

RUSSIAN LULLABY

Prepared for the Literary Club of Cincinnati
by Jerry Kathman
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Irena (right) with
her sister Marisha in
Leningrad in 1935.

**Every night, you hear her croon
A Russian lullaby**

**Just a plaintive, simple tune
When baby starts to cry**

**Rock-a-bye my baby
Somewhere maybe**

**There's a land that's free
For you and me**

That's a Russian lullaby

*Irving Berlin wrote these lyrics in 1927.
I have taken the name of this song as
the title for tonight's paper.*

The children were finally napping, and as was her habit, Irena prepared tea. The radiant warmth of the filtered sun through the kitchen window, along with her steaming cup of chai, brought a calming peace to a cold winter afternoon—calm to a life that had known little peace.

Irena Churayev never imagined life as a nanny. She never imagined life in America. Imagining a future at all was a luxury her life had ill afforded her. Who could have imagined any of the events that shaped her life; the Revolution, the Civil War, the terror, the purges, the Siege of Leningrad or life in a forced-labor camp in Germany.

But here she was in Passaic, New Jersey, of all places, learning a new language and new customs in a strangely optimistic new country. Grateful. Confounded. Emotionally exhausted, but alive. Helping to raise someone else's children. The year was 1949.

She grew up a daughter of privilege. Her father, Anatole Churayev was Dean of Mathematics at the GV Plekhanov Institute, which was founded in St. Petersburg in 1773 by order of Empress Catherine the II—Catherine the Great. It is the oldest engineering college in Russia, and is described by some as the MIT of that country.

As an interesting aside, Vladimir Putin's doctoral thesis was defended at the institute in 1996. Significant amounts of plagiarism have been discovered in Putin's paper. Some suggest he didn't even write it.

Forgive me for that unnecessary digression, gentlemen, but honestly, is there anything more delightful than a good Putin story! Now I return to the job at hand—propelling Irena Churayev's life narrative forward through the sweep of the twentieth century.

Because of her father's position at the Institute, her family was prominent. The Czar had knighted Professor Churayev with both the Order of Saint Anna and the Order of Saint Stanislaus. Two grand pianos fit comfortably into their large parlor. It was a life that would be found in the pages of Tolstoy or on the stage of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Ballet.

But Irena was born into a world in which revolution changed everything. In the beginning, there was hope. Czar Nicholas II had abdicated. There was, for a brief moment, a sense of optimism. Even the young editor of *Pravda*, a former seminarian from Georgia, Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili supported Alexander Kerensky's provisional government. But when Lenin prevailed at the April 1917 Communist Party Conference, the editor and *Pravda* shifted to opposing the provisional government. Around this time, the young editor had adapted the name "Stalin" from the Russian word for steel. He used it as both an alias and a pen name in his published works.

Soon Stalin was elected to the Bolshevik Central Committee. The committee voted in favor of an insurrection in October 1917. Lenin, Stalin and the rest of the Central Committee coordinated an insurrection against Kerensky. By the 8th of November, the Bolsheviks had stormed into the Winter Palace. Kerensky's Cabinet had been arrested, and the comfortable life that the Churayevs were living would end.

Civil war broke out in Russia, pitting Lenin's Red Army against the White Army, a loose alliance of anti-Bolshevik forces. Within a few years, however, all pockets of resistance were defeated.

Out of the Central Committee, Lenin organized a five-member Politburo, including Stalin. In 1922, Lenin suffered a stroke, forcing him into retirement in Gorki. Although Stalin visited him often, their relationship deteriorated during this period. Lenin was aware of Stalin's excessive ambition. He suggested that Stalin be removed from the position of general secretary. Stalin, however, saw to it that Lenin's views were never known. Lenin's Testament was never revealed at the Twelfth Party Conference in April 1923.

With the death of Lenin in 1924, Stalin pushed for rapid industrialization and more central control of the economy, contravening Lenin's New Economic Policy. Stalin launched massive purges against his enemies, putting them on rigged show trials and having them executed or imprisoned in Siberian Gulags. His campaign against alleged enemies culminated in the Great Purge, a period of mass repression in which hundreds of thousands of people were executed.

