

Elena Bairamian in conversation with Alla Vronskaya

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-- *Elena, let's first talk about your mother, architect Anna Val.*

My mother was born in 1925 in Baku to a secularized Jewish family. Her father, Alexander Val, was an engineer, and her mother was trained as a dentist. Mom spent her childhood in Baku. There were no architects in her family. Her sister became a doctor (and would later participate in the Second World War as an army doctor). And my mother, as a child, dreamt about becoming an aircraft designer. She even transferred into an evening school to be able to enroll into the aviation technical college as quickly as possible. But by that time the technical college had moved to Tbilisi, and her parents would not let her go that far. So my mother returned to her old school and after finishing it entered the Architecture department of the Azerbaijan Industrial Institute, where she studied in 1943-1948, graduating with honors. Strange as it may seem, my architect relatives came not from my mother's but from my father's side, although he was not an architect. Thanks to them, I grew up in an architectural environment.

-- *Please tell about your father and this environment.*

My father, Viktor Fuchs, was a structural engineer who worked in industry. Like both of his brothers, he served in the military during the Second World War. He fought in the infantry and was left disabled after a severe wound in 1944, followed by numerous surgeries. Despite this, he received higher education. He was very good in calculations and was often a member of state commissions: if accidents at petrochemical refineries happened because of structural flaws, he was sent to investigate their causes. I remember his trips to Poland, to somewhere in the Far East, to Angarsk [in Siberia] and Novopolotsk [in Belarus], where he built oil refineries...

Dad was very friendly with his cousin, the famous architect Felix Novikov. Novikov, also a native of Baku, studied at Moscow Architectural Institute. His wife, Galya Zhirmunskaya, was also an architect and was building in Moscow. Besides, Novikov's maternal brother was the Crimean architect Viktor Melik-Parsadanov, the husband of architect Maya Melik-Parsadanova, whom we also met. And another cousin of Dad's was a son of Boris Lvovich Vannikov, the atomic scientist, thrice a hero of socialist labor—Felix Novikov designed a monument to him in Baku. His family was friendly with the Kosygins [the family of the prime minister of the USSR Aleksey Kosygin]. We met his daughter Lyusya and her husband, Dzhermen Gvishiani, at their house.

-- *Where did your mother work?*

At first she worked at Bakgiprogor [BakiDovlatLayiha] together with architects Vadim Shulgin, Boris Ginzburg, Irena Orlova-Stroganova, and Martin Tovmasyan, who was the head of their studio. Later he unfortunately had to leave Baku. Besides, Leah Pavlova, who later married Leonid Pavlov, started with my mother's group. Another Baku native, after working at Bakgiprogor [BakiDovlatLayiha], Leah Pavlova moved to do her doctorate in Moscow, where Leonid Pavlov lectured. Although he already had a grown-up son, he fell in love with her and they married. Leonid Nikolayevich was a charming man, always wondering and smiling. We became family friends with the Pavlovs. He was mighty, while Leah Pavlova was tiny in stature, but just as charming. She possessed incredible energy and ability to work. Their daughter Alexandra Pavlova, whom I knew as a child, dreamed of becoming a ballerina, but had to abandon that dream because of her health. She, too, became an architect, and died at only 49. We have several works by Leah Pavlova: wonderful etchings and drawings, which she gifted my mother.

-- *What was your mother's position?*

In Bakgiprogor [BakiDovlatLayiha], as well as in Moscow Giprogor later on, she was the chief architect of projects

(glavnyi arkhitektor proektov, GAP). She was able—and that during the Soviet period!—to find interesting clients and, what was the most important, to obtain funding from the ministries. My colleagues affectionately called her “our Margaret Thatcher”, because of her energy and forcefulness. She was often away on business trips.

-- What was it like to grow up as the daughter of “Margaret Thatcher”?

Mom was an extraordinary person who knew how to get her way. For example, when I was four years old, I started stuttering very badly, being unable to breathe or pronounce a single word. Baku doctors did not have another advice for my mother except “Find her friends who wouldn’t make fun of her.” Instead, mom grabbed me by hand and took me to Moscow. There, she found a group led by a doctor who had a unique method of working with stuttering children. We had to come every day; the course lasted a month or two, and my mother attended every session and wrote everything down. I got rid of stuttering, and when we returned to Baku, it was my mother who cured many other stuttering children using this method.

