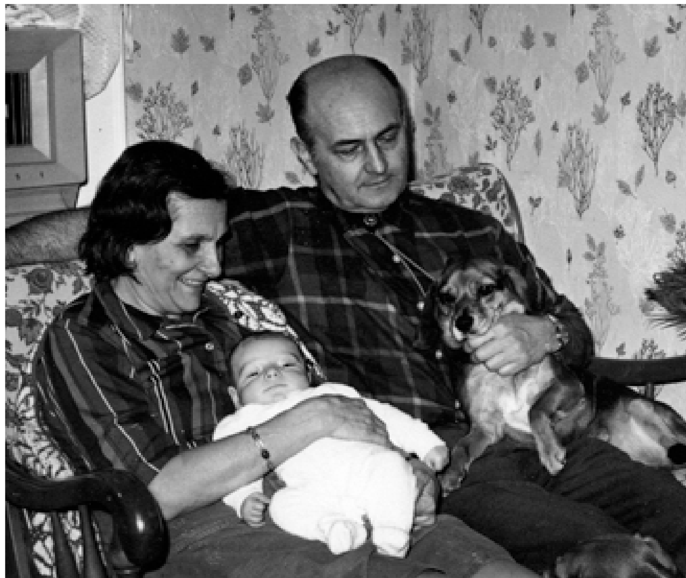
Book Six

Elena Vasileevna Sochanskaya Youth — Kiev, 1918–1943

Helen when she was about 12 years of age.



Peter and Helen with their first grandchild, Cedric Puleston.

Introduction

Elena Vasileevna Sochanskaya, alias Helen Stavrakis, was born on February 17, 1918 (NS) in her grandfather Gregory Britchkin's grand multi — dwelling apartment building on 12 Malopodvalnaya Street, Kiev, Ukraine at the time of the Revolution when the old Tsarist empire was being toppled and the Soviet Union was about to come into existence.

"My mother," Helen joked, *always said that I spoiled her birthday. True. Hers was on February 16. I was born on February 17, 1918 at home — of course! — in my grandfather's house."* Although stated in jest the comment had a bittersweet edge to it for as a child, Helen craved more affection from her mother than she received.

Elena Vasileevna Sochanskaya at about 12 years of age, the authors' mother.

УСРР
НАРОДНІЙ КОМІСАРІЯТ ВНУТРІШНІХ СПРАВ
Свідоцтво про народження № 1222

УССР
НАРОДНЫЙ КОМИССАРИАТ ВНУТРЕННИХ ДЕЛ
Свидетельство о рождении № 1222

Helen was born on February 17, 1918 (New Style) in her grandfather's house on 12 Malopodvalnaya Street in Kiev, Ukraine.

All the middle class and affluent apartments were cut up and converted into communal dwellings after the Revolution. The state regulated how many square meters per person was permitted.

Photo of a Kommunalka hallway at Savinsky Pereulok, Flat No. 5 in 1929. For lack of space people expanded into hallways, using them for kitchen and living areas. Regulations stipulated that hallways had to remain a meter wide but that was not always possible. (Photo Credit: riowang.blogspot.com)

At the time of her birth the family occupied the grand 10 room apartment on the second floor in the center of the house facing out onto Mihailovsky Lane (now Patorzhenskaya Street) *(See Book 5 Mihailenko/Britchkin for that part of the family background)*. The house built around 1898 still exists, though it had been converted to luxury condos in 1995.

She was baptized at home, with the priests making a house call out of respect for her grandfather who was a "starosta" (supporting elder) and generous patron of the Cathedral of St. Sophia. She was his only grandchild.

Six months after Helen's birth, her grandfather was dead and as the Bolsheviks consolidated their power, the family became targets of persecution. Sometime around 1919 or 1920, the house on Malopodvalnaya Street was seized and all their wealth was nationalized by the state (or "stolen" by mobs) and the family left destitute. They descended into poverty. The building was chopped up into communal rooms, called "kommunalkas." These were distributed among families the Revolution identified as politically deserving of free urban dwelling. Through the efforts of Helen's peasant father, the family escaped arrest, exile and execution and he even managed to acquire living quarters in the corner room of the house they once owned — no bathroom, no kitchen. Those remained communal.

This was where Helen grew up and the only life she knew. The Revolution rewrote history and criminalized one's predecessors retroactively so to talk of the past was dangerous especially as Britchkin had been a wealthy merchant, prominent in city politics and an outspoken supporter of Tsar and church. For the protection of the family, he had to be forgotten, erased from memory. Helen grew up never having seen a photo of her grandfather. Even to say his name was dangerous. This was the life she knew and to her it was normal.

Diagram showing how much space must be left open in hallways. Obviously no one paid attention to these rules. (Photo Credit: riowang.blogspot.com)

CHAPTER 1

Early Years

Helen when she was about 12 years of age with her hair in braids. The braids caused her some difficulty with the rough proletarian bullies in school #52. Braids were considered “bourgeois” and everything bourgeois was anti Revolutionary.

I was born handicapped, without a hip socket (hip dysplasia). The leg just hung there. It’s something you see from time to time. As you grow, one leg becomes shorter than the other. The bone that should be in a socket hangs loose and it’s hard to walk. Deda Vanch (her father, Vasily Ivanovich) decided that it could not be left like that. He wanted very much to have it fixed

So they gave me an operation. It was a time when there was shooting all around and the trams were not working. Deda Vanch carried me to the hospital on his back. There they gave me chloroform and one doctor tried to put the leg into the right position. It did not work. I remember I woke up in the hall after the chloroform, a sweet smell around me. Everything was flying around and I cried. I was probably no more than 3 years old.

Deda Vanch did not give up. He always had the thought in the back of his mind, “What will happen to her and how is she going to earn a living like this?” At this time a new doctor appeared in Kiev who was educated in Germany, Dr. Frumin. He was Jewish. I was his first patient.

Someone recommended him to my parents and Deda Vanch carried me there on his shoulders again. Frumin said he had two options. First he could cut the bone and that way make a socket; or, he could do it without cutting by putting me into a body cast. The bone would force its way into the pelvis, making its own socket. At first Frumin said he would operate but then he decided on the second option.

I was in a cast from the middle of the hip to below the knees. I remained in this cast for about a year. Adapting to the cast I even played with other children. I learned to jump but could not walk. Outside under the window on Malopodvalnaya there were always children playing. The mothers sat outside on the step on the corner of the house. All the children ran and I hobbled. I never had the slightest feeling that I was handicapped or not as good as anybody else. I was always in a good mood and everything seemed normal. Maybe 6 months later Dr. Frumin changed the cast to adjust for my growth. Later he made another and through a series of different casts he developed the socket.

(OS note: Casts to correct hip dysplasia generally position the leg at a 90o angle to the hip and the child cannot walk or even stand. It is also done before the first year of life so what Helen remembers may have been a period after the caste was removed when she may still have been handicapped due to the long period with a cast.)

> When they took the cast off my leg was not straight and I could not stand on it. I had to strengthen it with exercise and it was painful. My father put me on his shoulders and, as he carried me, he helped me straighten that leg.
>
> You can judge how well that worked by the fact that in the ten year school we had a lot of physical education and I was very good especially in track. We were supposed to grow up with a good education and good health for the "glory of our country." That suited me fine. In school I was very involved in sports. The socket was well done, but also probably sport helped. And then, we walked a great deal. There was no other way to get around but to walk. You walked to the bazaar; you walked to school.

Hip dysplasia is a hereditary condition where one hip joint lacks a socket. It is passed through females and manifests itself in every second generation. Olga's daughter Lyda was born with some dysplasia although it was not so serious that it needed correction.

Helen's hip socket served her well until she developed arthritis in it in her late 50's. At the age of 63 she had a hip replacement done in Delaware and that even though the lifespan of an artificial hip in those days was considered 16 years, hers lasted to the end of her life at age 95. However, she lamented that she was not permitted to run or jump with the artificial hip.

Flight to Nichiporovka 1919

The Russian Revolution was framed as a class war. The problem for Helen's family lay in that her family straddled two (or more) opposing classes. Her mother's family belonged to the bourgeoisie — the class that, according to Bolshevik doctrine, was composed of exploiters which could never be converted to socialism. They were the enemy and had to be totally eliminated.

Vasily Ivanovich, on the other hand, Helen's father, had clawed his way out of peasantry through education, pulled himself into the working class and by marrying Anna Sochanskaya had catapulted into the bourgeoisie. But he never lost his peasant habits or his worker values. He retained both the fierce individualism of the peasant and the collective action of the working class, which were two very contradictory positions making him a class hybrid.

Helen grew up in an ideological borsch. Her "bourgeois" grandfather had been an emancipated serf who had made good and become a wealthy merchant. He had married into an old Kievan merchant family. That family supported church

and Tsar. Her father who was a socialist and therefore close to an atheist, used the church to get an education and to move out of the peasant class. Vasily Ivanovich was a Social Democrat and believed in parliamentary government. For him the Tsar and all the trappings of privilege had to go. But he was not a Bolshevik. He had been on the losing side of the Revolution and was deeply disappointed with the way things had turned out. Still, he was closer to the working class ideal of a Proletarian than anyone else in the family and that served them all well.

Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky in 1905. This was taken during his Revolutionary period when he was a member of the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Party). It was about this time he met with Kirov. He had finished his seminary studies but was probably not yet enrolled in the Technical University in Tomsk, Siberia.

Vasily Ivanovich also had a large network of friends and colleagues with whom he had worked over the years and whom he had helped in various ways that he never talked about. When things got difficult for the family he drew on his lower class standing and called in favors. Luckily, he had not been married to Anna long enough to have become identified as a member of the dreaded bourgeoisie.

Around 1919, after Britchkin's death and before the seizure of the house, the urban slaughter of the wealthy made the situation in Kiev extremely dangerous for his bourgeois wife and mother so Vasily Ivanovich took the women and his daughter to the relative safety of his village of Nichiporovka about 75 km east of Kiev. Apparently, his mother in law stayed behind at first and joined them later. The account is somewhat lacking in detail because Helen was too young to remember and her parents avoided talking of this episode for fear that the child might blurt something out that would lead to denunciation, arrest, and worse.

She explained, *"The streets in Kiev were dangerous and no one went out without a special reason. People were shot point blank on Malopodvalnaya."*

Transportation in the rural areas was primitive and in spite of the short distance, the journey to the village was long and arduous. They travelled by horse cart on deeply rutted muddy roads. To our city bred grandmother, Anna Gregorievna (Baba Anya) it seemed like travelling to the ends of the earth. She had visited the village before and had been shocked by the poverty and squalor. She had never dreamed she would be living there.

A revolutionary propaganda picture showing wealthy representatives of the former ruling class. They are finely dressed in furs and the photo was meant to convey that they were well treated by the Revolution.

In actual fact, the head of the Kiev Cheka, Martin Latsis wrote in mid-May 1919, "We must kill in order not to be killed by the enemy." This was the beginning of the "Red Terror" when the former members of the ruling classes were sent to forced labor or killed in the hidden basements of the Cheka. (Photo Credit: Varto Press photohistory.kiev.ua/gal/index.php?spgmGal=1910-1919&spgmPic=65#spgmPicture)

Horse and buggy which was the main transportation at the time. This particular photo was taken of the Farimski family dacha in Zhornovka (see Book 2) prior to Peter's birth.

Later, when her mother, Baba Lyena arrived, she, too, was appalled by the primitive living conditions. Anna and her mother were used to running water, electricity, clean sheets, and servants. Nichiporovka was a totally different world. Squalid, muddy, backward, rustic and undeveloped. The cottages were still one room thatch huts without water or electricity. Most had packed dirt floors.

Olga visited the village in the snowy winter of 1998, and noted that aside from metal roofing that had replaced the old thatch, little had changed over the years since the Revolution. It was like a time capsule. The village had electricity and TV but no running water and the houses used the ancient traditional system for heating with a huge elaborately sculpted interior wood burning clay stove called a "pech" or oven which ran along the entire wall of the house with flat surfaces used for sleeping in winter and open fire pits for cooking and baking bread. It was fed by wood through the back from an attached shed.

After almost a century of Soviet rule, the streets remained unpaved and the village had no indoor plumbing. Water came from hand cranked wells situated in various streets around the village. Each cottage had an outhouse but without a seat. When Olga asked a local why they don't make a toilet seat for the outhouses the answer was, "It has not been invented yet." There was one flush toilet in the village in the school teacher's wooden house but it was full of trash and not functional. Bathing was done with buckets of heated water and only rarely.

Geese, cows and pigs roamed inside the fenced yard behind the house and sometimes got into the streets. When it was very cold they were sheltered indoors.

Serfdom had been abolished in 1861 but introducing cleanliness into rural Ukraine was obviously not an easy task without infrastructure. The streets in the village were paved only after 1998 reducing the sticky mud of spring and summer when villagers preferred to walk barefoot. Most villagers did not even own a pair of shoes for summer wear.

The Ivashenko couple in their village home in Nichiporovka in 1998 when Olga visited the village. The old man remembered our family and as a youngster had worked in our great grandfather Sochansky's mill which was located near his house although nothing was left of it.

The old couple lived in a typical village hut with a heating fireplace or "pech" along one wall of the house. They had a corrugated metal roof and a fenced in yard where they kept geese. There was electricity and TV but no running water.

In the village, Anna, had to work in the fields along with the other women. During harvests there was always a shortage of labor and all hands were needed including mothers and grandmothers. There was no one left at home to care for the small children so babies were simply left in cribs and toddlers were tied to furniture to prevent them from wandering off.

Needless to say, infant mortality, especially at this time of year was shockingly high (David L. Ransel 1990). Helen's memory confirmed Ransel's account of childcare practices in Ukraine that led to this high rate of death among small children. She remembered that babies in the village were given poppy seed wrapped in cloth (not always clean) to suck on as a pacifier.

