

**THE STRENGTH OF SMALL FREEDOMS:
A RESPONSE TO IONIN, BY WAY OF
STORIES TOLD AT THE DACHA**

by
Naomi Roslyn Galtz

#578

November 1998

**CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
WORKING PAPER SERIES**

The Center for Research on Social Organization is a facility of the Department of Sociology, The University of Michigan. Its primary mission is to support the research of faculty and students in the department's Social Organization graduate program. CRSO Working Papers report current research and reflection by affiliates of the Center. To request copies of working papers, or for further information about Center activities, write us at 4501 LS&A Building, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109, send e-mail to crso@umich.edu, or call (734) 764-7487.

*The Strength of Small Freedoms:
A response to Ionin, by way of stories told at the dacha*

Naomi Roslyn Galtz

*Paper submitted November 30, 1998
for CRSO Paper Award competition*

(originally written for forthcoming collection on life history approaches in Russia; the task was to place a single life history into conversation with new theoretical approaches relevant to Soviet Russia)

*The Strength of Small Freedoms:
A response to Ionin, by way of stories told at the dacha*

I. History of a near miss

This paper hails from an intellectual conjuncture that never was.¹ At one point in re-compiling the essays of *Sud'by liudei*² for publication in the West, several of the volume's collaborators from the Institute of Sociology, Moscow, hit upon an intriguing strategy: in lieu of an introduction they proposed to reprint a recent essay by a Moscow political sociologist, "Everyday Life and Freedom in the USSR."³ The choice was a curious one, for a number of reasons.

Sud'by liudei grows out of a central project gathering multi-generational life histories; Leonid Ionin, author of "Everyday Life," did not participate in the project, nor is he a proponent of life history approaches more generally. The pieces in *Sud'by liudei*, even those which highlight problems of theory, are based in deep empirical work; Ionin's essay is speculative, philosophical. The oral history collection embraces a number of themes: meanings of class, strategies for coping in economic and political crisis, identity reformation across generations, and so on -- a

¹Research for this article was supported in part by a grant from the Fulbright-Hays Foundation and from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Department of State, which administers the Russian, Eurasia, and East European Research Program (Title VIII). None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.

²*Sud'by liudei: Rossiia xx vek // Biografii semei kak ob'iekt sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia* (The fates of people: 20th century Russia // Family biographies as an object of sociological research) Moscow: Institut sotsiologii RAN, 1996. This precursor to the present volume has had an enormous influence on contemporary Russian sociology, despite the fact that it suffered the usual fate of tiny print runs. See this volume, Introduction, pp. [] .

³"Svoboda v SSSR," pp. 9-36 in L. G. Ionin, *Svoboda v SSSR* (Sankt Peterburg: Fond Universitetskoe izdanie, 1997). The title "Everyday life..." was a proposed translation, reflecting the emphasis on everyday conceptions of freedom in the article itself.

list as potentially endless as the sociological facets of a life. The Ionin piece treats a single (though grand) topic: what did freedom mean for individuals in the Soviet years.

In the end, and due to a number of considerations, the Ionin essay was not incorporated into the successor volume to *Sud'by liudei*. What is critical here are not the details of the publishing choices, but the fact that the Russian members of the project deemed Ionin's essay an appropriate framing piece. They didn't consider it a faultless article, but they believed his thesis had the power to provoke a western audience into a more perceptive, wide-awake consumption of their collection, and of the details of individual Russian lives...

The present piece takes up the central thesis of Ionin's essay which sparked such interest at the Moscow Institute of Sociology. It places his propositions into dialog with my own research, which is grounded in theories of space and place, and which involved gathering memories, impressions and life histories among members of *dacha* (or summer home) communities outside Moscow in 1997 and '98. The chapter proceeds in several parts: first, a consideration of the Ionin argument and its resonance in contemporary Russia; second, an introduction to the space of the Russian cooperative *dacha*; third, the close analysis of one *dacha* life story. In conclusion I approach the question: what can stories told by way of the *dacha* tell us about Ionin's thesis, and derivatively, what can they suggest about the study of freedoms in Soviet Russia?

II. *(The strength of) Ionin's thesis*

"Freedom conjugated with a ban"⁴ is how Ionin summarizes and evokes a particular incarnation of liberty during the Soviet years. In contrast to truncated political and public realms, he proposes, the realm of the private flourished in Soviet life; and the freedoms experienced in this private realm gained a particular depth and resonance-- were gracefully cloaked in a sense of intimacy-- precisely because of their location in a wider system of falsity and prohibition. Thus, rather than widening the experience of freedom, post-Soviet Democracy-- with all the proliferations in choice and opportunity which it inexorably entails-- actually spells the collapse of the sensation of freedom, the special ability to self-reflexively experience autonomy.

Ionin's argument is predicated on the idea that the existence of freedom within any society should be monitored at the level of experience--it is phenomenal, context dependent, and best captured by anthropological approaches. When we abolish the concept that Soviet citizens, as members of a totalitarian state, were "invalids of experience,"⁵ we discover--according to Ionin-- that they enjoyed a particularly full type freedom. To this end he uses as a prefacing quote, and as a literary anchoring point, the following lines from (forced emigre) poet Joseph Brodsky:

....While coaxing a beauty,
along the prisonwalls where you did three years,
to rush along, splashing mud, in a taxi,

⁴Ionin, p. 35. "conjugated with a ban" is [trans name]'s excellent rendering of "sopriazhennyi s zapretom."

