**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**

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

**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**RITA MASIS BLINSTEIN**

**Electrical Designer**

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BIRTH: September 30, 1956, Odessa

SPOUSE: Alex Blinstein

December 9, 1950, Odessa

CHILDREN: Anna, 1980

Simon (Sam), 1984

PARENTS: Sofia Masis, Feb. 28, 1925, Mogilev

Yefim Masis, June 2, 1916, Barazovka

SIBLINGS: a sister

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

Hillel Torah JCC

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of he Jewish Community Centers of Chicago

NAME: **RITA BLINSTEIN**

DATE: November 1, 1990

(Rita, what are your earliest memories of your family?) I have my parents, my older sister and when I was a child I had my grandmother and grandfather. (How many people?) It was one apartment, three rooms, six people. (Was it com­fort­able?) It wasn't comfortable at all because my grand­mother as sick for fifteen years. It was hard. It was a neurological condition. My parents lived in the middle of the apartment, like in the family room. Everybody who can go to the kitchen or get out must go through this room. This was their room. And I had one room with my sister until I finished high school and she was already in the university. We had one little bedroom. And my grandmother and grandfather had another one, and my parents lived in the middle.

(So your grandmother was bedridden?) Yes, she was. It was neurology problems with her head. She was okay; she understood everything but it was hard for her to turn her­self, to stand, to get out of the bed, to eat, to speak. It was a problem. (Was she in pain?) Yeah, she had a lot of medica­tions and my mother took her to Moscow to the very famous professor, but she was too old to take an operation. To the young people even in Russia they have something like that. (There was some sort of growth?) In the brain. They could have the operation on the brain if she was like 35 years old, but she was like 55-60 years old so it was impos­sible because of her condition. (Did it happen suddenly or slowly?) Slowly, slowly. It was fifteen years. It was a little bit harder, harder, and at last it was... So I had a quiet child­hood, because no noise at home, no noise, no kids, no birthday parties, no visitors. Sometimes I had birthday parties at my friend's house. She lived close to me, and I asked my friends to go to another apartment be­cause of my grandmother. And always somebody was with her -- my mother or my grandfather was with her for helping.

(So your mother didn't work?) No, she worked. But she worked close to my house so she could walk to her job and come back during lunch time. It took about 15-20 minutes by walking, so after her job she very quickly could come. And my grandfather, he didn't work at that time, so he usually could stay home and take care of the kids, house, cooking, every­thing. (What was his occupation?) He was a communist. That was his occupation and he... I don't remember his posi­tion, what he did before, because I was a baby when he was retired. He was a member of the Communist Party and he really believed. That's what I remember about him because the whole of life that I remember, he didn't work. He was retired. He was too old, about 65 when I was a baby. He had some position at the seaport. Odessa is a big seaport. The seaport administra­tion, but it was the low level, not the high level of the position, but as I remember because the first apartment that we talked about, it was in the special building that was built by the seaport administra­tion for the seamen. They had business trips by ship, and their family... that was a reason to build this house and we had an apartment in that house because of that. It was like a special kind of house. It wasn't special condition, but the reason to take this house was because we had no choice. It was just one chance to get an apartment. This was very hard at the beginning of the Sixties to get an apartment. So I really wanted another apartment, but I don't remember so much because I was five when we moved to this one. And we lived there about twenty years.

(You were near the sea then.) Yeah. It wasn't too close, but we can walk to the beach and swim and in my childhood we had a big crowd and all the kids from the house... We could go to the beach about 20-30 minutes by walk, and swim. I was like 10-12 years old then, not a little child, because that is too dangerous. The Black Sea is a dangerous sea, it's not like Lake Michigan. Anything can happen. There's a guard, but it's too far. So it's for the best swimmers. So I was 10-12 years old so I could come. It was a beach but here nothing can happen. [The kids] get attention and there are other people who work to take care of everybody who's swimming, but there it's anoth­er thing where it's quiet. There were more people in good weather on weekends in summer.

(Did you have chores?) I had some, not much. I don't really remember.

