

Interview with Marina Gewlitch Chatsky in Queens, 2000

This text is drawn from an oral history interview recorded in 2000 in Queens, New York. Marina Gewlitch Chatsky, a member of the Kamendrovsky family, shared her memories, stories, and family history with Masha Alexandra van der Heyde — preserving voices and lives that might otherwise have been forgotten.

The Family line of Mikhail Kamendrovsky + Paraskeva Timofeevna

Mikhail [Feodor Sr.'s brother], the head of the family, was deeply religious and served as church warden at the Church of the Kazan Mother of God icon. His wife, Paraskeva, was the one with the business sense in the family. They had the following children:

- **Nikolai** – Became an engineer. He never married and lived in Saltykovka, near Moscow.
- **Yakov** – A brilliant young man. When he was fourteen, he was accidentally shot in the head by his cousin during a hunting trip. Someone attempted to remove the bullet with a pin, but only pushed it deeper into his skull. The bullet continued to move, making surgery impossible. He died at the age of 21 when the bullet shifted again and entered his brain. He studied in Moscow, as did his sister Maria, who attended a French boarding school. Yakov often picked her up to take her to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (which was later destroyed and recently rebuilt). All the girls envied Maria because he was handsome and kind. The school's chaperones always trusted him. The siblings also went to the Bolshoi Theatre together.
- **Arseny** – Died during the Revolution; it is unknown whether the Reds killed him.
- **Alexander** – The troublemaker of the family. He was hot-tempered and often clashed with his mother. Marina recalled being afraid of him and hiding under the piano. Once, after she refused to have her hair cut, he caught her and shaved her head bald. She spent the summer wearing a wool hat with a pompom. Alexander had an illegitimate son named Yura, whom Marina loved. Yura always protected her; when other children teased her, he warned them, "If you touch her, you'll deal with me." Once, when she was playing with a worm, he told her, "Remember this for life: never harm a living creature."

Paraskeva welcomed Yura and his mother into the household. Later, Alexander married Nadia, a beautiful woman with a difficult son. Alexander drank heavily. They also had a daughter, Inna, who still lived in Moscow in 2000 and had an adult son. She worked as a metallurgist in Algiers, Singapore, and India before retiring.

- **Eugene** – Eight years younger than Maria. Maria cared for him as a child. He studied in Penza. When Marina and Alexis left for Danzig, Eugene was 19 and of draft age. To avoid conscription, he became a stonecutter and thus received a "worker's" identity. Later, he became an engineer and worked during WWII in a secret facility. Although he did not fight, he was officially classified as a first-rank veteran. His mother, Paraskeva, lived with him until her death in 1933. He later settled near Moscow. His daughter, Olga, was in her early fifties in 2000 and still lived nearby.

Paraskeva Timofeevna survived the harsh post-revolutionary years thanks to the kindness of local peasants who gave her a cow after all her possessions were confiscated. Selling milk and butter helped them survive. Marina believed this kindness

was a return for Paraskeva's generosity; before the Revolution, she would send wagonloads of colored Easter eggs to prisons.

- **Maria** – The only daughter. She studied in Moscow from the age of twelve to seventeen, returning home only during summer and Easter. Shortly after her graduation, the Revolution broke out. When she returned to Nizhny Lomov, her father was gravely ill and soon passed away. Only the youngest brothers, Eugene and Alexey, remained at home.

One day, a band of Red soldiers entered their house. One of them grabbed Maria, declaring he would make her his wife. The family's nanny fought them off so fiercely that they fled. The soldiers threw Alexey across the room, and he landed under a bed. That same night, Maria was sent to Penza, where a professor's family took her in under an assumed name.

In Penza, **Sergei Vladimirovich Gewlitch** was also in hiding — living secretly under a gazebo in someone's garden. There, the two met, fell in love, and were married. Soon afterwards, Sergei was arrested and sent to another village. When Maria went to visit him, she too was arrested. After his interrogation, Sergei was brought back to his cell only to find Maria sitting inside. "What are you doing here?" he exclaimed. In the same cell was a rabbi who was praying; when another prisoner mocked him, Sergei grabbed the offender by the neck and threatened him, defending the rabbi.

