

## Two Reunions with My Russian Family in Spite of the Obstacles

by Roberta Cohen\*

“I am sorry but I can find no one by the name of Maxim Perlstein,” the Intourist guide in Kharkov told me in July of 1969. Maxim was my grandmother Sarah’s nephew to whom she had sent back small amounts of money each year from New York to help him through medical school.

My grandmother came to America from Lithuania in 1905 to join my grandfather who had deserted the Tsar’s army, while Maxim and other family members moved from Vilna to Kharkov in the Ukraine. All contact with them was shut down during the Second World War. My grandmother would sit in a darkened room, with *yahrzeit* candles flickering, silently crying while listening to radio broadcasts, which listed the names of Jews in different towns and cities murdered by the Nazis. She never heard Maxim’s name and prayed that he and the others survived. But Stalin’s purges and the Cold War prevented her from ever finding out.

When my grandmother died in 1968, she left me \$1,000, which I used to join a Citizens Exchange Corps group on a tour of the Soviet Union. When we arrived in Kharkov, I gave the name of Maxim to Svetlana, the Intourist “guide” attached to the group. I was told that looking for one’s relatives had to be “above board.” But since Intourist guides were known to be KGB agents, I knew I would also have to make inquiries of my own. Since there were no public phone books or information operators, I went to the center of the city and stood there in the hope that people would talk to me. It was a time of a “thaw” in the Soviet Union -- soirees were being held to read *samizdat* literature, Soviet Jews were beginning to ask about Israel, and ordinary Russians were talking more freely to foreigners. And foreign I looked. My dress was not the sack with flowers that most Russian women wore. My hairstyle was not the same, and I wore earrings, bracelets and lipstick. Sure enough, Russians began to approach me and ask questions about “the West.” When an older Jewish man came over, whom I felt I could trust, I passed him a slip of paper with Maxim’s name on it. He understood immediately and motioned for me to wait while he went to a booth down the block. When he came back, he handed me an address. My heart pounded. Maxim was alive.

When I returned to the hotel Svetlana took me aside and told me that there was no such person in Kharkov. I thanked her for her search and asked one of our group leaders, a professor of Russian from Princeton, to accompany me to Maxim’s apartment. We took a tram and found the building easily enough. Maxim’s stepson opened the door, told me that Maxim was one of the chief tuberculosis doctors in the city but was out of town and would not be back while I was in Kharkov. Although a bit cool, he gave me the address of Maxim’s sister Rachel and said that through her I could find the whole family.

At Rachel's apartment I felt an immediate connection. No sooner did she open the door than I recognized the photographs on the wall, in particular one of two twin girls, with black bangs. I used to play with this picture when I was a girl and even make up stories about them. In fact, my grandmother's hard backed photos of "the twins," Maxim and other relatives were my "movie stars." Rachel invited me to return the next evening to meet the twins and other family members.

With two big shopping bags filled with gifts from members of my group, I headed toward the hotel door with a Russian speaking American student, Andy, who agreed to do the interpreting, only to be stopped by the KGB. They were polite, even friendly, as they blocked my path. "You must come back into the lobby and sit down," they said. "We would like to talk to you." They identified themselves as Intourist "guides" and after some pleasantries, asked, "Where did you go yesterday afternoon?" Almost immediately, the title of a book long on the bestseller list in the United States flashed through my head. It was about parents and children and went something like "Where are you going? Out. What are you going to do? Nothing." I decided to try that, and replied, "Out." They smiled and asked, "Where are you going now?" I said, "We're going to take a walk." "But where will you walk?" "Nowhere," I responded. They no longer smiled and began to be a little intimidating but I made up my mind I was not going to be deterred. They would have to arrest me to stop me (which had happened to another member of my group). So I got up and looking at them firmly, said, "It was nice to talk to you, but we are now going out."