Painting by Mykola Pimonenko called "Matchmakers" 1882. It depicts the inside of a village house in Ukraine. The bride to be is sitting at the "Pich" or "Pech" which is the heater that takes up one whole wall of the house.

The people in the back are negotiating her marriage contract. The original is in the F. A. Kovalenko Art Museum in Krasnodar, Russia. (Photo Credit: wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20190681)

One of the central streets in the village of Nichiporovka where Vasily Ivanovich was born and grew up. This photo was taken by Olga in November of 1998 during a light snow. Helen was left somewhere by the side of the road back in 1919 or thereabouts while her mother worked with the women in the fields.

Women loading a hay wagon in prerevolutionary Russia, 1913. Women did most of the routine work in the fields. The Soviets pulled the academically inclined out of physical labor and channeled them into education. (Photo credit: Bl.uk)

"Harvest" by Mykola Pymonenko. The painter shows the dilemma women faced having to work in the fields and to leave their children unattended or cared for by other children. Infant mortality was highest during and right after the harvest season.

Anna had to leave Helen somewhere "by the side of the road." We do not know exactly where and for how long, or with whom if anyone. At that time, Helen was still handicapped by the dysplasia so she could not walk.

The picture Helen retained in her mind, whether from very early memory or stories, was of herself as a "child at the end of the road in a dirty shirt eating kvasha" — (a mix of fermented grains, as well as bread soaked in water). In the villages, food was stored between harvests in root cellars and attics, in big clay pots, barrels or wooden bowls. To make grains last until the following year's harvest some part of the harvest was preserved by fermenting into kvasha.

Ukrainian villagers were quite masterful at preserving food in ways that produced famous delicacies. Even old stale bread is still converted into a fizzy cider akin to beer called "kvass."

Once, Anna was told some accident had befallen Vasily Ivanovich and she ran 12 km barefoot in a panic to find him. Thankfully it was a false alarm. Had he become incapacitated or died, the rest of the family would not have survived, for villages were notoriously xenophobic and hostile to outsiders, which was famously documented in a famous scene in the Ukrainian opera Natalia Poltavka, by Mykola Lysenko. Where the local village women attack a new bride and she managed to beat them all back and put them in their place.

In Helen's understated words — *Not everyone was friendly to the "rich Kievan" (Baba Anya) whom my father had married, and she was not always treated well.*

Their stay in Nichiporovka lasted less than a year, possibly only six months but included the harvest season. Upon their return to Kiev, they discovered that their whole building on Malopodvalnaya had been taken over by the state, divided up into communal rooms, and given out to various proletarian families. Even the family apartment had been seized. They were now homeless.

So Vasily Ivanovich geared up his peasant background, his proletarian class standing, and his old revolutionary connections and went to the directorate in charge of disbursing living quarters in the city to beg for shelter. Employing his prodigious charm and thespian talents he even dressed the part. Helen described his costume. "He wore boots smeared with the odoriferous waterproofing wax extracted from tar called *doycet*. On his upper body, he wore a loose fitting shirt of homespun thick coarse linen and, over that, he donned the peasants' sheep fur tunic called a *kozhuk*.

He not only looked the part of an ignorant peasant but he smelled the part. On his head, he wore the conical fur hat of villagers. One can imagine him humbly crushing that hat in his fingers, his eyes cast to the floor, as he pleaded stammering for living quarters with some officious petty bureaucrat.

Carefully avoiding revealing the name of "Britchkin" on the paperwork he managed to get a room for their whole family. Technically, Baba Lyena should not have been given living quarters, let alone a room in the house that had once been

Aunt Nadya (Baba Lyena's sister and Helen's great aunt) with Nicolai and Ivan Britchkin and her "foundling" adopted son, Boris, lying in front. This photo was probably taken before the Revolution.

Her husband died around age forty freeing her from an unhappy marriage. She lived in a large house one block from that of her sister and one day a baby was left on her doorstep. She named him Boris and raised him as her own.

She was an independent lady, lived on the wild side, spent all her money and became the subject of gossip suggesting that she had an affair with her adopted son's tutor.

After the revolution she moved into a tiny room next to Helen's family in the Britchkin house, living there with her two grandsons. We don't know what happened to Boris or to the boys after she died.

hers. She was of the dreaded wrong class. But somehow Vasily Ivanovich managed to avoid drawing attention to her or he called in a favor and succeeded in getting permission for her to remain with them.

Baba Lyena's widowed sister, Aunt Nadya, who had owned a house one block away from the Britchkins was assigned a little room up a short flight of stairs from the main room. There she lived with her two grandchildren — sons of her adoptive foundling, Boris. Evidently neither Boris nor their mother was interested or capable of taking care of the children. When she died, Baba Lyena and Helen took over Aunt Nadya's little room. What happened to her adopted son, Boris, or his two small sons is unknown.

We believe this is a photo of Boris, the adopted foundling raised by Aunt Nadya, Baba Lyena's sister.

We don't know anything about his origin or his fate after the Revolution although he seems to have disappeared and his two children lived with Aunt Nadya in the Britchkin house in a tiny room until her death.

Helen's Visit to her Nichiporovka Ancestors

When Helen was 5 or 6, she was taken back to the village and remembered being shown her great grandfather Djevanovki's house (See part 3). It is likely her father took her as her mother knew nothing of the village.

She described the visit as follows:

In Nichiporovka there were beautiful places surrounded by overgrown, huge old untrimmed trees. Exactly like Gogol wrote in his fantasy stories — *Evenings on the Farm Near Dikanka*. On this visit we did not get very close to the house. Evening was falling. There were *grachi* (грачи — rooks) and large numbers of crows hovered around. In the middle of the garden in front of the house there was a little courtyard surrounded by lots of green vegetation.

In the twilight it seemed to me that the house was quite large. Not a palace, but big inside. In front of the house in the middle of the courtyard, I saw a white statue that looked like an angel — a young girl running and reaching up into the wind. They told me that Dzevanovsky installed it, in memory of his daughter who died young. Her name was Ksenia, and when he had another daughter, he named her Ksenia also. *(Reuse of the name of a deceased child for another sibling was not unusual for the times.)*

I remember going along the street, which was unpaved gravel. A Ukrainian woman in boots and a wide skirt pulled together at the waist (a plachta) passed us going in the opposite direction. Over an embroidered linen blouse she wore a sleeveless vest. Her chest was completely covered with necklaces, strings of coral beads. They were so beautiful that until this day I am partial to these baubles. She had braids and she walked with a fast gait. As is the custom in villages, she greeted us, "Dobri Den" she said politely and walked on."

Life in the Kommunalka in Kiev

At first we were given one room at the corner of Malopodvalnaya and Mihailvoski Lane (now Patorzhenskaya). In this one room we lived — four of us — mother, father, grandmother and myself. It was on the first floor, the corner room, two windows, large. All rooms in grandfather's house were large — the windows were so high that when I stood on the windowsill and extended my hand up I would barely reach to the top. For a long time we didn't have a table. Then, Baba Anya got a rough table from a washerwoman — it was unfinished boards and she put an oilcloth on top.

Britchkin's house situated on Malopodvalnaya Street #12. The door in this photos is on the corner of Malopodvalnaya and Mihailvoski Lane (now Patorzhenskaya) and used to open into the room where Helen's family lived.

Her Aunt Nadya had a room entered through a small door on the right and up a flight of stairs. When she died, Helen and her grandmother moved into that room to sleep and Baba Lyena rarely went out so as not to be recognized.

This photo was taken by the authors in 1998 after the building was remodeled and converted into million dollar condos.

Whole families of the "Proletariat" lived in single rooms now called "kommunalkas" in the former luxury apartment building. *Many of tenants had never seen a flush toilet or running water, having grown up in hovels with outhouses. As a result they threw potato peels and trash in the hopper clogging the plumbing and the bathroom was always filthy.*

Families were assigned to rooms and had to make do with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. Some used primus stoves to cook in their sleeping spaces or hallways. Laundry had to be hung indoors to protect it from thieves as there were shortages of everything and marauding bands of homeless orphans called "Hooligans" stole to survive.

Bathrooms were often left dirty as many residents came from poverty housing without running water or electricity and they did not even know how to clean. (Photo Credit: riowang.blospot.com)

Families set up makeshift kitchens in hallways and alcoves — wherever they could find space — by laying boards and crates on which they balanced Primus stoves. There was no hot water or electricity in the early years and there were periodic shortages of food even after order had been restored. Some winters they had no heat. They had small kerosene stoves but at times there just was no fuel.

In 1998 Olga visited one of our relatives by marriage, Lyuba Kiselevich. She still lived in her kommunalka but under the new privatization program she had bought two additional unconnected rooms. Her kitchen was in the bathroom. She had made a counter by placing a piece of plywood over the old clawfoot bathtub. When someone needed to use the toilet or bath, the kitchen had to be vacated.

Life in the kommunalka had a dark side. Helen said that people spied and informed on each other, especially the envious who hoped to curry favor with the authorities by sending a neighbor off to prison. There was also a lot of stealing. In the early years, the class difference between Helen's family and the other residents remained evident but somehow they escaped the envy that led to denunciation and arrest. Helen mused, *"I guess they tolerated us, the previous owners, having a room there, because they assumed we would be killed eventually anyway."*

A number of families shared the kitchen although some set up Primus stoves in hallways and alcoves to try to gain a bit of privacy. In the early years there was often no water, and sometimes no heat or power.

Fights were common as residents originated from very different background. Clandestine informers listened in on conversations in hopes of turning someone in for material gain or just to be rid of neighbors. (Photo Credit: riowang.blogspot.com)

Like many other families in the "enemy" classes, the family destroyed old letters and hid ancestral photographs. Anything of value was kept out of sight to prevent attracting attention. One's ancestors, especially if they had been merchants or nobles were forgotten and ceased to exist.

As the state controls got organized the secret police paid people to spy on their neighbors and to report any "counter revolutionary" activity. After Stalin came to power, quotas were set for minimum numbers of arrests each community organizer had to turn in (Timothy Snyder: Bloodlands 2012). Informants were rewarded with bits and pieces of the victim's personal possessions.

As a result neighbors did not trust each other, especially since they had been thrown together from different socio economic groups that would not normally have interacted as equals or lived in the same community. The spying discouraged any counter revolutionary plots although it sent many innocents to labor camps and jails. But more importantly, it created a society based on fear and mistrust. No one knew who might denounce them so it was safer to trust no one. As a result, over the next 70 years, Soviet society turned inward and people isolated themselves from any but their closest associates.

In the Kommunalkas, those who reaped the benefits of spying often ended up in labor camps themselves for there was no shortage of opportunists. Conversations in the home were, therefore, guarded for fear someone might overhear, especially innocent children who might blurt out something that could be used to send a family member to prison or even death. Fear prevailed and silence served as protection.

Each kommunalka had an "organizer" and an unidentified party informer. The organizer was responsible for allocating space, mediating disputes and supervising affairs within the building. He or she also convened house meetings. Helen recounted how some residents simply refused to pitch in with cleaning of bathrooms and common areas. That, obviously, was not a political offense meriting a report. The bathroom was often filthy. People who had never lived with running water, dumped potato peels and other trash into the toilet. This was brought up often at the meetings and she recalled some residents who felt they

were above cleaning work, especially for the bathrooms. She remembered, *"Some people said they wouldn't clean the toilets because they didn't use them — they had been constipated, after all!"*

When asked why people did not just leave Kiev or abandon their former homes, Helen explained that in the beginning no one believed this situation would last. People were convinced that eventually things would return to normal and properties would be given back to their owners. The owners wanted to stay in or close to their homes to make sure when that happened, they could reclaim them. Of course, that never happened, and further, there was nowhere to go.

Helen studying in the room with all the old furniture piled up behind her. Her desk was blocked off by cupboards for privacy.

So Helen's family salvaged what furniture they could from the upstairs apartment and settled down in the corner room, in hopes of one day getting their house back. She remembered their room crammed with large elegant and expensive armoires, chairs, tables, chests of drawer and other fine pieces some of which appear in the included photographs.

Helen recalled walnut chairs with carvings like faces of embossed leather, as if from India. Light colored Viennese chairs of bent cane accompanied a large ornate dining table. A lamp hung over the table. There was even an indoor palm tree. Some pieces were simply pushed up against the walls because the room could not accommodate everything. This furniture represented the hope that better times lay ahead. At some point, sympathetic neighbors brought over more of their former belongings, including the piano, which Anna had played since her youth. Probably they, too, lacked space.

In an odd twist of fate, some 26 years later, Helen again lived with old pre-revolutionary war furniture but this time in Athens. In the ramshackle hut they shared with Peter's cousin's family, Helen and the children lived in a little room crammed with furniture that their family had brought with them when the emigrated from Odessa some 14 years previously. Like before, it was piled high against the walls and like before, it was ornately carved antique heavy wooden pieces embossed with gold leaf and inlaid with shell and lacquer.

Family Life in a Crowded Kommunalka

The dramatic and catastrophic change in their lives came so abruptly that it left them stunned, confused, and bewildered. Within the span of two or three years, Anna and her mother went from a life of prosperity within a large reliable family to that of two virtually abandoned women clothed in scraps of old finery scrounging and scavenging in the city for fuel, food and other necessities.

Anna and Vasily Ivanovich pictured here in a document from the early years of their marriage. They moved in with her parents after the wedding, which appears to have been performed in St. Sophia Cathedral where Anna's father, Britchkin, was a Starosta (Church elder and patron). However, no documents of her wedding survive.

The family had always run on established and very strict rules of order with the patriarch providing security and dependability. Now Anna's father was dead. Her three brothers were gone. Their apartment was out of bounds, their house filled with strangers, some from very primitive backgrounds. Anna had a child and no nanny. She did not know how to cook. She had no maternal skills or training.

The women, unused to taking charge or making decisions outside the household circle now looked to Vasily Ivanovich to step in to the role of patriarch. But he had spent his whole life avoiding responsibility and attachments. He had lived his whole life as a free spirit following his whims. He had evaded marriage much longer than normal for the society. He married without assets, a home or even any kind of property. Suddenly he found himself in charge of a household of helpless grieving women and a baby.

