We the Living and the Rosenbaum Family Letters

By Dina Schein Federman
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> "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's heroine Kira Argounova was speaking for the author when she promised to tell the free world about the evils of communism and the horrors of Soviet life. It is a vow Ayn Rand made before she left Russia. As a persuasive and passionate champion of freedom, she kept her word. And *We the Living* was the first weapon in her arsenal. In 1934, in a letter to her agent, Miss Rand said: "The conditions I have depicted [in *We the Living*] are true. I have lived them. No one has ever come out of Soviet Russia to tell it to the world. That was my job."[1]

The letters that she received from her family in Russia provide vivid evidence that the living conditions depicted in the novel were ones that she had lived through herself and that they were in no way exaggerated.[2]

Ayn Rand (born Alisa Rosenbaum) left Russia in January 1926, shortly before she turned twenty-one. She and her family, the Rosenbaums, corresponded regularly for about ten years after she left. Most of the letters to her were written by her mother, father, and two younger sisters, Natasha and Nora. She also corresponded with her cousin and good friend Nina Guzarchik. Her correspondence with them ceased circa 1936, prior to the height of the Stalinist terror. At a time when people disappeared without a trace and were shot without trial, it was potentially fatal for a Soviet citizen to correspond with persons living abroad. Ayn Rand knew this; she stopped writing to her family in order to protect them.

Most people wait for something noteworthy to happen before writing a letter; the Rosenbaums, however, wrote frequently and at length. (The Ayn Rand Archives contain 1140 pieces of correspondence to Miss Rand from her family.) The family's purpose in writing so often and so much was to keep in close contact with their daughter and sister. So, many of their letters describe their day-to-day lives, thus providing an excellent picture of the conditions under which they lived.

This chapter shows the great similarity between the background of *We the Living* and the actual living conditions as gleaned from her family's correspondence. Its main purpose is to support Rand's statement that the sort of life described in her novel is one that she had experienced herself. To this end, the Rosenbaum correspondence is an invaluable resource, for which no work of scholarly research on the Soviet Union could offer a substitute: it is the only source, outside of her own statements, that provides information on Rand's actual experiences in Russia. It is from the persons who were closest to her while she lived there, who shared many of her experiences; after she left, they continued living in the same apartment, holding the same jobs, interacting with the same people, going through the same daily trials as she went through.

In light of the stark realism of the novel's background, some readers might wonder if *We the Living* is a naturalistic novel, and thus if it was written in a way contrary to its author's conviction that romanticism is superior to naturalism. Ayn Rand held that writers of fiction should not merely copy people or events that they happen to observe in real life; instead, they should project an ideal conception of how life (and men) ought to be. I conclude this chapter by showing that there is no tension between her rejection of naturalism as a literary method and her use of Soviet reality as the background for *We the Living*.

FACTS OF LIFE UNDER THE SOVIETS[3]

"You came and you forbade life to the living." (404)

After the Bolshevik Revolution, private property was abolished. In *We the Living*, the Argounovs' textile factory was nationalized, leaving Kira's family in dire financial straits. The same was true of the Rosenbaums, when Mr. Rosenbaum's pharmacy was nationalized shortly after the communist takeover. People like the Argounovs (and the Rosenbaums) thought the ideology of the new regime was so obviously absurd and barbaric that it could not last for long. So, shortly after the revolution, the Argounovs left Petrograd for the Crimea to wait for the communist craze to burn itself out. They expected to be gone a few months. They returned to Petrograd five years later, when it became clear that, despite their predictions, communism was there to stay. The same was true of the Rosenbaums, as were the living conditions that Kira and her family experienced after their return: poverty, chronic shortages, starvation, and ubiquitous fear and hopelessness.

Let us examine *We the Living*'s presentation of the problems that Soviet citizens suffered, and compare it to similar accounts in the Rosenbaums' correspondence. I group these problems into four categories: housing, poverty and shortages, Soviet jobs, and hopelessness.

HOUSING WOES

> "God knows where you'll find an apartment, Galina. People are crowded like dogs." (36)

The first problem that Kira's family faced upon returning to Petrograd at the start of the novel was finding a place to live, for their old house had been taken from them after the revolution. Ayn Rand has made it clear that the details of the novel concerning the Argounovs' finding an apartment were autobiographical.[4] In *We the Living*, a sign painter lived in the Argounovs' house when they returned to Petrograd; he allowed them to take back some of their own furniture—broken pieces which he found useless—which they then carted to the small apartment they were lucky enough to rent. The Rosenbaums had a similar experience. They managed to rent a dilapidated apartment in the overcrowded city, were able to salvage a few pieces of furniture from their old home—which was occupied by a sign painter at the time—and were forced to live in squalor from then on. The Argounovs' apartment had no hot water; neither did the Rosenbaums'. When Ayn Rand was married and living in California, she described some aspects of her Los Angeles apartment to her family. Responding to her letter, her mother summed up their reactions: "We do not know what to be most amazed about. I am most impressed by your gas stove [and] constantly hot water" (287b/April 14, 1933).

The overcrowding of Soviet cities and lack of upkeep of buildings led the state to institute a "Domicile Norm," according to which each citizen was allowed only a small amount of space in which to live. Any apartment whose square footage was larger than the maximum allowed by the Domicile Norm would have more people moved into it. Henceforth, the apartment's owners had to share their living space with people who were usually total strangers.[5] As the years passed and the city's population grew while inhabitable housing dwindled, the allotted square footage per person continued to shrink. In the early 1930s, the upper limit on living space legally allowed per person was approximately eighty square feet (107b/January 3, 1927; 112c/January 15, 1927; 326b/October 5, 1933). In *We the Living*, nearly every apartment is occupied by many unrelated people.[6] By the time we first meet Leo, four of the seven rooms of his apartment had already been confiscated by the state and given over to "tenants." Later, Leo and Kira are further forced to give up two of their remaining rooms, after which they had to work, cook, and sleep in one small room.