Only four months earlier, I had to be equally determined at the UN in New York in the face of intimidation by a Soviet representative. I was called before a UN committee to explain the work of the French-based group that I represented, the International Federation for Human Rights. The Soviet delegate had proposed its expulsion from the UN. During the 2-hour session, the Soviet delegate banged his fist on the table in front of me and accused the Federation of having "slandered" his country. I stared directly at him and replied that the organization had one purpose only, which was to monitor implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an objective endorsed by the United Nations. In the vote taken, the Federation was maintained in its status at the UN.

This interlude crossed my mind during the discussion in the lobby and I motioned to Andy to rise and we left the hotel and got on the tram without interruption. We were welcomed with great warmth by Rachel, her husband Boris, the twins Dorina and Mary (who were now about 40), Dorina's husband Vladimir and her daughter Alla, a pretty girl of 14. I found out that Maxim and they had all survived the war by fleeing to Kirghiz in Central Asia while all the relatives who remained in Lithuania, including Rachel's parents, perished in the holocaust. All of them had been to university or technical schools. Boris was an architect who had helped rebuild Kharkov after the war. They made a wonderful meal of roast chicken, tsimmes and chopped liver, just the way my grandmother used to do it. And they served fruit, a rarity in those days and gave me lots to take back to the hotel. They also gave me books, which I still have, one with pictures of the buildings Boris designed after the war. When I left for Kiev the next morning, one of the twins came to see me off at the hotel. She embraced me right in front of Svetlana, who had told me there were no such people.

When I returned to the States, my mother immediately wrote to Rachel and sent gifts, but we never heard back and stopped writing, fearing that our contacting them might prove harmful. More than that, I feared that my own international human rights work would affect them. In 1971, I became Executive Director of the International League for Human Rights and became directly engaged in efforts to support Andrei Sakharov and the Moscow Human Rights Committee. And then in 1978, I joined the State Department's first Human Rights Bureau.

It was not until 1991 that I thought it would be a good time to try to reconnect with the family. With the communist system collapsing, I visited Russia, this time as part of a US-Soviet dialogue on ethnic conflict. But when I inquired, I found the family was no longer in Kharkov and there was no forwarding address.

What I was not to find out until 2005 was that one of the twins, Dorina, together with her daughter Alla, Alla's husband Viktor and their two children had immigrated to the United States in 1990. Once here, they began a search for me. They called every Roberta Cohen in New York, and went to the address on the upper east side of Manhattan, where I had lived 20 years earlier. Since I no longer lived in New York but in Washington DC, they could not find me and almost gave up. But Dorina insisted on keeping the search alive and contacted HIAS, which had assisted in her family's immigration and resettlement. With the help of dedicated HIAS staff, the internet and the United Nations, she finally found me in March 2005.

On April 27, at the Harvard Club in New York, thirty-six years after our initial meeting in Kharkov, I met Dorina and Alla for lunch. Joining us was my aunt Phyllis (whose father Josef Perlstein was Maxim and Rachel's uncle) and Jeffrey Cohen, Phyllis' son. We shared photographs and family stories. I learned that my mother's letters did arrive in Kharkov (with the envelopes opened) but the gifts never did. I learned they were not allowed to respond, in particular because one had a job bearing on national security. Alla took the decision to come to the United States because of discrimination against Jews in Russia, a poor job market, and the danger her son would be conscripted into the army (isn't that also why my grandfather left?). But life in America was not easy, at least not at first. They were only allowed to bring \$700 with them. They also were not fluent in the language and conveying their skills and professions was difficult. But despite hard times, they eventually "made it" in New York by dint of hard work and great belief in the importance of education. Alla's son Larry is now graduating from medical school and her daughter Kate is a graduate of Hunter College.

Over the past decades, we had all spent a good many hours trying to find each other and connect across continents. I am grateful to HIAS for locating me and bringing us all together. Despite the obstacles, we have managed to build a bridge between America and Russia. I know my grandmother Sarah would have smiled upon us for it and at me for finding my roots.

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