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The Communal Apartment in the Works of Irina Grekova and Nina Sadur

By Erin Collopy¹

Abstract

While a good deal of recent scholarly attention has been paid to the Soviet communal apartment, the current literature has not specifically addressed how women are affected by living in such a space. Russian women have a complicated relationship to the domestic sphere. While the domestic sphere is the center and source of women's power, cultural and social demands require that women bear almost the entire burden of domestic responsibilities. The present work provides a brief history of the Soviet communal apartment and Russian women's relationship to the domestic space. The focus then turns to the literary representation of women's experiences in the communal apartment within the works of two stylistically different Russian women writers, Irina Grekova and Nina Sadur. I argue that despite their differences, both writers portray life in a communal apartment as less than ideal.

Keywords: Russian Literature, Women, Communal Apartment

The communal apartment occupies a significant place in the consciousness of Soviet Russia and post-Soviet Russian society. Familiarly known in Russian as a *kommunalka*, the communal apartment is a largely Soviet Russian phenomenon in which families, sometimes as many as thirty but more often three or four, are housed in a single apartment with communal kitchen and toilet/bathroom space. Widely perceived as a pathological element of Soviet life, the communal apartment is seen by some as a metaphor for the worst of the Soviet period. It has appeared as a literary trope in the works of such Russian writers as Mikhail Zoshchenko, Mikhail Bulgakov, Iurii Olesha, the satiric team of Il'f and Petrov, and it has played an important role in memoirs of the Soviet period, including the essay, "In a Room and a Half," by the Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Brodsky. How life in such a space has impacted women specifically, rather than people in general, is only beginning to appear in the growing body of scholarly literature on the topic. The present work investigates the literary representation of women's experiences in the communal apartment within the works of two Russian women writers, Irina Grekova and Nina Sadur. Grekova's novella, *The Ship of Widows*, chronicles the lives of a communal apartment's inhabitants from the end of World War II until the 1960s. The contemporary Russian writer and playwright Nina Sadur lived in a communal apartment for many years and this figures significantly in her works.

Throughout Russia's history, including the Soviet era, domestic space has been viewed primarily as the realm of women (Lapidus 232-284). Culturally encouraged to

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perceive men as incapable of self-reliance and hailed as the “protector of the hearth,” Russian women largely accept their domestic rule with a degree of equanimity, less the quite reasonable complaint that the double burden of professional and personal responsibilities is overwhelming. It is possible that the lack of public equality and voice--to date less than 10% of the main legislative body is composed of women despite the fact that 53% of the voting population is women--create a situation in which women are willing to take on sole domestic responsibility as a way of exerting control in some sphere. Before I turn to Grekova’s and Sadur’s representations of communal apartments, I will first discuss two separate but related issues. The first is the relationship of Russian women to the domestic space and the second is the history of the communal apartment.

The communal apartment served two main purposes in Soviet society. The first was pragmatic--in a society with a rapidly growing urban population following the revolution, efficient and inexpensive housing was essential (Gerasimova 211). The second and no less important purpose was ideological. The early Bolsheviks had envisioned a society in which communal living was the norm—the traditional family unit would be restructured with the head of the family replaced by the state. An additional benefit would be the political and social control of the populace by one’s own neighbors. It was originally planned that communal housing would be built, with separate dormitory spaces for men and women. Children would be raised communally. This new way of life was presented as a benefit for Soviet women, since the state was never overly concerned with educating men to become more responsible for domestic concerns. Instead, communal living would allow women to form cooperative alliances to lessen the individual responsibilities of childcare and housekeeping (Attwood 38-39). However, in the time directly following the revolution, funding did not exist to create such new spaces. Instead, existing spaces, most often apartments previously owned by upper class families, were subdivided. And though families were never restructured to the degree originally planned, communal living was nonetheless difficult, in no small part because the physical spaces inhabited were not designed for group living. It was not unusual for an apartment to have one toilet for more than twenty people, or no bath, or a single sink located in the kitchen (Gerasimova 217). Moving into such spaces added to the overall sense of displacement and estrangement that any resettlement incurs, and these feelings were intensified by the political and social upheaval that occurred in Russia and the Soviet Union during the first half of the 20th century.

