Chapter Two

Parallel Lives: Models and Inspirations for Characters in *We the Living*

By Scott McConnell

Ayn Rand wrote in her foreword to *We the Living*: "*We the Living* is as near to an autobiography as I will ever write. It is not an autobiography in the literal, but only the intellectual sense. The plot is invented, the background is not" (xvii). Ayn Rand was born Alisa Rosenbaum in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1905, and lived there until 1926, living under the Soviets for more than eight years. Since one of her purposes in writing *We the Living* was to tell the world the truth about Soviet life, it was natural that she would use events and ideas from her own life and from the lives of people she knew.

In fact, one of the reasons she wrote *We the Living* as her first novel was that it would not require any research, because she knew life in Russia so well. But Ayn Rand was not a journalist or historian merely recording life under the Soviets. She was a fiction writer who used her experiences and observations as background only, as a means to an end: to dramatize her theme, characters, and completely invented plot situation. This chapter focuses on the ways in which some of the characters of *We the Living* were inspired by or modeled on actual people and names in Russia. The first and most significant of these models is Kira Argounova's "twin."

KIRA ARGOUNOVA AND AYN RAND

Kira is the heroine and protagonist of *We the Living*, but "Kira" also wrote the novel. In the book's introduction, Ayn Rand writes: "The specific events of Kira's life were not mine; her ideas, her convictions, her values were and are" (xvii). Although the main story of Kira's life—and especially the novel's central conflict—was not drawn from Ayn Rand's own life, the author of *We the Living* did draw upon her own convictions, values, and observations in creating the character of Kira.

Alisa and Kira are twins in spirit, especially in their attitude to life. Both passionately believe in the importance and great possibilities of their lives. While in prison, Irina Dunaeva tells Kira (her cousin) about her life: "they don't know what it means, that treasure of mine, and there's something about it that they should understand" (350). In the novel's foreword, Ayn Rand notes that at Irina's age (eighteen) she did not know much more about this question than did Irina, but adds that later she did complete her answer in *Atlas Shrugged*, where she dramatized what she then called the "meaning of the men who value their own lives and of the

men who don't" (xiv). Kira and Alisa did value their own lives—they were among "the living" referred to in the novel's title—as Kira says when addressing Andrei: "God—whatever anyone chooses to call God—is one's highest conception of the highest possible. And whoever places his highest conception above his own possibility thinks very little of himself and his life. . . . You see, you and I, we believe in life" (117).

Alisa and Kira's prolife convictions are also found in their anticommunism. In an interview in the early 1960s, Ayn Rand recalled that at the age of twelve, "I realized what's wrong with the Russian revolution, it was the communists' principle of living for the state."[1] Kira expresses to Andrei her reason for loathing communism this way:

> For one reason, mainly, chiefly and eternally, no matter how much your Party promises to accomplish, no matter what paradise it plans to bring mankind. Whatever your other claims may be, there's one you can't avoid, one that will rise to the surface as a deadly poison to turn your paradise into the most unspeakable of all hells: your claim that man must live for the state (89).

Because Kira and Alisa shared so many ideas, values, and attitudes, there are strong similarities in their characters and personalities. Both were passionate man-worshippers (Kira specifically in regard to Leo, Alisa in regard to his real-life counterpart—more on him shortly), and both were eager to find man at his best (whether loving engineering and building or the United States). Both desired to create (one, buildings and bridges, the other, novels). Both were valuers who desired to experience great art (operetta and foreign movies). Neither could surrender to the conditions surrounding them. Both lived and loved in extremes; "all or nothing" could have been their anthem. Both approached life fully focused, whether trying to understand the man they loved or the Russian Revolution. Both had a passionate sense of justice regarding the evil they saw around them, speaking out against communism, in student lecture halls or to family. Both expressed scathing irony toward fools and cowards (if they noticed them), such as the Russian masses or corrupt party toadies. Both yearned and fought to be free, in spirit and in body, which could only mean to go "abroad." Both Kira and Alisa loved their lives.

The list of Kira and Alisa's value similarities could run pages, but to clarify the point, I offer two examples. First, their attitude to work. When Kira is looking at a building under construction, she thinks of "the only work she wanted." Kira is suffocating, denied the freedom to pursue her career as an engineer and builder, her reason for being. For Kira and Alisa the only way to achieve this was "Some day . . . Abroad" (324). Alisa was equally passionate toward her work, creating fiction. She kept a journal of her ideas, wrote scenarios, began her first novel, and carried in her head to America the ideas for seventeen scenarios, novels, and plays. She was later to write two hymns to work, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged.*

The second example concerns art and aesthetics: Kira and Leo are watching the operetta *Die Bajadere.* Ayn Rand wrote, "They sat, solemn, erect, reverent as at a church service. . . . It was very gay nonsense. It was like a glance straight through the snow and the flags, through the border, into the heart of that other world . . . a promise that existed somewhere, that was, that could be" (208). Years afterward, Ayn Rand described how operetta (and later movies) were the "oxygen" from abroad that kept her soul from suffocating in Soviet Russia.[2]