The "former people" suffered dearly at the hands of Stalin. In his book by that name, Robert Powell explains that this dreadful term "former people" was used by Stalin for those who formed the Russian nobility or those who held positions of authority in the imperial era. They became "former people" and were thus designated as enemies. But because of his ambition toward an industrialized nation, Stalin was far more tolerant with certain "former people," including mathematicians and engineers. He simply needed their skills. Irena's father, a mathematician that trained engineers, thereby survived the purges.

Professor Churayev, of course, did not know that he would survive. He lived everyday in fear. He had a suitcase packed by the door. The rare sound of a car motoring down the street in the middle of the night would awaken him. If he heard the car stop, the doors slam and the sound of heavy boots running across the pavement, he would quietly walk to the door hoping that his arrest would not disturb the sleep of Irena and her sister, Marisha. But, alas, the police would go to another door. He would hear the pounding and the screaming as someone else was dragged away into the night. He would quietly go back to bed and attempt to sleep.

Life took a dramatic turn for young Irena and her family when strangers were moved into their home. Following the Revolution, communal apartments, called *kommunalka*, emerged as a response to the housing crisis in Russia's urban areas. The idea of a communal apartment was consistent with the Soviet's "new collective vision for the future." Communal apartments were typically shared by multiple families. Each family had their own single room, which served as a living room, dining room and bedroom for the entire family. The hallway, kitchen, bathroom and telephone were shared among all the residents. Three families moved into Irena's home.

This form of housing dominated the USSR for generations, and, remarkably, some communal apartments still exist today in certain districts of large Russian cities, including St. Petersburg.

People were driven from the countryside by poverty, collectivization and the Soviet industrialization campaigns. The exodus put enormous pressure on existing urban housing accommodations. This led to a plan to "expropriate and resettle private apartments." The communal apartment was deemed revolutionary as it "united different social groups in one physical space." Irena's family apartment now belonged to the government and was shared with strangers.

Think about this, gentlemen. Go home tonight and look around your house. Imagine the local commissar moving strangers into your home.

Life was now more difficult for young Irena and her family. The other occupants knew that the Churayevs were among those designated the "former people"—that the apartment had previously been their private home. They hated them for it—sabotaging their cooking and stealing their food whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Irena was also learning to speak quietly, if at all, in public. It wasn't just about the possibility that someone would overhear her say things that were deemed counter revolutionary. Even the structure and sound of her speech revealed a grace and sensibility that was at odds with the newly emerging Soviet proletariat language.

The codification of revolutionary doctrine into unambiguous and powerful symbols used in visual propaganda, such as posters, art and political cartoons, is certainly well documented. Less well understood is that the function of the Russian language itself had become a vehicle of propaganda.

In any society, language functions as a means of reflecting and shaping culture and values. The discourse of revolution had brought a vast range of neologisms, acronyms and new compounds into the Russian language. The meaning of Russian words had sometimes changed and foreign borrowings were frequently used. Substandard slang expressions coexisted with high Marxist rhetoric and

bureaucratic terminology in a strange new stylistic mixture.

Bolsheviks believed that a new language was to be found in the creativity of the liberated toiling masses. They desired that the newly created proletarian intelligentsia would express themselves in the “language of the factory and the farm.” It was believed that this form of social engineering would improve the link between the state and the people, and would allow the masses of the peasantry, led by the informed urban proletariat, to participate in the construction of the new state.

This baffled the young Irena. If she spoke to her mother or sister on a streetcar using the Russian language she spoke at home, she was spit upon by fellow passengers who embraced the new Soviet-speak language. Silence in public became the means by which she protected her dignity.

Even today among the Russian diaspora in Paris, London or New York, Russians in the briefest of conversations can determine when a fellow Russian speaker left the motherland—during Czarist times or after the Revolution. Modern Soviet Russian language offends the sensibility of those whose families left Russia before the Revolution.

Life continued to deteriorate for Irena’s family. Fear and petty humiliations were daily occurrences.

But a visit to the opera, which, surprisingly, thrived during this period, offered what Irena would later describe as the only truth left in Soviet Russia. A surprising thing happened to opera in this period to make that so.

The three countries with totalitarian systems, Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, politicized opera. Opera companies, however, did not lose quality during this strict oppression. According to Irina Kotkina, in her study concerning the art form in this period, she argues, that instead, the formalization of the classical repertoire—as we know it today—was established. Though the general aims of the regimes were dissimilar, each in their way attempted to create a model art that reflected the ideology of their respective new social order. Creating a new opera became a perilous occupation.

