

# Muted histories and reunited memories

by Irina Seits

**a story of a Swedish family during the times of the Russian Revolution**

It is hard to overestimate the impact that the two revolutions of 1917 had on the destiny of Russia and all those who were connected to the country in any way. One of the most fascinating examples of the tremendous change of life paradigms caused by the Bolshevik Revolution is the story of a great Swedish family that contributed enormously to boosting technological progress in Russia before the outbreak of the Revolution. Three generations of the Nobel family had been living and working in the Russian Empire since 1837, patenting numerous inventions, connecting various regions with railroads, building factories and developing cities around them. Ludvig and Emanuel Nobel developed what we know today as CSR policy: Corporate Social Responsibility, long before it started being practiced in Western Europe. They provided their workers with developed social infrastructure, planting parks and constructing houses, hospitals, schools, libraries and theaters.

By the mid-1910s, thanks to entrepreneurs, inventors and investors such as the Nobels, the Russian Empire reached the world's leading position in the oil market as well as in various spheres of heavy and light industries.

It all ended with the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 when many brilliant contributors to the blossoming of the Russian Empire at the dawn of the century – be it in technology, culture or art – were forced to flee the country with their families. Those who managed to escape after leaving all they had behind the borders of the new state were witnesses to the decay of what they had given their talents and labors to.

This year marks 180 years since Immanuel Nobel, the talented inventor, machine engineer and manufacturer, first came to St. Petersburg. Shortly afterwards, his wife and gifted children – Robert, Ludvig and Alfred – joined their father. Their youngest son Emil was born in St. Petersburg. Ludvig Nobel, Alfred's elder brother, lived most of his life in Russia and devoted his genius to the development of technology and science in various fields.

Early this fall Irina Seits, Russian PhD candidate at CBEES, Södertörn University met with Gustaf Nobel, Ludvig's great-grandson, in order to talk about the Russian period in the life of his prominent family.

**IRINA SEITS (IS): The centenary of the Russian Revolution this year marks a turning point in the development of Russia and the rest of the world. The global changes influenced millions of people's lives, and your family was one of those whose lives were ultimately altered by the Revolution. Was the memory of those events present in your family when you were a child? What did you hear about Russia and your family's connection to Russia? Was it present in some way in your childhood?**

**GUSTAF NOBEL (GN):** Well, I wasn't really a participant in any affairs regarding Russia, because – you know the history – my family: my father, Gunnar Nobel had to flee from Russia with his brother Alfred, his little sister Nina, and mother Eugenie, as did my grandfather Gösta Nobel, who was not with them in Baku at that time; he was in St. Petersburg. Emanuel Nobel also left the country. They had to flee, and they were on the run for one and a half months. Afterwards my father never talked about it for the rest of his life. Up until his death he said nothing. He would say, "I don't want to talk about it". So we didn't hear much about Russia or Revolution from him. But then his brother, my uncle, was a bit more open about it because he was three years older than my father... So we had a little information from him, but not much, really. Russia wasn't very present when we were children. But as we grew



Eugenie with Alfred, Gunnar and Nina 1918, and Eugenie with newborn Ludvig in front of the villa Petrolea in Baku.



Gustaf Nobel.



up, we became more interested in the history, of course, and we started studying it to a certain extent. Growing up, there was not very much to say about it, since no one talked to us about it.

**IS: And that was probably due to the trauma and all the losses that your family had gone through?**

**GN:** I think my father was traumatized by those experiences, even though he was only four years old.

**IS: You mentioned Emanuel Nobel, who continued developing his father Ludvig's oil and industrial empire. Russia had a very high level of technological development at that time...**

**GN:** Yes, and he contributed greatly to this process.

**IS: Until World War I broke out... Russia owed a great part of its technological success to the plants and factories that your family founded and developed.**

**GN:** Yes, they were the biggest company in Russia at that time. Of course they had an impact, and a very powerful impact. And for the family, for those that ran away, above all for the adults it was a total change of paradigm. They came out of Russia to a completely different life, a life that they were not used to. They had had a good life in the Russian Empire, making tons of money over there. But apart from earning, they gave away a lot to the people who were working for them, and provided for them in all kinds of ways. We don't have to go into that. It was an important thing and everybody knows the history of what they were doing. It was Ludvig and Emanuel, in particular, who contributed to that.



The Nobel brothers of Sweden launched the Baku oil boom in 1873.



Branobel field, Balakhani.