Reading Kira's story is a firsthand view of the young Ayn Rand. And who to better express this view than Ayn Rand, who could have been describing herself when writing about Kira in her journals: "Dominant Trait: an intense, passionate hunger for life. Beautifully sensitive to the real meaning and value of life." And: "Proud and definite. Unbreakable. . . . A sane,

healthy individual thrown into the very depths of abnormal, inhuman conditions." And: "No religion whatsoever. Brilliant mind. Lots of courage and daring. Only her calm exterior poise hides her tempestuous emotional nature. A sort of graceful restraint under which one can feel the storming fire."[3]

Not only did Alisa and Kira share important values, Ayn Rand did take some minor experiences from her own life and give them to Kira. Both Alisa and Kira suffered the terrible economic conditions of the new Russia. Of her family's economic position after the communist revolution of 1917, Ayn Rand said:

> In this particular respect, *We the Living* was very much the paraphrase of our factual history. That is, when we came back [to Petrograd from the Crimea in 1921], our apartment was occupied by somebody who had some of our furniture and some of it was in the basement. So we got back only what he couldn't use. I think he was a sign painter. . . . And so we were living in real squalor of the same kind I describe in *We the Living*. This is autobiographical as background.[4]

The Argounov family's journeys to and from the Crimea were also based on the travels of Alisa and her family, as Ayn Rand later reported: "And then we started back for Petrograd, and the way we traveled was exactly described in *We the Living*, so that is practically naturalistic autobiography. I mean the conditions and the trains and the bundles."[5]

Alisa and Kira were educated under the Soviets, and although Alisa was interested in engineering, which Kira studied at the Leningrad Technical Institute, Alisa instead studied history at Petrograd State University. She later explained that Kira's first year at university was practically "autobiographical, in the sense of background. I was taking chronologically the exact events as they were happening at that time." Regarding one of these events, she said,

> In my first year in college [1921–1922], I was somewhat reckless. I made all kinds of anti-Soviet remarks and was very much afraid afterwards because I realized that I could have gotten my whole family in trouble. . . . Kira is of that same period. And in that time, the dictatorship wasn't fully tightened yet. And there was quite a lot of anti-Soviet sentiment among students. Well, I was very vocal.

An example of her "recklessness" was telling a communist student that soon he and his ilk would be hanging from lampposts. In the novel, Kira is reckless when she loudly tells a fellow student, while *The Internationale* is playing: "When all this is over, when the traces of their republic are disinfected from history—what a glorious funeral march this will make!" (74). In fact, Alisa and Kira had the same reaction to the communist anthem: they both loved the music but loathed its lyrics and meaning.

Alisa witnessed the purging of the anticommunist students at Petrograd University, which she used in *We the Living* (209–13) and years later commented on: "In the first year . . . the students were quite outspoken and I attended my first student meeting, just as I described in *We the Living*." At one such meeting, a young man was very "outspoken against the communists," and Ayn Rand uses some of his words in the scene of Kira's first student meeting (70–75). Ayn Rand ends this man's story dramatically as follows:

> By the end of that first year [1922], there was a purge of students. They [the Soviets] began to tighten. And that same young man, plus a lot of others whom I

> knew, and girls who had gone out with them but weren't political in any sense, were all sent to Siberia. By the second year there were no more political speeches.

From 1923 to 1924, Kira and Alisa experienced another purge:

> [T]he conditions of the purge were as I described in *We the Living*. It applied to all institutes of higher learning in Petrograd. And you had to fill questionnaires about your parents and grandparents, and if your father owned a business before the Revolution, you would be thrown out as a socially undesirable element, therefore not to be educated.

Kira and Alisa *were* both purged, but unlike Kira, Alisa was soon reinstated. She later learned that she had purely by luck been saved by visiting foreign scientists who had complained about the purge. To "make a good impression on visitors," the Soviet authorities let the purged students in their last year complete their degrees.[6] According to Alisa's academic record from Petrograd State University, she was expelled on December 12, 1923, and later readmitted.[7]

Both Alisa and Kira worked as tour guides. Alisa (as did her mother) gave talks on the history of the Peter Paul Fortress, a former prison dedicated to communist martyrs. Kira gave tours at the former Winter Palace, which became The Museum of the Revolution (258).

When Kira and Leo begin living together, she tells him: "When I cook—you're not to see me. When you see me—you're not to know that I've been cooking" (135). This advice is very similar to that in a 1929 letter to Ayn Rand from her mother: "If a husband sees his wife work in the kitchen, their relationship loses its magic."[8]

Andrei's funeral was most probably based on Alisa Rosenbaum's witnessing, from her family's apartment window, the January 1918 funeral procession of the delegates to the Constitutional Assembly, who had been murdered by the Bolsheviks. [9]

Keep in mind that Ayn Rand was not a naturalistic writer, or as she puts it in the novel's introduction: "I would never be willing to transcribe a 'real life' story" (xvii). She used herself as an inspiration for Kira because of their shared values, ideals, age, and the similar period and circumstances in which they lived; but there were also significant differences. The most important is the plot situation central to Kira's life and story: a woman caught between two lovers. Alisa Rosenbaum had never lived with a man nor had a communist (or any other) lover in Russia.

Less significant, Alisa did not much resemble Kira, who was medium height, slender, with gray eyes, brown hair, and was born on April 11, 1904 (44–45). Ayn Rand was born, by the old (Julian) Russian calendar, on January 20, 1905[10] and was (according to her Russian passport) 5 feet 4 inches tall, and had a slender to medium build with a broader face than Kira's. Her eyes, though appearing black, were actually brown.