(Did you have political discussions?) Grandfather talked about being a Communist lots of times. And when I was a child I also believed that, some of those old stories were interest­ing, but I grew up so fast and like when I was fifteen, sixteen, I didn't believe in that. (Why did you grow up so fast?) I mean that the ten years in your child­hood can bring you much more than the ten years between 30 and 40, 40 and 50, etc. So much happens. (What caused you to change your mind about your beliefs? Who were your grandfather's heros?) Lenin, mostly. We didn't talk about Stalin because at the beginning of the Sixties there's ten years from the Sixties to the Eighties, we knew everything about Stalin mostly the second year after he's dead. Krus­chev opened the door and everything was discovered. It wasn't like a hero of the Soviets. He brought a lot of bad things to Russia, so he wasn't a hero in my childhood.

(By the time you were ten, about 1966-67, Kruschev's revelations about Stalin changed the schoolchildren's views about Stalin as a hero.) Yeah, I remember that. (How did your grandfather react to that?) I don't remember his reaction because his opinion about Lenin was like a wall and nobody could destroy that. (Who tried to argue with him at home?) Nobody, because it was impossible, first of all; and he was a very strong man, for his age and his behavior was like he was owner of this apartment and my father didn't discuss anything with him because we lived so close. It is impossible to make the people angry and to live together. We are trying to be quiet because we couldn't do anything. (So there was a lot of strain in that household?) Of course, but we didn't know about that. My parents were quiet and happy, like a couple. My childhood at that point was so happy because they didn't have a divorce and things like that. They were trying to bring the quietness in the family.

(What did your mother do?) My mother graduated the technical school like an economist. My father pushed her to do this because when she got married she just had the high school education. And my father finished at another insti­tute of technology just before the second world war, and he was an officer in the war. Just in 1941. He finished the universi­ty in June. So he took part in the war and a lot of battles and he had some certificate of recognition. He was a good officer, anyway. He finished his [duty] at Bucha­rest, Romania in 1945. That was the finish of the second world war. So he was in it four years, from beginning to end. Afterward he came back and married my mother in 1950. In 1951 my older sister was born. And he pushed my mother to take the educa­tion. So she finished and worked as the administrator of a big shoe store, like account administra­tor. It wasn't a high position. But it was a quiet job. Even a little education is better than never. My father was inspector of the food industry because he finished his education in food processing. So he was inspector of all food storage-- all kinds of food that come to Odessa, by seaport, airport, trains, everything. We have this special organization to check the food, check the condition of any kind of food like milk, bread, meat. He had about thirty years' experience. He was famous in his field. Even some­body in the high level of the same organization in Moscow, they ask you to take a higher degree than Masters-- Ph.D. He started it, but didn't finish. I was born and was a baby, and he needs to live in Moscow and it takes a few years, and he decided not to do it. He continued to work until he turned sixty and retired.

(Do you remember any historical events from your teen­age years, etc.) I remember what has happening in Czecho­slovakia because the soldiers from Odessa were sent there, because that's a special district belonging to the Ukraine which needs to take care of that. That was part of their job. So they took the soldiers from Odessa to go to Czecho­slovakia. So I remember that it was at night and they brought the dead soldiers back also at night. Nobody could see them. And I remember. This is a very good example: when I was after high school I was seventeen years old in the middle of the year-- It was a "good" age, Brezhnev peri­od, I mean good in quotation marks. One of my classmates was in the Soviet army and his mother was alone. She was a very interesting lady. She was very highly education, she was a musician, she finished the conservatory, and she worked at the radio station.

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She was very professional. She was a painter and she sewed well. She had unbelievable kinds of [embroidery, etc.] like that and she was a professional in this field also. But anyway, what happened with her. She was alone, divorced. Her husband was in Moscow. He was an officer in the Soviet army. She didn't like this. Her son was in the Soviet army and the KGB found that she was trying to orga­nize some Jewish young people to get their work, like music or philosophy, not close to the political, but anyway. Some of that work she was trying to put on the radio, recordings, and give them some space in the radio programs. (So it wasn't close to being political?) Not one percent. But they were Jews. She was Jewish 50%. Her mother was Jewish. That was the reason the KGB was watching her. And she lost her job and all her neighbors were upset with her and they did unbelievable things to her. She occupied a little room in a big apartment and a few other people lived together. They had just one kitchen for all of them. They could put something, like a dust, on her food. You can die from that. They made very angry jokes to her-- I can't find the right words right now because fifteen years have passed and I'm still upset about that because you know it was unbelievable. I was just one person in whom she believed, and she was crazy of that. The situation drove her crazy, I mean really crazy. (How long did they treat her that way?) A couple of years. Just two years her son was in Soviet army and nobody could save her and protect her from everything like that and they called in the middle of the night; they came in the middle of the night. You know, she lost her job and then she couldn't find another one because everybody knew-- the good person and nobody could give her a job and there's the special organization in each city like a housing authority. They didn't give her the permit to live anymore so she was closed to even a small room. So she was homeless: no job, no money, nothing for living, and it was driving her crazy because she was such a strong-feeling lady, she was so sensitive and nervous, you know, the high level of humanity and education and organization. So she wasn't so strong to get the war against the KGB. She didn't have any relatives or any friends to save her or give her even a little money.