-- How did your mother manage to combine work and family?

Mom did not cook much, this was something that my father did. Besides, we lived with my paternal grandparents. My grandmother, a fashion designer, was very businesslike and didn’t cook much either though. But when she cooked, she cooked Georgian food, because she was from Georgia. I learned to cook very early, and ever since I cook Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian food. What saved us back then was that a couple of times a week my grandfather or I would bring take-away lunches from the nearby Baku Hotel. And the rest of the time we ate salads: the beautiful Baku tomatoes and bread -- that’s all one needs for lunch.

-- Could you please tell more about your grandmother?

Grandmother worked at the House of the Model, and I loved visiting her at work, where I could participate in fashion shows backstage. I used to help the models change very quickly, making sure there were no bloopers. Now, watching the (rather silly) show with Heidi Klum, I am nostalgic for the time with my grandma. It was so archaic, but everything was wearable and practical. Now the imagination of designers is boundless, and yet boundaries are necessary. I think so.

-- Do you sew?

Sewing has never appealed to me; I lack the patience. But my father could sew: he did not like to, but he could. I could not, although I found the process itself to be very interesting: how everything was cut out, how material transformed into a thing. And much later, living and working in the GDR, I knitted many good and beautiful things.

-- Let’s return to your grandmother...

In addition to her work at the House of the Model, Grandma took private sewing commissions for Baku elites. She dressed famous Baku theater actresses. Everything took place in our apartment. My grandmother had an amazing vanity cabinet in the living room. There was also a big folding table that could fit all the patterns (on holidays, our whole big family would use this table for meals). Grandma had three or four seamstresses working for her. She would meet a client, discuss the commission, make a sketch and the pattern. She then cut out the parts and gave them to the seamstresses, who sewed the piece. The seamstresses worked at home, bringing things to try on, and then taking them back home to finish sewing. Then my grandmother would do the fitting and give the piece back to the seamstresses. She was very good at sewing, but had no time for it. Besides, Grandma always embroidered and beaded collars, buckles and belts herself -- this was in fashion then. A napkin embroidered by my grandmother in Richelieu still hangs on my wall today.

-- *Was your grandmother's secret business ever uncovered?*

Her clients were women whose husbands could travel abroad, to Iran and Turkey, for example. From there they would bring breathtakingly beautiful fabrics. We, my grandmother, our neighbor, and Feliks Novikov's aunt kept these fabrics at home. Twice the OBKhSS [Socialist Property Theft Control Department] came with a search order. My grandma told them: "This is dowry for my granddaughters"—and that is sacred in Baku. And as she kept the fabrics in different places, there was never too much in any one place, so they could not prove her guilty. I had two or three of her dresses. One of them, made of a stunning pink guipure from somewhere from somewhere in Syria or Turkey or Iran, I still have.

-- *What projects did your mother work on at Bakgiprogor [BakiDovlatLayiha]?*

The main one was, perhaps, the Baku Sea Port, which was opened in 1970. During the construction of the Sea Port, Mom often took me with her when she went to supervise construction works. I found it fascinating. The construction site had no ladders, only gangways, and I climbed on them with my helmet, feeling like a fish in the water. So found out that I was not afraid of heights, and I learned about construction safety. Finishing work, especially in the interior, intrigued me most of all. Later on, when renovating the multiple apartments in which I lived, I did everything with my own hands. Except perhaps for tiling and parquet flooring: I just did not have the patience for it.

-- *Is that when you decided to become an architect?*

Actually, in 7th or 8th grade, I really wanted to go to the Stroganov School [of Painting], but then it turned out that it required a portfolio and everything else that I didn't have. I drew a little bit, but not that much. It remained a childhood dream.