IS: Emanuel Nobel, as well as his brothers, was a known patron and a humanitarian. He supported the spread of knowledge and education among his workers, providing them with space for learning and discussions. He was of liberal views and was connected to left-wing political circles. Thus it is not a surprise that the February Revolution of 1917 (not the Bolshevik Revolution that followed in October and forced your family to flee from Russia), started with the workers' resurrections at Emanuel Nobel's plants located in the industrial part of the city – the Viborg Side in Petrograd, where the family itself resided. Emanuel provided his workers with access to libraries and helped them receive an education, which inevitably heated the turbulence in society. Thus, indirectly, Emanuel Nobel participated in preparing Russia for radical reforms, yet he argued for the democratic development of the new capitalist Russia. Of course, he had nothing to do with Bolsheviks and Communists.

GN: No, it wasn't his intention. Not at all.

IS: The thing is that Russia was hit by the two revolutions in the same year. The February Revolution, that promised to bring democracy to Russia and develop capitalism, failed. That was the revolution that Emanuel supported.

GN: Which was logical, because he saw that that was the only way to go for the future of Russia and the benefit of all the other people. After the failure of the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks came and confiscated everything.

IS: They called it "nationalization". The Bolshevik leaders had particular and even personal interest in the Nobel's heritage, for example Joseph Stalin, who in his early years terrorized oil companies in Baku and was appointed by Lenin after the Bolshevik Revolution to investigate the potential of the confiscated oil industries. Around the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution the figure of Stalin is being re-evaluated in Russia and, unfortunately, it seems to grow in a rather dangerous way.

GN: My advice to everyone is to read the *Young Stalin* by Simon Sebag Montefiore. It's a very interesting book.

IS: He describes the "robbery of the century": the attack on the State Bank in Tiflis (Tbilisi), the Georgian capital, in 1907, of which Stalin was the main organizer, as well as his wild activities in Baku, including an attack on the Nobels' office.

GN: Yes, he was a criminal. The family weren't great fans of Stalin, that is for sure. Some people claim that he also worked on one of the Nobels' oil rigs at one time, but I'm not so sure.

IS: He did. After leaving Baku he also worked at the Nobel's plant in St. Petersburg for a short period before the outbreak of World War I. He was great at recruiting workers into revolutionary circles. Yes, Stalin had



Family House at the Nobels' Town on Lesnoy Prospect, St. Petersburg.



The monument to Alfred Nobel by sculptors Sergey Alipov and Pavel Shevchenko, on Petrogradskaya Embankment in St. Petersburg.

his own issues with your family. It is remarkable that the silence about the connection to Russia within your family history, which is very understandable, coincides with the suppression of the memory of and knowledge about the history and heritage of the Nobels in Soviet Russia. In Soviet times we had not heard much about Nobels and their impact on Russian and Soviet industrial growth; it was as if nothing had existed before the exhaustive industrialization, initiated by Stalin, began. And the myth that the industrialization that cost millions of Soviet lives was the only way to reach the necessary level of technological development is being promoted again today. It justifies Stalin's repressions and his methods of ruling the country. The Nobels weren't mentioned much. We knew about the Nobel Prize and some people, especially those living in Leningrad, heard something about the Nobels' plants that existed in St. Petersburg before the revolution, but the names of the factories were changed and it was all forgotten. We knew nothing about the Nobels' industrial heritage that fell into the hands of the Soviet state all ripe and ready. We heard of the Nobels as the "Russian Rockefellers", which is, by the way, another interesting connotation, because in the 1880s the Nobel family dislodged the Rockefellers completely from the Russian oil market. And then after the Revolution, when the Bolshevik power reached Azerbaijan, Gustaf Nobel...

GN: My grandfather, yes...

IS: ... made a good deal by selling part of the oil company in Baku to Rockefeller.

GN: That was called the deal of the century (laughs). But actually the Rockefellers did hold out for quite some time, until the 1930s.

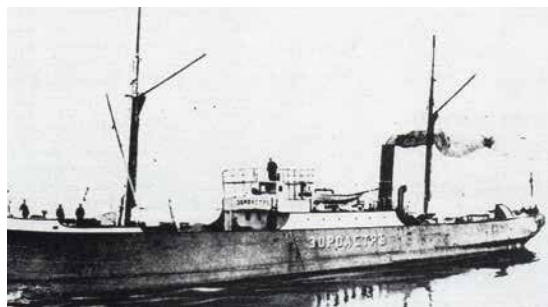
IS: They officially closed down their offices in 1950s, but before World War II they were quite active there. They probably still believed that Revolution might just pass over.

GN: But we all know that it didn't happen...