The Rosenbaums, too, fell victim to the Domicile Norm. New tenants had been moved into their apartment some months after Ayn Rand's departure; a couple of years later, the Rosenbaums had yet another room and their kitchen taken away from them, which meant they had to cook in a bedroom. Mrs. Rosenbaum commented in one of her letters to Ayn that she was glad she wasn't required to feed their tenants, too (98a/November 23, 1926; 192a/November 29, 1928)! One of Miss Rand's cousins, a doctor, lived in a tiny "hole in the wall in a small town [in

the middle of nowhere, carrying] on the existence of prehistoric man" (293b/May 6, 1933).

Moreover, skyrocketing rents left many people no choice but to sublet the little space they were allotted. For instance, the Guzarchiks, the family of one of Mrs. Rosenbaum's sisters, had to give up their daughter's room to tenants, forcing Ayn Rand's adult cousin Nina to sleep in her parents' former living room (113/January 16, 1927).

When a young couple married, they typically continued to live with their parents, because it was usually impossible to obtain a separate apartment. After Natasha and Nora married, both husbands came to live with the Rosenbaums, because there was nowhere else for the newlyweds to go. But they were fortunate: each couple had a room to themselves in their parents' apartment. [7] Still, the result was that three families had to live in a total of three rooms, and the Rosenbaums' unrelated "tenants" continued to occupy a part of their apartment (246/November 4, 1931; 282b/February 26, 1933).

The sheer number of persons crammed into tiny spaces led to chronic tension and unceasing hostility among an apartment's residents, particularly among unrelated persons sharing the kitchen and bathroom. The tenants in the Guzarchiks' apartment were rude to them and played nasty tricks on them. The Konheims, the family of another of Mrs. Rosenbaum's sisters, lived in constant fear of being evicted as a result of their tenants' machinations. The Rosenbaums' tenants—whom Mrs. Rosenbaum referred to as thieves and prostitutes—were not much better. As a result of their tenants' destructive actions, the Rosenbaums tried to get them evicted, but were unsuccessful (222c/July 3, 1930; 292b/May 6, 1933).

In *We the Living*, the tension and hostility among an apartment's residents is less intense than it perhaps was in real life. In real life, crime, including murder, was not unusual, as people fought desperately and ruthlessly for living space. In July of 1930, Mrs. Rosenbaum reported:

> You simply cannot imagine the extent of our housing crisis. There is a tremendous need for housing, and now anyone who moves into a room and lives there for a little while for any reason at all can no longer be evicted. So anyone with an "excess" of rooms hides this fact, tries to prevent it from leaking out, because everyone knows what it means to have a tenant who knows that he cannot be evicted. Usually such tenants show their beastly nature right away; their goal is no longer simply to hang on to their own living space, but to force out the owners of the apartment who allowed him to stay there in the first place. There are many cases of murder and violent crimes because of fights

over housing. While I myself have been fortunate to need only a consultation with a lawyer, I have heard of much worse cases.

For example, in order to get one more person into an apartment, a certain citizen passed off a male friend of his as his wife. He and the buddy officially registered at the Zags, and he lived with his "wife" in that apartment for more than a year. This "wife" used to kick the owner of the apartment, a lady schoolteacher. The schoolteacher could never understand how a woman could have such strength. The schoolteacher acquired terminal cancer as a result of those beatings. And it was only a year and a half later, when the husband and "wife" got drunk and had a fight, that the police came and the "wife" was finally exposed. But since the "wife" lived there for some time, eviction was impossible—goal accomplished.

In the same building, another group of tenants locked the owner of an apartment, an elderly lady, inside and set it on fire. Afterwards, since the owner was "missing," they got the apartment. (222c/July 3, 1930)

The Rosenbaums themselves had one such brush with death when some residents of their apartment building set it on fire. They managed to escape down the back stairs, and firemen succeeded in putting out the fire before the building burned down. "Thank God we got away with only a bad scare, commotion and mess. . . . We could have been left without a roof over our heads, and that is a catastrophe these days" (216a/March 20, 1930).

In a country where people felt fortunate simply to have a roof over their heads, remodeling a residence was a difficult achievement. The Soviet version of remodeling often consisted largely of a painstaking restoration of old collapsing furniture and decor. The Rosenbaums attempted such redecoration twice: the first time some months after Ayn's departure, and again shortly before Natasha's wedding (98a/November 23, 1926; 199a/March 18, 1929).

The Rosenbaums considered American living conditions (even modest ones) incredibly luxurious compared to their own—to be wistfully yearned for, but never attained. When Ayn Rand wrote from California that she and her husband were moving out of their one-bedroom apartment because it had become too small for their needs, her Russian relatives were amazed at her freedom to make such a move. By Soviet standards, a one-bedroom apartment for only two persons was a spacious residence. When told that in America people owned houses, Natasha had trouble believing it: "It's difficult for me to imagine that the two of you could live in an entire house all by yourselves. We are used to the fact that each building has a thousand apartments, and each apartment contains [lots of] people." (276c/January 27, 1933)[8]

STARVATION AND POVERTY

> "You stand in line for three hours at the co-operative and maybe you get food." (24)

The desperate shortage of housing in Soviet cities reflected Russia's wider shortage of all other goods. The entire nation was starving. In *We the Living*, at a party in the home of Kira's wealthiest acquaintance, the hostess offered her guests such "delicacies" as cookies made of potato skins and slices of bread "with a suspicion of butter" (158). Ayn Rand and her family were not exempt from the consequences of the famine that ravaged the country after the Soviets took over. When the communists nationalized her father's business and the last of the family's savings was gone, the Rosenbaums were in danger of starving to death. Mrs. Rosenbaum recalled their years of hunger: "[we ate] cakes made of potato peelings, which to our hungry stomachs had seemed more delicious than the nectar of the Olympic gods" (408a/January 22, 1935).

In their letters to Ayn Rand, her family would occasionally note the deteriorating material conditions. Like all Soviet citizens, the Rosenbaums spent hours scouring stores all over the city in search of food. Mrs. Rosenbaum noted that whenever she manages to buy a bag of apples Natasha and Nora devour it immediately (118e/February 15, 1927; 282a/February 24, 1933). Another time she reported: "onions are an item of luxury. It's almost impossible to get them. We bought a bag of onions, but they were so expensive that I don't dare to mention how much we paid for them" (308a/July 24, 1933). Mr. Rosenbaum was amazed to learn from one of Ayn's letters that in America "they have fresh tomatoes, fresh all year round" (287b/April 14, 1933).