-- *Did your mother's connections help you become an architect?*

I entered the Department of Architecture at the Azerbaijan Polytechnic Institute in 1967. Since I applied under my father's name, no one knew that I was Anna Val's daughter. What helped was that I had previously studied drawing at the House of the Architects in Baku. At the entrance exams at the institute, I received five A-s: there were two exams in drafting, two in drawing and one in math. The physics exam was the last one. The examiner told me: "You gave a B answer, but if you want to get an A, tell me, what is the dew point." I answered something. He asked again, "Are you sure?" "Yes," I said. "You are wrong, but I will give you an A for your confidence." So that's how I got in. Our group was the second Russian-speaking group in the Department of Architecture.

The pedagogues were excellent. I am very grateful to the wonderful teachers: the art history lecturer Gorchakov (who had also taught my mother) and the architectural historian Lev Gaykovich Mamikonov, whose absolutely brilliant phrase I still remember: "You can eat one cutlet in one minute, but not sixty cutlets in sixty minutes..." He asked us to do sketch and copy plans and facades of important buildings from books and albums: you had to do it regularly – not just a couple of days before the exam. Since the institute was polytechnic, the Department of Architecture had a technical focus. In contrast to MARKhI, where I later transferred, we studied a lot of engineering. They gave us deeper knowledge on constructions, which was interesting for me, though I never became a construction engineer.

-- *Your father's influence?*

Sometimes I asked him to help me with the mechanics of materials. He would say, "This is how you do it, but calculate yourself. I was great in metal constructions—and in music, too, I like heavy metal [laughs]. But wood constructions did not go so well.

-- *Why did you later transfer to MARKhI?*

In 1970, Dad was offered a job in Moscow, at the Design Institute, as the chief construction engineer. In 1971, we moved in with my father. We received a two-room apartment. My mom got a job at the central office of Giprogor, in the work-

shop of Anatoly Melik-Pashayev. And I transferred to MARKhI, from where I graduated with a diploma, although without honors.

-- How did you feel about that move?

It was not easy. The Baku people had a very special upbringing, and regardless of nationality, that upbringing was similar: strict and archaic.

-- Could you elaborate?

For example, among young people, it was absolutely impossible that a boy would take a girl's hand. According to the unwritten rule, if a boy looked at a girl, she had to avert her eyes -- because if she didn't, he would follow her, and it would be very difficult to get rid of him. We lived near the Baku Hotel. There were blonde girls from Russia, looking for adventures. Azerbaijani men stood in crowds under their windows, calling for them, and they would come out. So that this wouldn't happen to our girls, they had to avert their gaze. But if a girl looked away, the guy would leave her alone.

-- Was this rule in effect at the Azerbaijan Polytechnic Institute?

No, that was not the case at the Institute. There was a higher level there. It was a different environment, an urban one. At the institute, boys and girls studied and spent time together, were friends, went to parties, everybody was equal. Among us were construction engineering, architecture, and mechanical engineering students, and we all went to the beach together -- not just boys and girls, but also students of all nationalities.

-- Could you please tell about how different nationalities got along in Baku and at the Polytechnic Institute?

Baku had been a very international city since the time of the Nobel brothers. People came there from everywhere. In general, all nationalities lived peacefully, although there was always animosity between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis. For example, in my mother's group in Bakgiprogor [BakiDovlatLayiha], there was a couple, one from Armenia and the other from Azerbaijan. Their parents did not give them permission to get married. The Armenian family was not too harsh, but the Azerbaijani father said: "Only over my dead body." And so the couple had to wait until he died, and only then did they get married. That's the kind of thing that happened. At some level this enmity was suppressed from above, and people themselves were mostly aware of the need not to cross certain boundaries. In our class and in our group there were both Azerbaijanis and Armenians, and everything was fine, because they respected certain limits and never insulted each other.

-- How did you feel at MARKhI?

