**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**

**The Soviet Jewish Oral History Project of the Women's Auxiliary**

**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**ALEX BLINSTEIN**

**Lab Technician**

**Odessa Institute of Food Technology**

BIRTH: December 9, 1950, Odessa

SPOUSE: Rita Masis Blinstein

September 30, 1956, Odessa

CHILDREN: Anna, 1980

Simon (Sam), 1984

PARENTS: Chaka Shikovna Blinstein, 1914-, Yasenova

Simon Yakov Blinstein, 1920-1969, near Odessa

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago

NAME:  **ALEX BLINSTEIN**

DATE: December 20, 1990

INTERVIEWER: E. Snyderman,

(Let me begin by asking you your earliest memories growing up in Odessa. You told me that your father was wounded in the war, what do you remember of your fa­ther?) I have very small memories because, maybe from 1955‑56 he begins to use medicine and was in the hospital. But I remember that he was a very kind man. This is maybe mostly what I remember ‑ his kindness. That's all, because five, six years, it's not enough age (to have a clear memo­ry.) Yes.

(What were his injuries? Do you remember how he got them, in what battles?) He never spoke about this when he was healthy. But after he got sick it was impossible to speak with him about things like this. I remember in some war fighting he received a piece of metal in the leg. He was not so wounded, but his nervous system was affected ‑ not at this moment, but a lot of years after he came back. His health was worse and worse every day. Maybe this began when I was five.

(So for awhile was he able to work after the war?) Yeah, he worked all the time before this moment when he needed some medical help. And after this his condition became worse and worse. And he went to the hospital and after that, sometimes my mother took him back, but his condition became worse and it was impossible to live with him. We lived in the worst conditions ‑ unbelievably the worst ‑ maybe for usual American people it's unbelievable that we lived in basement without any kind of utilities. Only water. Without gas. We had a fire, and we cooked in the fire. (You built a fire with sticks?) Yeah, yeah.

I remember that maybe, before 1966, we haven't a gas stove, and I all times am preparing some coal or wood for winter. This was my duty at home from very early childhood. My mother received a very small salary and we tried to survive on this very small salary.

(What kind of work did your father and mother do?) My mother worked in the medical clinic ‑ like a janitor. She was completely without any kind of education. She couldn't write. She could only read ‑ that's all her education. (She did not benefit from the Revolution, did she? Why was that? Was her family property owners or storekeepers? Why was she denied an education? Or was she denied an educa­tion?) I think this is wrong understanding, that Revolution opened the doors for all Jewish to... because Jewish have a lot of circle in the USSR ‑ low circle who live in this village, in the pale, in the settlement. Most people who live in this pale, they remain at this level. (What was the Russian word for a pale settlement?) *Mestechko*. And a big group of Jews didn't receive any kind of educa­tion. But some Jews did receive education. This is because a lot of Jews came to the towns before the Revolution, during and after. Only these people could receive some education.

Do you know that after the Revolution, in any kind of school, colleges, or university, people could go if they grow up in the very [easy] settlements without any property, but some of Jews have some small property ‑ it's not exactly proper­ty, but from view of Revolution, this was like the father of my wife. He tried a lot of times to go to the institute, and twice he hadn't permission because his father had a small store, and this was the reason. Eventually he came to the institute and he finished. But it's not all Jews. Jews were shared by many different circles. There are Jews who were in higher level, intellectual, who repre­sent most famous of Russian culture, writers, whatever, but it's not only Jews, it's some circle. Unfortunately my mother didn't belong to this... Not unfortunately, this is like fate. We can't choose or change. We can only live, that's all.

(You lived in these very hard conditions ‑ even for Russia. You remember your earliest memories growing up in a basement with an open fire.) A wet basement. (You mean the walls were dripping?) Yes. Yes. (Did you have a bed?) Yes, I had a bed. Sometimes some relatives, not often, but sometimes they helped my mother. Relatives of my father didn't help with anything, but mother's brother helped. (How did he help ‑ with money?) Sometimes with money, sometimes with coal in the winter, because it's not easy to get coal.

(Did you have enough to eat?) This is very interest­ing. At this time, 1950s, beginning of '60s, there was more easy with food than now, because Krushchev began his re­forms, and it was not too bad in comparison. (So even though your actual home was a pitiful place, you weren't hungry. You had decent food.) Not sometimes, but not all the time. Sometimes we had enough food, but not all the time. Usually we had food... (What did you eat, for exam­ple? What would your supper be?) That's very difficult. In the summer, tomatoes, fresh tomatoes. My mother very often trying to put them... because I begin and can't stop. I eat, eat, eat. She needs to share for all times. I liked sugar. This is hard for Americans to understand, maybe. I can eat a box of sugar. (You mean eat it straight, by the spoonful?) No, no. Because we usually eat pieces of sugar, hard sugar. (Cubes of sugar.) Yes. (What was the main food that you survived on? Bread? Meat? Chicken?) Some­times we had chicken. Usually on a big holiday, New Year, First May, Seventh of November, my mother would try to make fish and a lot of other Jewish specific... (She made Jewish foods? We call it the gefilte fish. She made that?) Yeah. (She had the utensils. She could grind up the fish?) Yes, yes. I remember usually on all big holidays under the window we have, how is this called, what is this called (a ledge), we haven't refrigerating at this time. And she put usually all this stuff under the window (so it would stay cool). Yes. This is a picture in my eyes.

(Every day she had to bring food home to eat so it wouldn't spoil?) Not every day, but often. We lived ‑ I don't know how in Ameri­can ‑ it's called flea market, ba­zaar, because this is very fresh, and at this time it wasn't too expen­sive. And she sometimes would get things at the mar­ket.

(So it sounds as if you weren't deprived of a healthy childhood. Were you sick often?) It's interesting. Now I understand that this childhood was with some difficulty, but I never felt this. I grew up how usual children do. I went to sports. I studied in school the same as other people from families who had books. This is something strange, I don't know. But I had interest and began to read very early. In my house there never were books, but somebody gave them to me. My interest grew up maybe under the influ­ence from somebody on the outside, I don't know exactly.