We the Living reports that the revolution brought to Russia the kerosene-burning Primus—a smelly, messy, sooty cooker, whose use carried the risk of explosion. The Primus became the new Soviet stove, to cook citizens' hard-won food (134). Fifteen years after the revolution, Mrs. Rosenbaum mentioned that everyone in Russia still used Primuses, the only cooking implement widely available. They were one of the worst aspects of Soviet domestic life, because they generated dirt, filth, smoke, and noise (292b/May 6, 1933).

With even the basic food staples so difficult to obtain, sweets became something of a rare delicacy in Russia. When Ayn Rand mentioned in a letter that she ate chocolate-covered ice-cream bars for dessert, her family replied that they do not have them in Russia. Mrs. Rosenbaum remarked that people refrain from mentioning sweets at all, to avoid torturing themselves and others (308a/July 24, 1933). What passes for ice cream in Russia, she reported, is fruit-flavored frozen water between two paper-thin wafers—a confection very popular with children, for lack of anything better. She also mentioned ersatz "chocolate" candy made of

soybeans (292b/May 6, 1933). The only decent desserts were available from the "international trade" stores, which sold foreign food items and accepted only foreign currency—that is, shops out of reach to the vast majority of Soviet citizens (269a/November 25, 1932; 274a/January 12, 1933). Mrs. Rosenbaum sometimes sent Ayn recipes for delicious Russian dishes, from borscht and pirogies to delicate desserts, noting that they could no longer prepare them in Russia, since many of the ingredients—such as meat, eggs, butter, and sugar—were virtually impossible to obtain: "sugar and butter are objects of reverence: they are distributed only through ration cards" (216a/March 20, 1930).

Given that in Soviet Russia the mere satisfaction of basic needs took up the bulk of one's time, it is no wonder that what we in the free world regard as banal had been a cause for celebration in the USSR. *We the Living* shows people rejoicing when they obtain non-moldy millet for dinner or lentils or bread: "Next week, they say, we are going to get lard. That will be a holiday, won't it? That's something to look forward to, isn't it?" (425; see also 24, 57, 146). Indeed, with the struggle for survival in the forefront of every Soviet citizen's mind, it is normal life that had become an unattainable ideal: "Abroad . . . I heard . . . they say they don't have provision cards, or cooperatives, or anything, you just go into a store just when you feel like it, and just buy bread or potatoes or anything, even sugar. Me, I don't believe it myself" (154).

Food was not the only thing that was difficult to find. Soviet shortages spread to all items of production. The wistful longing for lard, bread, and potatoes was matched by a wistful longing for toilet paper, stockings, shoes that fit, etc. From time to time, the Rosenbaums mentioned their struggles to obtain footwear or clothing. Mr. Rosenbaum once reported his unsuccessful, weeks-long search all over Leningrad for a light bulb (286a/April 3, 1933; 351a/February 21, 1934).

We the Living shows that such articles of clothing that were available in stores served merely as protection from the elements. Finding something attractive and fashionable was an almost unattainable dream. Kira had a single dress in which to attend social occasions, a plain gray dress with short sleeves and a shirt collar, remade from one of her mother's old dresses. On another occasion, Kira spent three weeks painstakingly turning an old dress inside out, thus acquiring a "new" dress: "the blue wool was smooth and silky on the inside; it looked almost fresh" (95, 183). The rags that people wore contributed to taking the joy out of get-togethers: "The guests sat huddled in corners, shivering in old shawls and sweaters, tense and self-conscious. . . . They kept their arms pressed to their sides to hide the holes in their armpits; elbows motionless on their knees—to hide rubbed patches; feet deep under chairs—to hide worn felt boots" (152).

This aspect of life in *We the Living* was also autobiographical. Ayn Rand once mentioned that in Russia she had only one dress to go to parties in, which was

remade from her mother's old summer coat. Natasha once jokingly reminisced that her elder sister's dress was so old and worn out that it was a museum piece (15e/February 21, 1926). When a dress became so old that it was shiny with wear, it might have been turned inside out, as Kira had done; material to make a new one was hard to come by. The teenage Ayn Rand wore dresses made out of her mother's old garments, and these were in turn handed down to her sisters: Natasha reported going to a party in a "new" outfit made from one of Ayn's old dresses (98c/November 23, 1926). Mrs. Rosenbaum remarked that she, like everyone else, is "wearing ugly and shapeless felt boots," but that at least they keep her feet warm. Nora remembered that in Russia, Ayn used to wear things "which bore a vague resemblance to boots" (112c/January 15, 1927; 118d/February 14, 1927).

Old clothes shiny with wear and shapeless felt boots were an ugly reality for women, who yearned for fashion. For the Rosenbaum women, that ugliness was partially relieved for a few years, when Ayn sent them American fashion plates (52b/June 4, 1926). Her mother and sisters could sew themselves clothes in the latest American fashion, whenever they could buy some material. She once sent Natasha and Nora each a set of pajamas, as a gift. Compared to their regular clothing, these pajamas were luxury items, which her sisters did not want to use for such a mundane purpose as sleeping. Natasha refashioned her pajamas into a dress, and Nora wore hers when she entertained her friends, as an exotic party outfit (224/August 3, 1930).