It was very hard. At MARKhI, I was a complete stranger. I was never accepted into the group: they already had their own clan, their own structure, and I couldn't fit in. I had a Baku accent, and they made fun of it. For example, people from Baku people spoke Russian very correctly. We always pronounced the letter Ya: IYagushka [frog] instead of ligu-shka [as the word is pronounced in Moscow], zaYats [rabbit] instead of zaits. So my classmates carefully listened every time I spoke. For example, in the cafeteria they sold cakes called Yazyk [Tongue]. I would say: "Could I have a yazuk, please?" and they would burst into laughing. Then I started saying, "Could I have that long thing, please?" In order to make friends, following the example of my classmates, I started smoking. The only bright exception was Masha Kaganovich-Minervina, the granddaughter of Lazar Kaganovich, who also studied in our group. Masha was a charming, modest, quiet and wonderful person, and also smoked a lot. I could talk to her, and visited their home a couple of times. I met Masha's mother, Kaganovich's daughter. She was also a very nice, modest woman.

-- What did you do after graduating from MARKhI?

I was assigned to Mosproekt-2, to the workshop of Andrey Meerson.

-- Could you please tell more about this famous workshop?

Meerson himself appeared extremely rarely and worked mostly only with his GAPs [chief architects of projects]: Elena Podolskaya, Viktor Volkov, and others. I only saw Meerson three or four times. I remember the workshop: a huge hall divided by cabinets. Each of the GAPs had her or his own group: two to five architects and several draftsmen. In addition, there were mechanical engineers, construction engineers, and other specialists. This allowed the workshop to conduct the full range of works, from design to construction.

-- Was that specific to Meerson's workshop?

This approach was characteristic of Soviet architectural education and design in general. This "universalism" was very different from the way German architects work today, when the architecture office employs only architects, while construction engineering is outsourced. When I moved to Germany in the 1990s and became an architect here, the head of my office was always surprised that I could do so many different things. Of course, this was partly because of his stereotypes about the Soviet Union and Soviet education, but it was also because German education is considerably more restricted: architects, designers, construction engineers, and interior designers know nothing beyond their narrow field.

-- On what projects did you work at Mosproekt?

When I joined the office, they were finishing working drawings for the brick high-rises along Leningradskoe Highway in front of the River Port. The project included four towers with the common stylobate, in which the services were located, and many corner glass surfaces. Meerson came up with a modified Flemish masonry work, for which I made the working drawings. It wasn't a particularly creative job, but I got a good hand at drafting. Interestingly, I count very badly in my head (this is my psychological peculiarity, and none of my colleagues was aware of it), but I count very well with a slide rule and a calculator. And so, because I always had a calculator at hand, I was assigned to check the chains, and I found errors when something did not add up. Chains were complicated, and so were the patterns of bricks, which shifted in each row. Besides, I had to calculate all the angles, which required special care.

Then there was the reconstruction of the Dynamo Stadium stands for the Olympics. It was not very interesting. I took measurements and drafted. I gained experience working with the subcontractors and learned the technique of rapid measurement.

-- What else did you learn from Meerson?

Meerson's workshop was famous for its incredible drafting technique and a special typeface that was unique to it. I have been using this typeface all my life. At the drawing contests at Mosproekt, the draftswomen from Meerson's office always received first places.

-- With which GAP did you work?

First I worked with Elena Podolskaya. Then Volkov, who was also from Baku, took me to his team.

-- What can you tell about Podolskaya?

She was a very knowledgeable professional, even a workaholic: all of her life was in work. To me it seemed to me that she lacked the human side: when I was pregnant, for example, she did not pay any attention to it. Even Volkov somehow treated me more humanly.

-- For how long did you work at Mosproekt and why did you leave?

I worked there for three years after graduating, which included a year of maternity leave. When I returned from maternity leave, I got a nanny. But since the nanny came for eight hours a day, and we lived in Khimki, from where it took me an hour to get to Mosproekt, I had to switch to a six-hour workday. Then we sent our daughter Julia to kindergarten and

she began to stutter, just like me. She needed a lot of attention. I took her for daily sessions at the same center where my mother had once taken me: like me, Julia completely cured. Then came after-school activities, figure skating. The famous trainer Tatyana Tarasova herself considered Julia, but did not take her, despite her good skills, because she believed she would grow too tall (she never did). Anyway, I looked for an opportunity to work from home, and I found one at Mosgorbytproekt.

-- What did that organization do and what was your role there?

Mosgorbytproekt was a much smaller and less prestigious place to work than Mosproekt. Our main task was to design the interiors of commercial and public buildings. The institute employed five architects, each of whom was responsible for her or his own project and had one or two draftsmen. How exactly I found this job, I don't remember. It turned out that they were looking for an interior designer.

