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A Plate from Pogost: Life During the Soviet Regime

Told by Lyalya Gutin to Carola Murray-Seegert

Lyalya Gutin was born in 1926, in the shtetl of Ukhvala, about twelve miles northeast of Byerazino. Lyalya was the eldest of three children. Her parents were Moisej Gutin (b. 1905) and his wife Tanya Friedland (b. 1906 in Byerazino). They shared their home with Moisej's parents, Mendel Gutin (b. 1870) and Leah Rabinowitz (b. 1871). Leah was one of thirteen children born to Herschel and Beile Rabinowitz in the shtetl of Pogost, six miles from Berezino.

The Gutins farmed and kept horses in Ukhvala. In the winter, when the frozen ground made logging easier, Mendel and his sons worked in the family lumber trade,



harnessing their horses to sledges and hauling felled trees out of the dense forest. It was a hard life, and there were few opportunities - educational or otherwise - for Jewish families.

In Russia, the years between World War I and World War II - the time of Lyalya's childhood - was a period characterized by extremes of economic struggle and political violence.

Gutin home, Astankyna neighborhood, Moscow 1940s

The Gutin family was already looking for a way out. In 1913, Mendel and Leah sent their three oldest children, Rivka (later Ruth Shifrin), Zalman and Isaac, to America. Several Rabinowitz aunts and uncles already lived there, and they would give the Gutin children a good start, providing jobs in family-owned delicatessens in New York and Boston. Mendel and Leah hoped to follow soon with their three younger children, Izrael, Moisej and Lena, but around 1922, the 'window of opportunity' closed for immigration to America. Mendel and Leah somehow survived Stalin's ruthless 'reforms' and the accompanying political terror that swept the country, beginning in 1929.

Ten years later, in 1932, Mendel and Leah were finally able to emigrate. Mendel (known as Mark in the U.S.) never adjusted to life in New York, often saying that he missed his horses and the good smell of manure. In the meantime, the younger Gutins were getting ready to leave Ukhvala. In 1934, Moisej moved to Moscow with Tanya, Lyalya and her three siblings, settling in a tiny home in Astankyna, north of the city center, not too far from the Marina Rostcha synagogue. Lyalya would later marry Kolya, the son of a neighbor, a painter whose works include this nostalgic

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winter view of the street on which both families lived (above), and a portrait of Lyalya as a young woman (below, see "Lyalya's Career").

Soviet social control increased over the next three decades, as did institutionalized anti-Semitism. Contact with family overseas - especially family in America - was dangerous, likely to damage job prospects and to hurt chances for university admission. But the Gutin siblings managed to keep track of one another. Rivka, now married to the proprietor of Shifrin's Hebrew National Restaurant on the Coney Island boardwalk, wrote her letters in Yiddish, thus foiling the Soviet censors.



'My Fair Lady' posters on Biff's wall. Top left: New York, 1956; Lower left: London, 1958; Right: Moscow, 1960.

In 1960, Moscow and Washington began a series of cultural exchanges. The Bolshoi Ballet visited the U.S. and the Broadway musical 'My Fair Lady' toured the USSR. When Rivka learned that her cousin Biff Liff would travel to Moscow as the company's Production Manager, she gave him Moisej's contact information. Although it was risky, Moisej and Tanya decided to join Biff and his wife Arlene at the theatre. After the show, Biff remembers that, despite speaking no common language, the four of them stayed up until the early hours of the morning, eating, drinking, talking and laughing. Lyalya, who was by then a medical doctor, also remembers meeting these exotic American cousins at their Moscow hotel.

As the Cold War thawed, travel between the US and Russia became easier. Cousin Ewing Krainin, who was a photographer for LIFE magazine, visited Moscow in 1966 and met the family for the first time.

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Rivka brought her daughter Bea to Moscow in 1968 and returned in 1971 when Lyalya's daughter Lena married Ilya Serebrennikov.



Lyalya, Ruth and Bea Shifrin. Moscow 1968

In 1975, Lyalya and her father came to the US for the first time. Moisej was reunited with his brothers Zalman (Seymour) and Isaac (Aaron) and they visited the graves of Mendel and Leah Gutin on Staten Island, They also met Liff and Rabinowitz cousins in Boston, New York and Florida.