Mrs. Rosenbaum once explained to Ayn that they were not writing to her often enough because of certain obstacles set in their way, such as the unavailability of envelopes for mailing abroad (29a/April 21, 1926). The condition of the Rosenbaums' letters themselves serves as mute testimony to the lack of quality products in Soviet Russia. The contrast between the faded, thin and crumbly scraps of paper their letters were written on, and the thick sheets of stationery Ayn Rand's American relatives used to write to her at about the same time, is staggering.[9]

JOBS, NOT CAREERS

"What is my life? I have no career. I have no future." (284)

We the Living presents the kind of hand-to-mouth jobs that Soviet citizens held. A person did not have a career, that is, a long-range pursuit of goals in one's chosen field of endeavor. Instead, people clung to any jobs they could find with the desperation of animals hanging by their claws over an abyss: only Soviet employees had ration cards, which were one's passkey to food, and one could lose one's job at any moment. Those who were denied employment were condemned to starve. Kira clung to her secretarial position in the House of the Peasant despite the rotten work environment, for it was the only thing keeping her and Leo alive (192–99). And she eventually lost that job because of her boss's fear and Comrade Sonia's whim:

> Comrade Sonia roared with laughter: "Well, well, well! A loyal citizen like Comrade Argounova in the Red 'House of the Peasant'!"
>
> "What's the matter, comrade?" Comrade Bitiuk [Kira's boss] inquired nervously, obsequiously. "What's the matter?"
>
> "A joke," roared Comrade Sonia, "a good joke!"
>
> Kira shrugged with resignation; she knew what to expect. When a reduction of staffs came to the "House of the Peasant" and she saw her name among those dismissed as "anti-social element," she was not surprised. (225)

A person rarely liked his work; jobs were simply the means of keeping one's head above water. This remained true in the late 1920s and 1930s. Judging by the Rosenbaums' descriptions of their work and that of other individuals they knew, people often did not work in their specialty. Rather, they took whatever job they could find and hung on to it for as long as they could. Mrs. Rosenbaum summed up the situation: "[All the older people are sick and dying and are] making room for the younger generation. But our young people . . . have no opportunity to advance. Nobody works in the field which he likes" (194b/ca. December 30, 1928). She herself typically held several jobs at the same time, each bringing in a little bit of money to help keep the family afloat. The other family members were in a similar situation (23b/April 8, 1926; 194b/ca. December 30, 1928; 269a/November 25, 1932; 282b/February 26, 1933).

A number of jobs mentioned in *We the Living* were ones that Ayn Rand and/or her relatives held at one time or another. For instance, Kira's mother, Galina Petrovna, became a teacher in a workers' school. So was Mrs. Rosenbaum, who had been employed in a school for workers' children since 1921, and who continued to hold that position throughout the years of her correspondence with Ayn. The only difference is that in the novel Galina Petrovna taught sewing, whereas Mrs. Rosenbaum taught foreign languages. But Ayn's mother could not survive on this salary alone, even though more than one school employed her at a time. She complained that her workload was huge while her wage was very low (84c/August 25, 1926; 217/March 31, 1930). She needed another source of income, which she managed to secure for a few years: translation.

In *We the Living*, when Kira and Leo first started their life together, Leo had been making a living translating English, German, and French books into Russian for the Gossizdat (the state publishing house). It was work he could do at home, and it paid relatively well (136–37). Translation was Mrs. Rosenbaum's favorite job for the same reasons (37/May 3, 1926, 42b/May 11, 1926): "You work at home, you set your own hours, . . . and you earn almost twice the annual pay in a workers' school" (52b/June 4, 1926). When the teenage Ayn Rand still lived in Russia, she secured

translation jobs for her mother by submitting American movie magazines and other literature to the publishing house for translation.[10] For the first few years after she left, she sent her family American novels, which her mother then offered to translate for the state publishing house. Mrs. Rosenbaum marveled at Ayn's skill of selecting just the right books: many of the ones that she sent over a period of about two years were accepted, keeping Mrs. Rosenbaum in work that paid well. In *We the Living*, Ayn Rand describes the kind of foreign novels the Soviet publishing house was likely to accept:

> [in these novels] a poor, honest worker was always sent to jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed the starving mother of his pretty young wife who had been raped by a capitalist and committed suicide thereafter, for which the all-powerful capitalist fired her husband from the factory, so that their child had to beg on the streets and was run over by the capitalist's limousine with sparkling fenders and a chauffeur in uniform. (136–37)

What she sent were novels with communist themes. Her mother urged her to send books "with a social message," as those almost certainly would be accepted (24a/April 10, 1926).

Because translators could earn decent money by Soviet standards, Mrs. Rosenbaum taught some English to Natasha and Nora, who helped out with her translation projects. The entire family would pitch in to translate a book in the short amount of time allowed for by the publisher's deadline. Mrs. Rosenbaum was the chief translator, with Natasha as her assistant. They would divide up the pages of a novel to be translated, and each work independently. Nora's job was copying down translated sentences that her mother and sister would say out loud and looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. Mr. Rosenbaum, who did not know English, was often recruited to recopy translated pages, but Natasha complained that he was not much help: he would read the material and start discussing its philosophical and literary worth, which slowed them down.[11]

In *We the Living*, Kira gave private lessons in French for a while to make ends meet (173, 178). There is some evidence that Mrs. Rosenbaum, too, gave private foreign language lessons (18a/March 7, 1926).

In the novel, another job Kira held was lecturer and excursion guide at the Museum of the Revolution (formerly the Winter Palace). When the excursion center called, she would go to the museum to lead a tour, and receive a few rubles for her effort (258). This detail was autobiographical. Ayn Rand, in her last couple of years in Russia, worked as a tour guide, a job she got with the assistance of her mother, who herself had led tours through the Peter Paul Fortress and around many of

Leningrad's other points of interest (112c/January 15, 1927; 135a/ June 3, 1927; 139a/June 27, 1927). Mrs. Rosenbaum continued to guide tours throughout the years of their correspondence. She found tour guide jobs for her other daughters as well. A few years later, she reminisced about the days when Ayn used to work as a tour guide: the excursion center was a place of petty quarrels and intrigue, a "hornets' nest," where everyone was at each other's throat (326b/October 5, 1933).

It is doubtful that any of these jobs was something that Mrs. Rosenbaum and her daughters would have chosen as a career. They were simply a means of putting food on the table. Mrs. Rosenbaum from time to time lamented about the availability of new work and the danger of losing the job one had. She reported that if you missed a day of work and did not have a doctor's note explaining your absence, you would be dismissed and barred from further employment. And if you lost your job, you would lose your ration card and starve (286a/April 3, 1933).