⁵Ionin, totalitarian homunculus, p. 11--re-translate?

with a bottle of wine in a string bag--that's freedom!⁶

Here the proximity of the prison, the sense that prerogative force girds experience (and may intrude on it), opens a space for the eruption of freedom, an experience which seems both to emanate from, and lodge in, scattered artefacts of the mundane: a taxi ride (to see friends?), a bottle of wine (to be shared among friends, brought in a string sack or "perhaps bag"-- *avos'ka*-- carried perpetually *just in case* something interesting might appear on sale).

By marshalling these lines of poetry as evidence Ionin does not seek to fetishize political repression. Rather he introduces them, it appears, to map the extreme of a more general condition, in which hindered entry into a variety of quasi-public spheres of experience (literature, religion, travel, even criminality) actually produced a heightened experience of autonomy as individuals struggled to appropriate and re-create these spheres within their private lives (e.g., in the case of literature, through the private circulation of manuscripts). This authentic freedom, for Ionin, is therefore dependent in not only on the specifics of Soviet government--with its restrictions and its "ersatz"⁷ public realms--but on what he sees as a particularly Russian movement between public and private.

In this Ionin's proposition differs from Berlin's more classic observation--in his foundational statement on the nature of liberty--that personal freedoms merely *may exist* concomitant with life in an authoritarian regime, if the regime maintains an acceptable detachment from private

⁶find out name of translator from Viktoria, or re-translate, or find other English translator and cite

⁷p

spheres.⁸ Embedded in Berlin's observation is the idea that public and private spheres are entirely distinguishable and operate independently of one another.⁹ Ionin, on the other hand, sees these spheres as discrete, but links their operation dialectically. To highlight this linkage, and to avoid the idea that Ionin is "simply" pointing to the persistence of private freedoms in a politically restrictive system, I will refer at points to what I have dubbed "small freedoms." While *Freedom*, according to Berlin's synthesis of liberal theory, is cohesively engendered across a given population through a framework of inviolable legal protections, *small freedoms*--following Ionin--arise in fragmentary ways, atomistically, in the course of daily life, and they are spiked with meaning by their position within wider systems of impossibility.

The idea of the small freedom enjoys a certain currency in recent scholarship and retrospection on Soviet-Russian life.¹⁰ For instance, Svetlana Boym has argued that, in the Soviet 1960's, the life of small circles of intimates took on depth of meaning as pointed retreats from, and recreations of, a politically risky public "li(fe)." (The theme music for this phenomenon was Okudzhava's "Arbat," representing a cult of "minor everyday epiphanies on the street corners.")¹¹ In his 1996 exploration of gay and lesbian culture in Russia, David Tuller concludes that the very strictures of the Soviet system promoted a flexibility and creativity in the definition of

⁸Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 14

⁹Berlin sees this separation as an historically continent phenomenon, operative in western culture since the Renaissance or the Reformation. (*Two Concepts*, p. 14.)

¹⁰I use "Russian" generally in the sense of *rossiiskii* as opposed to *ruskii*--that is to say, as a way of indicating members of community coextensive with geographical Russia, whether or not of Russian descent.

¹¹Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, pp 94-95.

personal identity that is to large degree absent in U.S. gay culture.¹² And at a recent conference on private life in Russia, discussion of the late Soviet period was permeated by a nostalgia for the depth of fragmentary experience in Soviet times; indeed, the single toast raised at the concluding event suggested that, while Americans had mastered the professional, organizational side of life, they might do well to learn from their Russian counterparts, schooled in the Moscow kitchen,¹³ how to live more fully in the personal.

More importantly, the sense that a certain group of graceful, nuanced freedoms is dissipating in the presence of a louder, more uniform and putatively western-inspired freedom (singular) represents a recurring motif in the conversations of contemporary Russians. Much of this informal talk, not surprisingly, concerns economic change, and "market freedoms," as these are inseparably bound with the discussion of "democracy." For instance, people might express missing the bureaucratically-ordered disorganization of workplaces which allowed them to skip days, engage in personal transactions on the job-- even though this very disorganization was simultaneously a source of severe limitation in public life. Some of this talk roots at the most literally material, tactile levels: the sense that mundane objects gained depth of meaning in the years of shortage because of the troubles gone through to procure them; the sense that the dizzying array of *stuff* available now makes it more difficult to be inventive. As one acquaintance joked: "I'm Russian! If you give me *everything* to work with, I can't make anything

¹²David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet* 1997

¹³Throughout the Soviet years, the Moscow kitchen represented a warm, safe space where news, literature and politics could be discussed freely among a small circle of friends. Symbolically, it was figured simultaneously both as a hearth and as a bunker. (Of course, there is no need to assume that the curious public-private inversions of Russian life are limited to Russia. The kitchen took on a similar function in Beijing, according to Perry Link; see *Evening Chats in Beijing*.)

out of it. Ah-- but give me *nothing* to work with, I can make miracles!"¹⁴

This daily discourse is distinct in its logic from the (understandably) more pervasive calculations of gain or loss (e.g. "Things were better under Brezhnev," "Maybe we weren't free before Perestroika, but there was always bread"). And though in an analytic sense these daily expressions do not sit orderly under the heading of "freedom conjugated with a ban," they cluster easily around the pieces of poetry Ionin quotes from Brodsky; they evince a similar wry warmth towards small freedoms--ephemeral moments of private life, choices spiked with meaning by their location in systems of limitations. And they express something that can never fully be gotten at by an outsider, but which must be looked at, accounted for, broached, if we are to work towards a more honest understanding of social forces in the post-Stalin years.

