

The Gelfond-Savitsky-Titovets Family:

From Russia to the Texas Borderland

by Joyce Davidoff, with information provided by Lyuba Titovets and Marina Savitsky

To those of us who trace our Texas roots to the Galveston Movement 1907-1912, families arriving in the 1970s-1990s seem to be “new” immigrants. Here is one of their stories as relayed by El Paso artist Lyuba Titovets and her mother Marina Savitsky (Savitskaya in Russian.)

The family’s immigration story began decades ago when Marina’s grandfather’s family, the Gelfonds, moved from Lithuania to the Volga region of Russia. Due to regional pronunciation, the family name became Gelfond, both versions meaning “builder” in Yiddish.

Marina, born in Moscow before World War II, and her younger brother, Michael, born after the war, were educated in Soviet Russia – Marina at Leningrad Electrotechnical University and Michael at Leningrad’s State University. Marina’s education was in electrical engineering, and Michael’s in mathematics and computer science. Their parents were in the Russian army during World War II. Since their mother, Ruth, knew several languages specializing in English and Japanese, she was taken into the intelligence service after University graduation. Their father was taken into the maritime school during his third year at the Mining University. Nobody asked what they wanted to study or do; they were drafted into the Russian Army and went to the war.

It was very prestigious for a girl, especially a Jewish girl, to attend the Leningrad Electrotechnical Univer-



Marina Gelfond & Sergey Savitsky wedding 1964.

continued on page 11

Gelfond-Savitsky-Titovets, continued from page 10

sity and to succeed, as Marina did in academics and professionally. Upon graduation, students were required to work for three years, and the government chose where people worked. Marina was sent to the Department of the Navy as an Electrical Engineer. She continued working for the Navy and participated in the fabrication and installation of automatic computer control systems. In 1964, Marina married Sergey Savitsky who worked in the same unit. They each were required to sign documents stating they would not disclose Navy secrets or leave the country for fifteen to twenty years.

Based on standards at the time, the young couple lived relatively well in a two-room apartment “forever paying on credit” to an institu-



Standing: Ruth, Marina's mother; Bnoya/Bella, Marina's aunt. Seated: Sofia, Marina's grandmother; Marina as a baby, 1939.

tion which owned the building, and they acquired a car from friends who left Russia. Although they had their needs covered and were surrounded by people who cared and loved them, there was pressure to conform. Marina felt the pressure of state-sponsored antisemitism throughout her education and employment. By extension, Sergey, although not Jewish, felt it as well.

Marina's brother, Michael, was forced to leave Russia in the 1970s. He, his wife, and six-year-old daughter forfeited their Russian passports and belongings, and stateless, were housed in a Displaced Persons camp in Italy. The family ended up in California where Michael developed computer languages and early artificial intelligence.

When Michael left Russia, Sergey was fired from his job the next day. Marina maintained her employment

with the Department of Navy due to her needed skills and highest security clearance but was relocated to a low-level computer center. Sergey found a job as a chemical engineer working for a phosphorous mining company based in Kazakstan at half his previous salary. However, due to his skills, after two years he became chief of the company's laboratory.

Marina and Sergey's daughter, Lyuba, grew up in St. Petersburg/Leningrad, and was surrounded by European culture. She began art lessons at age five. At age seven, she was selected for a special children's art group. By fifth grade, she began attending an art school program after her public school classes. In eighth grade, she decided to pursue art studies with more preparatory classes at various institutions, to get ready for competitive placement later on.

After high school, out of thirty



Standing: Yulia Gelfond, Michael's daughter; Lyuba Titovets, Nina Titovets, Alexandra Gelfond, Michael's granddaughter; Anya Titovets. Seated: Jonathan Gelfond Michael's grandson; Sash Titovets; Marina Savitskaya; Michael & Lara Gelfond.

continued on page 12

students applying for one seat in the Educational State University College of Fine Arts comprehensive program, Lyuba was selected. There she met another art student, Aleksander (Sasha) Titovets. They married after Lyuba's graduation and lived with her grandmother Ruth, since it was impossible to obtain their own apartment. Lyuba had completed her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Fine Arts and was sent to work at a public school as an art teacher. She also worked at the newly established theater, "Mask," creating set designs and costumes for various productions. After three years, Lyuba was invited to apply and secured a position as an art historian in the University's new History of Culture Department.

Even with this level of education and success, Lyuba felt the ever-present stigma and fear of being Jewish.