(She lived in the same building with you?) No, it wasn't. But I already worked, and it was close to my job and it was like downtown Odessa and a few times a week I usually came to her apartment to spend a little time with her because I was afraid, of course, for her life, because I knew her very well and I understood the situation. She explained to me, pretty clear, it couldn't be false, because I knew the KGB could do everything they want and especially this kind of people who couldn't do anything. And at last she went to Moscow to the Moscow Congress to help and pro­tect herself and at the same time I was in the Crimea where her son was in the army and I met him there. He knew every­thing but he couldn't do anything because he couldn't leave the army. And he asked the officer to give him a few days because of his mother's illness, and at last he went to Moscow just a couple days later, and she was now in like a special hospital for crazy people. They put her the same, like the dissi­dents, everybody who doesn't agree with the Communist party or the government. They put a lot of people over there. So they put her the same kind of place and they give her some kind of medication and at last she died. (How long was she in the hospital?) Just maybe a few days and he asked the doctors-- just permit him to take her home and he did this and she lived just a couple of months after that. After that I saw her just one time because it was unbeliev­able, you know, because she was absolutely crazy.

(How old was she when she died?) Not even forty years old. She was so young. Her son was born when she was seventeen or eighteen years old. So they were like brother and sister. There wasn't a big difference between the ages. He was nineteen and she was like 37, 38. And she had a very big, long white hair like close to a yard long, enough that they cut her hair like in the army, like an inch long-- They cut off all her hair. And when I saw her I couldn't recognize her.

(Did she recognize you that last time?) No, she didn't recognize me. She didn't recognize even her son because of the medication. It was a big stress they gave to her-- it was like a shock. (Her son was your friend?) Yeah, but it wasn't close. We studied together. Anyway, this is a usual case. It's not like it's an unbelievable story. It can happen to anybody at any time. Even if you're just a little bit taller or not like everybody else, the KGB could find you. (It didn't help to stand out in the crowd?) Yeah, but she didn't do anything wrong. She didn't go outside and say, "I don't like this government, I don't want to live here, I don't want to be in the Communist party, everything is wrong"--no. She was just trying to help the Jewish young people to play music, to publish their poetry. She didn't do anything against anybody, but even in this case, anything could happen. If the people could say something outside, of course they could kill them.

(When you went to visit her, did you bring her any­thing?) I usually brought her some food. She didn't ask me for money and she didn't permit me to give her any money because she had some pictures and sold them to get a little money for bread. She got help from her mother, but usually I brought something to eat to her like sausage, bread, butter, cakes, mineral water, but she didn't permit me to bring her anything because she couldn't even eat-- She was so nervous. She lived in shock a couple of years and she was afraid to go out even to the kitchen to make tea or something like that. So she was afraid of everybody and everything. The last time I also was afraid because I saw that she was driven crazy. She told me I worked at the KGB. You know, I was seventeen years old and I couldn't say anything false. This was unbelievable. She said, "Okay, I believe you, I love you. You're my close friend and I appreciate your coming ..." It was like a round. She couldn't do anything and I saw that. She was sick of that, of course, but they killed her anyway by the medication, the situation - by everything.