When Stalin came to power in the 1920s it did not take long for the Soviet Union to turn from its revolutionary roots and become a totalitarian and patriarchal system, with Stalin as the great father. The equality between the sexes that had been championed by leading revolutionaries, was determined to have finally been achieved--the so-called ‘woman question’ that had been passionately argued for almost a century was ‘solved’ once and for all. Political organizations dedicated to improving conditions for women were therefore deemed unnecessary and dissolved. At the same time, puritanism was on the rise. Abortion, which had become legal in 1920, was outlawed in 1936 (Attwood, New Soviet Woman 115-125), and as late as 1954 schools were segregated by sex (Attwood, New Soviet Man and Woman 142). Some of these regressive actions were reversed after Stalin’s death, but the push to keep women focused on the domestic remained, and for a largely pragmatic reason. The state needed women in the workforce, but because of the falling birthrate, Russian women were encouraged by social and state

organizations to make the family the center of their lives (Attwood 4-6). The social collective of the future and the demise of the family as envisioned at the beginning of Soviet history were never realized. Instead, the traditional nuclear family became the idealized social unit, except that the woman of the family was a working housewife.

Women in Soviet Russia were required by economic necessity to work outside of the home, yet they also bore the major brunt of domestic concerns. They were largely responsible for provisioning the house, a time consuming chore due to the inefficient Soviet distribution system; cooking, without frozen foods or microwaves or convenience foods; cleaning, also time consuming because of the lack of such conveniences as washing machines; and childcare. Men could be expected to pick up grocery items on the way home from work and perhaps do some light cleaning, such as washing dishes or peeling potatoes; additionally, in theory, they might be called upon to do some household repairs. For many Russian women it was a point of pride to keep a spotless home, cook nutritious meals, keep their mate and children neatly dressed, and yet maintain their “femininity,” that is, dress as well as possible on their salary, keep their hair styled, and most importantly, be sensitive to the male ego. This already large demand on a woman’s time often necessitated her to sacrifice much of her professional potential. The justification for the fact that there were fewer women in leadership roles across the professions and in the political sphere was that women were absent from work more often, that their “natural inclination” to put the family first kept them from putting in the necessary time to achieve a high status (Koval 32-33; Ashwin and Bowers 30). It was considered either irrelevant or a sign of their lack of professional commitment that women were missing work to find food for the family, take care of sick children or because of maternity leave.² It should be stated, however, that some women, such as the one of the writers discussed in this paper, Irina Grekova, managed to attain a high professional status despite the double burden of work and domestic responsibilities.

But even if the family was not reorganized as originally planned, the public control that arose from communal living had the effect desired by the state. One of the earliest Soviet literary treatments of communal living appears in Evgenii Zamiatin’s novel, We, in which glass-walled dwelling places expose private lives lived publicly. The State depicted in We allows for a small degree of carefully controlled physical privacy; however, the psychological benefits of such privacy are counter-balanced by its transparency. When everyone is aware that someone close-by is involved in an intimate activity, either because one’s shades are drawn--signifying a state approved and planned sexual encounter--or by one’s absence--implying a trip to the bathroom--the intimate activity loses what typically makes it intimate and personal. Though the glass walls exist only in literature, the metaphor is appropriate. Memoirs written by former inhabitants of communal apartments emphasize the effects that a lack of privacy has on one’s life. Joseph Brodsky, in his essay, “In a Room and a Half,” writes that communal living: “bares life to its basics: it strips off any illusions about human nature.... You know the sounds they make in bed and when women have their periods” (454-455). In Common Spaces, Svetlana Boym remembers a painfully awkward moment, when her mother was

² It should be noted, however, that maternity leave was mandated by the state. Social services in Soviet Russia did allow for women to work and take care of their family. The inequality between men and women was as much cultural as state-sponsored.

telling a western guest about the wonders of St. Petersburg (121-123). Meanwhile, their drunken neighbor, locked out of his room by his wife, urinates on the floor while lying in the common passageway. The stream of urine flows underneath the Boym family's door, humiliating the family in front of their foreign guest, who would have had no cultural context for such an experience.

One of the most useful books to appear on the subject in recent history is Features of Communal Life, by the ethnographer, Il'ia Utekhin.³ I will discuss this work in detail as it illuminates the pragmatics of living in a communal apartment. Utekhin gives a detailed description of contemporary life in Moscow's communal apartments, devoting chapters of his book to such topics as how residents manage the utility bill payment, take turns cleaning common spaces, and set schedules for bathroom use. Fairness, or at least the residents' perception of fairness, is the basis for the division of communal responsibilities. Everyone in the household has an equal share in the responsibilities, regardless of how much space they have as individuals. Utekhin gives the example of one apartment in which electricity for the common spaces is divided by nineteen, that is, the amount of people who live in the apartment. The telephone bill is divided among seventeen people because the household includes two small children who are not yet old enough to use the telephone, and therefore, according to the residents' understanding of fairness, should not have to participate in paying for it (72). Cleaning of the common spaces is also divided equally among the residents, so that if a cleaning shift lasts a week and a family consists of four people, then that family is responsible for four weeks of cleaning (62-63). A single person would be responsible for one week. Utekhin does not state if each member of a family takes a turn cleaning or if the adult women take on the entire responsibility for the family. I assume the latter considering the Russian cultural attitude toward women and housework (Kay; Porukhniuk and Shepeleva; Ries). However, that does not mean a family in which there is no woman is not required to take their turn. I also assume from the text that women in communal apartments do the majority of family cooking, just as they do in single family apartments. This is never overtly stated, but from the pictures and statements in the text, it is evident that women are responsible for cooking. Thus the same concept of "fairness," as it is perceived by the residents, that permits small children who do not use the telephone to avoid paying for it, does not extend to a "fair," that is, "equal" distribution of responsibilities within the family unit.