It is not my intent to assess the political implications of Ionin's propositions,¹⁵ or to assess whether or not they represent an original contribution to theories of freedom.¹⁶ I propose, rather, to approach a more basic issue: what happens when we place his thesis into dialog with a life history? After all, though Ionin advocates anthropological approaches, he himself works from

¹⁴Personal communication with Natalia Timoushkina. April 13, 1997

¹⁵Though it would be a disservice to Brodsky to ignore them; after all, Brodsky can be seen as a connoisseur of "Soviet freedoms" only at certain fleeting, poetical, and warmly sarcastic moments.) For Brodsky's literally and figuratively more prosaic stance, see, e.g., his address to Havel in *On Grief and Reason* [cite]

¹⁶A preliminary consideration would suggest that it is not entirely new. Tim Gray's differentiation of meaning of freedom and value of freedom. Also Benn & Weinstein (1974) on social constructedness of freedom, Fuller on the absurdity of total freedom. ... Also might note Goldfarb's *On Cultural Freedom*, which compares Polish and US cases. In his contention that western concepts of freedom exclusively dominated by political, formal, Ionin would seem to be repeating biases of Soviet scholars of theories of freedom, see eg *Problema svobody cheloveka*, Riga, Zinatne, 1987.

the realm of the abstract, marshaling largely personal evidence.

I venture to explore Ionin's propositions by way of a very particular case--or, more clearly, by way of a space: a *dacha* community founded in the last years of Brezhnev, and one woman's life experiences there. I choose this site, and this respondent in particular, as representative of a particular social stratum: the ranks of the technically trained that fared well under Brezhnev, the closest thing to what one might call a late Soviet-era middle class. Not only were the workplaces involved in the coop I studied representative of this stratum (a chemical research lab, a federal economic planning bureau, etc.), but the people who received *dacha* plots were likely to be well-placed within their own organizations, owing to the formulae for assigning membership. Thus, where the sources mentioned above--Ionin, Tuller, Boym--depend on the vantage point of a more marginalized, "creative intelligentsia" (Szelenyi), this exploration turns to a group with whom many of the creative intelligentsia would have no truck--Soviet society being in its own cultural ways rigidly stratified.

IV. The setting

Although it may seem an odd choice of inquiry, the cooperative garden *dacha* is uniquely suited as a space for examining freedoms within daily life in the Soviet years. In part this is because the *dacha* touches on issues of ownership and proprietary relations, which have long been considered central to the study of freedom. [cite?] More centrally for present purposes: the cooperative garden plot represents a supremely "private" space--centered on family, rest, hobbies, and the fulfillment of purely personal economic needs--and yet it is a place where experience is

particularly clearly and transparently girded by state restrictions and economic impossibility.

Therefore, it is necessary to begin with something of a description of the space itself, in order to begin to appreciate the quality of experience and life stories told around and at the *dacha*, and to set the stage for re-engaging Ionin.

Eleven major rail routes stretch radially out of Moscow from nine stations. Around these lines, ringing Moscow far beyond the ends of the *oblast'* (county) boundaries, cluster millions of *dachas*, a sizable amount of which were built within *Sadovodcheskiiye Tovarischestva*, or garden cooperatives. A garden cooperative was formed when members of a workplace, acting under the auspices of labor or professional union organs, presented a request for the designation of lands (*zaiavlenie na otvod zemli*) to city or regional executive committees. Usually the impetus for this came from within the workplace, when potential *dachniki*-- in an age-old tradition, one hardly limited to Russia¹⁷-- hankered for a place outside the city. Once lands were provided, at the end of a fairly long, bureaucratic process, the cooperative would mark out equal plots and confer them to individual workers by queue. In accordance with guidelines set in the cooperative's charter, a worker's tenure, work record, age, community service, and similar factors went into deciding the place in queue. Garden cooperatives have existed in this basic form since the late 40's, with interest and access to membership growing steadily--so that if 1951 there were 40,000 members of garden cooperatives in Russia, by 1983 there were over 4 million.¹⁸ The 80's, by all accounts, represented something of a *dacha* craze,¹⁹ prompted by increasing deficits and worries

¹⁷Lewis, *The City in History* [cite]

¹⁸These figures, of course, exclude the private plots of kolkhoz workers. Yaroshenko [cite]

¹⁹cite article "*dacha* kak natsionalnyi (rossiiskii) faktor"

about the chemical content of fruits and vegetables, as well as the development of a certain "peer pressure."

