon. They settled in Poland, Romania and other Christian countries in Europe. At the end of the 18th century Catherine the Great began to resettle the Old Believers to Trans-Baikal for the purposes of development in Siberia. They settled as large families—*semeyi*

in Russian—so here they were called “*Semeyiski*”, or “*Familials*”. According to the stories told by the villagers, in 1814, three families from the northern village of Desyatnikovo due to the shortage of land moved to an available plot located to the south closer to the Mongolian border, and their village Novodesyatnikovo today is the most compact *Semeyiski* settlement in Trans-Baikal.

Of course, *Semeyiski* had been warned of our arrival. They met our bus with songs and dances, dressed in colourful vintage costumes, introduced them-



Visiting the Old Believers in the village of Novodesyatnikovo.

selves, showed us their farm, and a homestead museum, and then at the end of the visit fed us a generous meal.

On the way there our whole group was terrified by an almost insane steering style of our driver, who did not even try to slow down the bus to avoid the endless holes and ruts in the dirt road, but our visit with Semeyiski in Novodesyatnikovo was worth it and will be remembered forever.

The legendary ancient town of Kyakhta—located on the border with Mongolia—was the southernmost point of our trip. On the edge of the restricted bor-

der zone, about ten kilometers away from Kyakhta, our bus was stopped by a group of young soldiers—the Border Guards—standing on the side of the road. They asked for, and began to inspect closely, just our foreign passports together with the special permission forms for entering the border zone that we had obtained in Ulan-Ude. The commander of the guards quickly spoke a short phrase into his phone: «It's them...!»



“It's them!”—reported the border guard on the phone, after checking our passports at the entrance to the Kyakhta border zone.

Soon, a white sedan pulled up, these were the messengers who arrived from the town of Kyakhta to meet us, dressed in their national costumes. A Buryat girl brought for us a bowl of mare's milk on a white cloth, and one of the Semeyiski girls—a traditional round loaf of bread with a small bowl of salt placed atop. Together with the girls to welcome us came Nikolai Georgievich Filshin — the Assistant Chief of Kyakhta district, who also happened to be the Chairman of the Association for Researching the Great Tea Road.

Our delegation is heartily grateful to Nikolai Georgievich. He not only suggested, but also meticulously arranged all the details of our two-day stay in historic Kyakhta. The second man was the Director of Kyakhta historical museum—Sergei Syrenovich Petushkeev. Each member of our delegation received a traditional Mongolian blue scarf — Hadak to tie on our necks.



Meeting at the entrance to Kyakhta. A Buryat girl dressed in blue presented a bowl of mare's milk, and the girl from the Old Believers—a traditional loaf of bread with a salt shaker. We were greeted by Nikolai Giorgievich Filshin—Assistant Chief of the Kyakhtinsky district, he is the Chairman of the Association which is studying the Great Tea Road.



The founding and subsequent majestic flourishing of the city of Kyakhta happened due to territorial rapprochement between Russia and China and their economic development. In the Kyakhta museum we were offered an exciting and detailed excursion dedicated to the «History of Tea» that opened a new world for me, and once again confirmed the unlimited possibilities of human genius, creativity, ingenuity, and invincibility of private initiative and entrepreneurship...

Tsar Peter the Great, after a year of clandestine sojourn in Holland, returned to Russia enriched not only with vast metallurgical, military, shipbuilding and civic knowledge, but he brought along, and offered to Russian nobility, a substitute for traditional bread and honey based drinks—a simple, delicious and popular in the West tea that he had grown to love. And since then a small rivulet flowed—from the Vietnamese border across the enormous China, slowly and irresistibly pushing its way through — and became a huge boundless torrent that reached not only across the Mongolian steppes and the expanses of Siberia, but quickly overtook, “conquering” it, the entire Russian territory, ready to serve even the needs of Europe.

“...From 1815 to 1840 import of Chinese Lapsang black tea to Kyakhta increased more than twofold and reached 80 thousand cases per year.”

“...In the 19th century, Troitskosavsk amalgamated with the settlement of Kyakhta and turned into the largest city in Trans-Baikal.”

“...At the beginning of the 19th century furs (Siberian and Kamchatka squirrel pelts) still occupied the top position among Russian goods imported to China through Kyakhta.”

Just a single visit to the Kyakhta Museum of History—which was founded in 1890 and to this day remains one of the biggest museums in the Far East and Trans-Baikal—instantly captivates its guests with an avalanche of unique



Kyakhta History Museum, founded in 1890.

information, the depth of scientific explanation, the flow of reliable information about the events, decisions and achievements of daring creators of the previous historical epochs. Visitors simply do not wish to leave the museum...



The history of tea and its technology.

In one of the rooms we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by the artifacts from an exhibit about the life of Huns on the territory of present day Buryat-Mongolia. At the beginning of the 5th century this ancient warrior tribe reached Europe, and gave one of the lands they conquered its name—«Hungaria». At Iya's request Ilona Kercsi—our guest from Hungary, the Head of one of the Budapest Television departments—stood next to the exhibits in the room and «added to» the ilk of her distant ancestors...

In Kyakhta we were presented with several books on the history of the city. I must mention at least some of the interesting details we learned from them, especially from a remarkable book edited by L.B. Tsydenova, «BeauTEAful Kyakhta».



Our guest from Hungary—Ilona Kercsi—stood next to the “Huns” exhibits and “multiplied” the ranks of her ancestors, who came along the Danube and brought the name—“Hungaria”...

*Kyakhta. Resurrection Church.
Restored and operating since 2011.*



“...In 1834, a Senate decree edified by the Emperor Nicholas I on July 20 raised the taxes collected for the benefit of Kyakhta trade chamber for the purposes of constructing Kyakhta Gostiny Dvor [Permanent covered market place]. Design of the Gostiny Dvor was done by a St. Petersburg —based architect, Petro Visconti, who had previously worked on the St. Petersburg Stock Exchange. In 1837–1842, construction was done under the direction of Engineer-Colonel A.A. Medvedev. Gostiny Dvor’s style is an example of Russian classicism. It was intended for the implementation of large-scale wholesale trade, as well as manufacturing and warehousing operations. And that is why its architectural plan differs from what is usually implied by the words, Gostiny Dvor. Its main function was to serve as a temporary storage facility for dry goods (primarily tea) in preparation for further



Project of Gostiny Dvor and a picture of it in today’s St. Petersburg.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

transport... There were 72 storerooms in the building. On the exterior the building measured 145×192 meters, while the width was 10 meters. Despite its enormous size, during the heyday of the Sino-Russian trade, the building lacked sufficient space. In 1865, the Treasury transferred ownership of Gostiny Dvor to Kyakhta merchants. After that, the maintenance and repairs of the building fell under the responsibility of the merchants.”

“In 1854, there were 58 merchant houses in Kyakhta, 37 of these were Siberian, 21 of the merchants were from the Russian interior. Foreign goods—English, French,



Today's remains of Kyakhta's Gostiny Dvor.

Dutch and German—were passing through Kyakhta during transit to China. Kyakhta was drawn into the orbit of international trade. Kyakhta trade revenues reached 16 million roubles a year, and during some periods in the 1860s — up to 30 million.»



The former merchants' houses...

«A bright mark in Kyakhta's history was left by the Town Governor and Border Commissioner—A.I. Despot-Zenovich (1828–1895), who in addition to his official duties also served the community at large: he chaired an arbitration Committee for Kyakhta trade, as well as the Committee of the Trustee Society for the Penitentiaries; he was a member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society; he served as the director of the Kyakhta Orphanage named after Tsar Nicholas; and he also penalised the town officials for drunkenness and bribery. Under A.I. Despot-Zenovich Troitskosavsk's first public library was opened, street lighting got installed, sidewalks were built, and Kyakhta became connected to Troitskosavsk by a main road. The Governor always ensured that his orders got carried out, and he organized a daily street patrol in the settlement of Kyakhta and in Troitskosavsk.»

“ In 1844, 1st guild merchant J.A. Nemchinov used his personal capital to establish a new bank in Kyakhta for the purpose of assisting small business owners in commercial matters.”

*“Everyone heard ‘bout Kyakhta, best city of all
It was called a «gold mine...» for a reason:
Anyone could come here and make a windfall,
As long as it was his fortunate season
Notably merchants here traded in tea
The big parties they threw were all glory,
And dapper a worker caroused carefree,
Believing his job was so easy and jolly...”*

*(Nikandr Durov, secretary
of the Town Police Department).*

“Kyakhta merchants always differed from the Russian merchants in their level of culture and worldliness. All of them were hereditary honorary citizens of commerce and state councillors, they were gentlemen, and so on.... but being a «Kyakhta merchant» was paramount [to their identity]. This was a sort of professional pride,»- wrote I. Popov.

I would like to offer my reader some information about just one of Kyakhta's merchants, for example:

«Nikolai Matveevich Igumnov (1782–1867) — a Kyakhta merchant of the 1st guild, a councillor of commerce, hereditary honorary citizen, the largest trader in Eastern Siberia -- in the 1820's he was a mayor of Kyakhta, and at the end of 1850's—the head of Kyakhta Town Community. He made his fortune through active trading with the Chinese. For that, in 1816, he transferred from an Irkutsk guild to Kyakhta's 3rd merchant guild with a capital of 8000 rubles.

In the 1820s, after increasing his capital to 50 thousand rubles, he became a merchant of the 1st guild, and remained one until the middle of the 19th century. He owned one of the most beautiful and expensive houses in Kyakhta (appraised at 4 thousand silver rubles). He was a commissioner of St. Petersburg merchants—brothers Chaplygin in Kyakhta (in the 1840's.) Had his own extensive network of stewards, one of whom was a 1st guild merchant Yakov Kuznetsov of Selenga. In 1833, on the basis of the «Most Gracious Manifesto» he was awarded a hereditary honourable citizenship. He made repeat donations towards the development of schools, orphanages, hospices and churches. In particular, in 1820, «with an obligation to improve the middle class condition and wanting to earn the trust of society,» N.M. Igumnov tried to open a trade school in Kyakhta, donating for that purpose 500 rubles.

In 1835, N.M. Igumnov donated 5 thousand rubles to establish a school for the study of the Chinese language in Kyakhta; in 1852 he gave 1000 rubles for the Nikolas I children's shelter in Troitskosavsk. He repaired at his own expense the road from Kyakhta settlement to Troitskosavsk. In the 1840s, he organized the construction of a new Circum-Baikal Road in order to bypass an impassable and dangerous Khamar-Daban ridge, which almost halved the travel distance from Kyakhta to Irkutsk. In 1853, at the behest of the Emperor, Igumnov received a gold medal with an inscription “For Zeal”—to be worn around the neck on an Alexander ribbon—“for his laudable zeal, tending to the common good, and significant donations made to improve certain parts of Siberia». He also participated in the construction of the Around-Baikal tract, connecting Irkutsk with the Trans-Baikal region.

In 1860 N.M. Igumnov and A.M. Lushnikov gave money to establish the first Transbaikal public printing house in Kyakhta, which published the famous «Kyakhta News», the first private newspaper in East Siberia. Nikolai Igumnov amassed a fairly large book collection, he was known as a great bibliophile.

Familiar with many of the exiled Decembrists, he delivered letters and parcels from their relatives to them, bypassing the gendarmerie inspection; he was on friendly terms with the merchants A.M. Lushnikov, the Belogolov's, the Sabashnikovs and others.

In February 1857, at a dinner in honour of an American merchant—the official representative of the US commercial circles — P.M. Collins, N.M. Igumnov raised a toast for the development of Russian-American trade to their mutual benefit and profit: «It gives me great pleasure to meet with the Americans in Siberia, and we hope that you have shown to your fellow countrymen the way by which in the future they will be coming to our country.»

«Life in Kyakhta was lavish, rich, fun and cultured. When in town for festivals and receptions visitors were surprised by the local democratic ways, because in the house of a millionaire one could meet someone's brother, a craftsman, at a dinner table. And near a fashionable lady who ordered her outfits from Moscow or Paris, some poor cousin or an aunt was sitting with a scarf on her head.» The rich were not ashamed to admit that they had poor relatives.

The merchants were proud of their «hospitality». At Christmas raw frozen sturgeon was sliced thinly—outdoors, in the cold. The subtle pale pink translucent shavings were mounted on an enormous platter, and served at the table. Sliced sturgeon was sprinkled with salt, pepper and, dipped in Chinese vinegar and was eaten frozen and often washed down with champagne.»

«Travel between Kyakhta and Maymochen (the nearest transportation point on the Mongolian side) was absolutely free: no customs, no border guards and no gendarmes.

The conditions in which trade took place in Kyakhta were extremely varied. First of all, trade was conducted without any documents — records, contracts or bills — based just on the words of honour, confirmed only by a slap and a shake of hands. The lack of documentation was mainly due to the fact that the Russians did not know how to speak or write Chinese.»

«In the late 19th—early 20th century Troitskosavsk occupied one of the first places among the cities of Eastern Siberia due to the number of schools and qualified teachers it had. With the number of schools per 1000 people, Kyakhta—Troitskosavsk occupied the first place among Siberian cities. For the 9000 inhabitants in Kyakhta—Troitskosavsk there were 9 schools, and 24% of the municipal budget went to education. Citizens of Kyakhta also continued their education in the large Russian cities of Tomsk, Moscow and St. Petersburg.»

A witness to the economic and cultural development of the city, I.I. Popov wrote: «... Much seemed odd, surprising and shocking to visitors in Kyakhta: the millionaires' village itself, as well as the customs of its inhabitants and their characters... The mix of European and Oriental cultures was stunning... A sorrowful, one-note singing of a Mongol, and sharp purely metallic cries of the Chinese... And nearby—a magnificent cathedral, comfortably furnished apartments, dresses

from Worth⁹ of Paris, paintings, tapestries, fine private libraries, sounds of singing and piano playing that can be heard from the windows: Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky. «One and a half years after the invention of cinema the wealthy Kyakhta was already watching movies.»

«In 1829, A.S. Pushkin asked the Emperor for permission to go with P.L. Schilling on an expedition in Transbaikalia, in Kyakhta. ...But Pushkin learned that he was denied permission to travel from a letter signed by Benkendorf. The expedition set out from St. Petersburg to Kyakhta without him.

Pushkin's great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich Hannibal, in 1728 was in exile in Selenginsk having a formal order to build the fortress Selenga. Subsequently, he held senior military and engineering positions. He was awarded the Order of Alexander Nevsky.»

«In 1853, Italian singer Domenico Ferrari, pianist M.F. Knauf-Kamensky, and singer E.F. Marelli visited Kyakhta...»

«According to I.I. Popov, «Kyakhta made significant contributions to science, culture, arts, and the book printing business.» D.N. Prianishnikov — an academician, the founder of agricultural chemistry was born there; the brothers Botkin, and artist Wassily Kandinsky also have Kyakhta roots.»

«The heyday of Kyakhta did not last long. 'The same fate befell Venice—the beauty of the Adriatic, espoused to the sea: an instant greatness and power, followed by decline. Venice of the Siberian steppes followed the exact same destiny,'—wrote Yadrintsev. The volume of trade going through Kyakhta decreased after a railway was built. Kyakhta was far from that main transit route. And even though another project got underway—to build a railroad from Kyakhta to Mysovaya to join that trade route with the Siberian main route—the project remained unrealised.»

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the Kyakhta district administration and its head, Alexander Vladimirovich Bayantuev, as well as the other administrators of various ranks, for their warm welcome and attention they had given us. We learned not only about the rich historical heritage of the Great Tea Road, but also saw for ourselves the indomitable quest of the administration—and everyone else living in the district—to return Kyakhta to its former glory, raise its economic importance, and to restore as much as possible of the strong economic ties with the neighbouring regions of Russia, as well as Mongolia and China. We wish all of them the utmost luck, wisdom and energy needed to successfully restore the past glory and prosperity of this important geographical area of southern Siberia.

⁹ From the Paris salon of the English designer Charles Frederick Worth, who carried out orders for Napoleon's wife, as well as the first ladies of the Austrian and Hungarian kingdoms.



The warm welcome we received from the Kyakhta leadership headed by Alexander Vladimirovich Bayantuev.

Iya Rott.

Our tour of select sites along the Great Tea Road was coming to an end. Here I must also commend Iya and I—because the timely money transfers needed to cover construction and the daily expenses in Mysovaya and Irkutsk was never delayed. And for that we should thank all of our kind donors from Toronto and other cities.

A long-standing friend of our family, a teacher at the music school in the city of Togliatti, and nowadays a grandmother and pensioner Nadezhda Pavlova surprised and pleased Taisya and all of us by sending a money order to Mysovaya in the amount of her monthly pension—10,000 rubles. And this is what she wrote:



THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

“WE THANK YOU AND WISH THAT YOU EXPERIENCE ONLY GOOD FORTUNE ON YOUR WAY TO THE DESIRED RESULT!

LET THE GENEROUS SOUL AND HONEST PEOPLE JOIN YOU.

I PHONED GALOCHKA (another one of our faithful old friends—Galina Serapionovna Pestova, from the city of Syzran -VR): OUR REGARDS AND OUR LOVE TO YOU, MY DEAR!

YOU IMPROVE THE WORLD WITH YOUR KINDNESS AND COM-PASSION.

YOUR PROJECT IS VERY CONVINCING — IT IS SIGNIFICANT, AUS-TERE AND BEAUTIFUL.

AND FULL NAMES AND DATES, TOO—MY HEART ASHES. I CAN NOT BELIEVE THAT SO MUCH IS REAL.

ALREADY I AM SCARED—ALL COULD DISAPPEAR!

PROSPERITY TO YOU! “

Most of the expenses related to the construction of the Memorial were covered by the members of the «Torath Emeth Congregation»—our Jewish community in Toronto. Our list consists of the names of about fifty of them, including Iya and me, and our children, and many of the descendants of the Guterman family from Moscow, Estonia and New York. I hope that our dear donors will forgive me, for although they did not give me their explicit permission, I must list a few of their names, as the most generous: Agnes Weishouse, Isser Elishis, George Kuhl's family, Max Rubenstein, Dov Friedberg, Edith Weltman, Jeff Ansell, Alex Strasser, Tom Kohn's family... Two transfers—400 euros each—came from our Hungarian friends. Thanks everybody! Only through your support all this happened!

I would like to share a story that's very telling of how virtuous and decent the people are in our community in Toronto. After 40 years of living in Canada, I am now one of the oldest members at our synagogue. The majority of young people, whose names I can no longer memorize, now greet me with more respect than before, even those who only occasionally attend prayer services. I try to remember their faces and be friendly with them.

In one large religious Jewish family, a boy was born with a congenital liver defect. For three years the best hospitals in Canada and the United States had tried to find a cure for him, but in the end it was decided that the child needed a liver transplant. They announced a search for a donor...

Iya's eyes welled up when after one morning service I came home and told her that *70 people from our community had indicated they were willing to be donors!* To even hear this — that was quite an experience. A suitable donor was found, however he and his wife decided to remain anonymous.

On the day of the operation the donor was in a private room, and visitors were not allowed to enter. His wife was with him all the time.

The next day after the surgery the president of our synagogue and the Rabbi went to check on the baby and his parents. At the information desk they found out the number of the donor's room, and went up to see him. Not knowing that they were not supposed to go in, they knocked on the door: the donor's wife

answered and at that moment her husband asked, “Who’s there?” When she told him, he invited them in. The visitors were congratulating him and thanking him sincerely but the donor humbly replied:

—Please don’t mention it. This was like a gift for me — as if I won the lottery! After all, there were 70 other candidates...

For three days everyone was worried, but everything worked out well: little Shloeme began to recover, and his recovery started with a good appetite...

During Shabbat morning services, seven people normally get called up to read from the Torah, and usually those invited have something special happening in their lives that week: a Yohrzait — an anniversary of a family member’s passing, or a Bat/Bar mitzvah — celebrating the coming of age of one’s children and grandchildren, or a wedding, or another important milestone. After reading from the Torah such a person gets to be welcomed, with a handshake. On a Saturday morning several weeks later, one of those called to read from the Torah happened to be a familiar young man who always sits behind me. People were greeting him with unusual enthusiasm... *“Perhaps his wife gave birth to twins?”*—I thought.

When he returned to his seat, I also shook his hand and asked, out of courtesy, what was his name. *“Scott Woodrow”*,—he said humbly.

*—Why was everyone greeting you and shaking your hand so much?—*I asked.

For a moment he was silent, looking into my eyes, then he leaned over and confided:

—Mr. Rott, I am—the donor, who gave part of my liver...

I was lost for words for a moment... then I jumped up and hugged him...

*—Well, how do you feel?—*I naively asked, and right away noticed just how pale and emaciated his face was...

—Now I feel fine... But for the first two days the pain was terrible, I was restless... The medications weren’t helping...

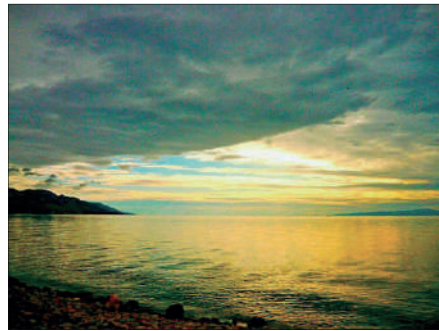
From his next answer, I learned that he had four little children of his own... I remembered his wife, a real beauty! So, that is—*Scott Woodrow! We all bow down to him and send our well wishes to him and his entire family!*



A farewell photo at the train station in Ulan-Ude.

THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

Our unforgettable bus tour of Buryatia ended at the railway station in Ulan-Ude, and from there we went to Irkutsk by train, to enjoy from our windows the expanse of the legendary Lake Baikal for a few more hours.



The vast expanses of the Earth! The vast expanses of Siberia that will forever belong to our descendants...

And if one of them shall rise a little higher, he or she will be able to see even further...



Photo: Valentin Chernykh.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 17

And perhaps will be able to leave their own mark by doing something good for their region.



TO FOUNDERS OF MYSOVAYA STATION

TO PIONEERS OF GREAT TEA ROUTE

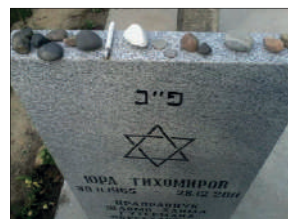
TO BUILDERS OF THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

FROM GRATEFUL DESCENDANTS

EPILOGUE

Take a look at some more photos of the Chernykh family, taken two months after the opening of the Memorial. Taisya wrote:

“August 14, 2014. Dear Vladimir and Iya! We’re doing ok. Yesterday we went to visit the Memorial. Everything was fine. It is evident that people come to visit “Shalom»: they leave rocks, candy, flowers, cigarettes, and coins... We clean up and remove trash, but it reappears. This makes us happy. Sounds like people treat this place as sacred!!! I am moved to tears... We water flowers every two days. Be well. Hugs! Taisya and Peter.»



“Taisya Chernyh, July 18, 2014. Dear Vladimir and Iya! Congratulations on the occasion of this mini anniversary for “Shalom!” A month passed, and we are finally getting it—we did it! What we dreamt of, and hoped for, has been achieved. We understand that it’s not without flaws, but we tried to do our best and poured our hearts and souls into it! Thank you for your patience, understanding and support, and for your anguish and sleepless nights! We are proud that fate brought us together!!! Now, when there’s renewed tension between our countries, I tell everyone that only good and open hearts can turn around things in the minds and hearts of all people, and I use your attitude towards Mysovaya and its people as an example.

Today we received your letter, sent from Ust-Omchug on 07/02/2014. Thank you!!

We also received a letter from the Department of the Interior Ministry in Kabansky region, in which the head of the department, S.V. Zvezdin, notified me that criminal investigation would not be opened, due to the lack of reasonable cause for it, on the basis of Clause 1 Part 1 Article 24 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation (that was for the acts of vandalism at the memorial). Hugs. Sincerely, Taisya.»

“Taisya Chernyh, July 20, 2014. Dear Vladimir and Iya! We received all of your greetings, so exciting! And thank you very much for the video recorded in Magadan, which we have just finished watching. That’s great! Another one of your dreams came true!! You belong to the cohort of winners!!!

We’re fine. At the memorial everything is in order. Hugs, kisses! Taisya.»

“August 14, 2014. Dear Vladimir and Iya! Next week we will be celebrating the Day of the City, and I was approached by the city folk with a request to jog everyone’s memory about the gift that you had given to our city. People told me, could you send greetings to everyone in the city, including the administration, to make it clear that you are monitoring the situation with Memorial «Shalom.» I was surprised to hear this suggestion, but I am sharing it with you.

Sincerely, Taisya.»

“Dear citizens of Mysovaya and the town of Babushkin!

Please accept, our cordial greetings and best wishes on the occasion of the City Day celebrations in Babushkin from the distant city of Toronto, Canada!

For more than half a century we have been linked to your wonderful region—the Republic of Buryatia. But after building and opening the Memorial “Shalom” at the old Jewish cemetery you became like family to us. This event became known in many countries.

We continue to present to the Western world, not only the photos of the Memorial and its builders, but we also speak publicly about your city and its inhabitants—your warmth and kindness, sincerity and hospitality. And, of course, more and more people become aware of, and interested in, the natural beauty of the vastness of your Lake Baikal region. We also get invited to come and share this story in New York, Hungary, Israel.

We are so happy to hear that people come to visit the Memorial, and that it became one of the attractions of your city.

We wish you good everything—good health, good weather, great jobs, and the joys that children and families bring.

With our deepest respect,

Vladimir and Iya Rott.

Toronto, Canada

August 14, 2014. “

The City Hall in Mysovaya received this greeting of ours, but they did not dare to read it out loud at the town rally.

November 29, 2014. News from Mysovaya and Ulan-Ude:

“Every Monday Peter Chernyh must come to the Railway hospital in Irkutsk, where he has to get injections after a botched, unprofessional knee surgery. He can barely walk with a cane, suffers terrible pain, and has been “advised” to go to Moscow or St. Petersburg for a corrective operation, or better yet, “overseas”...

Saturday night. It is + 4C in Toronto, and in Mysovaya there is a blizzard; the roads have not been cleaned. I make a call, and Peter answers the phone. He shares with me the details of his troubles, and soon Taisya comes home: *“Early in the morning I went to the station, but I was not able to buy a train ticket to Irkutsk. But just now I went back, and bought a ticket. We will have to walk through the blizzard in order to catch the evening train...”*

«Vera Gordienko, Louisa Maltsev and our other activists were at the Opera House in the gala concert given in honour of the 75th anniversary of the Opera and Ballet Theatre of Ulan-Ude. Vera is seriously ill (her heart) these days... but she really wanted to go to the gala concert, which featured artists from the Mariinsky, the Bolshoi and the Stanislavsky Musical Theatre... She tried using leeches, and that brought a bit of a relief... Anton drove her to the theater. She told us about the concert with such joy in her voice...

—And Louisa Maltsev also went to the concert, only she had to leave after the first half as she had gotten a headache... and the other “girls” stayed until the very end.

—Vera, but you were so sick, how could you stay...?

—And here’s how: We were sitting and sucking on our heart medicine...

Iya called her first cousin, Leonid Safro and his wife Nina, to find out how they were doing. They have been together for almost 60 years, having lost both of their children: their beautiful Nadia (she died of cancer) and Mitya (an alcoholic)... Leonid was born in Bobruysk... he had just had serious abdominal surgery. In response to Iya’s questions—How do you do? How is Leonid? Who comes to look after you?—Nina replied:

—We are ok! I love to eat yummy foods and, well, Leo—too, with me... He eats well. I try to feed him... Tanya (granddaughter) pops in almost every day to bring groceries. I don't go out, except to go to Tanya's apartment to take a shower... We do not have a bathtub... But I try to wash Leonid, I give him sponge baths... first his hands, then head... shoulders... tummy... And then, each of his feet...»

Toronto, March 2015.

Memorial “Shalom” is one year old! (E-mail to friends)

Dear friends!

On June 17 we'll be celebrating 1 year since we built the Memorial “Shalom” in Baikal. Congratulations to all again!

Our friend, Zoya Afrimzon — who joined the student band as Zoya Kovalev during our student years in Tomsk 50 years ago — was a violinist, and a student at the radio-technical faculty, and we have remained close friends ever since. She came to Tomsk from an orphanage, where she was also taught to play the violin.

In Tomsk, Zoya met her Sasha Afrimzon, they gave birth to two daughters, then had a few grandchildren.

Zoya has been living in Israel for a long time. She is no longer a radio engineer—but a grandmother. She still plays the violin in orchestras, she writes wonderful poetry and loves to paint. For the first anniversary of our Memorial in Mysovaya Zoya sent us her vision of it. Thank you, Zoya! It's so cool!



THE SHALOM MEMORIAL

In the next picture you can see Zoya Afrimzon with her daughter Lena (PhD in Biology) and grandson, at her home in the city of Petah-Tikva.



And the next photo we received from our dear Chernyh family in Mysovaya. In honour of the first anniversary they invited guests from Ulan-Ude and organized a celebration! Congratulations to the Chernyh's and everyone who they made happy with their work!

The photo shows the entire Chernyh family, with Town Mayor A. Laryushkin. June 17, 2015



Chapter 18

FATHER'S LETTERS LIVE ON

My parents—Mama Regina and Dad Ferenc—gave me life. But after the first three sweet and cloudless years of my childhood, fate perfidiously divided our family. Until she passed away—Mama Regina, who lived to almost a hundred—continued to be for my brother Joseph and me the sole protector, hope, our source of inspiration and a model of the struggle for survival. After the arrest of her husband, at 38 years old she was left with two children in the Soviet Union where without knowing the language, lacking a profession, and living in dire poverty she managed to provide for all three of us; during the war she saved us from the Nazi murderers; in deep despair, sometimes with the help of a belt, she groomed me into a normal schoolboy from the former bully and a slacker; she supported my brother and me so that we could get higher education, and when we became adults, for her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren Baba Regina—until her last days—was the subject of our love, filial pride, and a veritable well of wisdom, endurance and stamina.



The Rott (Róth) Family from Hungary arrived in Bobruysk in October 1932.

Ferenc Rott was arrested in July of 1938. Our family never saw him again. Like millions of other innocent victims of the Stalinist system, my father's name was entered into the absurd list of «enemies of the people». After ten years of hard labour in the gold mines of Kolyma, and the subsequent two years of unrealized dreams of reuniting with his family, Ferenc died in December of 1950.



The only picture of Vladimir with his father. Bobruysk, 1936.

During the twelve years of separation, save for that period of time when Belarus was under Nazi occupation, sixty-six of Ferenc's letters sent from the outskirts of Magadan—which are now carefully kept in our home in Toronto—reached his family in Bobruysk.

And what a correspondence this was! From 1938 to 1947 Ferenc was not allowed to write in Hungarian, and Regina could not read in Russian... Almost every word in these letters bears a noticeable "Hungarian accent" and contains grammatical errors. But the writing in the letters is meticulously calligraphic, to ensure that my brother Joseph—who was six years older than me and was attending school—could read them and tell my mother what my father was saying.

Ferenc's letters were full of sadness and desperate worry about his family. He didn't know where we lived, or what my mother did for a living. He was absolutely convinced of his innocence, naively waiting for the day when "someone, somewhere" would review his case and allow him to go back to his family.

In many of his letters he apologised to Regina for not listening to her objections regarding travel to the Soviet Union at the time when he was signing the contract at the Soviet consulate in Vienna. Each letter ended with an appeal to me, asking me to stop being friends with the “bad guys”, to begin studying seriously, and to obey mom and Yuzik (Joseph). In each letter, dad promised that he would soon return home and would be my best friend...

When I wrote my first book of memoirs¹⁰, I dedicated the tenth chapter—“My Father’s Letters”—to Ferenc’s letters. I write in Russian. Periodically, when a large part of my forthcoming book is ready, I ask my wife Iya to read the stuff that I have written, to correct mistakes or make suggestions in case I forgot to mention some details... After reading the tenth chapter, Iya said: “*You know, Vadya, your book is getting long, and you will be writing it for some time still. It’s not right to delay the publication of “My Father’s Letters”... This chapter must be published as a stand alone book...*”

I made a few copies of the tenth chapter of the manuscript and started showing it to my friends. It is hard to convey the joy I felt when Leonid Pahuta and Anatoly Shavrin—my good former colleagues from Togliatti—reported that the publishing house at VAZ¹¹ would publish “My Father’s Letters”. Two months later, a family friend—Vitaly Groisman, the Chief of Medicine at one of the Togliatti hospitals—informed me that he had moved into his home ...the entire first print run of “My Father’s Letters”!

After a bit of a wait for our visas to enter Russia, and a flight across the Atlantic, “Lufthansa” carried Iya and me from Frankfurt to Togliatti. How excited I was to be holding this small paperback—my first and infinitely precious book! It was evident that the typographers—whose names appear on the last page of the book: S. Bondareva, I. Popov, S. Urtembaeva, L. Baraboshina and N. Tikho-



Portrait of Ferenc from prison (GULAG Drawing by an unknown artist). Kolyma, Susuman village. October, 1945.

¹⁰ Vladimir Rott. «*In Defiance of Fate*», Book I, Joy from Sadness. 2009.

¹¹ VAZ—Volga Automobile Plant in the city of Togliatti.

nova—were masters with a big heart, and empathized with the suffering of a crushed prisoner—innocent and doomed—and tried to preserve the memory of him with the utmost dignity. On the last day of stay, as a grand finale to our visit to Togliatti, Leonid Pahuta—on behalf of the plant and publishing house—presented us with a precious gift: 20 copies of “My Father’s Letters” bound in a beautiful hardcover. As a son, my sincere thanks go to all of them.

Soon after a renowned translator, Zsuzsa Király, translated “My Father’s Letters” into Hungarian. Later, during one of my meetings with a popular Hungarian historian Miklós Kun, he said: «...*The publisher to whom I gave your manuscript admitted that she wept as she read it.*”

The publisher turned out to be Katalin Mezey—a mother of three talented children, a well-known poet, and the owner of the Hungarian publishing house “SZÉPHALOM KÖNYVMŰHELY”. Among many other awards, she won the European Union Prize for Literature in 2012, as well as the Kossuth Prize in 2015. Katalin not only published “My Father’s Letters” in Hungarian and English, but for eight years she has been carefully presenting all my books to the readers in three languages.

The birth of my books has completely transformed our lives. Now Iya and I are “in a rush to spend the inheritance of our children”: we travel around the world and present to various audiences the images of my heroes, which for more than a century have been travelling on our “high speed train”—Gardna—Miskolc—Bobruysk—Tomsk—Togliatti—Toronto. And what a joy it is to see in front of me an audience of attentive listeners, whether in Ulan-Ude, Tomsk, Togliatti, Budapest, Encs, Miskolc, Israel or Toronto.

To get a better idea about the scope and geography of my performances please visit this website—<https://sites.google.com/site/serenapublishing/home>.



A presentation of my books in the synagogue opened in Togliatti. May, 2011.



Presentation of the book "In Defiance of Fate" to students of technical school. Miskolc, 2013.

Whatever is the topic of my latest presentation, whether it's «Student life in Tomsk», «Construction of VAZ», «Adapting to new life Canada» or «Life in Bobruysk during the Nazi occupation», I always begin with a 'show and tell' about «My Father's Letters». My audience can appreciate why each of my books and each of my performances begin with the following dedication:

*«Dedicated to the fond memory of those innocent parents
who were murdered and deprived of the opportunity
to raise their children to be decent people.*

Grateful son»

A chance to write my books turned out to be a real godsend for me. Being immersed in the archives of our family and in the pages of my diary—which I have luckily kept from an early age until this day—enabled me to introduce to my readers the interesting people and events that I have encountered over many years, thank G-d. Besides that, raised without a father, and long since a father and a grandfather to adult children and growing grandchildren, I was given the opportunity to see in a different light my father's letters, which he had been sending home for twelve years, until his death, from the prison camp.

Filled with bitterness, with tears in my eyes, I experienced the hopeless, desperate days of this innocent prisoner. He demonstrated to us all how strong, infinite and tender was his love for his wife and sons, and how true and infallible was his love for his homeland—Hungary and the town of Miskolc—to which his

dreams, hopes and memories will be linked forever. Father did not only give us a feeling of how much he loved Yuzik and me: I was able to understand his character, his logic. I felt his presence next to me.

And now I would like to acquaint the reader with a younger Ferenc, and with two of his mis-sives to his beloved Rizushka, which found us almost a century after they were created; it happened after my book «Joy from Sadness», and a chapter titled “Father’s Letters”, had already been written. Let’s take a look into my diary:

“October 12, 2006, Thursday. Toronto. There was an unexpected phone call, at half past two in the morning. I grabbed the receiver and heard someone speaking in Hungarian: “Uncle, Vladimir! It’s Tibor Paulo calling, from Garadna. I have some good news for you!”

Not yet fully awake, I did not immediately recognize the caller, and suddenly felt very anxious. Two days earlier my first cousin, Jutka Dobos—the last surviving member of what once was a large Hungarian family—had been transferred to a psychiatric hospital. Her health had rapidly deteriorated. We had been getting ready for the worst news from Budapest... I thought that, perhaps, the call was about Jutka’s passing away... Although, just a day earlier I had heard her voice when we spoke on the phone...

Then I realized that it was Tibor Paulo, our good friend, a policeman from Garadna, who for many years had been caring for the memorial, which we erected in memory of my grandfather Herman Spielberger, and 32 members of his family that perished during the Holocaust... “Perhaps he wants to tell us that his eldest daughter got engaged,”—I thought.

But Tibor continued confidently:

—The current owner of Spielberger’s house began home renovations. The builders are replacing the ceiling and installing a new roof. Among the rafters of the attic they have found a pile of old letters that your father sent to Garadna in 1921... Over time the letters all stuck together and formed a solid wad... Where should I send them?...

—Oh no!—I pleaded, instantly realizing what a unique gift we were about to receive from the past.—Do not send it anywhere! Do not try to tear it apart!... Pack everything in a plastic bag. You will hand it to me when I come to visit you next time in Garadna...



On the bookshelf in the City of Toronto Library. 2010.

Photo by Iya Rott.

I recalled that time when a group of elderly villagers gathered by Marianna Paulo came over to meet me: they related stories from Garadna's past about the deportation of the Jews. Among them was Jolán Lipták, who was still alive. The last of the Spielberger family servants, she was in the house with them until grandmother Fanny and Uncle Vilmos, and the rest of the household members were taken to the village school building, where Jews were rounded up for deportation from Garadna. She also visited them in the nearby town of Kosice, where hundreds of Jews assembled on the territory of a brick factory, without food or water, were waiting to be loaded into railway wagons and sent away to Auschwitz... I remembered what Jolán Lipták said: *"Together with Uncle Vilmos we packed up the dishes and hid them in the attic..."*



Paulo Family: Near Iya is their eldest daughter, Nicole; Tibor Paulo—the policeman of 14 neighboring villages; Garadna's Mayor—Marianna Paulo with the youngest daughter Krisztina; Erzsébet Paulo—Tibor's mother. Garadna, 2008.

More than a year passed before I could get my hands on the package found in the attic. After 62 years the papers were fused together into a solid wad. The ink was all smudged due to moisture damage, and the edges of the papers had rotted. The package that I received, unfortunately, consisted of only 14 documents. They had to be carefully separated from one another. It was evident that, initially, the wad had been much bigger, and that construction workers tried to separate the papers first. Pieces that had been separated during the previous attempts to break up the wad did not reach me.

Ferenc wrote one of his letters to Regina in minuscule handwriting on a blank side of his military identification document. Typed on a sheet of writing paper it stated that in March of 1919 Ferenc Róth had been assigned to a military unit stationed in the area near Garadna... Three other letters were sent to Ferenc in 1917, 1918 and 1920 by his uncle Mark Grossmann, who lived in the 6th district in Vienna in №1, Moritzgasse. He was a younger brother of Ferenc's mother—of our grandmother Hani. Only two letters—which I have translated and copied, below—were still “legible”, despite being in a state of decay...

The address on the envelope: To Rizushka Spielberger, young lady,
GARADNA

Miskolc, October 30, 1921, 11:00 o'clock in the evening.

My dear, beloved Rizushka!

At noon today, I sent a few words of greetings to you from Aggtelek, and now, in the evening, I am already back at home. I suppose, Rizushka, that you would not expect me to bombard you with such fine details, which other people would never permit themselves to write.

Now I should go on with the details, but first I wish to ask you, dear Rizushka, to not be mad at me for not writing for a whole week, for my silence. If you are not angry with me, then I will continue with the story I had started...!

As you, dear Rizushka, know—this week I planned to go to Aggtelek on Sunday along with a young builder from Ormosh, and since it was on Thursday that I had made a promise to him, today I already fulfilled the promise. Having overcome a number of problems, on Saturday night I was fully prepared for the road, intently looking up to the skys, wondering what sort of weather would the dawn bring us? At half past two I was already up, the coachman on duty had put a harness on a young five-year-old gray horse, and prepared a small black britzka, with big wheels... While the last of the stars were still peeking through rifts in the clouds, I rode into Ormosh to pick up my traveling companion, so that at about four o'clock in the morning we were already approaching the second village.

We planned our route: Rudabánya, Kelecsény, Zibojg, Ragály, Trizs and Aggtelek. It was a cool morning, but we were dressed warmly, and time flew nicely. Our britzka was easily leaving behind stone mileposts. In the morning we were admiring the scenery, passing among the colourful hills of the area. Then we began to discuss more serious topics, such as: the workers, our working mood, the past and the future; then we began to philosophize about politics and religious affairs, but soon realized that all that talk was just to pass the time. As the weather improved, it was getting warmer, our spirits improved, too, and we felt great.

I noticed that my friend was wearing a gold ring on one of the fingers of his hand, meaning that in Aggtelek he was not allowed to look at anything else but the cave...

As we drove on a beautiful forest road and in front of us stretched a landscape suitable for a large beautiful park, my friend said, "You know, Mr. Róth, I would have much preferred if it were not you sitting here next to me, but the one of whom I am now thinking..." I refrained from responding, that I, too, had the exact same thought all along, however was not accustomed to discussing this with anyone...! If only, one day, this could really happen...

And then we had a small adventure. The last military post is in Trizs, there's a checkpoint. Now, if we continue further, we'd get to a crossroads from which one of the roads branches off towards Aggtelek, running parallel to the border, and the other one extends far into Stratsensk Valley. And just at the crossroads we got lost, because back in the village we had been told that if we followed a country road in the woods, we would be able to shorten our journey by an hour. Only we just rode from one forest and into another, without any trace of clarity any clearing in front of us. We even discovered pine forests, but no village or anything like that—just the valleys or, again, the mountains.

I was now sorry only for our little horse. The poor thing worked all along with such diligence, and now we were forcing it to carry us in between two unknown country roads. On top of that we were warned back in Ormosh that these days we must be especially careful near the border because of the political situation, which is not the friendliest. In the end, we heard cowbells ringing on the slope of a mountain—a large flock of sheep was slowly moving up the mountain through a saltmarsh pasture. From the other side of the mountain, we began to shout, please tell us which way to go! As a result, we reached our destination at half past ten—that is, an hour later than we had hoped.

I have to confess, my Rizushka, I could not describe that stalactite cave to you—at least not the same way as I saw it, but if there is one thing I am certain about, it's that one day I must show it to you... So, let me just write that I was able to admire fantastic beauty, and that at every turn we went from one miracle to another. The views surpassed my fantasies: underground rivulets, hot springs, healing streams, and a very beautiful church with an organ, with a podium in the middle of the hall, with a dome, and with little stones, polished by the millennia. This time I could only take a quick look, but if I happen to return to this place, although likely not this year, I shall take greater care to look around.

Later, at one o'clock in the afternoon we turned back; because of the bad wine in Aggtelek our mood improved, our hardy horse kept pace, so that when we finally returned we could not believe our watches as it was still only five in the afternoon.

I collected the necessary information because the day after tomorrow will be the first of the month; I prepared several orders for tomorrow, and then left with the evening train. On the road, I bought two newspapers and began to read about the king's case, and pondered over the fact that they want to exile King Charles on the island of Madeira. During my school years I read a lot about this island in adventure books. But then my thoughts got so hazy amidst the Pacific Ocean islands, that, of course, in Miskolc the conductor had to alert me that we have already arrived. Refreshed by cool air outdoors, I thought it wasn't so surprising that sleep could overcome a man who set off early on his journey and spent the whole day in a strong wind.



*Wedding photo of Regina and Ferenc.
Miskolc, 1926.*

This was my day, my Rizushka, I won't write more. In regards to myself I can only say that lately I feel good. In comparison to the important national problems my worries look good. I spend my time in Ormosh with pleasure, so I shall see what is to come from it. Now I only lack the news from Rizushka. However, I am still as poor as before, but I live and work to improve this situation.

Now, in early November, my work is about to start on all of the remaining orders for lumber, which will take about a week to complete, and after that I will have more free time available.

God is with you, my dear good Rizushka!

An infinite number of times I am greeting you and kissing your hands with sincere love, really loving You,

Your Feri.

For his other letter Ferenc used a letterhead of a private company where he worked as a lumber sales agent. A year after he wrote it they were finally able to get married, but in the meantime, the enamoured romantic and his patient Rizushka had been dreaming for six years, waiting patiently for that day when they could unite «forever». However their time together will be very short and harsh...

NEUMAN ÁRMIN

Lumber

MISKOLC

Account Number in the Austro—Hungarian Bank

Telephone Number: 404

*Miskolc, May 4th, 1925**My dear, beloved Rizushka!*

An hour ago I wrote to you from the main post office, and now I shall continue from home. However, by the time these words get into your hands, there will be a one day gap, but I believe, my Rizushka, that it won't matter that much. I would like to write to you about a very interesting event—it's worth using a few pages—but the result would be a lot better if I told you about it. But in view of the fact that it matters the most today—when I can not see my Rizushka—although I have been planning to do things differently, I will describe to you in detail how it happened in real life and how it lives with us today.