-- Was it difficult to turn into an interior designer?

I had never worked on interiors before, so I had to learn along the way. At MARKhI, I learned representation techniques: imagination was always running wild there. The leader of our group was [Armenian architect] Stepan Satunts, a very interesting and original architect, who taught us a lot. I was married by then, and had an Armenian last name, and he treated me very well. I remember how once, during a project review, we felt the smell of toothpaste. It turned out that it was Masha Kaganovich-Minervina's project: she squeezed paint into a tube of toothpaste and made embossed clouds that way. From Satunts I learned how to show marble and other representational skills.

-- How did you like the work at Mosgorbytprojekt?

The work was mostly not so interesting, but I tried my best. We reconstructed domestic services complexes, bathhouses, and hairdressing salons. I did measurements, drawings, approvals from various authorities. Fire safety and sanitary norms were particularly important. I received a lot of experience. But most importantly, I was able to take our daughter to the anti-stuttering group. I worked from home. By then, my husband received a small apartment in the center of Moscow, right across from the Soviet Army Museum. I took a few thick dictionaries, put them under a board, and that was my workspace. I had to bend all the time, and my lower back was chronically sore. But I had a good reputation in Mosgorbytproekt, so some people even envied me. I just came there and brought the interior designs for approval. I did the measurements on my own, then did the scale drawings, drafting, chose colors.

--Which projects do you remember?

When reconstructing the hair salon on Kuznetsky Most street, I tried to integrate the existing "Venetian" glass with etching and engraving and the Art Nouveau mahogany panels into the new interior. There were wall elevations and perspectives.

The famous Charodeika [Enchantress] hair salon on Kalininsky avenue was also reconstructed for the Olympics. The work was done jointly with the German firm Wella. They sent us all the documentation for the equipment, including its coloring plans, which is very important for the selection of wall colors and wall decoration. Based on the color of the equipment, I chose the color for the walls. Everything was coordinated, paint barrels and materials were delivered to the site. And right then arrived the equipment. Out of curiosity I opened the cardboard packaging and--Oh my God!--the color of the equipment was completely different! What do I do? Kalininsky Avenue - the face of new Moscow! I had to urgently order some additional pigments to the already arrived paint buckets, and, much to the painters' surprise, stirred the paint myself. Moreover, I went to a Christmas-tree toys factory and arranged that they would bring us their cullet free of charge. The cullet was delivered, I further broke it down so that it got smaller, I damped all that into the paint bucket--the painters' eyes were round. "Now take up the rollers" I commanded. It turned out great. The end wall in the waiting and check-in area shimmered magically. Safety precautions were also taken into account: since the wall was a

little prickly in places, I added a wooden panel behind the backs of the chairs.

Once I worked with the French: the company Yves Rocher. They came over. Our management very much wanted to give them a hair salon in the center of Moscow, so that they would decorate it in an Art Nouveau or Art Deco style, but they really wanted it to look modern. They were very amused by all of our norms and requirements. They needed mirrors in the evacuation routes, and carpeting. I tried to explain that this was not allowed, and that wouldn't be approved either. A hair salon requires frequent wet cleaning...

We also did interiors of bathhouse lobbies and domestic services centers.

-- What was your husband's occupation?

My husband is a clarinetist. He worked in the orchestra of the Honor Guard, and saw all the celebrities who came to Moscow. He was drafted into the Army, and stayed there for extra duty for the sake of the apartment, and when he got the apartment, an opportunity arose to join the Central Ensemble of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG) in the GDR and we went there.

-- What did that ensemble do?

They toured all over the GDR without end. Songs, dances of all the peoples of the USSR! Joint performances with German military bands and artists. Meetings with [Erich] Honecker. It was a whole epoch.

-- Where did you live and what did you do in East Germany?