Utekhin never discusses whether he perceives communal living to be more

³ Il'ia Utekhin is developing a website on the communal apartment at <<http://www.kommunalka.spb.ru/english.htm>>. The website is currently available only in the Russian language, but non-Russian readers should be able to find photographs of present-day communal apartments under the third link, "Exposition." Visitors to the site might be surprised at the decrepit condition of many of the rooms, particularly the toilet and bathroom. There are a few reasons why the rooms are in such a dilapidated state. The first, and perhaps most important reason, is that there exists in communal apartments a strong division between private space, that is, one's own room or rooms, and communal space, which includes the kitchen, hallway, toilet, and bathroom. Residents are unwilling to invest the extra energy and money it would require to keep the common space in good condition, which they believe to be the responsibility of the State. Secondly, even if the residents are willing to contribute the time, few have the resources available to make the necessary renovations. The communal apartments shown in the pictures are located in St. Petersburg, where buildings can quickly deteriorate because of the harsh climate.

difficult for men or for women. I assume from reading his book that life in a communal apartment is hard for both men and women. Nonetheless, by reading between the lines and from an understanding of Russian society, it is not unreasonable to assume that women could feel even more displaced living in a communal apartment than a man would, simply because the home for the majority of Russian women is their place of power. Darra Goldstein writes that because of the development of communal kitchens “the site of women’s power was severely diminished, and in many cases entirely lost” (145). The evidence of the kitchen’s sacred status within Soviet Russian culture is widespread, and it could easily be argued that the kitchen is perceived as the center of the Russian home--the communal area where everyone gathers. A Russian scholar, Larissa Lissytukina, writes the following in an article about what she perceives to be the fundamental differences between Russian and western women’s view of liberation:

The house, and especially the kitchen, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was the only free sphere. ...Women...after the beginning of *perestroika* demanded the right to return to the kitchen, to the family, and to the home....Most importantly, they by no means perceive their kitchen, which is rarely larger than five square meters, as a narrow corridor cut off from the world. Here, heated arguments about culture and politics take place. From here people go directly to huge meetings in the square with banners and placards. In the kitchen one is surrounded by intimacy, publicity, and intellectual creativity....In the kitchen life gushes forth. Quite a few more women wish to return to the kitchen in order to be relieved of doing road work, boring office jobs, construction jobs, or factory work. (276)

While the question of whether Russian women truly want to return to the kitchen is debatable, the importance of the kitchen as a significant space in Russian life is not (Ashwin and Bowers). Lissytukina does not mention the significant portion of the Russian women who do not even have this mythical kitchen at their disposal, a place of “intimacy, publicity, and intellectual creativity” (276). Their kitchen space is limited to their share of the kitchen stove’s burners, a table for preparation, and perhaps some storage space. Colette Shulman writes, “Now many [Russians] have had too much of [collective life], and they seek relief, both physical and psychological....Communal living contributes to a very real *peregruzka nervnoi sistemy* (strain of the nervous system)” (382). Here Schulman is addressing the stress Russians, particularly women, feel because of “enforced close collectivity” (382). The communal kitchen, instead of being a gathering place for family and trusted friends, is a potential source of negative feelings. Yet not everything about communal living was negative for Soviet women. Some common positive benefits for women include the ability to leave their children with an apartment mate while running errands, or assistance in case of illness. I will now turn to two different fictional treatments of the communal apartments.