Finally, a more significant difference between Alisa and Kira concerns their respective fates. On January 20, 1926, Alisa Rosenbaum legally crossed the Russian border, never to return. In the winter of 1925–1926, Kira was murdered trying to cross the same border illegally. Ayn Rand escaped the system that regarded her as a worthless slave to the state, and she fought it and its ideals for the rest of her life, and achieved all her important goals. Kira died, her values still a distant possibility, but her spirit lives on through this novel and the life and success of her older self and successor, Ayn Rand. Kira's life is Alisa's in spirit.

LEO KOVALENSKY AND LEV BEKKERMAN

Arguably the most fascinating model for a *We the Living* character is the model for Leo Kovalensky. Many years after leaving Russia, Ayn Rand noted the result of her having written this novel: “I was glad to do it. I found that it got Russia out of [my] system in the sense that I was through with it by the time I finished.” This was true, with one exception (which she noted): There was always the matter of Leo Kovalensky. Toward the end of the novel’s climax, after Leo has been arrested, he tells Kira: “I have only one last favor to ask, Kira . . . I hope you’ll forget me” (400). Kira does not reply, and she does not forget. At the end of *We the Living*—shot, dying, but forcing herself to continue through the snow—she thinks of “the Leo that could have been” (463). And Ayn Rand never did forget the man on whom Leo was based. While Andrei Taganov, as “pure invention,”[11] was perhaps the hardest character for her to write literarily, Leo must have been the most difficult psychologically, for with him Ayn Rand had struggled to understand the first man she ever loved.[12] His name was Lev Bekkerman.

Ayn Rand once said of Lev Bekkerman: “He was the symbol and the focus of my whole life in Russia, and if I were to project any kind of story, he had to be the hero of it.” She modeled Leo Kovalensky on Lev Bekkerman, from the broadest abstraction of his motivation to the detail of his first name, using the name Leo in the novel (a name she disliked and whose Russian equivalent is Liolia or Lev) and his “habit of saying ‘allo’ when greeting people.”

Alisa Rosenbaum met Lev Bekkerman in a social group of young men and women called Uno Momento, whose social leader was her cousin Nina Guzarchik. Ayn Rand later reported the following about one of their gatherings, when she was an eighteen-year-old university student:

> The first time I saw him, I remember being very startled by how good-looking he was. He entered the room and I couldn’t quite believe it. He didn’t look quite real in the sense that he was too perfectly good looking. . . . What was unusual is that he was my type of face, with one exception, he had dark hair rather than light hair. But he had light gray eyes, was very tall. . . . It’s that type of face, very sharp. . . . Of all my heroes, he would be the nearest to Francisco. And, it’s his looks that I liked enormously. Very intelligent face, very determined, kind of clear-cut, self-confident. And the quality that I liked about him most was arrogance. But the Francisco kind of arrogance—not boastful, not vanity, but actually what he projected was pride, with a kind of haughty smile. I tried to get the style of his appearance or outward personality in Leo in *We the Living.* There was always a smile behind his attitude, and an arrogant smile of, “Well, world, you have to admire me.” That sort of attitude . . . like some fantastic aristocrat.

Commenting further on Lev’s “enormous self-confidence,” she said:

> I would say of all the young men or girls that I knew there, he was the only one who seemed to value himself. You see what he projected was an authentic self-esteem. . . . He projected that he was something enormously important. I would forgive a lot of minor flaws for that. He never projected that he is unimportant to himself or that he is a mediocrity. And that I think I conveyed in Leo in *We the Living*.

Alisa also admired some of Bekkerman's ideas and one particular act of heroism where "he hid some young students, that were wanted by the police, in his house for the longest time. And he was literally taking a chance on his life." There were, however, also things she did not like about him: his over-flirtatious ways with women, his softness toward communism, and some of his "lightweight" and naturalistic literary and aesthetic preferences. She later stated: "I did not really understand him and . . . some day I very much [wanted] to know what is he really like." She was torn between her admiration for his enormous self-confidence and her doubt and dislike of his dubious activities and attitudes.

Unlike Kira and Leo's first meeting, Alisa and Lev's was not love at first sight. But two or three months later, after another meeting, Lev escorted her home and, as Ayn Rand later noted, "By the time he got me home, I was madly and desperately in love." Bekkerman would take Alisa to parties or the theater, but their "relationship" did not last long. She remembered: "the trouble was that progressively I would show openly how I felt and I knew he didn't like it."

The story of Lev Bekkerman's influence on *We the Living*—most importantly, Leo's motivation and final choice—continued and deepened after Alisa Rosenbaum left Russia in January 1926. This influence was a result of what she learned about him in letters from her immediate family and her cousin Nina.