(Did she or her son regard themselves as Jewish?) He went to Canada with me when the door was a little open. We were the first people who came and he went to Canada with his friends and he has now a wife and a little son and they're together. He said, "I wish to forget about Russia forever. I even wish to forget the Russian language-- never speak Russian, because this is not my motherland. It's not the country in which I wish to live and I don't need to teach Russian to my son and that's all." (Did he leave as a Jew?) That didn't matter because everybody who could leave could get a permit to go. Nobody asked him and there's this special office for where you're going. If you got the Israel invita­tion, it was enough. He prepared a little story how he's a Jew because he's just a quarter Jew, and he didn't have this specific appearance, you know, he had blond hair and blue eyes, like his mother. I think he will get a better future now. Everything is open to him now. He's just thirty or so, that's nothing for men. It's not like women. For men, it's just the beginning of life.

(What was happening in your life then?) I had my institute-- it's between college and university-- five years of education. I was in the evening division, and a full-time job. So I had six years because it's not each day you study. It's three times a week. So after high school I worked full-time and studied. (Because your family couldn't afford to send you to school?) No, because I was a Jew. I finished the special math high school. I had very good grades after this and I couldn't try to start any university but everybody knew who gets a Jew to start or another not. So my wish was to go into the architectural field because I like to paint and I thought this was enough. But because I was a Jew... My sister finished, but in the structural divi­sion. The director of this institute said to my father, because directors could sometimes close things to a Jew, he said, "I'll give you a good recommendation. Put your daugh­ter in any other institute but this, because she couldn't start anyway if she was like Einstein, because she's Jewish, that's all." They could tell you: don't spend your time. Don't spend your nerves. Just change your mind. (Were there quotas?) The quota was zero at this institute. This was in 1974. My older sister was six years older, so she was just finishing. She was almost 24 then. No matter what kind of education was before and how they passed tests--no matter--they couldn't even start it.

(What was the Jewish population in Odessa then?) It was big. I can give you a good example. My class in high school, this special math school, had about 35 kids and 80% were Jewish. So almost all of them get their education at Odessa University in the math division, just for program­mers, not a wide field, just this part was possible. But I didn't feel math was my field. I didn't understand a lot of things at eighteen that I understood later. And my father decided to put me in the institute like refrigeration tech­nology because he knew that it's not the best education but it's a high level of technical education, and I could find a job. And he paid 1,000 rubles for that to the director, from hand to hand. And for what? That's an interesting point-- for what? Because I had very good grades and a special math school gave me everything for five years of education. I had the same kinds of subjects I'd already had, so I didn't spend much time in the institute to study. Just the technical subjects I needed to study. So for what he gave the money? But nobody touched me during the test--nobody gave me an F for nothing. Just let me tell some­thing. Just the same like everybody. And I passed all the tests with As. And they didn't have enough people in this evening division because, of course, not many people wish to work full-time and study at the same time. It wasn't enough people because in Russia they usually plan the number of people who can be... so if it's more than this number then they have a competition. But in this division there weren't even enough people to occupy the whole place, so they had some extra places. But even for this my father needed to pay. Just don't touch. I don't know, but I guess I was one of the best students because I helped everybody because I knew almost all of the subjects, drafting-- and a lot of people couldn't draft and didn't have any experience and I worked as a drafter. I could help everyone pass the tests, do the homework. It wasn't the best place. Kids didn't dream of this place. They just spent the time to get the degree.