I shall begin my story in the summer and autumn of 1916 in Szatmárnémeti, when 127 young 18-year old cadets found themselves under the command of a zealous second lieutenant Abkorovich, whose character resembled that of a cannibal. He used to say: "I will either make a real soldier out of each man under my command—and an astounding soldier at that, or, on the contrary, he would exhausted by excessive efforts end up in hospital". Of these two possible outcomes Jenő Weinberger—my friend at the time—and I chose the more masculine—and dreaming of our future buttonholes with ivory and gold stars—and hoping to endure the difficulties of soldiers' training. If others could endure it, [then so could we], and we'd certainly be deemed—at the very least—"good soldiers", if not the «very best». But unfortunately, nowhere in the world are our achievements measured fairly. My friend Weinberger was slightly stuck with bad luck. Back home, in Budapest, his already poor family suddenly went bankrupt, and they never sent him a penny, even the underwear he used was standard issue from the soldiers' «treasury». But this fellow had something else that was very valuable: his elegant military bearing, and a proud, self-assured character. He would never ask for even a penny to go out in the city on a Sunday, and he never took off his uniform, and he never felt any poorer, or worse off, than any of the wealthy guys.

Frankly, junior officers were not overly concerned with our wellbeing. If a cadet wasn't constantly slipping banknotes into their hands, they demonstrated their most conscientious concern during gun inspections when they grilled him because his rifle was dirty; while the guns of those who generously tipped them were always found to be clean, despite questionability of such cleanness.

Naturally, under the circumstances, the idealistic dream that he and I were pursuing in the military service, of course, caused us to experience many bitter hours, but I always managed to cope with these things, because my whole life

kept me in the golden mean, whereas my friend began to lose hope more and more and, despite all of his proud military bearing, he really lost heart. Even junior officers were so turned against him, that when somebody made a mistake, Weinberger was always blamed, and this was a daily occurrence.

Later, the legendary junior lieutenant started to pay attention when he heard the name "Weinberger", and must have believed that, evidently, he was a bad soldier. But the actual tragedy began one morning on the marching field, when the junior lieutenant was conducting an inspection and discovered a few grubby cadets -Weinberger among them—who were wearing stale shirts that Monday, and thus deserved a severe punishment. From that day on the poor guy could no longer escape reproach. He was no longer permitted to go to the city after 6 o'clock, at night he had to sleep in a cell with the worst-behaved cadets, and when most of his peers were to carry only their weapons and ammunition belts to the firing drills, he and some others, as a punishment, were ordered to go in full gear, which was very heavy, and, of course, for more sensitive people it pressed heavily not only on the shoulders, but also on their souls. When Weinberger began to notice that his situation deteriorated, he began to worry. Many of the more pampered guys ceased to be friends with the constantly disciplined cadet, but I had not only graduated from a commercial school in Miskolc together with him, but also remained his only friend, the one in whom he could confide. There were days when it was difficult and I could not turn to him.

All this came to a culmination on one particularly sad Sunday. That morning we were in class, training, and while one of the lieutenants talked about the arms ring belt, we sat together but we didn't talk... because Weinberger was writing a letter. Then he asked me, given that he was not allowed to leave the garrison, whether I would be kind enough to deliver his letter to the post office. I immediately felt—and saw in his eyes—that he was no longer able to cope...

After training we all had to line up for Sunday inspection, during which problems were usually sorted out with the military commanders, and those who were under penalties were supposed to attend in full gear. But because it was Sunday, and our rooms were in a 'holiday state of order', we all usually ran out of time set aside for cleaning up, as for each of us five minutes was never enough to reorganize our rooms from "orderly" to "campaign ready..." As much as we could, we always tried to help the poor fellow Weinberger, so that in 5 minutes he could be ready. That day we practically managed to swing it, except for only one unfortunate little strap that was left hanging from the shoulder-belt, unfastened to the bandolier... Of course, when you are lined up for inspection you cannot even move let alone fix something... When the Lieutenant reached Weinberger and began to inspect closely, whether his dress was in accordance to regulation (I must note here that he was absolutely not an anti-Semite, it was not then in vogue), he noticed the

dangling strap. He came up to him and, grabbing the strap, began to push the guy back and forth, in order to pull him out of the gracefully filed rank, speaking angrily: «Well, Weinberger, is this what one must look like when attending the inspection?!»

I was able to observe this situation from a short distance, and could read on the guy's face that he was using his last strength to look straight in the eyes of the lieutenant who was still holding the strap, but wasn't able to move the man off his feet. For that dangling strap Weinberger received three days in the cooler. After the drill I returned to our room alone. A few minutes later Weinberger stormed through the door, dropping his equipment on the bed and without noticing me, hands trembling, pushed 5 rounds of ammunition into his rifle.

Before I fully realized what his intentions were he had turned the weapon on himself. I leapt on him, struggling to wrest the gun from his hands, but he was screaming, demanding that he be left alone. At that moment, another cadet walked in, an engineer from Budapest, and together we disarmed Weinberger. The guy went absolutely insane. Pale and shaken, he crashed down on the bed.

The news of the incident spread fast, and a minute later the whole school stood surrounding Weinberger. Someone—probably an informer—ran to the office of the junior lieutenant and told him about the situation. Junior lieutenant came in, and started to shout in commanding voice at the guy, asking what is he going to do. By then Weinberger was completely out of it, so he did not feel any fear, and that's when the real drama played out. Speaking loudly, looking straight into the junior lieutenant's eyes the man listed every episode of abuse he had suffered from the despotic lieutenant and the sergeants during his entire time at the school. He questioned the junior lieutenant in a tone that made the self-important gentleman turn pale: "Tell me, Mr. Lieutenant, why won't you leave me alone?!"

Later that day at school it was quiet like in a church; nobody had any business in town, and everyone stayed in the barracks, silently pondering their own affairs. That cadet, an engineer from Budapest, who was older than us, approached Weinberger and tried to talk to him heart to heart. The next day, Weinberger became somewhat calmer, and asked that I return the letter to him. I told him that he had nothing to worry about, that I had not sent the letter because I suspected what it was about, and asked him to leave it to me, promising to throw it in the fire with my own hands. Later, I read the letter. He was begging his parents and sisters to forgive him for this act yet he could no longer tolerate the bullying.

Cadet—engineer turned out to be a decent Jewish guy, kind-hearted and caring, he helped Weinberger to weather the crisis, and the following day the junior lieutenant issued an order pardoning all of Weinberger's offenses committed up to that day.

Weinberger was a changed man. He avoided having conversations with some of his fellow servicemen, and when he did speak to someone he made sure to remind that person of every offense he had to endure from them before his name became familiar to all. Sergeants no longer dared to find fault with his rifle, though occasionally it could be dirty. Weinberger ceased to be afraid, and began to live a normal life.

If somewhere a strict soldier was needed, he was there. If a sensible man was needed—he went there, but he stopped noticing his upper crust peers regardless whether they were near him or not.

A few months later we were transferred to an officers' school, where nobody could be a better soldier than he was, but there was also more justice, and there only officers were allowed to discipline cadets.

After 6 weeks at the school Weinberger was ranked "first" among 127 peers (yours truly was ranked "ninth"). (This is how ranking worked at a military school: there were as many ranks as there were cadets on the list. The most capable and diligent had "first rank", and the others followed down the ladder to the very last.)

In February of 1917, I was hospitalized with scarlet fever and typhus. I had to leave school despite my dream of receiving a star of distinction. From hospital I wrote sad letters to my uncle in Vienna, complaining that while I was cut off from the world, lingering among the sick, all my colleagues have already earned their stars. Soon they would be sent to the battlefield and become standard-bearers. But my uncle kept reassuring me, and advised to entrust myself to Fate. After 4 months I was discharged from the hospital, on the very day when the boys—in full dress, in brand new green uniforms—strolled through the city of Satmar, and the next day left for the front, to the city of Stanislav.

I felt like an infinitely sick man in comparison to them, and the only healthy people seemed to be those who were now in front of me, juggling their rifles near the carriages of the train, ready to depart.

By this time Weinberger had reached the upper limit of his sense of self worth. After earning the highest rank among the cadets, he demanded to be saluted by all just like any other officer. Once I noticed that he was reprimanding a cadet—a corporal (platoon commander)—for not saluting him properly.

Others had left for the front, and I had to go back to the officers' school. A few months passed when suddenly there were rumours in our garrison that the Russians had launched an offensive under Stanislav two days earlier, and that our battalion allegedly was completely destroyed. Unfortunately, this was true. Several weeks later, I met a cadet, my former colleague, he was seriously injured—and he said that Herho had been killed, and Meyer would have survived, but his puttee got untied, and as he stumbled on it a

Russian caught up with him. My colleague was wounded by shrapnel, and did not know what happened to the others. Soon I received a letter from my uncle who was called up to the Ministry of Defence around the same time. He wrote: "Son, for not being there, you can thank G-d."

Later I received news from Budapest that Weinberger returned home after being interned.

Tonight I was strolling down the street with a businessman -Brown, scolding him because the first of the month had already passed, and I have not yet received a payment from him. At that moment, a tall stranger stopped in front of me. I saw that he was looking at me... I recognized him too: it was Weinberger! I would not be able to repeat our conversation, but after 10 minutes we were speaking as if we had parted in the evening, and then met the following morning after a night full of nightmares. Weinberger was now working in Budapest, as head of production at "Porgoss" paint company, and he looked like a gentleman from the capital. His thinking today was still very much like on that ill-fated Sunday morning in 1916, which changed the course of his life. He said: "My friend, I do not need anybody. Of what I earn, I give a part to my father, he has aged a lot; and I evaluate other people only on the basis of how they treated me in the past. You, my friend, I will never forget, I have always thought a lot about you." ... "I can tell you",—he said—"I do not owe anyone anything, but I would not mind to meet that second lieutenant and those petty officers again".

We spoke for about an hour and went our separate ways, not knowing when we'd meet again. I wished him luck, and he said: "Ora et labora!" (Latin: pray and work!)

My Rizushka, I have nothing more to add. I can only say that all this is only a small part of what we went through, and perhaps over time we would be able to forget it all because we have survived, but he who experienced such life lessons in the past—keeps them in his memory. Only those people who do not think live meaningless lives. We spoke for an hour, we didn't say a single word about anything but our military service, and about us, when he suddenly said: "My friend, I want to get married." I did not say a word back to him, but I see that this guy is on the right path.

Now, I shall leave behind my adventure-like memories, and take you back again to my simple—but with clearly defined objectives—civil concerns. When my memory cells reproduce events and thoughts from my past, I always give them my most sincere respect for having happened to me, and however difficult they may have been, I still think that each of the individual days of the past was beautiful, to the present day. I continue to believe in the future, and today, after we have long forgotten all the old

arms, when I think of any mortal of today, and I can see that he, too, consists of certain significant parts as did those other ones, but today man is a little different. In those days, a long sword and the bright star in a buttonhole encompassed everything. Today we are more peaceful. There was a star and a long sword, but the enemy took them off. (One Czech senior lieutenant cut the cockade off one of my caps, at Tarnopol, as he pointed his revolver at me.)

Today we are back in our modest homes, and would be glad if we could live simply, without any combat victories. But even for this requires a lot. We sent the boys away from home for gold stars, because the purpose of our fighting required that. Life also does not provide something for nothing. It also has a respected battlefield, on which men need to prove themselves again, and victory will be a worthy reward. That other life ended with exhaustion, because war has no reward. Life manages things differently. He who has faith in it, he will succeed. We, the old soldiers, are not afraid, for we have always been able to stand up for ourselves, should that be necessary. Back then it was—we faced each day for a higher rank and the stars, but today we have become modest citizens, and some days –on their own—do not have any purpose. We would like to ask of life, what else could we still do to feel joy? But we, the old soldiers, know how to believe in ourselves, and in life's rewards. And for now we participate in this rat race of the daily difficulties. Two good comrades, eight years after [the war] meet each other on the street, and one of them says humbly: "My friend, I wish to get married..."

Meanwhile, it is already 11 o'clock at night. I will continue at another time. Kissing your hands with love: your best comrade in arms.

Feri

Translating this letter into Russian wasn't such a simple task for me, and it took me hours to decipher Ferenc's ultrafine handwriting, but I received a veritable satisfaction from doing it! And the reader was able to get to know a little closer this man, so dear to me.

Over the past decade, each year and sometimes several times a year, Iya and I go to Hungary. Occasionally we just transit through, but more often we go there with the purpose of visiting or entertaining our old and unforgettable friends from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. During each visit I am pleased to meet with my readers. This happens in city libraries or in secondary schools. In advance of the meetings, my meetings are prepared by the selfless workers of culture and kindness: Ildikó Lenkefi—an employee of the library of the city of Miskolc, Marianna Paulo—Mayor of Garadna, and in Budapest I get "engaged" to the Writers' Clubs and schools by my committed and tireless publisher—Katalin Mezey.

In April of 2013, Katalin suddenly handed me a somewhat unusual souvenir. It was «APÁM LEVELEI a szibériai munkatáborokból», that is, the Hungarian edition of my book «Father's Letters». Katalin had a slight grin on her face, and I was looking at the book, in surprise, trying to understand what was happening: *“My book, in Hungarian... It seems that the color of the cover is a bit lighter...?”*

—According to the decision of the National Márai Cultural fund—Katalin began to explain—«Father's Letters» were included in the list of literature recommended for reading by high school students. We published the book again, and sent it to the libraries of 174 schools in the country...

And that is not all. An email addressed to me that came from Hungary on February 8th, 2014 excited and pleased me so much that I first wish to show my readers the original Hungarian text:

*Kedves Vladimír,
szeretettel köszöntünk a Magyar Írószövetség tagjainak sorában.
Gratulálunk és üdvözlünk mindkettőtöket:
M. Kati February 8, 2014*

Here's the English translation of this wonderful message:

*Dear Vladimir,
With love, we congratulate you on joining the ranks of member of the Hungarian Writer's Guild.
Congratulations and welcome to both of you.
M. Kati (Katalin Mezey) February 8, 2014*

What incredible news! I am infinitely flattered and grateful to all those people who appreciated my work, inspired me and supported my firm belief that it is still worth it to try harder and do good deeds.

I love Hungary, and so does my whole family. This love came to me with the «milk» of my mother Regina, and the groans of helplessness and hopelessness of my so distant but forever dearest father. My love for Hungary grew as a redeeming antipode to the daily misery and absurdity of life in the Soviet Union, where the biggest horror was not even the deep poverty, but the unending pressure from the authorities—to praise and sing hymns to the general madness; where studying of historical facts only raised suspicion, and where convenient lies invented by the state were constantly planted as if portraying the reality... Thank you, Hungary, for the light on the horizon!

Now I would like to tell you about one of our family celebrations that took place in Toronto on March 18th, 2014. On February 24th, a female caller with a pleasant voice introduced herself in Hungarian on my home phone:

—*Stefánia Szabó, Consul General of Hungary in Toronto... I need to meet with you urgently. Could you come over today...?*

My work partner, Ruben, was away on vacation, and I was left alone trying to fill all the orders for repairs, so I had to ask to be excused, citing the scheduling issues that day. We agreed to meet the next morning. I was surprised that Mrs. Szabó expressed a desire to come to our home. A diplomatic vehicle with red licence plates has never before parked in front of our porch, thus Iya and I looked in amusement at the slender tall lady who almost ran up our front steps—a youthful, attractive woman, no older than forty. While I was taking away the lady's overcoat, Iya inquired with a smile, what was so bad that we could have done so that such an important guest was honouring us with a visit?

—*No, no! Do not worry!*—Reassured us Madame Consul General, sitting down at the table.—*You did nothing wrong... I read your books, read articles about you, and I've come to get to know you better... In recognition of the significant contribution to the culture of Hungary, Vladimir Rott is*



*Madame Stefánia Szabó—Consul General of Hungary in Toronto.
Her first visit to our home in February 2014.*

being awarded a medal «Pro Cultura Hungarica». I have to coordinate with you a date—most convenient for you. Mr. János Halász—Hungarian State Secretary in charge of Culture is arriving in Toronto in two weeks, he will be presenting this award to you. Currently, the consular premises are under renovation, so the ceremony will be held at my residence. It is just a few blocks from your home. Please call me simply—Stefi, and allow me to call you—Vladimir and Iya.

After we recovered from this unexpected news, we began to get to know each other. Iya offered tea and her homemade cake with fresh fruit. We learned that despite her age, Stefi had already spent four years in the consular service in Israel, where she had made many friends and got introduced to Jewish traditions. We selected a convenient date—18th of March, Tuesday.

A few days later Stefi sent us a sample invitation, where next to the announcement of the upcoming ceremony, was a photo of Iya and me taken from the newspaper “National Post”, which published correspondent Joe O’Connor’s lengthy article about us in October of last year.



Invitation to the evening presentation of the medal “Pro Cultura Hungarica”. March, 2014.

Although the Consul General’s private residence was chosen as the venue for the ceremony, Stefi was tactfully supporting my desire to invite many of our friends and family members. However, Iya and I realized that there were certain limitations, so, with great difficulty, we arrived at the decision to limit the number of our guests to thirty-three. I was pleased to see that our number did not disconcert Stefi.

Guests were invited to arrive at the Consul's residence at six o'clock in the evening. Iya and I arrived much earlier. The Secretary of State, Mr. János Halász, was already there. The Hungarian Ambassador to Ottawa, Mr. László Pordány, was accompanying him on this trip to Canada. When we met, the Secretary of State said: *"Mr. Rott, four years ago you your first book signed for me..."* I got confused... I forgot what happened... But Iya recalled that episode for us: *"It was on Lake Balaton. There were a lot of people who came to your presentation, and then we were invited to a banquet where you were seated at the adjacent tables... That's where Vladimir signed the book".*

It was nice when the Hungarian Ambassador, Mr. Pordány, surprisingly recognized our daughter Ilona, and her son Adam, who, contrary to his usual style, was smartly dressed for the occasion. It turned out that last year in Ottawa, during the citizenship ceremony, it was Ambassador Pordány who handed them their passports. Hungary is a member of the European Union, and Ilona often conducts her business in Europe, and so she decided to apply for citizenship.

The interesting and energetic Stefánia Szabó—Madame Consul General of Hungary in Toronto—was the first to address the gathering. I was surprised when she made her greeting first in English, then—in Hebrew, and then—in Hungarian. Next, Stefi said:

—To begin, a few logistical details concerning today's ceremony:

1. First of all, my friend Vladimir and I have decided that I will be speaking in English, as it is a common language for all gathered here today. However, the presentation of the Award by the Secretary of State Halász, and Vladimir's acceptance speech will be conducted in Hungarian, and I will provide a full translation in English.

2. All the foods that we serve today—including wine and other drinks—are kosher, prepared by "Tov-Li" catering company. Enjoy!

3. Personally, I am happy to receive so many Jewish friends, and Vladimir's family, in our home. My family has a special connection to Israel—and to the Jewish community. I spent 4 years in the diplomatic service in Israel, in Tel Aviv, between 2001 and 2005. I have made many friends there, and most importantly, my son was born there, so he is a sabra, so Israel will always have a special place in our hearts.

But if you look in the newspapers or watch television, you will see that in the world of today feelings towards Hungary are not as friendly as you and I feel here. I hope that through dialogue we will be able to bring down the walls, which the right-wing extremists are trying to build. As a gift to each of you, I have prepared book published by the Government of Hungary about the anniversary of Raoul Wallenberg, which we celebrated in Hungary. When you exit, please take a copy of the book from the stack by the door.



Consul General of Hungary, Madame Stefánia Szabó welcomes guests at her residence. Toronto, March 18, 2014.

*Dear Vladimir and Iya!
Secretary of State Halász! Ambassador Pordány!
Rabbi Landesman!
And the entire family, and friends,
of Vladimir's!*

You all know him better than I do. A few months ago, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested an official opinion of the Embassy and the Consulate General regarding the possibility of presenting the Award to Vladimir, we spoke with the Ambassador, and made some inquiries with some people in Vladimir's circle of friends, but we could not find enough information about him. That's the kind of man that he is: He does remarkable things but keeps away from fame. However, all of your great

deeds, Vladimir, have become known and have been recognized, and now you are here—in the spotlight.

We all know the sad story of the Rott family, the touching love that Ferenc Rott and Regina Spielberg shared. In search of a better life Ferenc decided to go to the East and was able to persuade his wife to follow him, although she did not want to go. We know now that this was the wrong decision. Ferenc wanted a better life for their children, just like Vladimir, who in 1974 “forgot” to return to the Soviet Union. Rott's family left Hungary for a better future, but Ferenc, even when he suffered under the barbaric conditions of labour camps, continued to write to his family his heart-rending letters, which Vladimir published under the title, «Father's Letters from Siberian Prisons». Although he did not have a single chance to help his family, this father was trying to keep the spirit of his letters at the highest level. And even in those circumstances—as we can see—he remained a true patriot of Hungary. Today is March 18th, and on March 15th, we, Hungarians, commemorate the Revolution of 1848. Each year, on March 15th Hungarians commemorate the heroes of 1848, their dream of an independent democratic Hungary. Let me read a few lines from a letter that Ferenc wrote to his wife on Monday, March 15, 1948:

“...My dear Rizushka! Look at, what an interesting date we have today... Today marks the 100th anniversary since the beginning of the Hungarian Revolution, when Sándor Petőfi said: “Arise, Hungarians, the homeland is calling! The time has come. Now or never!”

In school, I used to count with the fingers on my hands how many more years were left until the centennial celebration of the revival of the Hungarian people, imagining how great a holiday it would be. Perhaps today, in Hungary, there are big celebrations taking place, but we cannot see them. So, here, a parable is being realized: man proposes and G-d disposes. I have not been making any big plans in recent years. I now live with a single hope that good fortune would not leave me, that at the sunset of my life it could still resemble a life of a human. I can only wish that another wisdom proves to be true: "All is well that ends well."

...There is nothing different happening in my life. I am counting the days. And they pass so slowly and so anxiously! The saddest part is that for six months I have not had any letters from you. This crushes my heart so much, that if in a week I do not get a letter from you, I will send you a paid-response telegram. The only request I have for you—and it is important for me but is also very important for you—please try to obtain and forward to me, as I have already requested, a written certificate confirming that the family needs a breadwinner. Such a certificate makes it easier to return home. Otherwise, those who leave (after serving their sentence—V.R.) can expect great woes.

I should note that if I managed to get into the category of persons with disabilities, then it would not be necessary to send to me this certificate, but my chances are low, since I, thank G-d, do not look disabled—I am simply no longer young. In any case, try to help me, and I will also try to do everything possible to be back at home by my 50th birthday (December 25, 1948...—V.R.).

I cannot write to the kids, I have no strength to write calmly... And what's happening with our mail! A friend of mine just got a few days ago 20 letters at once, after they had been kept somewhere for one and a half years, and another person in one day got ten parcels, which the family regularly sent him throughout the year... And in the meantime we rattle our nerves, tortured by the uncertainty, wondering why nobody is writing to us..."

Stefi closed the book, and it seemed to me that after hearing all this a collective moan floated above the rows of people in the room...

—Incredible!—Summed up Stefi.—Imagine his circumstances, it is incredible that he was able to send home such cheerful letters...

When the Consul was speaking about me, she also mentioned an excerpt from Ferenc's letter, dated August 4, 1946, in which my father encourages my brother Josef—who later became a violinist—to find some sheet music for a Hungarian folk song «Fly, my swallow», and to try to play it. At that moment, on Stefania's cue, a violinist with a violin in hand suddenly appeared at the door, and began to play this sophisticated and soulful melody... I was not the only one who cried...I ran up to hug the violinist... I had never heard this melody, and first heard its title when I began to re-read the letters from my father before writing the future book.



Violinist Nándor Farkas plays a Hungarian folk song "Fly, my swallow".

Mr. János Halász took the floor next. First, he opened my book «The Joy from Sudness» and read a passage about my first visit to Hungary, when my grandmother Hani mistook me for her long-missing son and began to ask me about ...the children. At that time I was not yet married, and was at a loss for an answer, but Lolo—my father's younger sister—standing behind grandmother—gestured to me, and I replied to grandmother: «*Children are all right...*» After that, Lolo said to grandmother: «*Mama, do not ask him so many questions, but rather sing him a song, of those that he loved so much and has not heard for a long time...*» I cried... My father's sisters and brothers cried... nurses at the nursing home cried... and my 84-year-old grandmother sang softly: «*There is only one girl in the world*»¹².

During my childhood, my mother Regina often sang this song on Sunday evenings, if her hands got at least some rest during the day. This popular Hungarian melody Spanish composer Sarasate used in his *Zigeunerweisen*—«*Gypsy Airs*». Violinist Nandor Farkas immediately played the melody, thus fabulously enriching that unforgettable evening.

¹² «Joy from Sadness» 2009, page 305.



Afterwards the Secretary of State Halász continued:

—Dear Vladimir Rott! Ladies and Gentlemen!

As Boris Pasternak once wrote, “Man lives not in nature but in history.” In those historical zones, which are separated not by rivers but by ideologies, it is important that we find a way out of the sealed and sterile zones. In this case, the zone is called communism. In the middle of the last century our lives were divided by rivers such as Kolyma—with the infamous GULAG labour camps on its banks.

Vladimir Rott—who’s father perished in the GULAG—realized that it is necessary to transform the brutal energy of Kolyma, and that the suffering experienced there must be described and passed on to our descendants—as a truthful testimony.

When in 1990 Hungary voted for democracy and human rights, it did not know that the main enemy of the common man would not be the memory of the Communist dictatorship, but mostly the indifference—the apathy—which is a byproduct of the daily struggle for survival.

Vladimir Rott’s books help us not to forget the dictatorship of the twentieth century, which claimed the greatest number of human lives, and which from the outset was born out of crime.

The strength of Rott’s books is in that he explicitly expresses the inexorable truth. Until the human mind is able to go through a significant transformation, literature remains the most effective way to tell the truth.

With his books Vladimir Rott erected a monument to those tens of thousands of Hungarians who were forcibly abducted, and—along with his father—were taken as prisoners to the labour camps in Siberia. In addition, he drew a vivid picture of a family that emigrated to start a new life in Canada, describing the process of family reunification, and the moral strength of those who helped them to settle.

He humorously admits: “I often feel like I’m the richest man in the world: I write my own books; I publish them at my own expense and pay for translations; I distribute them or bring as gifts to friends and associates. And the scope of the topics for my stories grows more and more.”

The wealth of Vladimir Rott, in particular, lies in the fact that he is a part of Hungarian culture. From his mother he inherited not only the basics of Hungarian language, but also his love for Hungary. According to his credo, the next generations, when they get acquainted with the history of his suffering and vulnerability, will gain additional courage, and at the same time, I am convinced, that close-knit families that know their roots, always have more strength to survive.

Dear Mr. Rott!

You have contributed to the enrichment of cultural relations between Hungary and other nations. Thanks to your books, which incorporate a tremendous amount of material and knowledge, thanks to your selfless work—you deserve the award “Pro Cultura Hungarica”. I congratulate you upon receiving it!

After the presentation of the medal and diploma it was my turn to speak. Here are a few excerpts from my speech:

—Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

G-d performs Miracles, G-d created the Earth! G-d created Hungary! And what is happening here today is also one of G-d’s miracles: You are presenting me with the “Pro Cultura Hungarica” award. This award is not for me, but, primarily, for my parents! This award is for my family and my numerous relatives—shown here, in this family tree—including the 32 members of the Spielberg family who perished in Auschwitz.

The epigraph for all of my books contains the following: «Dedicated to the fond memory of those innocent parents who were murdered and deprived of the opportunity to raise their children to be decent people. Grateful son».

The award belongs to these parents!



Diploma and Medal «Pro Cultura Hungarica».



My speech at the residence of the Consul General of Hungary in Toronto. Sitting first on the left is the Ambassador of Hungary in Ottawa, Mr. László Pordány. Beside him is the Secretary of State for Culture of Hungary—János Halász. Toronto, March 18, 2014.

I spoke about life in the barracks after my father's arrest in Bobrujsk, about the arrival of the German army, and the return of Soviet rule when our family was again labelled the «the family of the enemy of the people», I spoke about my father's letters, and showed everyone the originals...

I also spoke about the wisdom of my mother Regina, who, living in deep poverty, with her last money bought for me the very first Soviet short-wave radio «Record-49», which immediately took me away from the hooligan underworld to the world of «Voice of America», BBC and Radio named after Kossuth, which almost

continuously broadcast music of the Hungarian Gypsy Orchestra, led by the genius Sándor Lakatos! (At this point, Nándor Farkas—who added so much to the evening—announced that Sándor Lakatos was his violin teacher... This brought a surge of applause.)

I also spoke about the Miracles, which in 1960 had brought me to Hungary for the first time; in 1965—to the installation of automatic lines from «Csepel Machine-Tool Plant»; in 1966—to the construction of the Volga Automobile Plant in Togliatti (LADA); and in 1974—to Canada.

At the end, I said:

—Iya and I bring to Hungary our old friends from different parts of Russia, not because our Canadian pension is that big, but because we are proud and happy to introduce them to the wonders of our Hungary. And after my book, «My Father's Letters», appeared in the libraries of all the schools in the country and became recommended reading in high schools, on each of my visits, I gladly accept invitations to meet with students.

Hungary is beautiful, elegant, vivacious, because it knows how to live. Lajos Kossuth, Sándor Petőfi, Franz Liszt, Imre Kálmán, Imre Kertész devoted their lives to it...

An all in all a beautiful country, and Budapest—what a handsome city! Matthias Church, the Royal Palace, the buildings of the Houses of Parliament, Dohány Street Synagogue, Basilica, Opera... And bridges over the Danube in the

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 18

evening light! All this was created at a time when the people of Hungary lived in absolute harmony, and it did not matter—whether you were a Catholic, a Protestant or a Jew. All people were equal. So it should be!

I live in a wonderful country—Canada, but I really want to do as much as possible for our Hungary so that it develops further and continues to be one of the most beautiful, interesting and attractive places of the Earth.

I am sincerely grateful for the honour!





Rott Family and Consul General Stefania Szabó. March 18, 2015.

“Toronto. April 7th, 2014. Mr. Victor Wolf, after watching Hungarian programmes on OMNI channel (a Multinational Television Channel in Toronto), made an attempt to contact me over the phone, hoping to talk to me and find out whether I am a relative of his grandfather, Spielberger, born in Kosice. I called him back, and we talked. I responded to him by saying that I could not be certain, and besides it was no longer possible to find anyone to confirm this... He finished our conversation with a memorable phrase, «Mr. Rott, for 50 years I have been watching television programs of the Hungarian channel in Toronto, and for the first a man in a kippah appeared on the screen... That was you...!»”

And now, my dear reader, that moment has come when we have to make a quick trip to a far away place, associated with my father's letters... For a few days now I have been sitting at my computer, excited...and not knowing where to begin... I really had no idea that one day I would be writing this... At the end of 2013 I somehow found out that *“In the village of Ust-Omchug of the Tenkin district of the Magadan region they opened a museum of local history...”*

From «Magadan. Kolyma—INFORM» I immediately received additional information: *“Inna V. Gribanova is the founder and the director of the museum. The main exhibition is dedicated to the camps of the Tenkin district, and they exhibit maps of the area camps, have photo booths and photo albums on Butugychag, personal items of former prisoners, materials about the construction of the Tenkin regional road, of gold fields and mines, information about trailblazing geologists-discoverers. A card index of prisoners at the Tenkin camps is also being kept.”*

“Oh, my G-d!.. I lived to witness this moment...! I ought to send them my books...”

I immediately began to seek ways to establish contact with I. Gribanova. I found a local telephone number for the district administration, dialed it and heard a voice on the other end say: *“Inna is away on vacation... The Director of the House of Culture can tell you when she would be back... his phone number is 2-26-77 ...And who is calling?”* I immediately hung up... Due to my “Soviet experience”, I knew that—had I answered: *“It's Vladimir, from Canada...”*—They would immediately be alarmed: *“Where to run to report this ?!”*

The Director of the Culture House did not answer when I called... So I decided that it would be best to ask Valentin Trofimov—our good old friend who lives in Moscow—to do the “ice breaking” for us...

Moscow, December 19th, 2013.

To the Head of Tenkinski district of Magadan Region,

N. A. Savchenko:

Dear Nadezhda [Antonovna]!

Between 1938 and 1950 a Hungarian national, Ferenc Rott, was a prisoner in your District. He had been sentenced to 10 years in the camps as the enemy of the people, but after serving his sentence he was

not able to return to his family in the town of Bobruysk. He died in your district as a forced civilian labourer, and subsequently was pardoned.

His son, Vladimir Rott, wrote a book of memoirs about his family, in which one chapter is fully devoted to his father, and to Magadan region, and also he wrote a shorter book—"Father's Letters".

In your district there has been opened a historical museum, and I have been instructed by the author to present his books to this museum. Please respond with the mailing address of the museum, phone numbers and e-mails, including those of the director of the museum, I.V.Gribanova.

Thanks in advance! Happy New Year! Wishing success to your district!

Yours faithfully,

Valentin Trifonovich Trofimov

Director General of the National Union of Milk Producers, Moscow.

Ust-Omchug, December 19th, 2013

Good day, Valentin Trifonovich!

We received your letter regarding the offer to make a gift to our museum.

You should know how grateful we are to you and to the author of the book, Vladimir Rott. It is today, that in our library a presentation of I.V.Gribanova's book—»Tenka. Vitok Spirali. A Twist of the Spiral"—was taking place.

It contains a lot of historical facts, which ought to also be in Vladimir's book! We have framed your letter a beautiful frame and presented to I. Gribanova at the gala evening. And your letter will be included in our museum exposition as a piece that connects the generations. Inna will contact you, and then you decide what to do. Thank you very much! Call us! Come join us in Tenka. Be healthy and happy.

With best regards and wishes prosperity, kind and happy New Year!

The Head of Tenkinsky district, N.A.Savchenko.

Moscow, December 21st, 2013.

Dear Inna Vasilievna!

Today, on the 21st of December, I mailed to your home address a valuable parcel—two volumes of V. Rott's book, weighing 2412 g. The parcel's tracking number is 1188934... Using this number, you can track the movement of the parcel on the Russian Post's website, www.russianpost...

I have fulfilled my duty and you can now communicate directly with the author, Vladimir Rott, and his wife—Iya.

Please let me know your phone number and the time difference with Moscow.

Good luck to you in your noble and selfless work to strengthen the bonds between the generations!

Happy New Year!

Regards, Valentin

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 18

Ust-Omchug, December 22nd, 2013.

Dear Valentin Trifonovich,

Many thanks. I will receive it in about 7-10 days. My phone number is 8 (914) 030... The time difference with Moscow is 8 hours.

Sincerely, Inna Gribanova

Toronto, December 24th, 2013.

Dear Inna Vasilievna!

Greetings! Please allow me to call you simply—Inna!

I am awaiting your confirmation that you have received my email.

All the best, Vladimir Rott

Toronto, December 25th, 2013.

Dear Valya! (Valentin Trofimov)

Yesterday morning I reached Inna by phone. I could hear her “as if I were in Magadan”... Our connection was interrupted five times. Finally I was forced to connect via the most expensive but reliable operator.

At first Inna thought that it was you calling her, but then she understood.

A graduate of the Moscow Geological Institute, in 1968 she was dispatched to Kolyma. Now she is 70 years old, no husband, one son, and five grandchildren... She is retired, but they opened a position for her, as a Head of the Local History Hall of the village of Ust—Omchug (at the Tenkinski district executive committee).

A nice woman, she is yet another enthusiast trying to convey to people the truth and justice. She got my e-mail, but to reach her by Skype in Magadan... it's easier to wave from the roof! She is waiting for the books that you sent. A 17-hour difference!

Thank you for yet another event. Maybe I'll write about it, G-d willing.

Sending our embraces to you and Janna,
Your Rotts.

Moscow, January 9th, 2013. The All-Russian postal tracking service confirmed that our parcel sent by Valentin on December 21st, left the sorting center of Moscow—Yaroslavl Train Station on December 27th...

Ust-Omchug, January 20th, 2014.

Dear Vladimir!

Today I attempted to track the parcel with books. I called the «hot line», and then turned to my local post office. At the post office they said that the parcel would stay in Neryungri until enough postal cargo has been collected to fill up a “Kamaz” truck, and only then it will be sent to Magadan. A “Kamaz” truck is not going to deliver just your parcel», they told me. So when this will happen is still an open question.

If you give me the address, I'll send my book to you tomorrow. At least, it will reach Moscow in a week or less.

Sincerely, Inna Gribanova

Ust-Omchug, January 21st, 2014.

Dear Vladimir! Thank you for your message. I have received the electronic version of the chapter "Father's Letters.» I have read it with great interest. There is just one thing that I cannot agree with: that your «father lost touch reality», when he invited the family to join him in exile in Ust-Omchug. That was a very common move in those years, because the exile after camp to those convicted under the 58th article of the Criminal Code was announced in the spring, and many families were able to come.

Officially exile was abolished in 1956, and many foreigners were released ever earlier. It is a pity that your father did not live to see this, as he wished to arrange everything for your arrival, and he cared deeply about the future of his sons.

With regard to the parcel: we should only treat this as a curiosity. Apparently the postal worker that processed the package in Moscow did not know the geography of Russia very well, and did not know that trains cannot reach Magadan, because there is no railroad. Here everybody uses airmail, and at the post office nobody even asks what's the preferred mode of delivery, they immediately put an «airmail» stamp on everything. And since the parcel did not bear such a stamp, that's why during sorting it was sent by train not to Vanino—from where it would have traveled here by sea (but now the navigation has also closed)—but to Neryungri. From there it is about 2.5 thousand kilometers by highway to Magadan. From Neryungri to Yakutsk to Magadan cargo isn't delivered very often, especially from Yakutsk to Magadan. Sea transport is cheaper, because we have such a thing as «northern delivery» when all the goods are delivered during the navigation in the summer and fall. We simply got unlucky. So we will have to wait for «Kamaz» to bring the parcel.

All the best to you! Sincerely, Inna

Toronto, January 23rd, 2014. I sent books to Inna from Toronto at the cost of \$125.97 CAD.

Ust-Omchug, January 29th, 2014.

Greetings from Kolyma! I received books sent in December from Moscow on January 30th. Hooray! I will read them.

Sincerely, Inna Gribanova

Toronto, January 29th, 2014.

Dear Inna! We rejoice with you! Hooray! Here we still have the 29th of January... Big hugs! Vladimir and Iya

Ust-Omchug, February 13th, 2014.

Dear Vladimir and Iya! I have finished reading the first book and started the second.

I'm excited, and am spreading the hype about the book among all my friends, and already a new person is reading it. Today, on February

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 18

13th, I received your parcel from Canada. I will give the “Letters” to N.A. and will hand one copy of the two volume book to our district library, while the other, autographed copy, I will leave at the museum, together with the letter in English. I shall keep the third book, with letters, at home. Thank you so much for absolutely everything!

Also, I visited our district archive. I thought that perhaps I could find out something about your father from the mill archives. But there’s nothing there. They said that the mill archive must be in Magadan. But there, they only give information or give copies of records to close relatives.

Thanks for the greetings. After reading your book, I feel that your big family became like a family, or close friends, to me. Thanks you!

A big hug to you all! Inna

Toronto, February 13th, 2014.

Our dear Inna Gribanova!

Dear our Star of the East, shining brightly high above the horizon of a distant Canadian family of Rotts!

I cordially congratulate you with the glorious 70th Jubilee!

First I want to congratulate your parents, who gave the world such a daughter!

You not only gave the best years of your life to the discoveries of the riches of Kolyma, and to raising your children and grandchildren, but you also continue to give yourself with inexhaustible energy to your valiant efforts of creating stories and perpetuating the memories about the inhabitants of this land. An increasing number of our friends and relatives are learning with great delight that there is now a historical museum in Ust-Omchug.

We wish you good health! And we hope that for many years to come you will continue to please all of us with your creativity and discoveries!

There is no better gift for our family in celebrating your Jubilee than receiving from you the news that the parcels with books from Moscow and Toronto got delivered into your hands.

We cordially congratulate the hero of the day, and your family and all the good friends who are now rejoicing together with you!

Hugs! The Rotts.

Toronto, Canada

(With this letter I enclosed a photograph of our extended family).

Thus began our acquaintance with Inna Gribanova. I read, no practically devoured, her book *«Tenka. The Turn of the Spiral.»* Then I also looked at several webpages on the information portal “KOLYMA.RU”. I was stunned, nervous... The stories of the victims of Stalin’s atrocities will remain forever with us, but our memory gradually smoothed the sharpness of their horrors. And here they are again with you... I decided that I will not repeat them in these pages, I shall omit them...

However, for the benefit of the Western reader let's browse through Gribanova's book, from which I will try to quote as close to the original text as possible:

«...Even a simple attempt to identify the total number of prisoners in the GULAG system is an awfully complex task, because these institutions were not interested in keeping records of the extent of their own abuse, even when it was approved through the orders from above. It is somewhat easier to estimate the number of Kolyma prisoners—since almost all of them have gone through the Nagaev Harbour. Some experts estimate the number of prisoners in Kolyma and Chukotka during the critical twenty years (1932-1952) to be approximately 750 thousand people, whereas the annual production output demanded the labour of only 130 thousand. At the same time, the actual roster of prisoners stored in the Magadan archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, consists of more than two million of prisoners' name cards. According to the witnesses accounts, the composition of labour crews got completely renewed two or three times per season, and only a small number of prisoners survived, which makes us gravitate more towards the total figure of two million.»

...One of construction workers of the Tenka track road shared this: "They had been able to take us as far as Arshi by trucks. There we worked and lived in tents. In early February of 1938 an argish (a train of reindeer sleds) arrived, driven by a tunguz* [a representative of local Siberian ethnicity], who did not speak Russian. They gathered all of us—approximately 800-900 people—together and sent out of Atki to the next colony, through the deciduous taiga. The argish, loaded with tents and stoves made from iron barrels, followed us. There was so much snow that year, especially amidst the inactive volcanoes and taiga, and the argish was constantly behind and was always late arriving for the stopovers at night. The guards were not aware of the need to choose overnight stops based on deer feed availability, and therefore we often had to walk at night. And 10-12 biscuits a day—that was what they fed us and that's all. People started dying back on the road. The trip to Butugychag took about a month.*

We arrived at our destination and saw just three bare inactive volcanoes... The guards ordered us to trample down the snow, to set up the camp. We didn't even have any tools; everything was packed in the argish. We brought over some firewood. Finally the perpetually late argish arrived, we set up our tents, and downed the biscuits with boiling hot water. There was practically no time left for rest. And in the morning we were told to go to our main workstation up on the inactive volcano, to clear the snow from our workplaces. The volcano was one kilometer high, and not everyone could manage to climb up there. The guards were brutally beating the prisoners, and even killed some. Everyone awaited the imminent arrival of the leadership, with much hope.

Two weeks later the superintendent of the camp and the mine manager came. But things did not improve. They were still feeding us the same biscuits and boil-

ing hot water. Mortality increased with each passing day. Corpses with tags attached to their feet were being piled up at the base of the hill and sheltered with tarpaulin. By the spring only third of the party was still alive..."

"In 1951, at the mouth of the Kotsugan river there was a hydrometallurgical plant being built, with capacity of 100 tons of uranium ore per day. The plant was built brand new, with German equipment installed. The ore from the galleries first went to the mill, then fell into the vats of acid, and then the pulp was pumped further on. After the product had been separated and dried, it was placed in bags. Five bags were placed in a barrel, and it was welded shut. Only men worked at the enrichment plant. They were given extra food rations: canned meat, cheese, and butter. Those who worked in the galleries, were not entitled to extra nutrition... On some maps the location of the plant is referred to as Agrobaza [an agricultural storage facility], probably due to secrecy considerations."

"According to the Decree issued on the 19th of April, 1943, all camps—including Butugychag—were ordered to organize hard penal labour sections, where the detention regime was to be much more severe, and the working day—longer than in the general camps. In addition, prisoners assigned there had to wear numbers sewn on top of their clothes and they were to be kept in separate zones. These were mainly political prisoners..."

"Butugychag—is one of the windiest places in the Magadan region, the average wind speed in January is 10.5 m / s, maximum—50 m / s. The number of days with drifting snow is 100 days a year. The average January temperature is —31.3 C, and in July it is, + 9.6 C."

"One convict, who appeared there in 1945, described the camp at the Gornyak inactive volcano: "Even the devil could not have found a better place for this extreme drudgery, than this mountain." Lifeless naked mountain top, as if on the moon... Severe frosts and winds burn away all life—grass and people. Trees—even shrubs—did not grow here. When, in the 50s, prisoners were allowed to have grass beds, they found enough only for one mattress. Even in the summer there was not enough water. And in the winter, when all the springs and streams froze over, they used snow. Compressed by the winds, it did not give to shovels, and crumbled under the axes. A crew of withered men sawed it into cubes and carried it on sticks into the kitchen or the bathhouse. They were even called—snegonosy—the snow carriers."

"There were 2410 prisoners working in Butugychag in 1947, of which 2147 had been indicted on political charges. In addition to prisoners, there were 68 civilian contract workers in engineering and technical positions, and 338 former prisoners worked as civilians labourers in auxiliary and service industries."

"During the construction of the road, a standard daily work quota for workers on the face (where the soil was taken—pebbles with clay) per person was equivalent to 2 to 4 cubic meters (depending on the quality of the soil). We had

to hack it, load it onto a wheelbarrow and take it to the road. Most people died not from hunger but from exhaustion: since in the summer they had to work the whole day for as long as there was light, only this was during the polar days. The mortality rate was very high. As soon as some people died new prisoners were always brought in. At every section of the road construction—when through one gate drove in a truck with 25 new prisoners, through the other ones they were driving away the corpses.”

Here's an excerpt from the memoirs of A. Krivorotov, an Honourable Road Builder of Russia, a former Chief Engineer of the «MagadanAvtoDor»:

“Once, in 1956, I was struck by a terrible sight. On the 4-th kilometer of the Palatka—Kulu route, and about 300-400 meters to the sidedirection, at a soil quarry bulldozer unearthed a shallow mass grave at a depth of about 50-60 cm. From under the bulldozer's blade poured the remains of the people buried piled up. Road builders often came across such mass burials and saw a lot of them.” “Ofentimes I saw—near the prisoners' tents on the road—hands and feet sticking out of the snow. A «goner» would stiffen overnight, so they would throw him out of the tent, and he stayed out there until the spring, when they would cut off their exposed limbs and bury them in a trench...”