(Your friends ‑ people who like to read books? I see you're a serious reader. You have Nabokov in Russian, and we read Nabokov in English here.) No, Nabokov had two periods. The first period he wrote all his books in Rus­sian. After he came here he wrote in English. But he translated all of it himself into Russian from English. (So you're telling me that someone influenced you early on to be interested in books, to learn to read, and it wasn't so much your mother, because your mother was working at what we call subsistence level, barely survival level, barely able to feed the two of you, and so this is a remarkable story. Did you stay healthy living in this damp basement, or were you sick sometimes?) I think I was sick how usual kids are. Not more, not less. I don't know how in this country, but in this time in my country, all kids have certain kinds of childhood sicknesses ‑ five, six, seven. And all kids, maybe a little more, a little less. And I had no more, no less.

(Were your friends Jewish?) In my childhood? (Yes.) It was a big mix. Do you understand, some Jews born in certain Jewish mentality. In this mentality you can see in the face, in the customs. This is not easy to understand. (You're not telling me there's a Jewish stereotype?) No. There's some kind of Jews who are born, and they receive maybe from birth, and maybe from surroundings, they receive some Russian mentality. And they don't look like real Jews in understanding around people. These kind of people had less conflict with their surroundings. (They fit in with the others.) Yeah. Because I know that in my class there were maybe three, four Jews. But in my class there weren't anti‑semitic relations. On the whole, basically. Some­times, yes, but on the whole, I had happiness in this case. This really depends on parents. If parents have anti­semitic feelings, they go to their kids, and their kids do the same way. My sister‑in‑law, she received a portion of this kind of relation. But I had another way. I had a lot of friends who were Jews and Russians.

(I remember Rita telling me her sister had suffered from anti‑semitism.) Yes. But do you understand? Her sister was very certain kind of exactly Jewish sterotype. Not only face, but in some understanding. (Something about her you could identify as Jewish, her looks, but something about her behavior...) No, it's not only a matter of looks, but of behavior. This is not exactly Jewish, but in the understanding of people around, they have a complex about bad things that Jewish people had. (It wasn't just because she looked Jewish, but because people identifed her as Jewish, and they had these bad feelings, and she became a target? She became the victim?) She became a victim, but her behavior was a little bit, how to explain... (Did she provoke them?) Yeah. (How did she provoke them?) I can't explain. This is very psychological thing. She didn't like company. She didn't like to share. We have different kinds of psychology. She was very close to her parents. (She was a little bit...) Selfish. (Spoiled by her parents?) No. I mean, she wasn't very kind, wasn't very open. (She was shy. She was bashful. She was timid.) Yeah, yeah. (So they saw her as a victim.) Yeah.

(And in your case, you were obviously outgoing and you participated in sports, so you were one of the guys?) Yes. (When did you realize you were Jewish?) [laughs] I know my mother is exactly Jewish and she... Maybe in the street when I first heard the word ‑ do you know the Russian word *zhid*? (Yes.) When I heard somebody call me. But in my life, it's not often. Maybe my life is a bad example for this, but I didn't hear this often, but sometimes I did. (So when you heard that word, was it against you, or was it against someone else?) Against me. I heard this word very often in my whole life; when I became older and had a lot of trips through the USSR. It was maybe most towns in the USSR because my work was specifically with my sports.

(So in childhood, it didn't make a lot of difference that you were Jewish? You didn't feel apart from the oth­ers.) Not exactly. Sometimes somebody would give me the understanding that I am Jewish, and I never forget about this. But in my case, this was a little bit easier in comparison with other Jewish kids. I grew up between the years... Do you know in old Odessa people, house build up letter "P" and they all have yard between them. And people who live in one yard, they know each other very good. They live together. They visit each other. It's peacful, a mix. And when you grow up in this world, you begin the same, a little bit. You can't refuse any kind of influence from the outside. And I have some conflict about this. But it's not regular. It sometimes happens.

(You're an unusual person, because you're a thinking person, and you're a person who reads deep things, and yet, at the same time, you could be one of the same guys.) This is not so unusual in Russia. In Russia... This is very difficult, how many percent Jewish people or non‑Jewish people. A lot of people begin to read very early. It's not unusual, I don't think. (Still, when did you take up the sport of boxing?) Maybe 1963. (So you were thirteen years old. By this time were you still living in the basement?) We were living in the basement before my marriage. (You remained there until you got married?) Yes. (Was it still a wet place...) Yes. Because my mother received a new flat, in this moment when I was in the mountains. Rita was not my wife, she was my fiance. And she came to my mother to see her. She saw that my mother take some clothes, no furniture, because everything was so bad that there was nothing to take. And this was in 1978, three months before our marriage.

(Let's go back to age 13. What made you choose box­ing?) In Odessa it was very popular. Before boxing I went to the pool. Sport in Russia in this time was very easy. Without any money, if you have some potential, they will go for you any teacher, because they need good sportsmen. And eventually they give the possibility to become student, because without sport for me it was impossible. (So because you were a good athelete, you got some scholarships?) No.

It was some different way for Jews to go to the insti­tute. To receive education, there were some ways. The first way is for very talented kids. But besides talent, you have something more. In Russian this is called *svjazy*. Good relations, somebody who has power. (Connec­tions.) Yes. This is one way. You should call it "talented plus connections", because only talented, this is very difficult, because every institute has 2% or 3% Jews. In this 2% are people who have connections.

(Now in Odessa the population of Jews to non‑Jews was much higher than 2%, wasn't it?) Yeah. (What was the percentage?) I can't count it. No less than 15%, because Odessa was one of the most Jewish towns in the USSR. (So you were in contests and did well in boxing. That was your major sport?) Yeah. After this I changed. I was champion of USSR between students. (In boxing.) This was my last, before I finished. (You were the USSR Student Champion of Boxing.) Yes. (That's a major thing!) I know. (So you competed only with other Russian students?) All students in the USSR. But this was when I came to the institute and maybe in my second year of institute. (So you were eigh­teen, nineteen years old?) No, twenty‑two. It was 1972. I became a student in 1971. (1971? You were twenty‑one? What happened from the time you finished high school?) I didn't go how people usually do after eight grades. After eight, you go to ninth and receieve a complete education in the school, like high school in America. I had to go to work after eighth grade. And I went to work, but not suc­cessfully.