An examination of the fiction written by the Russian women writers Irina Grekova and Nina Sadur allows some insight into what life in a communal apartment is like for women. Irina Grekova (1907-2002), the pseudonym of Elena Venttsel, was an accomplished mathematician and long-time math instructor. Grekova did not begin publishing her literary works until the early 1960s. The majority of her works explore the

lives of scientists, many of whom are women, and the difficulties they face in everyday life (Beaujour). While she has examined controversial topics, such as anti-Semitism, her works are not necessarily anti-establishment. One will not find scathing indictments of the Soviet system in Grekova's works, but the shortcomings of Soviet society are subtly disclosed in her descriptions of daily life in urban Russia. The setting of one of her better known works, the novella Ship of Widows, is a communal apartment in Moscow from the time immediately following WWII until the 1960s. The life of the main character, Olga Ivanovna, is irrevocably disrupted by events that occur during the Second World War. Not long after Olga's husband dies in the war, her apartment house is bombed and Olga's young daughter and mother are killed. Olga is seriously injured, and her apartment is obliterated. After a long physical and mental recovery, Olga receives housing in a communal apartment which she shares for many years with four other widows. Olga is not able to continue her previous profession as a professional pianist because of the effects of her injuries, and instead becomes a music teacher at a home for abandoned and orphaned infants. Throughout the novella, Olga does not complain about her fate—what she has lost is so enormous that it makes any other difficulties she encounters insignificant in comparison. Olga's description of her post-war life is presented with a degree of detachment created not only by her tragedy, but also developed through time since the narration is presented after many years have passed. What stands out in her narrative are the complex relationships she and the other widows develop with each other throughout the years. Olga chronicles life in her communal apartment, jokingly called "the ship of widows," the significance of which I will address below.

The reader is introduced to the communal apartment through Olga's own initial viewing of her new room:

The room turned out to be smallish, made smaller still by its oblong shape and its high ceilings darkened by smoke.... From the former inhabitants of the room remained a bed, apparently abandoned because of its uselessness.... Yes, I liked all this; it would be good to maintain this emptiness, simplicity, and brightness in the future. I didn't want to acquire things. They say that ships overgrown with barnacles lose their movement. I didn't want to lose my movement, even if there was nowhere for me to go (200).⁴

The apartment itself is also relatively small—containing five rooms, one for each widow—Olga, Ada, Pavla, and Kapa; and the fifth occupied by a couple, Anfisa and her husband, Fyodor, who both are at the front involved in the war at the time Olga moves in. Having returned unharmed from the war, a drunken Fyodor is later killed when he falls under a trolley car, leaving Anfisa as the fifth widow of the apartment. None of the women hold positions of authority at their workplace. Olga works at the orphanage; Ada, formerly a professional singer, now sells tickets at the theater; Pavla is a repairwomen; Kapa works as a night guard; and Anfisa once worked in a factory, but now joins Olga at the orphanage.

At the time of the novella's setting, the majority of Moscow's citizens lived in

⁴ This and subsequent translations are mine.

communal housing (Semenova 56). It was not until Khrushchev came into power after Stalin's death that a principle of "one family, one flat" was developed (Attwood, "Housing" 177). Until then, there was no perceived loss in status by living in a communal apartment, with the exception of those who were forced to subdivide their apartments (Semenova). Since communal living was the norm, there would be no reason for Olga to expect anything other than a room in a communal apartment, and she was happy to have that. Even if most Soviet citizens were in the same position, however, this did not make communal living easier. Conflicts among residents, even physical conflicts, were common, particularly among women, if one is to believe the press Lynne Attwood cites from the 1940s and 50s ("Housing" 181). Former communal apartment residents interviewed by Attwood recall the difficulties their mother had sharing the kitchen with other women: "Each [woman] insisted on having her own table, despite the lack of room. They made no attempt to establish a rota (*sic*) for using the kitchen, and if they all ended up preparing their family's meal at the same time, conflicts were inevitable" (181).

Grekova's text chronicles the many petty problems and nasty vengeance that inevitably arose in communal apartment living. When Anfisa returns from the front, her apartment mates immediately try to get her to side with them in their squabbles. Kapa tells Anfisa not to believe Pavla's story that Kapa rented out Anfisa's room during her absence; nor should she listen to gossip about the new widow, Olga. But Kapa is so busy justifying herself and disparaging the others that she does not notice that Anfisa is in an advanced stage of pregnancy. In another example of Kapa's pettiness, Ada leaves her kettle on and when it starts to boil, Kapa stops Anfisa from turning it off, saying, "Don't touch it!... She put it on herself and she can take care of it herself. Let it boil out, let it burn--I won't lift a finger!" (225). Throughout the text, Kapa attempts to get her apartment mates to side with her against the others, while maintaining the air that she only wants to get along with everyone.