Because keeping a job was necessary for bare survival, no one was immune from the fear of "reduction of staffs." In *We the Living*, everyone from Kira to Kolya Smiatkin (a minor character) lived in dread of this disaster (e.g., 153–55). One of Natasha's friends, who dropped in for a visit while Natasha was writing to Ayn, added a few lines to Natasha's letter, conveying her worry that there might soon be a reduction of staffs where she worked (61b/June 27, 1926). When Nora was awarded a prize for being the best teacher at her school, it allayed her and her family's fears, because winning that prize guaranteed her continued employment—at least temporarily (304/July 8, 1933).

In *We the Living*, no one—including Kira—dared ignore a notice about oneself in the wall newspaper at work. A negative reference could lead to dismissal; a positive one increased one's job security. Kira's mother was praised in the wall newspaper for being one of the best teachers at her school (260). So was Mrs. Rosenbaum, who was pleased by the praise primarily because it guaranteed that she would not be dismissed yet (112c/January 15, 1927; 242a/June 28, 1931; 430a/August 11, 1935).

Kira and the other excursion guides had to pass periodic political examinations, requiring the memorization of much useless information, such as the numbers allegedly reflecting coal production in the Don Basin, the latest decree of some commissar on schools for illiterates in Turkestan, and the state of some strike of British textile workers (324–25, 327). Those examined lived in mortal fear of their performance; some suffered nervous breakdowns, because failing an exam was likely to lead to dismissal. This, too, was taken from real life. Mrs. Rosenbaum, as a schoolteacher, was required to be "politically conscious." She reported that the Education Commission sat in on her class—a fact that cost her many long, stressful days of preparation, for her teaching "had to be perfect in terms of methodology, theme, grammar, *and ideology*" (287a/April 13, 1933, emphasis added).

In *We the Living*, Irina, Leo, and others were forced to work without pay on extra projects or risk losing their jobs, and everyone had to be active in the Marxist clubs at work for the same reason. They thus lost countless hours in political meetings or on Marxist thesis-writing (69–70, 145, 154, 166, 202, 205–06, 256). Natasha, who studied piano at the conservatory, complained that the number of mandatory political meetings left little time for piano practice. She later mentioned that she had to attend many political club meetings in order to keep her job (193b/December 9, 1928; 331/October 23, 1933).

We the Living shows how the Soviets replaced the legitimate pursuit of a long-term career with mindless work performed unwillingly to avoid starvation. Every minute of a citizen's life was regulated so as to destroy his ability to determine his own career and make other important decisions. Kira wanted to be an engineer, but was expelled from the Technological Institute because of her "social origins" and so had to make ends meet by leading tours of uninterested peasants and filing unread documents. Leo wanted to be a philosopher, but was expelled from the University and condemned to starve. This same pattern characterizes the lives of Irina, Sasha, and the other positive characters (212–14, 254).

This, too, was drawn from real life: Soviet citizens were condemned to a purposeless existence, with their basic survival needs as their most pressing concern, leaving little room for anything else. Consequently, countless lives were wasted. People did not flourish, but dragged themselves through their days. In the Rosenbaum family, Natasha is a particularly poignant example of this waste of talent. She studied piano, was one of the best students in her class at the conservatory, and—according to her mother's letters—passionately loved her work (32a/April 24, 1926; 35b/April 28, 1926, 53a/ca. June 8, 1926). Her mother commented, after watching Natasha's solo performance at a concert, that when she is playing the piano, she looks like a leopard about to pounce on its prey, and added with a wistful longing that if Natasha were to fall into the hands of some exploiter, her talent would really blossom (99a/November 28, 1926; 18a/March 7, 1926). Unfortunately, in Soviet Russia this dream was not to be realized. Instead, Natasha had to give up the piano and work as a tour guide, a job she disliked, for the rest of her short life. (She died in the summer of 1942 during an air raid.) On the job, she frequently led tours outdoors, walking for two hours at a time in the freezing cold of Leningrad (155a/November 21, 1927; 180/June 10, 1928; 220a/May 17, 1930; 246/November 4, 1931; 248/January 17, 1932; 339/December 24, 1933).

Nora followed the same pattern. Her career passion was costume design; during Nora's years of correspondence with her sister, she sent her many drawings of beautiful and elegant ladies wearing exquisite clothes. Sometimes she made drawings directly on the paper on which she and the other family members wrote their letters (see 32b/April 25, 1926 for a particularly spectacular example of the latter). Her joyful and graceful artistic style was constantly criticized in Russia. She

was told to bring her goddesses down to earth (407a/February 6, 1935; 409a/March 12, 1935). Instead of designing costumes and stage sets, as she wanted to, she was forced to do work that did not make use of her talent. Like her mother and Natasha, she made ends meet as a tour guide. She also worked as a teacher of graphics and as an architect. And she disliked these jobs and the fact that they prevented her from pursuing her desired career (212/December 28, 1929; 220a/May 17, 1930; 246/November 4, 1931; 248/January 17, 1932; 351b/February 21, 1934).[12]

Nina Guzarchik (Ayn's cousin and friend) suffered a similar fate to Natasha's. Her interests lay in cinematography, but she was prevented from such a career, spending her life swimming from job to job. During the ten years of her correspondence with Ayn, she worked (often for a very low wage) as a dancer, a teacher of graphics, and an architect (211/October 22, 1929; 259/June 30, 1932).

Pursuing a long-term career was often impossible, so people attempted to give themselves the illusion of such a pursuit. To this end, the Rosenbaums, their extended family, and a number of their acquaintances enrolled in courses that taught skills that they did not care to acquire and knew they would never use. For instance, Natasha studied Latin and engineering; Nora studied drafting and engineering; Nina studied architecture. Although a waste of time, working on course assignments gave one the illusion of being busy and moving toward a goal. In reality, there was nothing awaiting any of them. Mrs. Rosenbaum spoke for many Russians when she complained about their pointless lives (332/October 27, 1933; 357a/April 6, 1934).

DRAB, JOYLESS EXISTENCE

> [Kira] found suddenly that the mere fact of keeping alive had grown into a complicated problem which required many hours of effort, the simple keeping alive which she had always haughtily, contemptuously taken for granted. She found that she could fight it by keeping, fiercer than ever, that very contempt; the contempt which, once dropped, would bring all of life down to the little blue flame of the Primus slowly cooking millet for dinner. (135)

Kira never drops that contempt; she is the only character in *We the Living* who does not surrender. Although she is forced to endure ugly living conditions, she never allows the ugliness into her soul. She never, even temporarily, accepts that kind of existence as *normal*, as all that one can hope for in life.