New operas in Russia needed to fit the goal of the Soviets. The prohibition of certain new works by artists that did not fit into the appropriate style (the most familiar case being Shostakovich) led to a decided preference among Russian opera houses for the classics. There was simply less risk in staging established opera. Opera became a kind of “museum” spectacle.

For Irena, the timeless themes of the classical repertoire—fidelity, integrity, honor and love—presented a window into a rare world unmanipulated by the commissars. Her lifelong passion for opera was formed at this time. Opera gave Irena hope that there was life beyond the cruelty of Stalin’s Russia.

The invasive nature of the soviet system continued to enter every aspect of the Churayev home. One evening, a student visited Professor Churayev with a question concerning work he had been assigned. The student noticed an icon hanging in the corner of the family’s single room in the communal apartment. Russian icons in religious homes hang on the wall in the “krasny ugol” or beautiful corner. That was the case in the Churayev home. The student reported the professor to the authorities. A man in his position would lose his job if he were a believer. Professor Churayev assured the authorities that the icon was a silly manifestation of his superstitious wife, Olga, and it meant nothing to him. He assured the authorities that he would remove it at once.

Professor Churayev was in fact a believer. But he made the right decision—one I believe most of us would make. Denying his faith would quickly put the matter behind him and preserve his family. Proclaiming his faith would destroy everything. But the shame of that moment haunted the professor the rest of his life.

Soviet policy toward religion was based on the state's Marxist-Leninist ideology, which made atheism the official doctrine of the nation. The system advocated the control, suppression and eventual elimination of religion. The state destroyed churches, mosques and temples, ridiculed, harassed and executed religious leaders. Religious beliefs and practices, however, persisted among the majority of the Russian population in the domestic and private spheres of life including the Churayev home.

Irena's Russian Orthodox church suffered terribly, and many of its members were killed or sent to labor camps. In the period between 1927 and 1940, the number of Orthodox churches in Russia fell from around 30,000 to fewer than 500.

In 1929 Soviet policy brought new legislation that would form the basis for harsh anti-religious persecution in the following decade. Anti-religious education was introduced from the first grade up and anti-religious propaganda was intensified throughout the education system. A massive purge was conducted at the same time of Christian intellectuals, many of whom died in the camps or in prison. Eliminating church intellectuals assisted the state's propaganda that only backward people believed in God.

At first, the church was successful at competing with the ongoing and widespread atheistic propaganda. This prompted additional laws to be adopted against "religious associations" as well as amendments to the constitution, which forbade all forms of public, social, communal, educational, publishing or missionary activities for religious believers.

Stalin used the same methods and terror tactics against others he considered ideological enemies. In his book, *Russia: A Short History*, Abraham Ascher presents statistics that reveal the scope of Stalin's war against his own people. According to information released by the Soviet government after Stalin's death, about half the entire officer corps of the army (thirty-five thousand men) were arrested, including three out of five marshals, thirteen out of fifteen army commanders, seventy-five out of eighty-five corps commanders, one hundred out of one hundred ninety-five division commanders, ninety percent of all generals and eighty percent of all colonels. The number of people in high positions in the civilian sphere who were charged with crimes against the state is equally astonishing. For example, over 1,100 out of 1,966 voting and non-voting delegates at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934 were arrested.

Many of the accused were shot. Many lower ranking party members were purged and then either executed or sent for long periods to the Gulag, where conditions were ghastly. A large number of ordinary citizens too were shipped off to these camps for minor infractions of regulations or for no reason except that they were suspected of counter-revolutionary sympathies.

It is not known exactly how many ended up in the camps, but there is no doubt that the number ran to millions. Even the most conservative estimates suggest that at the time of Stalin's death in 1953, there were over 5 million citizens in various camps, colonies and "special settlements." Other estimates reasonably put the figure closer to ten or twelve million. No one disputes that the security force, which administered the Gulag, was the single largest employer in the

Soviet Union. It is also difficult to determine how many were executed or died because of the horrendous conditions in the camps, but again, the number was huge. Historians have suggested that if one adds up all the people who died as a result of official Soviet policies, a figure of fifteen to twenty million is not unreasonable.