Pavla, the most "difficult" of the five widows living in the apartment, manifests the stereotype of the "envious apartment mate," described in Utekhin's work and elsewhere. She believes that since she is not "worse than others" she should be allowed to have what others have. And if she cannot have it, then they should not either: "Pavla wishes that everyone were alike. If it is impossible for everyone to have it equally good, then let everyone have it equally bad" (Grekova 229). Utekhin relays in his book a story about a communal apartment resident who upon learning that a neighbor had a private line, tried to get a private telephone installed in her own room, too. When she made her request at the telephone office but was told that it was not possible to put a phone in her room, the woman then requested that her neighbor's phone be removed (Utekhin 87). Similarly, Pavla is described as obsessive about everything "being fair." If there is room near the window for only one resident's kitchen table, then Pavla would prefer that no one had a table situated near the window, rather than allow one person a privilege that no one else had.

Grekova's novella sometimes reads as if Olga is telling the story of her life in the communal apartment as she has reached old age. This temporal distance allows the narrator to maintain her detachment from much of the negative feelings she must have experienced throughout the years. It also allows for a somewhat objective, if nostalgic, view of her life in this apartment:

Living together and next to each other for so long it's impossible to stay strangers, and we weren't strangers. A kind of family feeling develops between the apartment mates, far from loving, but nonetheless familial. They quarrel, offend each other, blow up at each other from nervous malice, and still they are family. You fall sick—your apartment mates buy you what you need, bring it to you, heat your kettle. You die—your apartment mates bury you, give you a wake, drink to you. (209)

Despite everything, it is apparent that Olga appreciates what solace her living situation brings her. Her apartment mates are a sort of family, perhaps as dysfunctional as any.

Nonetheless, I contend that her apartment mates, no matter how close, are not Olga's family in the way her daughter and mother were. The relationships that Olga forms following her great tragedy are by nature impermanent—either with the children whom she teaches, who will grow up and be replaced by other children, or with the people with whom she forms alliances and friendships in her *kommunalka*. Grekova, in what was probably an unintentional response to the Bolshevik vision of a reinvented, communal family, emphasizes that the family unit is not easily broken apart or recreated.

By contrast to the impermanent relationships that Olga forms at her job and at home, the relationship that becomes central to the text is that of Anfisa to her son, Vadim. The connection between mother and son is passionate and difficult. None of the other relationships described in the text compare to this blood connection. Olga and the other women in the apartment love Vadim and help to raise him, but no one has the same right to his love as his own mother, nor is he constant in his love for anyone but his mother. Vadim is profoundly affected by the discovery that the man who raised him and who was his mother's husband was not his biological father. Despite his anger at his mother for her infidelity and the lies he has been told, he remains faithful to her, sacrificing much of his own youth to nurse her when she becomes bedridden after a stroke. It is therefore significant that Olga Ivanovna writes that her apartment mates are "like a family" or that they are a *kommunal'naia sem'ia* "communal family" rather than simply state that they are a family. In the text there is no replacement for the bond of a biological relationship. It is stronger than the any of the relationships formed within the communal apartment during a lifetime of living close together.

When Kapa calls the communal apartment a ship of widows, Olga is immediately struck by this metaphor:

"A ship of widows," I repeated, returning to my room, "A ship of widows." There was something captivating in those words. Some kind of unhurried, awkward movement. I often couldn't sleep at night, looking out my bare window [...]. It seemed to me that I could feel our ship of widows with its crew moving through time to an unknown destination. (Grekova 209)

The metaphor of sea travel is extended to such elements as the language Grekova uses to describe conflicts within the communal apartment, which are compared to storms. Olga compares acquiring things to barnacles adhering on a ship. The apartment "rocks" along, like a ship on a watery course. The widows are not steering the ship, nor do they know its

destination--they are only travelers. Opportunities to effect change in their own lives are limited not only by the circumstances of place and time, but also by gender. On the one hand, Grekova's message is certainly positive--as difficult as life can be for Olga, she is still capable of valuing life. A similar message is found in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, in which an inmate of the most potent of Soviet pathological spaces, a prison camp, recounts the simple victories of his day. Yet there remains a sense that the life that Olga leads after her catastrophe is so marginal and circumscribed, I wonder if Grekova is overstating her heroine's acceptance. I would argue, however, that one of the major themes of Ship of Widows is the effects of World War II on the lives of ordinary Russians. The difficulties of communal living seem trivial in comparison to enormous hardships and tragedies the majority of the Russian populace experienced because of the war.