In 1999, at age 73, Lyalya gave up her 50-year career as a pediatrician to move to the U.S. Her daughter Lena, a Professor of Telecommunications and Lena's husband Ilya, an Engineer with a Ph.D. in Electronic Engineering, had finally decided to emigrate. Although this had been possible since 1988, when restrictions were lifted after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it had not been easy to abandon their lives, friends and careers in Moscow. They further delayed their departure until the family's old dog passed away; then, because Lena and Ilya's son Max (Lyalya's grandson), was approaching military draft age, the family left Russia.

Today, Max lives in New York with his wife and daughters, while Lyalya, Lena and Ilya live in a Chicago suburb - a separation made necessary by their various careers. Carola (a family friend who lives in Germany) visited the family in October 2012, and recorded the following interview. Lyalya is learning English, so she occasionally spoke in that language, but because she is most comfortable in Russian or Yiddish, Lena and Ilya translated much of her story on the spot.

A Family Treasure

Lena: Lyalya would like me to tell you a story.

Carola: Oh yes!

Lena: OK, I will show you (goes to the china cabinet).

Carola (to Lyalya): Oh good! You have a story for me! *Eine Erzählung!*

Lyalya: *Gut!*

Lena: We have this plate. It's old, and used.





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Carola: With a lion!

Lena: Tanya, Lyalya's mother, used this plate too much.

Lyalya: Tanya and Papa

Lena: When Leah and Mendel - Lyalya's grandparents - got married in Pogost, they got a present for their wedding - they got six plates.

Carola: Uh huh?

Lena: Six plates! And they had six kids. When they sent their kids to America... Rivka and Zalman and Isaac - the three oldest kids - they divided the six plates, and they gave each kid one plate. Later, the three younger kids got plates, too. Moisej got one plate, of course, and Tanya used that plate, too many times, - a lot. So this is why it looks old.

Carola: Ohhhh...

Lena: But when I was maybe 17 or 18 years old, old enough to understand, I said "Grandma! What are you doing? How can you use it? This is from my great-grandparents! It is something for the family, a piece of family history..."

Carola: Yes!

Lena: "... We have saved it! We have kept it! We cannot use it anymore!"

And when my aunt Rivka brought her daughter Bea to our house in Russia, Rivka saw that plate and she said "Oy! I have the same plate!"

Carola: (Gasps)

Lena: ... and Isaac's family has the same plate, and Zalman. Everybody! And Izrael still has this plate. Each kid, finally, they saved that plate.

Carola: Amazing!

Lena: And I'm going to give this plate to my oldest granddaughter.

Carola: Yes! Oh, I love that story!

Lena: All kids now, all generations - next generations, they have it...they keep it.

Carola: The lion, does it have a special meaning?

Lena: No, no. It is English. I believe that this was something from England.

Carola: (turns plate over) Let's see. Yes, yes - see it says "Madras" and "T.G.B."

Lena and Ilya: So maybe India...

Carola: (photographs front and back of plate). Let's take a picture, because you can look for these things on line and find out Oh, that's lovely.

Lena: Maybe the name of the plate is Madras because of this lion.

Carola: It says "Ironstone." Maybe that's the kind of china.

Lena: It was bought maybe 100 to 140 years ago. Because, just think, my grandfather was born in 1905, and his mother was born in, uh, maybe you have it?

Carola: (checks her notes) Let's see.... your great-grandmother Leah was born in 1871, so maybe she got married in about 1891?

Lena: Yeah, something like this. So, maybe I'm wrong, but it is maybe 110, Maybe 115 years old?

Carola: Yes! Is the lion a special symbol? Because I think the lion - in Judaism, sometimes a lion...?

Ilya: No, no, no, no. Nothing.

Lena: No, I don't think so. No symbol.

Ilya: No, because this plate is just like a plate.



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Carola: (laughs)

Ilya: The plate, like subject - not some kind of symbol.

Carola: No symbolism.

Lena: No symbolism at all.

Ilya: It's nice to have, but unfortunately...

Lena: No symbolism at all. No.

Carola: But again, Rivka had one, and Zalman had one and Moisej and Isaac and Izrael and Lena? Six plates, six children!