IS: Unfortunately, the Soviet state avoided recognition and promotion of the achievements of West Europeans, whose contributions, though badly damaged and neglected, still laid the foundation for the new country's economy. The intellectual, technological, economic, and infrastructural wealth left by the Nobel family was carefully studied and recorded in post-war Soviet times by economists, sociologists and historians, but those investigations never reached the mass media and the general Soviet population; they were never mentioned in schools. That history was reserved for specialists and was absent in the new ideological space, which was a part of the State policy.

GN: Yes, to bury it, to hide it from the general peoples' mind.

IS: And that neglect was inevitably mirrored on the other side of the Iron Curtain. When I came to Stockholm



The Zoroaster ship was the first world's oil tanker designed by Ludvig Nobel and built in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1878. Later same year it was sent to Baku to the Branobel's oil company, founded by brothers Robert, Ludvig and Alfred Nobel.

**for the first time, a long time ago but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I visited the Nobel Museum as one of the city's main attractions, and I was surprised that there was no mention of the Nobel family's Russian period, of the childhood years that Alfred Nobel had spent in St. Petersburg. When I re-visited the Nobel museum in a more conscious state of mind a couple of years ago, I remembered that and wanted to re-check. And it only says that Alfred Nobel visited St. Petersburg: and that's it.**

**GN:** Yes, he was there. He was there with his family, in his early years, before his father Immanuel Nobel had to file for bankruptcy and leave Russia.

**IS:** Yes, Immanuel came to Russia in 1837. This year marks 180 years since that date.

**GN:** Yes, he soon brought Alfred and the rest of his family from Stockholm. He was initially doing great, but then after the Crimean War, in which Russia was not successful, they lost all orders from the government...

**IS:** Yes, because the government faced sanctions that severely limited the production of military equipment.

**GN:** And at that time Alfred returned to Sweden, together with his family, but his brother Ludvig stayed on in St. Petersburg.

**IS:** Alfred was 16 when he left Russia with his parents. He received his primary education in St. Petersburg and spoke Russian among other languages, including, of course, his mother tongue. His main teacher was a famous Russian chemist, Nickolay Zinin, who infected Alfred with his interest in nitroglycerin. There was another chemist, Petrashevsky, who was Zinin's and Alfred Nobel's competitor, and who experimented with the explosive features of nitroglycerin, but he was not successful in the practical application of his studies. When Alfred came back to Stockholm he continued the experiments that he began in Russia.

**GN:** And eventually he came across a solution on how to tame it. After that he never returned to St. Petersburg, I think. Nor did he ever go to Baku. He was a big shareholder in the largest oil company, but he never visited Baku.

**IS:** Yet the years that Alfred spent in St. Petersburg were an important part of his biography. But the way that the Nobel family history is currently represented in the Nobel Museum neglects the whole period of not only Alfred's life, but that of his parents, and other brothers – first of all, Ludvig and Robert. Ludvig Nobel, one of the major founders of the family industrial empire, was buried in St. Petersburg like some other members of the family even though he died outside Russia.

**GN:** Certainly, the family's relation to Russia is underrepresented in the museum to a certain extent. In my opinion, that period should be covered in more detail, but going back a couple of years. The story of my great-grandfather Ludvig, Robert and Emanuel, my grandfather Gösta Nobel, and others of course, was a hidden story for a long time. Nobody knew about it. Everybody talked about Alfred – since he came up with the Nobel Prize and all these brilliant ideas, and they set up a foundation after his death... But the others were just as successful as he. And they also had these other views of helping the people who worked for them, by providing accommodation, building schools for the children, giving them education, as you know... All these kinds of things. They were really ahead of their time. They deserve more attention. Today it's more widely known, you can Google it, and find the whole story about Ludvig, and Robert, and so on and so forth, which is good. I'm not saying that I want my family to be more famous than it is. But from a historical point of view, it has a certain importance to me. To let the world know that these two brothers were just as innovative, and progressive, and charitable, as Alfred was. Ludvig was

a genius, of course. But they all were. Robert as well. He was very skilled in his field of work. But it's amazing that they all were. All four. There were four brothers, as you know. One, Emil, never had time to develop his genius, unfortunately.

**IS:** Coming back to the Russian Revolution, what is your personal feeling about the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary? What is it to your family now? Is it viewed as a dramatic event?

**GN:** It was a dramatic event.

**IS:** Was it a tragedy? The positive answer should be obvious, at least since the collapse of the Soviet regime; the question should be unnecessary. And yet in contemporary Russia, it has once again become a hot topic of public discussion, especially this year. There is still no solidarity in Russian society in its attitude towards the events of 1917. Moreover, one can feel a shift towards justifying and even glorifying the Bolshevik Revolution. And it divides society. You hear more and more voices in the Russian mass media that interpret the Bolshevik Revolution and totalitarianism in the country as the only and inevitable path of development. All of a sudden, the question is becoming urgent again. We still can't come to agreement on our history and our past. What is your opinion on this matter?