In contrast to Grekova, Nina Sadur offers a much different literary perspective of communal apartment life. Sadur is currently one of the leading writers of late- and post-Soviet Russia. Until recently, she occupied two rooms in a Moscow communal apartment with her daughter and her mother. Life in a communal apartment as depicted in Nina Sadur's works is considerably bleaker than that described in Grekova's novel. In Ship of Widows, the communal apartment can be seen as a metaphor for post-war Russia: a place where life is valued--at least by Olga--no matter the difficulties of everyday life, because it is so fragile and precious. I believe that Sadur's communal apartment can also be read as a metaphor for Russia, but unlike Grekova's depiction, life is neither valued nor respected in what Sadur portrays as a psychologically detrimental place. Gaston Bachelard writes, in The Poetics of Space, that if he were asked to name the most important function of the house he would say that, "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). Bachelard primarily addresses domestic space as a positive and protected place, and intentionally avoids addressing "hostile" spaces, because, as he says, "[t]he space of hatred and combat can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images" (xxxvi). Bachelard's description of a hostile space applies quite aptly to Sadur's works. Her description of life in a communal apartment has none of the positive hedges presented in the novel, Ship of Widows. Edward Casey, in Getting Back into Place, writes: "entire cultures can feel profoundly averse to the places they inhabit, feeling atopic and displaced within their own implacement" (34). Casey had in mind the Navajo people forcibly separated from their own land and their subsequent despair due to this separation. In response to their loss, Casey states that: "to lose one's land is tantamount to losing one's existence" (37). He feels that disruption is part of a general modern malaise in which urban dwellers have become detached from their landscape to such a degree that they are unaware of the source of their sense of loss. Sadur's works contain this same feeling of loss, an impression that everyone is out of place, and that these characters either are struggling to find or to maintain their place. The communal apartment appears in many of Sadur's works, but none as significantly as the following--the short story "The Blue Hand," the novella "Miraculous Signs of Salvation," and the short novel, Diamond Valley.

The first work, "The Blue Hand," is Sadur's retelling of a children's *strashilka*, "The Red Hand" (Trykova 214). A *strashilka* is perhaps best translated as a 'scary story' in the manner of the "Man with a Hook" tale. In the original *strashilka*, or at least in one

of its many versions, a family moves into an apartment with a red spot on the wall. While everyone is sleeping a red hand materializes from the spot and strangles the mother, then later the father. The children decide to stay awake to find out what is going on. While they pretend to sleep, the red hand again materializes and searches for the children. The children call the police, who shoot the red hand as it reaches out from the spot on the wall. The red spot disappears. When the policeman who shot the wall returns to his own apartment, he discovers the red spot has appeared on his own wall. A detailed psychological analysis of this tale is beyond the scope of the present work, but the motif of the dangerous apartment apparently triggered Sadur's short story.

In Sadur's considerably more complex reanalysis of this children's tale, a young woman, Valya, who has recently moved to a communal apartment, is terrorized by one of its inhabitants, Marya Ivanovna. Marya bullies Valya in a variety of small ways, such as promising to cede Valya space for a wardrobe, but instead bringing in another of her own wardrobes, or sitting outside of Valya's room when Valya has a man visiting. She even asks her husband to urinate on the floor of the bathroom when it is Valya's turn to clean it. Valya is defenseless against Marya's attacks--she lacks both the psychological fortitude to ignore them and the type of character needed to respond in kind. First she begins to fall ill, and then she imagines horrible fates for Marya, such as making Marya witness the burial of her own intestines before being hanged to death. These imaginings ease Valya's anger, but suddenly she is afflicted with an outbreak of warts on her face—an outward manifestation of her negative feelings and anxiety. It is not Marya's cruelty that brings about the denouement, but rather when Marya unexpectedly feels sorry for Valya and gives her some pancakes. This kindness is more than Valya can bear. Later that night Marya wakes up to a rustling outside. When she nears the window, a blue hand seizes her by the neck and strangles her. Marya's husband wakes up the next day to find his wife dead, the mark of a blue hand on her neck. Valya has disappeared, her nightgown turning into dust when touched.

Another version of Marya Ivanovna appears in "The Miraculous Signs of Salvation." In this work, however, Sadur's descriptions of Marya are much more brutal and grotesque. The color blue, for Sadur symbolic of anger and misplaced passion, is repeated, only this time it is the main character's face that is blue rather than her hand. The description of Marya and her family is a masterpiece of a release of negative affect. Marya and her bald daughter, Salmonella, are described as undergoing mysterious changes in sex, such as Marya growing a scrotum. The entire clan, including Marya's granddaughter Zhopa (Russian for "ass"), are also irrationally depicted as products of spontaneous regeneration. They carry refrigerators on their backs; the lower halves of their body appear to be underground. Life for the protagonist, Nina, is unbearable with these apartment mates. The primitive territoriality is described in the following passage:

Most of all these people love to yell from various parts of the *kommunalka*. They like other people smelling like them. And that I would blindly step into these soft piles. So that I would smell like them. But having stepped in one I run off with a shout to wash it off. Then they start to steal: they beat my face, chest, stomach, scream offensive things. (69)

Nina must work through her anger and hatred at her apartment mates for her own

salvation. The place inhabited by Nina, both mentally and physically, hardly corresponds to Bachelard's ideal haven.