Unlike the institution of the *Dachno-Stroitel'nyi Kooperativ* (DSK), which has been in place longer, entails a different relationship to property²⁰, and was used more clearly in the service of elites²¹, the express purpose of the Garden Cooperative was to promote not the construction of *dachas*, but the development of-- well-- gardens. Most of my co-op respondents, in fact, would chafe at my discussion of their stories in connection with the topic of "*dacha*." Indeed, there exists something of a universal hand gesture for insisting the opposite: the showing of nails with hands curled and turned out-- a demonstration that too much work goes on here for this to be a "*dacha*" (coded as a space for rest). And yet, cooperative *dachas* serve, just as "*dachas* proper" do-- as a space outside the city to take kids for fresh air, to have a home, to socialize, and so on.²² In any event, the *act* of being there, is always the act of being *na dache*.

During the late Soviet years the garden cooperative *dacha* represented one of the most intriguing spaces imaginable.²³ The space was intriguing, first, in a straightforward, physical sense. Most cooperatives were granted virtually non-arable lots, in order not to "waste" cultivatable soil, as well as in hopes that personal labor would be invested to recover parcels of land which would otherwise be lost. For instance, the poselok near Dmitrov where I conducted interviews that feed

²⁰Vatman [cite]

²¹The DSK form, for instance, provided the legal possibility for the organization of *dacha*-refuges for much of the artistic elite. [cite figures from TsGAMO]

²²cite last issue of Subbotnyi Kurier on this question-- is the cooperative *dacha* a *dacha*?

this article was situated on a former peat-processing site-- the stripping of peat having left the soil loose and spongy, sodden with water like swampland, as well mineral-poor. The poselok is girded on two sides by drainage canals, and several of the plots granted to individual tenants originally sloped down to these ditches at precipitous angles; 150 truckloads of dirt had to be brought in to level out plots and replenish the soil.²⁴

Though large projects such as the trucking of soil were generally coordinated by cooperatives, each tenant was responsible for preparations made on his or her plot (*uchastok*), leading some members to relinquish their plots to co-workers in queue, and others to become engaged in something of a competitive comradeship, seeking to outfit their plots as professionally as possible. Though the elaborateness of plots varies, each respondent at the Dmitrov cooperative reports investing at least one full season of work before the ground was ready for a diverse horticulture. One dachnitsa-- whose plot is one of those running down to a canal-- dealt with the extreme sloping not simply by adding land, but by arranging her garden in a series of terraces, each carefully supported and enclosed by corrugated metal barriers.²⁵ At first the choice of terraces would seem obvious; but when one takes into account that both husband and wife were working full-time, traveling to the coop mainly on weekends, the neat terracing of the land emerges as a remarkably ambitious, labor-intensive solution.

In addition to the vagaries of the land itself, the space took shape through an interplay of administrative constraint and personal initiative. For instance, in accordance with the republic-

²⁴Zhukov, *koop predsedatel'* interview [cite]

²⁵Bella I. interview [cite]

wide *typovoi ustav* (a standard charter which set general guidelines for the cooperatives to follow)²⁶ each lot consisted, with relatively little variation, of six hundred square meters.²⁷ These size constraints were not particularly prohibitive, considering that each plot was meant to provide supplemental produce for one family only. But the chart-like regularity with which plots were demarcated tended to exacerbate natural variations in the land (orientation to the sun, shade from trees on neighboring lots, etc.), and this, in conjunction with a number of building and zoning codes (permitted size/height of buildings, required distances between living spaces and compost/toilets, required distances between structures on adjoining plots) served to demand-- and foster-- considerable ingenuity on the part of tenants in utilizing the space. (Often that ingenuity was dedicated to getting around regulations-- gardening out onto the strip across the road, leaving out the dimensions of outer walls in the calculation of building size, etc.)

Yet more ingenuity was required to find the resources to build and outfit both house and garden in the late, deficit-ridden years of the Soviet regime. Members of cooperatives were eligible to take bank loans, on fairly favorable 10-yr terms, in order to cover costs of building.²⁸ At the Dmitrov cooperative, where most *dachas* were erected in 1981-83, tenants describe few initial difficulties in erecting a basic building, whether this was a trailer-like "household block," (*khoblok*) or a modest two-story home. However, stories grow and multiply around particularities in interior design, the building of banyas (Russian baths) or garden buildings. It is in discussion of these flourishes that one encounters repeatedly the canny soviet term "dostavat' "

²⁶Yaroshenko [from appended *typovoi ustav*] Differed in some republics.

²⁷Hence the name of the popular weekly gazette devoted to gardening and *dacha* life: "Vashi shest' sotok" -- "Your six hundredths [of a hectare]."

²⁸Yaroshenko?

-- to get, to obtain (paramount importance lodging in the fact that this verb is in the imperfective, signifying a process that can never be complete).

Interestingly enough, the tenant described above as having established a terraced system of gardens stalwartly refused over several conversations to describe how she obtained the corrugated sheet metal used as embankments; she would merely shake her head and snort, saying something such as "Oh, now that's a history," or "there's a fairy tale."²⁹ And yet one gets the sense that there was really nothing particularly irregular in the way she procured the metal sheeting. The material may have been leftover from a construction site, or obtained by a friend... Her silence on this point, however, served to convey an overall sense of how her place was built, regardless of the concrete history of any one item. And it operates, too, as a spell, preserving a mystery around the machinations gone through in the Soviet years, in accordance with a self-completing logic-- impossible to ask about, unnecessary to explain to anyone who knows about the word "dostavat."