With his own advanced degrees, Sasha became an Assistant Professor of painting at his alma mater. Though not Jewish, he was told, "You will never succeed as an artist."

Sasha's family was originally from Belarus. Soon after the Bolshevik revolution, an informer told Red Army soldiers that Sasha's grandfather had an icon in the home. His grandparents were deported east beyond Siberia with their five young children, one of which was Sasha's mother. During the trip, the grandmother and children were dropped off in the taiga woods with nothing but an axe. The grandfather was forced further on as planned. In the frozen work camp beyond Siberia, Sasha's



Aleksander (Sasha) Titovets with daughters, Nina and Anya.

grandfather built a school, started teaching there, and was well liked by other prisoners. He was never heard from again, and the family learned he was shot. With her strong will and hard work, Sasha's grandmother was able to raise all her children. Sasha ate his first apple when he was nine years old.

Marina's brother, Michael Gelfond, had been hired by the University of Texas at El Paso in the 1980s as a full Professor of Computer Science (then later by Texas Tech University in Lubbock, from which he eventually retired). For permission to visit Michael in El Paso, Marina and Lyuba were advised by the French cultural attache in Russia, with whom Marina was friends, on how to best complete the necessary paperwork. Without this help, Marina said she and Lyu-

ba would never have been granted permission to leave for a visit. While in transit in New York, Marina and Lyuba visited another friend who helped Marina apply for the family to immigrate to the United States.

By the early 1990s, the Soviet Union was unstable. As Perestroika and open elections approached, Marina's husband, Sergey, feared that if Gorbachev was not elected, a Stalin-type era would return. Sergey's father had been killed during Stalin's reign, and his mother had been sent to a camp for wives of "enemies of the people." State antisemitism had always been felt in Russia and was further increasing among the local population as the danger of a Stalin-like revival loomed resulting from the "coup"

of open elections. Under these circumstances and because of his own history, Sergey felt the family had to leave.

Marina had completed her fifteen-year obligation to the Navy; but Sergey had to complete his twenty-year obligation, even though he no longer worked for the Navy. Therefore, the family had to wait to leave Russia until Sergey's compulsory obligation was finished.

Emigrating from Russia was a two-year process requiring applicants to quit their jobs and get by as best they could while waiting for permission to leave. Parents had to give formal permission for their child to leave Russia, no matter the age of the child – so Sasha as an adult had to receive his parents' permission allowing him to emigrate. Persons leaving Rus-

continued on page 13



Lyuba & Aleksander (Sasha) Titovets wedding, 1987.

sia also were not allowed to bring a book or written piece published before 1950, nor any other item produced before that year. This condition forced the Savitsky-Titovets family to give rare books and heirlooms to relatives and friends.

During the two-year waiting period, Lyuba and Sasha taught art at much less politically oriented schools and children's clubs, and also sold some of their art pieces – even though inflation in Russia in the early 1990s was so high that nothing really “cost money,” and it was nearly impossible to sell anything. With help from

friends and relatives, some saved money, and their ambition to leave, the family managed. They left Russia together in May, 1992, with Sasha and Lyuba taking several of their paintings with permission from the government institution. While paying the required fees and selling her mother-in-law's antique furniture, Marina was able to cover the family's necessities.

Thus, Marina, Sergey, Lyuba, and Sasha came to the Texas Borderland to join Marina's brother, Michael, and family in El Paso. All they had to live on was \$50. Michael and the El Paso

Jewish community helped them get settled in a two-bedroom apartment. A volunteer from El Paso's Jewish Federation escorted Lyuba and Sasha to art galleries in El Paso, and Federation friends took them to galleries in Santa Fe and Taos. Sasha got a job framing artwork at an El Paso gallery where he began meeting other artists and establishing a network. Lyuba began teaching art at the El Paso Jewish Academy where she worked for five years. Both also taught art lessons privately as well as classes for children and adults at the El Paso Museum of Art, Las Cruces Museum of Art, and Las Cruces' Branigan Cultural Center. The couple found strong supporters of the area's arts community. They entered local juried art exhibitions, and Sasha won a first-place prize of \$5,000. Meanwhile, the couple's two daughters were born in El Paso.

Marina and Sergey were over-qualified for available jobs. White Sands Missile Range offered opportunities, for example, but security clearance was not available. Their ages and limited English skills also were obstacles. Marina began teaching Algebra I & II, pre-calculus and calculus at a private high school; worked a year as a programmer for a local company; and taught Russian at several local language schools. Among other jobs, Sergey worked for El Paso Natural Gas (El Paso Corporation) before the company relocated to Houston, and as a researcher at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). He passed away at age sixty-seven.