**GN:** My opinion, my personal opinion is that Russia would have been better off not having the Bolshevik Revolution, because a lot of development came to a halt when Communists took charge of the whole country and nationalized the industries and so on... I mean, the industries were up and running. They were doing very well. And a lot of those industries just couldn't keep up in the same way after the revolution, after the Bolsheviks had taken over – because they didn't have those leaders any longer. Since everyone was working for the State, they were all tovarisch [comrade] and all that... But business efficiency wasn't actually that good, neither in the development, nor the maintenance and running of all industry's services. It wasn't on the same level as before because they didn't have the same objective any more. A lot of things actually became failures afterwards, rather than successes. Then again, the Revolution lasted a long time, more or less up to 1989. Then a new revolution happened. Yet I'm sure there are still a lot of people in Russia saying that times were better before 1991...

**IS:** Did the "revolution" of 1991 re-open Russia and the post-Soviet space for your family? For example in Baku, your family did get the opportunity – not necessarily to come back, but to restore the history of Nobels in the capital of Azerbaijan, for example by founding the museum in the Villa Petrolea?

**GN:** Oh, in that respect, yes. Also, since I've been working with an Azerbaijani company for the past five to six years, I've learned also how people in Azerbaijan and particularly in Baku remember the Nobels.

**IS:** So just as Ludvig Nobel and then Emanuel once did, you are now returning to Baku... And how do you feel that difference?

**GN:** Well, when you spell out your name at the reservation in a hotel, they never doubt that you are a member of the family who were there. They actually know that there is a family. And they are very happy to meet you. It appears that they really mean it, as well, because the name is highly respected in Azerbaijan – much more than in Russia, I would say.

**IS:** That's what you feel?

**GN:** That's what I feel. I've been to both countries several times, but more so in Azerbaijan. It's just that everyone you meet and talk to in Azerbaijan knows the story of what the Nobels did there before the Revolution. And now Azerbaijan is also a free country...

**IS:** Yes, they are also the victims of the Revolution, like your family. In Baku, the Villa Petrolea was in a state of considerable decay until recently.

**GN:** Oh yes, but nevertheless it has been very nicely restored, built up as a park museum, with restaurants and a reception area, and also a little hotel with five or six rooms.

**IS:** Did your family participate in the restoration of the museum ensemble, or was it done by Azerbaijan?

**GN:** It was done by one person, who contacted the family<sup>3</sup>, but we were not involved financially, and did not have any influence over the plans. A number of the family members was invited to the inauguration, to come and take part in the ceremony.

**IS: Have you visited the museum?**  
**GN:** Oh yes, I've been there several times.

**IS: How do you find it?**

**GN:** It's hard to say. I find it a bit emotional because my father was born there and lived in that house together with his brother and sister, as well as my grandparents. But they were the only ones who actually lived there, so from that point of view it's a bit sentimental. I have pictures showing my father sitting with my grandmother in the garden, in front of the old Villa Petrolea. And the new one looks very much like it (apart from the extra wing with the hotel rooms). But it's very nicely done. I really appreciate it, because it's a way of keeping the memory alive, although on the outside, the surroundings are so poor.

**IS: But it was probably the same when your family lived there. The Nobels were known for making paradisiacal oases around their plants that were so different from the surroundings.**

**GN:** Villa Petrolea was not just a villa. They had nine acres of land, where the engineers who came over and worked for them lived. They planted parks with 80,000 trees, and they used the ballast water from the tankers to irrigate Villa Petrolea and its gardens. That was another of Ludvig Nobel's brilliant ideas. They also had a theater there. Unfortunately all of this has been left in decay, in a ruined state. Yet there are big plans now. You know Baku's nickname is the Black City? For good reason. And now there is a project that has been going on for the last five or six years, called "Baku – The White City". I think it has stopped or halted, due to the decrease in oil prices, so there's not so much funding now. But it's a great project, to make Baku nice and "white", rather than "black", to move the refineries from the city center, and so on... Those are actually the old refineries that my family built there, so in a way they are also to blame for the "black city".

**IS: You are also involved in another project that contributes to the history of the Nobel family, the TV series that you've been working on. Could you tell about it?**

**GN:** We have the film script that was rewritten several times. Now I think we have reached a point at which it should be more or less acceptable for presentation. In fact it has been presented. As you know, the most important thing in making a series or a film is to find sponsors, who would like to realize this project. That's where we stand today. If done correctly, I think it has great potential, because it's an exciting story.