As a net result of the vagaries in the land, administrative constraints, and difficulties in obtaining building supplies and materials, the cultivation of these plots represents a concerted transformation of geographical *space* into social *place*--that is to say, into places, in the plural, humanly marked by the most intimate and intricate of labors.³⁰ What's more, we can begin to

29

³⁰Here I feel bound to make a clarification, engaging Edward Casey, who argues against the theoretical prioritization of a supposedly abstract, empty space, over particular, grounded sites of experience. Casey's points are well taken. In this particular instance, however, the idea that plural, social spaces emerge out of a blanker "space," is appropriately resonant with the experience of my respondents themselves. For the cooperative *dachniki* arrive with a pre-formed set of social relations (achieved in the workplace) and the landscape they are assigned is a random one, onto which they set to work, mapping out their plots and attempting to "take hold"

divine in the physical contours of the space an emergent argument along the lines of Ionin's: there is a dialectic at work in the way the houses and the plots take shape; they seem self-consciously to be constructed *in tension with*; the presence of limitation itself allows for the sense of a "carving out."

This sense only increases when we look at the *dacha*, not only as a physical space, but as a symbolic one-- that is to say, a "space in the system" of authority, power, and governance. The city planning literature in Russia of the 60's, 70's and 80"s, largely ignores-- or predicts the imminent demise of-- the ever-increasing number of *dacha* and gardening communities which spiraled out from Moscow and other Soviet cities. At the same time, shortfalls in the agricultural and consumer product sectors pushed the state to encourage the growth of the "600 square meter" brand of garden. As a 1972 decree laconically puts it:

"The Soviet of Ministries of the Russian Republic...has observed that over the last several years local soviet, agricultural and labor organs have allowed their attention to the development of collective gardening among workers and civil servants [ie: not *kolkhozniki*] to wane. Besides this, the production of potatos and vegetables in collective gardens serves as an important supplementary source of these food crops."

The note of alarm--and the perceived link between home-grown foodstuffs and a satisfied populace--becomes ever more clear in a series of such decrees, extending to the very end of the Soviet system.

(*osvoivat'*) the territory; everything outside of the confines of the coop becomes, for them, inexorably *peisazh*. (See Edward S. Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time," from *Senses of Place*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996)

A similar tension/paradox of this sort is at work concerning the property status of the garden plot. In one sense the cooperative plot served as a neat proxy for private property: land could be utilized, within certain limits, in accordance with the tenant's wishes; proprietorship was lifelong, and plots could be fairly unproblematically passed down to heirs (subject to a vote by the cooperative, which had to approve the heirs as members). The house, meanwhile, actually **was** private property [*chastnaia sobstvennost'*] in the Soviet legal sense of the term. All the same, tenants could, in principle, be evicted from their plots if they overbuilt, failed to garden on their land, or otherwise violated the spirit of the *tovarishchestvo*, and homes could be dismantled, "reduced", etc. if they exceeded size limits.³¹ In this sense, the plot represented a fragile, and incomplete form of property, always liable to incursion by the "state." (Here I place state in quotations because it is important that it be imagined not in its faceless bureaucratic form, but in the guise of the most concrete, familiar and everyday figures of Soviet life--for instance, the overly-inquisitive co-op president, who dropped in on her neighbors to track their compliance with state and coop norms.) But from this set of tensions emerged a fairly unified experience of the space: the plot was *svoie, one's own*.³²

In its symbolic configuration, then, the pleasures and freedoms offered by the space of the *dacha* seem to represent a full incarnation of Ionin's proposals. Here, frozen at the structural level, nearly ensured by seemingly conflicting sets of legislation and administrative procedure, is the precarious (yet sturdy) emergence of a cozy space, girded by prohibition and impossibility: an extreme case of "conjugation with a ban."

³¹[vatman and yaroshenko, 1967 guide to law on home construction]

³²Cite Bella I., Liudmilla, and other interviews.

But even if we can spy this as an operative logic at the structural level, it is still not clear if this is a durable description of experience. And this is where I turn to the case of Liudmilla Alexandrovna.

V. Stories told at the dacha

Liudmilla is a short, round-ish woman, 63 years old, with a brisk and easy manner. We met at a book and magazine stall, where I was seeking back issues of the magazine *Priusadebnoie Khozaistvo*. (Personal agriculture; see note x above.) Liudmilla, who was browsing at the stand, stepped in to say that she had collected all issues of the journal since it began publishing in 1981 and could show them to me. This began our relationship, as well as my connection to the cooperative at Dmitrov: Liudmilla is the one who first invited me there and provided crucial initial introductions to other members of the community.