(What kind of work did you do during the day?) I was a drafter where about 200 people worked. It was a special design institute of the food processing industry and the particular job was to build plants for children's food - all kinds of kids' food. Maybe it's not incomparable with American because as I see it you don't have a special kind of food for first years: canned food for the wintertime, soups, vegetables and fruits, milk with fruits, yogurt, and almost all was from fruits and vegetables and not too much from meat because the problem is the processing of meat. That depends on the technology. We froze the meat. I worked as a drafter for six years on the automated control systems, so that was now close to my field in America be­cause I'm an electrical designer now. After I finished my institute and finished my engineering degree, I worked as an engineer of refrigeration systems. And I prepared drawings and estimating. It's required to see the safety of the milk, fruit, etc. because usually the season is summer and they need to work the whole year, so they're safe for six to eight months until winter comes and they open the refrigera­tor rooms and took them out and in each room there was a different temperature because of the different kinds of food and each room has a different kind of machine to cool the food. Sometimes I went to the field to help the people who build the plants, to solve problems and make sketches for them, whatever. That was my job. And the last couple of years I had a couple of guys and we worked together and I give them a job and I was a [low-level manag­er], so I was like a middle-level engineer. (You were young--a lot of responsibility?) Yeah, but you know I spent almost fifteen years in Russia working so I had enough experience. I didn't like to be a manager because I didn't know how to do this. I couldn't say "that's wrong, you need to fix it; you're lazy and don't like to work." But sometimes I would ask the people who work with me for help and I need to check because I put my signature on the drawings. So I checked this. (Did you like this work or did you miss architec­ture?) I still loved this and I was trying to go to the Interior Design Institute in Chicago. I have translated my diploma, all my grades, and that was almost 55 numbers, and it cost me about $100, but anyway, I was trying to start and they require three years and close to $9,000 and the manager of the student department said that unfortunately she could­n't pass any of my grades because the fields are so differ­ent. And I prepared a few works for them but they weren't familiar with that and I couldn't do exactly what was re­quired, so I just did some drawings in ink and pencil on paper and mylars and I gave them to her and she said "It's okay, but what we need is 180 degrees different." She showed me the students' work and I discovered that I'd have to start all over again. And at first I thought it would be possible to finish in two years, to combine the first and second year into one, because she would pass some of my subjects. But I would have to start from the first year because of the times of classes, so it wasn't possible. She suggested that I start all over again if I wish, and I decided that the education for my kids to go to two Jewish schools was more important. Even with scholarship it's $300 each month. So I decided to give them education first because they are growing up and need it first and after that, we'll see. I really don't feel I can start all over again now because it's too much. Last year my income was zero. I received money from the government because my tax was too lower, and because we had two dependents.

(What is your work now?) The name of the company is Sargent and Lundy. It's a very big company. They work on power station plants-- nuclear or water, any kind, almost all nuclear. (In Chicago?) All over Illinois and in other countries-- China, Indonesia. But there's a pretty big company-- 3,000 employees. The building is downtown between Monroe and Adams on Wabash, across from the Palmer House. (What is your title?) I'm an electrical designer. But they have different level of electrical designers. I got I guess the lowest level. They have three levels. They give me some money. They gave me a raise twice this year, so now I've got good money. It was good to start with because they're a big company and can't pay big money even to de­signers because the designer isn't the engineering position. It's in the middle between drafters and engineers.

This company prepared all kinds of drawings for power plants. So they have a customer who asks them to prepare the drawings-- everything-- building materials, etc. They did everything and they give them to customers. They have engineering, designing, and the field, so they work togeth­er. (Who are your colleagues?) I have not much experience in another company since it's my first job, but a middle level of employees of my company are immigrants, almost all of them-- not too much natural Americans, because they prefer a high position like engineering after the MA degree or the Ph.D. The people who work with me, most are immi­grants or were before. They're from all over the world, but mostly [Eastern] Europe: Polish, Yugoslav, Hungarian, Czech, the Philippines, Indians, and a lot of Russians. Some of those are engineers, but most are designers at different levels. But to be an engineer you have to take the TOEFL engineering test. After that they get their MA in engineering and their own stamp with their name and regis­tration number. They can put this stamp on their drawings. They have to be regis­tered in the State of Illinois, or another state, maybe. They can get this after they pass the American test. The Russian diploma is not enough.

(Is this work satisfying?) I don't know exactly, because I didn't have a choice. I couldn't find a job during the year and in Chicago there aren't too many compa­nies where you can work as a designer in the refrigeration field. So I just had a few interviews and I couldn't satis­fy these employers because I was a woman and that's unusual for engineering, but it's usual in Russia. Because of this situation in Russia I had just two possibilities-- to go into mathematics and become a programmer, or to go into engineer­ing. There's no choice. And here that's unusual, so that's why I had almost fifteen interviews and nobody could give me a "yes." And maybe sometimes I was over-qualified... They always gave me "no." That's why I didn't have a choice. And the friend of my friend is an engineer at this company and he recommended me, that's why they didn't pay too much attention. At the same time they have good experience with Russians because they had a lot of good Russian workers. So maybe these are the two reasons they gave me a "yes." (Are there other women?) Not too many women, but a lot of the women are from Russia or other European countries. Some are Filipinos but they're like secretaries.