(What kind of work did you try?) I worked in a facto­ry. (What kind?) Build machine factory. This was hard work. (How old were you?) Fifteen. This work was with the heavy parts of metal. By the way, this was my first work with big anti‑semitism, because I worked between very low­level people. Some of them had been in prison. I did have some difficulties and problems, but most of all, it wasn't my field. I never had success in this field. I never liked the machines. (Was it noisy?) Noisy, but it was completely not my field. (Was it like assembly line work?) Yes, yes. But it wasn't a line, because in Russia, only in big facto­ries are there lines. We have some teams... Sometimes it required some competition because it's not too easy. But I didn't like this and didn't have any success, and after two years I changed my work. More easy work. I went to the seaport. In Russia, sport clubs have differences for people who work on the sea, this is one club, and I trained in this sport club, and they gave me the possibility to work in the seaport. This was easy work ‑ less money, but I can have good training and a lot of free time. This was for me some rest. Two years I worked in the factory, and two years in the seaport.

(Can you describe what you were doing there?) We made a plan for the port. The port has a different way for ships when they came from the ocean, from different countries. We had a special machine for deepest, how do you call it... [depth finder], maybe ten meters, fifteen meters. We made measurements of all this port and after this we made a special map for this. (So how did you do that? You went out in boats and dropped lines?) Yeah. At first we went out on boats. It was a more interesting job.

(There did you experience any anti‑semitism?) No. My first big experience was in childhood, but not hard. But in my first job when I should work between the people who are completely Russian. (How old were these people?) Very different ‑ from twenty to sixty. (So you were the baby?) Yeah. I was the baby. I want to say that I made some mis­takes, too. Because, you know, when you're very young and you receive some more knowledge than they, and sometimes you correct somebody. People don't like this. (So maybe you stepped over the line where you can get away with some­thing...) Sometimes I give them understanding (that you're smarter...) Yeah. Sometimes, not often, because I haven't experience with psychology, with people, with relations, and all young people have this. When they grow up, you want to show yourself older than usually. Sometimes I provoked them. There were some fights between me and ... (Fist fighting?) Yes. (One against one?) Usually. Fortunately. (How did you do?) Somebody helped us. Eventually it was peaceful. (So they broke it up before it became serious?) Yes. (You said it was anti‑semitic, though, and at the same time you're telling me that you provoked it by being a little too smart?) Do you understand? These are two parts that go together. When you didn't give somebody a reason, you're anti‑semitic, but if you're anti‑semitic, you should have some reason, Jews, that's all. And they're at all times trying to find this. Sometimes we give them this provocation. But most times they find it themselves, too.

(So after awhile things calmed down and you were able to work there, and you just didn't like the work itself, or did the anti‑semitism remain a problem?) It's like appear­ance and disappearance. People at all times feel something negative. When they felt good, we went together and drank vodka. First thing they taught me was to drink vodka, and you couldn't refuse, because you lived with them together. If you refused, you provoked them further. "You don't like us!" You understand this? And I drank with them. They taught me and I was a good student in this case. (So in other words, sometimes it was bad, at other times it was Okay and you were one of the guys again.) No, but systemat­ically, they give me the understanding that I'm a Jew. In this group. When I change my surroundings a little bit...

(How many fights did you actually have while you were working at that factory?) Five, seven. Not too much. (With different people each time?) Yes. Different people. But one of them was two. He hated me very much. He was after prison, and maybe he...

(You worked at the seaport. That was better, but you decided to go back to school.) No, I continued my education in the Russian system of evening education. In the begin­ning of the '60s, this was, by the way, a very good way for Jews, because something changed in the system of education, and people who went to the institute after having two or three years work experience ‑ they could get education easily. And a lot of Jews come from school, go to work, at first. First they go this way. But after three, four, five years, this is all changing in Russia. Eventually that change goes down. (You're saying that change didn't last?) Yeah. When I went to the evening school, there's a lot of changes and it's not....

Before, this was a very good educa­tion in evening school. But when I came to the evening school, I can re­ceive good education, because the teacher was very good. Usually students didn't go to the class. Usually there were five, six persons per class. Twenty people in the class, but usually, average number of students was six, seven. And if I want, I could receive highest education. But unfortu­nately I was too young and had too hard a training in sport club, and I didn't go to school regularly, and unfortunate­ly, I didn't have any success in the evening school. But some level I received. And I hoped that I could use this level for continued education. But for Jews, this wasn't enough, because Jews usually prepare years after the con­tinued education maybe twice more. The system was that Jews should prepare twice better. (Twice as well as the others.) Yes. (And you didn't do that.) I didn't do that, because I was young. My mother worked. We hadn't usual relations how you have in a usual family. I was very free.

(Your mother trusted that you knew what you were do­ing.) Maybe she had another way, because she was so busy, so tired. (Was she cheerful, or was she sad all the time?) Interesting question. (She had to visit your father in the hospital until 1969, so...) We shared. One week I went, one week she went. Fifteen years ‑ maybe from first grade I begin to without her. (When you went to your father, did he talk with you? He tried to guide you somewhat?) He talked with me. But his condition was very changeable, and once he talks, and once he doesn't understand anything. (But was he able to understand what was going on in your life? Did you tell him about your work in the factory, etc.) Yeah. But, you understand, he had a certain condition. It was very changeable. (So his emotional condition was not stable.) Not emotional, his understanding condition. (His mind was failing.) Yes. (Was that from the medicines they gave him, or what?) This kind of sickness, I think in Russia, could­n't, not only in Russia, but in the world, too. (What would you call it?) Schizophrenia. But this is not the right word. (But he had a mental illness. That's what we would call that.) Yeah. I think that in the world is this sick­ness. (And it came on in the later years of his life?) In 1955. (He was thirty‑five years old.) Yeah. And when we spoke with some doctors, they said that maybe he had prob­lems with job. He had problems with his job before I was born, and after. (What do you mean?) He had some conflict with his boss. I remember two reasons, when we spoke with the doctors ‑ some from the past, and some from present job. (Something about how he was treated by the boss there made it worse?) Yes. (The chief was not understanding of him.) You know, some conflicts it's very difficult to understand who is right.

(How did you get into the Insitute of Food Technology?) It's very interesting, a full adventure. This institute had a very big boss of this kind of sport. He collected every good kid for this institute. Maybe in America it's the same way at a university that has a good team... He proposed this to me and some of my friends. I tried twice. The first year he helped us, but not enough. The difficulty was that I'm Jewish, and I'm not enough prepared. Maybe if I was not Jewish, it was enough. But these two factors were too much for one person. And the first year his help was not enough. And the next year I went to another town, received a proposal from Kiev, but he met me and gave me a guarantee, and this year it was Okay, and I became a stu­dent. (What year was that?) This was at age twenty, twenty ‑one. 1971. (So you started school and your sport...) I started school and continued my sport.