The life of the Churayevs in the 1930s was extraordinarily grim, and not only because of the terror. For one thing, shortages of essential goods, including bread, a staple at every Russian meal, were widespread. In recently opened archives, a scholar found a letter from a housewife to Stalin complaining “you have to go at two o’clock at night and stand until six in the morning to get two kilograms of rye bread.” There were huge lines for bread and “often, going past these lines, Russians would hear shouts, squabbling, tears and sometimes fights.” Other foods such as meat, milk, butter and vegetables as well as salt, soap, kerosene and matches were also often difficult to obtain. The shortages of clothing were perennial, and the garments that were on sale were of shoddy quality. People who wished to mend their clothing could not find thread, needles or buttons.

Given these circumstances, it is remarkable that the Soviet people were able to rise to a severe challenge early in the 1940s—war with Germany. Ideologically, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party had posed a clear threat to communism ever since their rise to power in Germany in 1933. Marxism and Judaism were, in Hitler’s view, Germany’s twin enemies and he vowed to crush both. When Hitler became chancellor, the Soviets believed that his regime would not last long and that his policies would in the end help the cause of communism. Hitler would embark, the Soviets claimed, on a highly reactionary program that would antagonize the working class, who would be radicalized to the point of staging a successful revolution against Nazism. It did not take the Soviet leadership long to recognize the flaws in their analysis. By the mid 1930s it was clear that Hitler had crushed the working class social movement in Germany.

By the late 1930s the Western powers and the Soviet Union sought a unified policy to stop the expansion of Nazism. But the distrust between them was too great. Statesmen in Great Britain and France feared Germany but they also feared the spread of communism, which after the brutalities of Stalin’s industrialization and collectivization seemed to be more menacing than ever. On the other hand, Stalin suspected that the leaders of the West were prepared to strike a deal with Hitler against the Soviet Union. In the end, Stalin calculated that Germany was the lesser danger to his country. On 23 August 1939, he signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact, an agreement that struck many people, among them ardent socialist radicals worldwide, as a horrendous betrayal.

Within two years, Hitler was massing troops in the east, and despite many warnings from Winston Churchill and others that Germany was on the verge of attacking the Soviet Union, Stalin looked the other way. He simply would not believe that Hitler would betray him. When the German attack came, Stalin fell into a state of shock, utterly paralyzed, and for about seven days he was incapable of running the government.

The German Army was unstoppable. In armor, strategy, tactics and determination, it easily overwhelmed the Soviet Army. In one month, the German Army under General von Bock’s leadership advance five-hundred miles before encountering major resistance. In mid October the German Army stood at the gates of Moscow and for four days, from 15 to 19 October, Stalin suffered another nervous

breakdown. By that time, the Germans had gained control over territories in which sixty million Russians (about thirty percent of the total population) lived. This territory contained two-thirds of the country's coal reserves and three-quarters of its iron ore. The Red Army had suffered staggering losses: thousands of Russian tanks, guns and airplanes had been destroyed or captured and the number of casualties endured during the first four months of the war ran to over three million.

Things quickly got much worse for the Churayevs. On 8 September 1941, Irena's life of humiliation, confusion and scarcity was replaced by a genuine fear for her very life—death by means of starvation, cold or German shelling. Her beautiful city, Leningrad, was under siege. With the participation of the Finnish Army, the German Army Group North surrounded the city and the longest and most destructive blockade in history—the most overwhelmingly costly in terms of human casualty—had begun. It would last until 27 January 1944, almost 900 days after it began.

Hitler's goal was the total destruction of the city and its population. According to a directive sent to Army Group North on 29 September, Hitler stated "After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continued existence of this large urban centre. ... Following the city's encirclement, requests for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war, for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population."

Leningrad's value was both symbolic and strategic. The city's political status as the former capital and the place where the Bolshevik Revolution began would be a great propaganda victory for Hitler. The military value was significant because Leningrad was both a main base of the Soviet Baltic Fleet and an industrial center containing numerous arms factories.

Polk Laffoon read an excellent paper on the siege appropriately entitled "Shortage" last year. We learned that the blockade was a calculated attempt to starve the city into extinction. As food stocks ran out, people ate pets and wallpaper paste to stay alive. Indeed, Irena's family survived by these means and repeatedly thought that they were going to die when German bombs ravaged their neighborhood.