Anna, however, was made of stern stuff and she soon realized that her husband could fill some male roles especially in the outside world, but he was not going to take charge or the household and he certainly could not be relied upon to do any physical labor. The Ukrainians have a saying. "In the hut (cottage) the woman holds up three corners and the man holds up only one." Women were known to handle most of the work in and around the homes and also in the fields. Anna realized that if they were to survive it was up to her and in her quiet determined fashion, without fuss and without discussion she turned to the tasks at hand.

This she had learned to work efficiently from her father who had countenanced no slothfulness in his home. He always expected his family members to get up early each morning and immediately get to tasks at hand. No lolling in bed was permitted. The problem was that Anna had not been raised to be a homemaker or to make decisions. She was not a leader but a follower. She obeyed household rules and deferred to her father in all things, except in the case of her marriage.

That was an anomaly, however. In that instance she had dug in her heels and insisted on marrying Vasily Ivanovich against her father's opposition to him for his

peasant and somewhat shiftless and free wheeling background. Obviously when it was important she showed surprising strength and determination. Now necessity demanded that of her again. She would never make decisions nor take a leadership role in the household, but she would do whatever was necessary for her family to survive. And this she did.

In spite of her gentile ladylike education Anna she was extremely strong physically and skilled with her hands. She liked working with her hands whether it be hammering nails and fixing furniture or attaching a lace collar, once she learned to do both. As Helen said, “She was no shrinking violet.” Carrying water, hauling wood for fuel and strenuous tasks came to her easily and she found them very satisfying.

Anna Gregorievna Britchkina Sochanskaya, Helen’s mother, the authors’ grandmother at about the time she finished university with an Engineering degree after being tutored by her husband Vasily Ivanovich for three years in preparation. Her expression is troubled and worried reflecting the life she led and the losses she endured.

For the first years after the Revolution and later during the great famine, food and basic survival necessities were scarce and Anna learned to find food around the city and to prepare it creatively. It is also likely that Vasily Ivanovich brought farm produce occasionally from the village but he had to be careful for such luxuries could ignite envy and the attention of informants. Helen remembered that on a bad day, they may have had a soup made of one potato and one onion. Sometimes there was no bread. Anna spent hours standing in the long lines waiting to buy a little bread, oil or buckwheat and she never complained about this or any tasks she had to perform.

She learned to cook by trial and error. She kept a notebook of her experiments, documenting successes and failures and then compiling all the successful recipes for daily use. These were later lost when the family fled but in Greece she learned to cook Greek food. In the US where food was finally plentiful, she returned to the cuisine of her youth, especially for holy days and holidays, recreated her original recipes and these she did leave behind for her grandchildren.

The country was in the midst of terrible shortages of everything including clothing and shoes. As with her cooking, Anna learned to sew and became quite accomplished at it. She acquired not only the mechanical skills required but also discovered she had a sense of style that made her clothes unique and modern. She refashioned old clothes assembling and reassembling bits and pieces she extracted from the trash. She took apart faded dresses and turned the fabric inside out to create newer fresher clothing. She learned to refashion coats and in later years even remodeled abandoned Nazi jackets into attractive civilian wear for her family.

Helen was always dressed well thanks to her mother’s hand. Anna herself dressed in darker colors as was appropriate for her age but she adorned the austere dresses with lace collars or buttons reused from discarded or scavenged clothing. She learned to place these small trimmings in creative ways to make most attractive stylish clothing.

As much as she excelled in this type of craft and heavy labor, Anna fell short in housekeeping skills and fulfilling the role of nurturing mother to her small daughter. Everyday housework eluded her and their room remained filthy until Helen was old enough to take over the task. It was not due to unwillingness, but she simply did not see what needed to be done and had a high tolerance for household dirt.

One day the family invited Helen's teacher to dinner. While they were sitting at the large table the teacher ran her thumbnail along a groove below its edge scraping off a coil of grease which she surreptitiously held up for Helen to see casting her a sly and accusatory glance. With horror, Helen realized that not only the table, but all their living quarters were dirty. She was mortified. She wanted to crawl under the table and disappear.

This unforgivable insensitivity for an already traumatized child had a decisive impact on Helen for the rest of her life. The next day she started to clean the room and all the furniture. Thereafter, she became obsessed with cleanliness and harbored an irrational aversion to household dirt for the rest of her life.

Anna's mothering skills were even less developed and than her housekeeping endeavors. Baba Lyena was probably not much help with the baby either as her children had been raised by nannies and probably fed by wet nurses. Helen survived, however, and developed into a beautiful and accomplished young woman. Anna tried to do her duty by her daughter, but she just did not know what to do. Once things had settled down in Ukraine, she took Helen to Crimea some summers as was customary for the benefit of the child. City air was considered detrimental to one's health and given the coal burning, the winter air probably was polluted.

Some summers or parts of summers, Anna took Helen to Crimea, renting a room, usually from Tatar families, in Yevpatoria, a popular and affordable seaside area for Kievans. Here Helen, at about age 8, stands next to a row boat.

Helen probably in Crimea because she looks tanned and this was the only place by the sea that they visited.

Life in the one room home on Malopodvalnaya was very tense. These were three damaged and traumatized people, each suffering his or her internal pain of loss, unable to help each other and forced to share a tiny personal space that gave them no privacy. They were also pitted against each other by class and circumstance. There was no escape and no solace to be found anywhere, not even was there solitude. Only the newborn babe was entering a world without the weight personal loss although she grew up among adults enveloped in pain who also had to suppress their memories and maintain silence.

One can lose everything and still go on while there is life. But after the Revolution the state forcibly altered reality, memory and directed thought. As Helen explained, “The Soviets set about the change the past. They not only wanted to change what people did but also control what people thought.” This was not an easy task and there was no known formula for accomplishing such massive mind control so the rules kept changing. New vocabulary words were constantly being introduced and old words suddenly were banned. Then they may reappear again only to change again. One had to careful what one said lest one use a word that was censored and end up in prison.

Peter once explained how every morning he would look at the newspaper posted up on a local bulletin board and read off all the forbidden words published that day just to be on the safe side. In addition, he found the whole exercise somewhat comical. Years later when he found a list of political incorrect and now forbidden terms circulated by his granddaughter’s school in Portland Oregon, he remarked

that this was just what he encountered when he was young. Only mistakes were not punished with a one way ticket to Siberia.

One example, however, extended over the years and into our family life in the US. In the Soviet Union when Helen and Peter were young, the pronoun "I" (Ya) was forbidden and had to be replaced by "we." "Mine" was replaced by "ours." This was so ingrained in Helen that even in our home in the US we were forbidden to use the term "mine". Everything within the family was supposed to be collectively owned and therefore was "ours." Nothing was "mine." Thus, we had no private property (in theory) and the younger children were always permitted to simply take anything Olga owned and appropriate it at will because they were growing up in a society where private property existed while she was taught that all ownership was collective.

Back on Malopodvalnaya the adults were living a nightmare from which there could be no awakening and no escape. There was nowhere to go and death would be the only liberation. Thus, a series of morbid sayings and thoughts came into the language and culture. When your personality, history and identity are totally stripped away, you become a mere shadow of a person. Hence, the Russian term "former people" or "бывшие люди." These are walking ghosts. Souls who were someone in the past and but exist only as memories of themselves in the present.

Surprisingly, the little Sochansky household managed to survive extremely well even though each individual contended with his or her own demons. Anna and her mother each dealt with their personal tragedies by quiet withdrawal. Anna went into periods of sulking and non communication. Vasily Ivanovich lashed out at the women; cursed; shouted; ranted and at times just disappeared. Helen grew up in the middle of this emotional soup mostly trying to stay out of her father's line of fire and her mother's complicity with his tantrums.

The household centered around Vasily Ivanovich who was not the easiest of men even in the best of times. Complex, mercurial, moody and individualistic he valued his personal independence from responsibilities of family. He could be lighthearted, joking, singing and dancing one moment and then descend into a black depression making abusive and hurtful comments to his daughter and to his mother in law; insulting them; blaming them for the circumstances they were in and lashing out at his constraints. His negative moods sometimes lasted for days or even weeks and he continued to hold a grudge against his mother in law for what he perceived as her continued disapproval of his marriage to her daughter, something that had long ago been dwarfed by more pressing survival issues.

Occasionally he erupted in a frightening fury although he never struck another person as far as Helen knew. In such cases she and her grandmother cowered quietly in some corner waiting for his temper to subside. Anna went about her business for to try to soothe him was useless and he never turned his anger onto his wife. She never intervened nor did she ever come to the defense of her mother or daughter when his anger was aimed at them.

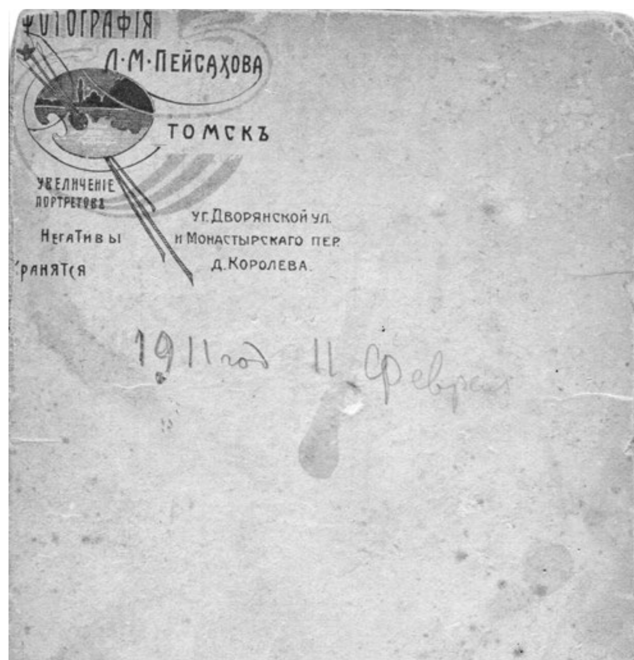
Anna accepted the loss of her promising young life without complaint, anger, or envy although it did take a heavy toll on her. We don't know what she was like

before the Revolution but afterward she suffered from periods of withdrawal when she simply refused to interact or talk to anyone. Helen referred to these episodes as "her moods" and they got more pronounced with age. Helen tended to be unsympathetic and in later years berated her mother during such times.

Helen's Grandmother, Baba Lyena, tried to become invisible. She was a danger to the family, being from a social class that the Revolution had defined as dangerous and which had to be annihilated. Being a quiet and submissive woman, it was not difficult for her to disappear although Vasily Ivanovich often sought her out just to shout abuse or to take out his anger.

When Helen was young, at some point, Baba Lyena needed to hide her valuables. It was not more than what fit into a small bundle but probably included some diamond earrings and pins. Vasily Ivanovich suggested he give them to his brother Nicolai in the village for safekeeping. She refused as she did not trust Nicolai. Vasily Ivanovich was extremely hurt and angry but Nicolai was known to be unreliable at best. Years later, in 1998, when Olga returned to the village, stories of Nicola's drinking and dancing were still very much alive. Helen thought her grandmother buried her valuables in the courtyard but we know not what became of them.

One summer Vasily Ivanovich got very angry at his mother in law for something or other and refused to speak to her for months, which was as awkward in a one room dwelling as it was rude and cruel. Every time she entered the room he turned



Portrait of Vasily Ivanovich taken in 1911 in Tomsk, Siberia. The back of the photo gives the date and the photographer's name and address. This was most likely his graduation picture when he finished his engineering degree. It was rare for him to dress in western clothing and it is the only photograph of him in a suit.

his back on her pretending she did not exist. Anna followed his lead and did the same. Helen anguished about this treatment of her grandmother and all she could do was stick close to her grandmother for mutual support.

Helen grew up in this emotional stew feeling both secure and unwanted. Her mother was incapable of giving her the love and affection she craved so she turned to her grandmother who also taught her basic ethics and manners as she herself had learned them. Vasily Ivanovich was extremely proud of her quick intelligence and her exceptional memory but when he fell into one of his negative moods he told her he had one child too many. Yet he stuck with her all his life.

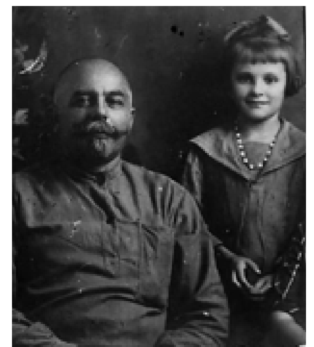
As a result the household fractured into two camps of unequal power; Vasily Ivanovich and Anna on one side and Helen and her grandmother on the other. Vasily Ivanovich held all the power and everyone knew well that they all needed his protection to survive. He was the legitimate Proletarian. So Helen and her grandmother deferred to him and stayed out of his way when he fell into one of his rages.

Anna's mother, Elena Britchkina (Baba Lyena), provided Helen with the support and affection Anna herself was not able to give her. Anna was competent, even tempered, and very straight forward but she was not a tender person and always sided with her husband when he raged against either his mother in law or his daughter. He was verbally abusing to her and at times even turning his back when she entered a room. This went on until her death in Athens in 1946.

Our mother, Helen, sitting on the steps of the door leading to the family room. The door is located on the corner of Malopodvalnaya Street and the former Mihailovski Lane.

This picture was taken by Yura Duhovichni, a classmate at the Kiev Industrialni Institut and close friend of hers who was half Jewish and came to say goodbye as he was conscripted into the military in preparation for the war. The dog was his.

It appears Yura Duhovichni survived the war because an architect with the same name still lives and practices in Kiev today and is most likely a descendant of Yura's. However, they never met again.



Vasily Ivanovich Sochansky and his daughter Helen probably in their room. During this time he worked as an inspector of riverboat boilers and disappeared for long periods of time.

He would leave with nothing but a rucksack on his back and sleep in the fields and woods as he traveled across the country on foot. His family never knew when and if he would return although he always did.