Revealed in the letters is an event that confirmed Ayn Rand's projection of the motivation of Leo Kovalensky in the novel. First, here is what Alisa's mother wrote (on August 3, 1933) about Lev Bekkerman's first marriage, to Lili-Maria Palmen: "Liolia [Lev] B. (whom I have never regarded as a hero) and his wife divorced (don't know which one of them initiated it). He stole another man's wife, and thus acquired a new family."[13] Ayn Rand's cousin Nina Guzarchik also wrote about this divorce:

> He [Bekkerman] and his wife Lilya [Lili] got divorced, it was painful for both of them. A little while later Liolia married again. Do you remember a certain Ata Ris? Well, he married her. They seem to live well, they have a family hearth and pretty doilies; they call each other Lyoka and Atia. Despite all this, he once told me that the purpose of marriage is to make one appreciate the joys of bachelorhood.[14]

Here is Ayn Rand's reaction to Bekkerman marrying a mediocrity:

> I was shocked particularly in this sense: that the whole issue in my mind is still an unfinished story, like a mystery story, to which I may never know the ending. Because I was fully aware even by the time I came to America that I did not really understand him and that some day I very much would like to know what is he really like. And this was just one more, and horrible, touch of mystery. And in spite of this I still couldn't, even then, think that he was a total mediocrity and that I just invented everything. Because he wasn't. Of that I am sure. But my only explanation, as hypothesis, not as knowledge, would be what I wrote about Leo in *We the Living*, that it was deliberate self-destruction, deliberately consigning himself to mediocrity because he couldn't care for anything. Because whichever higher values, if he were capable of them, were not possible there.

So who was Lev Bekkerman, and how did he more concretely influence the characterization of Leo Kovalensky? Although the historical record is slim, there are some Soviet records on

Bekkerman. They reveal interesting similarities (and differences) between him and Leo Kovalensky, and possible evidence of minor inspirations for the latter's characterization.

The main source of information comes from Bekkerman's student file at the Leningrad Technical Institute, where he studied engineering from 1918 to 1925. His file reveals that Bekkerman had a brilliant scholastic record at a boy's gymnasium (high school), graduating in April 1918 with honors and the gold medal for his "consistent excellent performance." His subjects included Latin, German, French, history, and philosophy. His fictional counterpart, Leo, spoke English, German, and French (171) and studied philosophy (155).

From 1923 to 1924, Bekkerman was secretary of the publishing house Atheneum, and in May 1924 he gave the following answer in a university questionnaire: "Since April I have no job, live on accidental earnings." He was translating technical works to earn an income. Similarly, Leo translated English, German, and French books into Russian (for the main Soviet publisher Gossizdat) (136).

In June 1924 Bekkerman reported: "During the current year, due to the illness of my sister, who had to go to the Crimea, I found myself in dire financial straits. Also due to my own illness and service." It seems that both Leo and Lev (and Lev's sister) had tuberculosis and lived in the Crimea to help cure it.[15]

Like Leo, Bekkerman was investigated during the student purge of 1923–1924. A sheet in his file is headed "Technological Institute, Form Sheet for students being investigated. 1924." As in the novel, Bekkerman filled out questionnaires that asked for such information as his parents' occupations and his party membership (cf. 209–10). Unlike the novel, however, while Kira and Leo were expelled, Lev was allowed to graduate, but was ordered to do so by January 1, 1925.[16]

The only other uncovered historical evidence concerning Bekkerman comes from a less benign source.

The fate of Lev Bekkerman is now known; but first, the fate of Leo. At the end of the novel, Leo Kovalensky is taking the steps necessary to commit spiritual suicide. Believing that under the Soviet dictatorship his life is not worth fighting for, Kovalensky lets the communist system "choke" the life from him, and he leaves Kira for an old, shallow, and promiscuous manipulator, Antonina, fully knowing her true nature and what their relationship means. Leo tells Kira: "You'll be better off without me." In real life, this turned out to be true for Ayn Rand. Many years later, when asked if she would have stayed in the Soviet Union if Lev Bekkerman had returned her feelings, Ayn Rand replied: "I would have. Almost certainly." (This was the fate of her sister Nora. In 1931, Nora married Feodor Drobyshev—just as Ayn Rand was arranging for her to come to America to study and become an artist.[17] Nora stayed in the Soviet Union, and was destroyed spiritually.)

The most tragic irony concerning fictional events in *We the Living* and real-life events involves the final fate of Lev Bekkerman. During the climax of *We the Living*, Leo is arrested by the G.P.U. for black market activities (395–400). Lev Bekkerman was arrested twice by the secret police, first by the G.P.U. and later by the N.K.V.D.

His first arrest was in September 1924, along with many other students (and professors). A search of his apartment found nothing, and he was released.[18] His second arrest, however, was in 1937, the Year of Terror under Stalin. The Leningrad Martyr Log for 1937–1938 lists the following:

> Bekkerman, Lev Borisovich, b. 1901 in Leningrad. Resided in Leningrad. Jew. Non-party member. Manager of the motor group of Voroshilor factory.

> Residence: 67th Soviet Street, apt. 9. Arrested January 18, 1937. Sentenced to the highest form of punishment, according to statute 58:7-8-11 UK RSFSR, on May 5, 1937, by the temporary session of the military committee of the Supreme Court of the USSR. Executed by shooting on May 6, 1937.[19]

Statute 58:7-8-11 refers to several "crimes" according to the Soviet criminal code. One was for black market activities, another was for "The commission of terrorist acts against representatives of the Soviet State or members of revolutionary worker and peasant organizations, and the participation in the commission of such acts."[20]

During his "interrogation," Bekkerman "admitted" being a member of a counterrevolutionary organization and sabotaging tanks in the factory where he worked. Witnesses described Bekkerman as "sharply hostile" to Soviet authority and quoted him as saying: "All Soviet authority is constructed on sand and kept by bayonets." As a member of this organization he was also accused of the December 1934 assassination of the Secretary of Central Committee, Sergei Kirov, who was second in power to Stalin. For these "crimes," Bekkerman was shot on May 6, 1937. On October 10, 1957, he was "rehabilitated" and declared innocent.