Like many members of the Dmitrov cooperative, Liudmilla is a pensioner. She studied to be an economist (something akin to the American notion of an accountant) in the early fifties at the Moscow Automobile and Road Institute, then worked as an economic planner in a federal office continuously from her graduation to retirement three years ago. When her workplace joined the Dmitrov cooperative in 1981, she and her husband enthusiastically-- she more so-- embraced the idea of getting a plot. Before undertaking this work, she had no links to farming; neither of her parents were peasants, and she had no *dacha* experiences when growing up. When I ask her

about this sudden pull to gardening she describes it as a "natural" thing, tied to age³³, tied to the fact that many people were taking plots at that time. It seems the case that the opportunity for a plot opened up just as a vague desire was taking shape in her life, fed by the heightened interest in gardening in the Russian media, and among her friends.

Though she never specifically describes it this way, the *dacha* seems to be, too, a common project, and a way to stay connected with her daughter. In a fairly typical pattern, her daughter and son-in-law have put up much of the funding for the development of the plot; they use the *dacha* as a place to relax, visit with their parents, swim (in a nearby lake or the Moscow-Volga Canal) and get sun. Though her daughter has little interest gardening, she is a great partisan of the *dacha*, and of the area itself; she takes a proprietor-like pride in the fact that the Dmitrov environs are still "rural" enough for nightengales, hedgehogs, and even beavers. [interview with Marina and Sergei] Interestingly, in one of our taped discussions Liudmilla describes the *dacha* as a project undertaken "my s Marinkoi" (together with Marina), rather than with her husband.

Liudmilla's plot sits on flat ground at the end of a row of dahcas, near the entrance to the poselok; on one side it is girded by the access road, and beyond that, a thick birch and pine forest. The first season they came to the poselok, she and her husband pulled out wild bushes, mowed (with a scythe) and filled the plot with trucked-in dirt and sand. (On one of our walks through the poselok she pointed out an "unclaimed" plot, overgrown with weeds, with at least an inch of standing water. "It's hellish labor. This was the kind of swamp we had, this is the kind of

³³seen as delo pensionerov This is not surprising, given that plots were assigned, first of all, by length of service. common wisdom that want to do it as you grow older. but then are a complex of economic and social reasons: get the vegetables, take break from city, etc. Also, time to put into it.

overgrowth." (And then, as if on cue in an overdrawn movie, a very unattractive two-inch bug, a pest known locally as a *medvedka*-- "little bear," or mole cricket-- slithered out of the weeds at the edge of the field, and Liudmilla crushed it with a sigh.)

In that first year, in addition to clearing and drying the plot, they erected a sturdy shed, built up the land at one edge of the plot and planted several fruit trees there, so the roots wouldn't rot; and they started plots of potatoes, beets, and a few other essentials. In the second year, they put up the *dacha*. This was mostly the labor of Liudmilla's husband and their daughter, working from a pre-fabricated kit. The *dacha* is tidy in the utmost-- a small, yellow, box-shaped house, with a sharply peaked roof, and small windows. It looks like one of any of dozens of projects published in the 70's, 80's, and early 90's in building guides called alternately "Build-it-yourself" or "We're building it ourselves." Inside the *dacha*, the first floor consists of a small closed-in verandah with two old refrigerators and a cupboard, a cozy eating nook, and a bedroom; the second floor is smaller, due to the sloping of the roof, and only semi-finished; it is outfitted with two narrow beds for Marina and her husband, as well as (beginning this year) a miniature portable toilet.

One of Liudmilla's dissatisfactions is that she "stuck too closely" to the building guidelines when they planned the *dacha*. She tells the story of a neighbor who over-built and then "threw out the president of the cooperative" when she came to make a complaint. This is not a confirmable story--certainly the cooperative president would have been able to take action if so inclined. But it speaks to the fact that there was an *unknown quantity of slack* in the rules for building and development. Liudmilla regrets that she didn't risk more; indeed, her *dacha*, with combined indoor space of about 25 square meters, is small compared to many of the other *dachas* at the *poselok*.

By the third year Liudmilla and her husband began to raise chicken and rabbits. This was an endeavor on the order of a hobby (probably inspired by reading *Priusadebnoe Khoziastvo*). As a family, they did not lack the funds to buy eggs or meat; and they did not sell the animals as many *dachniki* did--quite legally--throughout the '80's. Instead they ate and gave away the eggs, and used the rabbits for fur, commissioning two short coats to be made from them, one for Liudmilla and one for Marina. Later they turned the henhouse into a dark but comfortable summer kitchen.

After 16 years of tending, the plot has taken on full form, every corner developed, every spot having gone through several incarnations. The apple trees and summer kitchen fill the left side of the plot in back. In the back right sit two long wood-and-plastic sheeting greenhouses for the tomatoes and cucumbers; in front of these, plum and quince trees, with flowers planted around their roots. The middle of the plot is laid out in a series of narrow beds with potatoes, strawberries, garlic, onion, and herbs-- including basil, cilantro, dill, tarragon, valerian and curly parsley. (When the strawberries have passed season, Liudmilla digs up the rows and re-plants with more garlic and herbs, getting twice the use out of the area.) Further up, to the right of the house, and in front of it, she set in a series of flower beds, with a decorative border made of inverted glass bottles, pounded flush with the soil, to look like upholstery tacks. Here she grows climax, iris, floxy, peonies, tulips, gladioli, and tiger lilies. Along the fence on both sides of the plot are berry bushes-- red and black currant and gooseberry to the right, and *obelikha*-- a semi-tart, orange northern berry which grows voraciously-- clustered thickly and high along the left. (Liudmilla gives a rapid tour of these numerous cultures, saying in her very firm, clipped way: EHto luk, EHto pomidor, EHto zemlianika-- HERE's the onion, HERE's the tomato, HERE's the strawberry-- and motioning quickly right and left. She pauses only over her new acquisitions, for instance the "column-form" apple trees she is experimenting with, purchased this spring at a

former kolkhoz which now caters to upscale *dacha* clientele.)