A journalist and a writer, Alexei Kasterin, also was involved in the construction of the Tenka route. In 1965 he sent a letter to the editors of a regional radio: “I'm a man of the past, of the 19th century, and therefore my autobiography is hard to pack in a standard postal envelope. Suffice it to say, for example, that there were five wars that were fought during my lifetime (the Russo—Japanese War, the First Imperialist (WWI), Soviet Civil war, Russo-Finnish War and the last one, against the Nazis). I fought only in the Civil War. During the war against Japan I was just a little boy, and during the other three I was in prison for total (counting my exile) of twenty-five years.

...I worked with a drilling party that explored the grounds for the bridge and other industrial construction in Ust-Omchug. It was this experience with the drilling party that provided me with material for my story, “A Chess Tournament”.

...There is a story of the route construction in Tenka—I was building it after all, and my own «building blocks» are in it. And not just the “building blocks”: it so happened that I was dying on the pass at the 48th km. Generally speaking, in the studying of the Kolyma I got “lucky”: I have visited most of its areas, I knew its best commanders and many, many of the “hard workers”.

Unfortunately, to a very large extent we must still keep silent. And the book that you were interested in, it has gone through very severe tests and challenges, and brought me a lot of bitter days and hours. Suffice it to say that in addition to the official editor the book had more than a dozen other editors and reviewers. And the pens of these editors were more like metal hooks—parsing through the book, they all tore off pieces of meat with blood...

...And my first essay was written in prison, and I drowned it in the crapper can during one of the room searches.

The transfer of the labourers from one place to another was not included in the working hours, and the 10—kilometer forced marches with the instruments and often, also with their personal belongings, had to be carried out at the expense of the prisoners' private time.

"Order №135 dated November 10th, 1943 to NRCS¹³:

On November 9th of this year, I instructed the head of SCP¹⁴, Comrade Lukovkin, to dispatch 12 prisoners from the brigade of 155th km to the construction brigade at 165th km, and I specifically ordered that the transfer should not cause a loss of a work day. In reality, the labour force was sent out only at 11 am and arrived at the place of work at 12 o'clock.

I HEREBY ISSUE THE FOLLOWING ORDER: For failing to follow orders regarding labour dispatch before the guard mounting—the Head of SCP Lukovkin is to be put on reprove. The cost of the loss of 12 working days is to be withdrawn by the Finance department directly from Comrade Lukovkin's account.

Head of NRCS, Meltzer.»

„Order №95, dated 6th of August, 1943, issued to NRCS.

On August 6th, 1943 I was inspecting the bakery of the 1st tract. Head of the tract, Comrade Yekaterynoslavsky, baker—prisoner Redyko. It was found that after putting the bread away in the storeroom of the tract—there was a loaf of bread left in the bakery. To my question: "Why is there bread left?" the baker said that this bread was a payment to wood splitters. I ORDER:

Paragraph 1. For wasting of bread, baker prisoner F. Redyko is to be removed from his position, and to be used exclusively for general labour; this case is to be transferred to the investigating authorities to prosecute.

Paragraph 3. I warn all the bakers that all cases involving illegal output and handing out of bread at the bakeries will be transferred to the investigating authorities for squandering produce reserves in time of war."

"Order №23 issued on 03.06.1943 to construction services of the road from Nilykoba to Hinikanzha.

Paragraph 1. From March 6th set up a fodder ration for all the working horses at the NRCS as follows: 6 kg of hay, 3 kg of oats; and an 8 hour work day for each horse.

Paragraph 2. In cases where there are no oats, hay feeding is performed at 6 kg per day, and the duration of the working day for each horse is set at 4 hours."

¹³ NRCS—Nilkobinsk Road Construction Service.

¹⁴ SCP—Separate Camp Point.

“Order №147, dated 07.12.1943, issued to NRCS.

Paragraph 6. Ensure that all the horses along the route are provided with rest stalls and feeders, in such manner that the horses could rest normally, and eat a normal ratio of the hay feed.

Paragraph 8. Drivers are strictly prohibited from sitting on loaded carts, and from riding in trot.

Paragraph 9. Avoid leaving the horses outside in the bad frosts, out in the wind and where there are drafts...”

“Out of 22,000¹⁵ prisoners of Berlag (in my father's letters for some time “Berlag”—or the “Coastal Camp”—was marked as his return address...—V.R.), 2.7% were foreigners, the citizens of 18 different states and the stateless. Stateless persons among this category accounted for 26%, and about 19% were citizens of Hungary (but among them ethnic Hungarians accounted for slightly more than half). 12%—were citizens of Poland, 11%—of Korea, 9%—of Germany. However, the ethnic Poles and Germans were in their vast majority citizens of the USSR.”

“Prisoners of Berlag carried long sentences. Only a few had sentences from 3 to 5 years (2% at the beginning of 1949, and by 1953 there were none), half of them had 6—10 year sentences, but the most common term was 10 years (this was mentioned by almost all of the living in the village of Ust-Omchug former Berlag prisoners interviewed by the author). The number of prisoners with terms of 20—25 years increased every year, and in 1953 they made up more than 40% of all prisoners. (The only reason for this—as the years passed, the brutality and insanity of Stalinism increased, tightening the spiral of violence and fear... By 1952–1953 in our Bobruysk no one even heard of sentences less than 25 years long...—V.R.) ”

During the «industrial season»¹⁶ the entire population of Kolyma turned into gold miners, with or without orders.

Orders of «Dalstroï” (the Main Directorate of Camps and Construction of the Far North) :

“From September 25th, 1941. ...To ensure the implementation of the October plan, for each worker at the mine, regardless of their position or the type of work they normally do, the amount of metal (gold) that must be panned is set at 5 grams per day... in TGPU”.¹⁷

“Order, May 7, 1943: ...From the enterprises and organizations in Magadan, during the panning season—from 10th of May to 1st of October—2150 people

¹⁵ Data available on 01/07/1953.

¹⁶ Gold panning during the warm season of the year.

¹⁷ Tenka's Mining and Industrial Department District.

reported to work in the mines, of which 1,000 people reported to the mine named after Voroshilov”.

”Order dated June 9th, 1944: ...To mobilize the following labour force from all storage, industrial, and construction organisations of Dalstroï: 2700 civilians, and 1500 prisoners. Due date for shipment—June 20th”.

Such orders were issued regularly in Magadan and the region. High school students also participated in the panning, but voluntarily. Here are a few lines from the memoirs of one of them, a Magadan student Eugene Sanochkin, who worked at the mine named after Voroshilov, in the summer of 1943:

”After visiting in Ust-Omchug for about a week, I went to the mine. Together with some miners I got a ride in a truck. And the last five kilometers we had to walk on foot along the edge of an enormous gorge. I got tired, and sat down on a mound to rest. The heat in July was unbearable. And the following sight presented itself to me: at the bottom of the gorge hundreds, or maybe thousands of half-naked men rolled fully loaded wheelbarrows with gold-bearing sands towards the huge wooden bins of the panning devices... I was walking through the “marshal” gorge towards station №6 “Natalka”, of the mine named after Voroshilov. Suddenly I noticed a group of prisoners near the road, sitting by the fire, they were drinking chifir [a very strong, crude tea]. I went over and said hello. One of them said: “Sit down, son, have a drink of tea. If you got any shag [tobacco], we’ll give you a little bit of gold for it”. But at the time I did not smoke.”

The inflow of new labour force declined sharply during the war years. To compensate for the lack of new workers, former prisoners released from camps were kept at Dalstroï as civilians “until the end of the war” after virtually being transferred from life in the camp area to the barracks as volunteers at the same enterprise. And all those who had been serving time for “counter-revolutionary activity” remained at the camp “until the end of the war”.

“On May 9, 1945, at the gold extracting factory [of the mine] the first ton of mined ore was processed at the mine named after Beria. In total, in 1945 1339 kg of chemically pure gold was produced at the mine, and production cost of 1 g of it was 12 rubles and 76 kopecks.”

“Everything was done from scratch and practically by hand. Mining equipment, mainly of foreign origin—drills and hammers of such brands as «Worthington», «Cleveland», «Jackhammer», and trolleys such as «Anaconda» type, which were rolled manually—this is that little bit that was in service of the miners in 1945—1946.”

The mine report for 1946 states that *“...On January 1st, 1946, the mine did not have a single storage or production area, with the exception of a temporary compressor hall, built in December 1944, which was in fact an unfinished con-*

struction site. A mechanical workshop, drill sharpening, a smithy and a construction shop were located in the open air, and were completely lacking any sort of machinery”.

In a report on the cultural and educational work at the «Berlag» camp for 1950, the following was reported as the achievement: *“in the camp branches №1 and № 4, extensive work had been carried out on the preparation of mass mining professions for women. Many women had been trained to be drillers, haulers, drill sharpeners and so on. In addition to the main professions already mentioned, women laid rails for trolleys in the galleries, were carrying poles up the mountain to set up power lines there, they dug pits by hacks, sawed wood into wood planks and much more... They worked 12 hour shifts—a week of day shifts, followed by a week of night shifts.”*

“From the Order №196, issued to the health department of the TGPU on 03.09.1946: *“Examination of the medical hospital at the village of Ust-Omchug revealed the following: ...2. Two unauthorized persons spent the night in the workers’ quarters without the permission of the head of the facility or the caretaker. ...4. The laundry area of the building has not yet been repaired despite the arrival of the cold season. Doctor Shmurov’s piglets are corralled inside the laundry facilities, which is a flagrant violation of the Sanitary Rules. ...7. In August, without my permission, hospital attendant Nor was sent twice on personal orders, by the head of the hospital Doctor Shmurov to Duskanya. (In Duskanya there was located a food storage facility with greenhouses, and what’s more—since it is on the shore of Kolyma, and so, there was fish, too.—I.G.). 8. The head of the hospital, Shmurov, without anybody’s permission received from the hospital a full day’s dry ration assigned for the patients. ...9. On a daily basis, from the hospital kitchen without anybody’s permission and without the knowledge of the accountant, one liter of milk has been provided to doctor Shmurov, and 400 grams of milk to the X-ray technician, Ryazantseva, and this milk was being marked as “used by the patients.” The penalty—doctor Shmurov has been charged with the cost of milk and travel expenses of the hospital attendant Nor...*

There is this passage in an order issued in 1946: *“On the conduct of mass preventive vaccination against dysentery in the village of Ust-Omchug (under orders from Dalstroï and TGPU)”* and a series of procedures related to vaccination... (we never heard about the existence of such a vaccination—VR).

In October of 1949, orders were reflecting typhoid infections. Chief of epidemiology department analyzed the case files of those who died at the district hospital during May of 1949. Of the 5 cases—one stroke, one elementary dystrophy and three cases of stab wounds...

“From the order №12 to the Department TGPU from 01.06.1951: *On May 31st of this year, the attendant at the Scarlet fever unit of the Joint Hospital of Ust-Omchug village—Pryadko- was discovered working in a highly intoxicated*

state. This ugly fact is compounded by the following: Pryadko brought a woman with a small child to the scarlet fever unit, and during May 30th and 31st he continued with the debauchery while cohabiting with her...»

As usual, at the time of public holidays these orders included publications of personal awards to the best workers. As a rule, such documents included a standard preamble before the list of the «selected» few. It takes about two pages of text—from praising «the greatness of the leader and teacher—Josef Stalin,” to the vigilance in regards to the intrigues of the enemies who must be “exposed at every step,” mentioning «the order-bearing Dalstroï», that must “be made a truly advanced enterprise of the country” to success in your own company, which “strives for the best service to the workers, as well as a reduction of morbidity, mortality and as periods of temporary disability of the patients.”

Through corresponding and having telephone conversations with Inna we developed a great rapport. Suddenly it dawned on me: “*I should go to Magadan...!*” And I got frightened at the thought. Because of my superstition—“must not jinx it”—I decided not to tell about this “Flight to Mars” idea for as long as possible, and not only to Taisya Chernykh, but even to my wife Iya... It was the time of worrying about the completion of the construction of the Memorial in Mysovaya and the planning of our trip along the Great Tea Road.

I asked for some confidential advice from Natasha Gureva, a head of one of the travel agencies in Toronto, who for many years has helped us to choose the most convenient flight routes. Natasha calmly answered my questions on how to fly to Magadan, how to get there from Irkutsk or Moscow, and how much the tickets would cost... Everything was quite real and accessible...

Inna Gribanova was at first surprised by my idea, but asked around at various institutions in Ust-Omchug, and there she was referred to Magadan. As for the visit to Buryatia, to obtain a visa to visit Russia, as foreigners, we need to have an invitation from each city, and our visit would need to be officially recorded. Inna traveled to Magadan twice, where she was finally issued an approved invitation form for Iya and me. I had to prepare our Hungarian friends—Éva Orosz and Ilonka Kercsi—by alluding to the fact that from Irkutsk to Budapest they would have to travel on their own.

Then came that memorable day—Friday, June 27th, 2014. The day before, late in the evening, we arrived in Irkutsk and were met by Taisya Chernykh’s friendly family, concluding our eight-hour trip along the Circum-Baikal Railway. In the morning after breakfast we took Éva and Ilonka to the airport, and devoted almost an entire day to the exploration of the city of Irkutsk. We liked it. However, the nearly two hours we spent at the Jewish cemetery of the city did not bring the desired result. In 1939, Iya’s grandfather—Shlomo Chaim Guter-

man—was buried there two years after he had brought from Magnitogorsk for burial the body of his son, Isaac Guterman. His son had committed suicide at home with a single gun shot in the presence of his wife, his son and NKVD agents. We were not able to find their graves. People told us that since that time the cemetery had been rebuilt and reduced in size many times...

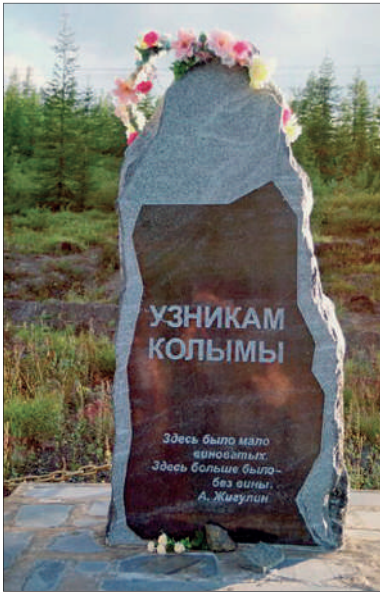
Our final hours in Irkutsk we spent in a small apartment rented by Valentin and Svetlana Chernykh, where Taisya's entire family tried to create a feeling of maximum comfort for us. At 21:11 pm, Irkutsk time, Iya lit Shabbat candles. Before midnight the Chernykh's drove us to the airport, "Off to MAGADAN!"

For me the word «Magadan» has always had a sad, terrible meaning—something like a deep grave from which the death cries of my poor father could be heard. And when a ton of information and truth became available about this region, this word acquired a mystical sense of madness in which the criminal inhuman regime could create thousands of beasts—guards that did not hesitate to incinerate hundreds of thousands of disenfranchised and doomed people...

But a day came when the news about the opening of the local history room in Ust-Omchug arrived, and then I read or, literally, swallowed "Tenka" and heard the live voice of its author. Then out of nowhere on my desk appeared a photo-

graph of a modest obelisk "To the Prisoners of Kolyma" on which were written the words of truth: "There weren't many who were guilty here. There were many—without any guilt." All of this suddenly changed my perception of this region... It began to seem warmer, more human. I wanted to visit it. And now we are flying there...!

With all this in mind, we went on this unusual trip. Our «Siberia» airline flight to Magadan was to depart from Irkutsk after 1 am. For over 21 kilograms of «extra» weight (books for Magadan and Ust-Omchug) we had to pay 8400 rubles (about \$250 at the exchange rate of the day). I could not believe that for the entire five days of this visit I will be following in the footsteps of my father. Four and a half hours of our flight just flew by. We could not fall asleep, thinking about what was to come, and we observed with interest the crew and our fellow travel-



Obelisk "To the prisoners of the Kolyma" is set on the Arkhagalin Pass, Susuman District, Magadan region. Opened October 2, 1999.



*Inna Gribanova geologist, veteran of Koly-
ma, Master of History, creator of the local
history room in Ust-Omchug.*

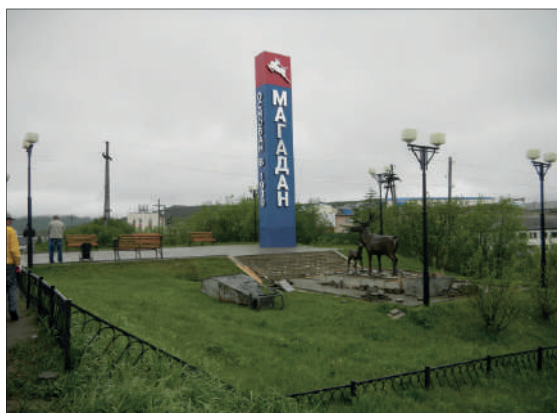
ers. We landed at a homely Magadan airport at 9 o'clock in the morning. My chest tightened: "Magadan...!"

"After the 35C heat wave in Irkutsk, Magadan's 8 degrees in the morning turned out to be a surprise. It was cloudy, almost rainy. This was Mother nature herself giving us a chance to feel at least a little bit of what Ferenc Rott, who arrived here 76 years ago on a barge, felt when he stepped on this ground.

I asked Inna to be sure to meet us at the airport. She promised to come to Magadan on the eve of our arrival and arrive at the airport in the morning, after spending the night with her granddaughter... But she took my advice: after a five-hour trip from Ust-Omchug by taxi-van Inna rented a room in a hotel for three nights for herself, and another one—for us.

That is why, having entered the Airport building a bit confused, we immediately were delighted to see Inna Gribanova waiting for us with a smile. She seemed a bit older than I expected...

Next to Inna was standing a taxi driver who brought her to the airport, and he then quickly brought us to the city, to hotel "Ocean". Seemingly, there were no other guests in the hotel. This place would not even qualify as a two star hotel, but they charged us for our room 65 dollars per night... About an hour later, having freshened up, we went down to the restaurant «for dinner». Without offering any sort of menu, they put in front of each of us a plate of very greasy soup and a modest meat dish, for which they charged us 450 rubles per person...



We arrived in Magadan. The city was founded in 1939.

After dinner we all went back to our room N 312, and Inna took us out to the enclosed balcony and proudly pointed at the view from the window: *"This is our beauty—The Nagaev Bay...!"* I shuddered once I heard the name. Outside, under the low dark clouds laid open a gloomy view of the wide expanse of water shrouded in mist...

"It's been such a long time since I heard that name... Dear Father! So this is it, the very «Nagaev Bay», which happened to be the return address on the envelopes of two letters from you! I looked at it with fear, but I ought to be glad that fate had allowed me to appear with a low bow to this part of the world..."



Nagaeva Bay view from our "Ocean" hotel window.

There and then we went on a short tour of the city, accompanied by Inna's friend—a young, kind, and energetic Sergei Reisman. Our first stop was at the waterfront by the Nagaev Bay. During the evil times of Stalin's regime thousands and thousands of prisoners from the entire territory of the USSR were brought by trains «almost to Japan»,—to Vladivostok, where they were transferred to the sea-going vessels of the Far Eastern Shipping Company. The capacity of these vessels was clearly too small, and the summer navigating season was short while the long expanse of the Sea of Okhotsk was free of ice, so the bulk of the prisoners were brought to the North in the holds of barges linked by ropes to towing vessels. Often several barges were linked together.

From Vladivostok to Nagaev Bay barges at sea travelled for about a month (passenger boats—took a little less time). Security guards were placed on the barge decks, from where they sent down into the holds provision supplies and water... In Nagaev Bay boats loaded with prisoners arrived at the left bank dock. For years, there were no buildings there (no barracks, tents or booths). Thousands of arrived prisoners were disembarked on the slopes of the coastal hills, where, sitting on the ground, they waited to be selected and sent on a foot hike to one of the many camps. Now it became clear to me why Ferenc Rott "had the time" to send out two letters from Nagaev Bay... (and, perhaps, more...).



*Nagaeva Bay and hill on the bank. Arriving prisoners were planted
on the slope of the hill.*

At 3pm I was already giving a presentation on my books to the readers of the Magadan Regional Library named after Pushkin. Only a handful of people were in the audience. Inna had previously expressed her doubts that people

would want to come on a Saturday... People listened to me very attentively. After my presentation, I asked a woman sitting on the side to introduce herself. And suddenly everyone present, one after another, began to get up and speak about themselves. It turned out that each of their lives began with a former prisoner of Kolyma.



On the hill the "Mask of Sorrow" by Sculptor Ernst Neizvestny. Low clouds overhead. In the right eye of the mask hangs a bell, swaying lightly in the wind. The bell's ringing breaks the silence... Iya lays flowers... June 28, 2014.

I brought copies of my books to present to the Library: one volume each of «Joy from Sadness», «Joy of Discoveries» and «Father's Letters», as well as «Mysovaya Station» which I gave them in Russian and English languages. Eugene Halász, a television reporter from the local television studio listened to my presentation and then took a short interview which he made into a four-minute TV report: "The author of "Father's Letters," Vladimir Rott—the Son of a Former Prisoner, a Hungarian Engineer, visited Kolyma". This report was repeated several times by the TV channels in Magadan and the region. It is necessary to pay tribute to the talent of this young reporter, who in such a short report managed to squeeze in an interview with me, an interview with Inna Gribanova and quite an informative story about what was happening... Eugene Halász admitted to me that he, too, was a descendant of the Kolyma prisoner of Hungarian origin... He smiled listening to my explanation that his Hungarian last name in Russian meant—"A Fisherman".



Active of A.S. Pushkin City Library, Magadan, June 28, 2014.

I noticed that Sergei Reisman, who was present in the audience, looked slightly nervous. After the presentation, he came up to me and said: *"I am impressed. You managed to keep the attention of the audience for more than two hours...! But now we must run to my mother. She already called three times that dinner was long ready for us, and that she had to warm it up twice..."*

Following Sergey we passed, almost running, by several city blocks and arrived to dinner at his parents. Mother—Tatyana, a Russian; Dad—Michael,



Inna Gribanova, Sergey and Tatyana Raizman. Magadan, June 28, 2014.

a Jew; father's brother—David, sister—Galina, all born in Magadan. The parents have already retired, and Sergey—a university lecturer, was working on his PhD thesis. David Reisman—is an Honored School Teacher of Russia, an associate University professor, who for 45 years has taught history and law at schools and universities in the city, and penned two dozens books. In general, this was a cozy group of retirees, scientists, teachers, and intellectuals—the

modest-sized parents' apartment lined with bookshelves. The evening was a complete success. I admitted to them that my father made a slight remark only about "A Friday evening and the ensuing Saturday..." in a pair of letters... and his son, just having arrived in Magadan that day, had such a memorable "Havdalah"—a festive final ceremony of the Sabbath...



White nights in Magadan. Midnight. June 28, 2014.

The next day—on Sunday—we spent going on city tours and visiting museums in Magadan. At first, we were accompanied by Sergei Reisman, who was soon replaced by his uncle, David. Inna Gribanova found for us for a day a driver with a car. He happened to be Andrew Gladkich—a nice young man who only a week later was getting ready to marry Alice—Inna Gribanova's eldest granddaughter. He serves in one of the militarized guard units at a prison camp functioning in the region...

Magadan with its population of 93,000 people is located between the Nagaev and Gertner Bays. The city's buildings represent the standard architecture of the Soviet period. Exploring it is difficult when the thought of its ominous «glory» as the Gulag capital, does not want to leave one's mind.

But we enjoyed the Regional Historical Museum. While on Sunday there were no visitors, the artistic level of their exhibition and a sincere desire to convey information about the tragic past—have clearly left us with a remarkable impression. The cleanliness of the city and an abundance of baby-strollers on the streets convinced us that the city was alive. Our guides were surprised by the endurance of visitors from Canada and their urgent desire to see as much as possible. Though, I admit, because of the jet-lag and a 15 hour time difference from Toronto, Iya and I, not once «nodded off...» listening to the stories told by the official guides.

In the evening I called the Reismans: *“Tanya, please excuse us for such impertinence, but we would really like to be able to spend the evening with your family. Please do not cook anything—we will be happy to help you eat up the remains of yesterday's dinner.”* That is how we got to spend another pleasant evening with this hospitable family in Magadan. We learned more about each other. At the table, everyone except Inna Gribanova, were wise and worldly Jews, but they had such a sense of discovery and purity when they listened to my story about the life of Jews in Canada: the traditions, the Jewish weddings and funerals, about kosher food, and family holidays... If only Ferenc knew that his son would visit Kolyma in an attempt to act as a «Canadian melamed...» As a parting gift, I presented each of our hosts with a commemorative envelope with a photo and postcard issued in honour of the opening of the «Shalom» Memorial.



The Municipal Theater of Magadan.



Visiting Raizmans: Galina, Inna Gribanova, Mikhail, Vladimir Rott, Sergei, Tatyana, Iya Rott, David Raizman. Magadan, June 29, 2014.

Heeding to Inna Gribanova's advice, in late April I mailed from Toronto the following letter to the Magadan Regional branch of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, enclosing copies of my Canadian passport and birth certificate:

To the Ministry of Internal Affairs Information Centre,
Magadan, 9 Dzerzhinsky Street.

April 24th, 2014

Dear Sir or Madam:

I ask for your help. Please try to find at least some of the documents. I wish to know more about the fate of my father, Franz Iosifovich (Yuzefovich) Rott, who, with his wife Regina and his son Josef Rott, came to the Soviet Union from Hungary in 1931 to build a lumber plant in Belarus, in the city of Bobruysk. I was born in 1935.

On July 4th, 1938 my father was arrested under the Article 58 (10 years in prison for—"counter-revolutionary activities...") His family never saw him again. The bulk of his sentence Franz Rott served in Susuman...

After his release from camp, while in exile, he worked in the Magadan timber industry, and in 1949 he was transferred to Ust-Omchug branch of the Magadan Department of forestry.

In December 1950 my father went missing...

I, Vladimir Franzevich Rott, have been living in Canada for the past 40. I am a graduate of the Tomsk Polytechnic Institute. Before my departure for Canada—I served as the Head of the department of installation and repair of machinery for the Volga Automobile Plant in Togliatti for 7 years. My wife—Iya Yaroslavskaya—is a native of the city of Ulan-Ude, she is an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto. We have three children and six grandchildren.

Since 1974, I have had my own firm in Toronto—SIBEL ENGINEERING LTD that is engaged in the design, installation and repair of various electromechanical systems.

In recent years I also became a writer, authoring autobiographical books that have been translated into Hungarian and English. I am a member of the Writers' Union of Hungary. My first book "Father's Letters," was published twice in Hungary and has been included in the list of books recommended for reading in Hungarian high schools. I have visited Russia multiple times to participate in the presentations of my books. And this year, in late June, I will be speaking to my readers in several libraries in Buryatia, and in early July I plan to visit your region, to see it with my own eyes, and to speak at the libraries in Ust-Omchug and Magadan. My wife and I will be arriving at the invitation from an Ust-Omchug resident, Inna Vasilievna Gribanova (Ust-Omchug 686050, 11 Mira Street... Home phone: 413-44...; mobile phone... 914-030...).

Because of my imminent departure from Toronto to Europe and Russia, I would like to ask you to not send any correspondence to me in Toronto, but instead forward it directly to I.V. Gribanova who will be meeting us at the Magadan airport, and, should you provide her with positive news, she would take us to your Information Center at the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Thank you in advance for trying to find at least some information about my father.

Vladimir Rott
(Address and telephone)

Not expecting anything positive to result from their search, I still brought with me to Magadan the original of my birth certificate. I dreamed and hoped that at least symbolically, I would be able to show this eighty year old original, which I have carefully kept all my life, to my father's soul floating high above Ust-Omchug, and tell him what has become of his son "Vladimirka..."

On the third day of our stay in Magadan—it was June 30th, 2014—Inna Gribanova came to meet us at breakfast with the news that she had already booked for us three seats in a taxi, which would be taking us to Ust-Omchug at 6 pm. After breakfast, while still sitting at the table, Inna telephoned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and told them that the same Rotts who sent them a letter and copies of their documents back in April have now arrived in Magadan, and that she wished to bring those Canadians to the Information Center... Inna placed the call from her mobile phone, but we could hear the overbearing voice of an employee at the Ministry's Info Centre, who articulated her words self-assuredly and firmly:

FATHER'S LETTERS LIVE ON



A view of the city of Magadan.



"Mask of Sorrow." Eternal Flame and the figure of the weeping girl.

—Don't you dare bring anybody to us! We will not let them past the entrance door! We have already written to you that you must provide a copy of your passport and a document that proves your relationship! After that, we will consider your father's case. We have a file on F.I Rott, and he had not been exculpated!... Therefore, we cannot show you his file! First we have to review his case...

—But...he was exculpated in 1956! Under Khrushchev...—Words just escaped from my lips...

Inna repeated my words to the employee of the Info Centre, and her response could be heard over the loudspeaker:

—In our archives we have a file on Rott—dealing only with his exile in 1948... There has been no exculpation...

With that the conversation was over... I was shaking in rage! Well, the Soviet government! Such monsters!.. Have you ever heard of anything like this? Poor Franz Rott! He never found out what happened to him. After his discharge from camp in 1948, my father always lived in hope that he was just about to go to Bobruysk to join us. I remember that at the beginning of 1948 my mother saved from her miserable wages and sent to him 500 rubles—"for the trip..." Father let us know many times, writing inside the envelopes in small letters: 58-10. KRD -that is, Article 58 of the Criminal Code, sentenced to 10 years in prison for "counter-revolutionary activities..." This meant, from 1938 to 1948...

But after his release from prison, he immediately was slammed with a new sentence: "Permanent exile in Kolyma." This is what's recorded in the new "File". And today, 65 years after his death, he is still waiting to be "exculpated..." In his most recent letters, my father was almost weeping that he was being "delayed" for so long... He only occasionally hinted to Regina that "maybe you and Vladimir should come to me...", but I'm sure that if only my father had seen his new sentence of "eternal exile", he would have insisted that we went to join him... Poor Russia! Same files, same archival custodians, same prisoners, and the same shameful and complete powerlessness of a man... That is the "Freedom and democracy of Putin..."

I was extremely disappointed. Once again I could sense what sort of place I had left behind... But, thank G-d, my "Bobruysk training" was still with me: two hours later I was holding a copy of all of the pages of "F.I. Rott's File". At first Iya began to photograph them, but I said, "They are all ours... Now let's get out of here!"

In order to complete the story of this "epic attempt" to obtain my father's file, we must leap in time to six months later. "January 20th, 2015 (!), The Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Toronto sent an envelope to my home address, which contained a copy of the above mentioned letter I had written to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Magadan, dated April 28th, 2014, and a response, dated May 27th, 2014:

Dear Vladimir Franzevich!

The Department of Special Archives at the Information Center of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs for the Magadan Region is in possession of archival information on Franz Yuzefovich (Iosifovich) Rott.

In accordance with the current legislation of the Russian Federation on the protection of personal and family information, and other information about citizens (personal data), in order to facilitate the issuance of archival data and to consider the matter of your father's—Franz Yuzefovich (Iosifovich) Rott's—exculpation for the period of his exile at a settlement in the Magadan region, as well as your exculpation, as a minor who was left without the care of one of the parents (underscored by the author—V.R.), you must provide us with the copies of the following

documents, certified in the manner prescribed by the laws of the Russian Federation:

- Biographical pages of your foreign citizen passport;
- Documents confirming your kinship with F. Yu. Rott
- Deputy Head of the Department (Signature) V.E. Demin

As I understood it, in this response I was being told that the electronic facsimile copies of my passport and birth certificate that I had enclosed previously were not acceptable because they were not “*certified in the manner prescribed by the laws of the Russian Federation...*”

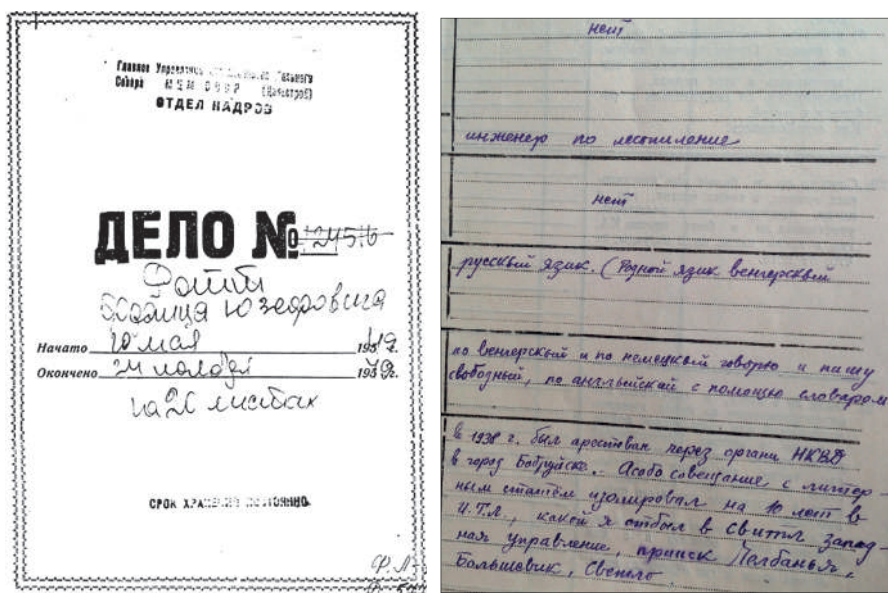
However, to find out today, 65 years after his death, that the unfortunate Ferenc Rott not only hasn't yet earned an elementary apology for his crippled life from Russia—woozy from her own greatness—but that he has not even been exonerated from “the eternal exile/settlement sentence...”- which had been concealed from him, this is truly above every limit of humanity... it is an inhumane atrocity!

Poor Russian people! Every time I return there with some hope of seeing at least small improvement in their lives, seeing some joy on their faces... but there is only the deterioration and decline. The rulers, like thieves, still fear the disclosure of their bosses' crimes, and vigilantly preserve the hackneyed thick files about these crimes, which also requires them to keep an absurd and overly expensive army of guards. Government propaganda and brainwashing apparatus will never let the Russian people know that once defeated Germany, in a sincere apology for the crimes of their ancestors, for 70 years now has been paying pensions and benefits not only to the victims of the concentration camps, but also to those who just happened to be in the occupation zones... Ask any Soviet immigrant in Israel about this, or in America, or in any other country. Monthly bank transfers... And this “world leader” of the impoverished and disgraced, to this day, is afraid to even apologize to the very people it tortured and to their families.

Moreover, in my 81st year of living, I suddenly had to learn that I, too, had not been “exculpated.” “My poor wife, our children and our dear friends! It might even come to such a point that they would have to request permission for my funeral...”

What sort of new information did we glean from the «File»? For the first time in my life I was holding in my hands such a document, shivering as I was browsing its pages. And there were many pages, but almost all of them were blank. When there were entries, they were made by Ferenc, in his characteristically beautiful handwriting, with the same endless errors in Russian words.

For my readers I would like to supply just one example, without amendments. When asked: “List all of your close relatives and specify what they are



"The File of Rott F. J."

One of the "File's" pages.

doing at this time, and who among them had been deprived of their voting rights?"—my father wrote: *"My relatifs all live in Hungary. Their amount was much, but during the German occupation, the Germans their majority had killed. I do not have the eksact informeyshion about who remained alive, iksept for my brother. His address in Budapest: №29 Vishegrad ucca, 3rd floor, apt.32, his surname—Rákosi, Artúr."*

The writing on the cover of the «File» says: "Began—May 10th, 1949; completed—November 24th, 1949." This means that for almost half a year father was summoned to the NKVD to give depositions he recorded in the «File». I imagined: the interrogating officer sat in front of my father, knowing that this man had been sentenced to "eternal exile..." and Ferenc tried to fill each page with his nice handwriting, full of hopes that he was going to leave for Bobruysk any day... In the 24th paragraph of the questionnaire in the «File» there is a question: *"What's your permanent address on the mainland?"* and father's hand wrote down: *"Bobruysk, №68 Schmidt Lane"*. Imagine his thoughts at that moment...

During his years in camp father never wrote in any of his letters about what he was doing, what kind of work he did, and now I can read this entry: *"...Isolated for 10 years and served time in the mines Chelobanya, Bolshevik and Svetloye. All of 10 years I worked as a getter in these mines."* (Gold mining—V.R)

I did not know how my father got his profession, and had never heard anyone mention anything about it, either. And now, in the «File», I read that, in 1916, Ferenc graduated from the Hungarian Forest Academy, located in Budapest, at №2 Pozmanya Square, where he had received his engineering specialization in sawmilling. Ferenc was ordered to recall the names of his teachers: *Jozsef Treyner, Stefan Sopko, Bene Hidveni, Géza Nagy...*

In the morning, when Inna came to book our taxi seats, she told the driver, Sasha, that «Canadians have three large suitcases and two bags...», but that did not worry him. He acted willingly and friendly when we met him. Right away he loaded our suitcases into his buddy's small van parked nearby. We began to discuss our main concern: on the 3rd of July, we should get from Ust-Omchug to the Magadan airport by noon, in order to make our flight to Moscow. Sasha assured us that at 7:20 in the morning he would be at our entrance door, and would bring us to the registration counter at the airport ahead of time.

Now, about that five-hour trip from Magadan to Ust-Omchug on board a seven-seat minivan taxi... It was horrible! Riding on a paved section of the road—the first 70 kilometers—was more horrible than the rest of the trip. As we were told, in the permafrost zone—when an asphalt road is being built—an insulating layer between the frozen earth and asphalt must be installed so that the heat from the sun and automobile tires does not get transmitted to the frozen ground. Typically, such a layer consists of tree trunks and tree branches, with pockets of air between them helping to improve the insulation.

Only in this case either the amount of thermal insulation was insufficient or, perhaps, someone just “forgot” to install it. In many places permafrost melted, and the asphalt dipped and began to undulate like a surface of a giant old washboard... Our driver, familiar with the route, confidently and quickly drove his «Toyota», as it dutifully followed all the pits and mounds in the asphalt, causing the passengers and their bags to constantly bounce up to the car ceiling... Therefore, the remaining 200—250 kilometers along a dusty dirt road seemed like paradise, and the zigzags of the serpentine road bends our driver Sasha “knew by heart.”

At the very first stop we were able to briefly commune with the nature of Kolyma. We stopped at a small wooden «tavern» with a snack counter, a TV set and an outdoor booth—a toilet. Just as soon as the sliding doors of the van opened, we were attacked by myriads of hungry local Kolyma mosquitoes. Terrified, we ran faster than bullets through the double doors of the «tavern»... Not that many trees along the road, last splotches of snow covering the tops of the hills, and dense clouds of mosquitoes hanging in the air...



The road to Ust-Omchug.



We made it to Ust-Omchug. (As I write these words I recall that very moment, I knew that I could not believe that it was actually happening.) It was late, but at that latitude, in Kolyma, it was still light. We exited the bus. I knelt down and reached the sinister ground with my lips... Iya and Inna silently stood beside me.

Driver Sasha refused to receive a tip from me, taking only 3000 rubles (a thousand per person). I presented him with a souvenir—a keychain with a miniature Canadian flag. Sasha seemed satisfied.

For the next three days Inna would be staying at her grandkids' while she lets us use her one-room apartment, located on the third floor of a five-story building. In the morning she came to feed us breakfast, after which we went out to get acquainted with the village.



Meet the current Ust-Omchug.



River Omchug.



Remains of the buildings from the Ust-Omchug GULAG's era.



In this building were located the area's Administration of the camps and mines.



In these types of houses lived management, security, and civilian personnel.

First we approached an attractive, freshly painted building of the village House of Culture, which hosts the Local Lore and History of the Tenka Region

Hall, organized by Inna Gribanova. Here, a pleasant surprise was awaiting us—a display dedicated to Ferenc Rott, compiled on the basis of information from my books. I signed a copy of «Father's Letters» donated to the museum: *“A gift to the GULAG Museum—from the author, in memory of those who departed to eternity. With hope that this will never happen again”.*

We spent two hours at the museum. It was filled with very interesting documents and had well-designed displays on the exploration of mineral resources, history of the industrial development, and the people and the extraordinary past of Kolyma—a unique economic region of Russia.



In front of the House of Culture of the Ust-Omchug. Photo by Iya Rott.



The museum of Ust-Omchug. Stand on the prisoner of the Gulag Ferenc Rott.



Masters of Arts, who were imprisoned in Tenkin's camps.

Extract from the Dalstroï's Order on June 23, 1941: “Stop the liberation from the camps counter- revolutionaries (all items of the 58th article of the RSFSR Criminal Code), thugs (all items of the 59th article of the RSFSR Criminal Code), repeat offenders and other dangerous criminals...” “ Inna Gribanova. Muzeum, Ust-Omchug. Photo by Iya Rott.



Ust-Omchug is the center of Tenka district of the Magadan Region. During the years of the tragic Stalinist camps—from 1934 to 1956—the Soviet regime obtained about 900 tons of gold in Kolyma. Tenka Mining and Industrial Control Department's annual maximum was achieved in 1943, when 24 ton of gold were extracted, and from 1939 to 2011 in Tenka district alone 20 ton of gold were mined from alluvial deposits, and 120 tons were obtained from ore.

After the GULAG times were over, in 1989 the population size of Ust-Omchug reached its maximum—11.3 thousand people. This was due to the closures of many villages, especially in the flood zone of the Kolyma reservoir: people moved to Ust-Omchug. By 2014, the size had fallen to 3,500. In the 60's-70's around 26,000-27,000 people lived in Tenka district, and today only 5,000 remain.

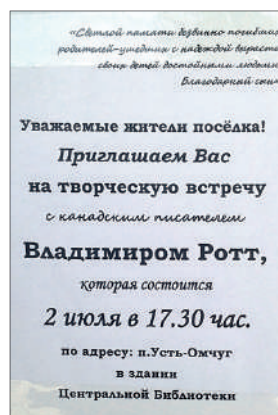
With his usual confidence, Nikita Khrushchev expected that after the disappearance of the Stalinist prisons the Soviet Union would replace Kolyma camps with micro-cities filled with all the necessary comforts, attracting continuous streams of young people, and ensuring that gold would be pouring into the state treasury just like before... But today's reality of dozens of deserted micro cities in Kolyma—with abandoned apartments, libraries, schools—stand as sad witnesses to that failed utopia... Here are some photos of the once bustling yet now abandoned miner's village of Kadykchan.





Abandoned miners village—Kadykchan. Even Lenin could not resist... Photos: <Sergeydolya.livejournal.com>; <...Drom.ru> and <Goroda—Prizraki>

The following day Inna Gribanova arranged a meeting with my readers at the village library. The small audience was very attentive, and I was asked a whole range of questions. As it turned out, the majority of the people in the audience were descendants of the former prisoners... Everyone was eager to share their story. No one wanted to leave... More than ever, I felt like their brother... And there was something very similar in their eyes shining in response.



A meeting with readers in the library of Ust-Omchug.

When I ponder the temperament of the good-hearted locals we met in the Kolyma region, I realize that although *"Magadan was built on the bones of prisoners"*, the nature of its residents' character is different. The origin of this phenomenon has been aptly summarized by a Magadan native, Antonina Aksenov (Yevgenia Ginzburg's daughter): *"...In Magadan, on the edge of the world, where permafrost and hate are a fact of nature, I was surrounded by an unusually warm, and—contrary to all reasons—very spiritual atmosphere. That's because, actually, the crème de la crème of the society was imprisoned there. We were surrounded by disgraced professors, persecuted but not crushed society ladies and academicians, the Bolshoi Theatre ballet dancers disfigured by the appalling labour camp conditions, and musicians whose hands had been mutilated during interrogations."*

Sasha the driver turned out to be punctual: on July 3, at half past seven in the morning he was already at our door; he was driving the car at maximum speed; and although we arrived at the airport on time, one terrible episode marred my memories of him:

I had a bit of a cold, began having a runny nose, and in order to spare the other passengers I sat next to the driver.

Sasha gaudily talked about his life plans:

—For two more years we'll stay here—my wife works as an engineer, but once she earns a good pension and all the benefits, then we will move to the mainland. I will open my own business—I shall farm sables...

And suddenly he asked me a question:

—Are you Canadian?

—I am!

—Tell me, do you, Canadians, just hate the Americans the same as we do..?

—But what are you saying, Sasha!—I was shocked.—The Americans are like brothers to us. Canadians and Americans—are one and the same nation. There isn't even an actual, guarded, border between us. I, alone, have about 600 relatives living in the United States...

—And I hate them... If Putin issues a call to arms tomorrow, I will give up my minibus ("Toyota", 7 seats), and I will take a machine-gun and will mercilessly kill every American!

After I heard all this I was petrified and grew silent... That's what they have done to Russia, Putin and his clique... *"Mr. Putin, will you also, having gone to a «better world», leave Russia full of so many mutilated souls?"*

Upon reviewing some ominous statistics—"millions of Gulag victims... millions of broken families... mass starvation and cannibalism in villages... hundreds of tons of gold and diamonds mined at the cost of death... a war fought under the muzzles of death squads marching behind Soviet

troops... the disappearance of thousands of people with disabilities... binge drinking..."—just one tormenting question remains: *"Oh, G-d! Humanity! Russia! The people of Russia! How could you let this happen? Were you really powerless to stop this? And what about the future? How can we build the future...?"*

Most of my life I have lived in the free world, in the West, in wonderful Canada, with its joys and challenges—but I was born and raised in Russia, and I sincerely wish it success and a decent lot in life. I can not believe that its people could be so indifferent to their own future... The people of Russia had been oppressed and immersed in injustice for centuries, but the development of mass communications has changed the entire world, it opened the eyes of the residents of the most remote and backward corners of the Earth. Look at how much progress has been reached by the people of India, Vietnam, South Korea... and only the people of Russia are still susceptible to false propaganda, which makes it possible for them to once again to be deceived and be marched into swamps...

This «moral high ground» of our taxi driver could only be possible under the conditions of unrestrained revelry of blatant propaganda and the tyranny of the rulers of today's Russia, who are trying hard to distract the attention of the people towards the "abstract patriotism", by continuously inflating solely the questionable examples of the "heroic past" and the mirage of self-hypnosis in its own "perfection and invincibility." And all this is taking place, instead of mobilizing the entire country to begin to think and decide how to raise the standard of living, how to avoid death by vodka, how to give people back their lost optimism and self-confidence, how to teach people to not wait for the next pipedream from the government, how to ensure that human life is protected by the law and how to let people feel like they are the masters of their lives, how to return to citizens that basic feeling that living a life in this world is worth it, that your work and effort can provide you with a future, and that society will create enough wealth so that the aging generation, too, can be ensured of a decent life.