(So it was the same kind of competition anyway?) Yeah, not that I began from the beginning. (I understand that, but at the institute, don't they have a special coach for you there?) No, a little bit. (Where were you getting your coaching? Where were you training?) In different clubs, not exactly in one. Because we have a lot of training outside, in another town, with the team of the Republic, with the team of the USSR. A lot of different training. (The institute doesn't have its own gymnasium?) Yeah. (Was there someone to train you there also?) Yeah, but this is the man who helped us. On the whole he was more a manager than a trainer. (So he arranged boxing tours?) Yes.

(So where did you go?) All towns. [laughs] I began to travel in 1966, at age sixteen. (While you were still at the factory...) All ages in sports share. Young and ju­nior. For junior, anybody have any interest, and I was for myself. Only if I receive a big result when I'm a junior, I may receive some scholarship. But while a junior I didn't receive any big results. (But you were still a pretty good boxer. Maybe one of the reasons they wanted to fight with you was to see how they were with you?) No, no. In the street there are other rules than in the ring. Completely opposite. I was a very specific boxer, always with head. Some sportsmen have a big force, and some only for reaction, for understanding, not good fighting, really. But I had some good feeling. (You had a strategy.) Yeah. This was some of my personality in sports. In the street it's com­pletely unhealthy, my strategy, unfortunately.

(So you started travelling at the age of 16. Where did you go?) Most towns in the USSR: Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad, Riga, Talinn, Krasnoyarsk ‑ anywhere. (Were you learning things from travelling? Were you getting a better idea of life in the Soviet Union because of your travels?) No, we grew up in a certain system, and this system from birth is trying to keep us inside. Only maybe in 1974, some new books, some new people, I received some new ideas about... Too late. My understanding about the socialist system came to me very late. I don't know why, because my first friend who went from Russia to America ‑ this was in 1972 ‑ this is one of the first to emigrate from Russia. This is called the "first wave" of emigration. I didn't understand this. (It puzzled you that someone would want to emigrate.) Yes.

(Because you felt that you were part of a good system.) No, I saw a lot of things that I didn't agree with. And this guy, my friend, he told me that after two, three, five years, eventually you become to this understanding. (Was this a Jewish friend?) Yes. A very talented mathemetician. I remember now, he may be a high‑level scientist because he was very talented. By the way, I think now he tried to get into Moscow University. He went through all the exams, and they stopped it here. (They wouldn't allow him.) Yes. And he went to Novosibirsk, an academic town, and he received there a very interesting education. He didn't finish, because his family was going to get out.

I, only very late, understood where I lived. Very late. In Tashkent I met very interesting people, most of whom are now in Israel. One of them was my sponsor when I arrived in Chicago. Many people know about him because he organized a big company for helping Irina Ratushinskaya. He was her big friend. And he arrived and after half a year somebody told him that she was in prison, and he organized a big complaint. One of these friends in Tashkent who very influenced me about Russian system, not Russian, the Soviet system.

(Although you're seeing places and meeting people, it hasn't dawned on you that you're going to turn against this system altogether, that you're not going to be content here. By the time you won the student medal, what was your think­ing then? This is 1972, right? That has to be a special kind of experience. Had you already changed your thinking about socialism? What has happened?) No, about socialism, my understanding changed a little bit later, when I began to be introduced to people with more knowledge. Do you know that between people in Russia there's a lot of fear? And people who know a lot about the Soviet socialist system never speak with you openly, because this is very dangerous, because any Soviet person could call the KGB and so forth. This is not easy to meet people who introduce you with something opposite than you usually saw around. But I changed my sport. I began climbing after boxing. Boxing wasn't enough for me.

(Once you got the championship...) I became a champion and turned to opposite side and go into climbing. (Mountain climbing?) Yeah. And for five years I spent time in the mountains. I worked in the mountains. And once I met some very interesting people from Leningrad, very intellectual people. Our meeting in the mountains and our friendship gave the possibility of them to share their knowledge about books, about people. This was the beginning. And after this, my next step was when I met the people in Tashkent. This is a big Jewish colony. This is second and last in my growing about social systems.

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JCC Women's Auxiliary Oral History Project

Second Interview with **Alex Blinstein**

DATE: March 19, 1991

INTERVIEWER: Elaine Snyderman

(When we left off last time, Alex was going to tell me how he became interested in philosophy, and it came about through a friend he met mountain climbing.) Yeah, it's right. (You went on this trip for the first time with a group of students?) No, this is a little bit a different case. I came to the mountain camp and after this we were invited to the tour camp. This is a little different be­cause in the mountain climbing camp there are only climbers, and in the tour camp this is usually people who are not only climbing, but walking and looking. In this camp there were a lot of instructors from different towns, from Leningrad. (So tourists came to this camp?) Yes.

But the instructors were interesting people who a little bit opened my eyes about the Soviet system, about political questions. Because before, I understood that there was something wrong, but I was not sure what was wrong. And these people who have big life experience and knowledge about the political system, they first opened my eyes, my mind about this, and from this moment to I began to have more deeper interest in the Soviet system. I began to find some books which usually ordinary people can't find. It was sort of risky because a lot of people received prison sentences for having these books.

(How old were you?) I was twenty‑­three, twenty‑four. It's enough, because usually people in Russia came to an understanding of the system more quickly and earlier, but maybe unfortunately, or maybe not, maybe it's good because when you don't understand exactly what's happening in the country where you live maybe it's better because maybe then you'll understand more deeply what a crazy system your life is in... (Is this about 1974?) 1975.

(Who are these instructors?) One of them was a teacher from Leningrad University. I don't remember his name be­cause this is... (What did he teach?) This is not exactly teaching because I was educated enough for discussing, for conversation. A lot of books I was reading. When we first met each other we spent maybe six, seven... This is a Rus­sian custom, maybe Americans won't understand this, but people introduce each other and they sit down and talk maybe six, seven hours. (Do you have a meal or drink together?) Small meal, drink, conversation. This is a very usual Russian custom.