When they were finally released, Sergei and Maria fled to **Rostov-on-Don**, living under false names in an abandoned Armenian monastery together with other Russian refugees. Later, Sergei was arrested again. Having served in the White Army, he was sent to requisition horses from the Kalmyks. When he and another officer returned to Rostov, they checked into a hotel and fell asleep still wearing their uniforms. Unaware that the city had just fallen to the Reds. They woke up staring down the barrels of guns.

The soldiers marched them down the hotel stairs. In the lobby, Sergei saw his reflection in a large mirror and dryly remarked, "I look rather pale." As they were about to be taken outside, the officer in charge entered and recognised Sergei as a fellow soldier from the First World War. "I will deal with him personally," he told the others. He led the two detainees to a barn, told them to wait, and later returned with civilian clothes and false papers. "Disappear," he said. And they did.

They made their way first to Penza, then to Moscow, living under assumed names. In 1922, they attempted to flee to Poland with a Jewish family who were friends of Alexandra Kamendrovsky from Kislovodsk. They couldn't risk taking me (their daughter Marina), so they left me in the nanny's care in Moscow. A Polish diplomat promised to take me later, but after a change of government in Poland, all diplomats were recalled. Stranded and penniless, my nanny and I made our way back to **Nizhny Lomov**.

During their own escape, Sergei and Maria were robbed. When they finally reached the border, the guards threatened to send them back. Sergei handed over his pistol

and said: "Here is my gun. I will shoot my wife and then myself." The guards let them through. They settled briefly in **Warsaw**, but disliked it and continued on to **Danzig**.

When they arrived, a German *Wachtmeister* came to inspect their papers. Sergei said to him, "You and I were honest enemies in the war." It turned out that they had fought in the same town. Sergei recalled an episode in which Russian soldiers had found a fallen German officer and written above his body, '*Died like a hero.*' The *Wachtmeister* recognised the story and, moved by it, promised to get them false papers, which allowed Sergei and Maria to remain safely in Danzig.

A few years later, a diplomat friend arranged official adoption papers so that I (Marina) could be granted a passport to travel to Danzig. Since I was only seven years old, my uncle **Aleksey Kamendrovsky**, who was fourteen at the time, received a visa to accompany me. Officially, to return, though he stayed with the family.

- **Alexey** - the youngest. At fourteen, he accompanied me (Marina) to Danzig and stayed there with my parents. He studied at a Catholic boys' school, later attended art school in Berlin, and joined Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir, touring Europe and America. Illness kept him from a pre-war tour, which saved him from being stranded abroad. He married Tatiana Nikolaevna Atisferova near the end of the war, she had been taken to Danzig for forced labour. After the war, the couple emigrated to the U.S., where Alexey painted silk ties by hand, later worked for NBC as a scenic artist, and died in 1962.
- **Marina**
Later, my parents and I moved from Danzig to Belgium and, after the war, to Brazil. In the mid-1950s, we settled in New York. I worked for a publishing house, managing international rights for children's books. I represented my company, Harper & Row, at international book fairs in Moscow and across Europe. I continued to travel until my retirement in the 1980s. I still try to visit Russia once a year, mainly staying in Moscow, where I financially support my cousin Olga (in 2000).

About my family line (MvdH - Feodor Sr. is my great-grandfather)

Feodor Kamendrovsky, Mikhail's brother, managed the factory and prospered. He was well-off and devoted to his family.

Marina remembered **Lydia Kamendrovsky** (my grandmother) fondly, calling her a very sweet girl. Her aunt **Shura (Alexandra)**, on the other hand, she recalled as rather bossy.

After the war, Lydia visited Marina in Belgium. She told her how important it was in Holland to display shining pots and pans in the kitchen, to show what a good housewife one was.

Maria was close to her cousin **Feodor** (son of Feodor Sr.), who had a jealous temperament. He married a woman from a distinguished family. When she asked for a divorce and he refused, tensions rose. After his daughter told him she had "a new father," Feodor shot the man. His wife received counsel from Bishop Eulogius but eventually sided with Feodor, and he was acquitted. It was the same bishop who later asked Maria to visit the camp where **Tatiana Antisferova** (Alexey's future wife) was held, to help some of the girls there. He told her that they were Russian girls from educated families.

2000, Marina Gewlitch Chatsky