Helen also found herself at times on the receiving end of her father's temper tantrums. When she was a girl one day she came home for dinner wearing a pin with Stalin's face that had been given her at school. It was a cheap trinket but looked to her like ivory, and she always loved jewelry. At dinner, her father scowled and ordered her to *take it off!*

Why? She said.

I said take it off!

"I don't want to!"

That scoundrel! That murderer! Vasily Ivanovich raged (more at Stalin than at his daughter). *How do you dare to bring his face into this house? Merzavitz! Bastard!* He launched into a tirade. (Dangerous if someone would have heard who was an informer.)

As most children she knew her father's vulnerable spots and decided to taunt him with his personal inner struggle and disillusionment with the Revolution. *But* ***you*** *were a Revolutionary yourself!* At this, Vasily Ivanovich jumped up and lunged at Helen, but she eluded him. He chased her around the table while her mother stood off to one side as if frozen and Baba Lyena trembled, terrified.

How could you talk to your own father like that? Anna accused her.

Helen probably in her apartment.

It would have been comical were it not for the painful consequences resulting from the very spiteful behavior on the part of the adults. Vasily Ivanovich seethed and stewed for months after the incident and gave his daughter the same silent treatment he had given his mother in law before. When she entered the room, he turned away and acted as if she did not exist. Anna did the same.

What hurt me most, Helen said, *was that my mother refused to come in and bless me at night (perekristit).*

In the early days after the Revolution, the targets of Bolshevik state terrorism were the "unbeaten bourgeoisie" which included everyone in the middle class — teachers, scientists, musicians, merchants, shop keepers, and land owning peasants (Kulaks). As time went on, the list of enemies grew wider and eventually, Poles, intellectuals, poets, writers, Greeks, and just about anybody could be accused of counter revolutionary activity and disappear. To meet the constantly emerging new arrest quotas local officials had to scramble to find the thousands of "guilty" individuals (Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands, 2012). One order mandated 23,000 arrests to be made within a specific period of time, a quota that was hard to meet.

Aerial view of the Britchkin House (in the lower left corner) in relation to the KGB Headquarters located on the upper right corner at 33 Vladimirskaya Street. The building directly across from the Britchkin house was built in the 1950's so from the Patorzhenskaya Street side of the house (The Blue Entrance), residents could clearly see the KGB which served as an administrative center, prison, and torture center although the full extent of the terroristic activities taking place there remained unknown until after the Soviet collapse. (Photo Credit: Google Maps, Kiev, Ukraine)

As a former member of the merchant class; wife of a prominent and vocal Tsarist supporter, and mother of two White Army officers, Helen's grandmother presented an enormous danger to the family. Hoping to become invisible, Baba Lyena lived in the shadows as much as possible. Helen sadly remarked, "By now, my grandmother was a big liability."

For protection of the family she remained out of sight as much as possible in hopes that neighbors would eventually forget about her. Unfortunately, the house still stood as a testimonial to her class origins, but with time it was hoped that her connection to the house as previous owner would eventually fade as other more pressing issues, like food, heat and clothing, dominated every day cares.

A lesser spirit might have succumbed to despair, anger or self pity but Baba Lyena accepted her fate and remained steadfastly devoted to her granddaughter. In spite of her having lost everything, including her three sons, two of whom she would never meet again, she remained philosophical. At one point she said to Helen in a bemused way, *"So, now I am a beggar* (нищая or нищенка)."

Just as Baba Lyena seemed to have successfully faded from public view an event took place that must have shattered what remained of any inner calm she may still have held onto. The NKVD/KGB moved their headquarters into the large administrative building across Mihailovski Lane! This was all kept secret, but everyone knew what purpose the building served. What they did not know until the fall of the Soviet Union was that the building also housed an internal prison and torture center.

In 1919 the Soviets took over this building as their headquarters for the secret police, CHEKA (at that time). Located at 33 Vladimirskaya Street this building was constructed in 1914 as the Land Administration (Zemskaya Uprava) for the Russian Empire. The Britchkin building predates it by about 20 years.

Baba Lyena could see the frightening building from their street and for that reason she kept out of sight as much as possible. During the Nazi occupation of 1941-43, it proved convenient for the Gestapo. (Photo credit: Wikimedia)

For protection, Helen was fed a heavily filtered truth. Moreover, she was never permitted to even approach the former family apartment on the second floor and in particular she was warned never to use the "blue entrance" to their building on Mihailovsky Lane which now opened out onto the back of the KGB building. The family fear was palpable and she said, *"I didn't go there. I sensed danger. I lived and grew up in this house, but I have never seen the apartment that my family occupied originally."*

In 1995 when the authors visited the house with Helen and Peter, it was under renovation and Helen got to see the original family quarters for the first time. A few pieces of the blue tile floor came home with us.

The authors, together with Helen and Peter and Olga's son, Cedric Puleston, visited Helen's home in 1995. The place had served as Kommunalkas for over 70 years and had been pretty much trashed for lack of upkeep during the Soviet era. Now it was taken over by the city and under remodel to establish high end condos. The workers were cautiously willing to take us through the house on a tour although parts were not safe. The family apartment could not be entered because the floors were being replaced.

Vasily Ivanovich — A Peasant in a Changing World

Revolutionary doctrine required the elevation of workers to positions of control, and the equality of women. This latter had a practical side to it as well as the ethical considerations. If Russia was going to pull herself out of her Medieval backwardness, she would need the talents of many and women had to participate in education and the work force.

Vasily Ivanovich agreed with this in principle but there were no living examples to show how such equality actually worked. No one knew exactly what equality of women should look like, especially within the home. How does one behave with women who are now equal and not ordered or slapped around? Vasily Ivanovich espoused the principle but without examples he was lost, so he started changing his relationships with education which was something with which he was familiar. After all, he had used education to climb out of peasantry and into a higher class. Thus, at home he pushed "his" women — both wife and daughter — into education. His mother in law, he continued to ignore.

For Helen this came naturally as it was consistent with what the Soviets expected of youth and she had been singled out early on as an extremely talented future engineer. For Anna this was a shock for she already had a good gentlewoman's education. She aspired to nothing more.

Although this poster is from 1964, the campaign to bring women into the educated work force started just after the Revolution and continued throughout the Soviet period. Women were encouraged to get out of the home and traditional "female" occupations and use their undeveloped talents to build the nation. Helen was in the first wave of these recruited scientific women.

Helen loved the theater and dreamed of becoming an actress. Her father said *"No! Do you know what kind of women those actresses are? They are like prostitutes!"* And yet, his objection to acting ran deeper than morality. He wanted her to become self sufficient and to be able one day to earn her own living in a profession that was highly respected. In the end, she showed exceptional aptitude toward science and technology and entered the Polytechnic Institute in Chemistry, a field of vital importance for the growth of the Great Soviet Socialist Republic.

In the running of the household Vasily Ivanovich did not figure at all. In fact, he was gone for long periods of time which probably was a welcome relief for the women. Where he went, no one knew and dared not ask. Helen at times said he may have taught at the Polytechnic but that did not require overnight stays and lodging was in short supply. Around 1935 the Gorni Institute (Mining Institute) was moved to the Donbass and it is possible he went to teach there because later he used his connections to get his wife into the school. But no one knew for certain.

Vasily Ivanovich often disappeared for long periods of time, sometimes months. As time went on his absences got longer and we felt he "fell away from us;" that is, left us for good. He refused to say where he was going and when he would return and if asked, gave cryptic and rude answers. At some point during her youth Helen was aware that he worked as an inspector of riverboat boilers on the Dnieper. (Or, that is what he told her). She described how he would put everything he needed into a

rucksack and set out on foot across his beloved countryside, sleeping outdoors on the ground sometimes for weeks or months. This may or may not have been true.

In spite of his volatile and unpredictable nature, his anger and rude behavior, Helen admired her father's pride in himself and his own people. He had no pretensions. He was generous and shared everything he had with those in need. He loved his people and he refused to play life's game by any rules other than his own which still adhered closely to those of the country's lower classes. He certainly strove for greater prosperity and was bitterly disappointed by the preemption of the Revolutionary ideals but he never aspired to emulate the life of the rich and famous or to acquire material goods. He particularly did not want to look, dress or behave like they did and Helen admired and emulated that all her life.

As Ukraine fell under the tight control of the vicious dictatorship, Vasily Ivanovich was able to slip below the radar and exercise a measure of personal freedom because he knew his country well. Before the Revolution as a railroad engineer and peripatetic young revolutionary he had traveled the length and breadth of Russia. Now he enjoyed his deep passion for his own land. He loved the autumn fields of wheat rippling in the breeze; the treeless steppe; the vast expanse of space cut only by muddy tracks carved by centuries of cartwheels. After all else had failed him and his dreams of a better world had shattered, his village property had been confiscated, no one could take away his love of this land.

Tragically in the end, he did lose his homeland. But like most rural Ukrainians, just before he left his country forever, he brought some of its precious soil with him. In 1943 just before he left his country for the last time, he returned to Nichiporovka to say goodbye to his ancestors and collected some earth from his mother's grave. Many years later, it was buried with him in Elkton, Maryland, USA a symbol of the indissoluble relationship between a village man his mother and his motherland.

Unknown date and location. Here Vasily Ivanovich, probably around age 55 but it is an interesting photo because he has this triumphant expression on his face. He is sitting at a table drinking vodka with a young man who looks warily at the camera and appears to be a bureaucrat. A young woman next to him also looks uncomfortable at having her photo taken.

Behind them the furniture is ornate and antique which indicates this was not taken in the US. The man is wearing some kind of insignia or button on the right collar.

In rural fashion, he wore black leather boots most of the time. Instead of socks, the foot was wrapped in a woolen cloth the size of a handkerchief to keep warm and to wick moisture. Boots were precious and in short supply so he always slept with his boots under his head for a pillow when he traveled to prevent them from being stolen.

Helen did not know what her father did and where he went but she did now that he maintained some political involvement with his village and with other comrades. This was dangerous and he never spoke about it, but she quietly watched her father, and reached her own conclusion.

After the Revolution around the time of the Kulak purges (1929-1939) Vasily Ivanovich appears to have also run some kind of secret program to hide villagers escaping arrest. The Soviets were forcing peasants onto collective farms and "kulaks" or wealthier farmers (identified as "capitalists") resisted giving up their land and cattle. The Soviets then encouraged the poorer villagers to turn them in as counter revolutionaries leading to their arrest, torture and execution. They had arrest quotas to deliver. These were high and the police scrambled to meet them, arresting anyone and everyone they could push through their sham special courts.

Lenin knew that peasants were highly individualistic and competitive. Mobilizing them was not going to be as easy as organizing workers. Thus, the party developed a strategy. They would unite the poorer peasants against the richer and cast blame on them for rural poverty. Divide and conquer, they derisively called the richer peasants "kulaks" or fists. Then, using the informant and reward system they had developed in the cities, the Soviets arrested thousands of land owning villagers all over Russia and Ukraine, imprisoned, tortured and sent off the prison camps in Siberia. Their farms were confiscated. Their land seized. The poorer peasants were rewarded with small perks for their snitching.

In the end, however, the poor peasants lost everything anyway for they were forced onto collective farms and all through the Soviet Period were kept much as serfs. They could not leave without permission and were paid in grain and produce from their own crops and not in money. They found themselves just as tied to the land as their forebears had been before emancipation.

Vasily Ivanovich, had an extensive network of former political allies and as villagers came under fire, he mobilized his network to help them escape. Helen remembered quiet knocks on their door at night, and people silently slipping inside; desperate people running for their lives. In the morning, she would find them sleeping in the hallway. Peasants dressed in *Kozhuks* (fur lined sheepskin coats), pants tucked into their boots, with everything they owned wrapped in cloth bundles and carried on their backs. The *kozhuks* were worn all year around, even in summer, and used at night for sleeping mats or covers. Somehow Vasily Ivanovich found safe places for them far from their native villages. For many he also found work. He told them, *I know a good communist there. Svoi chelovek.* (*One of us*).

If the place were searched, the hidden villagers had instructions to go through the corridor then leave by the back door and "melt away."

When men were arrested, Vasily Ivanovich instructed the wives to disown them; for their protection and that of their children, he advised them to say that their husbands had abandoned them. Helen remembered one woman who, when the authorities came to take her to "the same place as her husband," started wailing and swearing *"Sabachi sin!* (Son of a Dog! — or even worse). He abandoned me!" She cursed her husband.

The Great Famine (Holodomor)

Around 1930, when things settled down and order was restored, for Helen and her family, death came in the form of starvation. Peasants had only won their independence in 1861 and were fiercely protective of their ancient right to their tiny fields, cows and village organization. The Soviets decided to collectivize all the peasantry, breaking their traditional rights to land, cattle and produce enshrined in centuries of common law and custom. Not surprisingly, the peasants fiercely resisted collectivization. They simply held on to their crops and planned to weather the storm. At least they would not starve. The cities, however, began to feel the pinch.

To force the issue and vindictively punish the peasants Stalin sent in loyal brigades of young people and party zealots to confiscate all the crops of Ukraine and ship them to the Russian cities. The result was a catastrophic famine that killed 3-7 million people, up to 25% of the population of the region.

Helen's memories of the Famine…

Illustration of the three broad categories of peasants from the Soviet magazine "Prozhektor" (published by Nikolai Bukharin), 31 May 1926. The caption under the photo says "We received interesting photos from Novokhopersky county, Voronezh Governorate which shows the situation in a modern village") (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

The year 1932 brought an excellent harvest and the farmers were busy preparing for the long, cold winter. Part of the harvested crops and produce would go to the government, part would be sold in the city and the money used for family expenses and farm equipment. That year started with promise but finished in disaster.