**IS: Oh yes it is...**

**GN:** It's like a drama.

**IS: It is a drama, with all the different story lines that one can imagine will be included. I know a bit about the project, but could you reveal its general idea? It is connected to the Russian period of the Nobel family when they lived in St. Petersburg, right?**

**GN:** In St. Petersburg and in Baku.

**IS: So it relates to the times around Russian Revolution, contributing to the promotion of what we discussed in the beginning, promotion of knowledge about the Nobel family and its brilliant members.**

**GN:** Yes, it is set there. I have to be careful not to say too much, but this story will begin in St. Petersburg, and maybe there will be flashbacks to Stockholm, because that's where Immanuel and his wife Henrietta lived and where three of their children were born; the oldest – Robert, then Ludvig and Alfred. So there could be flashbacks to that. But the film is very much based in St. Petersburg, when the father was working with land and sea mines, and so forth... And then, of course, it goes down to the oil war in Baku, where you had Rothschild, and Nobel, and then, of course, the Rockefellers.

**IS: Is it a documentary or a fictional drama?**

**GN:** It won't be entirely fictional, because it's based on history. But then you well know that when you make a film based on history, you have to add a few things, to sort of "boost the interest" for it. You have to add drama and intrigues, and all that. So it might be like – if you pardon the comparison – Downton Abbey.

**IS: That's what I thought...**

**GN:** Yes, in those terms. There are people in the family who said: "No, no, no... It's no good. You have to make a plain documentary film". And then you will have zero viewers, because nobody would watch that.

**IS: I would not entirely agree, but ...**

**GN:** You have to make it interesting...

**IS: But your family history itself is full of interesting and dramatic events, from private dramas and love stories to political affairs, such as an episode when Gösta Nobel secretly helped Carl Mannerheim, the Finnish general of Swedish origin, to flee from St. Petersburg during the Revolution, bringing him a civil engineer's costume and false documents to the Hotel Europe. And then Gösta and Emanuel themselves had to flee, which is a thrilling story in itself. All those dramas, not to mention Stalin, and so on. It could be very interesting. The times were so full of events. And the Nobel family was so much affected by it because of their presence in the very center of it all, contributing to all spheres of life in Russia.**

**GN:** Yes, they also supported scientific expeditions. For example Sven Hedin was a friend and was helped by the family<sup>4</sup>.

**IS: So the series will reveal the connections between Sweden, Russia, and Azerbaijan... The connections that we need so badly today.**

**GN:** Oh yes. The way I see it, it's necessary to do that. And my only hope now, my wish, is that we will be able to find proper financing for it, and start filming. Again, it will not be a film, but a TV series.

**IS: But that's the best format nowadays.**

**GN:** So we'll see. I don't know where we stand in terms of financing now. But still there is a lot going on which I'm very pleased with. It will be great to have this film, to see it made and available for the public.

**IS: And that is probably the best way to represent and to preserve the family history. ❌**

## references

- 1 Emanuel Nobel (1859–1932), the eldest son of Ludvig Nobel and Mina Ahlsell, his first wife, the nephew of Alfred Nobel. After Ludvig Nobel died in 1888, Emanuel headed Branobel, one of the world's largest oil companies that held leading positions on the European oil market. After reaching an agreement with Rudolf Diesel, he founded the first diesel engine plant in St. Petersburg, that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and currently is known as Russian Diesel (Fig). Emanuel made Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, one of the major centers of the world's oil industry. He also took a decisive role in securing the execution of his uncle's will to give his fortune to the foundation of the Nobel Prize. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Emanuel had to leave the country. All the family's companies and private property were confiscated in the process of nationalization.
- 2 Ludvig Nobel provided the workers in his factories with social security packages that included paid sick leave and vacations as well as the 40-hour working week. Employees had access to libraries and theaters; even tennis courts were available at some sites. The best employees were provided with housing. Ludvig, and after him, Emanuel, developed the ideas of the workers' settlements that later spread in Europe as well as in Soviet Russia – housing estates with very well developed infrastructure, green recreational areas, social centers, and clinics. The family never minded living in the same area where their workers resided, opening parts of their living quarters not only as offices but also as concert halls, theaters and libraries for their employees – from highly skilled managers to the simple workers.
- 3 Dr. Togrul Bagirov, the head of the Baku Fund of the Nobel Heritage.
- 4 Sven Anders Hedin (1865–1952) was a Swedish geographer and explorer. Emanuel Nobel sponsored his expedition to Kashgar in 1899. Emanuel Nobel also financed the Russian expedition to South America in 1914–1915.



Irina Seits and Gustaf Nobel, early fall 2017.