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“I am grateful for those bitter times”

Soviet life prepared Betya Girlya for the American Dream

ROB LAYMON

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

It can't be denied that the former Soviet Union emancipated women, in a way. Betya Girlya was free to do any of the jobs men did in her native Moldavia. Beginning as a factory worker, she worked her way up to a kind of estimator, projecting the costs of building new factories and buying new equipment.

But in the larger sense, both women and men were free only to the extent the big Stalinist machine found them serviceable. After taking over Moldavia, the Russians separated husbands from wives, children from parents. They put everyone to work and for a long time provided only bread and water for food. Girlya was separated from her mother when she was 11.

So when a chance to emigrate arose — the result of the Carter administration's wheat deal with the Soviets — Girlya and her husband got out. They arrived in Philadelphia on June 7, 1978, with two chil-

dren and construction equipment.

Both of her sons joined the business, and the oldest, Yan, is now the company's general manager.

Indeed, Girlya found conditions in America highly favorable. But, more important, she found people willing to help her.

“I was very lucky meeting people,”

Girlya said. “You can have the most money in the world, but if you don't have communication with people you are really poor.”

“I feel very fortunate. I have had people around me who work very hard, and we have always tried to treat them right. You don't fool around with people working for you.” ■



Betya Girlya

UP CLOSE

NAME: Betya Girlya

AGE: 58

TITLE: President

EMPLOYER: Sambe Construction Co. Inc.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Started Sambe Construction, for which she worked on many major construction projects including those at the Warmminster Air Development Center, Willow Grove Naval Air Station, and many local municipalities.

EDUCATION: Degree in economics and finance from Kishinev (Moldavia) University.

HOMETOWN: Kishinev, Moldavia

CURRENT HOME: Cherry Hill

dren, two suitcases and \$550.

That, it turns out, was enough.

“Living in Russia can really teach you how to make a dinner from \$1 or from \$100,” Girlya said. “On one point I am very grateful for those bitter times in my life.”

Twenty-six years later, Girlya is the president of a \$30 million general construction company, Sambe Construction, located in Pennsauken, N.J. Her clients have included the federal, state and local governments, school boards throughout the tri-state area, the Navy, the Air Force, the Air National Guard and many others.

She and her husband started small: they found a landlord in Northeast Philadelphia willing to rent them an apartment in exchange for painting and maintenance work. After several years, they turned to what they knew best: construction.

With Girlya's accounting and financial training and husband Sam's expertise in construction engineering, the company thrived almost from the start.

The business grew from a headquarters in Girlya's basement to a 20,000-square-foot office/warehouse in Pennsauken, which also holds the company's fleet of ve-