Orders came from Moscow to confiscate everything edible from Ukraine. Stalin kept his promise to punish Ukraine for resisting collectivization. The Soviets sent in brigades to take all the food from the villagers. They used local people (informants) so they knew where the food was stored. The farmers could not hide it from these zealous communists. They searched everywhere and took everything edible. Nothing was forgotten: barns, attics, cellars, even potatoes stored in underground pits. The villagers tried to hide the food by burying it but the local brigades knew where traditional root

cellars were located. When the villagers moved the storage pits, the communists used sharp-pointed sticks to find these caches by locating the softer earth. They took everything; all the life sustaining contents.

All through the country long trains made their grim journey north, carrying away peoples' food, hopes, and lives. When the first frost came and killed the stubble remaining in the fields, the land lay dormant and dark and would remain so until next spring. The country was bare.

In November snow fell…

Young Communists confiscating and hauling away grain from a village of Ukraine. This photo takes place in October of 1932 in the Mykolaiv Oblast of Ukraine. (Photo Credit: history.org.ua)

Peasants hid food in storage pits but the young Communists, who were local, knew where to look. They used long rods or sticks to pierce the earth around the homes and find hidden food. Everything was taken. Nothing was left. (Photo Credit: Quora.com)

The original captions says, "Seizing Grain from Kulaks" but the term "kulak," originally meant to describe the wealthier peasants, was liberally applied to anyone who resisted collectivization. The young communists were Komsomol Members and in this case, they are photographed digging up grain hidden in a graveyard. (Photo Credit: Wikimedia RIA Novosti archive, image #79113 / Alpert / CC-BY-SA 3.0)

People dying of starvation in the streets of Kharkiv in 1932-1933 during the Holodomor, or great famine. Grain was confiscated from the peasants, beginning in 1932, and shipped out to Russian cities in retaliation for the peasants' resistance to collectivization.

In the end about 25% of the population of Ukraine starved. The peasants were forcibly collectivized and on those collective farms, they were no better off than under serfdom for they owned no private property and could not leave the farms without permission of the officials in charge.

In Kiev food shortages were common, and at first, the city people didn't know what was happening in the countryside. The Soviet government was very secretive and the press, which was censored, was forbidden from reporting the confiscation of food. Once the roads were snowed in and impassible, communication from the villages ceased all together. They were isolated.

As time went on the city began to starve. The government rationed bread and eventually had to mix it with unknown substances. It became virtually inedible so that even a hungry person could not eat more than one slice. Grocery stores, called Soviet Cooperatives, were completely empty. Coal and firewood were very hard to get. Rooms were cold and Helen's family wore their warm boots inside.

The following spring, as the weather grew warmer and the roads to the country opened up, floods of hungry, dying people streamed into the city. As Helen said, *Corpses that were still breathing came walking, crawling, dragging themselves into the city. Many died on the way. Those who made it collapsed all around, on sidewalks, in public gardens.*

One day I was at home eating our thin cabbage soup when I heard a scratching sound under the window. Looking out, I saw a man, stretched out on the sidewalk. He could not talk, his eyes sunk deep in their dark sockets. His lips moved but without a sound...He was trying to say "bread." I remember each of us giving part of our bread ration, softening it in the soup and feeding this fellow human being. He stayed several days under the window. I do not know what became of him later.

Still, life went on. One spring day, my friends and I went to play ball in the park. When you are young you have a powerful desire to live in spite of all odds. We wanted to enjoy the outdoors and shake off the grim reality around us. The ball flew high in the air and landed in the grass along the edge of the ball court. I ran to get it. As I pushed back the tall grass I was horrified to find several human bodies lying there. They were still alive but really more dead than alive. Happiness disappeared like a beautiful broken, soap bubble. Quietly, we walked home...We tried not to look at them, feeling ashamed for being able to walk.

Every morning the streets of Kiev were alive with big, covered trucks that picked up the dead along the streets and the parks. These grim loads were later delivered to the Anatomy Department of the Medical School. The Soviets wasted nothing. They were very well organized.

The Emancipation of women

Helen's account of her mother's university education…

After the Revolution everyone was expected to study and to work, male and female. To stay home and do nothing was unheard of. But my mother had no practical education. By the time I was ten years old her situation was rapidly becoming potentially catastrophic. My father was in danger of being taken away to jail. He was a Menshevik and politically very active. We don't know what his activities had been in the past, but we knew he had a politically active past of some kind before the Revolution and one's past could be a very dangerous thing in the Soviet Union where nothing was ever forgotten or forgiven.

Vasily Ivanovich's network of associates, mostly secret, protected us, and my mother, grandmother and I were totally dependent upon this protection and upon the small amount of money he earned. So he decided to change that and to help my mother become self sufficient. She was not an independent woman and she deferred to him in all things for he had a volatile and unpredictable temperament which at times frightened her. Yet, in spite of his domestic tyranny, he believed that women should have the total capacity to work and feed themselves without depending on a man. So, when I was about 10 years old (1928) he decided to teach her drafting.

For two years he tutored her at home and I suspect that he enjoyed that for she was exceedingly good at mechanics, math and engineering. It suited her abilities. After two years he decided drafting was not enough so he coached her for another year in Physics, Chemistry, Math, and everything else she needed to go into engineering. And it worked well. She was exceptionally capable and he gave her a good background. He prepared her for entry into the Industrialni Institute.

In the institute my mother went into engineering design of mining machinery which was at first in Kiev. But when education was reorganized the mining faculty of the institute (the Gorni Institut) was moved to the Donbass. So she finished her studies down there. The remainder of the Industrialni Institute remained in Kiev.

My mother got accepted to the institute in spite of her previous class origin because my father had connections. It is possible that when he disappeared from home for months at a time that he traveled to the Donbass and taught at the Gorni Institute although we never learned why he kept his whereabouts secret.

I remember one day I was walking through the park with my bag of books and there was my mother going the other way on the campus! It was very strange for a mother and daughter to study in the same institution at the same time in those days. When she finished, my father was extremely proud. He felt it was the achievement of his lifetime that she had become independent. Indeed, she became an engineer specializing in the design and construction of mining machinery. She was very good at it. First she worked in Kiev. Later, when we were in Germany, the Germans took her in immediately to work for them. So, her education paid off.

I started my studies in the Industrialni Institut the same year as my mother graduated, from the Gorni. When Mama graduated (in 1936 or 1937) from the Gorni Institute it had already been moved to the Donbass and she spent one year down there. During that year, Papa, Babushka and I remained on Malopodvalnaya Street in our one room. During that time I got scarlet fever

Helen got Scarlet Fever when her mother was in the Donbass for a year doing her last year of study in the Gorni Institute for her degree of Engineer in Mine Machinery design.

There was no medication in those days and only bed rest. She had her bed in the main room in between the piled antique furniture from her grandfather's apartment. She was cared for by her grandmother and her father was at home although he may have traveled for his work.

By the time the family got to the US, she had learned to deal with his put downs and belittling insults although they probably still affected her on some level. He had a curious need to constantly put her down, insult and hurt although in his old age his rages were limited to kicking the dog. In spite of his belief in the equality of women he still never touched "women's work."

The Purges, or Great Terror of 1936–38

When the famine ended we were faced with a new form of killing conceived by our clever government. As always, it was carried out in secret at first, so it crept up on us little by little. People started to disappear around us. One by one, little by little, neighbors, friends and relatives were taken away by the secret police. This was the Great Purge.

From the Revolution onward, the Soviets organized the secret police to nip any and all activity that might threaten their control over the society. When Stalin came to power he created a system of arrest and killing unparalleled in the civilized world. Even Hitler was in awe of the Soviet system's ability to quickly eliminate hundreds of thousands of people quickly and quietly *(confirmed by Timothy Snyder, in Bloodlands, 2012).*

By mid 1930 the secret police (with its various and changing names and acronyms) had created a vast network of informants and turned the whole country into a complex system of prisons, torture centers, and labor camps. All one had to do to eliminate a competitor or pesky neighbor, was to simply denounce him or her and one night a knock would come on his door; someone would be loaded into the van called the Black Raven and spirited away, often never to be seen again. The informant would get a reward — sometimes a better job; a better living space; sometimes pieces of the victim's possessions.

Now it is all revealed. Now everyone knows how it was. But at the time it was hidden and people did not grasp the extent of the terror. In the beginning the arrested were incredulous of the accusations and assumed they had been arrested by mistake. Later, it became clear this was a policy of general terror.

The authorities had kept them secret as much as possible, which is why they came to arrest people at night. In the beginning no one understood the extent of the brutal disaster that was about to engulf them and their country. At the time, they were still shocked when arrested for they thought there must be some misunderstanding. They knew they were innocent.

> The extent of the situation started to emerge only little by little until everyone lived with the constant fear that they or their loved ones would be taken away for good. The denounced were almost always accused of counter revolutionary activity — the most serious of crimes in the Soviet Union. It was better to be a common criminal than a political prisoner — they were treated better.

(Family members who fell victim to this persecution included Vladimir Stavrakis described in Book 1; Peter's nephew Andryusha in Book 2; Helen's uncle Leonti Ivanovich Paryii below and in Book 4; Stilian Kozmanov friend of the Stavrakis family in Book 1; and a number of other relatives who simply disappeared such as Vasily Ivanovich's two brothers.)

> The NKVD (KGB) comes at night, always at night, in a covered truck like a camper. The nickname for the truck was "Chorni Voron," Black Raven. Soldiers come in and say "get ready." They take the person to jail. The jails were overfilled and people were squeezed in side by side. If one person wants to turn, lying down, the whole row has to turn. There was systematic beating until they signed confessions.
>
> The arrests were followed by an elaborate process of interrogation, "evidence" gathering, sham trials, and then the inevitable demand to sign a confession. Peter remembered his own father's sadness in reading about what he called the "kangaroo courts" — after which the accused were taken out and shot.

This was all unfolding in secret and without any publicity so the West remained oblivious to the extent of the terror until the 1970's when dissident literature smuggled out of the Soviet Union started to appear. Brave writers risked their lives creating a clandestine underground press called *Samizdat* to spread the brutal truth behind the secretive iron curtain. Writers such as Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Shalamov and countless others began to expose the state terrorism creating a backlash of shock and horror.

The Purges Hit Home — Aunt Lippa in Barishevka

By the mid 1930's the purges were in full swing. Society had hunkered down as neighbors were enticed with small material benefits to inform on neighbors. Every family experienced fear and tragedy. No one escaped and because of this even Helen's stories possess a double edged bittersweet quality. Fond memories are tinged with traces of horror.

The story of Helen's Aunt Lipa [Евлампия Langut — cousin to Vasily Ivanovich whose mother, Efemia Yakovlevna Vlasenko (Ефемия Яковлевна Власенко) of

Nichiporovka was sister to her own mother (see Book 4 for relationships), and her physician husband, Leonti Ivanovich Paryii, is one such family tragedy.

In her youth Helen spent summers in the village of Barishevka, about 60 km east of Kiev, at the home of her Aunt Lipa, her father's cousin. She took the train from Kiev to the village then walked to the house from the station. No one had cars and few people had trucks. Food was scarce in the city, but at the time, the villagers grew fruits and vegetables, and Lipa had two cows. The fresh country air was considered healthy for a young person.

Lipa's husband, Leonti Ivanovich Paryii, was a popular doctor who had come to practice in the village after earning his degree. He and Lipa were both educated people from before the Revolution, having received education in the city and then returned to the country to work. They had a typical village house with just one room which served as their living quarters as well as his medical consulting room. Patients waited in the yard, and in bad weather they crowded into the little attached kitchen.

Leonti Ivanovich was considered a local saint, a leader of the village. He worked all day and at night patients came to his house by horse and buggy, or only on horses. There was a hospital nearby.

You paid the doctors what you could afford; cucumbers, butter, chickens with tied legs. Motya, a young woman who lived nearby and helped in the household, collect the "pay." Motya had been his patient and he had cured her of TB, while Lipa had nursed her to health. After recovering, she stayed with them. The doctor was a no nonsense man who had some rough edges — sometimes he shouted at his patients but they just looked at him. They knew he cared about them and they worshipped him. That worship eventually became his downfall.

Lipa and Leonti Ivanovich had no surviving children of their own and loved Helen like a daughter. Their own son had died of diphtheria when he was ten years old. There was no treatment except for a dangerous serum injection with life-threatening side effects. Leonti Ivanovich waited too long to administer the treatment and then it was too late. The child died with his parents at his side, unable to do anything to save him.

Aunt Lipa had a root cellar with a steep ladder extending down into its depth. The root cellar kept a fairly even temperature all year round and because it remained cool in summer she stored milk in pottery jars and other perishables down there. I loved climbing down to skim the cream from the milk. Aunt Lipa made delicious pastries topped with cinnamon, sugar and cottage cheese which we ate with the fresh cream.

Helen in Barishevka at her Aunt Lipa's for a summer vacation. She slept in a hayloft in a small outbuilding and the cat came with her each night. From the open upper service door she could hear the songs of young people and the voices of people returning home each evening from the fields.

Those were happy times. I slept in the hayloft over the small barn against the open loading door from where I could see over the village rooftops. The cat kept me company. You reached it by climbing up a step ladder that went up to the door. The hay smelled wonderful. I would often lie there listening to young people singing somewhere around a bonfire, the strains of their folk songs floating on the night air. Sometimes I would drift off to sleep listening to the voices and laughter of people returning from their fields at the end of the long northern summer day.

Aunt Lipa loved theatre and in winter she came to stay with our family where she got to know my friends who liked her very much. Sometimes they, too, took the train in the summer making day visits just to say hello.

Those happy times came to an end abruptly with Stalin's rise to power. As the decade of the 1930's began; so came the Famine and then the Purges.

Leonti Ivanovich's popularity and success did not go unnoticed and a jealous doctor in the local town, Bezborodko by name (it was a famous family in the region, once upper class), denounced him to the authorities.

Leonti Ivanovich was taken to Lukyanovka Prison in Kiev where, following standard procedure, the interrogators tortured and beat him to try to force a "confession." For six months he resisted.