Why tirelessly slam the United States of America, instead of—just once—telling your own people the elementary truth that the United States of America—is the richest country in the world only because all of its 300 million citizens freely work hard and teach this work ethic to their children, and that it's possible to catch up with it but only in one case: if one begins to emulate its best practices and starts to work with the same enthusiasm and dedication. To speak of anything else—that's only deceit and envy.

Have a look at this letter, it was sent to me at the end of April. It gives a sad example of the evil and uneducated tyrant installed in her official post for one and only reason—"to hold and not let go..."

"A Primary School Textbook: Mathematics in Russia.

In the nearest future the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation will publish a federally approved list of recommended textbooks, and Lyudmila Peterson's mathematics textbook for grades 1- 4 will not be included in it. The second most popular mathematics textbook in this country has not passed the state licensure. The official expert of the Russian Academy of Education (RAE), Lubov Ulyahina, pointed out the following in her published opinion: "The content of the textbook is not conducive to the formation of patriotism. Characters from the works of Rodari, Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, A.A. Milne, A. Lindgren, E. Raspe—dwarves, elves, snake charmers, as well as the three little pigs—were hardly designed to develop a sense of patriotism and pride for their country and fellow countrymen. "

Explaining her position further, expert L. Ulyahina stated: "Yes, mathematics is an exact science, so, what would it seemingly have to do with love for our motherland? But the authors of textbooks are aiming to form a child's personality, and not just to teach him how to count. Yet, what do we see on the very first page: the dwarves and Snow White—these are representatives of a foreign language culture. Here, again, the dwarves—I was surprised and wondered what they were doing here in such numbers, whether they added to the understanding and solving of various mathematical problems. And I came to the conclusion that they were not directly related to the problem solving, and I do not understand what they were doing, generally speaking. Here's some monkey, and here's a Little Red Riding Hood. When the attacks against me started, when some people started saying that "looking for patriotism in a mathematics textbook is ridiculous", I decided to take a count: out of 119 characters drawn here only nine are related to Russian culture. Sorry, but patriotism is not a joke—it is our mentality."

"If we continue to scroll through the textbook, there are no Russian cultural heroes at all. Here are some letters of the Old Slavic alphabet casually depicted in blue ink. Have you ever seen any of our ancient books written in blue ink? Not to mention that there are four factual errors, and that the letters of the Russian alphabet (students are invited to relate letters of the Russian and Old Slavic alphabet in the problem to their numeric value) have never had numeric values. The letters are depicted as careless scribbles at best. But right next to them are the Roman numerals—and note how clearly and beautifully they are represented. When this child will come, let's say, to the Tretyakov Gallery* [major art museum in Moscow-Tr.] and will see there properly represented Russian letters, and not what he had seen in the textbook, from that he can develop a deep disrespect: for the textbook, for the teacher, for the school"...

"And this picture—depicting fighting children—it's just great. It is one of my favourites. They are fighting over a ball, and the boy, as we have seen, has won: long live the force. And who is the lady that comes to the aid of the girl? This is a fairy, and in our culture, there is no such word, and there is no such a phenomenon as a "fairy". And take a close look at how ugly and blurred is the image of the Ded Moroz * [Russian Santa Claus- Tr.]. What's with the face of this grandfather, is he drunk? The [Christmas] tree here is completely not presentable. This is vulgar, just too vulgar."

Although my reaction to the kind of “patriotism” exhibited by our taxi driver might seem excessive to the reader, I just feel that it’s necessary to protect from such “patriots” not just Russia as a whole, but even the tiny Ust-Omchug, a town of a haggard fate. Of course, this episode could not spoil our impressions of the Kolyma region, where most of the residents we encountered were nice, tempered, and intelligent people.

Out of all of our meetings in Ust-Omchug, the most striking and memorable visit turned out to be with Inna Gribanova’s daughter-in-law and grandchildren, where we were invited for a lovely meal. The hostess, Tatyana Gribanova, organized a modest, warm, and welcoming dinner. She invited friends: Jeanna and Sergey Korpachev, as well as Tatyana and Vladimir Shchipachev. Tatyana Shchipachev’s pitch black, shiny hair—as well as her facial features—were perfectly suited to her nickname “Chukcha” [an indigenous people inhabiting some northern areas within the Russian Federation.] that was used several times, and to which she responded with a smile. Her mother was a true native of the Chukotka region. It turned out that—besides Inna Gribanova, Iya and I—the rest of the dinner guests were born in Kolyma.

I was surprised to see no alcoholic drinks on the table. I thought that I probably should have found a bottle of something to bring in addition to the other gifts we brought. . . But soon things got explained: our hosts were deeply religious people, members of the Protestant branch of the Christian church. For many years Pastor Ivan A. Jatin had been the spiritual leader of their small, close-knit community at the local prayer home in Ust-Omchug. Several members of the community, together with the pastor, had recently visited the Holy Land—Israel.

At the table there were also two nice young men: eighteen-year-old Sergei and sixteen year old Victor. We were happy to respond to their sensible questions. The dinner proceeded remarkably well. Everyone was interested to learn more about each other. For Iya and me the most delightful culmination to this evening was its ending, when the adults got up from the table, lined up and enthusiastically sang, in Hebrew, the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah.” They



Visiting Tatyana Gribanova in Ust-Omchug, July 2014.



followed it right up with “Hava Nagila.” And at the end, we heard a merry, popular Jewish wedding song, “Od Yashamaa”. It was unforgettable. That is just how they are, these Kolyma locals!

Thus multiplied the joy from our meetings. From then on, we exchanged letters, congratulated each other on the occasions of our birthdays, or important events in our families, as well as on official holidays. It was nice to get the first letter from the Reismans from Magadan.

“From the Reisman Family, Magadan, July 25th, 2014.

Dear Vladimir and Iya!

...Between the end of July and the end of August Sergei will be in St. Petersburg, and then he will return to Magadan. Here it has been raining hard. Magadanka river burst its banks, overturned a truck and some garages, flooded homes along the banks, and the salmon swam straight through the streets. The river washed off into the ocean a small shore-side park where some old, decommissioned civil and military aircraft used to be on display. A state of emergency has been declared in three districts of the region, as well as in Magadan. Yet, we have been spared.

Until next time, Misha and Tanya.

Danya and Galya also send their regards.

P.S. Have you had a chance to find any relatives of Franz (Danilovich) Polani, a Hungarian engineer born in 1898, who was a prisoner in the Kolyma camps from 1938 to 1946?»

We were also happy to receive a letter from Inna Gribanova, who sent us some pictures from the wedding of her granddaughter, Alice, to the already familiar to us Sergey Gladkih. The wedding took place in Magadan ten days after our departure.



Wedding day. The family of the bride—Alice Gribanova (right to left): Mother of the Bride—Tatyana, grandmother (on by mother)—Svetlana, elder brother—Sergei, the groom—Andrew Gladkih, the bride—Alice, the younger brother—Victor, paternal grandmother—Inna Gribanov. Magadan, July 12, 2014.

And this is how such an interesting person, Inna V. Gribanova, became our new friend. The above excerpts from her book “Tenka. A Twist of the Spiral” brilliantly supplemented our understanding of the events and reality, into which my father—a prisoner in Kolyma—got pulled into as a young Hungarian engineer Ferenc Rott, who did not dare to tell anything like that in his sad letters that he continually sent to his family during the 12 years of his imprisonment. After Ferenc’s death the letters stopped... But then Inna Gribanova entered our lives, and with her kindness, hard work and talent she enriched for us the story about the history of the Magadan Region.

In our family, the word «Ust-Omchug» had always produced only the bitterness, which made our hearts heavy. Suddenly, fate brought to us Inna, who also dedicated practically her entire life to this land. Her loyalty, her unfading love for “Tenka”, as well as the dignity and kindness of the people surrounding her in Ust-Omchug, turned around our feelings toward this mysterious town. And Inna’s deep attachment to Kolyma shines like a diamond in her words of tribute:

“Our villages don’t have any architectural monuments to show off with pride. The vast majority of them had nothing except for the barracks and the huts, of the ugliest kind. Our countrymen were born, lived and died in them, and they provided the travelers with temporary shelter. They housed people who found and gave away the wealth of this land to others, gaining nothing in return.”

Mama Regina, and also my dear brother Jozef, received from that trip their very last, symbolic message from our dad, Ferenc. Iya and I brought from Ust-Omchug a small sachet filled with Kolyma’s soil... Only six weeks after our return to Canada, at the Jewish cemetery in Toronto we managed to gather our entire family at the tomb of Baba Regina, onto which we poured some of the soil that we brought, and the rest went onto my brother’s grave...



A handful of earth brought from Ust-Omchug which the Rott family poured on the grave of Regina. Toronto, August 28, 2014.



Iya, Ilona and our grandchildren in 2000 and in 2015.

The final chord in the story about our flight to distant Magadan, and a grateful bow to Baba Regina happened when from the cemetery we all went directly to the newly rebuilt Baycrest (a Jewish nursing home in Toronto, where Mama Regina spent her last 18 years). We sat down at a large table in the cafeteria, ordered ice cream for all, and happily re-lived the «Ice Cream Parlour Hour with Baba Riza»—to which she had been a necessary party for so many years.

The present day residents of Baycrest, together with their visitors, were surprised to see such unusual guests in their cafeteria. And it did not pass without further excitement, 15 years after Regina's passing, two little old men came over to us with oohs and ahs, and with tears in their eyes began to eye our giant sized grandchildren: "Oh Goodness! We remember when they were so little...! They always sat at the table around their grandmother...!"

Toronto. September 11, 2015

Epilogue

I finished this chapter and put down the date... The next two chapters were almost ready. But suddenly life brought yet another surprise: I was able to see a different—and I would say—unique letter from Ferenc Rott...

In his letters from prison father wrote several times that his arrest was an error, that he was completely innocent, and that he was hoping to come home soon... To this day, my family knew only what Belyavsky—a former stable-man at the Lesokombinat [the lumber plant], told us when he returned from Kolyma in 1947. He had an open form of tuberculosis, and had been released from prison for that reason. My father asked Belyavsky to tell my mother Regina that immediately after his arrest on July 4th, 1938, in Bobruysk prison, he was forced to sign a confession that he was an “enemy of the people...” When he refused to do so, they started beating him... After several days of torture, when they put a pen into his right hand, and inserted the fingers of his left hand into the hinged side of the door frame and then started to close the door—my father could no longer cope, and signed the «confession...»

In December of 2015, a joyful event that I shall describe at the end of this book led my wife Iya and me to Belarus... In the chapter «The Rott Connection» I shared with my readers that the staff at the Department of Fire Safety Service of Russia had informed me that in the Belarusian city of Mogilev, in the KGB archive, filed under number 5592 there is a folder with documents concerning my father, Franz Rott's, arrest.

While preparing for my trip to Minsk and Bobruysk, I asked my good friends, Alexei Verbitsky and his son Dimitri, to inquire whether it was possible for a citizen of Canada to come in and review the documents in that folder. Two days later Verbitsky told me that he was able to get through to the Mogilev KGB office, where a staff member confirmed that they had a case file under such number, and that they would let me see it, if I provided notarized copies of my Canadian passport and my birth certificate, in order to confirm my relationship... Alexei said that the KGB employee persisted with questions as to how we had found out the file number...

Then came that special date, December 16th. In Belarus, just like in Russia, the clocks are no longer adjusted to winter time, so it was still completely dark at eight o'clock in the morning when Dimitri and his father picked us up at the entrance of the hotel «Tourist», and took us to Mogilev. The road was nice and clean, light snow was just starting to fall, and our almost two-hour journey was quickly over by the time we drove up to the Mogilev KGB office building. The attendant at the entrance made a phone call: “The

visitors from Canada have arrived...” and told us to wait. Approximately twenty minutes later, an officer with a folder in his hand invited us to follow him. We were taken to an empty room located close to the entrance, where Iya and I sat down behind one side of the desk. The officer sat on the other side, and put down in front of us the infamous Ferenc Rott file... On the cover of the file I noticed a long (six or seven digits) case number, on top of which, in the upper left corner, a different number was written in freshly black ink—5592...

The gloomy officer did not even find it necessary to introduce himself (I had to ask for his name), and started with a long warning: *“In accordance with the established legislation... when studying the file it is not permissible to use photo cameras, or recording devices, or to copy names... Most importantly, you are only allowed to read pages that are open... Pages secured with paper clips cannot be opened...!”*

As it turned out, they were only allowing us to see less than a quarter of the contents of the folder... And that was 77 years after Ferenc’s arrest! Yet, back in 1956 the Soviet government sent us an «Official Certificate» confirming that Ferenc Rott *“...had been fully exculpated and his Civil rights had been reinstated...”* But more than half a century later they were still afraid to show us something... In my early childhood I once heard from mother Regina: *“The bigger the thief—the more locks there are on his door...”*

On the first page I read that the NKVD Detective Sergeant T.B.Morin led the “interrogation” of Ferenc Rott. I scribbled the details on a piece of paper... However the officer sitting across from me issued an imperious observation: *“You do not have to write that name down!...”* Why so?—I countered. To defuse the situation, the officer explained in a slightly friendlier manner: *“Why write it down...? Just a month later this very sergeant—most likely—was also sitting in front of an investigator...”*

Sergeant T.B.M. managed to fill 20 pages in the Transcript of Interrogation, and each was signed by Ferenc Rott. Father was arrested on July 4th, 1938, and the transcript was started on July 9th. This gap refers to the very days of «reflection» and door closing that stable-man Belyavski would later tell us about. Transcript of interrogation was completed on July 27th.

Iya and I were feeling so unsettled after reading the first page of the transcript, that we did not notice how we began to read aloud as we moved on to the next page, perhaps to support each other. However the officer immediately interrupted us. We continued to read in silence... After I quickly leafed through all the pages of the transcript, in addition to feelings of horror, blood was pulsing inside my brain...

I will try to convey the contents of the transcript as closely as possible:
—*Do you plead guilty to spying for Germany?*

—Yes, I admit it. I admit it fully.

—Tell us when and how you were recruited?

—At the beginning of December 1931 my wife, and our two year-old son, came from Hungary to Austria. I had no money, so the Soviet consulate in Vienna refused me a visa to enter the USSR. I was in despair. At that time someone suggested to me that there was a special organization in Berlin that helped low-income families with moving to the Soviet Union. I went with my family to Berlin, and settled in a small hotel in the outskirts of the city. A few days later I met Engineer Schultz, who offered to help me. He said that he was a member of a German engineering company, which aimed to maintain German engineering achievements at the highest level in the world. He said that he could help me with my move to the Soviet Union, on a condition that I would agree to return a small favour—namely, sometimes transmit to their organization information about the technical condition of the plant, and its production volume, once I start working there... I agreed to it. A few days later Schultz found me again, gave me 300 rubles and a visa to enter the USSR. He said that he would tentatively address me as «Fritz».

—When and where did you hold your next meeting with the German agents?

—In the summer of 1932, in Bobruysk, at the factory where I was working. Someone told me that a German man was looking for me... That was Schulz. He asked, in German, if I had any information for him. I said that I had only been there for four months, and still did not understand Russian... I was still studying the language.

Two months later at the lumber mill I was stopped by a man. "Guten tag, Fritz!..." he said. He was from Germany... (surname). A week later I supplied him with the floor plan of the plant. He gave me 200 rubles...

—What kind of information of military nature did you provide?

—I said that tanks of two different models—representing the military units of the town garrison—participated in the May Day parade in Bobruysk.

Soon, a different German representative (surname) appeared at the plant, and I gave him a list of the plant equipment, as well as the estimated number of products that it could produce for military purposes... From that representative I received 300 rubles...

—What other information of a military nature did you manage to pass?

—I passed no further military information. At the end of 1934 someone (named a new name) sought me out, and told me that my report about the tanks was unsatisfactory. It was necessary to specify the models of the tanks. I was advised to locate and recruit an officer at the city military garrison, who would know the models and numbers of military equipment... He gave me 300 rubles...

After some time, that man visited me again, but I told him that I was not going to be involved any more... I said I was going to go back to Hungary with

my family... He warned me that the leadership of his organization would not approve such a decision, and that if I chose to return, they would send a report about my collaboration with them to the Government of Hungary.

In total I received 1,800 rubles from them. Since my decision to apply for Soviet citizenship for my family I ended all sorts of contacts with the representatives of Germany.

This is a short version of the main points in the transcript of Ferenc Rott's interrogation. It was very difficult to read it... At some point, due to the simplicity of the text, and my father's signature on every page, I almost began to think that this was some kind of concealed truth, of which my mother Regina was unaware...

The next thing we found inside the folder was a form printed on a single sheet of paper—«An Extract from the Transcript of the Minutes of the Sentencing Hearing», dated November 1st, 1938. This was a typical procedure in those years of the Soviet regime, like a conveyor belt it delivered sentences in a locked room, in secret, and was at best presided over by an infamous damned «Special Troika»—three NKVD agents. The form was a standard one, printed in a print shop, and the names of the “Troika” members were not specified. There was a typewritten addition under a “HEARD BY:” heading:

Item 5. Civil Case №42087 NKVD BSSR, charges:

Franz Yuzefovich Rott, born in 1898, a native of Gerstel (Hungary), a resident of Bobruysk, Hungarian, not a Party member, Head of quality control Department of the Bobruysk Lumber mill, citizen of the USSR.

A GERMAN SPY.

Recruited in 1931. Passed intelligence information about military units of the Bobruysk garrison. Informed German agents about the lumber plant and its intended mission during wartime.

Under the heading, “RESOLUTION:” in type:

To be isolated in a corrective labour camp for a period of TEN years, beginning with the period from 4 / VII-1938.

In place of the signature of the Secretary of the Special Troika—a facsimile seal...

The next part of the «File» consisted of three separate sections, approximately 5—7 pages each, held together with paper clips. Our first assumption, of course, was that those were the hidden from us “truthful testimony” of the unfortunate “witnesses”, which the investigator needed to give the interrogation some semblance of verity... An agent sitting in front of us was sure that

his vigilance in conducting our visit was of the highest calibre, nevertheless I noticed, on the inside cover of the folder,

«The Contents»:

Rott F.I. pp. 1—20

Wolfson pp. 21—23

Plus, 6 or 7 other names...

A sad document was waiting for us at the back of the folder. It contained 3 sheets of ordinary school notebook graphing paper. Each of the horizontal lines on the sheets was carefully filled in neat calligraphic handwriting. It was a letter—a complaint dated February 24th, 1939—written by my father to Moscow and addressed to M.I. Kalinin—the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union (similar to President—VR). As best as we can recall, here is approximately what it said:

“Dear Comrade M.I. Kalinin! I am writing to ask you to please read this complaint and to look into my case... I was arrested in July of 1938... My arrest was a huge and unjust mistake... Starting with the first day of my arrest, I got severely beaten... and that is why I decided to sign whatever they wanted me to sign, so that I could only have a chance to write this letter to you... I’ve never been a German spy. The investigator who interrogated me, was a very cruel and illiterate man... In vain I kept telling him that the entrance visas to the USSR my family and I received—were issued to us by the Soviet Consulate in Vienna... I still have our train tickets, which prove that we were in Berlin in transit, and that it took us only 52 minutes to transfer by taxi from one station to another, in order to catch the train to Moscow.

All the German citizens—to whom I did not pass any secrets—were lumber traders, who periodically came from Germany to the Lumber plant. With each of them I needed to deal during the course of fulfilling my duties as the Head of the Department of quality control of products at the Bobruysk Lumber plant... What factory secrets could I possibly pass? The Bobruysk Lumber plant was built in 1927—1928 by German and Swedish companies, and they installed all the necessary machines and equipment there...

During the interrogation, whenever I tried to protest against the charges, the real Inquisition began...

I beg you, Comrade M.I. Kalinin, please issue an order to review my case, so that I could quickly go back to see my wife and two small children. Today I know nothing about their lives, but my help is absolutely necessary for their existence...

Signature—Franz Rott «.

Like a travesty, the next sheet of paper in the «File» demonstrates that M.I. Kalinin’s office processed the complaint... It is another standard form, a record from the «Special Troika» proceeding:

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 18

“The interrogation transcript of the German spy, F.I. ROTT, has been reviewed. The verdict is to be upheld.

Special Secretary of the Troika—... (instead of the signature—a facsimile).»

My dear countrymen—Russians and Belarussians! This is what you are still living with today, and the kind of legacy that you are going to leave to your children! Instead of removing these sinister records from the rotten archives of the disgraced past and handing them out to each innocent family, along with an overdue—after 77 years—apology to all who had suffered—the rulers of today prioritize archiving and concealing the crimes of their former criminal masters. This is happening, because their monstrous minds cannot offer anything better to their people...

“You are following the true path, my Dear Comrades!”—(N. Khrushchev)

Dear G-d, please forgive these mad men! Do not punish them so severely!

Toronto, January 10, 2016

Chapter 19

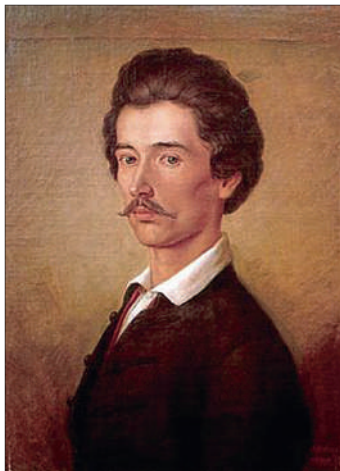
BARGUZIN

The woeful detective story.

Despite the impressive scope of the chapter on the Memorial “Shalom”, we have not yet parted ways with the enchanted Trans-Baikal. And what of our Barguzin! Well, my dear reader, we must introduce you to another miracle: his name is Sándor Petőfi. In order to imagine the trials and tribulations that the protagonists of this chapter had to go through, we must keep in mind the timeline of the events that had unfolded over the course of not two, and not even three human lives.

I was three years old when Stalin forever robbed my brother and me of our father. At that time, my family lived at the lumber mill, and, overnight, my mama Regina went from being a respectable wife of an engineer —Madam Rott,—to «Madam Rottiha», a labourer who loaded lumber into the railroad cars. We got kicked out of our apartment and were moved to a small room in a large communal barrack, where every night in the darkness mama cried loudly about the misfortune she had suffered as well as about the pain from the abscesses that were caused by splinters in the palms of her hands.

When I turned five, I heard from mama for the first time about an outstanding poet who once lived in Hungary, their national pride—Sándor Petőfi. Surprisingly, mama was able to recite by heart several of his poems, one of which I have kept in my memory ever since! Of course, my mama taught me a verse from it. Here it is:



NATIONAL CHANT

Rise, Magyar, your homeland is calling!
It's time to act, dark night is falling!
Why settle for slave's choice
When you should have a free voice?

Swear by our Hungarian God
That we shall never,
We shall never be slaves,
Ever!

*Sándor Petőfi.
Portrait by Soma Orlai Petrics (1840s.)*

The great poet wrote this oath for his fellow countrymen, and they have been proudly reciting it for over a hundred and fifty years. I consider myself fortunate to know Hungarian well enough to be able to read Petőfi's poetry in its original form. I really love Pushkin. His talent was G-d given! And Petőfi's talent, in my opinion, is the next brilliant page in world poetry. When reading his verses, it is as if your eyes are glued to the pages, which seemingly turn themselves. It is hard to put down a book of Petőfi's poetry, and it is a testament to his great gift that such poets as Leonid Martynov, Nicolai Tikhonov, Samuel Marshak, Boris Pasternak, Nicolai Chukovsky, Vera Inber and Michail Isakovski, all eagerly devoted their hearts and talents to the task of translating Petőfi into Russian.

Petőfi lived his short life surrounded by the heavy atmosphere of the insane revolutionary ideas of his time. While the half-century-old dust was settling on the sad results of the Great French Revolution, Karl Marx and his associates were poisoning the air in Europe with their naive fantasies of "socialist Utopia" without being able to come up, even to this day, with anything better than the «Society of universal equality».

«To take away from the rich and to distribute among the poor!»... It's easy to guess how challenging it really was to present humanity with such a «genius» idea... Oh, how «straightforward» and convenient it appeared. Even Putin, with his billions, a ruler in a country that still struggles to stop coughing up blood after the past horrendous attempts to move toward the «universal equality», even he lately keeps scaring his citizens with the idea of «taking everything away from the rich». Although these days it is hard to say who exactly he would deem to be «rich» when he begins to expropriate and re-distribute.

In 1848, Europe went up in the flames of yet another revolution, and Sándor Petőfi unreservedly joined the followers of the Hungarian uprising led by Lajos Kossuth. On March 15th 1848 he marched with an armed group of students and young workers to the streets of Budapest, seizing the news-printing facilities, and proclaiming the freedom of the press. It was during those days that the «National Chant» was first printed. In his stern verse, aimed at priests, landowners and against the oppression of farmers, Petőfi's call to «send the kings to the gallows» is repeated time and again. His poems continually called for a battle for Hungary's independence from Austria. Such ideas were not to everyone's liking, and that is why, when the ambitious poet tried to win a seat in the Hungarian National Assembly, he was not elected. Petőfi joined the army in the rank of captain, and served in Debrecen. In January of 1848 he wrote to Kossuth, requesting a transfer to the revolutionary field regiments, led by the Polish general, Bem. This is how Petőfi ended up in Transylvania. General Bem promoted Petőfi to major, and soon after he retired...

After the Austro-Hungarian monarchy pleaded for assistance, the Russian Tsar Nicholas I sent troops to suppress the Hungarian uprising. And for more

than a hundred years, Hungarian history textbooks invariably end the passage on Sándor Petőfi's life story with this: "*Sándor Petőfi, forever loyal to the current events, was present, in a civilian role, at the Battle of Segesvár, where he disappeared without a trace on July 31, 1849...*"

In 1955, when Sándor Petőfi's collected works were being published in the Soviet Union, a famous Hungarian poet and a literary critic, Antal Hidas (son—in-law of Béla Kun, a bloodthirsty Hungarian revolutionary), ended his introduction to the book with these words: "*The new Hungarian democratic literature strives to follow in the footsteps of the most progressive literature in the world—the literature of the Soviet Union. In Hungary Petőfi's poetry has become accessible to the wide masses of workers, a basic staple of the people. Petőfi has prevailed, and now his victory will live forever.*"

However, for the time being, let us put aside this historical and theoretical subject, and instead attend to our Russian-Canadian project: at an abandoned Jewish cemetery in Siberia, where we must complete the construction and proceed with the unveiling of the "Shalom" Memorial.

A tight schedule for each day of our visit to Burjatia had already been agreed upon and finalised, and according to it, after the memorial unveiling ceremony on June 17th 2014, a group of construction enthusiasts would begin their ten-day tour of the main places of interest along the Great Tea Road.

Barguzin was not on our list of places to visit, because during the planning stage for our itinerary we determined that our tour bus was too heavy for the road connecting Mysovaya to Barguzin, and in order to get there we would have had to reach Ulan-Ude first, travelling south from Kabansk (approximately 200 kilometres away), and then drive north for another 300 kilometers back to Barguzin. This stumped me, although I really wanted to visit this village, its name consonant with a strong Siberian wind, forever commemorated in a popular folk song «Hey, Barguzin, roll the wave!», which tells a story of a runaway convict, riding in an omul barrel across Lake Baikal towards freedom...

On April 24th 2014, Taisya Chernykh rather unexpectedly forwarded to me an email, which she had received, from a teacher she knew in Barguzin. Attached was a Russian translation of a letter from the President of the World Federation of Hungarians, Mr. Miklós Patrúbány, addressed to the Director of the Buryat Science Centre of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Please see a few excerpts from this letter, below:

"The World Federation of Hungarians greatly values the important role which the Academy of Sciences of the Buryat Republic has played in establishing the truth about the life of our great 19th century poet and revolutionary, Sándor Petőfi (Alexander Stepanovich Petrovich), in particular the last years of his life spent in Siberian exile (in Barguzin)..."

...After working for twenty five years, experts from various countries concluded the identification process of the allegedly discovered remains of Sándor Petőfi, which had, in the past, caused polemics between those who adhered to the theory about the Siberian captivity of the poet, and those who opposed this version of events. Today we know that the opposition was politically motivated. We are aware that in Russia, as well, both President Boris N. Yeltsin and the President of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Yu.N. Osipov, had cancelled the results of the infamous «Moscow International Expert Investigation/ Enquiry», which took place in January of 1990...

The international specialists' most important achievement has been facial reconstruction, by means of contemporary technology, of a man found in grave N7 at the old Barguzin cemetery. When his cranial features were superimposed upon the original daguerreotype image of Petőfi, an identical set of structural measurements was identified, thus revealing to us the face of our great poet revolutionary who had disappeared without a trace on July 31, 1849 during the Battle of Segesvár.

We would like to convey our gratitude for their assistance with our research on the Siberian period of Sándor Petőfi's life to your colleagues—A.I. Burayev (an anthropologist) and A.V. Tivanenko (an archaeologist and historian), as well as to all the other participants of the process of identification of the remains...

Budapest, March 18th 2014.

(Signed, President of the WFH)"

I was dumbfounded by this news, as I had never before heard anything about this matter. I learned about Petőfi from my mama Regina and A. Gidash. It was hard to believe that there could be any squabbles surrounding the dead poet. Besides, I had never before heard of this Association of Hungarians. I urgently forwarded that letter, written in Russian, to our kind and wise friend in Hungary, Éva Orosz, asking for her opinion and hoping that an electronic translation, in combination with her knowledge of Russian, would suffice. Éva responded with this:

—In the media, one finds most contradictory opinions of this Patrubány fellow and of his organization—«The World Federation of Hungarians»... And, in regards to the remains that had been found, it is an old story that had already resurfaced multiple times. I am convinced, that Petőfi died at Segesvár...!

At the same time, Éva sent us a few articles copied from Hungarian magazines, in which the authors, with utmost flagrant cynicism, literally dragged their opponent's ideas through the mud, aggressively ridiculing him and wholly rejecting any fresh evidence on the subject.

Initially I decided to stick with our itinerary without changing anything about our trip, leaving us without a visit to Barguzin, but later I admonished myself: *«what an opportunity! This is about my Hungary! Also, two of our female Hungarian friends said that they would like to join us. We should go!*



Rest in colorful Maksimikha.

People who know much about these issues will share their knowledge with us, and we will understand and learn from them...”

I placed a call to Louise Maltzev to ask her to locate a telephone number of this scientist, Tivanenko. Ravil and Irina Rizvanov warned me that due to the condition of their roads it would be quite onerous to attempt to complete a trip from Kabansk—to Ulan-Ude—to Barguzin in one day, and they promised to arrange an overnight stopover for us, most likely in the village of Maximikha.

A day later I was on the phone, speaking to the historian, Alexei Vasilievich Tivanenko, inviting him to join us on the trip not only to be our auxiliary guide wherever necessary, but most importantly, to tell us as much as he could about the discovery of Petőfi's alleged grave. As it turned out, Tivanenko had just returned from Hungary, where he was hosted by the World Federation of Hungarians. During the month-long visit he travelled to various cities, and gave twenty-two presentations about the remains discovered in Barguzin.

Thus, after a good night's rest and a decent breakfast in a tiny motel in Maximikha, our delegation reached the village of Barguzin early in the morning. Like in many other places, here we were touchingly greeted with the traditional bread-and-salt (a traditional Slavic greeting), and each one of us was fitted with a ritual Buddhist khudak (a blue scarf).



We were met by: Chairman of the Board of the “Barguzin district” Sundarov Zarihto Bato-Munhoevich, schoolgirls Darya Petrenko and Maya Radnaeva, Olennikova Ludmila—Deputy Director of the House of Culture.



Hungarian guests—deputy director of the department of the “Budapest Bank”—Éva Orosz was surprised she received a bowl (piala) of milk...



Member of the tour, the historian of the Buryat Republic—Alexei V. Tivanenko turned in front of a group of the Hungarian flag.

“Barguzin, 20 August 2014. Every day I am so overwhelmingly busy that I have not had the time to enter a single word in my journal about the events that took place on the day of the unveiling of the Memorial, and yet—here we are,



Our first guide—the mayor of the rural settlement “Barguzinsky”—Baluev Alexei Leonidovich. He not only spoke about the dramatic stages of village history, but in conclusion, sincerely sang the Anthem of Barguzin, of which he is the author of the words and melody. These are the words:

Amid the sea of the taiga,
Between the peaks,
It stretches the world splendidly,
Having absorbed all the beauty
of the land of nature,
Barguzin River Valley.

Beautiful, rich native land,
You are our homeland by right,
We praise you from Kuitun steppe,
Before the surface of St Baikal Lake.



already in Barguzin! Today is Friday. After a day filled with amazing excursions and surprising discoveries, we have just returned after an evening organized in our honour, the best ever «Shabbat». This is how the Jews of Burjatia call a festive communal meal, when they gather together to greet Sabbath...

When we were on our way to this dinner at a cafeteria we received some exciting news. Taisya's cellphone rang and her husband Peter reported from Mysovaya:

—It's Friday... I went to the cemetery to water the flowers [planted] at the Memorial, and discovered that we had guests—three small groups of young Jew-

ish people... “We came here to visit our ancestors!”—they told me. What a surprise...! And soon after two more groups arrived... And all of them perambulated the cemetery, walking only along the cleared path!!

Next I would like to describe our Shabbat evening in greater detail. There is only a small number of Jews living in the village today, as many members of the community started to move away immediately after the Bolsheviks came to power. The synagogue in Barguzin was demolished back in 1923... Community affairs are conducted through the Jewish Cultural Club «Unity», established under the aegis of a district cultural centre. Nina Amranovna Vovilina has led this club for many years. By the way, that greeting ceremony with bread and salt was organized by one of the executive members of this club, Lyudmila Olennikova. The villagers used to receive humanitarian assistance (distributed in Russia by an international or-



The school museum of Barguzin kept Torah scrolls from the former synagogue of the city, demolished in 1923.

ganization «JOINT» [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)]) via the Jewish Community in Ulan-Ude. However, two years ago they were made fully autonomous, and are known today as the Jewish Community of Barguzin Village, Buryat Republic. Evgeni Viktorovich Korjevsky is the Chairman of the community.

Traditionally members of Ulan-Ude's community celebrate the Jewish holidays together, and also strive to gather all interested participants for weekly Shabbat services. In Barguzin, however, members of community usually only get together for major holidays.

When Taisya Chernyhh informed them that Barguzin had been added to our itinerary, village community members proposed to hold a joint ceremony with the Ulan-Ude community in honour of our visit.

A joint event was being organized for the first time, and the idea was met with much enthusiasm among all of the participants.

The personnel at the «Bargudjin», cafeteria where our event was held, did their absolute best to accommodate the guests. A close friend of the Barguzin community, Buryat woman, Valentina Tapkhayeva, set up the menu for our dinner. She had been instructed in advance on which dishes to choose and how to prepare them, and she negotiated all the details with the chefs at the cafeteria.



Shabbat in Barguzin. Olga Rusinov says the Bible portion for the upcoming Sabbath.

Anna Amazgayeva was the organizer of the Ulan-Ude group.

Alexander Paley brought over his entire trove of bottled kosher grape juice. Approximately thirty people sat down as good friends behind two long tables—Jews, Russians, Burjats and Hungarians.

Olga Rusinova enthusiastically related to everyone the contents of that week's Torah chapter. I recited the blessing over a glass of wine. Then, according to the ritual, I rinsed my hands again and sliced up a big round challah. Before dessert, I described to everyone how such evenings are traditionally conducted by religious families in Toronto. We sang several songs together. It was an unforgettable evening! Smiling, we thanked each other as we said our good byes."

Vladimir Rott is preparing to read the blessing over the wine..



I would like to share with you a few more stories about the Jews of Barguzin. In the Israeli town of Petah-Tikvah lives a former classmate of Iya's from Ulan-Ude—her good friend—Fanya (Feiga) Novomeyskaya, who is also now in her late seventies... Over the years I often heard Iya relay Fanya's dramatic family history, how she brought her elderly and frail mother over to Israel at an already very advanced age, and how she lived to be 102 years old.



Novomeysky Feiga and her husband Simon. Petah Tikva, Israel, 2013.

Only in Israel Fanya was able to confide in us: *“As a schoolgirl, I often heard people say that Jews just sat it out in Tashkent during the war...But my two brothers—Rahmil and Moses—were killed at the frontlines. An official military death notice for my eldest brother arrived by mail in 1942. My eighteen-year old brother Moses went missing in action right after he was mobilised”*.

Iya would like to add to this, that although the two girls entered the same 1st grade in 1945 and were neighbours, living on the same street, Iya never heard Fanya utter a single word about her slain brothers...

For many years Fanya continuously sent inquiries to the Soviet Ministry of Defence, trying in vain to get more information about the fate of her missing brother. Only two weeks prior to her mother's death in Israel Fanya received an answer, learning that her brother perished during the first month of war. To this day Fanya is feeling remorseful for sharing this news with her mother. Blind and nearly deaf Revekka Rahmilovna said ruefully: *“I really hope that he died instantly... without suffering”*.

Back in their days as a young couple, Revecca Rahmilovna—then a student at the Tomsk Medical University, and her husband, Vitaliy Moiseyevitch—a law student at Tomsk University, had to abandon their studies interrupted by the events of the Bolshevik revolution. Due to the persecution on the basis of their

«higher social class» background, not only did they lose their young child, but they were also forced to flee to Barguzin, join the family, where Vitally Moiseyevitch managed to get a job as bookkeeper... When most of Moshe Novomeyski's family departed for Palestine, our not-yet-fully educated protagonists moved to Ulan-Ude where they began a new life teaching high school mathematics. Vitaliy Moiseyevich became known as the best math teacher in town.

Whenever we meet and speak with Fanya about her family, she always humbly shares with us something about her famous ancestors—the Jewish family of the Novomeyski's—who started out in Siberia, in the ostrog [a rural village, encampment for political prisoners] of Barguzin.

During the uprising of 1830-31 in Poland, a tragic attempt by the Poles to yet again liberate their country from a foreign yoke, Fanya's great-grandfather Haykel L. Novomeisky was arrested in a small town of Novo Miasto (hence—the last name of the family) for aiding and hiding the insurgents.

The captured rebels, her great-grandfather among them, were initially kept in various Russian prisons for several months and then sent into exile in Eastern Siberia. All prisoners, hailing from every part of the country, were gathered in Moscow and placed into bands of several hundred each. From Moscow to Barguzin—a distance of six thousand kilometers—the exiles walked on foot. After every 20–25 kilometers they were corralled into a transit prison or a fortress. Their slog lasted almost four years. Only those who were sick got to travel in the drawn carts, and everyone else had to make it on foot. They walked for two days, and rested on the third. Their ration was only 10 kopecks a day, each. With this money the exiles bought their own food during the overnight stopovers.

In order to prevent young Jews from settling down in Siberia, their exile conditions were made particularly harsh, in accordance with the special rules written for that specific purpose.

For instance, according to these rules, the wives of exiled Jews were allowed to follow their husbands in the same manner as the wives of Russian and Polish exiles were; however, when a Jewish woman was exiled, her husband was not allowed to follow her. Even harsher still, were the rules governing the children of exiled Jews. Women of every creed and ethnicity were permitted to take their children into exile with them—but Jewish women were not, instead they were separated from their kids. A Jewish man followed by his wife was allowed to take with him his sons—those who were five years old or younger, as well as his daughters that were still under ten were permitted to join the parent. At that time, the Novomeisky's only son was eleven; in Moscow they were split up, and the boy was sent back into the Pale together with the other Jewish children also separated from their exiled parents. Only half a century later, after numerous petitions, he would be allowed to visit Barguzin, and he came with his own thirty-year-old son, but he was not able to see his mother alive again...

The grandfather's decedents also carved for themselves a line in the history books, with their own hard work and talents.

A house on the former 3rd street (today it is Dzerjinsky Street), where the would-be gold mining industrialist Haykel Novomeiski lived with his family, still exists in Barguzin. In 1860 he bought it from the widow of the late Decembrist, M. Kiuhelbecker. After the Soviet regime was firmly established, this building was given away to the local Department of Education, later it was turned into an orphanage, and then it became a childcare facility.

Haykel's son, Abram Novomeisky, grew his business in the 19th century, and travelled a long way from being a small-scale leaseholder of one auriferous plot, to owing approximately ten gold mines in the Baikal region. Not only was he a successful businessman, an innovator in the field of gold mining technological processes, but he was also a popular and well-respected patron to the residents of the Barguzin valley. Abram Novomeisky died in the summer of 1916, not an old man at sixty-three, and still full of energy. His death was completely absurd. One day, when he was out inspecting his gold mines on horseback, he developed a blister on his buttock. A field doctor was summoned straight from the hospital where he was treating some infectious patients. He applied an ointment to the blister, and probably accidentally contaminated the wound. The gold industrialist felt worse, and passed away in a couple of hours.

This death happened hundreds of kilometers away from Barguzin, in a place that could only be reached after three or four days of riding. There was no



cart road to take the body back to the village. His sons temporarily buried their father in the permafrost, in a metal coffin, and only after the rivers froze over they were able to take him back to Barguzin. In a nearby village of Nesterikha Abram Haykelivich had built a trade school for about a hundred local kids. When the villagers came out to meet the funeral procession, they took the coffin off the sleigh and carried it for seven kilometers, all the way to Barguzin. The school building did not survive to our days.

There were three daughters and three sons in the Abram Novomeisky family. One of the sons—Moshe Novomeisky, after graduating from the Irkutsk Technical School in 1893, continued his education in Germany at a mining academy, which was the best in the world at that time. During his studies Moshe had a six-week internship at the goldmines in Hungary. After five years he was awarded a mining engineer's qualification, and returned to Barguzin to carry on with his father's business. Moshe ordered new equipment from England, and in 1914 he launched the very first in Trans Baikal the dredging-machine and gold sand separator, which worked well for several years until confiscated by the Bolsheviks. When it became clear that the Russian borders were about to get sealed, Novomeisky decided to leave everything and, in the early 1920's, traveled to Palestine via Vladivostok, Mongolia and China. The indomitable Siberian, having overcome the toughest desert conditions, and all the hurdles and endless rejections by the British government, after eight years of fighting for concessions—authorisations to mine for bromine and potassium—was finally able to begin the development of the natural treasures of the Dead Sea, rendering it into a *vital sea for Israel*.

Let us continue on with the tour of Barguzin. In the village high school we were surprised by an unforgettable Historical museum. We were struck not only by the size of the rooms, but also by the quality of the exhibits and the depth of the commentaries. Everything looked amazing as the organizer and the director of the museum, a teacher—Tatyana S. Filippova—enthusiastically talked about the history of first a prison, then a town, and finally, after 1927—a village of Barguzin... Thanks to her relating the history of the place to us we felt like we were the actual guests in the homes and families of the Decembrists, who, in 1826, got exiled for many years of hard labour in the prisons of Eastern Siberia.

That day our calendar was showing Friday, June 20, 2014. The rest of our tour of the school museum accompanied by a heart-felt story told by Tatyana Filippova, was a veritable endless dive «under the water...» or maybe—«into the maelstrom...» but, hopefully, not to the bottom... Because today is April 12, 2015, and it means that 10 months have already passed, but the dictatorship arbitrariness, and arrogance of the authorities... basically their literal treachery against everyone who wishes to somehow live a normal life is still prevailing in

this world with no end, and leaving no hope... And this is in reference to the story, which Tatyana Filippova started to relate to us about the sad fate of the legendary Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi; and about the international anthropological expedition of 1989 that discovered in Barguzin the buried remains of the poet; and about the limits of logic of either overt or covert dictatorships.

The impact of the information we were receiving was magnified by the fact that Professor Tivanenko—a participant of that expedition—was speaking alongside Filippova. But that's not all. Striving to identify those who were buried in the old Jewish cemetery in Mysovaya, Taisija Chernyh found the name of Aaron Jakovljevic Barbas (1846—1921), written on a granite slab. After his great-grandson—Oleg Barbas, an Israeli, found out about this, he did not hesitate to fly to Russia to join our group. Oleg even brought along a unique gift for our Memorial—a silver-plated jug—to serve as a tzedaka / moneybox for donations to be raised and finance the security measures for the Memorial.

Oleg was a native of Barguzin. It turned out that he was a professional «digger» for archaeological and anthropological expeditions, and that he also



From this shot, you can judge just how enriched by knowledge, joy and hope for the respectful the human burial of the remains of the great poet Sándor Petőfi, we came out of a unique museum in the remote Siberian village—Barguzin. We will witness the triumph of Humanity! In the center, long beads around her neck, stands Tatyana Filippova—soul and director of the Petőfi Museum in Barguzin. On the left, in a white shirt—Professor Alexey Tivanenko, front, with white bag in his hand,—Oleg Barbas.

worked in the same expedition that dug out Petőfi, and moreover, he kept a daily diary of excavations, which he had stored in Israel.

For more than an hour all three of our «experts» together enriched our knowledge about the life of Sándor Petőfi, about his legendary death, and most importantly, the moral obligation of the Hungarian nation as well as of all the admirers of the great poet to give him a dignified funeral, and to bury his remains in his home soil—in Hungary. Éva Orosz—a Hungarian member of our delegation—after our tour of Barguzin made the following confession to me when we were back in our bus: «Well, well... Petőfi...! Now I am unsure, myself...»



Cemetery in Barguzin. Here is the grave in which, from 1856 until 1986, lay the remains of the great poet of Hungary. Pillar left the expedition in 1986. The photo shows two of today's grave guardian angels: Tatyana Filippova (right) and Leonid Budunov (in plaid shirt with a camera).

Dear reader! From this moment on, I will be faced with an incredible task: in the most succinct way possible, brushing aside all those details and speculations that have already been regurgitated by the press, I must share with you all the information and ideas that have literally overwhelmed me over the last six months. It's incredible to be writing this today, on April 26, 2015, and to be feeling such a singularly frightening concern: what will tomorrow bring, into what sort of mire will the current rulers plunge my poor Hungary? Things are changing by the hour. For now the lunacy is winning...! Dear G-d! Do not let a tragedy happen!



Pointing to the house, Tatyana Filippova said: "And in this house even today live distant relatives of Sándor Petőfi."