Lyuba and Sasha continued their work as artists and raised their two girls. They established their own private art school for all ages and abilities, and in recent years also began teaching through the internet reaching students at great distances. Over

continued on page 14

Gelfond-Savitsky-Titovets, continued from page 13

the years, they have given back to the community by creating posters for the El Paso Symphony Orchestra and El Paso Opera Company, various festivals and events, magazine covers and newspapers; and sculptures benefiting a local hospital and UTEP. Their older daughter now works in high tech for a global company in Scottsdale, Arizona. The younger daughter is a fine art photographer and works in social media, advertising, and event organizing for an El Paso company.

The following is drawn from an article in *Border Heritage* magazine, September, 2023:

Lyuba captures imaginative figurative works and color harmony, sometimes bringing to life the folk traditions of Russia. She describes her work as “too symbolic to be realistic and too realistic to be symbolic.” Her paintings are in numerous private

and public collections in the U.S. and abroad, and her work has been displayed at the Great American Artists Exhibition in Cincinnati, Ohio; and Westminster Abbey Exhibition, London. Lyuba has participated in many juried art shows, has illustrated books, and is included in the Archive of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Aleksander’s work reflects the Russian School of Oil Painting with a classical style integrating lyrical impressionism and strong realistic movement. Some of his most powerful pieces capture intricate harmony, contrasts of shadows and light, feeling and mood, sometimes displaying nostalgia for Russian landscapes along with “graciousness of the soul,” as he describes it. He says, “I try to find something in nature of calmness and some reason, and let’s say harmony....”




Art by Aleksander Titovets.



Art by Lyuba Titovets.

Aleksander has won Best of Show six times in the International Fine Art Competition. He has participated in competitions of the National Academy of Design in New York, Oil Painters of America, and National Oil and Acrylic Painters Society. He was honored in 1998 with the Artist’s Choice Award of the Artists of America national invitational exhibition. Both Lyuba and Aleksander have exhibited extensively throughout the Southwest, U.S., and internationally. They have appeared in many publications including “International Artist” magazine, which described Aleksander as “one of America’s leading impressionistic painters.” Among many other honors and highlights, he was chosen by the Smithsonian to paint the portrait of First Lady Laura Bush for the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. His paintings are in many public and private collections including those of Proctor & Gamble; Sophia Loren; and the Museum of His Majesty Juan Carlos, King of Spain.

As Aleksander acknowledges, he and Lyuba “...achieved the whole ‘American Dream.’” They may be visited at titovetsarts.com. 

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

Hyman J. Ettlinger - Renaissance Man

by Vickie Vogel

This column is based on information available in the TJHS archives, supplemented by some online research. If you have corrections or additions to this information, please submit them in writing to the TJHS editor at editor@txjhs.org. We want the TJHS archives to be as complete and accurate as possible.

Mathematics professor, All-American athlete, Jewish lay leader, textbook author, Phi Beta Kappa, bank director, football referee and coach - Dr. Hyman J. Ettlinger was truly a Renaissance man. Born Sep-

tember 1, 1889 to Abraham and Pearl Shucart Ettlinger in St. Louis, the second of six children (two girls, four boys), Hyman attended a Jewish day school and learned to read Hebrew. Upon graduation from high school as valedictorian, he received a four-year fellowship to Washington University in St. Louis, but he didn't need four years, finishing his BA in three. In addition to his academic studies, he was a member of the debate team and was a three-sport varsity player—football (All-American), basketball, and baseball. At one basketball game, he scored more points than the entire opposing team.

A Washington University mathematics faculty member secured a Harvard Club of St. Louis scholarship for him to pursue a graduate degree in mathematics at Harvard, where he also became interested in the Menorah Movement.¹ Originating at Harvard in 1906-07 out of a desire to establish a Jewish cultural society open

to students and faculty,² Ettlinger helped organize a Menorah Society at the University of Texas after he joined the Department of Applied Mathematics faculty in 1913. There were only thirty Jewish students at the time and only a handful of Jewish faculty members. The Menorah Society was succeeded by Hillel in 1929 and Ettlinger chaired the committee to raise funds for a campus home in 1930.