Lipa was desperate and very outspoken in her support of her husband. She tried to see him and finally was told if she didn't stop she would join him in prison. She waited every night by the prison outside Kiev. Political prisoners weren't allowed walks, but those convicted for criminal activity were. So family members shoved notes under the door to the criminally convicted when they went out in the yard.

One night a woman by the fence whispered, "U kovo Leonti Ivanovich?" (Who belongs to Leonti Ivanovich?) She was the wife of a man convicted of a non political crime. When Lipa surreptitiously identified herself, the woman quietly slipped a piece of paper into her hand which she had held hidden.

Lipa took the paper quickly, read it nervously in secret, then hid it. At home she kept it under junk in a drawer by day and at night she moved it to a different place. Sometimes she stuck it in a crack in the floor. Or if her house would be searched, she planned to hide it in her mouth. She had been told not to show the paper to anyone "or we will all be killed" but she wanted to keep it.

Here Helen remembered different versions of the story.

Version 1

The note, written in pencil in a shaky hand, said — "They are beating me. Continuously beating me. Bleeding from rectum, losing my senses. I won't last long. I'm not guilty of anything. They want me to sign papers. I resist. Do something!"

Lipa tried "to do" something. She approached the authorities. He's not guilty of anything! It is a mistake!

"The Soviet government", she was told, "does not make mistakes. We have ways of dealing with people like you."

Version 2

The note said, "Liva (possibly his nickname for Lipa.) They are beating me to the point of blood. I am writing this letter in blood. Find out why they are doing this. Go to the organization and try to find out who is doing it! I am not guilty of anything!!"

The notes may differ in details but the story they tell is the same. Leonti Ivanovich was being beaten, tortured and bleeding. He begged his wife for help. In those early days of the purges, people still assumed their arrests were a mistake. This was 1938, at the height of Stalin's purges. It was still not generally known that this was national policy. People were still shocked at being arrested. However, as they got more frequent, it became clear the authorities simply trumped up charges to meet detainment quotas.

In the end, Aunt Lipa could do nothing. Leonti Ivanovich was sent to the labor camp Usolag in the frozen Perm region. As a physician, he cared for inmates and sometimes wrote, saying, *There is not much I can do for them*.

Lipa's house belonged to the government and she was evicted when it was given to another doctor. Helen's hayloft was gone. Lipa survived somehow on her meager savings. As time passed, more people were denounced by their neighbors, and

more information about the camps leaked out of the frozen east. Leonti Ivanovich survived and was released in 1951 after thirteen years. He and Lipa were then moved to the village of Motovilovka. But by then his health was ruined. He was a broken man and never recovered, dying five years later. Clandestine letters from her occasionally arrived to our Grandmother Baba Anya and to Helen smuggled somehow out of Ukraine and postmarked in the US.

One such letter, arriving around 1953, informed Helen that she inherited her father's land in Nichiporovka — hollow news for although the villagers knew to whom each parcel of village land belonged, the state had seized all private property long before.

That year, 1938, was a memorable one. "Normalcy" for Helen and Peter bounced between joy and sorrow. In April they got married. Around that same time, Andryusha was arrested and spent the next 8 months in prison being tortured. Leonti Ivanovich was sent off the prison camp for 13 years. University studies were engaging and liberating — something different to think about. They transcended the daily tragedy around them. Helen had a stipend so they had enough to eat and contributed to her family. She had a wonderful group of friends. Fear surrounded her.

By the time 1938 ended, it had become clear that they would be at war. Mobilization had started, although in an ineffectual and disorganized manner. Stalin hid himself away and brooded, paralyzed by the enormity of world events. Within two years, Helen's world was gone.

War scars people. But all these young people already lived in a frightening violent and brutal world. Fear, death, and loss surrounded them and was part of their everyday reality. Thus, when the war came, it can be seen in one of two ways: Either it was "more of the same" or it was an opportunity to fight the Fates. Was it better, worse or more of the same? Helen never knew.

CHAPTER 2

Helen's Education

Before the revolution, education in Russia was a Holy Word. It was considered "LIGHT" which is our equivalent of Heaven. From long in our past, ignorance was equated with darkness which in the Orthodox view is the same as Christian Hell. Before the Revolution, education was a class privilege only available to those with money and position. Literacy was extremely low. (About 28% for men and 13% for women).

But don't credit the Revolution with elevating the status of education because, according to what I was taught by my family, we had a respect for education for 150 years before the revolution. Maybe even earlier. And especially among women. Our women fought for education. Even when Russia was a principality, women were very often on top and highly educated.

Everyone knew that education was a wonderful thing — ordinary people, peasants, merchants (meschani) and the few workers. We had no worker class to speak of before the Revolution but all tried to give their children an education because it was widely known that schooling gave a person opportunity and a chance to be somebody; to rise above your family position at birth.

My grandfather Britchkin knew the value of education and made sure all his surviving children, three boys and one girl, got the best schooling possible even though he was taught to read by his mother at home and only to about eighth grade level.

Portrait of Helen probably in 1936.

When I was seven or eight years old, soviet society was still in a state of terrible and violent disorder so my first two school years were spent at home with a private tutor. Many people refused to send their children to school. Crime was still everywhere and it was dangerous for children to walk to school. Schools were in a miserable shape, without heat, pencils or books and the children lacked food and clothing.

Learning at home was terribly boring. You had one teacher and she taught biology and all the other subjects. Everyone always warned me that school would be worse. They said, "You will go to school. You will be sorry that you don't have your own tutor. You will wish you were at home studying again." But truly they did not understand anything about being a tutored child.

Helen Story — Establishing Order after Chaos — Orphans and Hooliganism…

For the first years after the Revolution there was a lot of crime because the Revolution and Civil War had left millions dead and families displaced. It was called hooliganism. What to do with the homeless and the orphans was a big problem. They organized themselves, living underground in the catacombs outside the city, and in caves along the banks of the Dnieper. They did what they had to for survival. They stole food, snatched clothes off lines, robbed and assaulted people. Even though there were shortages of everything they tried to survive. The streets were unsafe. The hooligans made their own bombs, guns, everything. There were older people who organized the children and sent them out to rob. It was a whole community organized for survival.

Orphaned children after the Revolution, who survived by petty thievery and lived in caves along the river or just on the street.

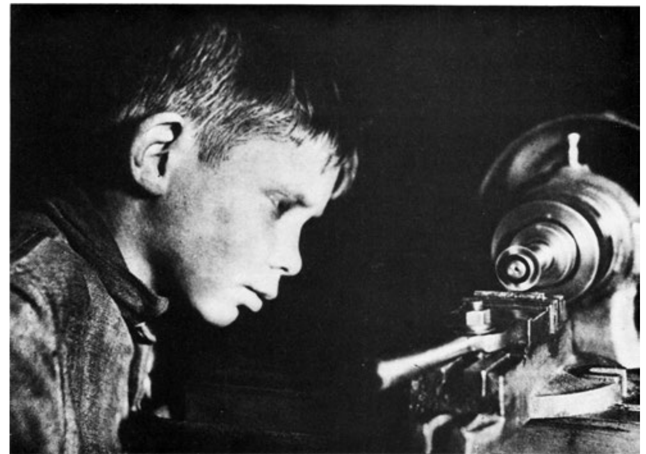
By 1928 the Soviets had forcibly removed the children to camps known as the Dzezinsky Camps for vagrant youth. Dzezinsky was the architect of the first Secret Police and the control of the population through citizen informants. (Photo Credit: fedka.com)

Once the new state got organized, the authorities handled the problem in typical Soviet fashion. A decree was pronounced and officers swept through the streets herding up anyone who seemed homeless taking them away in police vans. We were told they were taken to boarding houses in remote parts of the Soviet Union if they couldn't prove they had family. We did not know if that was true or what happened to them afterward.

After several months, it was heaven! You could walk everywhere in the city at any time of night or day. Crime disappeared and the streets were safe. Libraries were built and when things got difficult at home with everyone cramped in one room, we spent until midnight at the library."

And that was how hooliganism ended.

When I finally went to school I was in heaven. Kindergarten started at age six and at age seven and children were placed into the "Nulevoy class" (the starting class) but I entered the second class and had a very good teacher Natalia Constantina La ??? who had tutored me at home the previous year, so I was well prepared for school. She was from the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg. These teachers were not just good hearted young women but they seemed to know everything.



Young communards working in the Dzerzhinsky Commune machine shop in 1934. (From 'USSR in Construction', April 1934) (Photo credit: K. Kuznetsov on Fedka.com.)

That "second class" Helen entered was at the school on #52 Funducleevskaya Street which she called "the 52nd". The school, located only a few buildings up from Peter's family apartment, had previously belonged to Elizaveta Augustavna and Katerina Augustavna Krueger, two Russian born Germans who had operated a private school in the building. Their property had been nationalized and their school taken over by the state. Helen loved the "52nd" and particularly excelled in physical education. She stayed in that school until the 7th grade.

We had several teachers in the 52nd who offered a wide variety of subjects and admitted students from various backgrounds, something not previously permitted. It was impossible to get bored. I particularly delighted in the required physical education class where I excelled in spite of my earlier handicap. I remained in that school until the seventh class.

I spent summers in the village of Barishevka with my beloved Aunt Lipa and her husband, my uncle. She was my father's cousin. One day when I came home from Barishevka, my parents received a letter informing them that I was no longer attending the 52nd. The school was turned into a more elite one for children of former "people" as the tsarist nobility were

called. Why they would cater to a class that the state has designated as an "enemy of the people" I don't know. *(Note: Helen probably misunderstood he objective of the school for the upper class children. They were probably being re-educated and indoctrinated and not actually privileged at all. Since the higher classes were being persecuted and executed, it makes no sense that their children would be favored in some way.)*

The letter went on to say that because I was "socialistically reared..." I would be transferred for seventh grade to School #8 which catered to "proletarians." It was on the opposite side of Funducleevskaya, again only a block away from Peter's apartment.

Our government was acutely sensitive to class difference. Even if you never said a word the authorities somehow knew where your family stood and what its past class affiliations had been. I always thought they could somehow identify the "socialistically" inclined through the skin. Perhaps our behavior or comportment gave us away.

This school turned out to be a huge disappointment. I had difficulty adjusting. Every day I felt as if a stone hung around my neck. All the children seemed socially warped in some way, unnatural. When I had the chance to laugh at my fellow students with friends, we derisively called them "overgrown defectives."

These proletarian children were physically huge and ape like. They came to school with bottles of vodka which they guzzled at the back of the room with their feet up on desks. They were hostile and aggressive. Russia had not developed a refined working class and I felt very alone. On top of everything, I wore my hair in two breads at the time, a clear sign of the "bourgeoisie."

The teacher could do nothing because the school had its own assigned party member and its own NKVD (secret police) spy to report any unauthorized activity. Under such surveillance one does not complain about vodka in the back row. We had excellent teachers, but they quaked in their boots and trod carefully so as not to invite any complaints from these "scholars" of the proletariat. That lasted a year. In the eighth, ninth, and 10th classes I was placed into School #6, the first experiment for the 10 year program.

About ten years or so after the revolution, the Soviets had finally established order and taken control of society. Then they focused on revamping the educational system. Lenin said that our country cannot exist and become the best if people are illiterate for illiteracy is a kind of blindness. I think this idea was correct.

School became mandatory and if you did not send your children to school, you were punished. Education then became wonderful! All children now had to go to school for a minimum of seven years, especially the peasants who were illiterate before. They were delighted. Delighted! They were proud that their child is studying.

As people started to study, books were now in demand. Books! — that's a holy thing! At first the bookstores were empty but there were small private enterprises called "bukinisti" that sold used books, many of them classics. These stores occupied only one room. My mother (Anna) used to search these places for books. People sold their books only as a last resort or when someone died. Later the Soviets published and books were always cheap.

Then we also had movies and music and we could go to the opera because it was all very cheap. And our theater was the best. It even came to the US in the 1950's and we went to see the Cherry Orchard with Alla Tarasova in New York.

The teachers were educated before the Revolution. At first the Bolsheviks tried to kill them as part of the program to eliminate the bourgeoisie. They thought they did not need the bourgeoisie and everything that class represented was evil. So they sent a lot of them off to labor camps or to build the White Canal.

(OS Note: The White Canal she refers to opened on August 3, 1933 and connected the White Sea with Lake Onega. It was constructed using 126,000 laborers, most of whom were gulag inmates who had been teachers and middle class educated people. According to official records, 25,000 died. This was all exposed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his writing. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Sea%E2%80%93Baltic_Canal).

When things fell apart, after the Revolution, and they realized that Russia was an uneducated, backward and ignorant country, the Soviets were forced to spare some of the top-level educated people in order to teach this new generation. By then, of course, a lot of good people were gone.

Before the Revolution, teachers were on the bottom socio economic level of society. Now, ten years later, they received the highest salaries and became a profession of great respectability. They were highly valued.

When you had a child, the question as to whether that child would go to school or university never came up. There was no choice. The normal course of events was for that child to go to school then to higher education, depending upon ability. The first seven years of school were the same for

everybody, just like elementary school in the US. It was part of the national literacy program for peasants as well. It was for everyone and it was free.

At the end of the seven years most students went to technical schools called Technicum for 2 to 3 years training in nonacademic vocational professions. The emphasis was on industrialization so here they prepared for basic factory work such as electricity, hydrology, mechanics and also managers. They graduated with the title of "techniki."

Helen in 1935 during her last year of School #6, the ten year school and about the time she took the exams for the Institute and passed.

If you were academically inclined, you continued in the ten year school which prepared you for university or an institute of higher learning. You had to pass exams to get in but everything was also free. We even got stipends in university for all our expenses. It was not much but it helped pay for food and a little clothing.

Of course, it was better for you if you came from the Proletariat class, you got better positions, but if you have good grades, they would take you whatever your family background. The country needed trained professionals and they took them in any way they could. Schools were in high demand because everyone was hungry for knowledge and education.