In the winter of 1943, the Churayevs were evacuated by means of the Road of Life. The Road of Life was a route across the frozen Lake Ladoga, which provided the only escape from the besieged city. They were moved by the Soviet authorities to the south where they were quickly overrun by the advancing German Army. Along with thousands of starving Russians, the Churayevs were made prisoners of the Third Reich.

The family was herded into a boxcar so crowded that they could only stand. Packed with 60 other terrified, emaciated Russians, the family spent the next 15 days in utter filth and fear arriving at last at their destination—a forced labor camp in Germany.

As Slavs, the Churayevs were considered Untermensch (German for under man, or subhuman). The term became infamous when the Nazis used it to describe "inferior people," especially the masses from the East, Jews, Gypsies and Slavic people. Though the word is associated with Nazism, the term "under man" was first used by Lothrop Stoddard, an American, in the title of his 1922 pamphlet *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man*. The

term “Untermensch” was later adopted by the Nazis from that book’s German-language version. Stoddard’s definition of the under man is “A man who measures under the standards of capacity and adaptability imposed by the social order in which he lives.”

Stoddard believed that the recent takeover of power by the Bolsheviks in Russia meant that the country was now ruled by the most degenerate people on earth. The combination of the alleged inherent racial inferiority of Russian Slavs with the idiocy of a political creed that appealed to the vilest of human instincts (jealousy toward the more gifted and more affluent) necessitated a new term to describe this phenomenon—the under man. To Stoddard, the October Revolution was the battle cry for an upcoming unavoidable clash between civilized and uncivilized nations.

In Nazi Germany, the term “Untermensch” was utilized repeatedly in writings and speeches directed against Jews, the most notorious being the 1935 SS publication with the title *Der Untermensch* which contains an anti-Semitic tirade from a speech given earlier by Heinrich Himmler. An example of using the term “Untermensch” directed against Slavs is found in another brochure with the same title *Der Untermensch*, published in 1942 at the start of the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis. I’ll quote from it.

“Although it has features similar to a human, the subhuman is lower on the spiritual and psychological scale than any animal. Inside of this creature lies wild and unrestrained passions: an incessant need to destroy, filled with the most primitive desires, chaos and cold-hearted villainy. Not all of those who appear human are in fact so. Whoa to him who forgets it.”

Hitler’s intent was to reduce the numbers of Slavic people who both then and now are the most numerous of the European peoples. Importantly, unlike the Jewish people, the Nazis did not seek the complete elimination of the Slavic people. They saw Slavs as a valuable source of slave labor in the expansion of the post-war Reich—a slave race born to serve their Aryan masters. The concept of the Slavic people being Untermensch served the Nazis as justification for their aggression against Poland and the Soviet Union. The plans for the post-war German Reich, summarized in Generalplan Ost, envisioned the displacement, enslavement and the elimination of no less than 50 million people who were not considered fit for Germanization from the territories it wanted to conquer to the east.

According to research housed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Nazi’s subjugated millions of people (both Jews and other victim groups) into forced labor under brutal conditions. From the establishment of the first Nazi concentration camps and detention facilities in the winter of 1933, forced labor—often pointless and humiliating and imposed without proper equipment, clothing, nourishment or rest—formed a core part of the concentration camp regimen.

Initially, the Nazis imposed forced labor primarily on Jewish civilians. But as early as 1937, the Nazis increasingly exploited the forced labor of other so-called “enemies of the state” for economic gain and to meet increasing labor shortages.

Immediately following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans allowed millions of Soviet prisoners of war to die through a deliberate policy of neglect, insufficient food, clothing, shelter or medical care. By the spring of 1942, however, the German authorities changed policies and began to deploy Soviet military prisoners at forced labor in various war-related industries. From 1942–1944, the Germans also deported nearly three million Soviet civilians to Germany

as forced labor, including the Churayev family.

So the timing of their capture by the Germans proved fortuitous. Had it been a few years earlier, the Churayevs likely would not have survived. A few years earlier the Nazis were simply pursuing a conscious policy of “annihilation through work.” Prisoners were literally worked to death. Prisoners were forced to work under conditions that would directly and deliberately lead to illness, injury and death.

So began life for the Churayevs under Hitler. They were no longer “former people” surviving the madness of Stalin. They were now Untermensch hoping to survive the madness of Hitler.