Finally, under the obelipikha berries, sandwiched between a permanently parked old car where the cat suns himself, and a greenhouse full of sweet peppers, is a little area devoted to recreation. This space has been forged over the last two years, mostly by the daughter, Marina. She laid a sand floor an area about 5 feet by 7, and dug out a pit for *shashlik*, or shish-ka-bob, the social equivalent of American bar-b-que. Her father helped her brick around the pit and set in little benches by it; then, this summer, Marina and Sergei brought in four white plastic deck chairs, with a matching table and a large bright beach umbrella. (In one of my favorite photos of the plot this bright, striped umbrella pushes its head up over a swath of garden greens, incongruous as a beach umbrella in a field of young corn.)

"That's theirs. Marina laid the pit." Liudmilla notes drily when giving her tour. The recreation area is a cause for constant light joking in the family; the "kids" threaten to take over more land for a lawn and sunning area, causing Liudmilla to worry about her plans for new flower beds or trees. This, too, is an issue familiar to the point of stereotype at garden cooperatives: children with more disposable income seek to turn their parents' *dachas* into spots for relaxing, like country cottages. Liudmilla is not at all dismayed by the tendency; she does not assert the need to work, or bemoan the laxity of recent generations. But still in all the tremendous work ethic of the garden cooperative acts a backdrop; against it, the presence of an area for rest is something to be *explained*. (So, for instance, as we walked by a *dacha* which belonged to the daughter of a deceased co-worker, Liudmilla felt the need to interpret the meaning of a blank lawn: "They didn't plant anything *on purpose*; for them, it's like a place to rest.")

On a typical summer weekday, Liudmilla is alone at the *dacha*. Her husband, though also retired, picks up extra money by working two days on and two days off as a handyman. Generally, he spends his days off at their one-room apartment in the city. Marina and Sergei come in most weekends, and bring Marina's father with them if he is free. (On workdays the collective has the feel of a women's zone, as men are more likely to commute in for the weekends, leaving their wives and/or mothers to tend the plots. Liudmilla moves about the garden freely in just a shirt and a pair of underpants.) Depending on the weather, Liudmilla is likely to stay at the *dacha* from early May, for planting, through the end of September, when the last two chores are hastily done: digging up potatoes and gathering in the prodigious obelipikha.

She breaks this with stays in the city as she wishes, taking rides home with Marina and Sergei. Unlike other retirees I have spoken with, she does not regularly ride back into Moscow to collect her pension; rather she has it automatically roll over into a savings account.

If one had to pull a central thread from Liudmilla's story it would undoubtedly be the setting of a stage for her retirement. She took the *dacha* when she was nearing retirement age and pursued it as a beloved hobby with the free time which entered her life when her daughter became self-sufficient. Now the *dacha* acts as something of a homestead: the family as a whole invests resources into it, the children come here on weekends; or they retreat here on weekdays to recover from colds, or stressful days at the office. In Liudmilla's mind, this would also be the perfect space for her to look after a grandchild...

This idea of the *dacha* as a stage for her retirement has led her to dream of other, yet more "suitable" options--something closer to the city, a community equipped with phone lines and gas

hook-ups. So, when tv ads in 1991 invited applicants for a sort of communitarian settlement, she called for more information. Eventually she invested about \$350 in the venture, as a "membership fee." For this money she received a beautifully made architectural plan of her dream home, as well as a present from the organizer on women's day (a pair of leather boots). Liudmilla keeps the bound architectural plan carefully folded in a old school satchel of Marina's and likes to take it out from time to time: it shows a fabulous three story structure, with two symmetrical dwelling units, one for herself and her husband, one for "the kids." The two units meet in the center, in a two-story hothouse-conservatory.

It is not clear how Liudmilla envisioned financing such a home, nor is it clear that such a home ever was to be built. In any event, by 1992, the venture began to encounter difficulties tied to its attempts to procure land, and in 1993, the organizer died under mysterious circumstances. It is not clear if this was simply a misguided venture, or a nascent pyramid scheme. Liudmilla, in any case, is not particularly bitter about the experience. This project having failed, she is more cautious in her attempts to find a new home for her retirement, but dogged nonetheless. Her plan is to sell the Dmitrov plot, take out a mortgage and erect a modest-sized, three bedroom home. Eventually, she would rent out her one-room apartment in the city in order to earn extra money.

What is striking about Liudmilla's story is the way it seems to unfold, driven by internal factors, with little disjuncture in the narrative between pre- and post-Soviet period. The Soviet system presented certain opportunities (once she paused in the middle of a walk through a field to say, "this was a great gift from our government" [cite]) as well as certain barriers to her plans (for instance the building codes). And she reports on these as normalized, routinized opportunities

and constraints,³⁴ no different from the range of financial and organizational opportunities and constraints she encounters now, in a market economy, under conditions of liberal democracy: getting a mortgage, finding suitable land, and so on.

