

Sisters Polina Zaika and Julia Sandetskaya
at their downtown Seattle interior design
studio, Musa Design.



FREEDOM IS THEIR *Muse*

For most Americans, the freedoms we experience each day are something we often take for granted. But for Russian-born sisters Polina Zaika and Julia Sandetskaya, their freedoms have allowed them to have lives full of promise and possibility.

"I was 10 years old when I realized I didn't want to live in Russia for the rest of my life," says Julia. "At that young age I knew people in my country were not allowed to make choices for themselves and I didn't want a life where my decisions were always dictated by others. I wanted to do something grand with my life, so I made a decision right then that my life would be far different from that of my parents."

BY PAM KNEPPER



Polina, 19, and Julia, 16
Russia standing in front

Polina and Julia, both born on Sakhalin, an island located between Japan and Russian Maritime Territory, were just 4 and 1 when they, along with their parents Valery and Margarita Sandetskaya, moved to St. Petersburg. Their father, like many Russian men, served in the military.

"On Sakhalin our father was a radio engineer and helped protect the Russian border," says Polina. "When we moved to St. Petersburg he served as director of the cultural center on the military base. It was here that our exposure to the arts began."

As director, their father arranged to have movies, concerts and art exhibits held at the center. As the girls grew older, their involvement at the center increased.

"Polina served as a stage director for many of the theatrical performances and I played the piano and sang," says Julia. "It was a wonderful environment to grow up in."

Another cultural outlet for the sisters was the family's weekend trips into downtown St. Petersburg where they took in the many art exhibits and plays. During the week, Polina and Julia traveled back into the city, a distance of over 20 miles, to attend the St. Petersburg Music School to study piano and the Russian

Museum to study art and theatre.

Julia says it has always been important to her father that she and Polina be exposed to the arts.

"My father is an extremely gifted singer. When he was a young man he was given the opportunity to study voice at the Moscow Conservatory," explains Julia. "Unfortunately, he

was denied permission to go because the Russian military claimed they needed him more. My father has always wondered what would have happened if he had been allowed to attend. So because of his experience, he always placed the arts as a high priority for Polina and me."

When asked what it was like to live on a military base in communist Russia, Polina and Julia both agree life wasn't much different than what the average Russian experienced.

"I would say the only difference we had was our level of freedom.

We could travel all over the base and not be questioned. I think the average Russian didn't experience freedom

like we did," says Julia. "I guess you could say we were sheltered from reality."

But regardless of how sheltered they were, Julia, in particular, was not fooled.

"I am definitely the realist and Polina is more of an idealist who lives in her dreams," explains Julia. "I knew the government ran the people's lives in Russia and I didn't want any part of it. Polina, on the other hand, was heavily involved with the art community in St. Petersburg and for the moment was content to go along with that kind of life."

But then 1985 arrived and everything began to change.

"A few years earlier we had heard reports that the communist party was losing strength in our country, but no one seemed to believe it. We had lived under communist rule for so long that most people couldn't comprehend another way of life," says Julia.

Julia added it wasn't until American President Ronald Reagan told Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev to 'tear down this wall' that the reality of the situation came to full fruition.

"When the wall finally did come down, I don't think any of us were

ready for the changes that freedom brings," says Julia. "It was all so new to us. I knew someday soon I would want to leave and break out on my own, but in the meantime I had other priorities keeping me home."

Julia earned a bachelor's degree in concert piano from the Music College in Kishinev, Moldavia and Polina attended the St. Petersburg Art Academy and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in art history.

Four years later in 1989, Julia decided it was time to leave Russia.

"My parents were heartbroken when they heard about my decision to leave," says Julia. "My mother, in particular, thought I was being selfish because I hadn't served my country. She thought I should stay and give something back to Russia. But I knew she was just trying to hold onto the past. In reality she knew I didn't owe my country anything."