Our country was far behind the west in the higher sciences and we also had a severe shortage of qualified teachers. So they created the 10 year school to push through a generation of highly educated professionals quickly using the surviving teachers. Then they took the most capable students from the school and sent them to higher academic institutions like the polytechnic and the university where they studied, math, engineering, chemistry and the higher research sciences.

Being interested in university study, I applied and was accepted to School #6 for the 8th class and there again I found academic paradise. All the children hungered for education. They avidly read books, searched for information, experimented, and were excited about the material taught in the classes. The teachers, students, and materials were exciting and stimulating. So, they succeeded in creating a new Soviet educated intelligentsia. And they succeeded marvelously.

The label on the back says "September 2-3, 1937 School #6 Engineering lab" but Helen entered the Industrialni Institute (KII) in the fall of 1936 so this is either 1934 or 35. He is the blurred figure in the middle front sitting down.

I am a prime example of that "Communistic Intelligentsia." One of the first graduates. They, of course, stuffed us with all kinds of sociological sciences, but I had nothing against it because we all knew how to filter out the shit. Dialectical materialism, for example — DiaMat (so it was called). I see nothing wrong with it to this day. Everyone had to learn it. Papa (Peter) could not take it in at all.

They gave us marvelous teachers, and such a program (at School #6) that when I entered the Industrialni Institut, everything was repetition. We had math, physics, chemistry — we were prepared well. Chemistry was taught by Kuharskaya. A wonderful teacher! A woman. Mathematics! Geography!...all well taught.

Helen labeled this photo as taken in 1935 before her taking the entrance exams for the Institute (KII — Kiev Industrialni Institut, formerly the Kiev Polytechnic).

School #6 was located in the center of St. Sophia's Square, not far from Helen's home. Our family visited the building in 1995. It was no longer a school and we found it locked but after knocking, an aging custodian opened the door and let us in. It turned out that he also had attended school here and was excited to share memories with our mother, who was quite a bit older.

The interior had been remodeled although some of the old floor tile remained in the spacious atrium. A lean male ballet dancer in pink tights and dance slippers came skipping lightly down the sweeping central staircase, stopped midway to light a cigarette then continued on his way.

We were not permitted into the interior rooms but Helen sat on the landing outside the entrance for a long time collecting her memories. In the middle of the square, the great equestrian statue of Bogdan Khmelnitsky reared heroically on its massive pedestal toward the great church of St. Sophia.

Helen's School #6, as it looked in 1995 during a family visit. It was no longer a school but had been, in Helen's youth, the first 10 year school, established to move exceptional students faster through secondary education and on to high level technical, managerial and research in science, mathematics and engineering.

She was a member of the first graduating class of this new educational system and went on to become a Chemical Engineer. The Soviets created a generation of talented educated people and then tragically destroyed most of them in the purges and in WWII.

ДЕРЖАВНИЙ
ДИТЯЧИЙ МУЗИЧНИЙ
ТЕАТР

Toward the northeast, perched on the cusp of the hill overlooking the Dnieper River and the statue of St. Vladimir where he first had the Slavs baptized, loomed the ugly dark Ministry of Culture, designed in the regulation Soviet style on the spot where the Michailovsky Monastery had stood from the 11th century until 1934 when it was demolished in the frenzy to extinguish religion. Helen looked at the modern monstrosity for a while then remarked wistfully, *"I used to walk to school toward the Michailovsky Monastery every day. It had beautiful Golden Domes. Then, one day in my last year of school (#8), they blew it up. That is what they replaced it with."*

In 1998, when Olga returned to Kiev, as she was entered Sophia's Square, where the lifeless dark stone monstrosity had stood only three years earlier, a spectral apparition with an ornate light façade and golden domes shimmered through the haze of a light snow. Not believing her own eyes, she stared at what turned out to be a faithful reconstruction of the old Michailovsky Monastery with its gothic facade and domed roof surrounded by glistening cupolas, just as it had in her mother's day.

Using old drawings and diagrams Kievans rebuilt the multi-domed sanctuary to its original design. As work started, the locals excitedly recounted, many of the original 11th century frescoes and the gold and silver icons once thought to have been lost forever, miraculously reappeared after almost 80 years in hiding. At great peril, the Kievans had hidden these religious objects which could have cost them their lives. Now, in the midst of the post Soviet economic crisis, Kievans expended their meager resources to restore a piece of our spiritual past.

Map from 1935 of the central area of old Kiev with Malopodvalnaya Street, the Mihailovsky Monastery location, and the Sophia Square.

In the early days of the USSR, other developed countries pretty much avoided us. The bourgeoisie was pretty much gone so all the uneducated bumpkins now took over international positions. When our representatives traveled abroad our poor people did not know how to behave, how to eat, how to converse, how to present themselves. They did not know good manners. Investors refused to do business here and only part of the problem was that our population was illiterate, uneducated.

The Soviets soon learned that education was not enough to establish a Soviet Intelligentsia respected in the west. Much to their surprise they had to restore at least some of the bourgeois values and proper behavior they had previously denigrated and rejected.

The large majority of those who occupied the high places in the beginning were “plain” (e.g.: uncultured). We lacked fundamental social graces and we were completely socially inept. The notion of “manners” or “polite behavior”, of course, had been forbidden right after the Revolution as representing the decadence of the upper classes but now it became evident that good manners were a necessary part of proper interaction. If the rest of the world was to accept us on equal terms we had to shed our brutish habits and learn basic forms of civilized behavior.

For example, the women who were sent to Europe at first brought beautifully embroidered shirts and in these shirts they went to the opera. It took a long time for the Europeans to forgive us that one! *(The early Soviet Union rejected western dress and created its own “proletarian” styles bade of homespun linen. The reference to “embroidered shirts” is puzzling because Soviet styles never idolized the traditional peasant dress until regional cultures were elevated through theater and dance. The communist ideal downplayed individual identity and glorified sameness, to the new Soviet dress was austere, badly cut, ill fitting and cut from a single pattern. The “sack cloth look” proved embarrassing to diplomats sent to Europe.)*

Diplomats now traveled to Europe with their wives. Before the Revolution we did not have the custom of dragging the old lady along everywhere you went. Wives stayed home. Of course, the Soviets changed this and eventually the old lady herself became a diplomat and scientist and had no reason to hang onto her husband’s back.

So as always, the Soviets, did what had to be done without discussion. They made a law. Manners! Etiquette! Dancing! The government quickly organized dance lessons, language classes and schools for etiquette. I remember I took a ballet class taught by an ancient ballerina called Dobjanskaya.

Papa (Peter) was in an entirely different class especially for engineers, doctors and other professionals…only ballroom. No ballet. There they were with another emaciated old ballerina, with red dyed henna hair, teaching them ballroom dances! And it was not so bad. It worked.

When you saw Gorbachev, he was already okay *(in terms of manners)*. In the beginning of the post revolutionary period, one like Gorbachev would have been a completely different kind of person. He would have “fermented” in Europe *(meaning he would not have accomplished anything and would only have sat somewhere alone and ignored)*. Now (1980’s) Soviet diplomats know how to talk and to behave themselves adequately. They have been

transformed into people *(OS Note: "to be transformed into a person" is a single verb in Russian referring to a magical transformation as in a fairytale).* As a result of all these changes other European countries began to accept us and we slowly moved out of the darkness into respectability.

One of the first programs of the Revolution was to eliminate illiteracy and to do it quickly. At the time, literacy in the Empire was only 28% among men and 13% percent among women. Schooling was a privilege reserved for the upper classes. Most villages had no primary schools at all and children, like our Great Grandfather Britchkin, learned to read at home. After the Revolution, schools were in demand but adults could not go to school and in any case they were still scarce in the early years. So the solution was to organize youth brigades to quickly teach people to read and write.

Helen's account of the literary brigades…

To fight adult illiteracy the government organized brigades of students from universities and high schools. I worked in such a brigade in high school. We went to homes and made lists of illiterate people and then taught them to read and write. All of a sudden the whole country became literate.

I remember how we taught them. Little old ladies gathered in someone's house and we held lessons starting with the A, B, C's. The result was excellent and by the time I went to the Industrialni Institut (1936), illiteracy had been wiped out. Still, we have no illiteracy today.

Of course, later on they executed the educated and that was a waste of talent. So many good people…

Posed propaganda photo of a literacy brigade. The name comes from a condensation of the two words meaning "likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti" (liquidation of illiteracy). Helen participated in these and found it very satisfying. They were much less formal than this photo but extremely successful. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Following her successful completion of entry examinations, Helen qualified for the prestigious Kiev Industrialni Institut (KII — also known as the Kiev Polytechnic) which she attended from 1935 to 1939. At the time, the KII had four major faculties: Mechanics, Engineering, Agriculture and Chemistry. Helen majored in Chemistry and Chemical Engineering completing the degree of Diplom Engineer, a level rated in the US between a Bachelor of Science and a Master's degree.

Helen (bottom left) with her group at the Kiev Industrialni Institute in 1936. Students were organized by type of study and within that they had smaller units called groups. This is an official school picture group. The group ID number is on the top right. One of the other girls is Ada Ginsburg, Helen's close friend.

Since its establishment in 1889 by the sugar barons of Southern Russia the Kiev Polytechnic Institute went through a number of transformations and name changes. In 1934, Shortly after Kiev became the capital of Ukraine, it was renamed the Kiev Industrialni Institut (KII). The latest renaming took place in 2016 when it became the National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute". It is an irony that the institute should have been renamed for the inventor of the Sikorsky Helicopter and the founder of Pan American Airlines who was a Russian, born in Ukraine, and emigrated to the US in 1919 to escape the Revolution. Further, his name is of Polish origin and in 1939 Stalin was arresting and executing tens of thousands of Poles in Ukraine (Snyder 2012). Had he stayed in Ukraine, he would not have enjoyed a long life at all!

Kiev Polytechnic Institute renamed the Kiev Industrialni Institut in 1934 then changed back again to its original name in 1968 and changed names several times thereafter. It was established in 1889 and completed around 1902.

The main auditorium where Helen attended lectures and the chemistry bench in 1900.

Helen's uncle, Nicolai Britchkin studied engineering here around 1914. Helen entered the institute in Chemistry in 1936 and graduated in 1940. In Chemistry she used a text written by her grandmother's brother, Jacov Mihailenko who took over Mendeleyev's lab and work after the latter's death. (Photo Credit- building: Wikipedia; the other two from starkiev.com).

> Our higher educational institutions were concentrated in Kiev or around Kiev where we reached them by tram. One of our girls rode 2 hours on the tram one way to the Industrialni Institut from Pushchiva, where she lived. Everyone had to live at home because we had a terrible housing shortage in those years. But no one had to pay for education. They gave us books, paper and school supplies as well. It was all free.

Helen loved those years…

> We had unlimited possibilities. The whole world was open to us with all its opportunities. We felt we could do anything. That may sound idealistic, but our horizons were unlimited. We were taught that we were building a new society and so we were treated well as students. We were special and privileged. If it had not been for the existence of Stalin, it would have been a wonderful society. We had more hope for the future than the people here. Materialism is a dead end.

Helen and Peter were part of an elite group, whose social status was based not on material wealth, but on education and intellectual achievement. In real terms, all were economically poor. Even those who were better off, such as Peter's family, were not at all affluent by Western standards. But the future seemed to hold unlimited possibilities for them. And Helen and Peter were some of the stars of their group. (Note: Katheryn met a woman in the US in 2014, who had grown up in Kiev around that same time period and she remembered them well, speaking with awe of our parents' good looks and charisma). These young people were necessary for the building of the country and had a strong sense of their own value. They were the intellectual elite of the time. Helen remarked that "recruiters" for various jobs came to their schools even before they had graduated, hoping to attract their talent.

During those years, Helen and Peter belonged to a close knit group of friends, (See Book 7 for their photo album of friends) all of them products of the best Soviet education and most came from educated families of various humble social classes. They knew their importance to the society and they all studied for high-level professions. They were doctors, chemists, biologists, engineers, architects, geologists, and top level musicians.

So, Elena Vasileevna Sochanskaya became a Chemist Engineer.

Helen's group of friends from the Institut dated October 1937. Her Group is designated as IX-II III. These are all the students studying Chemical Engineering together. Peter was at the University of Kiev at the time, in Medical School and although he socialized with Helen's friends, their circles were somewhat distinct.

The purges of the 1930's and later during WW2, decimated these intellectual "stars" and many were executed. Those who survived, like our parents, fled when survival looked totally hopeless. The group scattered, and as the Soviet Union closed its borders again after the war, most never connected with each other again.

As an example of lost talent, there is the case of Yura Siemensov, a capable chemist and the son of a renowned Professor of Chemistry. Yura left Kiev also around 1943 with his parents and ended up in the US in Allentown, PA where his father and he both taught at Lafayette College. A published history of their family in Kiev speaks to their prominence before WW2.

Булгаковы, Попперы и другие в Буче

22. На фото: в первом ряду: крайний слева Борис Поппер, крайний справа Ваня Булгаков; во втором ряду (слева направо): Жорж Семенцов, Мура Лысянская, Оксана Лерхе, Роман Максимович Семенцов, Анатолий Петрович Семенцов (Ноля); в третьем ряду: вторая слева Надежда Булгакова, за ней Евгений Августович Поппер, Вера Булгакова, крайний слева Николай Булгаков («Японец»). Буча, 1910 г.

Передано Е.А. Земской. Фонды музея М. Булгакова.

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На хозяйственном дворе у Семенцовых кроме обслуживающего персонала жила еще цепная собака Цезарь.[45] Очень страшная, по размерам и масти похожая на львицу. Она была гладкошерстная, с короткими ушами и страшной мордой. Ее иногда выводили на показ гостям. Она была по меньшей мере вдвое больше нашего испанского дога Цезаря. Дворовые псы: Аргон — крупная лохматая веселая собака белая с оранжевыми пятнами и огромным пушистым весело

[45] У Тузика, собаки Булгаковых, был «полный титул» — Тузик Норкович Норкинзон (Норкинсон). — Н.А. Булгакова. Дневник 1910. Фонды музея М. Булгакова. С. 386.

