Elena was a good match for Nikolai. Born in 1879 in St Petersburg to the family of architect Ivan Ivanovich Shaposhnikov (1883–1898), she had a gift for music. Having finished the Mariinsky female gymnasium in 1895, she entered a private musical school where she attended the piano class of Prof. I.A. Borovko and was thinking of a musical career.

Her father Ivan Shaposhnikov was educated at the Academy of Arts and is known as a designer of many tenement and industrial buildings in the city. He also designed the synagogue at the corner of Ofitserskaia and Bolshaia Morskaia streets. Elena's mother Ekaterina Vasilievna (1857–1913) had aristocratic roots being a descendant of the princely family of Golenistchev-Kutuzov. On her mother's side Elena was a grand niece of the famed commander-in-chief of the Russian army Mikhail Illarionovich Kutuzov, who defeated Napoleon in 1812.

Her father's lineage was Germanic, according to Elena's oral testimony. She claimed that her great-grandfather was a Frieslander, von Tessner by name. He was a rich man and an eminent persona, the burgomaster of Riga. When Peter the Great visited the city in the early 18th century von Tessner presented him with the legendary Hat of Monomach (Shapka Monomakh), the cone shaped headgear of the Russian tsars and grand dukes, trimmed with sables and studded with jewels. Hence the tsar Peter gave his German donor a Russian name – Shaposhnikov. Elena also asserted that one of her uncles, Evgenii Ivanovich Shaposhnikov (b. 1814) was a military engineer and member of the Russian Geographical Society. He took part in one the Society's expeditions to Central Asia from which he never returned. The same man, she claimed, some time prior to that journey turned up at a fancy-ball in St Petersburg, at which the tsar and tsarina were present, dressed up as an Indian raja which suggested that he had been to India before. And she also believed that her great grandmother, Anastasia Ivanovna El'chaninova (1809–1889), belonged to the lineage of the great Mongolian ruler, Chinggis Khan, to be more exact, that of one of Chinggis's sons.
This and other stories that Elena as an elderly woman told about her ancestors\textsuperscript{1} are for the most part fictional as shown by Russian genealogist I.V. Sakharov in his extensive study of the Shaposhnikovs’ family history.\textsuperscript{2} Ivars Silars, on his part, also maintains that Elena’s account of her high-born German ancestor, the possessor of the Hat of Monomach, is utterly implausible:

Since the mid-14th century the German traders and craftsmen of Riga were united in two separate guilds. Therefore it is hard to imagine that any of these traders could meet Peter I and present him with a gift, entirely on his own. “The Hat of Monomakh” in this context does not deserve any commentary at all. It seems most improbable that Peter I, who was not an illiterate Russian \textit{muzhik} (villager), could reward a German nobleman, by depriving him of his family name. And how he did it – issued a special decree? But when?\textsuperscript{3}

In the late 1920s – early 1930s, when living in the valley of Kulu in Northern India and posing as a spiritual guru and clairvoyant, Elena would actively mythologize her past life by claiming that her invisible teacher Morya had secretly guided her since early childhood. She would recall her ancestors, the Shaposhnikovs, and would particularly admire her vanished uncle. He did not perish during his Central Asian journey as many believed, she would explain, but went to the Himalayan Brotherhood and remained there under the name of Mahometi. In one of his former lives he was incarnated as Abu’l-Fazl, a celebrated 16th century biographer of the Mogul emperor Akbar, the one who wrote \textit{Akbarnama}.

It was then that Elena revealed to her most devoted disciples Sina Lichtmann and Esther Lichtmann some of the remarkable events from her Petersburgian period, unknown to anybody. From these narratives one may infer that she was quite a willful person, strong in spirit and democratic in her ways. She liked to resist her environment, to surmount obstacles and to tread the unbeaten tracks. She recounted, for example, that as a child she had a strong desire to help people – at the age of six she sewed dresses for poor children and had “moments of ecstasy and delight” when she imagined how she would endow them with

\textsuperscript{1} Their main source is a typed manuscript “Rod Shaposhnikovykh” which belongs to the archive of Pavel Belikov. Similar stories were told by Elena in 1929–1930 to Esther Lichtmann as they were recorded in her intimate diaries which remain unpublished (Notebook 2, entry for 26 June 1929, Notebook 5, entry for 10 February 1930). See Andreev 2011b, 122–123.

\textsuperscript{2} Sakharov 2002, 496–570.

\textsuperscript{3} This opinion of I. Silars was quoted in Andreev 2011b, 123.