Let's put aside for a moment a «comfortable legend» about Sándor Petőfi's «disappearance» during the Battle of Segesvár. Of course, his wife Julia did not find her husband neither among the wounded, nor among the dead. There is no doubt that the Russian army interred dead quickly... But it wasn't for a dead man that the Austrian government offered a reward... The reader will find numerous different sources and witness testimony... I will try to briefly share the facts known to me.

Sadly, I realize that the years of the «Sovietisation» of Hungary have fostered a special group of historians in the country. A few of them have been lecturing with confidence that «the Russians never transferred their prisoners of war to Siberia...» And at the same time, the archives of Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude, and Chita contain volumes of correspondence between the Tsarist government on one hand and the provincial, county and township levels of government on the other—about the impending arrival of «the subjects of the Austrian Empire» that rebelled against the government, and had been sentenced by a court martial «for participation in the insurgency», and about determinations regarding detainment camps for these «state criminals», as well as about the construction of two Protestant churches for them in Nerchinsk and Petrovsky Zavod...

Petőfi was wounded in the battle of Shegesvar, and they were hunting him down... He was able to hide his true identity forever under the name of «Petrovich». «Why didn't he write...? But to whom, and how, could he write?! Together with the other Hungarian prisoners of war, he was chained, and sent on foot to Tomsk; from there, prisoners that were the most exhausted by harsh winter cold were transported to Trans-Baikal in horse-drawn sleighs... In Barguzin prisoners were housed with the local residents. Alexander Petrovich, and his guards, was destined to live in the house of the postal superintendent, where he soon fell for his host's sister—Anna Kuznetsova, with whom he would father a son, Alexander.

Anna's sister was married to Michael Küchelbecker, one of the Decembrists, who had been living in Barguzin for a long time and who befriended Petrovich.

The most valuable information about Alexander Petrovich's life in Barguzin had been gathered by Professor Lazar Efimovich Eliasov—a famous Eastern Siberian folklore researcher, a native of Barguzin, who worked at the Buryat branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. As he was gathering materials for his research, Professor Eliasov was not able to see at first that Alexander Petrovich and Sándor Petőfi—were one and the same person. In 1926, the professor was lucky enough to meet a couple of long-time Barguzin residents—a brother and sister Morokovs, who happened to know Petrovich personally. Being already of a very advanced age, they were able to remember some of the most interesting details from the life of the poet.

Pavel Innokentjevich Morokov, born in 1836, recalled that a settler who's first name was Zander (a more convenient way for Buryat-Mongols to pronounce the name of Sándor) was also called Petrovich (or Petrovan), and that *"he hailed from some European «kingdom of Frantz». He was a jack-of-all-trades: a locksmith, a carpenter, he could repair locks and samovars, treated people with medicines, which he prepared himself from local herbs. On Saturdays, he organized theatrical performances in the large houses of the wealthy, acted in plays, read his own poems, and was also good at painting. He belonged to an unfamiliar Christian faith, and although he wasn't on friendly terms with the orthodox priests, he was not a blasphemer. His complexion was «tanned», i.e. swarthy, and he spoke with an accent, and thus talked little."*

Stories related by Maria Inokentyevna Morokova, born in 1841, shed more light on the events in Petrovich's previous life, in Hungary, and were shared with her under an oath of secrecy by her friend Maria Kuznetsova, the poet's wife. From her L.I. Eliasov heard that *«Petrovich and M. Küchelbecker were engaged in the restoration of icons, often went on foot around the neighbourhood, but that a wound on his leg would not allow a «mystery man» to climb up the mountain. It followed from Maria's story that Petrovich not only came from an «overseas» state of «King Franz», but that he was also a leader of an insurgent people there. The anxious king called in the troops of the Russian tsar, «Nikolka». After a fierce battle, the dead fighters from Petrovich's «rebel army» were buried along with their commander in a common grave, but a Russian soldier noticed that Petrovich was only unconscious and alive, not dead. He pulled his body out from the grave, and put him down on the thick grass. When the wounded man came to and looked around, he saw nearby a fresh mound above the mass grave of his comrades"*.

The Orthodox Church of Transfiguration in Barguzin did not recognize a marriage between another faith follower Alexander Petrovich and Maria Kuznetsova, and so their son who was only allowed to take his mother's surname. Thus he came to be Alexander Kuznetsov. The young family had to move, and settled in the village of Illsunsk, located a few dozen

kilometers to the east of Barguzin, and that's where the poet died of tuberculosis in May 1856, at the age of 33 years. A Buryat Lama of Illsunsuk did not allow the «sacred Buddhist land to be desecrated with the foreigner's remains», and so the villagers buried Alexander Petrovich just outside the enclosure of the Jewish cemetery in Barguzin, where, later, they also began to bury the dead «foreigners/aliens» people and those who were not Russian Orthodox...

Leafing through Hungarian magazines and newspapers published between 1850 and up to the time when socialist regime collapsed in the late 1980s, to my surprise, I noticed that each year Hungarian newspapers turned out at least 3-4 articles with new information (new speculations) about the Great Poet's fate, or about his interment. For me, this was the most convincing proof of the unfettering love Hungarians have for Sándor Petőfi. It is this kind of Great Love that has the power to breathe life even into a dead man. When you love deeply, believe endlessly, you are ready to give all of yourself to Him.

Now read, and feel this veritable love cry of another Hungarian, a famous writer and poet, Jókai Mór, to his friend:

«An immortal man—his body in ashes, and yet he invigorates his nation and he travels around the learned world; he has fallen silent forever, yet with his powerful voice he still proclaims the glory, the liberty and the noble name of the Hungarian nation!»

But the Hungarian nation is also grateful to the deceased poet, for his poetry—the decoration of the soul of the people, his name in the pantheon of glory. Our Nation mentions his name with awe among the first, collects sacrificial pennies to erect a monument to him, plants greening trees on his grave and make pilgrimages to it.

—Did Petőfi really die? Does he really ask for a statue and the monument for his ashes? Is he really there—under the four lime trees—listening to the pilgrims, who are singing hymns?

—Who saw him fall?

According to my sources, there were three person who described the circumstances, and the location, where he was last seen by a Hungarian man who knew him. All three of these reports ended similarly: that the Cossacks pursuing Petőfi must have caught up with him, and that the witness escaped.

So there are just two possibilities left: either the squad that was chasing after him killed him, or they captured him.

If he was killed, then he certainly might be resting in the same common grave where the heroic martyrs of that fateful day were buried, and are lying, piled up on top of one another.

And what if he was captured?

I have suffered many a sleepless night, pondering this thought.

Perhaps he was taken into Russian captivity—thousands and thousands of miles away—into the depths of Siberia. Perhaps even now he is lamenting the

fate of his country in the snowy fields of Kamchatka; perhaps, somewhere near one of the fort lines protecting the silent stillness of Volhinsk forests, he can hear the sound of their shackles? Maybe he is straining his back, under the weight of exhausting labour, among the other victims, deep in the lead mines of the Ural?

Is it not possible?

Aren't some other people, our acquaintances, still alive—after being captured at the same time as Petőfi, and deported deep into Russia? Take an old friend of mine—a former adjutant to General Bem—he was seized by the Russians, but escaped deportation to Siberia en route, thanks to a series of miracles. He is a brother of one of the Debrecen members of our parliament.

Now let's add to this Petőfi's obstinate and passionate nature, his inability to submit to coercion... he could never fake being meek and subdued; what could happen to him if he has suffered a plight of this kind?

It's been so long, and we have not heard a sound!

But is it possible for the sighs of a prisoner who has been dying for years, to be heard from the depths of the mine? Is there a way for him to let us know that he is alive? Could he, who was captured one night in one of the most regal capitals, and deported while he was still so youthful—could he have died? Or could he only return back to his family, his hair grey and long after he had been forgotten, once a new ruler comes to power?

Did it not happen, here, just a few weeks ago, when a political prisoner of 1848 was located alive in a fortress prison in Austria and released on pardon, while his father, mother, brothers and sisters thought he was dead!

And are there no political prisoners today, buried in the same Austrian prisons, their weeping brothers and wives, in tattered rags looking for them, yet without a clue as to how to locate their family? Perhaps the coronation day of the King will return them to the world?

But if this is happening around us, could it not have happened in Russia as well?

Does not Petőfi deserve that we raise an issue of finding him, even if only to bring peace to our own souls?

When the brave explorer Franklin and his companions perished amidst the ices of the Arctic Ocean, the valiant British nation sent one expedition after another, to find their traces; year after year Britain spent huge sums to rescue the heroes, who were considered to be alive until their bones and the last scrap of their clothing had been gathered. And will Hungary, for the sake of its celebrated hero, ask at least a single question?

Where should we look?

First of all, here at home.

If Petőfi died here, the people who buried him should have preserved some sort of memory about him. During my trip to Transylvania, Romanian peasants showed me some fragments of clothing, rings and other items that Pál Vasvári had on him when he died at the mountain pass of Bihar. These relics have been preserved with reverence.

And Petőfi, too, had similarly identifiable relics: especially his sword and scabbard, which was totally unique, and no other soldier carried ones like that. About his sword: in jest it was said to be not a sword, but—a guillotine. Even if nothing else did, the sheath should have survived, because it was not valuable, however, the artisan who made it, in Pest, certainly would have recognized it. It is likely that Petőfi probably kept notes. On the basis of these and other objects which he carried with him, and which could not have disappeared without a trace, it should be possible to verify whether his bright life really ended on that battlefield.

I think it would be useful if the Commission for the construction of the monument to Petőfi could offer a decent sum of money as a reward to anyone able to present compelling evidence that the poet was still alive. An announcement by the Defense Ministry should be disseminated in the villages, especially in the vicinity of Segesvár.

And if such an appeal, along with the promised reward, does not lead us towards the right trail, then it will be the duty of the Hungarian government—to use their connections and to approach the Russian government with the request for information. First of all, the Hungarian government needs to establish that there are no prisoners of war of Hungarian origin in Russia, and secondly, if there are, whether they have, among the prisoners, any participants of the battle of 1849. Then we should try to find out who, specifically, was the commanding officer of that cavalry unit, which allegedly tracked Petőfi? We would need to question that man as to whether or not Petőfi could have been captured alive.

A description of his personal belongings is easy, for the simple reason that—as had been noted, by others—he was opposed to the rules governing the military uniforms. For example, not wearing a tie set him apart from all the other commanding officers. And finally, was any such person taken into the depths of Russia? Is it possible that he is still there now?

This would be the least that we could do for the sake of the man we call the pride of our nation.

Or must we wait for Remenyi to go on a tour of Russia with his violin, and to open doors to the diplomats and in the name of our Hungarian nation ask them questions about Petőfi?»

What is it, if not a decisive, intelligent, visionary plan for action?

For decades those Hungarian prisoners of war, who by their fate got a chance to return to their homeland from Siberia, used muted voices and whispers to share a story they had overheard while in captivity—that somewhere in Trans-Baikal there is a grave of a prisoner of war, a poet, Alexander Petrovic... A variety of newspapers responded to the news, however a thick veil of «Alexander Petrovic» safeguarded the secret of «Sándor Petőfi». I think that back home, the actual name of the poet was neither well remembered nor con-



Ferenc Schwiegel in Siberian captivity (sitting next to the sign. Verhne-Udinsk (Ulan—Ude), 1916.



Ferenc Schwiegel before joining the army.

sidered important, and while in captivity, he tried to spend his days in the safety of living «in a shadow»...

The biggest riot in Hungarian literature was caused by the message from a Hungarian soldier during World War I, Franz Shvigel, who managed to return from Siberian exile, and who published in the newspapers a photo of a gravestone, discovered in Trans-Baikal, with the following inscription:

**«Alexander Stepanovich
PETROVICH, Major.
Hungarian Major and poet,
died in Illsuns—Asia –
May of 1856”**

Next to the photo of the grave, Petőfi's 1853 poem was also published, along with his signature.

As the years flew by, Hungary was enduring revolutions, kings, and wars. Petőfi's fate was not its top priority, and in 1945, the unfortunate country became consumed, seemingly forever, by brutal Stalinism. The Soviet-style «national security»—a system of total surveillance, lawlessness and arrests—was immediately set up in the country.

Under the new regime, freshly installed public servants of all ranks worked tirelessly to ensure that not



Photo of grave of Alexander Petrovich, brought from Siberia by Ferenc Schwiegel who was in Russian captivity during the First World War.

even the slightest suspicion would slip through about the inferiority of the Soviet Union, the harbinger of a «happy future» to the occupied countries of Eastern Europe. Represented by the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, the local communists shut down attempts to research Petőfi's possible stay in Siberia several times as «anti-Soviet...»

At the same time, a new ideology—«Soviet-style thinking»—was being swiftly planted in the brains of the members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, who completely pulled back from the search for Petőfi with the advent of Stalinism.

As part of my research, I have just been shown a confidential list with the names of twelve members of the Academy who for many years were tasked with following the orders of a secret KGB department appointed to oversee this «pantheon of science».

Among the former Soviet citizens we can hardly find someone who had never been invited to the ubiquitous «Department N1» (KGB overseers where unfamiliar, freshly shaven men in civilian clothes politely welcomed, issued no orders, and only asked, confidentially, to “*listen to the conversations of colleagues in order to prevent provocations...*” Promising that in a couple of weeks, the citizen would be invited to come back again...

Yet Hungary needed Sándor Petőfi. People read, memorized, lived his poetry, however any mention of his remains being forgotten somewhere in Siberia was always instantly suppressed: “*How dare we offend our Soviet comrades...?*”

But the truth can't be hidden forever...

In 1968, the top experts in the history and regional studies of Siberia and Trans-Baikal gathered at the Irkutsk University for a conference, which included a writer A. A. Hershkowitz, and a Hungarian writer, Gyula Csák. All the scientists, without exception, stated at the time that they had never heard about “*the presumed stay of the famous Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi in the Trans-Baikal region*». They were being earnest, because no one could conceive that Petrovich and Petőfi—were one person.

Professor A.B.Gurevich, a local historian, *born* in Barguzin, recalled how he and his father often came to the Jewish cemetery to visit the grave of his grandfather. Leaning against the fence, he listened to the words of his father, who pointed to the grave of a «foreigner» buried next to the fence: “*Your grandfather was exiled to Siberia from Ukraine... And the birthplace of this man was even further... in Europe!*” In 1970, professor A.B.Gurevich wrote to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, expressing his views in a letter: “*Sándor Petőfi lived in exile in Barguzin from 1851 to 1856, until his death*”.

The answer this Siberian scientist received from a Hungarian academician, Sándor Lukácsy, was an incontestable remonstrance: “*Petőfi was killed in the Battle of Segesvár*”.

In the same year, professor L.E. Eliasov handed to the Hungarian Academy a folder, filled with documents he had gathered on the life of Petrovich in Siberia, mainly the recollections of the Morokov's that he had himself recorded. In May of 1972, the very same Sándor Lukácsy responded: *"These are mere legends, because Russians took no prisoners to Siberia; Petőfi died in battle July 31, 1849, near Segesvár."*

The first time the new star above the name of Petőfi was lit, was by a Transcarpathian scientist, Vasily Vasilyevich Pagirya, who stumbled upon a scrapbook with clippings from the newspapers published for those Hungarian POW's during World War I who ended up in the camps in Siberia. There he found some interesting materials on the tomb of the Hungarian poet and Major, Alexander Petrovich, in the village of Barguzin.

Of course, in 1984, V.V. Pagirya was not able to publish in Hungary his short article «Truth or legend of Sándor Petőfi», but he managed to get it into an Irkutsk—based magazine, «Siberia». Then, the editorial board of the magazine «Baikal», published in Ulan-Ude, became interested in Pagiri's materials, and referred them to the Buryat regional specialists A.V. Tivanenko and E.V.Demin. Thus began the practical search for traces of Petőfi in Siberia.

As a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev initially liked the idea of returning to Hungarians the remains of their national hero. The leader's plan quickly spread down the chain of command to the bureaucrats that began to ponder the stratagems for such an event. However, by then, Hungary became one of the first countries in the Soviet bloc to conclude the socialist experiments in the economy, and turned to the West, in order to develop private enterprise. This was not to the liking of the Soviet leadership, whose good intentions immediately evaporated, and the «chain of command» had to urgently reconsider the whole plan, which affected the fate of Sándor Petőfi, full of so many twists and surprises.

1985. The Soviet Ambassador in Hungary is still thinking constructively in regards to the Hungarians taking steps towards sending a search expedition to Siberia... when someone named Sándor Fekete literally storms into to his office and shouts hysterically at him, *«What do you think you are doing?!? If you find Petőfi, there will be a new revolution here! A new 1956!! [the year when the Hungarian anti-Soviet uprising took place]...»*

Professor A.V.Tivanenko recalls another «compelling reason» for banning the search for the remains of the great poet: *«In 1987, we visited Hungary, and were received at the Academy of Sciences and at the Central Committee of Hungarian Socialist Workers Party. At the time, the principal specialists in «Petőfi-oeuvre»—academicians J. Kiss and S. Fekete, as well as the party leaders, explained to us with the utmost frankness why they did not support the search. They said: "For a century and a half Hungarians have been under the impression that Petőfi died a heroic death at the barricades of the revolution, and it would be undesirable to persuade them otherwise.»*

Still, in 1987 the first Hungarian expedition that included Hungarian filmmaker from the film studio «Mafilm», András Balajthy and his assistant, László Szirti, visited Barguzin. The former, recalls professor A.V.Tivanenko, proved to be a pushy and forceful man, who declared to the Siberians that he wished to be the sole discoverer of the tomb of the Great Hungarian. At that time the all-powerful Soviet intelligence services did not have a ban imposed on free access to the State archives, and Balajthy boasted that before coming to Siberia he had already worked at the historical archive of the Soviet military, where he had seen a file on General Bem, with lists of prisoners of war captured by the Russian army. He was convinced that, among 1500 names, he found the name of Alexander Stepanovich Petrovich... Upon his return to Hungary, Balajthy announced that, having secured the support of Siberian scientists, he was ready to begin the excavation of the grave. Edith Kéri—a well-known journalist, an active supporter of the search for the remains of Petőfi—in pursuit of a sponsor for this expedition, approached a number of well-known compatriots: George Soros, Ernő Rubik, and others. She received a positive response to her request, though without any serious interest, from Ferenc Morvai, the owner of the Hungarian company «Morvai Kazán Magyarország Kft.», a successful water-heater (boilers) production company with numerous locations across the country.

Ferenc Morvai recalled his initial scepticism towards allocating funds for such an ambiguous project. But A.Balajthy took him with a «full-frontal attack»—for several days he persistently sat on the bench located just opposite the entrance to the «boilermaker's» (as he is often called in Hungary) house, in the hope of securing his financial support for the planned excavation. He finally got Morvai to agree, on—the condition that first he would go with Balajthy to Buryatia...

This was upsetting to Balajthy who had been dreaming about his own personal success, but he had no other choice. In December 1988 they arrived in Siberia. Morvai was able to find understanding and support with the government of Buryatia. In Barguzin they met with regional officials and they were able to obtain consent to conduct excavations at the cemetery the following summer. Then, due to his excessive alcohol dependence, Balajthy's activity in this field came to a full stop...

In early 1989 Ferenc Morvai returned from his trip to Ulan-Ude and Barguzin, and began organizing a group that would have to complete the search for Petőfi's possible remains in Siberia. State Minister Imre Pozsgay carefully heeded to the proposal made by the businessman, and also provided a lot of support, on many different levels. Thus was born an active organization—«Committee Megamorv-Petőfi», consisting of 12 members, who agreed to take part in its work. Committee members elected Imre Pozsgay

as Chairman of the Committee, and Ferenc Morvai as his deputy. The Committee included archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, doctors, writers and journalists.

István Kiszely—an outstanding Hungarian anthropologist well known outside the country, a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences—agreed to become a member of the Committee. In considering the problems of the upcoming expedition, Kiszely suggested to Ferenc Morvai that, in view of the huge importance of the results of the possible findings and conclusions, he doubted that the authority of his expert opinion alone would suffice, and therefore he strongly advised to include in the expedition several well-known anthropologists from other countries.

And that is when Ferenc Morvai's first trip to the United States and Switzerland appeared on the horizon. He recalls with a smile:

—This was my first visit to America. Right away I got incredibly lucky. In New York, Erzsébet Spéter instantly took me under her wings. This famous American of Hungarian origin—a very wealthy and generous patron of the arts, who for many years supported various charitable projects as well as private individuals in Hungary and other countries. She agreed to help me find the right American specialists for the expedition to Barguzin. Immediately she noticed—(although I do not particularly care to hide my origins)—that I came from a poor rural family, where during the winter «instead of the radiator we had the side of our cow standing in the house...»

One evening Erzsébet wanted to introduce me to the then New York City Mayor Edward Koch... I remember as we sat down at a restaurant table in a high-rise hotel she owned on 54th Street in Manhattan, the waiters were gracefully putting fine dishes in front of us, when she suddenly exclaimed, «Wait, do not touch anything... We're going to go to the reception with the mayor Koch, and you do not even know in which hand it is necessary to hold your fork...!» And then she asked the waiter to set in front of me all the cutlery, in the correct order, and to demonstrate to me what to do with it, and what to use for cake, butter, and jam... She sat opposite me and smiled benevolently, as I carefully tried to master «the new way of life».

With Erzsébet Spéter's help Ferenc Morvai met two famous American anthropologists: Bruce Latimer—professor, Director of the Museum of Natural Sciences in Cleveland, and Clyde Simpson—an anthropologist and mathematician, who both agreed to take part in the expedition of Megamorv-Petőfi. On their way to Siberia, the Americans made a stopover in Budapest for a few days, where at the Historical Museum they were able to take physical measurements of an officer's jacket once owned by Sándor Petőfi, and now stored there. They were also surprised by a small strand of the actual hair belonging to Sándor Petőfi, once donated to the museum by the poet's wife, and now present among the museum exhibits.

On July 13th, 1989, having travelled 8,000 kilometers away from their country, the 23 members of Hungarian expedition «Megamorv—Petőfi», headed by Deputy Chairman of the Petőfi—Megamorv Committee—Ferenc Morvai, arrived in Ulan-Ude. At the airport they were met by official representatives from Buryatia, as well as by a group of Soviet specialists who had also joined the expedition. After exciting greetings, handshakes and introductions, they left in a large rented bus and headed to north Buryatia, 300 kilometers away, to the village of Barguzin.

The expedition included anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, journalists, translators... Hungarian anthropologist István Kiszely became the scientific leader of the expedition. To help him, in addition to the two scientists from the United States, Alex Burayev from St. Petersburg arrived—a Soviet anthropologist, born in Buryatia. In Hungary, at the last moment, Lajos Kardos was also included—a radio operator from Kecskemét, who had to report three times a day in short-wave communication to his homeland on the results of the excavations.

There are quite a lot of objective publications describing this expedition in great detail, including the excavation of the graves in Barguzin, and the results of the study of the discovered remains, and thus I would like to only tell the story of the «pitfalls» that were still on the way of the unfolding sad fate of the Great Sándor Petőfi...



During the excavation the majority of the pictures are made by L.P.Budunov. Leonid Budunov shows photographs to Bazil Pagirya and Alexei Tivanenko. Barguzin, July 1989.



From left to right: Alexey Buraev—the anthropologist from Buryatia, Klayd Simpson—an anthropologist from the US; with a notebook is Oleg Barbas; squatting-sitting Tatyana Filipova; in the pit is Bruce Latimer—an anthropologist from the US. July 1989.

Yuri Davidovich Winokur, a well-known Soviet historian, ethnographer working in Trans-Baikal, who was born and raised in Barguzin, came from Moscow to help the expedition to find the grave at the abandoned cemetery. Using his tips, on July 17, the expedition uncovered grave №5 and found the remains of Decembrist Mikhail Kuchelbecker... Right next to it, Yu.D.Vinokur stuck in the ground a wooden stake, and said, «Dig here!» His tip was successful, but not very accurate, and it became necessary to partially excavate several neighbouring tombs before the archaeologists were able to lay bare before them a skull with the famous «wolf



*The remains of Sándor Petöfi.
Barguzin. July 1989.*

fang»—a sticking forward tooth... It was the first sign of the remains of Sándor Petőfi!

Yes, burial place—grave №7—was discovered on July 17, 1989, but it would take at least another three to four days before it would be possible to finish the excavations, to sift and remove every handful of earth with extra care, to secure and photograph each little bone emerging out of the ground, cleaning it with soft brushes, hands constantly quivering, careful not to make a mistake during any of the hundreds of manipulations performed. Members of the expedition were working hard, doing their job with enthusiasm and joy. In the meantime, none of them had the slightest suspicion about certain events that were taking place in the world...

Keep in mind—that driven by some members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS)—nihilism, sarcasm and complete denial in the Hungarian press of even the slightest hint at the possibility of the poet's death in Siberia prevailed in the country for many years, until the start of the expedition. One day, future generations will have to get to the true causes of such national ostracism, and lack of tribute, towards the unfortunate fate of Sándor Petőfi. But for now, we just have to carefully observe the events that took place around the expedition «Megamorv—Petőfi».

Clearly, each country has its own secret services, which are required to ensure the safety of the state. The socialist system could easily afford to maintain and grow any number of secrets agents and informers, its rule lawless and arbitrary. It would be interesting to know what percentage of Hungarians believe that when the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Hungary, it also withdrew its former secret agents?

Of course, none were withdrawn! However, the card-board boxes filled with confidential «Personal Files» on each of the former «assistants» were shipped to Russia, and at any moment could be used to reveal some «strings» that would make them easily manipulated, pulled by the new «Lord of Europe» to carry out its latest wishes. The expedition members were ready to work hard in Barguzin... It would be naive to believe that the secret service was afraid of the possible discovery of the poet's bones... But the secret service could not pass up the opportunity to plant «their people» in the next group of highly educated, creative scientists who were on the verge of uncovering a secret kept for a century and a half. And plant they did! Both Hungary and the Soviet Union did. Only, usually a country chooses to spy in their own favour, and not for «the other guy...» But, as we shall see, in this respect, categorizing Hungary as a «country» could be still deemed problematic...

On July 18th, the day after the start of the excavation of the grave, radio operator Kardos and historian Géza Szabó—included in this expedition on the insistence of HAS—began to exhibit some strange behaviours... With a tape measure in hand, they began to re-take measurements, and argue that

the alleged location of the grave was chosen incorrectly, and began to insist on moving the dig about 5-7 meters to the side. Kiszely does not agree with them...

On the 19th of July 1989 Hungarian newspapers published a statement by TASS [Soviet State News Agency] that the remains found in grave №7, in Barguzin, apparently belonged to Sándor Petőfi. Anthropologist Gyula Henkey estimated the probability of this at 99%. István Pécsi, Edith Kéri and Tibor Borzák via Lajos Kardos's radiotelephone regularly reported the latest information from Barguzin. The HQ Kecskemét's TV was documenting every step carried out at the excavations.

The same day, immediately after TASS publication, an anthropologist Tibor Toth (who had strongly insisted on being included in the expedition) and a historian, Tamás Katona, showed up in a huff at the TV studio from where the evening news of Channel 2 was being televised. Katona said, *«Russians did not take any prisoners, so it just could not be that Petőfi ended up in a foreign land!»*

The participants of these events state that local experts helped to install a few parabolic antennas on the roof, and that radio operator Lajos Kardos was able to regularly send the news to Hungary from Barguzin, but on August 21 the connection broke down for a few hours. The next day, on behalf of HAS, Hungarian television aired a news episode with a famous American scientist, who, standing in front of a photograph of a skeleton, explained that it was from Barguzin, and that it was absolutely clear that it was a female skeleton... From that day, members of HAS began to assert that the remains the expedition had found could not belong to Petőfi...

Edith Kéri recalls that during the first days of their stay in Barguzin she began to notice how the historian Géza Szabó was almost whispering in Russian with someone, for a long time, in the evenings, at the end of a dark corridor of their hotel...

When Petőfi's skull emerged from the layer of mud during the excavation of the grave, it still had a lock of hair attached. Bruce Latimer carefully removed it and wrapped it in paper and put into a round flat tin box used for film storage. The next day, the box disappeared... And the day after, the Soviet members of the expedition convinced everyone that it was necessary to arrange a day of rest and to have a picnic on the shores of Lake Baikal. At one point, along a sixty-kilometer track their bus stopped to pick up a pretty young woman, who, standing on the side of the road, was gesturing vigorously, asking for a ride somewhere. Inside the bus she was somewhat unusually greeted by, and seated next to, Géza Szabó, with whom she began a lively conversation. By the end of the picnic, when it was time to leave, the young lady and Hungarian historian went missing after just being seen there. Dense forest... Mosquitoes... people started to worry... But soon they returned... And on the way back their lively dialogue continued...

On the first day of excavation the expedition members heard from some of their Soviet colleagues an unfriendly grunting: «*digging without permission...*», «*desecrating graves...*» Ferenc Morvai instantaneously made a decision. He flew to Moscow to obtain official permission to open the grave. A Plenipotentiary Representative of Buryatia in Moscow—Nikolai Kryuchkov (a great helper in the affairs of the expedition, I will have more to say about him later) realized the urgency of the situation and was able to arrange so that Ferenc Morvai was received by the Soviet Prime Minister, Alexei Kosygin... «*Yes, yes—Kosygin!*—Recalls Morvai.—*At the entrance to the Kremlin I even had to remove my shoes to be checked!*»

In the application submitted to the Chairman of the Soviet Government by Morvai he tried to secure permission to dig several graves in the cemetery in Barguzin, just in case they encountered unforeseen circumstances, however Kosygin, having read the request, made a restrictive resolution: «*Cleared to excavate one grave.*» He handed back the application to Morvai, saying: «*Hungarians have only one Petőfi, therefore an excavation permit for one grave is good enough...*» Upon concluding this important meeting, the appellants immediately called the party bosses in Barguzin, and confirmed that «permission had been obtained...» Upon hearing the news, excavations were permitted to proceed at the cemetery.

But due to his natural intuition, combined with the expert opinion of some of the members of the expedition, who were predicting that excavations at such an old cemetery could potentially make accessing the neighbouring graves unavoidable, Morvai opted to stay in Moscow for two extra days. After a detailed conversation, the Head of the State Committee for Protection of Historical Monuments at the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, V.V.Kuchеров, agreed to help the ambitious, already famous Hungarian seeker of truth, and issued him the necessary document.

Literally following in Ferenc's footsteps, E.V. Demin arrived in Moscow from Ulan-Ude, and managed to arrange a meeting with the Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation Melent'ev. In front of the Minister, Demin mustered much confidence and viciously attacked the «impermissible acquiescence to the foreigners...» The Minister of Culture immediately fired the Head of the Committee for the Preservation of Monuments for «exceeding the authority...» (E.V.Demin—then an Associate Professor at the Institute of Technology in Ulan Ude—was a colleague of Professor A.V.Tivanenko, and during the initial stages of information gathering about the mysterious foreign grave in Barguzin, he passionately believed and defended the theory that those were the bones of Sándor Petőfi. But later, under some inexplicable circumstances, and one can only imagine their true nature, he altered his persuasions and soon became, and continues to be, to this day, a fervent denier of the existence of remains belonging to Petőfi, convinced that «the skeleton belongs to—a female...»)

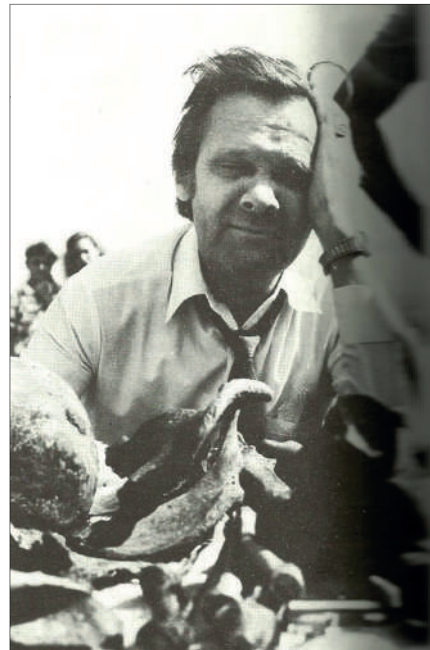
Because of this trip to Moscow Ferenc Morvai was not present during the exhumation of Petőfi's remains, and thus he was not aware of the latest news from Barguzin. He was met at the airport in Ulan-Ude by a driver who started telling him something interesting, but not easily understandable... And what he was trying to say, was that two young Hungarians never before seen by the driver, went to board that very same aircraft, on which Ferenc had just arrived from Moscow, and that minutes before they were talking loudly in Russian to the passengers waiting by the registration booth. They were saying that the expedition in Barguzin was a «mafia-arranged adventure», and that scientists had long established that there was a female buried in that grave... They repeatedly said that they were Hungarians, they spoke with an accent, and their performance was repeated several times...

It was the first time Ferenc heard the word «female», in connection to his life's Dream, to Barguzin.

My sources have told me that these «two young Hungarians» flew away with a tin box containing the Barguzin's strand of hair belonging to Sándor Petőfi, with the help of Géza Szabó. At the very same time, the «Hungarian» strand of Petőfi's hair disappeared from one of the displays at the Historical Museum in Budapest, after warming the hearts of the museum visitors for more than a century. But members of HAS, having compared the two strands of hair of the poet, were instantly able to see that Sándor Petőfi was waiting for the Hungarians in Barguzin, and began a frenzied and relentless attack, alleging that «it was—a female».

I should add that a few years later Géza Szabó would receive from HAS a doctorate degree, and Lajos Kardos would be given a Minister's portfolio in the Hungarian government.

The driver was pressing hard on the gas pedal, driving the car to Barguzin. Ferenc Morvai, tired from the long flight, sat beside him and said nothing. At this point, he still did not know what had been found at the cemetery in Barguzin. Everyone remembers that dramatic moment when Ferenc approached the crowd at the grave. People stepped aside to let him approach the table on which the exhumed remains were neatly laid out, and István Kiszely said in an undertone:—»This is—Petőfi!» Ferenc sat down, picked up the skull, and his wide-open eyes filled with tears.



Dear Reader, let us celebrate together with all the members of the expedition and enjoy this extraordinary historical event. The country might have temporarily lost the trail of its great son, but it never lost faith in its ability to find his remains and bow to their greatness.

In front of my eyes, right now, is an invaluable document—the «ACT OF IDENTIFICATION OF THE REMAINS OF SÁNDOR PETŐFI», signed by one Hungarian, one Soviet, and two American anthropologists. All of them were well-known scientists, highly educated professionals who had chosen to undertake this necessary and deeply moral profession—to seek the truth. After having travelled to distant Siberia, they applied the best of their talents and knowledge, carefully and honestly examining every bit of the exhumed remains, Bruce Latimer (USA), Clyde Simpson (USA), István Kiszely (Hungary) and Alexei Buraev (USSR) put their signatures on this document, which ends with the following resolution:

«Neither the skull nor the skeleton bear any marks contradictory to the known corporeal properties of Sándor Petőfi. Moreover, all the marks mentioned in the existing records—the «wolf tooth», forehead, jaw, scars on the body—are extant on the skeleton, and therefore we, the anthropologists, confirm that the skeleton we exhumed on 17 July 1989 in Barguzin in grave №7 is identical to the skeleton of Sándor Petőfi.

Barguzin, July 23, 1989.»





On July 24th Barguzin turned into a truly festive place. People were congratulating each other, and everyone was smiling. The official guests from Ulan-Ude, the leadership of the Republic, were applauding members of the expedition and the villagers. The celebratory atmosphere was inspired by the sense of pride in the work done, by the sense of accomplishment. People were gathering around grave №7. Friendly, kind, hospitable Buryats were pleased that their land had given refuge to a Hungarian national hero. And thus the chain of kindness continued uninterrupted: from their land tribal Huns moved to Europe in the 5th century, and formed Hungaria, and now they were celebrating the good work. And Buryats express their happiness very openly.



*F. Morvai at the memorial pillar set on the site of the tomb of S. Petőfi.
Barguzin, July 1989.*

On July 28th, a message arrived from the Hungarian Embassy in Moscow, prohibiting the transfer of Sándor Petőfi's remains back to Hungary... At the same time, Soviet authorities were vaguely suggesting the need to have a «Certificate of expert opinion from the Academy of Sciences of the USSR», they also demanded «some sort of resolution by a comprehensive international commission», which would have to gather in Moscow... The members of the expedition travelled back to their homes. The sealed remains of Sándor Petőfi, were left in Ulan-Ude, in the custody of the Government of Buryatia...

Before I tackled the following paragraph, I had thoroughly and carefully reviewed materials available to me from the Hungarian press published over the month of July of 1989. I hope that some of my readers will be able to do the same. But no matter how much I would like for this to not be true, my premonition of a «huge tragedy»—the «malignancy» of the Hungarian media—becomes glaringly obvious. Up until August 20, 1989 more than 95 percent of the press filled, sometimes—with a smile, but—with joy, with a good amount of pride, with sincerely good wishes for the new pioneers of the nation—the expedition «Megamory-Petőfi». Newspaper pages were filled with kindness, good luck wishes, and acknowledgments that the next generation of explorers were «going to sea».

But what happened after the 20th of August? Who poisoned the joy? Who detonated the bomb? What for? Let's work together to find the answer. Life goes on!



Old cemetery. Barguzin, June, 2014.

What was awaiting members of the expedition, so inspired by their success, at home in Hungary, where they returned on August 29th? First of all, based on the information fed to them by certain employees of HAS, newspapers started to issue the following statements: «*This is a female...*» «*it's a pregnant female*». And some tabloids wanted to be even more convincing, and went further: «*this is a Jewish female...*» No one has seen anything: the bones were left untouched in Buryat-Mongolia. Special services followed Kardos, the radio operator, but at the time, he could only transmit words. At the same time some members of HAS were able to get their hands only on the hair, which told them a lot.

Certain members of the Academy (HAS) did not have, and did not wish to have, any concrete evidence. They took a comfortable stance on the issue, their all-time favourite: «*Prove to us that you're not a fool!*» And that was that! Also, from them: «*This is not Petőfi! Because he just cannot be there!*» How do you like this kind of «scientific» conclusion? What a pity that there was no one in the government of the country who could at least once demand that HAS behaved decently.

The vast majority of newspapers filled their pages with brash inventions and mockery, aiming to bully and degrade Ferenc Morvai and István Kiszely. Several members of the «Megamorv-Petőfi» committee had to resign. A legal expert, László Harsányi, wrote a letter to the head of the International Department of the Ministry of Culture, G. Drexler, in which he stated that he considered the opinions of four anthropologists to be insufficient... From the beginning of August—on television, radio and in the newspapers—a flurry of materials appeared and all of them were propagating a single idea: «death in the Battle of Segesvár». At the same time, no one had the decency to broadcast even one of the documentaries filmed during the excavations in Barguzin, and the members of the expedition were not granted a single opportunity to speak on radio or television. Each and every one of the daily newspapers, as if they had all conspired, published materials written exclusively by «deniers». Certain HAS members doggedly avoided expressing their opinions, and the Literary Museum named after Petőfi categorically denied that even a remote chance existed for the «Megamorv—Petőfi Committee» to find the remains of the poet.

Új Tükör («New Mirror») — a satirical magazine — confident that it was the center of world humour, took the route of discrimination and gross insults, and condemned not only the members of the expedition, but the whole Petőfi affair. The names of all of these spiteful critics should not be forgotten. New generations will still have to determine, who, among them, had their «Personal Files» taken to Moscow...

That entire nightmare seemed like a mere trifle in relation to how Ferenc Morvai was treated. After he landed back in Hungary, those who were meeting him at the airport informed him that he had nowhere to go, since his house had been confiscated by the Hungarian Tax Office... As they say, to read this would be funny if it were not so sad in reality.

Imagine: a countryside boy, who by sheer force of his talent and hard work became one of the leading philanthropists in the country, for a short time leaves to uphold the honour and glory of his country, and in the meantime the tax office, that had «certainly never even heard of his name before», «accidentally» discovers his «crime», which it assesses to be punishable by no less than the immediate confiscation of the house in which he lives.

And here is the gist of what his crime actually was: by then, his expenses for the planning and execution of the expedition «Megamorv—Petőfi» amounted to 70 million forints—using the exchange rate of the day—this was equivalent to approximately 470 thousand dollars. Morvai paid the expenses from his company accounts... Let's not dissect his intentions here... In Canada, this is also often done, but at the end of the financial year the money must be returned to the company from a personal account unless Canada Revenue Agency agrees that this was «a charitable donation».

An immediate repayment of the entire sum from his personal account was being demanded of Ferenc, or otherwise his house would have to be sold. Of course, he did not have a sum like that... Tax authorities immediately put the house up for auction. And so our trailblazer had to make quite a few rounds trying to raise the money.

Minister Imre Pozsgay, who was also the Chairman of the Committee «Megamorv—Petőfi» helped him in many ways, especially with getting a chance to re-purchase his house through the auction, and at the lowest rate.

But then the following happened: As soon as the auction ended, and while the mood was still positive, Minister I. Pozsgay put his arm around Ferenc's shoulder and whispered, "*Do not tell anyone. Immediately send the bones [the remains] back to Siberia, or just quietly bury them somewhere... Otherwise, you and I are going to be in big trouble...*"

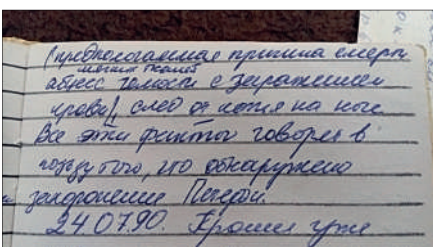
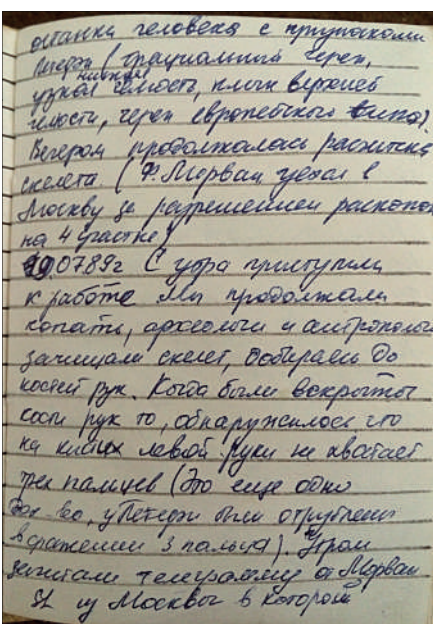
—*What are you saying?!*—retorted Ferenc.—*We worked so hard to obtain them! I am not sending them anywhere!*

After a brief hesitation Pozsgay dropped the bomb: "*In this case, I'm out of your organization...*"

—*But we all voted you in...*—Ferenc said, frustrated.—*Why did you agree then?*

—*I never believed that you could make it work...*—the statesman calmly dodged the question.

However, Ferenc Morvai, our hero, wasn't so easy to crush. He began to guess that the Russians were plotting something dirty in order to avoid giving out the remains. Ferenc decided that he must immediately organize an «authoritative international commission», which Moscow had insisted upon in August. "*I must arrange it in September the further away from Moscow the better—in Ulan-Ude, Buryats are more humane, they will try to help...*"



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On September 20th, representatives of «Megamorv—Petőfi» together with the Americans arrived in Ulan -Ude. That same evening they were all invited to the local TV studio where they were asked questions about the graves of Kuchelbecker and Petőfi.

Soon they learned that the day before their arrival, one of the leaders of Buryatia had received a call from Moscow. Politburo member Eduard Shevardnadze (!) himself called, and immediately began talking about the upcoming conference on Petőfi, and issued an order: *«Work as long as you want, but remember, the results should be negative!..»* Then Comrade Shevardnadze explained in greater detail why the work of the Commission had to drag on for at least four months: *“In Hungary, the election time was approaching, and if they «get» Petőfi, they will probably not choose «our man» for a President, but someone else—maybe even... Morvai...”*

This was such devious news, definitely something to ponder. Thankfully someone from Buryatia happened to be brave and decent and warned the Hungarians...

Morvai asked Dr. Imre Straub, a well-known forensic pathologist, an expert on the physiology of Sándor Petőfi, to participate in the conference in Ulan-Ude.

When he saw the bones laid out on the table, the doctor ran to the table and began to compare them with his data, and he started to explain enthusiastically... He brought with him 27 identifying signs, and that is why the Academy of Sciences of Buryatia called their 2nd Commission for the examination of the remains, and all of the 27 signs happened to be analogous to the data available on the skeleton of the poet. This was communicated to the leadership of Buryatia, USSR and Hungary.

But all of this really did not bear any significance, because none of the expected Soviet colleagues attended the conference the next day... Frustrated Ferenc placed a call to Moscow. Academician Alexeyev said, without much embarrassment, that the members of the Soviet delegation were very busy, and he asked that the conference be postponed «four months...» and «promised to communicate the exact date at a later time...» The expected experts from HAS also did not attend...

Yet the greatest disgrace, above all, was «exposed» by the anthropologists from Japan and Switzerland. Surprised by Morvai's calls, each of them said the same thing: *“We did not come because the Soviet embassy told us that the conference in Ulan-Ude had been cancelled, refusing to issue a visa...”*

Many years later, Professor Tivanenko recalled that, when the Hungarians conceived of this «September conference» arranged in Ulan-Ude, academician V.P.Alekseev also supported it, but a couple of days before it started he suddenly said: *“You have too much ruckus stirring around the Sándor Petőfi affair*

in Ulan Ude... So I am not coming!" Thus, Shevardnadze's call did not come from out of nowhere...

We should share the feelings with which István Kiszely, Ferenc Morvai, Monica Búzas, Imre Straub and Nehéz Mihály returned to Hungary. American anthropologist B. Latimer and K. Simpson went home, not knowing the level of hostility towards the expedition, thinking that the conference failed due to the «typical Russian lack of organization...»

Let's hope that one day the world will learn of the true reasons for such an attitude towards the memory of Sándor Petőfi on behalf of the leadership in Hungary and in the USSR. The Soviet leadership never upheld the importance of demonstrating even basic respect towards the feelings, desires, and interests of any of its allies. For the USSR, there was no difference between Hitler's Germany and M. Rákosi's Hungary. In our Marxism-Leninism classes we were always taught, *"that the only true friend of our country was the «progressive part of mankind». Being surrounded by the hollow remnants of capitalism eager to grab us by the throat at any moment, we need to keep our gunpowder dry."*

The Hungarians wanted to repatriate the remains of their hero, the Poet. But «Big Brother» had never even returned any of its own heroes home, unless it served some propagandistic purpose. «Big Brother» did not only not want to hear about the Hungarian request, he simply didn't understand it. The leadership of the Soviet country was only capable of understanding the uncompromising suppression of any potential insurgencies, and were always concerned only with their own survival.