But those around her do accept such an outlook. Their ambitions since the revolution never rise above trying to buy buckwheat at the cooperative before it runs out; their conception of ecstasy is being able to take a "nice, hot bath with soap" (432–33, 24). Soviet living conditions made life meaningless. Nina Guzarchik

described herself as "a person without plans, without a career, even without any desires" (66a/July 3, 1926). A common theme running throughout the family's correspondence is the drabness and joylessness of their lives and their consequent depression.[13] Mrs. Rosenbaum frequently commented that their lives were dull and monotonous—which she regarded as a *positive*, because change usually heralded a turn for the worse. "Same daily grind, day in and day out, and I often thank God for that, because frequently I'm afraid things will get worse, since any changes are more likely to be negative than positive" (18a/March 7, 1926). She was happy whenever a day went by without misfortune. The daily battles to acquire food, clothing, and medical treatment, she complained bitterly, made them unwilling to generate the energy to go on living (18a/March 7, 1926; 279/February 5, 1933; 280a/February 12, 1933; 283a/March 6, 1933).

Resignation infected every area of life, even that which is normally the most joyful: romantic love. *We the Living* shows love falling victim to the gray rot of daily Soviet existence. It mentions divorces for the sake of a bread card and describes marriages for the sake of party standing (155, 298–305). Vava Milovskaia, a stylish young woman in love with Victor Dunaev and eager about her future with him, eventually gives up and settles for a marriage to Kolya Smiatkin, a dull, nerdish drudge. She mutters in justification: "What is there to wait for? What can one do with oneself, these days?" (314–15). In letters written a few months after her daughter's departure, Mrs. Rosenbaum reported on a flurry of marriages—or "registrations," as they were called—devoid of celebration or joy. She noted that "everyone is getting married, everyone is unhappy," and predicted that none of the newlyweds would enjoy his or her married life (48a/May 21, 1926; 85c/August 31, 1926; 88a/September 12, 1926; see also 25/April 13, 1926 and 26/April 14, 1926). This was not said out of malice; it was a prediction based on wide observation. Indeed, a few years later, she and Nina reported that all those people were divorcing or already divorced (259/June 30, 1932; 313a/August 3, 1933; 349/February 9, 1934).

A Soviet citizen could not count on taking a vacation from the dreariness of Soviet life. Going out of town was fraught with difficulties, owing to the multitude of permits and other documents one had to obtain to travel and to stay in another town temporarily. Here is a relevant scene from *We the Living*:

> Once, Kira and Leo attempted to spend a night in the country.
>
> "Certainly," said the landlady. "Certainly, citizens, I can let you have a room for the night. But first you must get a certificate from your Upravdom as to where you live in the city, and a permit from your militia department, and then you must bring me your labor books, and I must register them with our Soviet here, and our militia department, and get a permit for you as transient guests, and there's a tax to pay, and then you can have the room."
>
> They stayed in the city. (162–63)

Natasha and Nora described similar struggles to arrange for summer vacations with their husbands. In Nora's case, this included, among other things, waiting in line for twelve hours to buy a train ticket (306/July 18, 1933). Natasha described the hoops she had to jump through in order to obtain permission to go on holiday with her husband (320a/September 5, 1933).

Even when successful, the sisters and their husbands did not have much to look forward to. Some Soviet citizens could take a vacation at a "rest home," in which one could secure a spot through one's place of employment. One summer, Nora and her husband went on such a holiday by the seashore. The rest home had no indoor plumbing; one cardboard outhouse had to serve the needs of the entire building. Since no baths or showers were available, one had to wash in the sea (392c/October 2, 1934).

If one was unsatisfied with such an arrangement, one could choose a different Soviet vacation option: In the summer, rows of tents were set up on hard ground in a wooded area outside the city. These tents, along with makeshift outdoor cooking facilities, made up a "tent town"—an arrangement reminiscent of an American Civil War army camp. Citizens could rent a tent, as Mr. Rosenbaum did for a couple of weeks in the summer of 1932 (293a/May 12, 1933).

In the years before Ayn Rand left Russia, Mrs. Rosenbaum and her daughters sometimes rented a room in a small house in a town outside of Petrograd, for a few weeks over the summer. During these vacations, the teenage Ayn slept on a mattress whose springs stuck out (49a/May 26, 1926), and as there was no indoor plumbing, she had to carry water up to the house in buckets. Nevertheless, in contrast to the kinds of vacations they had to contend with in later years, Natasha had fond memories of these outings (71a/July 14, 1926).

If vacations failed, people could still attempt to escape the drabness, if only for the span of an hour or two. *We the Living* mentions crowds that flocked to plays and movies, with an eagerness disproportionate to the mere pursuit of an evening's entertainment (97). The same was true for Ayn Rand's family. Mrs. Rosenbaum summed it up for all of them when she said that because they disliked their work, they went to the theater to escape (358/April 9, 1934).[14] During her last couple of years in Russia, Ayn Rand herself attended hundreds of films in local theaters.[15]

Because they lived like animals trapped in a cage, people dreamed of the free West. *We the Living* projects the reverence felt for "abroad."[16] Kira's family and her acquaintances regarded foreign-made objects, and listened to stories of life in the West, with breathless wonder. Kira's cousin Irina sat through two showings of a foreign film in order to catch a single shot of New York at night.[17] So did the young Ayn Rand herself. All of this, too, was autobiographical: as Mrs. Rosenbaum

mentioned, "the word 'foreign' works magic here" (334/November 16, 1933). In the 1930s, the Rosenbaums listened to the radio frequently, because they could occasionally catch foreign broadcasts. In 1934, they saw their first American "talkie." This was their only chance to get a glimpse of the American way of life; for the first (and only) time they heard how Americans speak, and they saw on the screen a "black jazz band singing, and the sounds of life of a large American city" (373/August 8, 1934). The Rosenbaums had yet another source of information about life in America: letters from Ayn Rand. Her mother responded to one of her letters describing the joyousness of Americans: "Americans are a people who are quick to be delighted. When one is in a permanently good mood, everything seems good" (71c/July 15, 1926).