(Later, an online search reveals that the Madras pattern with the lion was a type of ironware made by the Thomas G. Booth Pottery in Tunstall, Stoke-on-Trent, England in 1872. How did this set of English dishes get to a small town in the Russian countryside, and who gave Leah Rabinowitz and her groom Mendel Gutin this wonderful gift in 1891? Wouldn't it be great to know?)

Childhood

Carola: Tell me something Lyalya, what was a happy memory from when you were a child?

Lyalya: (replies excitedly, in a passionate tone of voice, interrupting Ilya and Lena as they start to translate to repeatedly clarify and re-state her point of view).

Ilya: She wants to say...

Lyalya: (repeats, emphatically)

Ilya: Ok, Ok, I will translate...

Lena: Wow! You know what she said?

Lyalya: (continues speaking strongly, it's obviously something important to her)

Lena: They lived very, very hard and poor! She said when she was a little girl, she doesn't remember anything good.

Ilya: It was very hard to live....

Lyalya: (again interjects, strongly)

Ilya: It was a very poor village and...

Carola: Ukhvala?

Ilya: Yes, and she does not remember anything bright at this time because it was under pressure, without money, and all community got the similar problems, and it was not a happy childhood...

Carola: Was it dangerous?

Ilya: ... and she did not remember anything bright and happy there. Actually, children should be happy, but she didn't feel such happiness.

Lyalya: (Interrupts)

Ilya: She says she remembers when she moved to Moscow (in 1934, when she was 8). It was not so easy because they had very little room, but the best memory she has, it was a Christmas party in the company where her father worked, and there were some presents....

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Carola: Ahhhh!

Lena: But it was not a "Christmas" party, you know, Communist country, no Christmas.

Ilya: New Year, it was a New Year party.

Carola: And the company had a party for its workers and their children?

Ilya: Some companies. Big companies. And her father, Moisej, had a good position...

Carola: (to Lyalya) What do you remember about the New Years party at the company? Was there something good to eat?

Lena: (Starts translating and then laughs at something Lyalya is saying)

Lyalya: (Describing) ... *Podarkya, mandarinka!*

Carola: (understands) '*Mandarinka!*' Mandarin oranges?

Lyalya: (in English) One! One! One!

Carola: One for each child.

Layalya: (continues in Russian) *Pakete...*

Lena: OK, she remembers only... Ded Moroz, he's like a Santa Claus, but in Russian it's like Grandfather Frost - *moroz* means 'frozen.' They sang songs, there was a little, little, little performance around the Christmas tree, and then Moroz gave every kid a present. It was a box, a little box.

Carola: '*Packetchen*'?

Lena: A little box like this, you see them in the stores now...

Carola: With a little bow?

Lena: Yes, and there was a candy inside...

Carola: Mmmmmmm! And what else? (trying to remember what Lyalya said earlier) '*Piroshky*'?

Lena: *Piroshky*? No, no, not *piroshky*.

Ilya: Some cookies...

Lena: Some cookies, and some candy and one mandarin orange. You know?

Lyalya: Mandarin!

Ilya: ...and apples

Lena: No, no apples. One mandarin

Carola: And that was very special, because you didn't usually get oranges, right?

Lena: Correct. Oranges were special.

Ilya: Oranges, we got from Georgia.

Lyalya: (continues telling about the gift)

Lena: Oh! Nobody eat it, everybody keep it...

Lyalya: At home! At home!

Lena: Everybody kept it and ate it at home - not like now.

Carola: Yes, now the kids are like, always, "munch, munch."



Ded Moroz

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Lena: Yes - eating right away, right away. But she says her generation was very different.

Ilya: It was very hard...

Lyalya: (interjects in Russian)

Lena: And then it was a war - the Second World War -and then she got the evacuation from Moscow.

Evacuation to Siberia

Carola: You were evacuated from Moscow in 1941? Your whole family? By the company, your father's company?

Ilya: Yes, yes.

Carola: Where did they go to for the evacuation?

Lena: (matter of fact) Siberia.

Lyalya: (dramatic) Siberia!

Carola: (astounded) Noooo!

You lived in Siberia?

Lena: Yes! It was very cold.

Lyalya: Very, very cold!

Lena: It was not like in a jail!

Carola: No, no, I know....

Lena: It was just evacuation

Carola: I read about that. In the Second World War some offices and companies from Moscow evacuated to the East to get away from the Germans...