These are the final notes in tragically similar lives: of the man who was Ayn Rand's main source of happiness in Russia and the one crucial to her being able to write *We the Living* and its hero.

VASILI DUNAEV AND ZINOVY ROSENBAUM

Vasili Dunaev is another character heavily modeled on a real person who was close to Ayn Rand. She once said: "I copied Uncle Vasili in *We the Living* from [my father, Zinovy Zacharovich Rosenbaum], both in appearance and in essential characteristics, not in every literal detail. But if you have an idea of what that man was, omitting the slight exaggeration of fiction, that would be my father."

Ayn Rand also noted the following about her father: "the unbending character, the enormous, what I today would call somewhat repressed, integrity. He was a man who held ideals which I didn't discover until I was fifteen. Very strong ideals, a man of very firm conviction." Vasili Dunaev was very much like this in the way he built his fur trading business and led his family and ran his life.

Ayn Rand said that her father "had an exaggerated mid-Victorian attitude," notably in regard to women and romantic relations. Uncle Vasili was similar, once expressing this attitude by walking out of the room when Kira visits, because she is now living with, though not married to, Leo Kovalensky. Upon exiting the room, Vasili, as Zinovy would also have done, says, "There are things with which one does not compromise" (139).

Vasili and Zinovy were both well read and enjoyed Russian literary classics. In *We the Living* Vasili is seen reading Chekhov, and he says: "Old classics are still the best. In those days, they had culture, and moral values . . . and integrity" (214). In interviews Ayn Rand has spoken of her father's enjoyment of such minor Russian individualist writers as Vladimir Korolenko and of his desire to be a writer.[21]

Zinovy Rosenbaum and Uncle Vasili were ardent anti-communists. Ayn Rand said her father "would have been for a constitutional monarchy. His ideal of government was England." Both men believed at great cost to themselves, that the Soviet regime would soon fall. At one point, Vasili says: "We're all turning into beasts in a beastly struggle. But we'll be saved. We'll

be saved before it gets us all" (257). While Vasili waited for that day, Zinovy Zacharovich, also expecting the Soviet system to collapse, refused in 1918 to take the opportunity to flee the country.[22]

Further evidence of Zinovy Rosenbaum's anticommunism is found in letters from his wife, Anna, to Ayn Rand. In one such letter Anna wrote that her husband had ended his relationship with his sister because she had married a communist, but that they had later reconciled.[23] In an earlier letter, Anna Rosenbaum reported her husband calling the rest of the family "socialists," presumably because they weren't strong enough in their anticommunism.[24] In the novel Vasili rails against the communists and is furious when they visit his home (115).

This anticommunism is reflected in both men's attitude toward working for the Soviets. Ayn Rand said of her father:

> He wouldn't do anything. To begin with, he wouldn't have been accepted, as a former owner, into any Soviet job and he didn't want to do it. In that sense he was very much like Vasili. He was enormously on strike. Only about the time when I was leaving Russia, he finally decided that he would go to work. And since the regulation kind of relaxed a little, he got a job as an employee in some drug store, somewhere way at the other end of the city.

Zinovy worked several years for the Soviets in the second half of the 1920s; after this, there was little work for him, and like Vasili, he became the homemaker of the family. One letter from Anna Rosenbaum reports his doing the family cooking, shopping, and other household work.[25] Vasili Dunaev never worked for the Soviets.

Ayn Rand had one later use for the Zinovy-Vasili connection. In early 1944 she began working at Warner Bros. Studio, writing the screenplay for *The Fountainhead.* When completing an application for Social Security, she wrote that her father's name was "Vasili Rand."[26]

Uncle Vasili is a fascinating glimpse into the soul of Ayn Rand's father, and of two men of integrity who were trapped in an evil system choking life from them. Nora Rosenbaum said of her father: "Papa was tall and handsome, but not energetic. He was broken by the Revolution. . . . Everything was taken away from us. And Papa was unable to withstand the tragedy."[27] At the end of the novel, Uncle Vasili is without a future, standing forlornly on a street corner, still hopelessly waiting to be rescued from communism, while struggling to survive with his daughter. This picture is a dramatic symbol of the fate of the man he was modeled on: Ayn Rand's father, a man of great integrity, trapped in a slave camp that embodied the antithesis of that virtue.

GALINA ARGOUNOVA AND ANNA ROSENBAUM

Ayn Rand used not only her father but also her mother as a model for a *We the Living* character. She once said of Anna Borisovna Rosenbaum:

> We really did not get along and, if anything, she was my exact opposite. She was by principle and basic style, and sense of life, extremely social. Her sole interest, in fact, was to have parties, to be an intellectual hostess, to be surrounded by people, to be very active. And she was much more interested in the social aspects of activity than in the subjects. For instance, she would be, by the standards of that time, considered intellectually avant garde. She would consider herself a

> revolutionary. She was much too tolerant, for instance, of the communist revolution, in a kind of a vague, liberal attitude. Parts of it I used for Galina in *We the Living*.