(Tea or vodka?) It doesn't matter. I think not a lot of drink. (So your heads were clear while you were drink­ing?) [laughs] Usually it's... it's not so important. After this guy, another guy came from Leningrad too. One of them was a film producer and very interesting. He spent a lot of time abroad. For me this is all in one month. I graduated institute, and after institute I came to the climbing camp for a month. And two months I spent working in this camp. (Working?) Yes, actually working because the chair­man of this tourist camp very much appreciated people from the climbing camp and so they would employ them and pay them not a big salary because we have food and a room. But this was a very good job for me. In the beginning I wanted to con­tinue this work.

But unfortunately there was another side to this work. In certain places it's Kabarda, Kabardins [a people inhabit­ing the Caucasus‑SK], and there's no good relations between Kabardins and the people all around. Because during Stal­in's time people were captured and brought to another side of the country... Do you know that during and after the Second World War Stalin took a lot of nations and put them from one place to another place? This is Tatar, not Kabar­dins. This is a republic of two nations ‑ Kabardins and Bulkartsy. Bulkartsy were captured and taken to another place, and only many years ago they could come back. They hate all Russians. And in this atmosphere it's very diffi­cult to survive. I decided it's better to go home and try to use my diploma. But this summer in this camp gave me a lot of things, and played a big role in my understanding.

(Was part of it what you were reading?) Before I read a lot, but not this kind of book because you can't find it unless you're trying to find them, because they did not lie in the store. In the store, by the way, any kind of good book is not there, because in Russia good books are always popular and all people try and get them. But after this... (Give me a name of a book, or an author or two...) I began Solzhenitsyn, *First Circle*, I began some philos­ophy, Nietz­sche, Freud. Some were members of the Communist Party who survived the War and went abroad, and after this wrote memoirs about growing up in the Communist Party from the beginning of the century to 1930. It was very interesting, because it was the first information about the Party. This was a very strong book. I can't remember his name... (When you think of it, tell me...) After this summer I returned to Odessa and for a long time I couldn't find a job, because in Odessa at this time a lot of people went to America, to Israel. All the bosses of factories or any kind of organi­zation see from the Bureau of the Communist Party receive scandal for every Jew who went to Israel or America. And eventually it was very difficult to find a job, not because I am exactly a Jew, but they are afraid to take me because they don't know ‑ he takes me and after two‑three months I should go. And maybe six months I was without a job.

Eventually, I had a very good job, and I worked twelve years in a big design institute. In this institute I re­ceive a lot of information because this was people with high level education, and a lot of them were very interesting and I had very good relations at this institute. These twelve years... a lot of people, fifty, sixty percent were Jews in this design institute. This is sometimes the usual picture in a town like Odessa. In a design institute there will be a lot of Jews because they usually try and receive a good education. They don't try to go to some factory plant. They usually try this. Most of them eventually became very professional guys and had high‑level professional skills. A lot of them are here now and found good jobs too.

(So you thought you were in a good place?) Yes, with my history, for me, because it matters that I went to this institute too, that I was going to the department that needed a young man without a family who could move to any town for information about designing. This is only one of many and they take me. This is not the first time, this is three months before they decide to take me or not. And eventually they take me and I grow up with regard to salary and position. Eventually I went from Odessa in one of the high positions in this institute...

(You remained there a long time?) Twelve years. My wife worked there fourteen years. She came after high school and she studied in the evening class in the insti­tute. I came after institute because I had the possibility to have the day class. In this institute a lot of people received information because the most important thing in the work between these people is a lot of information going between. Most of them hear the Voice of America and Radio Liberty, stations with more free information. On one of my trips, after half a year, I was in Tashkent and I was intro­duced to a group of people who became my very close friends.

One of them met me here and was my sponsor. Yefim Godler. [?] Usually people know him because he is a very public person... (An activist?) Yes. (A dissident?) Yes. (So he made a name for himself in this country or after he came here?) No, after he came here he found out about his friend, the poet who received five years in prison... (Irina Ratushinskaya...) Yes. He organized a big committee to liberate her and maybe four or five years fought for this with Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. I met with him and his friend who now one year have gone to Israel. He's Jewish but a Russian poet. Igor Darsky. Igor and Misha Darsky, they're brothers. It was very interesting to meet them and I was very lucky to share with them a lot of time because maybe seven, eight times a year I was in Tashkent.

(This was all tied in with your design work? It was the same company Rita worked for.) Yes. (Was this refrig­eration?) Rita worked in the refrigeration department, and I worked for a place where they would build a factory, and a lot of things would be needed while they built this factory, trains, water, canals, energy, power supply. In America, maybe this is very difficult too, when some firm wants to build something, a lot of agreements have to be made with different governmental departments, environment protection inspection, like this. And after my trip I bring all mate­rials to my institute and representatives from my depart­ment, we have a meeting and discuss what needs to be done, and decide how to build it. This is called "their informa­tion". Because when engineers should design something, from zero he designs, but from zero he needs a lot of informa­tion, plan maps, different kinds, a lot of agreements, maybe hundreds and hundreds, inspections.

(So you helped to gather this material.) Yeah, I looked for this material and brought it to the institute and we discussed it. This isn't only one trip, this continues years and years, while they build this plant this continues too because a lot of information becomes old and we need new, so this is a big job. Because they all exist in Odes­sa, and the plant exists here, so all the time fresh infor­mation...

(So while you're doing your job, you're really getting another education in the world ‑ you're meeting interesting people. You're traveling. You're still getting wise in the ways of the world...) Yeah, this is, by the way, by now it's difficult because twelve years, and one month in Odes­sa, and second month in ... this is a specific life with all the time in planes, trains, hotels. In Russia it's very difficult to get tickets.

(And you're still living with your mother?) Maybe, just a moment, one and a half years. Then I met Rita and we got married. My mother at this moment when we got engaged, at this moment she received an apartment. She waited for this apartment twenty‑five or thirty years. She received the apartment and we lived maybe two‑three years together with my mother. When Rita became pregnant, it was too far from town, and we replaced the apartment of her parents. My mother remained... This is by the way very interesting that this apartment is not better than what she has now at "Gran­dma's House" on Broadway and ... This is subsidized here in Chicago. But the apartment she received in Russia was smaller, but was one room, second room, kitchen. This is not convenient. (So this is a step down for her?) I'm not saying it's a step down, but she doesn't like it... (Be­cause it's an open floor plan rather than divided up...) These are some American differences.