Bucha was a famous and favorite summer place for the intelligentsia before the Revolution and up to about WWII. This book is about the Siemensov family, who spent summers there and whose last member, Yura, was a close friend of Peter and Helen's.

He and his parents came to the US and settled in Easton, PA where both father and son taught Chemistry at Lafayette University. In this book we see Yura's grandfather and father and many members of the prominent family.

A friend of Peter's, George Steshenko, was the son of a well-known Ukrainian singer, on the order of the famous Russian singer Chaliapin. He remained behind the iron curtain and no contact with him was possible after 1950. Another classmate, Mikhail Voinsvenski, became a world class biologist and scientific author and remained in Kiev but all those who stayed behind and who survived were watched and intellectually isolated from scholars in the rest of the world.

Helen and Peter met him at his apartment during their visit in 1995, shortly before his death. He loved to go fishing and Peter brought him some fishing line. However, at the time, the lakes in the area were radioactive due to Chernobyl but that did not seem to bother him, and he ate his fish happily. His daughter, who lived across town, came daily to cook and clean for him. His son Yura came to see us off when we left on our Dnieper cruise. Misha was a prominent biologist and had written a number of books on local birds and other wildlife. His name translates to "Swedish Warrior" so it is possible he is a descendant of a Varangian.

Misha (Mikhail) Voinsvenski, who went to university with Peter and was friends of both our parents. He was a few years older than our parents and died a couple of years after our visit in 1995.

Misha was a prominent biologist and had written a number of books on local birds and other wildlife.

They had the joy and hopeful energy of youth. It seems, in retrospect, this time period was like a bubble that, once broken, ceased to exist forever. *Book 7 Kiev Friends* gives us an insight into their youthful lives. There is something touching about the photos of young, attractive people playing and working confidently towards a bright future, against the backdrop of hindsight: that it was all to be swept away very soon, in the tsunami of violence and war. Among those who survived, most would be scattered around the world. Those few left at home were never given the freedom to build the great society they had been prepared for.

Upon graduation, Helen was thrilled to accept a prestigious position working with petroleum based explosives. It was a plum job. *"The academy was wonderful… big corridors, wonderful laboratories, great employees; an entirely different life."* This academy was spear heading the newly growing field of research on crude oil and gasoline because the Soviet Union did not have enough energy to power electricity

Helen with her classmates from the Chemical Engineering faculty in the Institute. October of 1937. The note on the back says this is her cohort which is identified as Group IX-II III.

or gasoline to support their developing aviation system. The Soviet defense system was still woefully disorganized but with the approach of WW2 they worked feverishly (and often ineffectually) to prepare for the inevitable invasion.

Love and Marriage

Helen and Peter met around 12 years of age. They became lovers when she was 18 and married two years later. In the early years of their romance, they would rendezvous under the clock on Teatralnaya Street, next to the Opera Theatre. For some reason, it was a custom in Kiev for young lovers to meet under clocks. They married in April, 1938, when she was 20 years old and he was 21.

Their marriage lasted 71 years, until Peter's death in 2006 and in spite of wars, displacement loss of family, home and country, they remained devoted to each other and as united as two very different personalities can ever hope to be.

Among their peers, they were known as extremely attractive, intelligent, and capable couple. In their younger days, Helen had a number of suitors whom she kept at arms length enjoying their attentions.

Helen and Peter grew up in the same neighborhood although their families did not travel in the same circles. However, everyone in that community knew

everyone else among the educated and prominent and both came from well known families. They belonged to a close knit social world that remained stable throughout their youth. People did not move around and the young people knew each other well. Those from educated families formed a social circle that stayed together throughout all their student years. As time went on, and their skills and interests diverged they entered different study programs, but within their friendship endured for they were a small and highly selective group of students. They were the future intellectual elites. Unfortunately, things did not turn out as planned and their promising union was shattered by the purges and the war.

The Soviet Union went to great lengths to engage young people in healthy activity and to steer them away from early sex. The prevailing philosophy was that if young people were kept physically and intellectually engaged, when their hormones kicked in, they would channel their energies into productive activities instead of into sex. The Soviets believed that early sex was detrimental to the development of the country and would pull the capable students away from the pursuit of careers.

To this end, they built libraries, theaters, movies, and sports centers which also served to relieve the pressures of family life in the crowded Kommunalkas. There was a terrible shortage of housing as well, and nowhere for young married couples to go other than hang a blanket to cleave off some private space from their parents.

On top of that, when the Soviets established the equality of women, they made both marriage and divorce extremely easy. As Helen always said, "When you go to the court to marry, you should always keep a ruble in your pocket. If it does not work out, you pay that ruble to register a divorce." In spite of the ease of divorce, marriages in the Soviet Union were extremely stable, possibly because within a terror controlled society, those whom you could trust were extremely valuable.

Kiev Opera House around 1900. Helen loved to go to the Opera which was inexpensive and of exceptionally high quality. Before marriage, she and Peter met under a clock only a block away from the theater. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Helen looked upon the US custom of dating with disapproval. In her youth, she had said, young couples did not date. Teens went around in groups and girls formed their own packs with the boys circling around them competing for attention. It was old Ukrainian village custom that a boy would try to impress his intended with his physical prowess, romantic songs and with the acrobatic dancing. Ukrainian rural males were known for their elaborate and colorful dress but in the city, especially among the "modern" intellectual circles, a less colorful form of gallantry developed. Boys carried books for girls, escorted them home, bragged about their achievements at school and displayed their various intellectual talents.

Helen had a number of suitors competing for her attention. One young man, a painter, totally disheartened by her indifference and the stiff competition, painted

a canvas with Helen sitting on Bald Mountain knitting a string of male hearts. The painting was later lost.

In courtship, it was expected that the male pursue the female and that she play hard to get. In Ukrainian culture, before marriage, the woman held all the power. After marriage, she would be responsible for all the hard work and the male would presumably rule his household in autocratic fashion mirroring that of the Tsars. This order was sanctioned by religion for the Tsar was the "father" of his people as God was the "father" of souls. Many times, Helen would say to her daughters, "Before you decide on him, make sure you will be happy to wash his socks the rest of your life."

What the male wanted in a spouse was a hard worker, a beauty, and, after the Revolution, a woman of intelligence and education. Helen was highly accomplished and measured up extremely well to this ideal. On top of that, she was quiet and modest. However, having grown up with a demanding and emotional village father, she was careful about her choice of spouse. She did not want a man like her father and she always said to her daughters, "Never marry a Slav! I didn't." She never explained but the authors could only guess that she referred to her own father's brutish side and violent mood swings as an example of the "Slavic character" as she knew it.

Peter was the exact opposite of her father. He was quiet, even tempered, and undemanding. He went along with family members, older cousins and to those he deemed them to be "experts." After marriage and in later life, he deferred all non medical decision making to Helen crediting her with a superior intellect and education. She ruled the household with an iron hand and he was content with the arrangement. When we, the children, were asked by our US peers who was in charge of our family, the answer was always an unambiguous, "Our mother."

Peter had decided in his teens that she was the woman for him but she refused to commit and continued to string Peter along, although she had already decided that he was the right partner for her well before her 18th birthday. He had all the characteristics she valued. He was not a man prone to emotional displays; had no bouts of anger; was highly intelligent; and he was considerate. He was also resolute and she probably knew that no matter how much she eluded his attentions, he would not give up his suit and indeed, he finally got tired of waiting for her to make up her mind, swiped her passport and had a friend impersonate her to sign the papers. (See Book 3 for details). He then informed her that they were married. She had no objection to marrying him but she had to break it to her parents which she did by organizing a second fictional wedding which they then celebrated together.

After marriage, there was the difficulty of deciding where they would live as a couple. Helen at first refused to leave her parents so the first year and a half Peter remained with his family; and she, with hers. Helen defended this arrangement by insisting, "I was not going to leave!" At first, she may have felt intimidated by the family of the well-known physician, but eventually he managed to convince her to move in with his family where he had the special luxury of a tiny private bedroom.

Peter's father, Stilian Emilianovich, died the same year Peter and Helen were married. Even so, Helen did not feel comfortable in this household. The family was boisterous and loud. The sisters argued and at times did not speak to each other. The house was crowded but this in itself was not unusual. What was unusual and intimidating to Helen was that it was filled with strangers. She was not a person who dealt well with people she did not know well and she was not free with her trust even in later life. She did not make friends easily and always preferred to remain with her small circle of trusted friends than to open that circle to new individuals. Her grandchildren even referred to her as "agoraphobic" in her later years.

The household consisted of two couples besides Peter and Helen, Helen's mother in law, Ekaterina, Nina's daughter, Elena, Olga's newborn son, Ivan and another couple assigned to reside there by the government. Nina's little son Yura, had died the year before 1937.

Her mother in law was quiet, even tempered but often dour. Peter's two sisters were loud and dramatic, and, as Helen described it, they squabbled loudly and sometimes got so angry that they did not speak to each other for days at a time. She expressed surprise and shock to see, *"… how badly the sisters treated each other."* This was a very strange attitude considering how badly her own father treated her and her grandmother. Vasily Ivanovich meant his behavior to be abusive and hurtful. The Stavrakis sisters could hardly do more emotional damage to each other than Helen's father could manage in a household of submissive women. No one in Peter's family was outwardly nasty or spiteful. They argued and fought as Helen described it but they hardly went for the weak as they were all equal. This was not a household dominated by a mercurial tyrant who professed to liberate his women. Further, Baba Katya, Peter's mother, was not a woman of violent or intense emotions and Peter, like his mother, seems to have remained oblivious to the chaos around him. He did not participate and even seemed not to notice. His memories of his childhood and family were always very happy. He seemed to have totally missed the sibling rivalry between his sisters.

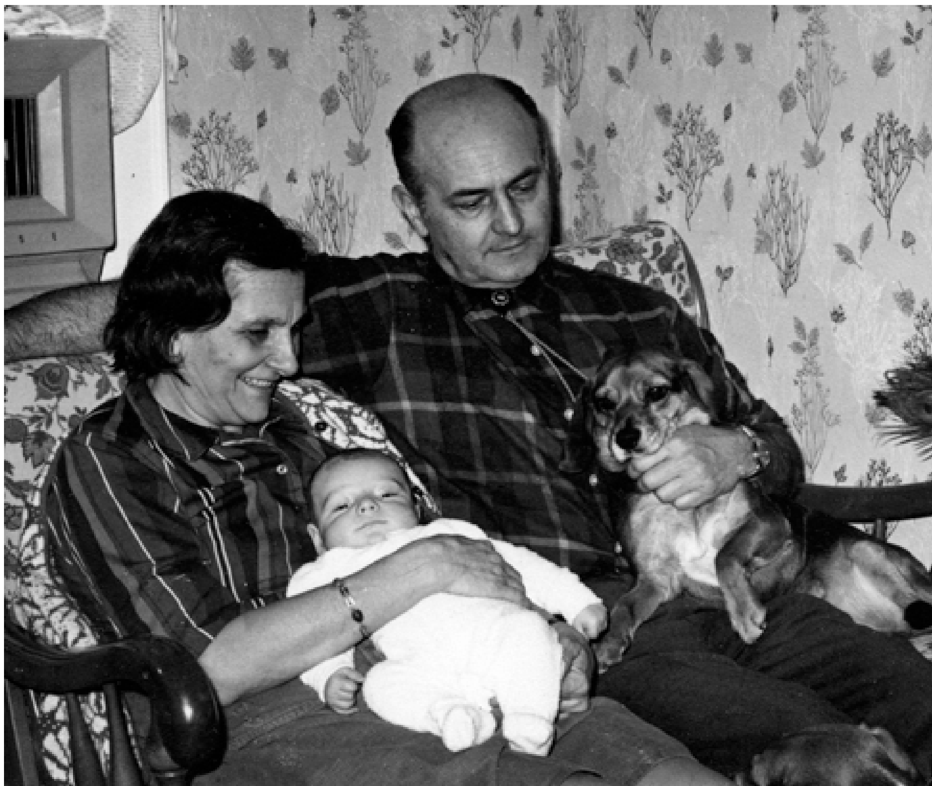
The two families of the young couple were profoundly different and both Peter and Helen were each convinced that their own family was the normal one and the family of the other was abnormal and eccentric. Each had a strong sense of what was right and appropriate and each considered his or her background "normal" and that of the other "uncivilized" although Peter accepted the differences whereas Helen never did. One critique she made of the Stavrakis family was that they did not eat dinners together and her family did, therefore that is the way family life "should be." Of course, she overlooked the fact that even though her family ate at one table, there were months on end when Vasily Ivanovich ignored and ignored his mother in law and pretended she did not exist. There were other times when he raged or insulted his women. Peter learned not to argue with his wife over his or her family. In any case, for him these were not important issues. He was a person who never felt an insult or embarrassment. People's idiosyncrasies simply amused him.

Helen's parents and her grandmother stayed with her the rest of their lives and she often said that the one thing she admired in Peter was that he accepted them

willingly in his life and treated them all with great kindness and consideration even when they were being difficult. Helen, on the other hand, continued to feel threatened by Peter's family even in the US and refused to allow Peter's mother to live with them. Little by little, over the years, she severed his ties with his cousins and his sister in Canada and prevented her own children from establishing ties with his side of the family.

The newlyweds worked all day, ate dinner with Helen's parents on Malopodvalnaya and came back to Peter's room to sleep. Helen described this period of her life as happy and they had enough to eat and their education paid for. She even earned a salary although Peter did not so she helped her parents with food bills. Her father's occupation continued to remain a mystery although it appears he now remained at home much of the time.

Then war came.



Peter and Helen with their first grandchild, Cedric Puleston, and their two dog in their first home in Newark, Delaware, USA. The first dog they acquired in the US was Brownie, whose head is just visible along the bottom of the photo. They both finally got what they wanted: freedom from fear, peace and family. Peter had wanted a dachshund since he was very young and he got that, too.