She continued, however, that she did not use her mother for Galina as much as she used her father for Vasili. "But that one aspect, if you remember in which way Galina was kind of socially being a snob about the Revolution ultimately. . . . Well that's my mother. That attitude."

Ayn Rand's comment on her mother was echoed by Nora. When asked, "What were your mother's views?" she replied: "she was a 'pink'—she would occasionally talk about 'beautiful ideas.'"[28]

Galina and Anna were both schoolteachers. Ayn Rand said: "My mother was teaching languages in high schools. And she had several [schools] on her list and she was really the main supporter of the family." Anna Rosenbaum knew at least three languages (German, French, and English) and also taught social studies and "political literacy" at high schools and language seminars.[29] Galina taught sewing, mostly to high school students (163, 271).

Ayn Rand later used the connection between Anna Rosenbaum and Galina Argounova when filling in the Social Security application mentioned above: she wrote her mother's name as "Galina Ivanova."

IRINA DUNAEVA AND NORA ROSENBAUM, AND SOME OTHER PARALLELS

An important part of Ayn Rand's literary technique is that all her characterizations are integrated to the work's theme. Her working title for *We the Living* was *Airtight*, which stresses the suffocating nature of dictatorships while expressing the novel's theme: "the individual against the state, and, more specifically, the evil of statism."[30] We have already seen how this theme is applied to the lives of the novel's characters and their real-life models, but there is no more tragic example of this than Sasha Chernoy, the man Irina loves. Ayn Rand explains the real-life basis for this character:

> There was the incident when one young man, who incidentally is the model for the character of Sasha in *We the Living*, he was a friend of my cousin's [Nina] actually. . . . He came suddenly to ask me whether I would let him hide anti-Communist pamphlets in my house. . . . I didn't want to refuse him, but I knew that I had absolutely no right to take it upon myself, so I told him I'd have to ask Father. Because if I smuggled it in without telling the family, I was risking their lives. Father absolutely forbad it. . . . And so I had to refuse him.

Several months later, engaged to be married to a girl also in the underground, this man was arrested. Ayn Rand tells the climax of his story:

> He had a mother. And the story of Irina and Sasha is [based on] what his mother did. She went through every possible Soviet bureau and commissars' offices, begging to let them be sent to the same prison in Siberia. . . . And she succeeded in getting them married but not in being sent to the same place. They were sent to two Siberian prisons miles apart. That was a true story.[31]

Ayn Rand did not tell us the fate of the real Sasha and Irina, but it was probably the same as in *We the Living*: slow death in Siberian camps (341–43).

Although Irina was partly modeled on "Sasha's" wife, she was also based on a person very close to Ayn Rand.

Ayn Rand once described her youngest sister Eleonora (Nora) as "the one that wanted to be an artist." In fact, Nora Rosenbaum was a significant model for the character Irina Dunaeva, Kira's cousin. The key similarity between Irina and Nora is that they were both artists with a similar style. A 1935 letter to Ayn Rand from Anna Rosenbaum reported the following criticism by Soviet teachers of Nora's drawings: "Nora having trouble at work. She draws thin, aristocratic ladies with proud faces, whereas she is required to draw stout peasant women."[32] In the novel this same complaint is directed against Irina: "I've been reprimanded twice in the Wall Newspaper. They said my peasant women looked like cabaret dancers and my workers were too graceful. My bourgeois ideology, you know" (256).

When Sasha and Irina are being shipped to the labor camps, he asks her to put drawings in her letters to him. In Nora's letters to Ayn Rand in America, she drew pictures on the pages, with her first letter (in February 1926) including seven drawings.[33] Another artistic similarity between Irina and Nora was that Irina wanted to work designing fashion and stage sets (336–37), and Nora did in fact become a theatrical artist.[34]

Although the following two inspirations for *We the Living* characters were based on people known to Ayn Rand, they also represent a class or type of person. The first involves Ayn Rand's other sister, Natasha. Of her middle sister, Ayn Rand recalled that while having "friendly relations," they "had nothing in common." She explained:

> Because she was . . . my exact opposite. She was not intellectual particularly, she was very feminine. She is the one who took great interest in personal appearance at a time when we were really in rags. She was more interested in young men than I was. And she had girlfriends in school, which neither I nor my little sister ever had. And she was much more conventional.

While on the surface this description seems to fit Lydia in *We the Living*, Ayn Rand explicitly stated that she was not the model for Lydia: "Lydia is total invention. She [Natasha] was not religious nor mawkish like Lydia. Lydia is the projection of my idea of the collective Russian soul. . . . The typically Russian young ladies." Or, as she put it more specifically in her journals, Lydia was a "representative of the older half of the younger generation."[35]

Natasha does, however, appear to have influenced some minor aspects of Lydia's characterization. Natasha, like Lydia, was very feminine, as evidenced in Natasha's letters to Ayn Rand in America, which focus on fashion, clothes, her appearance, and men.[36] Although Natasha was feminine, she was also well educated, very modern, and somewhat ambitious, especially in her career. The most significant similarity between Natasha and Lydia is that both were pianists and worked hard to be successful musicians. In *We the Living*, Lydia played Chopin, Tchaikovsky, and Bach (93, 117, 446), as Natasha did, and they both practiced long hours. While Lydia practiced three hours a day (93), Ayn Rand said of Natasha: "She practiced eight to ten hours a day, driving everybody and herself crazy, but she practiced. She had marvelous technique and very little expression. She was a strictly virtuoso pianist."[37]

It is plausible that when writing of Lydia's fate in *We the Living*, Ayn Rand was echoing her sister's fate: never becoming a concert pianist, playing at Communist Party functions or

parties, not playing at home except for the rare, violent outbursts of beloved songs smashed from the keys (446).