(Did she and Rita get along when they met? Were they comfortable with each other?) It's not an easy question. I don't think you could find the couple for whom it's easy with the relatives, you know this is life... Older people have some difficulties, and young people don't always under­stand this. In America maybe it's softer ‑ this conflict between... (I don't think so...) From the surface it looks more so, but I think it's human beings, basically.

(You said, and so did Rita, that when you first met each other you right away knew you were in love...) Exactly me. (She was engaged to be married...) Yeah, but there was some interruption and I met her. It was in November. I had a good relationship with her supervisor, and her supervisor, a woman, she told me... I explained my interest and she said that she's engaged. So I turned away. But after half a year, there was some holiday at a discotheque at this insti­tute, and I remember this date, this is February 27, because from this day we decided the whole question.

(So you were at what we would call an office party, and you were still interested in her. Had you conversed during your meetings on the job?) I wasn't often at work because I traveled so much. (So you saw something that you liked?) Yeah. It was maybe four months before this party, we had some conversa­tions, but not serious ones. In Russian this is called *perekur*. [Smoke break].

(What do you think it was that you liked about her? You hadn't had much contact, and you knew she was engaged? What was it?) She was very open and I feel that she is a very altruistic person, and I don't think in my life I've met such altruistic person. (So she was giving and kind...) She was by the way... [pictures]... after tenth class she came to work... Unfortunately I don't have enough English words to explain. She was friendly and open. I appreciate this kind of human openness and altruism. (So at this party were you dancing?) Yeah, something like this, and this evening I should go to the train and go to another town. (And something made you tell her how you felt about her?) How to explain... It was like falling in love this evening, we both know about it without any explanation. (She ex­plained it the same way.) The same way? It's like a movie. A new film, one part she explains, and one part he explains, and they give opposite explanations of their life together. (This is different. It's such a romantic story, forgive me for invading your privacy...) After twelve years it's not privacy, because after twelve years there's a lot of bad and good.

(She told me that it wasn't long after you got married that you had the idea to emigrate?) I have some ideas about emigration, first, when my very good friend, he now lives in Montreal, we were in Montreal last September... He had a very big influence on me... no, it was when we were married, no, before, I was influenced. But I remember exactly it was some anniversary of the climbing club, a big concert, some Russian bard, you know this? who plays his own songs, like Vysotsky who wrote the music and accompanied himself and sings. (You use the word "bard"?) Yes. (They're like folk singers...)

Maybe this is more clear. I remember a big turnover of my feelings when I was in this singing and all the people I spent time with in the mountains, and I changed my mind. (So he was singing songs about...) It was the atmo­sphere. (So these aren't political songs....) No, no, this is about climbing, about friendship, about love. Because political songs are okay. Second, this was in 1979, I was married, and my very close friends began to think about going to Montre­al. And we began preparing some documents, and exact­ly at this moment all the ways of going ‑ OVIR, the applica­tion for going, all this was broken for ten years, and only in 1987, at the end of 1987 and beginning of 1988 this was all restored and people received the possibility to emi­grate.

(Rita remembers that you couldn't get permission to leave from her grandfather...) Yeah, this was one of the dangerous things because Rita's grandfather was a Communist, he fought in the civil wars. (The Revolution?) I think after. Usually we don't exactly believe him because he was too old and the times were changing a lot through Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev. It's very difficult to believe these people, because one period changes their way of understand­ing for surviving. But he was an old Communist and had a personal pension, that's twice the usual pension ‑ sometimes it's five times more when you had a big position in the Party apparatus, but he wasn't in a high position, but he was very proud. I think it's because he took a very short view. He was too old. But it was one of the things we feared when we first went in. We thought that we wouldn't tell him and he wouldn't know about it, but eventually it was all interrupted. Only when Gorbachev opened this ques­tion, exactly in this moment, without any waiting, because we had the experience of waiting, exactly when it opened up we began. Of course we had waiting after we got our invita­tion because it took time to do this.

(Do you remember when you first heard about the Cher­nobyl nuclear disaster?) We knew about this. (How far is Odessa from that place?) It's too far but not enough for safety. I'm afraid for the looks in our kids maybe... Exactly on this day we were outside in nature with our friends. It was a very sunny day and unusually warm. Only after this I remembered this day. And now I fear maybe some... but I think that we weren't too serious to this because you always try to think better when things are worse. (You didn't want to worry about it....) Right. (But your children were very young, and that's probably the first thing parents think about...) We weren't too close to this. [look at map] It's very bad for Kiev. Kiev is very close. (What's the distance?) Between Kiev and Chernobyl is 100 miles. For us it's maybe 300‑400 miles.

(So there was no immediate danger?) No, no. We could speculate about this maybe. (So when you heard about it, was it first from the papers, or some other source?) I think that official information came maybe two days after this catastrophe. (In Odessa you heard it sooner than people who lived near the disaster...) No, I think after two days... (But the accident was on April 26, and people have said that on May Day they didn't know about it. There were all the outdoor things. So if you heard about it before May Day, either it was not official, or they told the people who lived further away that there was no danger...) I'm afraid to make a mistake because it's difficult now to restore exactly. In this time it's the beginning of the information revolution, and so many magazines, etc., every day this is like twice, four times more, every day. And this information is very difficult to remember. Because it was the first time of *glasnos*. By the way, every month changed about information. In the beginning they said one thing, next another. This is together (the trouble? mw) with *glasnost*.

(Were you worried about the environment, such as the food you were getting?) We worried not about the environ­ment at first, but about surviving. Because when it became *glasnost*, anti‑Semitism showed its face officially. (Offi­cially?) Yeah, officially, because he who fights with anti‑Semitism, before you can't find information. Anti­Semitism you could find, but fighting against it was very different. But now fighting about it, there is this source of information too. This grows very fast.

(What evidence was there of anti‑Semitism?) First of all, this is the beginning of *Pamjat'*, and second, maybe the greatest source, was the Russian Union of Writers. Russian, because there's the Soviet Union of Writers. Because art has unions ‑ this is the idea of Stalin, that all people should organize because he understood that this role of art, of books, movies, is for the people, and that it should be under his control.