Putin's propaganda machine has inherited the methods of the arrogant, deceitful Soviet information service and is constantly busy searching for any kind of negative news relating to the United States, and is incessantly reporting and repeating this «news». This Russian audience is completely unaware that the United States is continuously searching, finding, repatriating and honourably burying the remains of their soldiers who were lost during the Vietnam war. But in America there is a weekly publication with detailed information about the remains found and the number of searches that continue to this day.

Naive Hungarians bothered the «Big Brother» in the summer of 1989. Their timing was really bad... Amidst the impending total collapse, the USSR was being torn apart by the shameful issues of its criminal past. Look at this:

It's common knowledge that when in March of 1940 one of the last meetings between the NKVD and the Gestapo took place in Zakopane and Krakow, they discussed joint efforts in the fight with the Polish resistance.

It is believed that the Germans refused to accept the Polish prisoners of war. Following that meeting, the Soviet Union embarked on the ultimate destruc-

tion of more than 22 thousand captured Polish officers. In 1942 the Germans invaded the areas around Smolensk, where—at Katyn and other places—the remains of thousands of victims of mass executions have been found. In those Marxism-Leninism classes we were told that these were the victims of the Nazis, and when we asked why the pockets of the dead contained letters and newspapers clippings (of which we learned from Western radio stations broadcasts) dated no later than December 1939, our history teacher used to explain cheerfully: *“The Nazis were emptying out the pockets of the dead, substituting the old newspapers with the fresh ones...”*

In the end, the terrible truth became known all over the world. In March of 1989 (take note, the same year—1989) the new Polish government officially transferred the murder charges from the Germans to the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. (Three years later, the Russian government was forced to disclose publicly the documents that proved that the Soviet Politburo and the NKVD were responsible for these murders and their subsequent concealment, and that Stalin issued the order.)

It was at this time that the first reports about the discovery of remains belonging to the Russian Tsarist family were emerging and the details of their execution were getting publicized, and plans for the recovery of their remains from the mine shaft where they had been dumped, were being made; the compulsory DNA identification of the bodies was being discussed... There was talk about the re-interment of the remains... The great status of Russia mandated that this would need to be done at the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg... All odious news was becoming public knowledge...

And at this rather «difficult time» the Hungarians pushed forward with their Petőfi! The leaders of the Soviet Union at that time did not care about interring the remains of «someone else’s poet». Who cared? «It is not Petőfi!»—And that’s that!

Although it may seem ridiculous to some people, as a former Soviet citizen—in my life I often still use the «Soviet logic», which for decades crippled our morals and bred on this planet such evil and misery, as the «ex-soviet folk» disconcerting the world today. During that time, no matter what was being announced as government news on the radio, most citizens realized that it was just another lie, an attempt to hide the truth. If such and such doctor was being denounced as an enemy and a saboteur, preparing to poison the elite of the Soviet leadership, then a normal person understood that this doctor was an innocent victim in yet another scheme of the state. If the former «Attorney General» Vyshinsky, whether from the podium at the United Nations or in The Hall of Columns at the House of Unions (in Moscow), loudly cursed an accused, then we knew that the accused was an innocent victim! And Vyshinsky knew it better than others, and therefore shouted

at the top of his lungs to reassure himself, hoping that he would be better believed...

Such logic convinced me that the discovered remains of the Hungarian prisoner and poet Petrovich most likely belong to Sándor Petőfi! Just because for more than a quarter of a century, without a shred of evidence, this has been fiercely denied by the Hungarian «Academy of Sciences», which meticulously copied KGB methods. In any normal country an organization would not be able to call itself the National Academy of Sciences, if it did not rush to examine any fresh information or findings about their country to demonstrate their knowledge and loyalty to the nation, which employs them and in return expects the truth—of course, the scientific kind of truth!

In late December, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR informed the parties concerned that between January 5th and January 11th, in Moscow, they would hold yet another Soviet-Hungarian conference on the identification of the remains of Sándor Petőfi, under the leadership of V.P. Alexeev. The Soviet delegation was the largest by all accounts. The HAS sent to Moscow a separate delegation headed by László Harsányi. Because the government of Buryatia did not want to hand over the remains of the poet to Moscow, delegates from «Megamory-Petőfi» initially flew to Ulan-Ude, and only on the morning of January 9 they appeared in Moscow with the Buryats at the first meeting of the conference.

Meanwhile, on January 7 Hungarian Kossuth-Radio had on the daytime and evening news shown an interview with someone named Odze György, who, on behalf of HAS, reported that *«the Commission in Moscow was very close to reaching a conclusion that the remains belong to a female...»*

Professor A. Tivanenko shared his recollections with me:

—The bones were brought to Moscow, by the entire delegation. I was in charge of caring for the metal box with the remains. We were greeted, taken to the hotel of the Academy of Sciences, and then, instead of meeting at the Academy, for meet and greet we were gathered in the great hall of the Committee of Preservation of Monuments. We were a group of about 25 people.

In his welcome address, academician V.P. Alekseev straightaway signalled that «continuing the examination of Petőfi's remains seems unlikely to be feasible without further investigation...»

The Director of the Soviet Archival Department spoke next and made every effort to create a negative atmosphere at the conference with verbose scepticism, by making statements such as this: «Upon thoroughly reviewing all the files nowhere could we find a word about Sándor Petőfi... The data looks very raw... Some sort of decision is necessary...» After his speech, everyone paused for a lunch break, and I stayed in the room to look after my iron box...

After lunch, the next speaker continued that kind of vaguely negative talk about the reviewed archival data. Then I lost patience, got up from my seat and said: «What are you talking about? What files have you seen? Are you aware that in Tomsk, Irkutsk, Ulan—Ude, and Chita there is a mountain of untouched archives left from Tsarist Russia?» My remark produced excitement in the auditorium. The next coached speaker was careful to add: «Of course, we need to examine all the files...»

After that I had to stand up again, «Why are we having this pointless conversation...? Let's rather have a closer look at the poet's bones, excavated from his grave!»—I said, and carried my box of bones over to the table of the Presidium...

Next it was Ferenc Morvai's and István Kiszely's turn to speak. Together they shared a few interesting logistical details about the excavation of the grave, while pointing several times to the box on the table. The atmosphere of the meeting started to thaw. Academician Alekseev said: «We certainly shall have a close look at your treasure... But right now, according to our program—we have a banquet scheduled at the «Prague» restaurant... After the banquet, if our guests are not too tired, in the evening we could gather at my office in the Institute of Archaeology.»

At the entrance to the restaurant the doorman insisted that I leave my box in the cloakroom. Of course, I adamantly refused to do so. The organizers of the banquet found out about my situation and had to persuade the authorities at the restaurant to make an exception for me... So the box ended up under our table, and from time to time I nudged it with my foot...

I congratulated Alexei Vasilievich Tivanenko. After all, he had the good fortune of being the last person in this world to «invite Sándor Petőfi to a banquet hall for dinner!»

After the banquet at the restaurant our much merrier group went to the Institute of Archaeology. We gathered in a small conference room. Academicians Alekseev and Harsányi immediately began to take out the bones out of the box and lay them on a table covered with a gray paper. Their eyes ran with excitement. They picked up the skull, and right away proceeded to feel the upper left «fang»-like incisor.

I had known V.P. Alekseev for a long time. He passed through Ulan-Ude several times when heading out with expeditions to Mongolia. I also took part in them. Our tents used to be pitched alongside each other... We used to share food from the same pot... Once he even stayed at my house... Before the excavations in Barguzin I received a letter from him in which he had instructed me: «Aleksey Vasilevich, pay utmost attention to the «fang»-like incisor. This is the main defining feature of Sándor Petőfi...»

The participants of the conference surrounded the table with the remains of Petőfi.

Harsányi and his colleagues from HAS assiduously measured and recorded the metrics of the skull, and then studied the pelvic bone even more thoroughly.

Around midnight, Academician Alexeyev called home to his wife. Like him, she was also a prominent Soviet anthropologist. I sat next to him when he told his wife: "I must stay longer. I've got a room full of Hungarians and Buryats..." And, covering his mouth with his hand, he added: "And—Petőfi is on the table...!"

Only Professor Alexander Gromov, speaking on behalf of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, constructively and honestly stated that bone samples of Sándor Petőfi's relatives would be required for the final identification—especially those of his mother, and that it would be necessary to exhume her remains. The HAS delegation accepted this proposal. This moment even got captured on camera.

One László Kovács was part of the HAS delegation, and listed as «a senior researcher at the HAS Institute of Archaeology». At the conference Kovács first outlined his «archaeological credo» in regards to the investigation of the probable remains of Sándor Petőfi: *"These remains are unacceptable... and... unsuitable for scientific research, because the «Megamorv—Petőfi» Commission carried out excavations in Barguzin despite the fact that it could not provide any reliable documents about Sándor Petőfi's relocation to Siberia..."*

István Kiszely and Imre Straub covertly observed the HAS envoys taking down measurements of the skull and especially of the pelvic bones, and distorting them towards female proportions...

A professional photographer—Leonid Budunov, of Barguzin—was among the members of the delegation from Buryatia. He continues to make interesting photographs on the subject of Petőfi to this day. At the conference in Moscow, he photographed almost nonstop, trying to capture everything that was happening around him. He specifically tried to capture those moments when various measurements of the bones were being taken.

Tatyana Potemkin—Deputy Director of Alekseev's the Institute of Archaeology—was among the conference participants from Moscow, and made several rude attempts to kick Budunov out of the office of the commission: *"You are not an expert..."* To which he boldly replied: *"I have been authorized to attend the study of our skeleton by the Barguzin authorities and I am not going anywhere!"*

After silently swallowing this response, angry-faced Potemkina turned to A.V.Tivanenko who was standing next to her, and hissed in a «serpent» like voice: *"You will personally be held accountable for this...!"*

The conference was also attended by one of professor M.M. Gerasimov's former students, Natalia Lebedinskaya, already a prominent Soviet anthropologist at the time. She said: *"I notice a similarity between Petőfi's photo and the skull from Barguzin. I can agree to do a reconstruction of his appearance based on the skull; however, since this is a long and costly process, I shall take the*

job only if you are able to substantiate with archival documents that Petőfi had been in Siberia.”

A.V. Tivanenko continued:

“István Kiszely suggested a chemical analysis of the bones, which would demonstrate whether they belonged to a male or female, in order to determine the gender of the skeleton. Immediately, with a steel handsaw pieces of bone got sawed off for analysis. After 1:00 AM the group began to disperse. Several police officers—assigned to us by the special order of the head of the Soviet government, Nikolai Ryzhkov—locked and sealed the conference room for the night. I should note that the Prime Minister, unaware of the behind-the-scene games around the remains of Petőfi, was able to provide serious organizational help for our conference.

The following day I arrived at the Academy at 11:00 AM. To my surprise, our translator Mihai Nehez was the only person inside the conference-room. I asked him where everyone else was. He replied that Morvai, Kiszely and Traub stepped out to grab a snack at the cafeteria, and that Harsányi accompanied by the entire HAS delegation, as well as Academician Alekseev, took the samples of the bones and left. It seemed that they had been urgently summoned to the Hungarian Embassy... We sat there, baffled...

About two hours later we suddenly heard footsteps and some excited voices in the stairwell. They stopped in front of the door that was slightly ajar, and I could hear the voice of academician Alekseev, «So, what we should say, is that the laboratory was very busy, and therefore the chemical analysis could not be performed... and that our turn would be in three months...»

When the excited scientists entered the conference room, Harsányi's and Alekseev's faces were glowing with joy... Alekseev immediately announced that due to the overload at the laboratory the results would only be ready in a few weeks and therefore the conference will have to be adjourned until the following summer, the exact dates to be confirmed...

It took almost two hours to draft a joint statement, which had to be constantly translated and corrected by the Hungarians. The majority, which was formed predominantly by the «deniers», succeeded in making the statement sound like this: «Investigation in Moscow could not provide a definitive answer as to whether the remains discovered belonged to Sándor Petőfi. The presence of female characteristics on some of the bones further complicated the task of the commission. Since chemical analysis of the bones could not be conducted due to the overload at the laboratory, it is being suggested that the commission resumes its work in four months.»

And a separate paragraph in the communiqué stated the following:

«Due to the on-going status of the investigation no comments for the press will be made, and in the meantime researchers will continue their investigative work independently: at the Academy of Sciences of Hungary and at the Soviet Academy.»

What was that, if not a wild wolves' party in a hen house...? It looked exactly like the old familiar, tried and tested Soviet system of blackmail and injustice.

The drafting of this statement was finished well past midnight. The bones were packed back into the box, sealed and entrusted to the officers of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, who performed their duty in an exemplary fashion—following the orders of Nikolai Ryzhkov, they had to ensure the safety of the box and hand it over to the warehouse at the museum of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

“That night passed very quickly. Early in the morning we went to the airport. Prior to boarding, I went to a newspaper kiosk and bought a fresh copy of «Izvestia» [major Soviet newspaper]. Sitting there and leafing through it, I suddenly noticed:

«TASS REPORT:

...Upon concluding its investigation, members of the commission arrived at the unanimous decision that the alleged remains of poet Sándor Petőfi presented to them belonged to an unknown female...

Thus, finally, this long affair has come to an end, and the so-called «Siberian hypothesis» can be put to rest...»

I did not sleep a wink during my flight back to Ulan-Ude. The events of the past few days were flashing before my eyes. On my way to Moscow, I was absolutely certain that Alekseev would accept that it was Petőfi... On each of my previous visits to Moscow he always greeted me warmly, with a smile... Yet this time he just glanced at me hastily and then looked away... And I did not attach any importance to this...

Upon arrival, I went straight to V.T. Naydakov—the president of our branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. I showed him the TASS REPORT in the newspaper, told him that there was a difficult agreement to wait for three months and to not speak to the press, and that the TASS REPORT must have been planned in advance...

Vasily Tsyrenovich Naydakov listened to me carefully and said, «All right. Draft a letter to the President of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin...»

In the letter, we asked the President to reject the resolution of the Moscow commission on Petőfi from January 1990 since it was based on falsified data, and called for the re-appointment of a new and independent commission.

At the same time, we received a message from Hungary informing us that upon their return from Moscow both Hungarian delegations were met at the airport by a large group of media representatives, and that during the ensuing press-conference F. Morvai and I. Kiszely explicitly accused L. Harsányi and D. Farkas (as well as the other members of the HAS delegation) of blatantly tampering with bone measurements, in order to make them appear more consistent with the anatomical parameters of a female skeleton.

Cornered by the journalists peppering them with questions, the two scientists attempted to explain: «Yes, admittedly, we inaccurately recorded some measurements...» At the end of the day, they confessed to the errors. Rumour has it, that after this information reached József Tigyi—the president of HAS—he was forced to dismiss L. Harsányi and several other members of the academy delegation, and then József Tigyi, in turn, was also removed from his position by the President of Hungary...

We did not entrust our letter to the President of Russia to regular post, but handed it over to N.I. Kryuchkov—the Representative of Buryatia in Moscow—and he put the letter on Yeltsin's desk the following morning. The Russian President issued an edict to the President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Y. I. Osipov:

- «1. Repeal the resolution of the Moscow commission passed in January, 1990.*
- 2. Appoint a new commission to resolve the matter of S. Petőfi.»*

A few days later Osipov went to President Yeltsin, and stated his opinion: «We do not have to organize a new commission, as long as politics in Hungary is prevailing over science... First, let them sort out their political issues, and after they would deal with the science...»

Professor Tivanenko recalls:

“A hiatus that followed lasted four months... No further proposals on the appointment of a new commission arrived from Moscow... I submitted a big article to a newspaper, where I described the infractions overlooked by the commission on Sándor Petőfi in the Moscow... I also mentioned our letter to President B. N. Yeltsin...”

Soon after, the Council of Ministers of Buryatia received a letter signed by academician Alekseev in Moscow, to the following effect: *“...Dr. Tivanenko played a negative role in this entire affair. With his damaging publications, he humiliates not only Soviet science, but also me, personally, as the Head of the Commission... I ask that you re-evaluate his status as a member of the Buryat Branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences...”*

Academician Alekseev also wrote: *“Since it had been established by an international commission that the bones belonged to a female, kindly arrange to pick them up for re-interment at the Barguzin cemetery.”*

Academician Alekseev had a very uncooperative and self-willed secretary. Ferenc Morvai described how aggressively this particularly standoffish woman behaved towards him. Her attitude was always rude and reluctant, and she forced him to wait in the reception room for hours, sometimes even for days... This was occurring on each of his visits to Moscow.

Once Ferenc complained about this problem to his good friend György Bárándy, who advised him to present the secretary with a lovely bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. And that's exactly what Ferenc did the next time he went to Moscow... After that, it was as if the lady got switched with

someone else. She transformed into a pleasant and loyal acquaintance, doing things quite differently, and Ferenc always returned her favours. And in early January of 1991 this lady performed a truly invaluable service for Ferenc Morvai. A secret letter from Budapest arrived for academician Alekseev. One of the leaders of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was asking his Soviet colleagues to destroy the remains from the excavated grave №7 in Barguzin... And our «loyal acquaintance» immediately notified Ferenc of the contents of this letter...

Around the same time a letter we mentioned earlier, from Alekseev, containing Moscow's request to pick up the remains and bury them in Barguzin arrived to Buryatia. And thus a green light was lit, allowing the remains of Sándor Petőfi to once again fall in the hands of his supporters.

Here it is necessary to give credit where credit is due, and to express an enormous gratitude to Nicolai I. Kryuchkov, the former representative of Buryatia to the President of Russia. Like no one else, Nikolai Ivanovich was fully aware of his important role, and did his very best to save the remains of Sándor Petőfi from disappearing into oblivion. To this true humanist—the Conscience of Buryatia—belongs this phrase: *“I must give Morvai and Kiszely another chance to safely complete their investigation of the remains of Sándor Petőfi...”* And he also said: *«Perhaps I will not live to see another day, but we must do this for Hungary!»*

Representatives from Buryatia sent a telegram about their forthcoming visit to Moscow, and had two documents prepared. In the first one, they requested that the Soviet Academy of Sciences return to Buryatia the remains from grave №7, and in the other—they brought a permit from the Government of Buryatia allowing Morvai to take the remains to Hungary for further analysis. N.I.Kryuchkov summoned Morvai to Moscow.

Morvai and Kiszely knew that they were facing a huge obstacle: there were more people who wanted to destroy the remains and to close this case forever, than there were real devotees of science, ready to work hard for the final determination of the truth. Moreover, they realized that the omnipresent tentacles of Soviet intelligence services would not allow them to complete their investigation even in a different European country...

All of the participants of this epic story had a clear understanding of the scale and fortitude of the hostile forces—the intelligence services—that were watching them. Morvai's wife—Monica Búzas, and their translator Mihai Nehez accompanied Morvai and Kiszely to Moscow. They carried with them a letter to the Government of Buryatia with a request to transfer to them the remains from grave №7 for further research. Before departure Ferenc Morvai again visited his Hungarian friend, György Bárándy—a lawyer, who advised Ferenc to purchase return (Budapest-Moscow-Budapest) flights for all of them, but at the same time, to have in their pockets a separate set of tickets, just for Ferenc and Monica—to fly to New York via Moscow...

While in Moscow they constantly felt like they were being carefully watched. Strangers were loitering in the hallways of their hotel at all times. Often these people peeked into their room, as if to make sure that the box containing the remains was still there... N.Kryuchkov, who was accompanying the Hungarians, asked Morvai about the size of the longest of the exhumed bones. Ferenc said that it was about 52 centimeters. Nikolai Ivanovich advised them to buy a ladies handbag, and to transfer the bones into it... The size of a carry-on travel bag with the logo of the Hungarian airline «MALEV» turned out to be just right. They loaded the emptied box with a few bottles, crumpled newspapers and some dirty laundry...

On February 8, 1991, in Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport Kryuchkov took the carry-on bag from Monica before going through customs inspection and put it over his shoulder. After flashing his ID card of the Buryatian Representative to the President of Russia at the customs control, he went forward without any delay... In the departure hall Nikolai Ivanovich returned the bag to Monica, bid a warm farewell to everyone and left. I do not know all the details about their next steps in this detective-like story, but half an hour later Ferenc and Monica, having said goodbye to I. Kiszely and M.Nehez, were on board a flight en route to New York...

At the airport in Budapest Kiszely and Nehez discovered that the box with the «remains» did not arrive from Moscow with the rest of their checked luggage... An airline representative from «MALEV» apologized to them, and promised to track it down, helping them to fill a lost-luggage form... The baggage hall was already empty when they noticed three young men, apparently waiting for them. One of them, evidently a supervisor, was grinding his teeth with rage. He called Kiszely aside and started questioning him while trying to keep his voice down... but flushed István just shook his head and shrugged helplessly. In the end, the angry «supervisor» cursed loudly and gave anthropologist István Kiszely a few strong blows with a palm of his hand...

Four days later, in Ulan-Ude, Professor Tivanenko was summoned to the «relevant» organization where he was met by two generals who had just arrived from Moscow, one—from the KGB, the other—from the Interior Ministry. No one in Buryatia had ever seen such high-ranking officials, with gold epaulets of such size... The generals were concerned with just one question: «*How could Petőfi's bones end up in America?*» Visibly confused and embarrassed Professor Tivanenko was in shock:

—*What?... How could this be? Are they really in America...? But this question is not for me to answer... This question—is for Mr. Morvai...*

Meanwhile, a few days later István Kiszely came over to help Morvai in the United States. It took about a week for several US laboratories to conduct independent analysis of the remains. Laboratories unanimously confirmed that the bones they brought belonged to a male. They spent the following week

attempting to move the remains from America to Hungary, trying to bypass the customs officers who were longingly awaiting them. For Ferenc Morvai and István Kiszely their last attempt happened to be successful...

The findings made by the American laboratories, to date have been sufficient for all except the hard core «fighters» from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, who have been—for more than a quarter of a century, without ever conducting an investigation or any objective analysis—confidently proclaiming: «It's a female skeleton...» As we shall see next, for the current leadership of Hungary—the Government as well as the press and the media—the «opaque» opinion of HAS is actually very convenient. It is not necessary to delve into the essence of things if you can refer the matter to someone else, who would vehemently batter his chest on your behalf...

It is hard to imagine how this fictitious cancer is getting healed in today's Russia. Of its original «flag bearers» almost no one is still alive, but for a mad orgy of nationalism—just about any ruse and any illusory symbol of past greatness—is quite suitable. Recently Vladimir Putin made a few remarks about Petőfi's remains: «A case like Petőfi's could unite all of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin...»

* * *

Dear Reader! I happened to find out about the sad set of circumstances that befell Sándor Petőfi's remains only just recently. I knew nothing about this tragedy prior to my trip to Barguzin. It was terrifying to listen to both Professor Alexei Tivanenko and the school museum director, Tatyana Filipova: *“In the past 25 years, Hungary neglected to inter the remains of its great poet!”* *“How can we explain it to our students? For many years Sándor Petőfi has been hailed as a hero at our school museum, too!”* *“Is it really that difficult for Hungary to find the means to take a bone sample from the grave of the poet's mother and to compare the DNAs? After all, it took the Americans only one week to compare the DNA of President Abraham Lincoln to that of his mother's...”* *“If Hungary does not need” its Pushkin “then it should give us back the remains of Sándor Petőfi, and we shall bury them properly, and we shall honour him more caringly...”*

We returned to Toronto after attending the opening ceremony of the «Shalom» Memorial in early August of 2014, and I immediately began to work on Chapter 17. There was a lot that I wanted to share; the number of pages was growing. The subject of Barguzin was at the end of the chapter. As soon as I started mulling over it, I became quite alarmed by the amount of information already at my disposal, and even more so—by the amount of information that would be uncovered in the course of my work. Much was still unclear. And so I asked Éva Orosz to send me the latest publications on Petőfi, and, if possible, some recorded interviews from TV programmes about him.

Éva is a thorough and dependable person and therefore only three days later I was spending all of my time just trying to familiarize myself with the information I received from her. It was crude, for the most part negative, but most importantly—I could not discern neither any love for Petőfi, nor even an iota of warmth for Hungary in anything that was being said...

Short newspaper articles authored by László Kovács, an archaeologist, stand out due to the intense anger and *frustration* expressed in them towards Sándor Petőfi's alleged remains in Barguzin. Amid just over two hundred works he published, Kovács's flagrant assaults on «the bones from Barguzin» are particularly remarkable due to the distinct loathing, impervious arrogance and vicious denigration of the self-sacrificing labours of Ferenc Morvai and his colleagues.

It appears that the initial ideas for verbal attacks that HAS propagated against the remains were also articulated through Kovács. First, his unjustified and incontestable statement: *“It’s a female...”* Then, the malicious idea he brought to Moscow: *“These remains are not acceptable for purposes of scientific research, because the Megamorv-Petőfi committee began their excavations in Barguzin without demonstrating a verifiable proof of Sándor Petőfi’s «presence» in Siberia...”* Subsequently out of his pen came complete nonsense, *“Under no circumstances should the grave of Petőfi’s mother be unsealed for a DNA analysis, because this is not required...”*

Sadly, neither an intelligent mentor nor a true scientific researcher—eager to make unprecedented discoveries of national treasures—emerged from László Kovács's (or his graduate students') articles about Petőfi. They contain just restrictions and limitations: «close the topic and ban the research...»; «only the Academy has the right to do this...»; «stop digging...»; «European scientists have no right to interfere with Hungarian scientific research...»

Professor Kovács collected every unfavourable opinion ever expressed by a HAS members, and published them all together in a single volume titled «Not Petőfi!» The level of scientific scholarship of these members can be gleaned from an excerpt from one of the numerous resolutions passed by them in regard to Sándor Petőfi's remains:

«...On the basis of [the aforementioned information], the Petőfi Commission of HAS deems that further examination of skeleton №7 from Barguzin is unwarranted. Moreover, a representative of the «Megamorv-Petőfi» Commission personally transported these remains from the Soviet Union to the United States (according to his own statement), and thereupon it was withdrawn from the scope of scientific control. Because of this move, a discovery which had been heretofore considered controversial became unsuitable for the purposes of further scientific examinations.»

In late 1992 Lajos Kovács suddenly arrived in Buryatia with a manuscript of his book «Not Petőfi», and showed a lot of wishful thinking by hypocritically announcing that *“upon concluding its investigation of the remains from Barguzin, the HAS came to a unanimous conclusion that these remains belonged to a female, and that they should be returned to the same grave from which they had been removed...”*

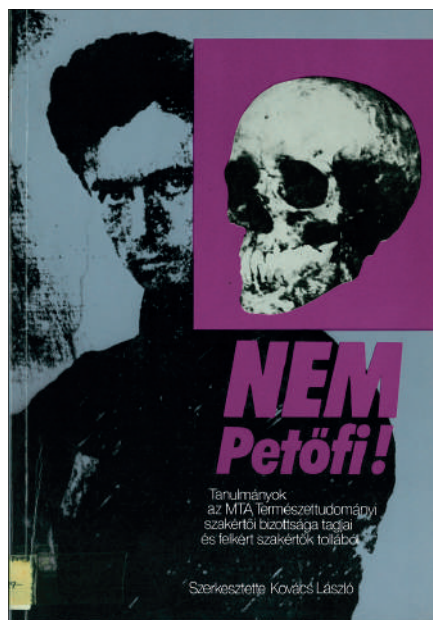
This Hungarian visitor did not bother to arrange a meeting with either professor A.V.Tivanenko, or the director of the Petőfi school museum in Barguzin, T.S.Filippova. Kovács was received only by E.V.Demin, already familiar to my readers as a fierce opponent of the identification of the remains. The two men spoke on Buryat state television, and presented the manuscript to the audience, reiterating that imported myth about the «ultimate identification of remains as belonging to a female». (*The members of HAS never got a hold of even a single fragment of the remains.*)

Upon his return to Hungary, professor Kovács announced that the contents of his book had received a stamp of approval from the scientific and political leadership in Buryatia, where «the outcome of HAS’s final investigation of the poet’s remains» had been duly noted. However, L.Kovács completely «forgot» to share with his countrymen two important details about his trip to Siberia. Firstly, that he had asked the leadership of the Republic to find resources to finance translation and publication of his book in Russian, but most importantly, he concealed a story about his and Demin’s semi-secret trip to Barguzin, where the former head of the Barguzin region, S.R.Tetlin, following directions from Ulan-Ude organized a public meeting between them and the leaders of the village as well as a few war veterans. Those who attended the meeting listened to Demin’s speech regarding «female bones...», and wrote an open letter to the leadership of Hungary and to Mr. Morvai, *«demanding the return of expatriated remains, their reburial in the original location, and a compensatory payment to the residents of Barguzin, for moral damages...»*

And that was indeed exactly what happened: a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences went to Siberia, and instigated Buryat supporters to arrange an open letter to be sent to Hungary on behalf of Barguzin citizens, demanding the return (from his native country, Hungary) of the probable remains of the Hungarian national hero and requesting a compensation for moral damages... To stoop so low! Utterly unbelievable...

I would like to supplement this story with two photographs. The one on the left you can see an ordinary photograph of Sándor Petőfi’s skull taken in Barguzin during the exhumation of the remains. Fortunately, his «fang»- a visibly protruding incisor on the upper mandible—had been preserved. For the majority of specialists that was the most important feature for the purposes of identification of the poet’s remains. And the photograph on the right depicts a cover of the

book—«Not Petőfi»—which had been produced by members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and edited by Lajos Kovács. Evidently, they had to work very hard to prevent the reader from suddenly noticing the «fanged» tooth, which appears to have been «accidentally» retouched...



My good mood was ruined.

For about three weeks I could not write even a couple of lines... During this time I received an invitation from Hungary, asking me to come to Budapest for an upcoming conference of the Association «Málenku robotni», dedicated to the 70th anniversary (1944–1945) of the postwar relocation of Hungarian civilians to the USSR (to work in the Donbass mines, in construction, forestry, on postwar restorations, and so on. Approximately three hundred thousand people were taken away, and about 40% of them did not return. According to various sources—there were about twenty thousand Hungarians in Kolyma. My father talked about them in his letters).

At the previous conference, which took place two years prior, in the city of Miskolc, I was elected as a member of the Association Council, and made a well-received presentation that was subsequently uploaded onto their website. But this time the conference would be convening in one of the halls inside the Hungarian Parliament building. I was alarmed to see that the cunning Mr. Orbán was trying to use the conference for his own purposes. Moreover, «*without providing an advance copy of the text of my report... and without a copy of the passport*», I would not be allowed to attend the conference.

But I did not have to worry about any of this, it just wasn't on the horizon for me... I was depressed about the dead end situation with Petőfi, and quickly wrote back to the Chairman of the Association András Majorski to say that I could not attend due to my busy schedule...

However, My wife Iya, seeing my confusion and depression, offered her opinion two days later: «*What's the use of torturing yourself?... Go to Hungary*

for a week. Firstly—you will relax a little bit, and secondly—you will meet other people, talk to them, and you will find the right solutions...»

I confirmed with Mr. Majorski that I would be coming after all. He replied that he would be happy to see me, but it would not be possible for me to present, since the conference program had already been arranged...

Professor Tivanenko supplied me with the telephone numbers of several members of the 1989 expedition living in Hungary. I made a few preliminary calls from Toronto. I was glad to hear the voice of Lajos Kardos—former radio operator of the expedition who immediately agreed to a meeting and promised to come to visit me at my hotel... I did not know that he had recently served as a State Secretary and he did not tell me about this during our meeting. But after I came down to see him off in the lobby and walked him to the hotel exit where his car was waiting, hotel employees standing behind the reception desk smiled at me and said: “Mr. Rott, what an important guest just paid you a visit...!” “Lajos Kardos...—I replied,—and how do you know him...?” “Actually, he happens to be our ex-State Secretary...”

Our meeting was very interesting. His former colleague and translator, József Kákonyi, who was a Soviet university graduate, and spoke decent Russian, accompanied Mr. Kardos. Josef told me that most of the time Lajos was confined to bed due to the state of his health. József and his wife Tatyana took care of the old man... And he brought Lajos in his car to see me...

Lajos Kardos presented a large manila envelope to me, filled with documents from the expedition. At one point, when due to health reasons Ferenc Morvai withdrew



The conference TRAUMA ÉS TABU MÁLENKIJ ROBOT 1944/45—2014/15—70 years of the tragedy «Malinku Robotni», Budapest, Parliament, Upper House Hall. February 25, 2015.



With Lajos Kardos. Budapest. February 2015.

from the leadership of the «Megamorv-Petőfi» committee, Kardos took over the helm. The envelope contained documents, copies of which were unexpectedly discovered a few years prior in Barguzin, inside Petőfi's old grave. Lajos assured me that he did not know anything about this, since he had sent a parcel to the museum in Barguzin that was not intended for some secret burial (I will share more on this, below...) Lajos was pleased to report that he was still an active member of the Committee «Megamorv-Petőfi», however he only mentioned Ferenc in passing, negatively... I was surprised, but said nothing.

On his way out from the meeting, which took place on the day of my arrival in Budapest on February 23, 2015 in the «Thermal» hotel, Lajos Kardos asked me to be sure to put in my book the following statement: «*Az MTA bizonyos körei, akikkel mi ebben az ügyben kapcsolatba kerültünk, mélységesen hazárduló társaság. Széchenyi foroghat a sírjában...*»

(Translation: «*In all this, certain members of HAS have turned out to be the most corrupt group in our motherland among those with which we had contact. Szecseni can roll over in his grave...*»)

He shook my hand, and said: «*I am very grateful to G-d because he brought me to you.*»

My hesitant initial phone conversation from Toronto with Ferenc Morvai surprised me. (Barguzin and Ulan-Ude citizens gave him praise not only for his financial power and organizational skills, but also for his generosity. He used to pay grave excavators 50 rubles a day. It was considered a decent amount at the time). Ferenc understood instantly who was calling him and from where. He said, succinctly: «*As soon as you land in Budapest, call me right away from the airport and we will arrange everything.*» I could not believe that I would get to meet and speak... with Morvai «himself».

Having picked up my suitcase, sitting in Gábor's car, I immediately called Ferenc. He said he was busy that day, but promised to be at my hotel the following afternoon. He asked me where I was staying. At Hotel «Thermal» on the Margarita Island in the middle of the Danube, I explained.

Since the time of our visit to Barguzin six months prior and up until then, I had been convinced in one unequivocally and repeatedly reiterated piece of information: «After the remains of Sándor Petőfi were brought back from the United States they were hidden away in some monastery, either in Germany or in Switzerland. According to the wishes of Ferenc Morvai and István Kiszely's wife, Ildikó Hankó who is also an anthropologist, the remains could be returned to Hungary only if HAS lifted its ban on exhuming the remains of the poet's mother, and agreed to make an impartial analysis of the DNA.»

This notion had been also indirectly confirmed by regular invitations to Hungary issued to professor A.I.Tivanenko by the «World Federation of Hungarians» after he supported the idea proposed by Miklós Patrubány—the Head

of the Federation—«To hold a funeral for Sándor Petőfi as quickly as possible, even if it meant symbolically burying an empty coffin without the remains...» Such a ceremonial burial was proposed to take place at one of the oldest palaces in Slovakia, converting this palace into a permanent museum for Petőfi...

That is why the last sentence uttered by Morvai literally shocked me. I gave him the name of my hotel where we were to meet the next day, and asked vaguely: «*So what's going to happen to Petőfi's remains?*» «*We are going to bury them!*»—I heard him reply confidently. «*How.. Aren't they somewhere in Germany?..*» «*I have them! We are going to bury them!!*»

It was incredible news. Such a huge thing! And so close...

The next day, I waited at the hotel until 4pm, but no one came. I called Morvai, and in response I heard some sort of mumbling, «didn't write the name of the hotel...», «not feeling well...» I was about to «cross the whole thing out», when suddenly he said: «Can you come here tomorrow?» This was the last straw, I got angry and replied: «I want to come now...!»—«Well, come then...» I wrote down the address confirming the spelling of the street name a number times. I called Gábor fortunately he was home and available, asked him to pick me up from the hotel and gave him the address where we need to go. Gábor sounded surprised: «On my way... Do you know how far this is? About... 100 km... near Miskolc...»

Gábor's «Skoda» was flying like a bird, although it was already getting dark... We found the place... an expansive red brick mansion. We pulled up to the gate, which immediately began to open automatically... A welcoming secretary, Rosa, invited us to drive in to the territory, and the gates closed. Gábor and I followed Róza inside the house, where we were greeted by an old, tired-looking man, who had just been working on something with the second secretary... It was Ferenc Morvai...

It turned out that Ferenc was 68, and he was very surprised to learn that I was about to turn 80... I think, he simply did not believe it... He told us that he had 16 factories producing boilers, or water heaters. He could not stress enough that he had «plenty» of money... I remember his words: «*At first I believed anyone and everyone... these people occupied high positions—so they had to be serious, I thought... I allocated some money for this project and went ahead... And, instead of helping, they suddenly began to almost obviously cause harm...*»



With Ferenc Morvai. Mátrafüred. February 2015.

Ferenc confidentially gave me a copy of his letter to President of Hungary János Áder, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and the Chairman of the Parliament László Kövér. That letter described the last 25 years, dedicated to the research into Petőfi's remains, on which he had already spent approximately 100 million forints (about 700 thousand dollars); virtually smuggled out of the Soviet Union remains of the poet; attempts to trace down Petőfi's family descendants, who had agreed to give samples of their blood, which were transferred to the laboratory of the Ministry of Justice of China, which in the beginning provided very encouraging data; his desire to inter the remains of Sándor Petőfi as quickly as possible and with dignity. Ferenc had unofficially invited each of these statesmen to take part in the upcoming funeral ceremony. A few days later I learned from Ferenc that each of the three recipients had verbally indicated «this issue was not of any interest to them...»

Our two-hour long conversation just flew by. It was the most amazing thing, to hear Ferenc say: *“I have Petőfi's remains!...”* He said this and made a slight gesture towards one of the adjacent rooms... Ferenc spoke so enthusiastically about himself, about the way Fate had prepared him for the cruel and unrewarding struggle for Petőfi's honour and dignity, as well as about the endless threats from unexpected detractors, that by the end of that evening I still had not had a chance to tell him anything about me. He gave me a wonderful present, a book by István Kiszely *«Mégis Petőfi?»*—(“Maybe Petőfi?”).

Two days later, on February 26th, we had another meeting. I began to feel more and more like I was unwittingly becoming a participant of those events... I thought a lot about it, and before my departure I wanted to share with Morvai some of my thoughts and invited him to my hotel. He arrived two hours late, but had called me twice with apologies, warning me that he was still far and would be delayed. I was waiting for him in the lobby, when he appeared, accompanied by a tall good-looking man. I thought this was Ferenc's driver, but then we got introduced: «The lawyer of our «Megamorv—Petőfi» Committee, and my chief assistant.»

At first Ferenc firmly refused to go up to my room, citing «potential microphones». For over an hour we talked, our conversation accompanied by the piano music from the lobby-bar. Ferenc said that HAS was adamantly refusing to exhume Petőfi's mother, formally citing the ruling by the mayor of Budapest... Two living descendants of the poet in Budapest provided their blood samples, which, together with pieces of Petőfi's skeleton, have been sent to a laboratory in China. Depending on its findings there was the possibility of interring the remains of the poet, brought from Barguzin. Ferenc said that he personally would have to fly to China to obtain the results. If I understood him correctly, Chinese experts had requested a hefty sum, the larger part of which had already been paid...

And then... I received from Morvai a totally unexpected request. Here is approximately what he said: *«I have to bring to the Chinese the rest of the payment,*

about 10 thousand dollars. I now do not have such a sum at the moment. Could you please lend me the money...? I'll pay you back. I will sell one of my patents for 500 million forints... But for now, help me..." I was alarmed... It was something new, unexpected and incomprehensible... I was at a loss... But, to save face, I told him that although it was a rather large sum of money for me, when I get back home I would review my capabilities or ask someone else, with «deeper pockets».

Towards the end of our meeting I invited them up to my room to present Morvai with two volumes of my book «In Defiance of Fate», in Hungarian. Although it's almost impossible to find it now in Budapest bookstores, I asked Gábor to borrow a couple for me from our «Presentations Box», which I plan to replenish with books from my Toronto stock during the our next visit.

We said our goodbyes, and I had to return to Canada, feeling quite ill at ease. During my entire flight back I was trying to comprehend the severity of that incident. The next day I called Ferenc with the intention of telling him that I was not in a position to offer that kind of «assistance», however he actually beat me to it, by saying: «Vladimir, I apologize for that request. It was a big mistake on my part... Forgive me, and forget about it. I will deal with it through my personal means.»

I must add, that after March 13th, the «Megamory-Petőfi» Committee made an announcement regarding the forthcoming burial of Sándor Petőfi's remains, and, among other things, issued an appeal for donations to cover the costs accompanied by a bank account number set up for this purpose.

I think that when I made a \$1000 USD wire transfer contribution to this account on March 24th, I was one of the first donors to do so. When I told Ferenc about the amount I sent, the phone line went silent, and then I heard him crying...

Dear Ferenc Morvai! Please do not be saddened by anything you did! You have earned your right to make mistakes, because no one could have endured better the endless harassment of the so called «Patriots of Hungary», starting with the «deaf-mute» members of government and the cynics from HAS, and ending with the cowardly newspapermen, that profess to be humane. You are a Giant! Be strong and persistent! You are backed by your honest work and by justice! G-d bless you, be healthy and happy!

And here is a short story about another interesting event. Today, together with my good friend and my driver who helps me to get around Hungary, Gábor, we picked up Éva Orosz at her house and drove to a charming small Hungarian restaurant, located in the district of Csepel, the area where Lajos Kardos, whom I invited to dine with us, lives. He was brought to the restaurant by the Kákonyi's—a couple that looked after him.

Engineer József Tarjányi and his pretty wife Annushka, who came from Austria just to meet us, also joined us.

Two words about them: in August of 2014 Tatyana Filippova—the director of the school museum in Barguzin—indicated to me that about a week after our delegation departed to continue on our journey along the Great Tea Road, some Hungarian, a real fan of Sándor Petőfi, arrived in their village. He spent several days there, and was able to organize a construction of the new iron fence around the former grave of the poet. He brought along a bronze bas-relief of Petőfi and wanted to install it on a wooden post above the grave, but T. Filippova



József Tarjányi left the iron fence at the former grave of Sándor Petőfi. Barguzin. July 2014.

took the bas-relief to the school museum, where its safety could be ensured... L.P. Budunov sent me a photograph and the name of this Hungarian. I asked Éva Orosz to locate the address of this person. She found out that his name was József Tarjányi, and that 15 years prior he had moved from Hungary to Austria, to the town of Sásony (Winden am See). Sándor Petőfi had a connection to this town due to his stay there when he was serving in the military in 1840... That's exactly what prompted József Tarjányi to choose that town in Austria as his new place of residence. He and I got in touch, and called each other from time to time. And now we reached that point in our lives when we could meet in person...

A tall, good-looking middleaged couple entered the restaurant. We quickly learned that in her time, as a rower who participated in three Olympic Games—in Mexico City, Munich and Montreal, Anna Pfeffer had won two silver and one bronze Olympic medals for Hungary as well as a world championship title, while József used to be a member of the Hungarian national handball team... And as it turned out, Tarjányi and Lajos Kardos had known each other for a long time. And so our conversation was very exciting, all of us had something to share.

József presented me with a compilation of interesting information, such as a detailed list of all the 230 sculptures, commemorative plaques and busts of Sándor Petőfi extant in the world, from Ecuador to Sofia, and 180 of which he had been able to visit personally...

Together with a friend of his, a sculptor, József Tarjányi has been planning to build a monument as a tribute to Sándor Petőfi in his little town of Sásony.

Tarjányi is a chemical engineer by profession, always on the road, working for a Japanese company that sells fertilizers worldwide. In the meantime, József and Anna, along with the rest of us, worry about the success of Ferenc Morvai's plans to organize a burial of Sándor Petőfi's remains.



Left to right: Éva Orosz, Vladimir Rott, Lajos Kardos, József Tarjányi, Anna Tarjányi, Tatyana Kákonyi and József Kákonyi. February 2015. Photo by Gábor Bordás.

Another important event for me took place on March 24th. My friend and translator György Zoltán Józsa arranged a meeting with the previously mentioned professor László Kovács. The meeting took place in one of the buildings at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in the Buda Castle located close to Mary Magdalene Tower. I was aware of the professor's leading role in rejecting the discovery made in Barguzin as well as of the hardline unyielding articles he wrote, so at first I was hesitant to face him, but our meeting was very interesting and I am sincerely grateful to György for this opportunity.

We walked into Professor Kovács's small and modestly furnished office exactly on time. A stocky man of about seventy warmly greeted us. György briefly introduced me, and I thanked the professor for the opportunity to meet with him, adding that I had recently visited Barguzin and had high hopes regarding the remains found there. I also said that I was familiar with the professor's position on the matter, and that without wasting his precious time I would like to ask just a few questions, the answers to which would be of interest to my readers.

I admitted that I could not understand why members of HAS had been inexorably striving to achieve a seemingly singular goal—to destroy all the facts and to put a permanent ban on anyone's engagement in the fate of Sándor Petőfi.

After my first question, Professor Kovács's face flushed, he became visibly nervous, and I, in turn, apologized and explained that due to the level of my skills in the Hungarian language, I would prefer to ask him brief questions. I am going to ask the readers to keep in mind that at the time I did not know about a strand of hair, which had disappeared in Barguzin... nor about a HAS letter to Moscow with a request to destroy the remains from grave №7...; nor about the professor's trip to Barguzin to obtain a letter written by the «village citizens», demanding the return of the «female...» remains and compensation...

Here is what I was able to record that evening:

—Mr. Kovács, could you tell me whether you actually believe that these are the remains of Sándor Petőfi? [As far as we know], to this date, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has not conducted any serious investigation [into them]?

—I'm 100 percent, and perhaps even—150 percent certain, that this is not Petőfi!

