

AWSS Newsletter, July 2012

A Grandmother's Legacy

By Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, Research Associate, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University

Some of my best research finds have been serendipitous. Much of trying to piece together the history of feminism in the Russian Empire has been like detective work, finding details about the lives of the feminists, how the organizations worked, searching out clues in archival funds, figuring out who are in those wonderful and tantalizing pictures of, for example, the 1908 Women's Congress in St. Petersburg. The most serendipitous of all so far has concerned the feminist leader Poliksenia Shishkina-Iavein. So active through most of 1917, she, according to Richard Stites, had fled to Bulgaria, and then Estonia with her husband and family after the Bolshevik Revolution. And there, in 1921, for Stites, the trail ended.

Then, at the Women in Civil Society conference in St. Petersburg in June, 2002, I gave the keynote, speaking about the forgotten legacy of feminism in Russia. After my talk, Irina Yukina introduced herself, and told me about her research on pre-revolutionary Russian feminists. And she told me that she had met Shishkina-Iavein's granddaughter, Nonna Igorevna Roshchina, by chance. Roshchina was working as a typist at the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg when Yukina struck up a conversation with her. In due course, Yukina explained the subject of her research and Roshchina spoke about her grandmother. Shishkina-Iavein had not died in Estonia. Her husband suffered a massive heart attack there, leaving her in 1921 with two children and few resources. Proclaiming that "Russians should live in Russia," she returned to her homeland soon after. Her medical education saved her. Although she was of gentry origins and therefore of a despised class in the new revolutionary society, she had skills desperately needed in the aftermath of revolution, civil war, and large scale emigration. Working as a physician Shishkina-Iavein supported her family, lived through the purges, the siege of Leningrad during World War Two, and died in 1947.

Nonna Igorevna remembered using feminist proclamations as wallpaper in the communal apartment in central Leningrad where she, her mother and father, and grandmother lived. Bonding with her grandmother, she stopped her mother from destroying many of the photos and documents from the pre-revolutionary period. Miraculously, this trove survived, as did Shishkina-Iavein's grand piano. According to family lore, the piano was selected for Poliksenia Nesterovna by Rachmaninov.

This rich collection resides not in an archive (no Russian library would take it, a sign of the historical importance accorded feminism), but in Nonna Igorevna's apartment, a fourth floor walkup in a nineteenth-century building overlooking the Griboedova canal. Nonna Igorevna would prefer to keep the physical archive in Russia. But how to preserve it and make it available to scholars?

Luckily, modern technology makes it possible to scan documents and photos. And this is what we did. Through Widener Library and Harvard, and especially with the incredible help of Hugh Truslow, the Davis Center librarian, and the Russians with whom he connected, we were able to scan over two hundred images. These include pictures of

Shishkina-Iavein with her family, with her medical school classmates (she was probably the first female gynecologist in Russia), at the League for Women's Equal Rights planning meetings, and during World War One, at field hospitals and other medical facilities for the troops. Also included are newspapers from international women's conferences, especially the 1913 Budapest conference, and a few posters advertising meetings about the "woman question."

I hope that soon the collection will be available through the Harvard Libraries. Stay tuned.