In 1930 all the Union of Writers, Ac­tors, Painters, all kinds of artists made unions. The Soviet Union of Writers come from different republics ‑ the Armenian Union, Ukraini­an, etc. And the most anti‑Semitic became the Russian. And two magazines, Molodaya Gvardia [Young Guard], and Nash Sovremennik [Our Contemporary]. These two magazines began publishing anti‑Semitic material, and at this moment I realize that this *glasnost* is going in very inter­esting directions. (So these magazines were publishing anti- Semitic statements?) Not only anti‑Semitic state­ments, but novels, big novels. Vasily Belov. I very much appreciated him before. He wrote one book, the first official anti‑­Semitic book was published.

(We read last year about a meeting of writers where the group of *Pamjat'* people broke in...) That's when we were still here. (What year was that?) I think it happened in 1988, maybe 1989. But after this happened, a lot of things, they killed a very interesting man, Aleksandr Mann'.

He was a very famous priest. He was Jewish, but his mother was very close to Christianity. (He was born a Jew, but his mother was a Christian?) Yes, his mother was Jewish too, but he took the Christian religion. But he had a very interesting position ‑ an ecumenist, who wants to destroy walls between different kinds of Christianity, and between Christianity and Judaism too. He published a lot of inter­esting books abroad, before *glasnost*. And the KGB tried a lot of times to get him out of the country. (He published abroad?) Yes. He was, by the way, like a spirit father. If you go to the Christian church you have a spirit father... (You mean like a priest?) No. You believe God, and someone prays for you, like your father, he takes care of you for your spirit. (A spiritual father...) He was a very famous man because he was a spiritual father for Solzhenitsyn, for a lot of very high level people in the intelligentsia. (He inspired them and they came to him for guidance?) Yes. Not only Russians, but a lot of Jews came to him, writers, Russian poet Jews, Jew by birth but Russian poets. Most Jews wrote in Russian. You could appreciate Jewishness, but your readers are people who speak Russian.

(What happened to this man?) They killed him. (How?) They killed him very symbolically, this is a very old Rus­sian style of killing. They break the wood... (An axe?) Yes, an axe, but there is more ritual. He didn't die exact­ly in this moment. He gets to his house and dies in the arms of his wife. Maybe one‑and‑a‑half years ago this happened. (Was this published in our press?) In the Chica­go Tribune I've read a lot about him. We order the best Russian newspaper from Paris, New Russian Word from New York, and Russian Mind from Paris, and these give a lot of information about his life and his books. (How old was he?) Maybe fifty‑two. He now became very popular and to lecture on TV about Christianity, and this is one of the reasons they killed him. (You think it was *Pamjat'*? Yeah, but not only. KGB, the Party, they're together. I think this is all together. In Russia nothing could happen without this.

(It's a little like Trotsky's death isn't it?) Trotsky was killed with an alpinist... you know, for climbing. You know he had a good guy around. And he came around and Trotsky believed him and they were going to walk to the mountains. This is basically the same, but a little of this ritualistic symbolism. A lot of famous people have asked Gorbachev about an investigation and he said Okay, but there's no investigation. And after this two or three guys were killed who published independent newspapers.

(So when you were getting ready to leave, these were not issues for you because they took place later... Or you were just fearful because you knew that *Pamjat'* was active and there was going to be a certain amount of anarchy, was that it?) Yeah, at that moment I realized it's very danger­ous to remain here with kids. I was right, because every day it was worse and worse.

(Let's try to summarize some things... What was the worst time for you in Russia?) That's a very difficult question. Maybe before I came to the institute, maybe my childhood because when you have only mother, for boys this is not enough. Anybody couldn't help and show you and share some experience and give good advice at certain times, and I think I lost a lot of this before seventeen or twenty years old, because a lot of forces are going into survival ‑ not growing or intellectual things, but for surviving.

Only after this, a little bit later... In the Russian school system the first four years you have one teacher. And he or she teaches all subjects, and I had very bad luck and this teacher was anti‑Semitic. She completely didn't like me. She punished my day by day. I would stand behind the room until three, four, five o'clock. Every week she would call for my mother. In Russia the best mark is five. I have all times only ones or twos. When I came to the five class, and now I had good luck and a very intelligent liter­ature and language teacher, and he was Jewish, and he gave me a lot of things and he saved me. Because maybe this continued the first four years, and my mother, only after four years understood what happened. After the first quar­ter she received a letter from the Board that your son is such a good student, because for four years she received only bad things. From age seven to age eleven.

(So this teacher became your 'spiritual father' didn't he?) A little bit, but I was too young, and a lot of forces were going into surviving. I chopped the wood for the stove after school. We lived in the basement without anything.

(What was the best time?) The best time was exactly the five years in the institute. This was freedom ‑ materi­al freedom and intellectual freedom. Material because... I think American students couldn't be so happy because there are a lot of things around that he or she needs without any question. There were mountain trips, without money. Life without money, that's like life in Communism.

(When you left home you took your pictures, what else did you take? Any things, books, family treasures?) Unfor­tunately, our baggage was so limited and our financial ability was small, so we should sell our big library because we needed money for tickets. We took our pictures from our life, and I took letters I had received. (Trophies from boxing?) No, because they so often changed apartments, four times we moved.

(You didn't serve in the army did you?) In the Russian system if you're in the institute, you go to the army re­serves and you receive Officer status. I have one picture from kindergarten. Then in the institute. (In the reserves did you feel you were treated like everyone else?) You come with everyone as a group from the institute, so it was Okay. It's like vacation. (The naval reserves?) Yeah, but it was more specific, chemistry naval. It was very easy. A very good place for us.

(You came here. Did you have a hard time in your travels or did it go smoothly?) We had very good luck. In Vienna we had an unbelievable place. I don't know why, we lived in the center of the city in a very old family hotel. They built a museum of this family. We invited our friends. There were old rooms and old furniture. It was unbeliev­able. It's a wonderful memory.

(During the hardships with Rita... did you mean in Russia or America?) Both places. (What were the disap­pointments when you came here?) In America I can be only disappointed with myself. I haven't enough professional skills. This is only one disappointment. In America it all depends on your skills, your education. My skill was very specific, I never prepared to go here. So my life here is a little stronger than people who... But I haven't any disap­pointments. (Are you in a position where you can get a better position here?) I can't use my skills here at all. It's interesting work, etc. A lot of work in America is specific work that you couldn't use in other countries. Unfortunately I'm forty with two kids, and it's not easy to change the profession. But maybe I go to some course and take something. But it is too late for me. This is not even a disappointment.