Nora dreamed for years of getting out of Russia and going to America; the rest of the family wished to go as well (see, e.g., 24a/April 10, 1926). Unfortunately, that fervent wish could not be realized. Although Miss Rand attempted in the 1930s to get her family out of Russia, she did not succeed: the Soviet government refused to let them emigrate. Like Kira, most of Ayn Rand's family would never make it out of Russia. Mr. and Mrs. Rosenbaum, Natasha, and Ayn's cousin Nina all perished before or during World War II.[18]

The background of *We the Living* was not invented; it was taken from real life—from the daily life that the young Ayn Rand had lived, and that more than a thousand letters from her family reflected.

WE THE LIVING: REALISM *AND* ROMANTICISM

> As far as literary schools are concerned, I would call myself a Romantic Realist.[19]

In the *Art of Fiction* Rand says:

> In today's literature, many books do not have any abstract theme, which means that one cannot tell why they were written. An example is the kind of first novel that relates the writer's childhood impressions and early struggle with life. If asked why the particular events are included, the author says: "It happened to *me*." I warn you against writing such a novel. That something happened to *you* is of no importance to anyone, not even to you (and you are now hearing it from the arch apostle of selfishness). The important thing about you is what you *choose* to make happen—your values and choices. That which happened by accident—what family you were born into, in what country, and where you went to school—is totally unimportant.
>
> If any author has something of wider significance to say about them, it is valid for him to use his own experiences (preferably not too

> literally transcribed). But if he can give his readers no reason why they should read his book, except that the events happened to him, it is not a valid book, neither for the readers nor for himself.[20]

Rand rejected the literary school of naturalism, which presents people as they are, not as they should be, and in place of plot and stylized characterization chronicles the actions of "average" people. As a romanticist, she held that the better novelists are not passive, uncritical reporters of the people and events they see around them; instead, she adhered to a literary principle that she argued was first formulated by Aristotle and adopted by the romanticists, namely, that unlike history, which represents things as they are, fiction should represent things as they might be and ought to be.[21]

But in *We the Living*, Rand certainly made use of "things as they are" in the Soviet Union—that is, the people and events of 1920s Russia that she and her family observed. As she points out: "the living conditions, the atmosphere, the circumstances which make the incidents of the plot possible, are all true, to the smallest detail."[22] I have provided ample evidence for this in the present chapter. In addition, most of the songs that figure into the story—for example, "You Fell as a Victim" and "John Gray"—are real;[23] and the university purges (in which Kira, Leo, Irina, and other students were expelled) actually took place. Ayn Rand was a victim of the purges, expelled from the University of Petrograd in December 1923.[24] And I could go on.

Does the fact that the background of *We the Living* has been taken from real life, recording the exact sorts of things that its author had seen and experienced herself during her youth in Soviet Russia, contradict her esthetic convictions? Did Rand choose the events of her first novel simply because they happened to *her*, and the location simply because that is where *she* grew up?

No. As she writes, *We the Living* "is not a novel about Russia. It is a novel about the problem of the individual versus the mass . . . and a plea in defense of the individual. . . . I have selected Russia as my background merely because that problem stands out in Russia more sharply, more tragically than anywhere on earth."[25] In her foreword to the 1959 edition of *We the Living*, she says that

> *We the Living* . . . is a story about Dictatorship, any dictatorship, anywhere, at any time, whether it be Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, or—which this novel might do its share in helping to prevent—a socialist America. What the rule of brute force does to men and how it destroys the best, will be the same in 1925, in 1955 or in 1975—whether the secret police is called G.P.U. or N.K.V.D., whether men eat millet or bread, whether they live in hovels or in housing projects,

> whether the rulers wear red shirts or brown ones, whether the head butcher kisses a Cambodian witch doctor or an American pianist. (xv)

In her introduction to Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three*, Rand points out that "Hugo's story is not devised as a means of presenting the French Revolution; the French Revolution is used as a means of presenting his story."[26] In the same way, her story is not devised as a means of presenting life in 1920s Soviet Russia; the details of life in 1920s Soviet Russia are used as a means of presenting her story. Her use of her own experiences in Soviet Russia, which the letters from her family confirm, does not dull her theme or make her story merely journalistic; instead, these details help her to create an even more accurate picture of totalitarian existence.

The realism of *We the Living* is perfectly consistent with Ayn Rand's romanticism. In order to present things "as they might be and ought to be," a writer need not shun things that actually happened. The theme of *We the Living* is the evil of dictatorship; the events of the plot show that dictatorship crushes human lives, that such a system makes impossible the pursuit of human values. The real-life conditions, events, or persons that she included were all carefully selected to convey that theme. For instance, including the University purge, a policy that denies young people an education, thus destroying their chances for a future, supports her message.

The concrete details of Soviet existence recorded in the novel are true to life: they are the conditions that Ayn Rand herself and other Russian citizens were forced to endure. But these details are neither the focus nor the essence of her novel, nor do they make the point of her story inapplicable to other people, places, and times. They were an excellent means of presenting her theme, which is universal. The ethical-political theme of *We the Living*—that man's life is sacred and that dictatorship destroys it—is relevant in any society and era, and is one that we cannot afford to ignore.[27]

NOTES

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

2. These letters, written in Russian, are housed in the Ayn Rand Archives. When I cite a letter, I usually indicate both its archive file number and its date (e.g., 287b/April 14, 1933). Translations from the Russian are my own.

3. The letters from her family date from 1926 to 1936; *We the Living* is set in the mid-1920s (in her foreword to the 1959 edition, Ayn Rand speaks of 1925 [xv]). For further information on the nature of life in the Soviet Union at this time, see Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 6. Also see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 1999). The period Fitzpatrick covers is the thirties, but much of what she describes is applicable to the twenties.

4. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).

5. See *We the Living*, 164, 177.

6. See *We the Living*, 33, 135, 164, 177–82, 187, 198, 202, 218–19, 315, 355.

7. This was fortunate by Soviet standards. The housing shortage wreaked havoc with marriages. Some spouses were forced to live apart, because of a lack of living space (320c/September 6, 1933). Divorces, too, were often impossible, owing to the difficulty of finding separate housing (236a/April 2, 1931).