At least in part, the pragmatic way she negotiates both opportunities and barriers must be tied to the fact that Liudmilla has fared well--solidly and moderately well-- both during the Soviet years, and beyond. Until her retirement, she held a secure mid-level position in a federal bureau. Now, during the dislocation of economic transition, though the family does not enjoy a lavish lifestyle, she is protected both materially and psychologically by a close-knit family network. In short, while Liudmilla was not a member of the Soviet elite, and is not now a "New Russian," there is a solid middle class ease which girds her sense of freedom and choice in her private life, and it is compressly expressed in the way she uses the space of the *dacha*.

VI. Re-approaching the theoretical

Ionin's main concept--dubbed here the "small freedom"--resonates both with a number of moves being made currently in scholarship on Russia, and, more importantly perhaps, with a particular brand of nostalgia operative in daily talk in Russia in the late 1990's. What I have attempted to show is that the space of the cooperative *dacha* is girded in some ways by precisely the formula Ionin identifies: heightened possibility within restrictiveness, "freedom conjugated with a ban."

³⁴This point is very much resonant with a comment Ionin makes, in seeking to "normalize" examination of Soviet experience: "Soviet people proceeded from the choices at the disposal and understood freedom as a chance to choose from what was available." [p]

And yet this is not a particularly useful formula when examining the experiences of the coop's members, as neatly exemplified by the story of Liudmilla Alexandrovna.

Nearly all the folks I interviewed and spoke with at the Dmitrov cooperative place a real importance on the role of the dacha in their lives. They speak of a sense of control and mastery in determining the course of a garden or the shape of a house. Or they find a singular sense of peace and security in the perfect routinization of life there. Or they simply say they could not live as fully as they do without the access to the fresh air and extra food the dacha affords. In each story, certain of these feelings are held in tension with the vagaries of the Soviet system. But they are also held in tension with narratives of urbanization and pollution, narratives of age v. youth, narratives of market economy... Taken together, their stories reveal something more pragmatic, less complete, less exotic, and ultimately less redemptive of Soviet restrictiveness than Ionin's formulation. This is not to say that each and every one of my respondents would not recognize the condition Ionin describes so persuasively; it would seem there is no *dachnik* in Russia who cannot, for instance, find something wonderful in the forced inventiveness of a Soviet gardener. But for many, the idea of heightened freedom within limitation is simply an available social semiotic, a formula that can be recognized and appropriated in discussion, but which is not cohesively reflective of experience.

One has to be careful where to step from here in drawing conclusions; one cannot, after all, "test" a thesis such as Ionin's, nor could one--if such a test existed--put the burden of it on an individual life story. The strength of Ionin's work is that it operates as a fantastic opening up of the sociological imagination, an attempt to refigure our understanding of the relationship between personal experience and formal mechanisms of power and control during the Soviet years. On

one level then, I have simply tried to lay alongside his proposition another such "opening" of the sociological lens, with a much more mundane (but, ironically, possibly more explosive) suggestion: if the prohibitions and ersatz nature of the public realm enhanced, for some, the content of fragmentary experiences of freedom, for others, the experience of freedoms *and unfreedoms* in the late Soviet years was a dully straightforward proposition. (Though this is by no means to imply that *freedom as a political condition* was a dully straightforward proposition.) People such as Liudmilla Alexandrovna took very seriously their jobs, their public lives and their civic responsibilities, and they also took seriously the personal opportunities afforded to them through those spheres--opportunities such as participating in a garden cooperative. And though we cannot ever assume one-to-one correlations between class location and experience, it seems possible to speculate that this statement would be particularly true for members of those strata--such as the ranks of engineers, chemists, economists and other technically-trained--that came to constitute something of a middle class during the late Soviet years.

If this is a worthwhile speculation, it would seem to beg a series of other questions--ones regarding gender, poverty, national identity, region, and so forth.³⁵ That is to say, it would lead us to question the formulation of a cohesive "Soviet experience" of any sort, minding the ways that other types of social location inflect experience. At very least, it would remind us to be use extreme caution in applying voices and sources from one social group to another, especially as

³⁵In suggesting this, I am also suggesting that Ionin's problematic implicitly belongs in a comparative framework, despite his implication that the condition is unique to Soviet Russia. After all, if we conceptualize a more sociologically variegated landscape of the experience of freedoms, Ionin's suggestions begin to link implicitly with other important discourses. One of these is the debate on active re-appropriations of consumer culture by "dominated" consumers [see eg Baudrillard, *Critiq of Pol Ec of the Sign*, or Martyn Lee (?)]. Another is the debate on women's freedoms within Islam [see, eg, Gocek and xx]...

the experience of certain groups--the late-Soviet middle class included--have yet to be adequately explored.

If stories told at the dacha do anything, then, they remind that a good deal of "opening up" and parsing of life histories lies ahead, if we are to better theorize the content of experience in the Soviet years. And in this sense, though he is far afield from the essays contained in *Siud'by Liudiei*, Ionin represents the ultimate argument for their importance.