Ilya: Yes, yes

Carola: What place in Siberia, what was the name of the place where...

Lena: Village Lapartkye, Chelyabinsk Oblast

Ilya: The main town Liberjya

Lyalya: Liberjya

Lena: The closest main town was Liberjya

Ilya: Main city Chelyabinsk, it's in the Urals - 930 miles from Moscow.

Carola: In the Ural Mountains. And how long did you stay...

Lena: Lyalya stayed two years almost.

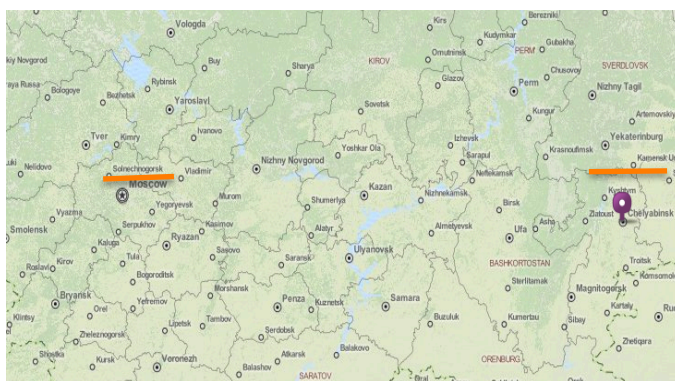
Carola: And when you came back to Moscow, was your apartment still there?

Lena: Yes!

Carola: (wanting to be sure) It was still there? Because many people lost their apartments when they evacuated, I thought.

Lena: Her house was still there; at that time, it was a private house. They did not have an apartment from the government, no. They bought it. When Moisej moved from Belarussia to Moscow, they bought a very small room in one house - bought for money, like here.

Carola: Private!



Evacuation from Moscow to Chelyabinsk, 1941 (930 miles)

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Lena: Private. And it was very cold, she had to use, um, coal or oil or whatever... wood

Carola: A wood stove?

Lena: Whatever, to make it warm. She moved from Siberia to Moscow alone- just she, all by herself.

Carola: (amazed) All alone?

Lena: Yes! She was 15 at that time, and she stayed in her friend's house. At that time, her mother Tanya and the rest of the family - nobody could come to Moscow. They had to have a special paper.

Ilya: But she was young!

Lena: She was younger than 16, so she was able to come in by herself.

Carola: I see.

Lena: Because Moisej was in hospital - he was wounded.

Carola: Was he wounded in the War?

Ilya: Yes, he got shot in the leg, and all the rest of his life he is a little bit... (he pantomimes)

Carola: Limping?

Lena: And he cannot move with his right leg.

Carola: Oh Lyalya! So your father was wounded and you got permission to go to Moscow to the hospital to see him!

Lyalya: Very, very, very bad time.

Lena: I don't know if Americans can believe about that time. There was no food.

Ilya: Her father did not eat in the hospital so he could save food...

Lena: He did not eat and he left some food...

Ilya: He saved his food for her!

Carola: Oh my. He saved it for you?

Lena: Correct. He gave it to her. She came to him almost every day...

Ilya: The military gave him food...

Lyalya: (explains)

Lena: (translating) "And I eat right away on the street."

Ilya: Because everybody was hungry.

Lena: (noticing that Carola is wiping away tears) Sorry! Sorry I told you, because you are from Germany now, and....

Carola: No, no. It's just so sad....

Lena: ...now we're OK with the German people. You understand?

Carola: I understand

Lena: We have a completely different feeling with the German people.

Carola: Oh, I understand.... It just makes me cry to think what people go through.

Ilya: Communist propaganda did not mix together population of Germany and fascism - the Nazis.

Lena: This was good from Russia

Ilya: (agreeing) Good!

Lena: They did not mix fascism and German people. No - it was separate.

Ilya: If you come from Germany, you are not necessarily Nazi. And you are welcome.

Lena: Just like a normal, a normal person, and welcome to Russia.



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Layalya: (tells a story, ending with the words '*laufe schnell*')

Lena: Oh, you know what she says? From Tanya's side of the family, lot of the family lived in Byerazino. And when it was the Second World War...

Ilya: Occupation

Carola: Yes

Lena: Occupation from German people, there was a lot of...

Ilya: Nazis killed Jewish...