At 19 and married for only a year, Julia and her new husband left

Russia in August 1989. Their adventure took them from St. Petersburg to Czechoslovakia to Austria and finally to a refugee camp in Italy. Nine months later, they received their American visas and had their first glimpse of the United States when they arrived in Atlanta, Georgia. Unfortunately for Julia, Atlanta fell short of her expectations of life in America.

"We were housed in an apartment building located in a very dangerous part of Atlanta and most of the time I was afraid to go outside," says Julia. "Plus, I had to deal with the language barrier. I did find a job, but the work was not at all stimulating. It wasn't quite what I had pictured for my life in America."

"We had lived under communist rule for so long that most people couldn't comprehend another way of life."



The sisters with their mother Margarita Sandetskaya at the Czar's summer residence in St. Petersburg.



at home in St. Petersburg, of a wall they designed.



The girls with their father Valery Sandetskaya.

A year later, Julia knew she needed a change and contacted a friend of hers who had settled in Seattle.

"I had grown up in the northern part of Russia, so I was used to having water around me and a cooler climate. I found out very quickly that Atlanta didn't offer this kind of environment," says Julia. "So when my friend told me about Seattle and its natural surroundings, I knew this was the place I wanted to be."

A few months later, the couple arrived in Seattle and quickly established a home in Bellevue.

Back in St. Petersburg, Julia's parents were not happy with the changes that were taking place in their country.

"Under the communist government, my parents always earned enough to pay for their living expenses," says Polina. "But when communism ended, their salaries were not enough to support their lifestyle because everything had become much more expensive. So after Julia left, they called and told her they wanted to come to the United States."

As Julia worked on getting visas for her parents, Polina's life in Russia went on as usual. Two years before Julia left Russia, Polina had gotten

married and a year later had given birth to son Daniil. She was also working as a designer with a private gallery in St. Petersburg. Unlike her sister who jumped at the first chance to leave Russia, for the moment Polina was very content with her life.

"I had a great life and the best job. I worked with people from European cities who wanted to restore old buildings in places like Hamburg, Germany and London, England," explains Polina. "I was also helping businesses in St. Petersburg create new office space for their employees."

But while Polina enjoyed her job, she did miss her sister and often wondered what life must be like in the "land of the free." This tugging became even more pronounced in 1992 when her parents were granted their visas and joined Julia in Bellevue.

"I loved my country, but I really missed my family," says Polina. "It was very lonely."

Like her sister, Julia was also experiencing some loneliness of her own.

"After my husband and I settled in Bellevue we discovered we didn't have anything in common, so five

years after getting married we decided to get a divorce," says Julia. "It was a difficult time in my life. But rather than sit around and feel sorry for myself, I took English classes and worked at Sears so I could talk with other English speakers. It was the best thing I could have done to improve my speaking skills."

At Julia's urging, Polina decided to visit Bellevue with her 7-year-old son during the summer of 1994. Not sure what to expect, Polina says the longer she stayed the more she liked it.

"I enjoyed experiencing the freedom people have living in America. Despite the fall of communism in Russia, you still feel like someone is evaluating you because the behavior is so engrained in the culture," explains Polina. "This type of behavior makes you feel like you have to keep up your guard all the time and this can be incredibly draining. In America you feel like all that weight has been lifted off of you and you can do anything. People don't judge you in America like they do in Russia. In America you are free to be who you want to be and that is incredibly enlightening."

After spending two weeks with Julia and her parents, Polina's decision to move to America was solidified when her son announced he wasn't returning to St. Petersburg.

"I can't say I was totally surprised when Daniil told me he was staying," says Polina. "He certainly made my choice a whole lot easier to make."

Shortly after settling in Kirkland, Polina and her husband decided to divorce. Knowing she needed a way to support herself and her son, Polina took English and graphic



Polina and Julia

design classes at Bellevue Community College and then went on to earn a degree in graphics and animation design from the School of Visual Concepts in Seattle. After graduating, Polina began accepting freelance graphic design jobs. While working on building up her client base, Polina met her current husband, Igor Zaika. The two married in 1996 and son Peter arrived in 2000.