We lived in Wünsdorf, the headquarters of the Soviet troops in the GDR. When we arrived, I immediately got a job in the Design and Survey Department, which was sort of a branch of Voennoproekt. At first we lived in the so-called Generals' Village. This was a group of former generals' mansions, which were converted into two-, three-, four-apartment houses. Each apartment had a big kitchen, a bathroom, and several rooms, and was shared by more than one family. We had two rooms, and another family, also with a child--one room, but bigger than ours. They were Muscovites too, and we got along. We shared the bathroom and a big kitchen with two stoves. Other families were housed in the former barracks, where each space became a one-, two-, or three-room apartment with a separate bathroom.

For some reason employees were not allowed to bring their families, but the military were. Employees came for 3 years, and could extend the contract for another year. And the military came for 5 years, and could also extend the contract for another year. But no one managed to stay longer than that.

-- What was life in Wünsdorf like?

It was like miniature copy of the Soviet Union on the territory of the GDR. I can say that everyone was friends there. Of course there were troubles, quarrels, but it was more about everyday life... My daughter went to school at the military base: most of the teachers there were from Ukraine, my daughter even acquired a Ukrainian accent. And I still use many Ukrainian words that I learned from her. We made a lot of friends from Siberia, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltics, Belarus, and Central Asia. There was one throat singer from Yakutia: the Germans were absolutely delighted. Thanks to these friendships, we traveled a lot around the Soviet Union. We went to Kiev, where the family of my daughter's closest friend lived, to the Baltics, to Chişinău. The friend whom we visited there later became the minister of culture of Moldova. Everyone we were treated really well. This was at the end of the 80s, and Moldova was already in turmoil. My daughter and I could go out only when accompanied by our Moldovan friends. We spent the first three or four days in the village, with one dancer's family, in an authentic Moldovan house, where they made their own wine, and then we were "handed" to another family.

-- Who were your colleagues at the Design and Survey Department?

Some of the architects were employees, i.e. they came specifically for the job. There was an architect from Moscow,

another from Leningrad, there were design engineers from Leningrad, and a lot of people from Ukraine. There was a couple from Bila Tserkva, wonderful people. He was the head of our group. I worked with him for a year and a half, then their term ended and they left.

-- What was your role at the Design and Survey Department?

I worked in a group of architects and draftsmen. There were endless new constructions and reconstructions, redevelopments. Residential buildings, Soldiers' and Officers' Clubs, canteens, and field trips to construction sites. Frequent "shows" for our officers and commander in chief. Moreover, the orders of another show always came in unexpectedly and at the end of the day, and were due tomorrow! Or in a couple of days at best. We worked until dawn. Blueprints were not yet finished, but construction was already in full swing. As the musicians say, "playing at sight." Unfortunately I could not take any of those drawings with me.

But most of all I worked on reconstructions. Soviet military bases were usually located on the territory of pre-existing military facilities. So we had to rebuild what was there. Wünsdorf had been a military base since 1910, and the old buildings had to be reconstructed.

-- Did you have access to building documentation?

Partly. The officers had access, and they sometimes brought the documentation, but mostly everything was done by measurement. You had to knock on walls to see which one was load-bearing, where you could make an opening, etc.

-- What was the new construction like?

They were mostly three- to four-story panel buildings--like "Khrushchevkas" but lower. Every once in a while we would build a store. Once, two copies of a great book called *The Architecture of Chinese Gardens* were delivered into one of those stores that we had designed. Each copy was 100 marks: one was bought by the architect from Leningrad and the other by me. I still have it.

-- What was unique about designing for the army?

First of all, we worked with different types of buildings. Take, for example, a soldiers' canteen: it required a large hall, where tables had to be arranged so that everyone had easy access, and a large kitchen that met the technological needs. The soldiers' canteen had to be big enough for a company to enter quickly, eat quickly, and exit quickly. It had large recreational areas. I built such soldiers' canteen in Schwerin. Unlike the soldiers' canteen, the officers' canteens were more chamber-like, not unlike a restaurant: people walked in in no rush.

-- How free were you to determine the style of the new buildings?

All new buildings were to be built in the "Mies van der Rohe" style: steel supports and large glazed surfaces. This style and technology were set from above.

-- Who did the construction work and where did the building materials come from?