Carola: Yes. Oh, I know....

Ilya: And one of the German officers took a girl - not little girl, a girl of 18

Lena: She was maybe 18 or 19 at that time

Ilya: And she was very pretty, and he told her "Run away!"

Layalya: "*Laufe schnell!*"

Carola: Tanya's sister? He told her to run away?

Lena: Not her sister - Tanya comes from a large family - her cousin, something like this.

Carola: In Byerazino? Berezin?

Lena: Yes, Berezinó (accents last syllable). And he told her "Run away." And I know that lady! Because she moved, she ran away from the Germans through the border...

Carola: She escaped?

Lena: She escaped. She lived in Leningrad, what do you call it, St. Petersburg.

Carola: Ahhhh!

Layalya: "*Laufe schnell, laufe schnell.*"

Carola: (echoing) "*Lauf schnell!*"

Layalya: (adds a detail)

Ilya: Nobody knows who was this officer.

Lena: But during the Second World War, everywhere in Russia, most people lived very difficult lives, no food, no nothing, because everything was put into the war.

Carola: For the military, yes.

Lena: For the army, everything just for this war.

Ilya: The Russian military officer and soldier, they have a chance to support the kids, the family, but it was impossible to do in regular ways. No food, no transportation.

Carola: So Moisej -where was he stationed when he got wounded?

Lena: It was not far from Moscow, like Kursk, I forget exactly. It was maybe 500 kilometers from Moscow.

Ilya: Four hundred or three hundred miles! It was a huge, huge battery and he got wounded...

Carola: And he got injured and they brought him to Moscow to hospital?

Ilya: No, he was in the local hospital and then they transferred him. But he was lucky because many people died.

Carola: (sighs) Yes, yes.

Lena: But because he was hurt, but in my opinion not terribly. OK, after that he cannot move his foot, and because he could not move it, they did not take him back in the war.

Carola: So that was good.

Ilya: And maybe that was the reason he survived.

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Lena: And the war went on for like another one and a half years, but he was just working on a civil job, like an accountant again, you know, but not in the war.

Carola: And as a veteran, a wounded war veteran, did he have any special papers to get some food?

Ilya: No, it was not so popular. He did not have some kind of privilege from like veterans

Lena: No, because he was not hurt so terribly. Privilege? No, he has both legs, both hands, his head, so, you know, he has everything! He just did not go back to the war.

Moisej Gutin - His Career

Carola: What work did Moisej do?

Ilya: He was an accountant.

Lena: In the beginning he was just an accountant, but ..

Lyalya: (interjects, giving more detail)

Lena: ... after a year, with his experience and everything, he was a huge accountant.

Carola: So he kept the books? He counted the...

Ilya: Counted the money. (laughs)
Money, money, money!

Lena: '*Buchhalter*' - you know?

Carola: '*Buchhalter*' - an accountant - yes!

Lena: But he was very good and very professional. He worked for a very huge company - even if he was a Jewish - he was Chief of Buchhalter group.

Carola: For what company?

Lena: It was a construction company, but they did construction in the Kremlin.

Carola: Oh!

Lena: They wanted to fire him, because he was Jewish, but the chief of this construction company, he said "No! I want to keep my money, everything debit and credit"you know these words?

Carola: Yes!

Lena: "... on a zero. Everything should be OK. I would like to sleep very good at night, nobody should steal the money, so I would like to keep this Jewish guy!

Carola: Moisej Gutin!

Lena: Gutin! The chief was very friendly with my grandfather. He was in our house many times, visited, you know, to celebrate some birthdays, holidays, whatever. He was like a friend. He was not Jewish, of course, but he just kept that...

Ilya: His position was like chief of government department of the United States.



Moisej & Tanya entertain cousin Ewing
Krainin, Moscow 1966



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Lena: Yes, that company - actually it is a government company. It was very big, and they did the decoration of the Kremlin, and the Moscow Meryia and things like this, you know?

Ilya: It was very, very famous

Lena: They did not build apartment buildings, not like that...

Ilya: Many years, he was Chief of Buchhalter - of Accounting Department, and after that, after he got retirement, they invited him to come back as an auditor

Carola: Ahhh. To check!

Lena:(agreeing) To check

Carola: And how do you say the name of the company in Russian? What's it called?