(Are you working as an engineer?) No, Rita is working as a designer. I'm working as a lab technician. (So this is beneath your training, it doesn't challenge your abili­ties?) But I'm glad I can work and bring home a salary so far. But this is work, not too bad in relations with peo­ple. I have a good friend there. He now lives with my English teacher.

(With your difficulties, what has kept your family strong and together? I know in the USSR there's a high divorce rate?) I don't think the USSR has a higher level than in America. I think it's an unexplainable question, a thousand books have been written about marriage. I began to think that marriage is something unexplainable, it's like faith. You should believe or not believe. For Jews, I think it is that the family survives for the kids. If there's some conflict they go round it and forget about it. I think. But I can't explain because I think that family life is very difficult to make a classification about. It's somebody [everybody?-mw] trying.

(Was there something your mother taught you about Jewish beliefs about family?) This is something maybe from myself. But I feel this is most important in life, kids. If you lose them you have nothing more. It's a more diffi­cult life, but it gives you more satisfaction.

(What are your plans for the future?) Most important is trying to find some balance in this life. It's very difficult in America between what should be first: educa­tion or house, this work or this work. To give more time to the kids and spend family time together, find some better way to survive with kids, the possibility to raise them better, and be more understanding in the American life. It's very different from Russia and it's sometimes too much.

(What is it hard to understand about American life?) People aren't so open. It's very difficult to think about somebody. From the surface they are very open but it's not easygoing to be close and understanding. Life in America is more difficult. You have such big numbers of ways to spend money, spend time, all the time you're in a neurosis trying to decide what to choose. But I want to find a balance between material life and other life. I think it's a prob­lem in American life, it's materialism going deeper and deeper into the human being. They surround people with bigger and bigger. Every day a new thing. So you try this and this, and you haven't time for something else. Material goods take more part of the human being. It's hard to find the balance.

(What do you hope for your children?) I think it's like family, that it's very unpredictable. I believe that people from birth have their own way. I think I could give something to them, be close, feel love and appreciation, but I feel that we all have some way from God, and what she receives from me, mother and God together, I think it's difficult to change. I think it's a potential to be real­ized. We can only better help to realize it.

(Where did you come up with the idea of God when you didn't have Jewish education?) The idea of God ‑ when you go deeper and deeper into human life you see that there is no order without God. You could only make order if you became God. Without this you couldn't see the world around.

(Would you consider yourself religious?) Maybe no, because maybe when I am close to religious people they irri­tate me a little bit with a lot of things they build between God and the people who believe. (And yet your children are going to a religious school...) So far, but I'm not sure we can afford this in the future. (But they're getting a foundation in Orthodox Judaism...) I don't think this is Orthodox. It's conservative, but not Orthodox. I have some disappointments with the school because this openness, the difference between America and Russia, it begins from kids, and it's very difficult to have close friends for my kids and my daughter suffers from this very much. Sometimes we have some problems with school. We didn't see something that we expected from the school. (The program?) The pro­gram is not so important, but the relationships. Sometimes we're disappointed with the fact that knowing and the doing don't go the same way. Some prejudice between Ameri­can kids, they have some images of Russian kids, like that "you go here because you don't have money". My kids told these kids, "by the way, we pay money." This is a small thing, but... (So there's a little prejudice here too...) It's interesting, because this is a generation whose grandpa and grandma came from Russia.

(What do you miss about Russia?) I miss my youth, but I can't bring it back here or in Russia. We all lose our youth, and this is a general position. Remember I told you, this is from Nabokov, he explains that it seems to others that we lose our fatherland, but we have only one father­land, and that's our childhood.... when I lived in Odessa. Everyday I came through the street where I grew up. This is my school... When I live here there's a break. Eventually, my childhood, not in Russia, but in my past life... I miss a lot of very close friends. One of them I believe we were a big part of each other's lives. He has abnormal physical development. It made it hard to grow up. Did you see the movie, "My Left Foot"? He like this guy is very close. His face, his one leg and two arms are Okay. Only the same prob­lem with his leg. We had a very close relationship. He had a very interesting library. I met him in the institute. (Is there any chance he'll come here?) I think not because he has a lot of physical problems and mental problems, I mean physically, because he's very deep, a very intellectual guy.

(Is there more you'd like to say about your personal philosophy?) It's difficult. I could speak, but I'm not sure... I haven't any sort of personal philosophy. What I have I've explained to you. I think the basic things I have tried to explain.

(Is there anything else I should have asked about?...) This is very difficult to concentrate on something. You could imagine something, relations, etc., but it's very difficult to criticize something because first of all you should criticize yourself. I can't find something that disappoints me. Quite the opposite. We have a very good friend here. I have a good friend, Gara, he works in the Russian Cultural Center, and some people who are here too.

(You came together with her sister...) No, they came here after a year. (Were you their sponsors?) Yes. In this time we shouldn't pay some money. We only met them and they lived with us for a month. It's not too hard. My wife and I began work the day after they arrived.

(Who gave you the most help here in terms of getting work?) By the way, one of the things I'm disappointed with is Jewish Vocational Service. Not me, my wife. Something strange with this organization. No, Yefim was our sponsor and helped me and helped Rita too. He had conversations with people who work in his firm. He was very important because he worked there twelve years and his bosses appreci­ate him. And so my wife works from this time. (Is he Russian too?) Yes, he lives here maybe ten years, and works as an engineer. He has a very good position. His reference was very important. And Yefim helped me too. Another man, the brother of his wife taught us to drive, helped us buy a car, took us to the drivers test. And eventually we became drivers. We had never driven. (And now you have a car?) We make a lot of trips now, to Wisconsin Dells, Devil's Lake, State Park of Wisconsin. Holland, Michigan. We have now a second car. We bought a brand new car.

(It sounds like you're fulfilling the "American dream". But you have things that make it not just a material dream...) But to buy a car, you can't live here without a car. You can't go anywhere without one. I like to go to museums with my kids. (What museum do you go to?) Science and Industry, Art Institute, Planetarium. Not too much, but they have four years difference and have different inter­ests.