(How did you meet Alex?) We worked at the same compa­ny. I was 21. I had a boyfriend and was going to marry him. And I met Alex and in one day I knew everything was broken, and I said "no" to my boyfriend and "yes" to Alex. He was Jewish too. The boyfriend lives in Chicago now. He has a little girl, and everything's okay now. That was inter­esting. My daughter always asks me, "Mommy, how do you know what is love?" And I say, you can't answer, but you can feel. If it comes, you will recognize it. So that was love, and it came from God.

We worked in a not very big company. It was like 200 people so it was close, like relatives. And I worked almost five- six years already and everyone knew me. I was seven­teen when I started. So everyone was my baby­sitters, so I grew up there. Alex just started. He worked in a different division, like a manager and he organized papers outside our company to start to build a plant. That's the hardest job because a lot of papers are required for all kinds of au­thorities all over this plant because a lot of the organiza­tion, they don't know what they are doing in Russia. But they spend money and time. A big permit is needed to do something on land. So there's water, energy. So all the government organizations all over Russia. He was a boxer when he was young, then got an MA degree. (Unusual to be a Jew and a boxer?) No, but it helped him get into the insti­tute. He was a good boxer. He had other Jewish friends the same. There was a big team and they went to­gether to the institute and they gave them a "yes" because it was inter­esting to get the good sportsmen, like the big games between the cities and republics and even countries. They took part all over the country. (Sounds like an extro­vert?) He's an unusual guy because he loved music and poetry. He loved sports and he was absolutely romantic. He didn't believe anything like everybody else in Russia. At the beginning of eighteen kids knew everything. And he went all over the country when he was a sportsman and afterward he had the same kind of job, to travel. So he could see everything, how the people live, what they believe and he loved to talk to people and discover what kind of life they've got, so he's had a lot of unusual conversations. He had good friends who can open the world of literature and culture, so he could read the books that were underground, not only books, but to hear the tapes of the poets who were killed, so he grew up in this kind of underground culture. (Who were these writers?) Like Solzhenitsyn, Mandel'stam, Ga­lych, painters and writers like these who were killed.

(There were Yiddish poets who were killed.) A lot of writers and poets were killed because of the Soviet sys­tem... but it doesn't matter if they were Jews or not be­cause the Russian mentality was so strong. For in­stance, Mandel'­stam was an interesting poet and I love him, but he got an unbe­lievable mix of the Russian and Jewish mentality. This was usual. It was impossible to get just a Jewish mentality in Russia because it's such a strong culture. So interesting, so wide. We lived in this. The best way is to be a Russian and come here because now we're not Jews, we're just Russians because we speak the Russian language, and because to be Jews here, that means to get some part in the religion. But we didn't have anything like that, most of us. (But your children have it?) I wish, because I can compare how to live without any God and what's going on after that, how they took everything out, so we'll see I guess... They made animals from people, because they took out God and didn't put anything in. The Communist authority can't be in the same place that God occupied. They were trying to do this but they couldn't do anything, so it was empty space. An empty space can never be empty so I think that was one of the important reasons why people in Russia were made crazy, were made like animals. Because they grew up without God. They grew up without the rules of humanity, the rules of democracy that all over the world people know.

(With Alex--was it love at first sight?) He was inter­ested in me first, but he knew I had a boyfriend and was going to get married. And he was afraid to destroy this because of course he didn't know how strong is it and how serious is it, but he couldn't do anything with his feeling and I met him and the first time he said, "I love you and wish that you will be my wife." And I said, "I wish so also." That's all. It was just one moment like a shock. I mean, if you put two fingers in a socket you'll get the same; like a fire. (How long until you married?) About nine months, but just because of his business trips and because his mother was going to get a new apartment from the government and we were going to move. This required some time.