The final work, Diamond Valley, contains a much more complex presentation of a communal apartment. In this novel, the protagonist, Vera's, communal apartment is described in more detail than in either "The Blue Hand" or "Miraculous Signs of Salvation." Klavdia Klykova, the Marya figure here, is a convicted thief, and her husband is a six-fingered alcoholic, (just as is Marya's husband in "The Blue Hand"). Again, like Marya from the two stories described above, Klavdia has a granddaughter, but the granddaughter is described more sympathetically here, as is Klavdia, in her concerns for the little girl. The other inhabitants of the apartment are Grandpa Aleksei, his granddaughter Anna, her husband Georgii, and their young son Alik; Susanna Borovik-Estand'ia, a crippled bitter old woman; and Farida, a Tatar woman, who has limited command of Russian and who brings home many casual lovers. Grandpa Aleksei is the most positive of the residents. He had lived in the country but his son has brought him to Moscow in order to increase the family's allotment of living space. Now he is senile and in the course of the story loses his ability to take care of himself. His granddaughter, Anna, asks Vera not to buy him cigarettes, not to "stick her nose into their family's business" (39). But Vera continues to buy cigarettes for Grandpa Aleksei, not out of genuine altruism, but because Anna does not want her to.

Vera finds it difficult living in her apartment, but she does seem to manage better than the main characters of "The Blue Hand" and "Miraculous Signs of Salvation". She hates how the other residents cabal against each other and try to involve her in their quarrels, but she also seems unaware of how she contributes to the general ill-will, either by deliberately acting against another's wishes, or by behaving as if she is above their despicable behaviour. She falls into a pointless argument with Klavdia and her husband about who is not turning off the light in the bathroom, and Klavdia suddenly asks: "We are all real people here, we all have our own shortcomings, but we live as one family. And you, you despise us all, don't you?" (39). Vera answers that she is completely indifferent to all of them, and that she would not notice if they were all to disappear from the face of the earth. Klavdia appears shocked beyond belief and responds that Vera, with those words, has ceased to exist for them. However, at the same time she is thinking to herself that if something were to happen to Vera, such as if she were to commit suicide, they would have to immediately rush to the housing authority and ask that her room be put to general use. The reader is left to understand that Klavdia is only shocked at Vera's honesty, not her sentiment, and that Klavdia has no family feelings for Vera. Later in the text, an unidentified narrator, perhaps Vera, walks into the communal kitchen in the morning and notices the negative mood that pervades the room:

At first I thought that someone else had moved in, everyone had such long faces. For some reason it's not acceptable among us to just ask what happened. After all, we aren't relatives and if we notice a long face or eyes red from crying, then we're supposed to stay silent as if nothing had happened. (47)

The problem was that Farida, the Tatar, was beaten in the night by one of her lovers. No one came to Farida's aid and no one knows how to help Farida, who seems entirely

indifferent to what has happened to her. Despite the animosity that the residents feel against Farida—for her otherness, her inability to speak Russian, her sexual proclivity—they nonetheless recognize that their own humanity is compromised by their inability to help her. Yet, they have no real connection to Farida. Notwithstanding their almost intolerable physical proximity to each other, they are strangers. It is this unbearable forced intimacy that makes communal living so impossible.

True to Russian cultural attitudes about the domestic sphere, the women in Diamond Valley are the principle actors in the communal life; their husbands are merely appendages who stand by and offer support to their wives, but do not initiate anything themselves. Sadur creates interactions among the women that simultaneously present them as repulsive and sympathetic. When Klavdia and Vera have the argument about the bathroom light that leads to Vera's sincere answer, Klavdia is worrying throughout the argument about her granddaughter: "How will my pure gentle little girl Olechka live among these big and heavy people" (40). She genuinely loves her granddaughter and wants the best for her. Yet at the same time she thinks about the possibility of Vera's room becoming available if Vera kills herself. Returning to the interaction Vera had with Anna about buying cigarettes for Grandpa Aleksei, it seems that Anna's real concern is that Vera is the source of a rumor that Grandpa Aleksei has lice. Vera denies spreading the rumor, but also asks Anna where those lice came from, giving the impression that she could have started the rumor.