Lena: "Stretlinia, Stretlinea Triesta" I'm not sure...

Ilya: National Builder Construction Company of Moscow City.

Carola: Ahhh. And this was the time when it was very difficult to be Jewish.

Lena: Unbelievable.

Ilya: Yes, yes. And he was not Communist, and he was not in Party, but because he has so high level of qualification, the chief of the department and chief of company try to keep him, and he has very good reputation.

Lena. Moisej was very educated. You know, Moisej finished only - you cannot believe - he finished only two grades in the school!

Carola: Oh my!

Lena: That's it! Two grades! Can you believe it?

Carola: And he was so smart...

Lena: But he was so smart, he loved to read books, he graduated everything by himself. He was a very, very educated person all by himself, without any diploma and without any education certificate.

Ilya: You cannot believe how many books he read.

Lena: How many books we had in Russia, in Moscow, in our house.

Ilya: For education, for knowledge, for history

Lena: For history, for everything.

Ilya: The last year of his life he was very, very interested... he loved to read books about war. Memoirs of some famous generals...

Lena: Generals and marshals...

Carola: Military history

Ilya: He loved it because it was part of his life.

Lyalya's Career

Carola: So tell me Lyalya, you came at 15 years old to Moscow to be with your father, did you then begin to study? How did you become a doctor?

Lena: She went back to school again.

When she graduated from 10th grade, she got a diploma and she could go to any university. What it was good with the communist system, the education was free. You just need to pass the test.

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Carola: To be smart.

Lena: Yeah, but at that time - during the war - because a lot of people were in the war, there was no competition.

Ilya: You can go where you want. No boys, because all boys got to be soldiers. So without any tests, she came to the University of Moscow.

Lena: It is a long story. First of all she went to a special university - the Technical University

Ilya: She tried to be a professional weapons engineer! She wanted to be a weapons engineer, for bombs

Carola: Designing bombs!

Lena: Yes, she spent one year at that university, but then she understood it is not for her. After one year, she would like to be a doctor. But it was in 1945 and the War was ended. It was May, right, but they start to study in October. And a lot of people from the war came back!

Ilya: Men!

Lena: Soldiers could get a university place without any test.

Ilya: For free. For soldiers, it was for free.

Carola: I see!

Lena: But Lyalya, she- she needed to pass the test!

Carola: (gasps) Ohhhh!

Lena: And she did it! She passed the test for Moscow Medical University.

Lyalya: Fifty years, I work.

Carola: Fifty years, you worked as a doctor?

Lena: Almost, yes.

Layalya: seventy-three years, no more work and come to America.

Lena: At 73, she retired and came to America.

Ilya: She started working when she was 23, worked as doctor for 50 years, and stopped only because we got immigration to United States.

Lyalya: In Russland, doctor have not money. Very....

Carola: Not like in America

Lena : Doctors are very poorly paid - like a teacher. Is a teacher rich in Germany?

Carola: No.

Ilya: Doctor, and engineer and teacher were paid the same. If you transferred it to dollars or euros, it would be 'Funny Money'

Carola: (laughs) Un huh.

Ilya: All life was funny. Your amount of your salary was funny. In one month, you can make a choice: to buy good shoes or eat all month.

Lena: Good shoes cost the same like your monthly salary.



Portrait of Lyalya by her husband
Kolya

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Ilya: Monthly salary. And if you want to buy your shoes, you have to divide your salary and keep this money for next time.

Carola: So you weren't rich, Lyalya. But you were doing good work. You were doing important work. *Wichtige Arbeit*.

Ilya: She was pediatrician

Carola: Yes, helping children.

Lyalya : Very much I work. In the night...

Lena: She worked at night. At the hospital, you know sometimes doctors work at all times.

Carola: Yes but it is important work, you are helping people.

Lyalya: I want this...

Ilya: She wanted to help, she wanted to help kids

Lyalya: I want to be doctor

Ilya: (joking) But if she knew about immigration, she could have stayed a doctor, because doctors here are very, very rich. But we have good salary too.

Lena: Let's go take a little bit lunch, ok?

Carola: I'd love to have some lunch. I'm gonna turn off this recorder.



Carola and Lyalya, October 2012

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1834 Map of the Minsk Region

Towns whose names are underlined in red are places where members of the Rabinowitz & Gutin families lived