—Why has the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for so many years been obstructing, and hindering, attempts to take bone samples from the grave of Sándor Petőfi's mother for comparison with the DNA of the remains from Barguzin? Buryatia, Hungary and Russia have been waiting for such a simple demonstration of understanding for 26 years... Otherwise, what facts do you have that would prove that the discovered remains do not belong to Petőfi?

—Exhumation of Sándor Petőfi's mother is not necessary... We are not going to do it, because we already know that this is not Petőfi...!

—Mr. Kovács, maybe one day when you are no longer around, your successors will exhume Petőfi's mother to ensure that you were correct... What mandate would you leave for them?

In response the professor smiled faintly and said nothing... I continued:

—I want to tell you that I grew up in the Soviet Union, where answers to the most burning questions could be deduced in the first place from the latest jokes... The statements of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences regarding the remains found in Barguzin—which it has failed to examine—are similar to the statements made by Armenians in the following joke:

Two neighbouring states—Armenia and Georgia—have always been trying to get ahead of each other. Once, the Georgians began to dig a hole in the ground.

They dug and they dug... At the depth of two meters they found a bent nail. Immediately they declared: «Our findings suggest that in Georgia, 2000 years ago, there already existed the wired radio connection...» Of course, the Armenians immediately started digging a pit, too... they dug and they dug... dug down to a depth of 5 meters, but still found nothing however they immediately declared: «Our findings suggest that in Armenia 5000 years ago there already existed the wireless telegraph...!»

When I asked whether he had ever been to Buryatia, or visited Barguzin (at that time I did not know that he had), the Professor L.Kovács said that he had brought the manuscript of his book to show in Buryatia, and somewhat reluctantly mentioned that he had only visited the legendary city of Kyakhta...

Then I tried to move on to spiritual issues, i.e., talk about the level of morality of society, where human remains are prevented from being interred, and not only for scientific purposes... The Professor angrily waved away that question.

Then I decided to ask:

—Excuse me, Professor. Are you a religious person? Do you go to church...?

He laughed at this, shook his head and told me that he had only been to a church with his mother as a little kid... And I wanted to share with him something about my mother:

—Dear Professor, I appreciate that you do not mind me telling my readers about our meeting today. But this is what I would like to tell you about my mom:

My mother—Regina Spielberg—born in a small Hungarian village Garadna in Aba—ui—Torn Varmede district of Zemplensk region (Abauj-Torna Vármegye Garadna Község), in a family where there were 12 children; who lived in terrible conditions with two sons after her husband's arrest in the Soviet Union; who never learned to speak Russian but spent a lifetime loading lumber into railway cargo wagons; without her husband, who had been taken away by Stalin, alone raised two sons; she always taught us this: «Children, remember: nothing good can happen to this country and to this nation, while they have an unburied corpse of a man lying around in Red Square...!»

And my beloved Hungary for a quarter of a century has been kicking the bones of their own Man! Even if it is not Petőfi...! Even if there is only a one percent chance that this is him! And what if it is Sándor Petőfi?! Who has ever taught us to leave our dead unburied?

Since my last trip to Hungary events surrounding Petőfi began to unfold with unbelievable speed. Here's a quick overview:

«March 10th, 2015. Ferenc Morvai returned from a three-day trip to China, where he personally retrieved the results of the comparison tests between DNA samples taken from the bones found in Barguzin and the blood samples of two of Sándor Petőfi's family descendants living in Budapest. The state-of-the-art laboratory at the Ministry of Justice of China performed all the tests.

As I understand, Ferenc had to go there not only because the remaining balance had to be paid in cash directly to the cashier at the laboratory, but also because two weeks earlier a couple of Hungarians allegedly came to the lab requesting that the results be issued to them... This is very nearly what happened, however, a lab engineer who was also a translator from Hungarian, questioned the legitimacy of their demand, and advised his boss to call Morvai in Budapest in order to find out more about them... Morvai was very surprised by this news and forbade issuing anything to anyone without his permission...

Ferenc shared with me: *«You know, Vladimir, when my boilers began to sell well, I started to donate money to all sorts of good causes...»*

One day a man came to me asking for help: a Chinese student had finished two years of university, but the money to continue his studies ran out, and he would have to go back to China... Could I help him...? I helped him, paid for his education... I can not remember his name, but he was grateful to me...» Next, the laboratory engineer turned out to be this former student...

All the recently published materials on Petőfi in the Hungarian press are either critical or sarcastic...

«March 12th. I made a telephone call to Lajos Kardos. Having been invited by Morvai, in the morning he is going to attend a meeting of the «Megamorv-Petőfi» Committee, where Ferenc will introduce the scientists from China...»

«March 13th. A well-attended press conference arranged by the «Megamorv-Petőfi» Committee brought together about 50 participants. F.Morvai provided details about the search for the remains from grave №7, and their subsequent misadventures; two scientists from China presented, through a translator, test results demonstrating a 99.2% match between the DNA from the remains found in Barguzin and blood samples from the descendants of the poet's family.

Members of the 1989 expedition—Csaba Csonka and Béla Varga—delivered their presentations, while the President of the World Federation of Hungarians, M. Patrubby, thanked the members of the «Megamorv-Petőfi» Committee for their lasting perseverance and congratulated them on the latest results. F.Morvai could not obtain permission to hold this press conference at the Sándor Petőfi Museum in Budapest, so he rented a hall in a small hotel instead. No representatives of the HAS attended the conference, and Hungarian media ignored it completely. Full boycott...»

“March 14th ...«Instructed» by HAS, the Mayor of a small town of Kishkeresh did not allow news reporters from China to film inside Petőfi's house...”

“March 20th ...«Megamorv-Petőfi» issued a «Proclamation to the People of the Country», announcing the date—July 17, 2015—of the upcoming public celebration, the «Day of the Burial of the Poet» at the «Sports Arena named after László Papp». The proclamation also announced that on April 15th an

international conference on the final identification of the remains from Barguzin would take place in Budapest, where scientists from other countries would participate along with the representatives of HAS. The Chief anthropologist of the Council of Europe would chair the conference. The Proclamation called upon all citizens to make donations towards this celebration, and included the number of the bank account for donations...”

At the end of March of 2015, F.Morvai received the following letter from Canada. Mr. Csaba Grünner, of Hungarian origin, from St. Catherines, Ontario, wrote:

«Dear Mr. Ferenc Morvai!

To attend the funeral, I would like to lease a passenger aircraft with a 350 seat capacity to travel from Toronto to Budapest and back to Toronto.

Unfortunately, this can only be done after presenting a letter from the organizers a funeral permit as well as other related documents. Please send them as soon as possible, because they must be presented at least 60 days before the flight...

With gratitude and respect, Csaba Grünner.»

«March 30th ...F.Morvai assumed that unless the leadership of Hungary changed their attitude towards Petőfi, he would bury the remains of the poet in the same crypt with the poet's mother. Petőfi's family's living descendants had already given their consent...

But today, Ferenc called in with the NEWS: “Today Petőfi's mother's grave was declared a «Heritage site!»—Apparently, my phone conversations are being systematically tapped...”

April 2nd. From Ferenc: “Today, a high fence is being built around the tomb of Petőfi's mother... It is not clear—what for? Perhaps to keep us out, or perhaps they are planning to do something on the inside...”

April 5th. From Louise Maltseva in Ulan-Ude: “Vladimir, once again I am struck by your organizational skills and foresight. Just like you said, the plane landed at 7:00 am. Ira and I handed the flowers to Ferenc and Lena. Ravil got their luggage. I called Tivanenko and they had just left, because they thought that the flight would be arriving at 8 o'clock. We took the guests to hotel «Buryatia». We parted really warmly, embracing each other. But what if the Rizvanovs did not arrive? Our guests would have been alone at the airport for over an hour. How awkward and embarrassing it would have been! Hugs, Louise.”

As multifaceted character traits of our protagonists come to light, it is nonetheless difficult not to be astonished by the amount of muck thrown at Ferenc Morvai to vilify the man who was once persuaded to contribute huge sums toward the national pride of the country... Yet if from the outset HAS took things under its scientific control, instead of following instructions from Moscow, today Hungarian school teachers would have been leading the younger generation with greater confidence...

Let's take a good look at where Ferenc is today, on April 6, 2015, and what he is doing... Hungary—in its insanity—does not strive to bury the remains of its hero, but instead via the cemetery “Fiumei úti temető”—drives Morvai to Siberia to seek permission to bury their Own, Petőfi, whose remains have been moved and hidden around his native country for a quarter of a century.

And in the post-Soviet Buryatia, just like in the rest of modern day Russia, people still do not understand in what kind of age we live, which issues are the most relevant in today's world, how to survive, how to feed the population, and how to help them realise that their country's sliding to the last place in the world is preventable... To achieve this all that is needed is a little piece of paper with a scribble allowing to lay to rest—what had been withdrawn from their hospitable ground—into his native ground, where the poet was born, and where the remains of his parents also rest.

Buryatia, just like the rest of Russia, has been content with the notion that the bones «probably belonged to a female...», that they were being scattered around... Then suddenly, the mighty China points out that it is not junk, but the remains of a Hero... Morvai arrived to Buryatia, and, breathless, calls for the urgent interment of the remains... Buryat television shows Morvai surrounded by scientists. Boris Bazarov, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Buryat Academy of Sciences (to be exact—БНЦ СО РАН) declares:

«This is the first time that we are seeing this document, and it still has to be carefully examined. The authority of this Shanghai organization is recognized around the globe, but we should not forget that all authorisations must be issued by the Russian Federation.

To bury the remains of Sándor Petőfi in Hungary, scientists of the Buryat Scientific Center would need to conduct additional investigations. Also, an «approval» for the burial of the remains must be issued by the government of our republic, and, later, by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia. And only after that the bones of the Hungarian poet could finally be laid to rest.»

Such overinflated and brash bravado reminds me of the cocksure prison guards of the labour camps of Kolyma. Can you imagine how he would sound if he was forced to improve the level of life in the country by 1%, or if he needed to bring home the remains of all the Buryat soldiers whose remains are strewn around Europe, or even one of those sets of remains.

Nevertheless, thank G-d, the Buryat land has always had an abundant supply of talented people, who took care of it, enriched and respected it, and Ferenc Morvai encountered some of them. The following day he returned to Hungary completely satisfied.

At the same time, due to the kindness of his heart, he gave out invitations to the funeral left and right. That is how a guest list, below, came about, although it got finalized two weeks after the date of this entry.

Delegation from the Republic of Buryatia (Russia) to Sándor Petőfi's Day
(Budapest, July 17th, 2015)

1. Tivanenko Alexei V.—Professor, an expert on Sándor Petőfi.
2. Kolmynin Viktor Ivanovich—Bishop of the «Union of Christian Churches» of Siberia and the Far East.
3. Baldakova Tamara Shatovna—Director of Kurumkansky High School, descendant of Sándor Petőfi.
4. Dorzhiev Tsydypzhap Zayatuevich—Doctor of Biological Sciences, Professor, Honoured Scientist of the Republic of Buryatia, Head of the Department of Zoology and Ecology of the Buryat State University. Descendant of Sándor Petőfi.
5. Bazarova Elena Garmaevna—Ph.D., Associate Professor of the Institute of Educational Policy, the Honourable worker of secondary education. Descendant of Sándor Petőfi.
6. Bazarov Tsyren Radnaevich—Ph.D., mathematics teacher at Ulan-Ude school №60. (Married to Bazarova E.G.)
7. Filippova Tatyana S.—Sándor Petőfi Museum Director, a secondary school teacher in the village of Barguzin.
8. Melnikov Ivan Vladislavovich—Head of the Barguzin region of Buryatia.
9. Baluev Alexey Leonidovich—the Mayor of the village of Barguzin.
10. Budun Leonid—professional photographer, 26 years of experience with S. Petőfi's case.
11. Stepanova Ayuna S.—employee of the newspaper «Inform-Poljus», Ulan-Ude.
12. Gordienko Anton S.—construction of the memorial at Mysovaya, director of a trucking company, Ulan-Ude.
13. Gordienko Svetlana A.—Director of a Beauty Salon, Ulan-Ude.
14. Rizvanov Ravil Sabirovich—contractor for the memorial in Mysovaya, chief engineer of the locomotive depot station, Ulan-Ude.
15. Rizvanov Irina V.—chief accountant of the branch of the «Asian-Pacific Bank « in Ulan -Ude.
16. Rizvanov Daria—10th grade student of secondary school №14 in Ulan-Ude.

I would like to add two more people to this list—my wife Iya and I. I undertook to help the «Megamorv—Petőfi» Committee with organizing the trip for the «Buryats»: to help arrange their accommodation and transportation, and to accompany them in Hungary as their sole interpreter.

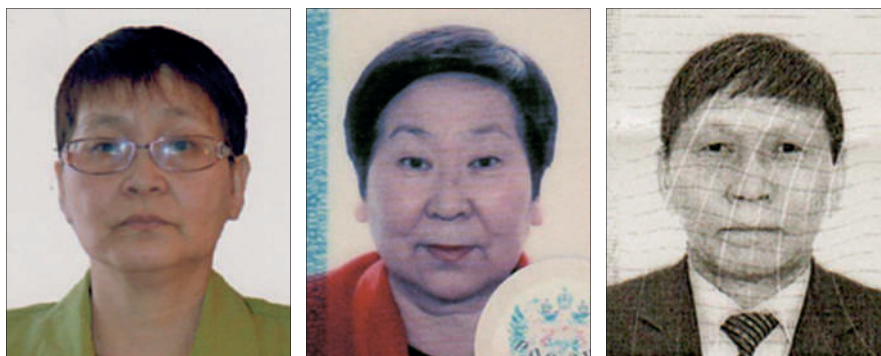
Ferenc Morvai was very happy to accept my help. And I always remember his financial fiasco during our second meeting—on February 26th. Therefore, I took into account his overly generous, overly ambitious invitations to Hungary

issued during his last visit to Ulan-Ude, and with the help of A.V. Tivanenko I managed to reduce Morvai's guest list to 11 persons mentioned at the top. Ferenc promised to cover their expenses in full.

Iya and I decided to add to the list, and to pay for, our true friends and assistants Anton and Svetlana Gordienko, and Ravil and Irina Rizvanov. The latter wanted to take along their daughter Dasha, well known to all of us. Our initial calculations showed that even a modestly priced trip would cost approximately two thousand dollars (USD) per person.

The reader might be surprised to find a note, «Descendant of Petőfi...», next to three names on the list. In my story, I have not yet touched upon this topic, leaving it to A.V.Tivanenko, L.P.Budunov, and other authors. This is a very interesting historical aspect of the poet's life in Siberia. In summary, it refers to the fact that during the long summer days of hay harvesting in the fields, Sándor Petőfi took a liking to a pretty young woman, a Buryat. As a result of their mutual affection a baby boy was born... When it was time to register the child, S. Petőfi was no longer around. As we have seen from the gravestone inscriptions at the cemetery in Barguzin, in those days, the main inhabitants of the village were Orthodox Christians, Jews, and «foreign aliens»... The not very well educated inhabitants of a nearby Buryat village didn't have the name of the boy's biological father, and registered him as «Evrein...» (Jewish son). Legend has it that the baby fortunately grew up, and the Evreinovs in Buryatia are considered his happy and closely-knit descendants.

A.V.Tivanenko told me that an elderly female descendant lives in one of the distant ulus [villages], she is recognised as a gifted poet... When we were planning the trip to Hungary, to process the tourist visas they sent us the copies of their passports, and that is why I am able to include the photographic images of these three prospective members of the delegation...



The descendants of Sándor Petőfi in Buryatia: Elena Bazarov, Tsydypzhap Dorzhiev, Tamara Baldakov. Passport photos.

April 7th ...During the time when the 1989 expedition was taking place, a very substantial amount of across-the-board assistance was provided by Alexander A. Petrunin, who worked at the time as an Aide to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Buryatia, and later served as Deputy Minister of Culture of the Buryat republic. Although now he had already retired, Petrunin accompanied Ferenc during this visit to Ulan-Ude, and after the Hungarian's departure, «according to the established tradition», reported to an Advisor to the President of Russia, in Moscow, on the end of Morvai's research expedition in Barguzin, the identification of the found remains, and the forthcoming burial in Hungary. The Advisor replied: (Translated from Hungarian—VR) *"...This issue is of great interest to Mr. Putin. I must report this information to the President, please remain on the line..."*

Shortly after that Vladimir Putin picked up the phone... I will attempt to relate his words as accurately as possible: *"As a big fan of Petőfi I am closely following the progress of the investigation; if it is complete and all is ready for re-burial, I would definitely come to the festival and take part in the ceremony. We shall coordinate all the details through the diplomatic channels with the Government of Hungary and Mr. Morvai. I will try to touch upon this issue during my next televised interview (April 16).*

I wish you success. Thank you for the information".

"April 11th ...Mr.Hong, Engineer, reported that, in response to accurate competent materials recent publications in Chinese press are stating that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences did not recognize the results of the analysis done by the laboratory in China. Dr. Chengtao Li¹⁸ gave an interview that was broadcast on Shanghai television, where he introduced the audiences to the results of the DNA testing of Petőfi's remains conducted by the Laboratory of Forensic Science under the Ministry of Justice. Dr. Li rejected HAS's point of view, and mentioned that he was getting ready to report this incident to the international scientific community and peer-reviewed journals.

Dr. Li pointed out that the identification of Petőfi's remains had been conducted by the same methods as those employed during the recent identification of the remains of King Richard III."

"April 15th ...Today, in Budapest, in the historic hall of the «Pilvax» hotel an international conference on the remains of Petőfi was supposed to be taking place. But HAS did not even respond to the invitation to take part in the conference, and Ferenc Morvai had to urgently cancel participation of the scientists from other countries...

¹⁸ Dr. Chengtao Li—Chief Professor, Department of Forensic genetics, Institute of Forensic Science, Ministry of Justice, China. Affiliation: Shanghai Key Laboratory of Forensic Medicine, Institute of Forensic Sciences, Ministry of Justice, Shanghai, P. R. China.

...In his half-hour speech, Ferenc spoke of fluctuating success and achievements of the «Megamorv—Petőfi» Committee in recent years, noting that, unfortunately, not one of the Hungarian governments showed any interest in the remains of the poet since 1989. He introduced the audience to the agenda for the planned «Celebration of the Return of the Poet» on July 17, 2015, and asked everyone to lend their financial support to this event, which would take place in the arena named after László Papp.”

“May 1st ...An awful thing happened today at dawn in the office of Morvai’s production plant, located in Nagyréde. Some hooligans smashed several of the windows with stones, and wrote across the entrance gate in huge letters, «Megdöglesz Petőfi» (You will die because of Petőfi) and also drew two swastikas... Police were investigating the incident...”



Vandalism at the entrance gate of one of the factories of Ferenc Morvai. Nagyréde. May 1, 2015.



“May 6th, 2015. It’s 8 pm in Budapest. It has become somewhat of a tradition, that at this hour, when Ferenc is already lying in bed, he calls me: “Today I had a good day, good news!”—“Come on, tell me!”—“I’ve told you, that at the cemetery where Petőfi’s

parents are buried, the government declared their crypt «a heritage site» about two months ago, and a week later they even put up a high fence around it... To find a solution, about a month ago I bought at the «Fiumei úti» cemetery two plots close by—one for Petőfi, and the other—for me.

At the request of the cemetery, I went to Buryatia to bring back papers regarding the poet’s former burial site... And yesterday the government—just to hurt me—declared this entire cemetery a «heritage site», and now people can be buried there only by special permission... Of course I got upset, but today I decided to go there in person. I came and told the employees of the cemetery how I had been harassed for 25 years... and that now they have also been deemed a «heritage site»...

They listened to me and said, “For 25 years you have gotten so many good things done for the country, that we wish to help you, too—we will issue for you a burial permit! Show it to the police if they start to pester you... And if, for doing

this, we get fired, then so be it, let them fire us...”, the cemetery director and his deputy said to me. Imagine, there are such kind people out there!”

“May 11th ...Poor Ferenc told me yet more sad news: “...*You won’t believe me... Today, we were passing by the cemetery “Fiumei úti temető” (cemetery on Fiume street), and decided to stop by, to clarify something... And there was a big crowd, a lot of people; all the old employees had been fired, we couldn’t recognize anyone; the fence was being reinforced, new locks on the gates were being installed...; the new workers seemed like they were from the countryside, too timid to answer our questions...*” Ferenc was barely able to speak...

“May 14th ...F.Morvai constantly complains of fatigue, he doesn’t have the energy to work in the afternoons anymore... Today he had some light heart surgery done, I believe they put in one stent... he called me in Toronto from the hospital, two hours after the surgery...”

“June 5th ...Today, I spoke for the first time with Ildikó Hankó—the widow of I.Kiszely, an anthropologist (I got her phone number from Morvai’s secretary). Our conversation lasted about 30 minutes, until we got interrupted by her grandchildren who came over to her place for lunch. I introduced myself, and said that the purpose of my call was to let her know that I would serve as a guide and an interpreter for the members of the delegation attending the funeral from Buryatia.” “*But there won’t be a funeral!*”—she responded instantly. I said that I would prefer to discuss the subject with her at another time, and that in the meanwhile I just wanted to confirm that she would agree to receive the delegation and, if possible, let them take a photograph with her—because half of the members of the delegation remembered her husband so well from working with him in Barguzin. She agreed to that.

However, Ildikó was strongly opposed to the funeral that Morvai was trying to organize because, allegedly, he only had the minor bones, whereas she had the skull and the rest of the bones... She was polite. It seemed that I didn’t scare her much; she spoke freely. Apologized when her grandchildren began to get in the way of our conversation, then firmly stated: “*Until they appoint a State Commission in charge of the exhumation of Sándor Petőfi’s mother—until that time I shall keep the skull and the remains, and shall not give them away!*”

I think at this point I ought to doff my hat in genuine admiration to István Kiszely—one of the main characters of our «almost» detective story. Although he passed away a long time ago, achievements of this veritable scientist should not be forgotten. Like him, soon we shall also pass away, yet truth needn’t die.

One of the last works written by Kiszely—his dramatic anthology «Mégis Petőfi?» («Still Petőfi?»)—is a concise, detailed collection of stories, accounts of the lows reached by Hungarian society, and of the occasional small breaks in the stormy fate of the Great Poet. At the end of his book István Kiszely leaves the kind readers with a heart-felt confession of a truth-seeking scientist standing on the precipice of a boundless expanse:



István Kiszely.

“As «Petőfi’s case» unfolded, our society got divided: into honest and dishonest people, people who followed traditions and those who were more open to fresh ideas. I had already reached my senior years; people related to me in two different ways: there were those who believed that at this stage of my life—especially because of my unconventional views regarding the history of the ancient world—the time had come to insult my professional and human dignity; and there were others who believed in me, and knew that I always thought things through, in a sense that I had never expressed an opinion about anything, whether in writing or verbally, unless I was absolutely certain.

Of course, science is a naturally open environment, and can contain errors, too; but, still, they get resolved by the future generations. There were people who supported me, I made a lot of new friends, and at the end of a life that was entirely dedicated to my work, this is precisely what allows me to say that life had meaning.

I am an anthropologist. I worked as an anthropologist for three decades. In the course of my professional career I extracted very little value from the above mentioned publications, that is—from the documents published by the press; historical facts, which had been insidiously turned

inside out or misinterpreted, misconstrued by the people working in various professions that like to take only what suits them from everything and discard the rest, and who call anything that does not conform to their own views—a «falsification». I am not competent in this sort of senseless talk. Only, in my professional opinion, on the basis of it—I am convinced that the one I inadvertently found is—Sándor Petőfi, because all the anthropological features point to him, even if the poet had narrow build and short stature.

It's possible that I was wrong, and then—as I have already said before—my entire professional career is not worth anything. The saddest fact, however, is that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences prevented my theory from being tested, by not allowing the crypt on Kerepesi street cemetery to be unsealed. And if the employees of this institution call themselves «scientists», but do not employ the most basic scientific criteria, then an honest man should not be working there.

I acted accordingly. After 28 years of service at the Academy, I left this “slap in the face of Hungarian science”, abusive “National Academy”—academy of János Arany, Károly and Sándor Kisfaludy, and István Széchenyi.

The foregoing, viewed along with citations could serve equally well as a conclusion for now, and in the future. Many ideas that haven't been carefully thought through could be developed further. Petőfi's case provided a glimpse into the hearts of many people, lofty as well as shallow.

But the saddest thing of all is that the book provides an accurate snapshot of our society in this day and age: the cowardice of the officials, not daring to have an opinion about the governance at the Academy; the spinelessness of most journalists; the submissiveness of most people. Despite all this, I'm glad that I had the opportunity to become one of the initiators of this divide, and I consider myself lucky that I was able to live in such a version of Hungarian society, where—despite all of the above—the seed of truth and goodness can still grow.»

I felt a strong urge to find Katalin Mezey. After all, this year she is not only a famous Hungarian poet, but also the publisher of my books. On March 15, 2015 Katalin Mezey was awarded a Kossuth Prize—one of the most distinguished awards for contributions to the culture of the country. I shared my experiences with Katalin for a whole hour. What's going on with this so-called «burial of Petőfi...» is a nightmare, a tragedy. Obviously Morvai is unstable; Ildikó Hankó—stubborn; and some dark forces lurking behind our backs are causing harm, terribly afraid of something... but this is about Petőfi and his Hungary! What will become of it...?

Kati shared my despair. We tried to somehow forestall the escalation of the absurd. I remember her final words: *“I am absolutely sure that these remains*

belong to Sándor Petőfi, but I can not imagine what to do in this terrible situation...

“June 11 ...In recent months Morvai’s financial difficulties started to look more and more prominent, as banks placed various restrictions on his firm’s accounts. Even though he insisted more than once that he could sell a patent on one of his products, for which he would be paid «many millions...» Yesterday he missed the deadline for wiring the money, and today—instead of money—he sent some very grave information. In his email Morvai informed me of the current status of preparations for the upcoming events:

1) ERSTE—bank has agreed to give me a loan in the amount of 50 million forints on June 10th, (I had to sign papers to guarantee it with more than 100 million forints worth of equity in my house.)

2) Today, I will meet with the officials from the Police Department of Budapest regarding an increase to the number of personnel needed for maintaining order.

3) Today, I will hold negotiations with the leadership of the Sports Arena, and with the print shop in Debrecen, because they suddenly requested an immediate payment of all costs in full, despite the fact that they had previously agreed to accept the payment in several instalments.

4) Like I promised, my finances should be in order after I have settled the issues described above, in paragraphs 1,2 and 3.

5) Our foes are trying hard to derail our plans:

—the master of ceremonies refused to participate out of fear,

—one of the lead musicians refused to participate because he was promised that he would receive a lot more money for performing in Felcsút,

—one famous composer also refused to participate because he received 30 million forints for playing one of his new pieces elsewhere,

—there were other obstacles. For example at the Sports Arena some employees were flat out lying to people who were calling up looking for tickets.

6) Since every local clergyman, having received a warning that “there could be bloodshed at the arena...”, refused to participate—the Buryats’ visit is especially important for me due to the fact that there is a priest among them. However, please understand that I have to be careful with the payments. But, even if it costs me my home, Sándor Petőfi will be buried on the 17th of July 2015.

To ensure that it won’t be just you and me attending the funeral, the following is also being done:

a. 500,000 invitations have been hand-delivered to apartments in Budapest.

b. We continue to place paid advertisements in newspapers, on radio and television.

c. 1000 large posters will be displayed around Budapest, and 3000 small posters—in other cities of the country.

Morvai added an email written on June 10th by musician Gábor Berkes which was addressed to the management of the Sports Arena.

This famous musician expressed his serious concerns:

“Our dress rehearsal will take place at the sports arena immediately prior to the event, because our audio equipment will only become available at that time.

I will continue to search for a suitable event host. There is also another serious problem. At our first meeting I was under the impression that in the rays of Sándor Petőfi’s glory, the oratorio and the funeral would become an event of great national importance. Unfortunately, so far we could only observe the opposite. A live performance at the Sports Arena has never before been prepared in such secrecy, and whichever new circumstances might occur, unless something changes, it might happen that there won’t be enough spectators. If there isn’t much interest, it’s possible that only a few hundred fans would be in the audience. Posters alone will not make a big enough difference.

By itself, July 17 does not mean anything. This is a problem. If this situation does not get fixed immediately, it will end up being a major failure.”

Ferenc Morvai wrote in a letter to the Manager of the Sports Arena about an unpleasant event after he received a letter from a female resident of Budapest. She had gone to the Sports Arena to purchase a ticket for the Petőfi celebration and she was refused by the cashiers. They informed her that the tickets were strictly for VIPs with special invitations, and that they were not going to go on sale to the general public.

Morvai is insisting that next to each box office cashier’s window there be placed a note that reads:

—tickets will be distributed free of charge on a first come first served basis on July 17, 2015.

“I am asking you to find out all those who are responsible for sabotaging our event, and to take all necessary steps to ensure that these things don’t happen again. I will come myself to each box office cashier’s window to make sure that these notes are indeed hanging there.”—concluded Morvai’s letter.

On the promised Friday, June 12th, I received a letter from Morvai containing a response from the Bank whereby they refused to lend him 50 million forints.

Time will tell to what extent it was my fault, and whether I should be held accountable for supporting Ferenc Morvai’s essentially insane idea to bury the remains of Sándor Petőfi, after they had been separated into two lots, and when it was impossible to announce the location of the burial in advance. I cannot wish this for Sándor Petőfi and Hungary.

Of course, I was incredibly frustrated because of everything that has happened. Many thanks to one very kind-hearted person, Lena Sarnya, Ferenc Morvai's longstanding translator (she is shown on the right in this photo, taken during their most recent visit to Ulan-Ude). She was first to respond to my letter to her boss:

"Good afternoon Mr. Rott!

I have read your letter to Ferenc Morvai.

You are absolutely right!

I also told Ferenc, that it is necessary to make a statement about the arrival of the delegation, even if they are not coming. You must let people know what is happening.

Indeed, among the members of the delegation are not only seniors, but also people who have jobs and need to make arrangements regarding vacations at their workplaces. Or, perhaps, not to make?

Maybe you will decide to come, if, of course, you will have the desire to meet with Morvai, to witness the ceremony, and to describe it in your book, not according to Ferenc's words, but with your own, as you will see it all!

I am also very upset about this situation!

I would be happy to meet you, if, God willing, this ever happens.

Sincerely,

Lena"





*From left to right: Louise Maltsev, Ferenc Morvai, Irina Rizvanov and Lena Sarnya.
Meeting Ferenc and Lena at the airport in Ulan-Ude. April 2015.
Photo by Ravil Rizvanov.*

What a pity that due to all of these misadventures we forget our main duty—to pay our sincere and deepest respect to the legendary Sándor Petőfi. Petőfi is a genius, he will always live on. Look—he is standing next to you:

*There won't be a tombstone
Above my grave when I die...
Only a small wooden cross
Will tell where my ashes lie...*

*But if all my pain and woes
Turned into stone and granite,
Over my grave then would
Arise a tall Pyramid¹⁹*

¹⁹ Translated from Russian source by O.B.

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 19

Still, I am not able to feel at peace:

My dear Hungarians! What excuse will we offer, if it turns out that these really are the remains of Sándor Petőfi?

And we just kicked them around for a quarter of a century...

The truth will be revealed to us not by historian L.Kovács, who always speaks with such obstinate conviction—suspicious and uncompromising—but by another Person.

Sándor Petőfi, like all of us, will receive the greatest gift of all from his own mother. This will happen when they finally open the tomb of Mária Hruz and compare her remains with the ones brought from Barguzin.

And if in this grave they won't find any bones at all, or if they find someone else's bones—not Mária Hruz's—this will only confirm that HAS had found out before anyone else whose remains were found in Siberia.

Toronto, June 28, 2015

Chapter 20

A LETTER TO BURYAT-MONGOLIA

Toronto, July 30th, 2015.

Dear descendants of Sándor Petőfi! Dear Aleksey Vasilevich, Victor Ivanovich, Tatyana²⁰ Sergeyevna, and all the other members of our failed mission to the funeral of Sándor Petőfi!

Allow me to refer to all of you collectively by a convenient, and already popular in Hungary word—“*Barguzinians*”! I wish to tell you as soon as possible about a wonderful celebration, which Ferenc Morvai nevertheless managed to organize.

First, I must apologize for such a long period of silence. Iya and I just yesterday arrived to Toronto from Hungary, and during our stay there, my laptop for some reason could not send out any e-mails via the Hungarian network.

During our stay in Hungary, you were always next to us, every day, and my heart bled from the fact that you were unable to see it all. I must share so much with you, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to do it properly.

Believe me, during those chaotic days, oftentimes I thought that perhaps it was an expression of God’s will that you could not be brought to Hungary. Since I was the only person who would have been simultaneously translating and explaining to you the meaning of what was taking place, searching for appropriate words to describe to you all the filthy, malicious and duplicitous lies that seeped from a variety of sources into mass media...

A flagrant example of that was the official statement of the World Federation of Hungarians, signed by M. Patrubány, who ten days prior declared that “*there were no bones in F. Morvai’s possession, and the funeral should be prohibited...*»

Since then the passions around the funeral slightly subsided, and the remaining days in Hungary allowed us to get a closer look at how the events were unfolding, I would like to say the following:

²⁰ We mean Siberian (Buryat) descendants of Sándor Petőfi: Tsydypzhap Zayatuevich Dorzhiev—Doctor of Biological Sciences, Professor; Tamara Shatovna Baldakova—a secondary school Principal; Elena Garmaevna Bazarova—Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, associate professor; as well as: Alexey V. Tivanenko—Professor, specialist on Petőfi; Viktor Ivanovich Kolmynin—Bishop AXII “Union of Christians of Siberia and the Far East”; Tatiana S. Filippova—Director of the Sándor Petőfi Museum, and a secondary school teacher in Barguzin.

Congratulations to all of you, as well as to the people of Buryatia and Barguzin on this tremendous occasion—the successful and respectful preservation through the ages of the priceless Hungarian treasure—the remains of their national hero, an outstanding poet—Sándor Petőfi! Only with time will come a full appreciation of everything that you have done for Hungary. In turn, I have already been inspired by the powerful unfolding of these important events—sewn by you during the many years of work and devotion to the Truth. Now you can relax and feel proud of your fruitful work, to which you have dedicated so many years.

By July 17th, 2015 the Hungarian press and the country's leadership not only did not soften their tone and attitude towards the matter of Petőfi's funeral, instead they have continued to be extremely hostile. Ferenc Morvai deserves much credit, for being able to go through all that and to hold up. Of course, he made a lot of mistakes, but to invest that many millions of his own money—as well as his health, nerves, time—and to continue, as a mighty bulldozer, to clear the way towards a singular goal of burying the remains of the Poet in the soil of his homeland—that is Ferenc's ultimate, and infinitely noble, achievement. There are very few heroes, like him, capable of fighting for justice for a quarter of a century, of standing up against a torrent of muck and bullying.

For a quarter of a century some members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences did not allow bone samples to be taken from the tomb of the Poet's mother; and instead of in March his mother's burial site was declared a protected historical monument, and within a month it was enclosed with a high fence... Then, F. Morvai bought a plot at a nearby cemetery—on Fiumei street—but the authorities declared it a “historic monument” immediately after the acquisition, making it necessary to seek special permission for a burial on the site... That's what forced Morvai to fly to Buryatia in order to obtain “*Permission for the Hungarians to bury their national Hero...*”

During his visit to Buryatia, Ferenc Morvai sincerely believed that he would be able to put together a delegation of a decent size, to represent the Republic. He was planning to include me, my wife, and four of my friends, the future potential builders of the monument to Sándor Petőfi on the site of the old grave in Barguzin. At the same time, hostile powers hindered Ferenc Morvai's every action: he had to manage the fee for renting the stadium, composers' and artists' fees for performing the Oratory, pay expenses for printing and distribution of posters, flags and brochures, the costs of hiring security, arranging the flowers, etc. Prices were raised many times over original quotes, all expenses had to be pre-paid in advance, and all the banks were instructed to not extend credit to Morvai.

Unfortunately, the sources and causes of this nation-wide hostility and persecution have not yet been revealed. Of course, today Hungary is facing

hundreds of other problems, yet—as the funeral demonstrated—Hungarian people do not give up easily: they can be confused but they cannot be fooled.

I first heard Ferenc Morvai's name at Petőfi's grave in Barguzin in July 2014, and we met in February 2015, during my trip to Hungary to attend a science conference.

Over the course of the last few months we were in contact on a daily basis, and I was aware of many things, learning firsthand about threats and the unending additional obstacles pertaining to the burial. But he did not dare to tell me on the phone that by May he had already done something important to the remains of the Poet. And I, without telling Ferenc, tried (through my various influential acquaintances) to persuade I. Kiszely's wife to consider adding Petőfi's remains at her disposal to the forthcoming interment...

My relationship with F. Morvai deteriorated sharply when he began to reduce the number of guests of the Buryat delegation, since for me that was totally unacceptable... As a result, my wife Iya and I were forced to cover the cost of the trip for the four friends we had invited...

Upon arrival to Hungary, on the eve of the funeral we were shocked by the atmosphere of hostility, and by the level of disregard for the event that was about to take place the next day... Ferenc Morvai told me on the phone that the Return of Petőfi festival at the "Arena" would open at 11 am with performances by the folk ensembles, and that the funeral would be held at 10 am at the cemetery "Fiumei", and that we were invited as part of a small group of invitees.

Then, all of a sudden we received a late evening phone call from a good friend of mine, who said: *"Tomorrow's funeral has been cancelled..."* Soon after, another Hungarian friend sent us two e-mails. From one of them, we learned that Ildikó Hankó—the wife of the anthropologist Kiszely, and a journalist—Edith Kéri, denounced Morvai in the press, saying that *"Morvai was a deceiver, he owned no bones, and that they were not allowing the funeral..."* In the second email, typed in large font, we read that the City Funeral Office had issued the following statement: *"In view of the late submission of some documents tomorrow's funeral would not be taking place..."*

I was very upset, could not fall sleep the whole night. It seemed to me that Morvai would not survive such dreadful, disturbing news... *"Tomorrow we would be burying him but not Petőfi..."*

In the morning we went to the cemetery, arriving there at 9:30 am. Unexpectedly, a guard at the wide-open gate politely explained to our driver how to get to the 59th sector, where *"they would be burying... Petőfi..."*

As it turned out, we were the first ones to arrive. We went to the grave, and saw that a gravestone had already been erected. Three television cameras had

already been set up... and very soon there were about twenty of them... Reporters rushed to us: “Where are you from?”—“We are from... Barguzin!” Right away, they started asking us for an interview, but we replied: “The Buryat delegation could not attend, and they have not authorized us to give interviews...!”



Morvai soon appeared with his group. Ferenc recognized and embraced me. He asked me to hold some kind of black iron cylinder with a twist-lid and three attached seals... Iya and I were dumbfounded: “Did he have to cremate the bones due to this atmosphere of harassment and surveillance...?” Lena Sarnya—Ferenc’s translator—who was standing beside me just nodded inexplicably in my direction...

As soon as we appeared at the tomb, one of the cemetery workers removed a small marble lid off the



With Lena Sarnya.



Guests from Buryatia, brought by us.



Delegation from China—Scientists from laboratories in Shanghai, where the blood, taken from the descendants of family of Sándor Petőfi living in Hungary, was analyzed.

horizontal gravestone slab, and underneath it we saw a hollow vertical tube—embedded in concrete... We did not know at first what it was for, but then, standing with the cylinder in hands, we had an epiphany: *“So this hollow space was intended for a container...”*

It was very hot. A colourful bright group of people approached—guests from Transylvania were carrying flags. Hungarian relatives of Petőfi’s family flanked the grave, two young men and a woman stood out among them.

Hungarian clergy had been intimidated...—they sent their regrets to Ferenc... The ceremony was led by two priests, dressed in beautiful black cloaks—one from Romania and the other from the town of Gyöngyös. Both of them explained to a reporter that they were happy to come to Budapest. Each one of them, for many years, had been looking for an explanation of the mysterious disappearance of the poet, and now they were truly proud to participate to the best of their abilities in this long-awaited event.

The top was lifted off the grave, and F. Morvai slid the cylinder down the hole...

The first priest—Imre Krizbai—congratulated all with the occasion, thanked Ferenc for his courageous work, and reminded the audience that *“Moses, when he was taking the Jews out of Egypt, also dug up the bones of Joseph, brought them with him... and buried them at home...”*

The second priest—Tamás Kéri—very convincingly explained that *“it’s always important to understand not what happens to us but, most importantly, why it happens...”* The Dream of the Pharaoh about the seven thin cows that came out of the Nile and ate the seven fat cows, he connected to the seven most fruitful years in Petőfi’s life (1842—1849), and the seven years brought him by Fate (1849—1856) as he was wandering in exile in Siberia...

Together we all sang the Hungarian national anthem and began to lay the wreaths...



Petőfi family’s descendants living in Hungary.



Funeral ceremony being performed by the priest from Transylvania Imre Krizbai.



Ferenc Morvai's cylinder with documents is being interred in the gravestone.



Funeral ceremony concludes, the priest from Gyöngyös Tamás Kéri.



As we were leaving the cemetery, Ferenc shared his worry with me: *"There is a big problem: I just got a call from the Arena, far more people gathered than it can accommodate... We are advised to cancel..."* That was a provocation to cause him to panic...

At the large and beautiful arena building, cooled with air conditioning, on each of the 14 thousand seats was carefully placed a commemorative booklet about the events leading up to the day's celebration, as well as a small Hungarian flag with a portrait of the Poet. The audience filled less than one-third of the space.



"From Barguzin to Budapest!" In the company of Anna and József Tarjányi.

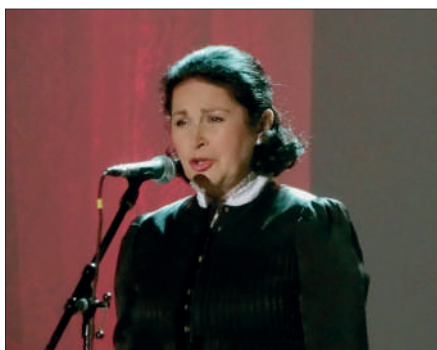
Two orchestras were positioned on the huge stage of the arena. The MC—dramatic actor *János Csabai* began reading verses from *Sándor Petőfi* poems. Next, a world-famous opera singer, *Katalin Pitti*, came on stage and sang

the Hungarian national anthem. A renowned Hungarian ensemble, “Cormoran”, played a few excerpts from a rock opera, its libretto based on Petőfi’s lyrics. On the occasion of this festival—the Return of Sándor Petőfi—two famous composers, *Gábor Berkes* and *Géza Pálvölgyi*,—composed an oratorio using the poet’s verses. The audience warmly welcomed an almost two-hour performance of the oratorio by the country’s leading artists.

Photos of the artists participating in the concert:



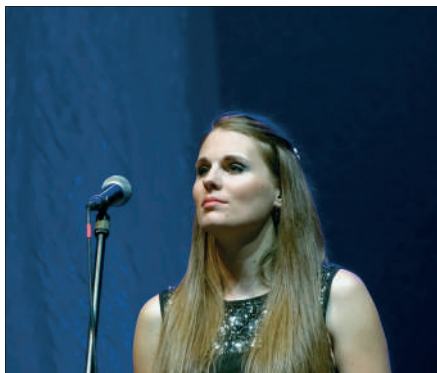
Géza Pálvölgyi and Gábor Berkes—authors of the oratorio “The return of Sándor Petőfi”.



Katalin Pitti—the world-famous Hungarian opera singer.



Gergely Koltai—leader of the ensemble “Cormoran”.



Nóra Fehér—ensemble “Cormoran”.



Ildikó Keresztes—famous singer of the pop genre.

A LETTER TO BURYAT-MONGOLIA



Veca Janicsák—a singer of the pop genre, and a member of the television program “We are looking for talents”.



Árpád Zsolt Mészáros—actor, singer of the Operetta Theatre.



Csaba Zöld—actor, singer.



Bence Gazda—violin soloist of the ensemble «Budapest Klezmer Bank».



P. Szilveszter Szabó—actor, singer of the Operetta Theatre.



Imre Vadkerti—ensemble “Cormoran”.



Ensemble "Cormoran".

Ferenc Morvai.

Some of the poems recited at the concert:

Divination—(1843)
God's Wonders—(1846)
Here's what they have—(1845)
Man, be a man—(1847)
For the kings—(1848)
To the poets of the XIX century
(1847)
In my homeland—(1842) (1844)
The summer when I was old
enough to be a man (1848)
Farewell—(1848)



After the performance of the magnificent Oratory, Ferenc Morvai was invited to come on stage. The audience greeted him with a standing ovation. Ferenc came out, his hand placed over his heart. He spoke well, but it seems to me, that he said a lot of superfluous things... It was then, that for the first time, Ferenc announced publicly that *he was forced to bury Sándor Petőfi's remains in a four tonne concrete sarcophagus, which was lowered by crane into the grave*

underneath the gravestone... And in that black cylinder they left in the grave a brochure about the burial and documents signed by six different lawyers, certifying that they have in six separate envelopes samples of Sándor Petőfi's bones. A copy of the Shanghai experts results is also there.

After the concert, Ferenc told us that before the concert even started the «The Chief Fire Inspector» of the Arena called him and said: *“...There is a bomb placed at the Arena... It is necessary to make an announcement, and tell people in the audience to leave... The MC and I were the only two people who knew about this... We decided to take the risk...”*

Now it became clear why the MC warned the audience at the beginning of the concert: *“Be careful! There could be provocations...”*



14 thousand stadium seats have been filled less than one-third...



At each of these seats Petőfi waited his guests who ever tell why they did not come...

At the end of the concert there was a slight mix-up: the MC began calling the artist, *Katalin Pitti*, back on stage to perform the final song. He loudly called out her name several times, but for some reason she was at the back of the hall, in the last rows, so she raised her hand and responded to the MC letting him know where she was. At this point, the entire audience got up on their feet and, waving flags with the portrait of Petőfi, happily sang the patriotic «Székely himnusz» («Székely anthem»), after which they performed even more enthusiastically the old Hungarian anthem «Boldogasszony Anyánk» («Our Lady / Hail Mary”).



The concert ended. The MC announced from the stage that everyone was invited to an organized walk to the cemetery. Along the two-kilometer route there were trucks from which everyone who walked was given a long stalked rose to leave on Petőfi's grave.