There were also important differences between Lydia and Natasha. Unlike Natasha, Lydia was ten years older than Kira and a Christian, whereas Natasha was younger than Alisa and Jewish, though nonreligious.[38] While Lydia's denunciation of others for not being religious enough indicates a somewhat nasty personality (see 114–15), Natasha wasn't like this. Ayn Rand's comments about Natasha, and Natasha's letters to her, support this view.[39]

Another character who also was representative of a class or type is Antonina Pavlovna Platoshkina, the promiscuous middle-aged woman with whom Leo Kovalensky begins a self-destructive affair at the end of the novel. In her journals Ayn Rand wrote that Antonina was "the condensed low female of all times. Selfish like a dumb, brutal monster. Vain. Conceited. Eager for everything that flatters her ego. But mainly: a loose creature out to satisfy herself. . . . Vulgar in her sex affairs. She has many of them—some for profit, some for animal desire . . . the animal desire of an oversexed creature for the gorgeous male that he [Leo] is."[40]

Antonina, too, was based on a real person:

> I went to Paris [in route to America, in 1926]. And there, one acquaintance that I had was the woman whom I used as the model for Antonina. Not quite as bad, but she was one of those Russian widows. . . . She had two children. And I'm afraid she was living by her wits, more or less, barely respectable. We had known her in the Crimea. And that's the only address I had for Paris and she helped me to select which stores to shop in.

While Antonina and all the character inspirations discussed above were based on real people, not all were; some are pure invention. Ayn Rand wrote of the character Ivan Ivanov (the Russian equivalent of John Smith), the border guard who kills Kira: "That solder is a symbol, a typical representative of the average, the dull, the useless, the commonplace, the masses—that killed the best on earth. . . . Citizen Ivan Ivanov was guarding the border of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. And that Union killed Kira."[41]

Some of the character names Ayn Rand created for *We the Living* were also symbolic—and comical. She applied a technique she used in other fiction works: undercutting negative or villainous characters with silly, ironic names, sometimes in a foreign language. The humor is Ayn Rand's private joke about Soviet types. In *We the Living* the mediocrity and power-luster Pavel Syerov has a surname meaning "gray." Syerov's friend Valka Dourova has a last name meaning "idiot" or "fool" (288). Comrade Sonia's last name, Presniakova, means "bland" (72); the non-entity Kolya Smiatkin has a family name deriving from "v smiatku," or "runny egg" (153). When the *upravdom* (a Soviet apartment building manager) of the Argounovs' apartment building visits the Argounovs to collect money, he is holding a list of the building's tenants. On the list are the names Doubenko, which also comes from the word for "idiot," and Rilnikov, which means "pig's snout" (68).[42]

A little-known figure from history is the last *We the Living* character inspiration. Nestor Makhno is mentioned when Kira is remembering her family's journey to the Crimea (27–28). Kira remembers the fear of the travelers—that they would be attacked by the bandit Makhno. (They were not.) Though not strictly a bandit, Nestor Makhno was a real person of that time and place. Born in 1889 in the Ukraine, Makhno was an anarchist and revolutionary who from 1917 to 1921 was a military commander in the Ukraine, first against the Central Powers of Germany

and Austria, then against the White Russians, and finally against his former allies, the Reds, who had betrayed him. Makhno fled Russia in 1921 and died in France in 1934.

In 1918, the Rosenbaums traveled to the Crimea through the Ukraine, and—unlike Kira's family—they were attacked and robbed by bandits (though not political ones). They were released and made it to their destination, Odessa.[43]

CONCLUSION

From this minor example of a character influence to major ones such as Ayn Rand herself, the lives of real people can be seen woven by Ayn Rand into the fabric of a larger, more dramatic cloth, a fictional plot. This principle can be seen in one last real-life scene that she wove into *We the Living*.

At Alisa Rosenbaum's farewell party in St. Petersburg, a man told her to "tell the rest of the world that we are dying here."[44] This became one of Ayn Rand's motives for writing *We the Living*, and she gave the man's plea to the novel's heroine. At the novel's end, Kira has a chance farewell meeting with Uncle Vasili, who is standing on a street selling saccharine. Kira says goodbye to the man who has lost everything except his daughter Acia. Vasili tells Kira that change will come to Russia, and Kira replies: "Uncle Vasili . . . I'll tell them . . . over there . . . where I'm going . . . I'll tell them about everything . . . it's like an S.O.S. . . . And maybe . . . someone . . . somewhere . . . will understand" (451).

Ayn Rand kept her promise to the man at the party and Kira's promise to Uncle Vasili, in fact to all the admirable characters who were inspired by real people and who were victims of communism. Ayn Rand wrote her Russian novel and essentially got the Soviet Union "out of her system." But she did not forget those she loved, who were not only an important part of her life, but were also influential in the creation of the "autobiographical" *We the Living*.