The construction battalion built it. We had our own construction battalion in Wünsdorf. All the materials came from the GDR: panel elements, roofing materials, ground slabs. Nothing was imported from the USSR.

-- Did you have contact with German architects and locals?

No, not at all. Out of the checkpoint to the nearest store, where they sold very tasty ice cream--and that was it. Rarely there were the most elementary contacts, for example, about sizes. I knew absolutely no German. My daughter started learning German in the Soviet school in Wünsdorf though. And once, there was a dinner party with some kind of twin organization. We were warned: do not talk to them, nothing beyond strictly necessary. The food was not very tasty, and

somehow it was not interesting. I never went to such events again. People were completely different: different gestures, different behavior, everything is different. It reminded me of Stierlitz [character of Soviet spy films].

-- Were you able to travel outside the military unit?

Yes, we toured all over the GDR. By then, the Friedrichstadt-Palast had been reconstructed. It was a unique and beautiful building. I often went there for performances. A féerie. Moulin Rouge. Gaucho from South America, a Music Hall from Germany, some kind of water revue. We even attended a nighttime revue. We walked back at dawn past Alexanderplatz, nightingales were singing! Unforgettable... Restored Schauspielhaus. We attended concerts there. Touring performance, by ticket only, I managed to get a sit at the top, on the window sill: "Bachianas Brasileiras" of Heitor Villa-Lobos... Bach's St. Matthew Passion in the Marienkirche in the center of Berlin. Multi-hour, an organ, a choir, a miracle. For my daughter, visits to the zoo, to the pool with different "water treatments" in Berlin: there, you could eat, rest, and get back into the water. Life was full to the brim. We got visits from artists from the Union, as they called the USSR. Rosenbaum, Shainsky, Solovyanenko, artists from Roskontsert and Moskontsert...

-- Were you allowed to travel on your own?

On your own you could visit cities, but it was absolutely forbidden to go to Berlin. One had to change trains in Berlin-Schönefeld. On the platform where commuter trains to central Berlin stopped, a Soviet patrol was always on duty -- soldiers with white belts. They were very adept at catching our compatriots. It was simple: German women were plainly dressed, almost no makeup, no gold or other flashy jewelry. Some of our women, myself included, learned this quickly. Others were still in all of their "regalia," so it was easy to spot them. Then they and their husbands were reprimanded by their commanders. After a few times they faced a terrible punishment: deportation to the motherland. Such cases were few though. On my numerous trips to Berlin I used to think: I don't know Russian! A patrol could quietly say a few phrases in Russian, such as: "Madam, your purse is open", or "Madam, you dropped something," and whoever started fussing and turning around was caught. I passed with my head held high, calmly, without fuss, and with absolutely no understanding of the "great Russian language"! We always had to obtain a travel permit, and it inevitably contained the phrase: "Permitted to pass through the city of Berlin without the right of entering the city."

-- What was Berlin like?

Berlin (like all of the GDR) was clean and orderly, no homeless or destitute people. By the end of our stay, the Nikolai quarter was restored: it was so beautiful. In Dresden, the Frauenkirche was still in ruin. Of course, the border wall ran through Berlin. The Reichstag was there, without the dome, the Brandenburg Gate was in "no man's land." One could not come close to them. In 2010, for my 60th birthday, we made me a gift: a trip to Berlin with a visit to the Frida Kahlo's retrospective. The feeling of going through the Brandenburg Gate and looking at it from the other side, from behind, was unforgettable! The Palace of the Republic was gone, the Reichstag got its new dome. We waited in line for a long time to enter the exhibition, and I bought a thick catalog. I had been familiar with Kahlo's and Rivera's work for a long time and was very impressed. While I was standing in line, I suddenly noticed the "footprint" of the wall on the ground. It made me think of the outlines of the Bastille in Paris. We stayed in a hotel near the Ostbahnhof. We walked all around the city center, in the eastern—"our"--part. It was dirty, there were homeless people, it became like everywhere else.

-- And what happened to Wünsdorf?