After earning a degree in diagnostic ultrasound from Seattle University in 1995, Julia went to work for Providence Hospital and then for a start-up company that sent her around the world educating people about small PC-based portable diagnostic ultrasound machines. While Julia was busy traveling the world, she met her current husband, Alex Mogilevsky. The two married in 1998 and had daughter Valeria in 1999.

Alex's son Nikita, 12, from a previous marriage, completed the family.

Always willing to take on a new challenge, it was during Julia's pregnancy with Valeria that Polina proposed the two sisters open up their own interior design studio in Seattle.

"I had been thinking about opening my own studio for some time. I thought with my background in design, art history and previous commercial interior design

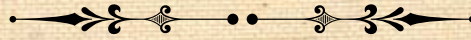
experience in Russia coupled with Julia's good business sense, we could offer clients a lot for their money," says Polina.

To ready herself

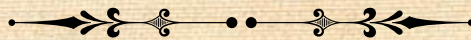
for the design and business demands a new studio would bring, Julia completed correspondence interior design courses from Rodech University in London and attended Cornish College of the Arts in

Seattle, taking part in their interior design program.

In 2000, Polina's dream became a reality when she and Julia opened Musa Design. Housed for the last four years in Polina's house, in early 2005 the sisters moved their business to Fifth Avenue in downtown Seattle. Defined as a studio that considers or meditates on people's design issues and then comes up with complete



"Polina is definitely the brain...and Julia is the heart and core of our business."



solutions to their problems, Musa Design (www.musadesign.net) offers a wide range of services for both commercial and residential clients.

"We want our designs to be life changing for our clients and to radiate feelings of balance, simplicity, happiness and comfort," explains Polina. "Helping people decorate a room is simply covering up the problem. For us good design is helping people solve their problems and make their space the best it can be."

As is the case with most new ventures, it took a few years for Polina and Julia to get their business off the ground. But with the help of the Internet, referrals from past clients, and the recent addition of two more staff designers, it looks like Musa Design is definitely here to stay.

Their most recent high-profile project has been the complete design of Café Darcee in Fisher Plaza in Seattle. This project has been recognized in *HK Space* and *Metropolis* magazines and won the 2005 prestigious lighting award from the International Interior Design Association. This fall Musa Design will unveil the redesign of the Luster Communications offices located under the Pike Place Market. Other upcoming projects include showing art and displaying furniture they have designed in their studio, as well as traveling to national and international furniture exhibits and expanding their commercial client base.

When asked what has been the main ingredient for the success of Musa Design, the sisters quickly credit each other.

"Polina is definitely the brain," says Julia. "And Julia is the heart and core of our business," says Polina. "We are two very different people, but we don't possess each other. That is why our relationship works so well," says Julia.

When the sisters are not at the office, they also choose to socialize together outside of work.

"We have a lot of the same friends," says Julia. "Plus, we like spending time together with our parents and families."

Anxious to see how their homeland had evolved since their departure, in 2003 Julia spent two weeks visiting Moscow and Novosibirsk, and during the summer of 2004 Polina visited the same cities taking in museums, concerts and theatre performances. For Julia, she enjoyed seeing the country she used to call home. For Polina, she noticed the poor design and tasteless elements that have enveloped her country.

"I was amazed to see many of the old historical buildings in Moscow being torn down and replaced with a style you would see in Las Vegas," explains Polina. "Right now the Russian people are drawn to bright lights and bright colors and in general the Donald Trump-style of building. There is no real sense of good design anywhere. For me, that was sad to see."

But while their trips were very different in perspective, one element was the same ... the sense of a lack of freedom.

"I thought with communism now gone, the freedom we experience in America would have finally made its way into Russia," says Polina. "But sadly it hasn't. Instead, it is like a third world country where there is a great gap between classes. While I was visiting, I again sensed that nagging feeling of being evaluated by those around me. I felt like people were just surviving in the lower level of society. I didn't feel the freedom of expression and legal enterprise I experience at home in America. And it is that freedom which continues to make all the difference for me, Julia and our families."



as teenagers.