Sadur's depiction of communal life differs significantly from that of Grekova's. In Grekova's bittersweet novella, Olga stoically and rather sadly recalls a life that for all its difficulties remained meaningful, and in the absence of a "real" family, the other women in her communal apartment gave her a sense of family. Sadur's works, however, only depict negative aspects of communal life. But as Oleg Dark, a Russian critic and acquaintance of Nina Sadur, describes, the prototype of Marya/Klavdia was far from her imagined form:

There wasn't anything mysterious, fatal, or sinister in the family of "Marya Ivanovna". The entire crime of these inoffensive people (I agree, it's monstrous) consisted of their mediocrity. They were unlucky with their writer-apartment mate who was visited by incomprehensible and probably frightening people (I think that they were afraid of us). But all this seemed different for Nina: there were intrigues, persecutions, and scheming. (par. 23)

For Dark, Sadur's response to this family was paranoid and overdramatic, but he was only a visitor and could leave as he wished. Interestingly, Sadur dedicated the story, "The Blue Hand" to Marya Ivanovna. If nothing else, life in a communal apartment was a source of inspiration for Sadur.

Grekova's and Sadur's literary styles and artistic aims differ significantly. Grekova's depiction of communal life is melancholic, but not really negative, while Sadur's is grotesque. For Grekova's heroine, Olga, the communal apartment allowed her to maintain close human contact after the loss of her family. The communal apartment described in Sadur's works is a purely dysfunctional space. Despite their dissimilar artistic visions, these writers give an idea of the effects of communal living on women. We can still see some of the positive aspects of communal living described by former

residents of communal apartments in Grekova's novella. For example, all of the women participate in raising Vadim, essential because of the shortage of state-sponsored daycare. Also, Olga believes if she had not lived in a communal apartment, she would have been utterly alone. Both authors portray the daily and seemingly insignificant conflicts among the women living in the communal apartments. In *A Ship of Widows*, the more negative characters such as Pavla and Kapa, are drawn more sympathetically than Sadur's Marya, but they are seen through Olga's eyes, not through the eyes of one of Sadur's characters. This is not only due to the difference between the two writers, but also, I believe, to Grekova's desire to create a character who remains spiritually generous and forgiving even after her life is so tragically reduced. Olga manages to construct a healing space for herself as much because of the communal apartment as in spite of it, but her apartment mate, Pavla, never creates a healthy space within the same walls. Sadur's more provocative works end badly: Vera of *Diamond Valley* dies, Valya of "The Blue Hand" magically disappears after murdering her tormentor, and Nina of "The Miraculous Signs" waits for an unlikely salvation. The mental and physical spaces these three characters inhabit are destructive rather than constructive.

Lynne Attwood writes that the Soviet press reported that women were the main participants of conflicts in communal apartments, which is not difficult to understand, since in Russia the domestic sphere is firmly associated with women (Housing 181). Women were legally required to participate within the public domain as workers, but their primary responsibility remained the family and the home. Susan Reid writes that "[w]omen, far more than men, were defined by everyday things, their worth registered by their domestic material environment and the quality of their housekeeping" (152). A woman living in a communal apartment would be twice stymied--first by Soviet society's devaluation of her public worth, and second, by her inability to control the only space in which she is considered to have value. Recently, there has been a spate of nostalgia for Soviet life in modern day Russia, including nostalgia for the communal apartment. Aleksandra Marinina, the best-selling Russian detective writer, recently participated with other popular Russian figures in a call-in radio show on the topic of the communal apartment ("Kommunalki"). Marinina herself grew up in a communal apartment and has positive memories of her experiences there. During the show she expressed her concern that the Russian people have forgotten how to live together since the demise of the Soviet Union. Her sentiments are echoed by many of those who sent messages or called during the show, some of whom feel isolated because of recent social and economic changes.

While many people still live in communal apartments, their main impediment to leaving is acquiring enough money to find a new place, rather than a lack of single-dwelling apartments, as was the case during Soviet times. Many of those who now fondly recall communal living are children who grew up in the communal apartments and remember a full and interesting life with many adult participants, such as Marinina. There are even a few women who have some positive memories of communal living. We can see a hint of why this could be in Irina Grekova's *Ship of Widows*, in the support the women provided each other at one time or another, but Sadur's representation of communal living is so grotesque that it is incomprehensible that any person, man or woman, would wax nostalgic about it. Neither of these authors' works contains descriptions of anything similar to the marvelous kitchen life that Larissa Lissytukina claims Russian women want to make a permanent part of their lives.

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