We visited Wünsdorf on the same trip. It was like coming back home. Our house still stands, it is occupied, new balconies have been added. A lot of it was rebuilt, but a lot remained "closed zones," with trees sprouted through the buildings. For some reason I thought of Chernobyl, where I have never been. By the way, the building of the Design and Survey Department, where I once worked, was repurposed as an unemployment and social security office. I visited it too. Our daughter went to Wünsdorf a few years ago. She climbed over the fences, like a stalker, took photos of the ruins of her

school, of her classroom, of the House of the Officers building, of the Ensemble building.

-- Did you enjoy living and working in the GDR?

Frankly, those six years were the best of our lives. We were young, we had interesting jobs, we had a good income, we saw a lot, life was full, we believed in ourselves!

-- Where did you work after returning to Moscow?

After I came back to Moscow, I returned to “my” Mosgorbytproekt. But now I had to go to work every day. Most of the commissions had to do with reconstruction and redevelopment. Occasionally -- with interiors, and there was a lot of designer’s supervision. By then, the Giprogor architect Andrey Kosinsky created his own architectural organization, called EkoStil, and enticed my mother, whom he highly appreciated, to work with him, and she brought me there. The team was small: apart from Kosinsky himself, it included Nikolay Mushegovich Misropov, a first-class structural engineer and an absolutely interesting person, a Baku Armenian, who had once worked together with my father; another designer; a couple of architects, and a couple of draftsmen - ten people in total, if not less. That was a wonderful team, and I enjoyed working there.

-- On what commissions did you work there?

When I came, the team was working on the masterplan for the center of Abakan [the capital of the autonomous Republic of Khakassia, Russia] with the design of individual buildings. As far as I know, that work remained on paper. There was a residential building with communal services, a kindergarten, a school, a hotel, a café, a dance club, etc. Kosinsky sketched it out, and then the architects developed individual parts. “My” building was the school with an astronomy (!?) focus. Kosinsky’s first sketches were followed by the stage of conceptual design. It was very interesting. After several months of work, of debate and decision-making, Kosinsky said: “And she is a delicate [architect]!” The phrase was addressed to me. This was very flattering: getting such a “stamp” from the maestro.

-- Were local climate and conditions taken into consideration?

Yes, of course. Kosinsky was very good at it. He had worked in Tashkent before: he went there for a couple of years after the 1966 earthquake but stayed for 15 years. There, he had learned how to work in the local style. And now he came up with the idea of using the yurt motif, which is characteristic of Siberia.

-- Did you go to Abakan?

No, I personally did not.

-- Did you collaborate with local specialists?

No. Collaboration with local specialists was very rare. For example, when my mother worked in Dagestan, where she designed a sanatorium for the Council of Ministers on the Kayakent beach, she often went there herself.

-- What prompted you to move to the reunited Germany?

Everything was falling apart: the monetary reform, the empty counters, where for some reason there were bras instead of food—there better was nothing! At work, we were signing up for [food] “orders,” which were also limited, so we had to share them. The term “persons of Caucasian nationality” appeared. Our daughter was admitted to the seventh grade of the same school where she had studied as a first-grader. A boy from the parallel class threw her a phrase: “Go back to where you came from.” Judging by the last name, he meant Armenia, where we (unfortunately) have never been. My daughter was born in Moscow. She has six (!) nationalities in her blood: who is she? Where is her motherland? And our grandson has seven!



Meeting of architecture graduates of the Azerbaijan Industrial Institute (1949 class), Baku, 1970s or 1980s. Anna Val second from the right (top row), Maya Melik-Parsadanova in the center



Elena Bairamian's photograph on her student ID from Baku Politechnich Institute, 1967



Elena Bairamian in Wünsdorf, 1983-1988



Elena Bairamian with her husband Vladimir and daughter Julia, Moscow, 1980



Elena Bairamian demonstrating her interior design project for an officers' hotel, East Germany. Wünsdorf, 1983-1988



Elena Bairamian with daughter Julia in front of the Wünsdorf book store, 1988



GDR memorabilia of the Bairamian family



Elena Bairamian's daughter Julia visiting her old classrom in Wünsdorf school, 2015



Elena Bairamian, collage dedicated to her 30th wedding anniversary, 2002. 1993 photograph, jasper, quartz, Tiger's eye, heliotrope, and other minerals and stones.