Ferenc Morvai received another call, someone else was trying to get a hold of him. He was told that it was almost six o'clock—time to close the cemetery, and in the meantime people continued to arrive in an endless stream. Morvai rushed to arrange an extension of the working hours for the cemetery guards.

Since it was a workday, people were able to go to the cemetery only after work. The next day, József Tarjányi told us that he appeared at the cemetery around 10 pm, but he was unable to come close to the grave. Visitors were arriving in a continuous stream. Only the following morning Tarjányi managed to take photographs of the grave.

A LETTER TO BURYAT-MONGOLIA





From the stadium to the grave of Sándor Petőfi.



The next day, some TV stations, finally, began to broadcast the laying of flowers at the grave of the Poet. Everyone who wished to introduce himself or herself could approach the microphone. Many people were carrying flags. It brought tears to my eyes

when I heard that there were people not only from Budapest but also from all regions of the country and from abroad.

I will always remember the incredible sight: late evening, cemetery crowded with people. Everyone comes to the grave, lays flowers and proudly announces their name and where they came from. There are dozens of television cameras. Curious reporters ask the same question: *"Why have you come here today?"* In response, they invariably received the same proud and bold answer: *"Because I am—Hungarian!"*

Dear Barguzinians! Over the next few days we began to feel that this Event had really touched people. Online, the number of more reasonable comments grew, and the Academy of Sciences was being cursed mightily, as people were demanding an investigation into who and why, for a quarter of a century, was *"burying a woman..."*

For each of you I signed one of the pamphlets about Petőfi that we took from the arena seats, expressing my hope that one day we should gather all together





in Budapest. It is the Hungarian people's intent to restore the name and reputation of Sándor Petőfi once and for all, which has given me such hope. The perpetrators must be identified. The burial site must be relocated, and a monument to the Poet in one of Budapest's public squares must be built.

During the subsequent ten days of our stay in Hungary I was told that the stream of visitors to the "Fiumei" cemetery did not dwindle. And for that you can take full credit, my dear Barguzinians.

Please accept my respect and my best wishes,

Yours truly,

Vladimir Rott



Chapter 21

RECENT EVENTS

I have completed all the chapters I had conceived for this book, and now all that remains for me to do is to mention some of the most recent events.

The photo on the front cover of this book was made by Sandor and Manana's daughter—our granddaughter, Audrey Rott, a third-year student at Canadian Queen's University. I call this picture—"The Source of Daring." It is a cityscape of Toronto—the city of four million people -where I have lived most of my life. 40 years ago this city gave our family shelter, and helped to raise and educate our children, and now—the grandchildren. Here we have been able to feel like complete citizens of the Free World.

And since I already mentioned Audrey, I will also say a few words about her father—Sandor, who was involved in the organization of the construction of the «City Center» in Las Vegas for five years. For the last seven years Sandor has been employed as a leading architect at the construction of the «Trans Bay Transit Center» in San Francisco, where he will continue to commute from Toronto every 2-3 weeks for the next two years. In other words, next week Sandor's company will be sending him to San Francisco for the one hundred and eighth time... It's a hard and demanding job, especially complicated by the time zone difference. This construction project is very interesting. It will span four city blocks; in the underground space there will be a city train station, above which there will be also a bus station...

After the release of my book, "Father's Letters," my heart was connected with Magadan through an image of the majestic memorial "Mask of Sorrow", over-



According to the program of international student exchange Audrey Rott leaving for the spring semester at the University of Maastricht (Netherlands).



Sandor Rott—Executive Architect for the Transbay Transit Center in San Francisco, a new multi-modal transportation facility for High Speed and Commuter rail and Intercity Buses. Right photo was taken after the celebration—the installation of the last steel beam. January 2016.

looking the capital of Kolyma, as well as through “Repentance”—a song of breathtaking poetry and melody by a talented Tomsk resident, Valentin Shusharin. I happily showcased these two stars at the end of “Father’s Letters.” During the subsequent years readers sent me touching letters full of enthusiastic admiration for the sincerity and genius of this poem, although its author left this world basically unrecognized, in poverty...



Let's read these verses again:

REPENTANCE

*Born of God, we lived without God,
We blazed a black path, created a new sin,
We wished to soar higher than the highest,
But often fell below the lowest low.*

*I whisper simple words of my repentance,
Burn, oh my candle, dropping light into the heart,
Forgive us, Lord, us and all of Russia,
And give us many, many years of strength!*

*Don't leave us in our grief, Lord, in this world,
Teach us the sacred works and teach us the truth:
To share with others our bread and our last coin—
And tell the future in beautiful music!*

*I whisper simple words of my repentance,
Burn, oh my candle, dropping light into the heart,
Forgive us, Lord, us and all of Russia,
And give us many, many years of strength!*

Fortunately, by the grace of Fate I managed to visit Magadan to bow to the “Mask of Sorrow”. And just prior to that, my friends from Tomsk reported great news: after many years of submitting petitions, the efforts of the friends and admirers of the talent of their countryman, finally came to fruition. On October 2, 2014 a bas-relief memorial to commemorate Valentin Shusharin was placed on the wall of the House of Culture at the Polytechnic University in Tomsk.



The building of the Cultural House of the Polytechnic University unveiled a memorial plaque to Valentine Shusharin. Tomsk. October 2, 2014.



V. Shusharin's friends: Dr. Boris Jaworski and Professors Anatoly Gavrilin, Larisa Gavrilin, Marat Goldschmidt and Yuri Zhukov.

We continue to visit Hungary. In handsome Budapest we traditionally stay at the charming "Thermal Hotel" on Margarita Island. While there we visit the spa and wellness facilities, invite our friends over, and go the theaters. At least once on each of our visits we have dinner at the nearby "Grand Hotel", where the usual cozy atmosphere is created by the gypsy orchestra of Ernő Kállai Kiss, who has long ago become our friend. It has become a tradition for the musicians: when we come to the restaurant one orchestra member remains on stage at the cymbals,



Gypsy Orchestra of Ernő Kállai Kiss, Budapest, "Grand Hotel" on Margarit Island.

and the rest come to our table, and masterfully perform for Iya a touching melody of, “I Met You,” a romantic song. We introduced them to this tune a decade ago.

Now, on each visit we are sure to meet with the family of my cousin, Edith Varga (the heroes of Chapter «Annush»). Her daughter, Zsuzsa Lantos, one day decided to introduce us to her close friends—the Rosensteins. Not far from the East Train Station, on a nondescript dark Moson street, Iya and I tracked down the house with the right number, with a hardly visible sign—«Rosenstein»—above the entrance to the restaurant. In a room bathed in bright light, Zsuzsa and her brother Péter were already waiting for us. Even as we were being helped to take off our coats at the coat-check, we could sense some unusually pleasant food aromas. Surprisingly, it turned out to be a very extravagant restaurant, and on that night goose recipes dominated the menu. We started with aromatic foie gras, and then... (I can't recall the names of all the yummy dishes...)

At the end of the feast Zsuzsa brought over to us the owner of the restaurant—Tibor Rosenstein. He was also chef in the kitchen, where his wife Judith and son Robert, as well as his wife, work alongside each other... Tibor gave us a present—a book about his restaurant, and then shared with us his incredible life story. During the war his parents perished in Budapest, and two-year old Tibor



“Rosenstein” Restaurant. Right to left: Iya Rott, Tibor Rosenstein, Vladimir Rott and Zsuzsa Lantos. At the table sits Péter Varga. Budapest. November 2013.

and his sister remained in the care of their grandmother, who earnestly taught them culinary skills. And ever since they have been working as a family in their own restaurant, which has become famous.

In the book that Tibor presented to us, in addition to the recipes of their traditional dishes, there is a photograph of the wall inside the restaurant, on which numerous famous visitors left their autographs: Steven Spielberg, Tony Curtis, Glenn Close, Jeremy Irons... As a parting gift, we also received from Tibor a bottle of plum brandy “Rosenstein”.

Each time we are on holiday in Hungary we strive to visit Garadna village, where the number of inhabitants has already dwindled to less than 400. Old people die, and young people move to the city. Vacant houses get scooped up by the Slovaks—they prefer to live here yet work in Slovakia... Amazing bucolic landscapes, clean and quiet environment, and happy stork couples coiling nests on top of the power poles—everything assures that life goes on...



Street of Garadna. Stork nests.

It's not easy for any country to heal the wounds caused by the socialist past. Hungary also struggles; although the European Union is making an effort to help. Garadna truly lucked out—the Mayor, Marianna Paulo, was wisely elected for her second term. I have mentioned her name multiple times. A young, energetic woman—the wife of a police officer and a mother of two children—she gives all of her imagination and energy to the wellbeing of Garadna residents. The Mayor “inherited” 50 unemployed villagers, but today every one of them is engaged in productive work (Marianna had it especially hard with a few mulish drunks...)

Having received a small amount of money from the EU, Marianna's first step was to organize all of the unemployed to be sent to clean and restore the roadside storm sewer for the village: two trenches on both sides of the asphalt road, as well as concrete pipelines for the trenches laid under the entrance way to every house. The unemployment benefit used to be about 92 euro's per month, but the mayor started paying 180 euros in lieu of benefits to all those who became involved in socially useful work. Later, they mastered production of brooms: cultivating, drying, tying together and selling their product to shops in their own village as well as in the vicinity. After that, for a knockdown price they supplied the village with onions, potatoes,

and eggs, also selling a large surplus to the neighbours... Today Marianna told me on the phone that they were facing a new challenge: their crop of 3,000 kg of sweet red pepper was still in the field, and it was necessary to purchase two machines immediately, so that this crop could be grinded into powder and sold.



The mayor of the village of Garadna—Marianna Paulo in her office. 2015.

Under the leadership of our heroine, Mayor Marianna, for not having a financial deficit Garadna placed among the top 10 of 79 “social communities” organized in today’s Hungary. Due to such success the mayor was invited to an EU conference in Norway, where she flew in late August to talk about her experiences.

In 1920’s Garadna opened a “Park of Heroes” and installed 18 small wooden pillars bearing plaques with the names of Garadna residents who died in the First World War. Over the years, the pillars rotted and collapsed. But more recently—under Marianna’s leadership—the park was restored, new pillars were cut from wood, and the names of those killed were looked up in the archives. On one of the following pictures you can see a plaque with the following inscription: “Géza Spielberger died a heroic death in 1915”. This was my mother Regina’s older brother, who did not return home after fighting in Ukraine!



*Recovered Memory Park
of Garadna residents,
who died in the First
World War.*



More recently a commemorative marble plaque with the names of those Garadna residents who died during the Second World War was installed near the Mayor's Office in the village. It bears the names, among others, of the four members of Regina's brother—Vilmos Spielberger's—family that did not return from Auschwitz...



*City Hall of Garadna. A granite plaque with
the names of villagers who died during the Sec-
ond World War, including the family of Vilmos
Spielberger (in Auschwitz).*



JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 21

Last summer we spent two days in Garadna. The Paulo family put us up, together with our friends from Baikal, in the house of Tibor's mother, who had grown old and moved in with her son's family. I last experienced this unique kind of quietness—possible only in the countryside—back in the distant days of my college years, when we were annually dispatched to “assist” at the Soviet collective farms. At the very onset of twilight, the village streets look empty. Garadna residents disappear into their homes, although the streetlights stay on all night. After dusk the cool country air seems even fresher. Occasionally someone's dog can be heard barking. And in the early morning hours roosters crow noisily and the bells on the necks of cows jingle as they come out from the yard gates and follow the shepherd out onto the pasture. During these days very special feelings filled my heart: right next to us was the neighbouring house, the house of the Spielbergers, where my mother Regina was born and raised with her twelve brothers and sisters...



Morning in Garadna. In front of me is the house of Herman Spielberger where all 13 of his children were born, including, in June 1900, the 12-th child—Regina.

I also have another story to share about Hungary. For more than 40 years I have carried in my pocket a simple wallet—a modest money holder that travelled with me to dozens of countries. It can be seen in a photograph that appears here. Of course, it is “long past its expiry date”, but I just cannot

part with it. It always reminds me of that desperate time back in October 1974, when an alarming thought gradually began to sink in: that the events surrounding my staggering presence in Canada could unfold in such a manner that I would never see my dear family—Iya and the children—again.

During that period of “mental clarity” tears became my increasingly regular “visitors”... On one of those days my cousin Joe Weltman bought this wallet, inserted a 20-dollar bill in it, and handed it to me. It’s not even an actual wallet, but a leather case with a compartment for paper money. In English it is called a billfold, i.e. a folded banknote, but I could not find the word for it in Russian and Hungarian languages... I always keep it in my left trouser pocket...



My time-honoured wallet “bill-fold” was returned to me with money intact.

In late July, after all that excitement regarding Sándor Petőfi, Iya and I were taking a morning flight from Hungary to Toronto, with a transfer in Vienna. At the Budapest Airport passenger security screening seemed to be unusually strict. Besides being required to remove our computers from our carry-on, we also had to take off our belts and shoes, and empty our pockets... In Vienna, transfer passengers had to undergo a similar screening... And that’s where I was stunned to discover that my “billfold had been stolen...” I had about 100 thousand HUF (about 350 US dollars) in it, but I was more upset about losing my “faithful companion”... Immediately, I thought: *“Perhaps it wasn’t stolen? Maybe I did not take it from one of the five bins that transported our carry-on items through the x-ray scanner?”* I ran over to the information booth, but an Austrian beauty behind the glass did not wish to sympathize with me at such an early hour. With an almost military authority she cut me off: *“It was left in Budapest! That’s none of our concern...!”*

I wasn’t able to see a way out of the situation... My Hungarian mobile phone, as always, stayed with Gábor... Boarding had already been announced... Suddenly I remembered that I had my Canadian cell phone with me... I found it in my bag and turned it on—two bars of battery charge still left... Gábor was already at work, and could not be distracted... But what about Éva—our good friend Éva Orosz...? My early morning call reached her aboard a train—she was en route to see her mother in Karcag. Smart Éva quickly promised: *“When I get off the train, I’ll locate some phone numbers and will try to talk to someone...”*

Iya spent the entire flight to Toronto watching movies, and I silently sat beside her, mentally saying good-bye to my billfold, and trying to imagine what someone holding that amount of money might be thinking... Our eight and a half hour long flight was soothing... I was not expecting anything, but among more than three hundred emails waiting for us on our home computer, I jumped at the latest... It turned out to be a message from Éva Orosz: *“Erszény (wallet—Hung.) has been found; they put it away in a safe; write an authorization letter for me—and I’ll go to the airport and pick it up!”*

Bravo, Hungary! Bravo, Hungarians! What a great way “to make people happy!”

And my billfold was handed back to me at the end of August, at my home, with a smile upon her return from a summer vacation by Her Excellency Stefánia Szabó—Consul General of Hungary in Toronto, already familiar to the reader.

In the second volume of my memoirs, I spoke about an unusual tradition established by my dear cousin Joe Weltman. On the eve of each Sukkot—a Jewish religious holiday—as a gift to our family, he used to bring a ritual bouquet—a traditional palm branch and etrog (a fruit that grows in Israel, belongs to the citrus family and looks like a large lemon). I thought that with Joe’s passing this tradition would be over, but much to our delight on the eve of the next Sukkot our door bell rang, and we saw Edith Weltman, who decided to carry on with her husband’s touching tradition. And for so many years, already with a walking stick in hand, our “Canadian Mom” knocks on our door on Sukkot. Wishing her health, and sending our gratitude!



For the holiday of Sukkot Edith Weltman again brought us the Palm (closed frond of the date palm tree)...

Almost every other year we visit Israel, and this week we received two photos—below—that made us very happy: these are young female members of our family who serve in the Israeli Defense Force. On the left is the granddaughter

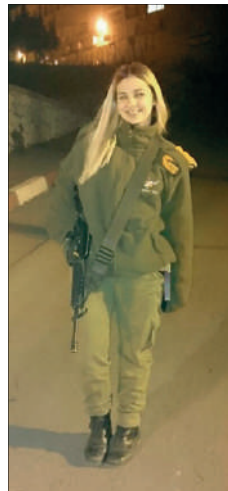
of my cousin Marie Roth (Nemshits)—Private Ofri Reichmann—standing next to her mother Yael, a primary school teacher in the town of She’ar-Yashuv. In 1982, Yael was that 12-year-old Israeli girl whose leg was seriously injured by Arafat’s first rocket launched from Lebanon... Ofri started her military service in December.

My niece Yael Reichmann and her daughter Ofri—Private, Israel Defense Forces. She’ar-Yashuv, December 2015.



On the right, an army Sergeant Nicole Belov, who has almost completed her service, with her mother Olya—a milk sister to our son Edwin. In 1968, in Togliatti our friend Tatyana Shapiro urgently needed to find a wet nurse for her newborn daughter Olya, and as a young mother Iya had enough milk for both babies...

Iya’s “milk” daughter—Olga Belov (Shapiro) with her daughter Nicole—Sergeant in the Israel Defense Forces. February 2016.



There are about fifty synagogues in Toronto. Among them—«Torath Emeth Congregation»—a synagogue that became our family’s second home since the moment we arrived in Canada. Members of this synagogue became key participants of every joyful and sad event in the family: weddings, Bat- and Bar-mitzvahs, the births of our grandchildren, or my mother’s funeral, or—my brother’s... Our children began their education in Canada with seven years at the synagogue’s primary school, and continued at a public high school and later—at the University of Toronto.

I have already mentioned a few times a charitable foundation that we started—“Rachel Solomonovna Guterman—Yaroslavskaya Foundation”. Members of our «Torath Emeth Congregation» are, in fact, the main donors for the foundation, and for the past twelve years we have turned to them annually for support. Thanks to them, assistance has been offered to the elderly and low-income Jews in Buryat-Mongolia. The “Shalom” Memorial was built with the funds raised by the Foundation. And whereas Hungarian translations of my previous books were partially paid for by my Hungarian friend Károly Szabó, after his death three generous members of our community who wished to remain anonymous covered this portion of the cost.



Dear guest from Israel, Mr. Kurt Rothschild and the “Second minyan”²¹, 2014.

²¹ A Group of not less than 10 men required for Jewish prayer.

I would like to do my best to describe the atmosphere of the next event. Built 60 years ago, in 1956, our synagogue has been undergoing a major renovation for over a year. Today we must remember with gratitude its creative original builders, our outstanding ancestors: Dr. Julius Kuhl, Mr. Sam Worthman, Mr. Etshe Meyir Korolnek, and Mr. Abraham Tanenbaum, who were spiritually guided in those days by Rabbi David Ochs, PhD—the father of our esteemed Rabbi Mordechai Ochs. Each of them not only put his personal money into the project, but also actively participated in the construction. For example, Mr. Abraham Tanenbaum supplied all the needed steel structures for the construction.

And now the time has come to renovate the synagogue. Accordingly, a blueprint was developed in collaboration with several architects. Luckily, «Jeda Rose Management Inc.» construction company was selected to manage the project, and the president of the company, Gideon Zameret, took the special significance of the building to heart, which from the beginning added a noble tone, and diligence, to the project. The budget grew to six million dollars.



*The renewed synagogue Torah Emeth Jewish Centre after 60 years received a new facade.
Toronto, July—December 2015.*

Construction went into full swing. Like ants in the anthill, contractors were hurriedly labouring on every floor, from morning until late at night David Reichmann and Jack Eisenberger—the current president of the synagogue, and his deputy, elected to these volunteer positions—supervised the work. These are young, energetic men, heads of their own large companies, however they not only did a tremendous job collecting the necessary sum for the construction, but also sacrificed so much of their personal time to supervise it.

Boris Beniashvili, already well known to my readers, was the third most invaluable supporter of a major upgrade to the synagogue building. What he managed to achieve was that amidst all that “construction-caused chaos” not

a single disruption happened to the regular, twice a day, prayer service at the synagogue. Those who notice his energy, thoroughness, and meticulousness are completely unaware that in the past Boris used to be an important entrepreneur in what once was Soviet Tbilisi.



Construction organizers. From right to left: President of Synagogue David Reichmann, Vice President—Jack Eisenberger, general contractor—Gideon Zameret. March 2016.

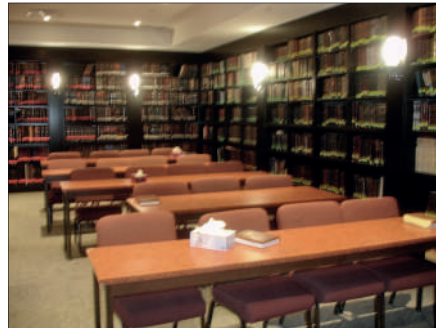


“The Managers” of the synagogue Boris Beniashvili, D.Reichmann and J.Eisenberger.

At present, the main construction work is already completed. Hundreds of meters of bookshelves have been installed. And therefore I would like to mention the name of a young man, Leibel Gerstner, a highly educated Talmudist, long-term supporter and the guardian of the huge library. Trusting no one, after the renovations he personally put back on the shelves thousands of volumes of “intelligent books”, from the rich collection at the synagogue.



RECENT EVENTS



Since the time when I had to take care of my aging mother Regina, I somehow have grown used to looking after the elderly, and most often they happen to be the senior members of our synagogue. Typically, I volunteer to take them to the synagogue and back home in a wheelchair on Saturdays. Sometimes

I also run small errands for them. Due to a long-

standing friendship with one of my “wards”, Mr. Leon Taffet—a one hundred and two year old single immigrant from Krakow whose entire family perished in the Holocaust—many people thought that he was my father. Besides Mr. Taffet, I had other “Saturday passengers”, such as Joseph Penner—a humble father of a small-size family and a well known importer of matzoth from New York; and Jacob Siegelman—the head of another beautiful family and a long serving cantor at our synagogue, whose fruity deep voice people remember to this day. Our family truly appreciated his memorable singing to bless the newlyweds at Ilona’s and Sandor’s weddings.

Mr. Max Rubenstein—a likable man, strong-willed and well respected, a wealthy owner of a large firm—has sat next to me at the synagogue for the past 41 years. Now he has grown old, and for the last three or four years, as his friend, I have been trying to help him out on Saturdays. I am especially happy that Max has read my books and remembers their contents, so we always have something to talk about. He has two adult sons, but they do not belong to our synagogue, and live far away, and he sometimes needs my help on Saturdays.

Just recently Max Rubenstein and his wonderful wife Eve—thin as a blade of grass, smart, and the “wearer of the pants”—each celebrated their 95th birthdays. Of course, both of them are very old, but one can listen to Max’s stories indefinitely. He was born in Poland, in the city of Ostrowiec, and brought to Canada as a one year-old child. A big dandy, very fashionable, he likes to boast that in his youth he was the best-dressed guy in Toronto’s Jewish neighbourhood.



The highly respected Rabbi Mordechai Ochs and the young Rabbi Kalman Ochs, January 2016.

In 1937, Max Rubenstein created a company, «Export Packers Co. Ltd», which still exists today. Although the father now rarely delves into its affairs, his eldest son—Jeffrey Rubenstein—successfully leads the company. Their business is food, and here are some interesting numbers: in 2012, the company sold almost a billion dollars worth of food products... A while back, it supplied a customer in California with 120 tonnes of boneless beef weekly... And for egg powder production the company cracked open up to two million eggs at its facilities daily, and it used to be the main supplier for brands such as «Lipton» and «Kraft». Each week, the firm receives from Chile about 80 tonnes of salmon... “Max, why Chile?”—I once asked, naively.—“Doesn’t Canada produce enough salmon?”—“Canadian salmon is much more expensive...”—with a half-smile enlightened me this self-taught “professor...”

The Rubenstein family members are well known philanthropists, helping hospitals, synagogues, schools not only in Toronto, but also in Israel and in other countries. And our community, in appreciation for the assistance with the financing of the current reconstruction of the synagogue, named the newly remodelled banquet hall after Max and Eve Rubenstein.



Members of our community Max and Eva Rubenstein celebrated the 74'th anniversary of their wedding. Behind them is their great-granddaughter—Sydney. Toronto, 2015.



The rebuilt banquet hall of the synagogue.





The renovated facade of the synagogue.

I must also tell you about another Miracle. And I sincerely want to assure the reader that I do not seek out the Miracles I describe among the daily hustle and bustle, but they just come to me, and that is why I can only use “Miracle” — with a capital “M”. At the end of December, 2014 I made a traditional call to my dear physics teacher, Nikolai Nikolayevich Vdovin, who lives in a nursing home in Zhdanovichi, Belarus. I called to wish him well on his 99th birthday. And a month earlier I congratulated his wife, Zinaida Petrovna, on her 97th. My readers have already heard me speak many times about this legendary couple that turned me, a common punk, into a person—an engineer.

This is how our conversation ended:

—*Nikolai Nikolaevich! Just hang in there for another year, and Iya and I will come to celebrate the remarkable date with you...*

—*Oh, no, Vadim, we're not well enough for something like that...*

—*But let's still try...!*

The countdown to this very desirable, but risky year began... I myself fell silent, not really believing that a gift like this could be possible. I did not even dare to call. But I could not hold back, and four months later I did call the Teacher. How great was my delight when, instead of the usual groaning and trying to hear something and to understand who is calling him, I heard him ask this question right from the start:

—*Vadim! My dear! So it's... What...? Eight months left...?*

After such a promising question, my superstitions prevailed: “*What if I am tempting our luck this way?*” I decided to make no more calls and to trust fate... I was busy making personal plans but the Vdovins remained on my mind... “*After all, one of them, G-d forbid, might die at any moment...*” Only at the end of September I asked my friend—Alexei Verbitsky from Bobruysk—to try and get for me the phone number of the nursing home doctor. In response to my cautious question whether my teachers were still alive—“*the Vdovins?*”—a friendly female voice convincingly reassured: “*They’re alive! Alive!*”

I introduced myself and said that I would like to come over in December for Nikolai Nikolayevich’s 100th birthday. Would a visit like this be a burden to them? The doctor replied, “*Zinaida Petrovna went completely blind, and she no longer gets up from her bed, but when her diapers are changed, Nikolai Nikolayevich always helps... Have a word with him yourself...*”

In Belarus, phone numbers often change, so the doctor went to the Vdovins’ room to find out their new phone number. When she returned, she said: “*Call him now. He is waiting and he is very excited*”. Nikolai Nikolayevich’s voice was cheerful, but when I said that I wanted to visit, he said:

—*No, Vadim. I don’t think you should do it... She is totally blind, bedridden... I can barely walk... I get dizzy the moment I stand up on my feet -ready to collapse... How are we going to receive visitors in such a state?... Don’t bother coming...*

—*Nikolai Nikolayevich! You won’t need to do anything. I just want to give you a hug... And at the celebration you will be just the guest of honour.*

—*You think so?*

—*Just so!*

—*Well, in that case, come!*

In the «Joy of Discoveries» I wrote:

“Published in Russia in 2008, my book *Joy from Sadness* first appeared in the book-stores in Moscow. The publisher I had chosen turned out to be very passive, and so I had to invest a lot of energy myself to make the book available for purchase in Togliatti, Tomsk, Ulan-Ude, and other Siberian cities. Despite the interest in my book in Belarus, especially in Bobruysk where several newspapers ran excerpts from it, the book never went on sale there. It was explained to me that the bookstores and libraries in the kingdom of “Big Daddy Lukashenko” are allowed to spend their money only on the purchase of books published by Russia’s state-owned publishing houses... However, with the help of some good people, about thirty copies of the first volume of my memoirs did reach Minsk and Bobruysk.

When I was writing *Joy from Sadness*, Iya and I located, at Iya’s suggestion, my school friend Tamara Okhlopkova, of whom I hadn’t had any news in more than 40 years. After many adventures, our search ended in mutual joy when we

heard each other's voices on the phone. Her voice had aged, she spoke in more of a village dialect and had acquired a Byelorussian accent...

It turned out that Tamara, now almost 70, was living in Minsk in an apartment once allotted to her father. My guardian angel and savior Maria Yakovlevna (I finally learned her maiden name: Merson) had passed away in 1966, at the age of 56. General Okhlopkov had died in 1978, aged 67. Tamara was living with her ailing, divorced son; her husband had been dead for several years ("he was a bit of a boozier"). Shortly afterwards, she received from me a copy of *Father's Letters*. She sent me a rave review and admitted that she had known nothing about my family before... It cost us a great deal of effort and a great many phone calls to get *Joy from Sadness* delivered to Minsk. Tamara waited impatiently for the book, knowing that, among other things, it told the story of her own family. She made daily phone calls to the vending stall at the book fair where the book was supposed to arrive. Her 28-year-old son had died a month earlier... Finally the book came in, and Tamara was supposed to pick it up the next day. Three days later I started calling, wanting to know what she thought of the book, but there was no answer. After another three days, on May 5, 2008, there was a call from Minsk.

—*Uncle Vadim? This is Katya Shkarubo, Tamara Okhlopkova's daughter. Mama is dead... Cardiac arrest. The funeral's on May 7. She wasn't answering the phone, so we had to come over and break down the door. We found her lying on the bed...*

Unfortunately, Tamara Okhlopkova, one of the heroines of my book, never got to read *Joy from Sadness*. It was her daughter Katya who paid for the book and picked it up. When we spoke a couple of months later, she told me:

—*I read the book—couldn't put it down. Uncle Vadim, it's a good thing you married Iya, not Mama. Mama could never have endured the kind of tribulations Iya went through in her life...*

So, this very Katya Shkarubo (Okhlopkova)—who is a talented construction engineer; a mother of two smart professionals; a grandmother to one granddaughter; a wife to a kind and affable Valery Shkarubo, her former classmate at the Belarusian Polytechnic Institute; and a smart and sensible head of her own business, co-established with her husband—Katya was one of the organizers of Iya's and mine visit to Belarus to celebrate the 100th birthday of my dear physics teacher. Katya also turned out to be a great driver of her own "Skoda", in which she wheeled us around Belarus covering hundreds of kilometers during our nine-day trip. Katya and her family live in the capital of Belarus—Minsk.

The other individuals who helped to organize our trip to Belarus were: Alexei Verbitsky and his son Dmitry, of Bobruysk, as well as my childhood friend Tamara Khoroshun, well known to the readers and who is still able to

organize much needed help for people clearly and sensibly despite being three years older than me.

The village of Zhdanovichi is located not far from Minsk, but when we go to Belarus, it is also necessary to pay a visit to my native Bobruysk. Tamara Khoroshun suggested a few items for our agenda. I asked her to visit our former high school №1 and to announce the upcoming 100th jubilee celebration of N.N. Vdovin. A few days later I heard back from her: *“On Wednesday, December 16th, at 2 pm we will attend the 85th anniversary celebration of our Bobruysk Forest Engineering College, where I had worked for 40 years... At 11 am on Thursday you will be speaking before the local Jewish community. At 2 pm that day you will be expected at the Museum of the House of Culture of Fandok (today's name for the former Lumber Mill—Lesokombinat -VR). On Friday at 10 am you will visit the Jewish cemetery... At 2:00 pm they expect you at the museum of local history... And I have been to our school: no one there knows who Vdovin is... The Principal said that he has two of Rott's books, and that he often discusses them with his students... The Principal also asked whether you could speak to the upper class students. It should be on Friday, some time in the afternoon. He will confirm the exact time... I promised to speak to you about it...”*

We arrived in Minsk on Tuesday, December 15th. At the airport we were very pleased to see Alex and Dmitri who came from Bobruysk to pick us up. A tall attractive girl was standing next to them, and although we had never met her before we quickly realized that she was Katya Shkarubo. Katya's warm smile and the kind of reception that we got immediately aroused a sense of confidence that our visit would be successful and joyful.

Katya handed me an extraordinary amount of money—9,125 million belarussian rubles for our everyday expenses... It turned out that this sum was exactly what I had asked for—a currency exchange of the 500 dollars I handed to her... that is, 18,250 roubles were equivalent to one dollar... We were told that in July, the circulation of money in the country would be simplified—the last three zeros would get cancelled... Katya said that she went to Zhdanovichi, but she has not yet managed to coordinate the date and time of the celebration. She learned that the Vdovins were expecting both of their daughters. One of our surviving classmates, Gregory Rasin, was happy to join our celebration. Two days later, early in the morning Katya would meet his train from St. Petersburg and bring him over to Bobruysk in her car. At the main train station, another of our former classmates, Svetlana Lesnikovich, would also join them.

We said good-bye to Katya and went on a 120-kilometer trip to Bobruysk. It was five o'clock in the afternoon, but the sun was still quite high in the sky. Dmitri drove our mini-bus. It had not snowed yet. A good road, and a clean and beautiful, still green, landscape enhanced our journey and delighted us. Before

checking into our hotel, we drove up to Tamara Khoroshun's house and took her into the mini bus with us. Then Alexei and Dmitry invited us to their home for dinner, where Alexei's wife, Lyudmila, had been waiting for us with a lavish spread. And after her late work shift ended, Dmitry's energetic and beautiful wife, Lilya, also joined us.



The first dinner in Bobruysk. Alex and Lyudmila Verbitsky. On the right—their son Dmitry and Tamara Khoroshun. December 16, 2015.

We had an unusually warm visit with the Jewish community of Bobruysk. Some people brought copies of my books to get them autographed. I could sense that many in the audience were intimately familiar with the contents of my books. Speaking in front of an audience in my hometown, the city of my childhood and youth, made me truly happy. In my opinion, sensing this, the audience also had an instantly warm reaction. A particular surge of surprise and excitement swept through the hall when I explained that we came not just for a simple visit, but to celebrate the 100th birthday of Nikolai Nikolaevich Vdovin! It turned out that the majority of the people in the audience were his former students, but almost no one realised that he was still alive and, actually, celebrating such a marvelous milestone... Moreover, nobody knew that his wife Zinaida Petrovna—an equally famous and deserving teacher—was also still alive... This incredible news brought everyone closer! I would like to compare what was happening with some powerful creative explosion that produced a shining example of human kindness.



After my speech in the Jewish community of Bobruysk.

An equally warm and memorable meeting took place in a small yet overcrowded museum hall at the Lumber Mill's clubhouse. It was especially pleasing to see in the audience a large group of young people—the Bobruysk State Forest Engineering College students. And although I had been told about it in advance, a strange feeling came over me when I got escorted into the hall and was led towards an expanded display commemorating the murdered innocent employees of the plant, Ferenc Rott's name and photo now included among theirs...

I thanked Tamara Khoroshun for building such a display, but it turned out that she was just a proactive assistant to its creator as well as the mastermind behind the entire museum full of meaningful historical information at Club FanDok—former director Lidia Ivanovna Vegilyanskaya—a person of high culture, deep knowledge and infinite diligence. Unfortunately, we were not able to meet Lidia Ivanovna personally. She had retired and that day could not come to the Museum for health reasons. Upon my return to Toronto, I was able to reach her by phone. We had a heartfelt conversation, I discovered things about her life and family, and she already knew a lot about my family from my books and archival materials.



In the Museum of the Club of the Lumber Mill (Lesokombinat) in front of memorial stand for Ferenc Rott. Next to me is my classmate Gregory Racine and Tamara Khoroshun.

At my dear high school №1 our delegation, which included 1954 graduates, was taken aback by an unanticipated surprise. Later someone mentioned to us that the school did not get the requested approval for my presentation before the students of the senior classes. So instead of visiting a classroom filled with students, we were greeted by the principal, Gen-nady E. Cherepko, and the headmaster of the elementary grades, as well as a reporter from one of Bobruysk's newspapers, and got invited to the principal's office, where we had a short conversation. We were greeted warmly and thanked for the noble purpose of our visit to Belarus. As a gift for N.N. Vdovin the Principal asked me to take to him a commemorative booklet with copies of old photographs that the school had prepared.



The Director of Bobruysk high school №1 G.E.Cherepko shows to graduates of 1954—V. Rott and G. Racine a booklet of photos—a gift from the school to former teacher N.N. Vdovin.

Recalling our visit to Bobruysk, a meeting with the director of the City Museum of Local History, Natalya Petrovna Artemchik, truly stands out. She not only introduced us to some interesting exhibits at the museum, but also charmed us with her intelligence, enthusiasm and boundless energy devoted to doing for the city and its people only good deeds. Our impressions of the visit were much brighter thanks to Natalya's efforts to spend as much time as possible with our group and to kindle our hearts with the best impressions of the city and its rich history.

From Bobruysk Katya transported us to Minsk. Back in Toronto, when I initially told her about our plans to come for a visit Katya said right away



The introduction of the exposition of the Bobruysk Regional Museum began with a welcoming cup of tea. The museum's director (second from right)—Natalia Petrovna Artëmchuk.

that we would be staying with her, and later the entire Shkarubo family for four days in a row made us feel truly comfortable and gave us their full attention. First of all, we visited the cemetery and brought flowers for the graves of the Okhlopkov's: Maria Yakovlevna, Leonid Ivanovich and Tamara... We also visited museums, and the opera house. Most of all, we were impressed with Katya's energetic drive, as she managed to convince us that she was not just an engineer, but also an interior decorator of her house—where she could install ceramic floor tiles all by herself and put up the wallpaper...



The gravestone of Maria Yakovlevna Okhlopkova (Merson). Minsk, December 2015.



*With Katya Shkarubo in the evening at the Minsk Opera and Ballet Theatre. December 2015.
Photo by Valery Shkarubo.*

Then came the coveted day—Monday, December 21st, 2015—when Katya Shkarubo drove Iya and me, together with Grigory Racine and Svetlana Lesnikovich, to Zhdanovichy for Vdovin’s centennial celebration that was to begin at 10 am. Being slightly late, trembling, we rushed into the main hall of the nursing home. To our delight, Nicolai Nikolayevich and Zinaida Petrovna were already seated at the head table next to their daughters, their granddaughter, her husband and their great granddaughter. All the tables were lined with yummy foods prepared by their daughters, Natalia and Galina. There were about thirty people in the hall including us—nine people from Bobruysk (four of us were their former students).

I was seated next to my physics teacher, and Zinaida Petrovna sat on his other side. We had not seen each other for 11 years. Nicolai Nikolayevich got noticeably thinner, and his Zinnochka looked like a dried up little rusk. Most of the time they just tried to hold hands. With his free hand Nicolai Nikolayevich handed her a piece of something from the table, and she brought it up to her mouth. Her eyes did not open at all, but she could hear everything. To every good wish she replied: “Thank you!” And to Iya and me she repeated several times: “Dear Iya and Vadim! You are so kind, so attentive, it’s as if you were our children. Thank you...”



100-year-old Nikolay Nikolaevich with 98-year-old Zinaida Petrovna and their students—graduates of 1954—Gregory Racine, Vladimir Rott, Svetlana Lesnikovich. On the left is Iya Rott.



JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 21

In October, Zinaida Petrovna turned 98 years old. They got married in 1939... Interestingly, their eldest daughter Natalia turned 75 on that very day... She is a doctor, lives in Pskov region, in the town of Velikiye Luki. Their youngest daughter—Galina—lives in St. Petersburg.

These photos from the celebration will describe the atmosphere of the event.



To the left of Vdovins sit their daughters Natalia and Galina. Zhdanovichi, December 21, 2015.

Twenty minutes later a nurse took Zinaida Petrovna upstairs to her bedroom, and Nicolai Nikolayevich stayed, and continued to delight us with his logic and composure... He was even able to listen carefully to my story about the construction project that our son Sandor was leading in San Francisco. Other guests stood around us and listened to our conversation. At one point I even asked:

—*Nicholai Nikolayevich, do you still remember how to speak Hungarian?*

—*No! I do not remember anything...*

—*“Te mennyi éves vagy?”*—(«How old are you?»)—I then asked him playfully in Hungarian. He thought for a moment and suddenly said:

—*“Száz év...!”*—(«One-hundred years...!»)



I was happy to translate his response for all. People standing around us laughed out loud, and I began to tease him even more, in order to make him remember more Hungarian phrases. Nicolai Nikolayevich again resisted slightly and, finally, said in a very decent Hungarian accent:

—“Józská! Né bólonduj...!”

—«Yuzka! Do not play the fool!»—I translated his answer verbatim, which made people, starting with me, react by embracing, kissing and complimenting him...

29 Декабря 2015 года...

From: <griga1937@...ru>

Subject: Please read that

Date: 29 December, 2015 12:26:25 PM EST

To: Vladimir Rott <viarott@sympatico.ca>

[Today, Nikolai Nikolayevich's wife died. Peace be upon her. Grisha. \(St. Petersburg\)](#)

«Toronto, January 20th, 2016. It wasn't easy to get over this shock... After my joyful report, which I delivered to all my friends about the brilliant centennial celebration, I decided to share the sad news that Grisha Racine conveyed only with the nearest and the dearest... I thought about it, and worried about Nikolai Nikolayevich, but only yesterday mustered the courage to call Zhdanovich. First, I spoke with the doctor at the nursing home:

—Zinaida Mikhailovna, hello! Calling you from Toronto, Canada... How's my Vdovin...? How is he managing? Can I call him?

—Hello, Vladimir Franzevich! Nothing much to tell you, really... So far—we have not done it yet—he has not tried to walk down to the dining hall... We bring food to his room. He spends most of the time in bed... I think that you can talk to him...

My Physics teacher answered the phone only after 4—5 rings... At first he did not immediately recognize who I was, but then talked to me quite sensibly.

—Oh, Vadim... Thank you for everything... My... Zina... she flew to heaven... You know, Vadim... I lie here... and quietly cry all day...!

—Nikolai Nikolayevich! Brace yourself! Now you must live through the rest of your life beautifully... for yourself, and for Zinaida Petrovna...! We believe in you!

A long article about our visit to celebrate your 100th birthday was just published in one of our Canadian newspapers. Tomorrow I will send you a copy of this article.

—Was published... in what language?

—In English, of course...

—Thank you, my dear Vadim...

Three years ago my old friend—Mr. Kurt Rothschild—made a permanent move to Israel. He remains the President of the International Jewish organization «Mizrahi». A thorough and sensible Mrs. Elka Pelt, his faithful assistant and secretary at his busy Toronto office forwarded to her boss an article from the «Canadian Jewish News» newspaper about our trip to celebrate the 100th birthday of my physics teacher. To this article I had also attached a few photos from our visit to Belarus, and wrote to Mr. Rothschild, who recently celebrated his 95th birthday, that Iya and I were wishing him a good health and hoped to visit him in Jerusalem for a similar kind of celebration...

Let me share with you Mr. Rothschild's response:

On 13-Jan-16, at 4:27 PM, Kurt Rothschild wrote:



Kurt Rothschild and his eldest son Lenny, whose house his father always stays at during his visits to Toronto. December 2015.

Dear Vladimir and Iya,

Your trip to Belarus and the party that you arranged there was a real Kid-dush Hashem.

I do not know if I will make it to 100, but I got a tingle when I heard that you want to prepare for it. There is nobody better than you to do it and for sure I would love to have you folks there if I am still around to make it, with my limbs and mind still working.

Keep up being great humanitarians.

We love you for it.

Kurt

As I conclude this book, I wish to confess to my readers that I cannot believe how quickly I have aged. Suddenly it was time to be celebrating my 80th birthday... And two months prior to that, I received a letter from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, politely informing me that once I reached that age, my driver's licence that had been issued to me 5 years earlier would have to be renewed... It turns out, in accordance with the existing rules, after drivers turn 80 years of age, every two years they must have their driving records reviewed, and undergo a vision test and, if necessary, also take a road test... "Wow! That's news to me! Retake a road test? How dreadful!"

I was upset for a few days, but laws are laws. I decided to use the time left until my birthday to study for the test... Iya bought me the latest edition of «The Driver's Handbook». I went over it closely, but it seemed like I was doing everything correctly... Sitting behind the wheel, I began to practice again: "Left mirror", "Right mirror...", "Parallel parking..."

But during that time I had a setback: in late March I slipped on ice and suffered an unfortunate fall, tearing three ligaments in my left knee. I had to have surgery, after which my doctor "locked the knee in a case" for two months. Yet my doctor said nothing about driving... It was not easy to fit my left leg with an unbending knee into the car, but after that it didn't get in the way of driving... And by that time Iya already refused to drive our car and only got behind the wheel if it was absolutely necessary...

On the day of the test I was one of 25 people invited into a classroom. A female examiner, who had reviewed the driving records kept by police for each of us in advance, quickly checked our vision using special equipment, and asked us a few questions. Then she handed us the test, and we had to provide the answers in a matter of split minutes. Only three people were sent away for further medical examination, and the others had their driver's licences renewed for two more years.

I provided the "transportation" introduction, above, in order to relate to the reader a pleasant event associated with it. The validity period of one's driver's licence is tied to each person's birthday date, and since mine falls on May 24th—that's when my previously issued document was going to expire. *"It is necessary to pass the test prior to that date, and I can only walk with a stick, and my left knee does not bend... How will I be able to show up like this for my road test...? They'll ask me for a doctor's note... And what if he doesn't clear me to drive...?"* I had plenty to worry about...

My test was scheduled for 9:00 am on May 8th. I decided to «arrange a conspiracy» for my bad knee... I decided to play down my knee injury. Hoping to arrive at the test centre as early as possible, at 8:10 am I was already there; I parked my car; with great difficulty climbed out of it; left my walking stick on the seat, and carefully and slowly hobbled towards the entrance of the driving test centre. Surprisingly, there were already about 10 people waiting in the reception area... It was clear that they belonged to the same age group as me—senior drivers subject to the "license renewal test..." And I could sense that they were as worried as I was...

There were plenty of empty seats available. I sat down next to an elderly gentleman—on his other side sat an elderly lady. Suddenly the man, who turned out to be an immigrant from Portugal, leaned over to me to ask a question, and this little dialogue took place between us:

—*And you, youngster, what are you here for...?*

JOYOUS ENCOUNTERS, CHAPTER 21

I did not understand his question, and hesitated for a moment... He realized that I needed help:

—*Is this your first time here...?*

—*Oh yeah! I am here for the first time...*—I was happy to make conversation...

—*And I am here for the SIXTH time...!*

I heard his words and became even more worried, “*My G-d! So, he has already failed the test five times, but he is still allowed to retake it?!?*” But just a moment later, I realized: “*No, that means he is 92 years old!!!*” I grinned and put my arm around his shoulders and asked cordially, pointing to the lady sitting next to him:

—*And how many times has she been here...?*

—*She is not here for the test... She is my wife... She does not let me come here alone...*

So, let's try for a little more life!

Toronto, January 13, 2016.

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