8. In *We the Living*, Irina says to Sasha: "I'll draw two dozen pictures—there, abroad—and you can stick them all over the walls of our house. Sasha, *our house!*" (337). In Rand's novella *Anthem* (written in 1937, revised edition, in 1946), the hero and heroine—recently escaped from a collectivist dictatorship—discover a house from "the Unmentionable Times," and are astonished: "We found no other beds in the house, and then we knew that only two had lived here, and this passes understanding. What kind of world did they have, the men of the Unmentionable Times?" Ayn Rand, *Anthem*, fiftieth anniversary ed. (New York: Signet, 1995), 103.

9. This comparison is based on letters to Ayn Rand from her relatives in Chicago written around the same time. Unfortunately, her letters to her family in Russia have not survived.

10. In her final year or so in Russia, Ayn Rand was a student at the Leningrad Cinema Institute, studying scenario writing and other skills for working in the movies. While a student there, she wrote reviews of and essays about American films. My translation of two of these essays can be found in Ayn Rand, *Russian Writings on Hollywood*, Michael S. Berliner, ed. (Marina del Rey: The Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1999). It is most likely that she obtained her information about the American film industry from American movie magazines, to which she subscribed. (See, e.g., 18c/March 7, 1926; 19a, b, c/March 12, 1926.)

11. A completed translation might have been submitted to the publishing house in handwritten form. Hence, a manuscript had to be neatly recopied for submission. Many of the earlier letters in the correspondence mention or discuss this translation work. See, for example, 9b/January 23, 1926; 13/February 3, 1926; 18a/March 7, 1926; 19a/March 12, 1926; 21b/March 23, 1926; 23b/April 8, 1926; 24a/April 10, 1926; 27a, b, d/April 16, 1926; 29a, d/April 23, 1926; 35a, c, f/April 28, 1926; 37/May 3, 1926; 39/May 6, 1926; 42b/May 11, 1926; 44a/May 15, 1926; 45/May 17, 1926; 47b/May 19, 1926; 48b/May 21, 1926; 49b/May 26, 1926; 50b/May 30, 1926; 52b/June 4, 1926; 67a/July 4, 1926; 70b/July 13, 1926; 71c/July 15, 1926; 72/July 17, 1926; 73a/July 22, 1926; 75a, c, d/July 26, 1926; 76/August 2, 1926; 77a/August 6, 1926; 78d/August 9, 1926; 79/August 11, 1926; 81a, d/August 17, 1926; 83a/August 21, 1926; 84a/August 24, 1926; 85c/August 31, 1926; 86a/September 4, 1926; 87a, c/September 8, 1926; 89/September 22, 1926; 90a, c/September 28, 1926; 93a/October 12, 1926; 94a, c/October 14, 1926; 96a, d/November 8, 1926; 97a, c/November 16, 1926; 98a/November 23, 1926; 99c/November 28, 1926; 101a/December 12, 1926; 102a/December 16, 1926; 106c/January 2, 1927; 115c/January 26, 1927; 116b/January 30, 1927; 120a/February 27, 1927; 121e/March 6, 1927; 122b/March 13, 1927; 126c/April 11, 1927; 127a/April 15, 1927; 128a/April 19, 1927; 130a/May 2, 1927; 132d/May 12, 1927; 133b/May 23, 1927; 134a/May 30, 1927; 136a/June 10, 1927; 139a/June 27, 1927; 143a/September 7, 1927; 147a/September 27, 1927; 151c/October 29, 1927; 156b/November 27, 1927; 160b/December 26, 1927; 166a/February 5, 1928; 167b/February 12, 1928; 217/April 3, 1930; 218/April 8, 1930.

12. Unlike Natasha, who was barred for the rest of her life from the work she loved, Nora was later able to find employment closer to her calling.

13. See, for example, letters 16a/February 25, 1926; 18a/March 7, 1926; 20/March 16, 1926; 26/April 14, 1926; 31/April 25, 1926; 66a/July 3, 1926; 80/August 11, 1926; 88a/ca September 12, 1926; 119a/February 20, 1927; 129c/April 25, 1927; 180/June 10, 1928—among others.

14. See also 109a/ca. January 8, 1927, and 351a/February 21, 1934.

15. A diary she kept of the movies she saw is reprinted, with my translation, in Rand, *Writings on Hollywood.* See also *We the Living*, 91, 95, 96, 146, 381, 383.

16. On the meaning of the word "abroad" for a Soviet citizen, see Ayn Rand, "The 'Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,'" in *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, Peter Schwartz, ed. (New York: Meridian, 1999), 125.

17. See *We the Living*, 79–80, 142–43, 153–55, 174–75, 184–85, 208, 337, 357–58, 444, 447–48, 457.

18. Correspondence to Ayn Rand from Nora, 1973; correspondence from one of Ayn Rand's cousins to another, December 1946.

19. Ayn Rand, "The Goal of My Writing," in *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 167.

20. Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers,* Tore Boeckmann, ed. (New York: Plume, 2000), 16. Emphases in the original.

21. Ayn Rand, "Basic Principles of Literature," in *Romantic Manifesto*, 80; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a36–b5, 1460b8–11, 1460b32–35, 1461b11–13.

22. Berliner, *Letters*, 4.

23. See Michael S. Berliner, "The Music of *We the Living*," in the present volume.

24. See *We the Living*, 209–15, Berliner, *Letters*, 636–37, Ayn Rand's University of Petrograd student file (Ayn Rand Archives), and Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives). Soviet law allowed expelled students who had less than a year before graduation to complete their studies. This amendment was provided in response to pressure from a delegation of foreign scholars angered at the injustice. Since Ayn was in her final year at the university, she was readmitted three months later and graduated in July 1924. Most children of nonproletarian parents were not so fortunate.

25. Berliner, *Letters*, 12–13.

26. Ayn Rand, "Introduction to *Ninety-Three*," *Romantic Manifesto*, 156.

27. I wish to thank Robert Mayhew for his comments on earlier versions of this chapter.