Ettlinger remained at UT for 56 years as a teacher, switching to the Department of Pure Mathematics in 1953, and chairing the mathematics department for twenty-five years.³ He served on various committees to raise funds for scholarships, vetted applicants for financial awards, and helped students find short-term employment. Ettlinger and a colleague wrote the calculus textbook used in the introductory course. His research was in differential equations and the calculus of variations. He was associated with the UT Defense Research Laboratory where he worked on aerodynamics.⁴

In 1914, 16-year-old Texan⁵ Rosebud Segal entered the University of Texas, and shortly after her graduation in 1918 with a degree in botany, she and Hyman married. They had two children, Yetta Pauline who died at age two in 1926,⁶ and in 1925, Martin Grossman Ettlinger.⁷ Hyman, Rosebud, and Martin were all Phi Beta Kappa.⁸ Rosebud served as president of the University Ladies' Club and was active in other organizations.

In the summers of 1919-1920, Hyman returned to Harvard to complete his doctoral degree, around the time Harvard set a quota for Jews. Ettlinger wrote of no problems at Harvard or UT, except for one occa-

MATHEMATICS



Hyman Joseph Ettlinger (second row, first on left) and the math faculty at the University of Texas. Image included in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107 as seen at <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/ettlinger-hyman-joseph>

continued on page 16

sion when, as assistant football coach, a caretaker refused to unlock a door so he could get a whistle. The caretaker said he wouldn't do it for anyone "and certainly not for a Jewish..." at which point the 210-pound Ettlinger floored him, largely to provide an example to his watching players.⁹

Also in 1919, Hyman and Rosebud bought what is now known as the Worrell-Harris-Ettlinger House built in 1912 in the Duval area just north of the UT campus, for \$4,000. The house is part of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the Craftsman bungalow style. The neighborhood was popular with professors and staff. Rosebud's botany degree was put to use designing the landscaping, including a stone wall Hyman built around the property to keep the cows out of Rosebud's garden. The house is on the National Register of Historic Places and was featured in an episode of HGTV's "If Walls Could Talk."¹⁰

Ettlinger integrated sports and

math. "You have to count to play football and you have to count in mathematics," he said.¹¹ An assistant coach of the UT varsity football team 1917-1919, he served as Director of Intercollegiate Athletics in 1928-1930. He was freshman football and basketball coach for two years (1913-1916).¹² His football squad never lost a game. "We tied one game though, 0-0. We would have won that one, but my quarterback disobeyed me."¹³ In 1931, Ettlinger arranged the only football game to date between UT and Harvard, which Harvard won 35-7.¹⁴

Ettlinger refereed many high school and college football games within a hundred mile radius of Austin, where he often addressed a school assembly or math class before the game, or became the luncheon speaker for a local service club. His topic was often a plea for stronger support of math or science. "At one time I refereed so many A&M games that they called me the

twelfth man on the squad," he said.¹⁵

In 1931, he was head linesman for a game between LSU and Arkansas at the Louisiana State Fair. After kickoff, a squat man in the stands starting leading the fans in yells and passing out dollar bills to band members. Ettlinger stopped the game and walked over to the man - Governor Huey Long. His six-foot frame towering over the governor, Ettlinger told him to sit down. Long stood silent. Ettlinger pointed to a seat and said, "Governor, I mean it." The Governor sat down.¹⁶

Ettlinger was an official at the spring Texas Relays for many years, as well as the interscholastic track meets. He was a charter and life member of the Southwest Conference Football Officials Association. In 1973, he was elected to the Longhorn Hall of Honor.¹⁷ He maintained his lifelong interest in college sports, although he began to think of it as too professionalized. Hyman Ettlinger was a great athlete, who regularly played handball and swam until late in life.

Although there were few Jewish faculty members at UT when Ettlinger arrived, they tended to be active in the Jewish community. Hyman and Rosebud were active members of Austin's Beth Israel where he taught Sunday School and served as secretary of the congregation from 1927 to 1945, and as president around 1938. For a year in the 1920s when there was no rabbi, Ettlinger led services each week. For ten years or so, he was a "circuit rider," traveling to small congregations without a rabbi to lead services, especially High Holy Day services, including towns as far as Palestine,¹⁸ Brownsville (1918),¹⁹ and Wichita Falls.²⁰ In 1951, he presided over the dedication of Temple Israel of Schulenburg, remarking that some day archeologists studying the area would discover the Jewish star mounted on its western wall and realize



Ettlinger in his office with graduate students, 1963. On the right is A. D. Stewart. Others not identified. Photo by Benny Springer. H. J. Ettlinger Photographs, di_07302, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin

continued on page 17