By the end of the war, civilian deaths in Europe totaled almost 16 million, which includes 1.5 million from military action; 7.1 million deliberate victims of Nazi genocide, the Holocaust; 1.8 million deported to Germany for forced labor and 5.5 million from famine and disease deaths. In addition to the 16 million civilian deaths during the war, an additional 1 million died in 1946 and 1947 as famine continued in Europe after the war. Some of us remember our mothers telling us back then, “Finish your dinner—there are children starving in Europe.”

At the end of the war, millions of non-Germans remained in Germany—a legacy of Nazi efforts to exploit for forced labor those they perceived as racial inferiors from lands to the east.

This included the Churayevs who were living day-to-day on the streets. They made their home, in fact, for a while in a newspaper kiosk. After life as “former people” and then “inferior people,” a new term was now assigned to the Churayevs—“displaced people.”

A displaced person is someone who has been forced to leave his or her native land. The term was widely used during and immediately after World War II to describe the overwhelming flow of refugees from Eastern Europe.

Preparations for dealing with the challenge of displaced persons were set in motion by the Allies during the war. In November 1943, representatives of 43 countries met at the White House and established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Its objective was to plan for the provisions of food, clothing, medical supplies and other forms of assistance to refugees when the war was over. The Allied forces in Germany would set up camps and assembly points where displaced persons would stay until they could be returned to their own countries. In 1945, responsibility for the care of displaced persons began for the now victorious nations—the United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union—each in their respective occupation zones.

The Churayevs were suddenly aware that they were now in the Soviet zone. They were once again paralyzed by fear. Circumstances were sufficiently chaotic, however, that Professor Churayev had an opportunity to act on what would prove to be a fateful decision. He knew that what awaited them upon their return to Leningrad was likely imprisonment and death. The Soviets would see them as traitors for permitting themselves to be made prisoners. He moved his family west. Through incredible hardships they made their way into the American zone.

Over two million Soviet citizens were returned, willingly or unwillingly, to areas under Soviet control at the war’s end—but not the Churayevs. In 1948 in the United States, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act primarily inspired by growing anti-communism—and growing awareness of what the Soviets were doing to their returnees. Its passage led to a timely relaxation of US Immigration

policy, if sponsorship could be found.

After a year in a displaced persons camp for Russian speakers in the American zone in Germany, Professor Churayev happened upon a copy of a Russian-language newspaper published in New York City. He recognized the editor as a friend from his childhood. He sent a letter to New York seeking sponsorship of his family to the United States. Professor Churayev was convinced that the Soviets would conquer all of Western Europe in a short period of time. Only by getting to America, he believed, would he keep his family from returning to the clutches of the communists. His friend sponsored the family. Soon they were sailing into New York Harbor. So began life in America for Irena.

What must have gone through the mind of Irena, now a young adult, as she passed by the Statue of Liberty? Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, provides an understanding. (I am grateful to my fellow Literarian John Tew for sharing this book with me.) Frankl describes the three stages one goes through having experienced life in a forced labor camp. He describes the initial period of admission, followed by the period where one is entrenched in the camp routine and finally the period following release and liberation.

The first stage is one of shock. Frankl's description of his arrival at the camp includes chaos, terror and helplessness. This parallels the experience of the Churayevs. He then describes the routine of the camp, which involved a cold detachment of the mind from its surroundings. He quotes Dostoyevsky, who defines man as "a being who can get used to anything." Feelings are blunted. The prisoner soon surrounds himself with a very necessary protective shield. There is a daily struggle to maintain one's dignity.

Frankl then describes the final stage, that of the liberated prisoner. The day comes when looking back at his experiences, he can no longer understand how he endured it all. When the day of his liberation eventually comes, everything seems to him like a beautiful dream. So also comes the day when all his camp experiences seem to him like nothing but a distant nightmare.

Frankl states, "The crowning experience of it all for the homecoming man, is the wonderful feeling that after all he has suffered, there is nothing he may fear anymore—except his God."

Terrible as it was, Frankl's experience solidified his ideas concerning life's meaning. Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure as Freud believed or a quest for power as Alfred Adler taught. Rather it is a quest for meaning. The greatest

task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life, says Frankl. He saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person) or in courage (the attitude we take while suffering). Suffering in and of itself is meaningless. Frankl states, "We give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it." Quoting Dostoyevsky again, "There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my suffering." Work, love and



Irena (left) with her daughter Elizabeth at an exhibit about the last Tsar and his family in 2004.

the attitude she took toward her suffering would give meaning to Irena's life in America.