NOTES

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1. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives). Except where indicated, quotes from Ayn Rand are from this source.

2. See Michael S. Berliner, "Music in *We the Living*," in the present volume, pp. 146–47.

3. David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 50.

4. Cf. *We the Living*, 52–53.

5. Cf. *We the Living*, part 1, chapter 1.

6. Cf. *We the Living*, 209–13.

7. From a copy (in the Ayn Rand Archives) of Alisa Rosenbaum's (Ayn Rand's) academic transcripts, in her student file at Petrograd State University. The Ayn Rand Institute's St. Petersburg researcher Alexander Lebedev reports: "In the 1923–1924 academic year there was an especially thorough 'cleansing,' resulting in the expulsion of about 4,000 students, i.e., about a third of the entire student body. The 'cleansing' was conducted by a committee created by the university administration and its Party organization. The students expelled were not only those who actively spoke out against the Soviet regime, but also the children of the so-called 'socially alien elements,' and students who were not members of the Party." I am greatly indebted to Alexander Lebedev and Irina Chabatayeva for their groundbreaking research work in Russia finding Ayn Rand-related documents and for arranging the interviews of her sister, Eleanora Drobysheva.

8. Letter from Anna Rosenbaum dated October 22, 1929. For more information on the letters Ayn Rand received, while in America, from her family in Russia, see Dina Schein Federman, "*We the Living* and the Rosenbaum Family Letters," in the present volume.

9. Reported in Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

10. By the later Gregorian calendar, adopted by the Soviets in 1918, she was born on February 2, 1905.

11. See Leonard Peikoff's introduction to the sixtieth anniversary edition of *We the Living*, vi.

12. See Leonard Peikoff's introduction to the sixtieth anniversary edition of *We the Living*, vi.

13. Russian Letter from Anna Rosenbaum, no. 276a.

14. Russian Letter from Nina Guzarchik, no. 308, dated February 9, 1934.

15. From Ayn Rand Institute researcher Alexander Lebedev, and the Leningrad Technical Institute records.

16. Leningrad Technical Institute record.

17. Russian Letter from Nora (Rosenbaum) Drobysheva, no. 218, September 15, 1931.

18. From the Ayn Rand Institute researcher, Alexander Lebedev.

19. The Leningrad Martyr Log for 1937–1938, vol. 4: 1937 (St. Petersburg, 1999), 44.

20. From the Penal Code of the USSR of that period. It is interesting and ironic that Bekkerman was charged with black market "crimes," similar to Leo in the novel.

21. Reported in Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

22. Reported in Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

23. Russian Letter from Anna Rosenbaum, no. 294c AB, November 10–11, 1933.

24. Russian Letter from Anna Rosenbaum, no. 260e, May 6, 1933.

25. Russian Letter from Anna Rosenbaum, no. 250a, February 26, 1933.

26. I presume the lie was to protect her Russian family's identity and safety, especially in a studio and government riddled with communists. On the same form, Ayn Rand gave her own birth name as Alice Rand.

27. In Scott McConnell, *100 Voices: An Oral History of Ayn Rand* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 11–12.

28. In McConnell, *100 Voices*, 11.

29. Revealed in a letter in Natasha Rosenbaum's Conservatory record, and Russian Letter no. 12d, April 8, 1926.

30. Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, Tore Boeckmann, ed. (New York: Plume, 2000), 17.

31. Cf. *We the Living*, part 2, chapter 8.

32. Russian Letter from Anna Rosenbaum, no. 358–A, February 6–7, 1935. Cf. *We the Living*, 256.

33. Russian Letter from Nora Rosenbaum, no. 4.5c, February 21, 1926.

34. From Nora Drobysheva's Soviet work record.

35. Harriman, *Journals*, 55.

36. Russian Letters from Natasha (Natalie) Rosenbaum, nos. 44b, June 18, 1926, 53b, June 30, 1926, 49b, June 27, 1926, and 4la, June 8, 1926.

37. A letter from Natasha Rosenbaum (no. 85b, November 28, 1926) reveals that she played Bach.

38. No member of the Rosenbaum family was a theist, and at most they observed some of the Jewish holidays for purely social reasons.

39. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives), and, for example, letter to Ayn Rand, no. 50, June 28, 1926. Nora supported this positive opinion of Natasha: "Natasha was cute, a good person with a heart" (McConnell, *100 Voices*, 11).

40. Harriman, *Journals*, 55. Ayn Rand's stress on Antonina Pavlovna Platoshkina's animal desires could be deliberate irony, because the name Pavlovna brings to mind Pavlov, the famous researcher of drooling dogs and other animals. If Ayn Rand intended any irony concerning Antonina's

family name it is unclear. Platon is the Russian equivalent of the name of the Greek philosopher Plato, whose philosophy Ayn Rand opposed in all its fundamentals.

41. Michael Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 18.

42. In her play *Think Twice*, the villain, a Soviet spy, is called "Sookin"—Russian for "son of a bitch." I am indebted to Dina Schein Federman for these examples and for her translation of all the Russian material used in this chapter.

43. Reported in Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

44. Isabel Paterson, "Turns with a Bookworm," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 29, 1941. Newspaper clipping in Ayn Rand's papers (Ayn Rand Archives).