Irena completed her time as a nanny. She saved enough money to help with a down payment for a modest home in Passaic. By then, she was a young bride. Friends had introduced her to another displaced person, a young Russian soldier who, after fighting in the Red Army, found himself a refugee in Europe. He too knew that by returning to Russia, he would be thrown into the Gulag or worse. Jerislav Grubow was sponsored to the United States by kind strangers in a Lutheran parish in Passaic. Irena and Jerislav settled down and raised a family.

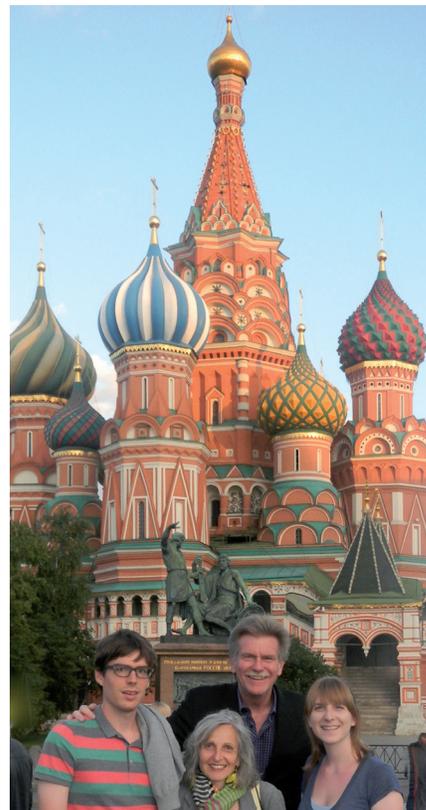
If I may, I leap ahead now thirty-five years to 1985. I am sitting next to Irena at the Metropolitan Opera, listening to Luciano Pavarotti and Montserrat Caballé perform in Puccini's *Tosca*. On my other side sits Irena's daughter, Elizabeth, my wife.

The evening was spectacular. As the curtain closed, Irena turned to me and said, "Did you enjoy that, Jerry?" and what could I say but "Oh yes, it was magnificent." The next thing she said was curious—not the kind of comment one expects at the opera. She said "No one can ever take that from you, Jerry." Such a strange thought to share at such a joyous moment. Yet she felt compelled to say it, for it was the profound truth—the transcendental truth—that her life had taught her. Life is nothing but a series of experiences. Nothing material survives. In Irena's life, very little of the material survived. But how she chose to respond to her suffering is a powerful inheritance for her family. Her example vastly exceeds the value of anything material.

The Orthodox Church Sunday liturgy includes a beautiful passage, which always moves me. The priest beckons the congregants to "bless thine inheritance." Honor all that comes before you—honor the wisdom of those who precede you.

My wife, Liz, and I traveled to Russia several years ago with our children Stefan and Alexandra. We visited Irena's neighborhood (or should I say Babushka's neighborhood, for she was by then only known by that name to our kids). Our children were both in school; our son studying at Harvard College and our daughter at Boston University, both possessing strong, curious, scientific minds. Minds that I am confident would have pleased Professor Churayev.

We stood on the stairs of the GV Plekhanov Institute, where Professor Churayev taught so many years ago. The wind was blowing heavy off the Neva River and an overcast sky framed my solemn mood.



My family visiting
Russia in 2010.

My thoughts were of Irena. She lay in a bed back in Passaic well into her journey of dementia. No longer able to recognize us, but yet so much a part of us. Irena remains part of us and always will. This idea—that those who come before us remain part of us—is beautifully expressed in the opening scene of Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*. I’ll close with a reading from it.

A Rabbi is speaking with a heavy Eastern European accent, paying respects at the passing of Sarah Ironson in the Bronx Home for Aged Hebrews. He says, “I did not know this woman, and yet I know her. She was not a person, but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean.” He turns to her grandchildren and says, “You can never make that crossing that she made. For such great voyages in the world do not anymore exist. But everyday of your lives, the miles of that voyage, between that place and this one, you cross. Every day. You understand me? In you, is that journey.”