(What was your wedding like?) I don't know how to call it because I didn't have such. We really didn't think about it. All my friends, a lot of my best friends weren't in Odessa so there was no reason. I have no close relatives, just my mother and father and a couple of uncles, that's all. So they just came once to my house, and to the govern­ment office to get married. It was just across from my house, so we just spent thirty minutes there and came back, and the next day we took our tourist bags and went to the Crimea. We spent two weeks there because we had a close friend there. We spent time in the mountains because Alex was a mountain man also. He had the special sport and loved it. And he spent a few years over there before our marriage and after that until our older daughter was born. And I said, "You need to decide which is more important because mountains are very dangerous." This was 1980. (So you've been married 12 years?) Since 1978. Anna was born two years after we got married. I'd just finished institute and already was pregnant. Just after my Masters, Anna was born. That's just two years. We were trying to get out in 1979. 1978 was the best time to go out, but my grandfather said "never, until I die." And that was the truth. Six years later he died. But unfortunately at that time we couldn't get out because of the government changing their policy. We waited ten years more, maybe, to get out. We even didn't start to ask... We had an invitation and everything, but in the meantime the Russian government was trying to close the doors. They closed OVIR offices, so there was just one office in the whole city, and there are thousands and thou­sands of people who stayed in the middle of the night there to write the names. And we got the numbers on the hands and we stayed there for a long time... There wasn't *glasnost* yet. (Who wrote the numbers?) I did, because we got the hun­dreds-- one, two, three, and the few people who organized the line and thousands in one line, and they couldn't stay the whole day because they work so they got a number and a list of the numbers and the names of the people who stand in this line, and they checked each other because a thousand people were waiting. Even at that time we understood that it was impossible to get out because of the number of peo­ple. And the last person who left in Odessa in 1979 was my supervi­sor. Now he lives in New York. Alex helped him, because he brought the whole family together, and didn't have any relatives in Odessa and nobody could help them to get out. They checked all the papers. Sometimes of course they send you back. We have a few villages like Chop to get out. Even now we went through Brest'. Still the same vil­lages as ten years before, which is the way to get out. Now when we left, my husband remembered everything because he had helped a few people to get out. He went with them to care for the papers, the old people because they're nervous. And I still am in touch with my previous supervisor. We call each other and on Jewish celebrations I always write a little card to him. He always calls me on my birthday.

(Where did you live?) In those ten years after 2 and a half years we got our own apartment. At first I lived with my mother-in-law in a new apartment in a new district. She waited on this apartment almost thirty years. Fortunately she had a son. That's why she got a two-room apartment. If she had a daughter she just got one. So we got two rooms, one we occupied and the other she occupied. She worked and when Anna was born I moved to my mother's apartment because of the little baby. It was in downtown Odessa. My mother had three big, separate rooms. It was bigger and pretty close to my job, I can walk even, and Anna was one year old. My education was over and I needed to work, and I could walk. It was so helpful. (Who took care of her?) I had a part-time job, in the afternoon I worked from one to five. And the first part of days I took care of her, and at lunch­time and after, my father came. And the sister of my grand­mother was so kind. She was the favorite of my rela­tives. And everything that I can make by hand and my heri­tage comes from her. She was babysitter for everyone in her family, nine kids, usual in Jewish families. She was the oldest. She didn't have a family, but she got the family of her sisters all over again... She had a very hard life like a lot of old people in Russia and she didn't work, just house­work and take care of kids, and she was so nice. She died a few years ago. Anna was three. I was pregnant with Sam. She came to help me with the baby. She was almost eighty years old. She helped my sister...

(Why did you and Alex decide to leave?) Maybe I don't remember exactly the particular reason. I mean, something happened and we decided. Because it was impossible. First of all, the whole life. I didn't have too much pressure in school, but by the way, my husband couldn't finish his high school, just the evening high school at the same time he worked, and after that he started the institute in the evening division for years. And after that he couldn't find a job because he was Jewish. He did the Masters degree and every­body required those kind of people, and he couldn't find any kind of job because he was Jewish and didn't have any protec­tion. He just saw the ad and came and showed his passport and they say, okay, we don't need someone anymore. So that was absolutely clear. (So the anti-semitism was the reason?) It was like a soap bubble. We were inside. I can't say if it was anti-semitism or not. It was our life. We knew about it from birth. Nobody was surprised that it happened just to him and they heard that was usual case. No, everybody knew that was our life. Yes, that was the foundation of our reason.

But the push to make this decision was that my husband read too much literature and the poetry and the heretic tapes of the people who already left, and who write the best writing published about Soviet life, like Solzhenit­syn, like the Gulag Archipelago. Maybe it was a basic reason. I can't decide now what was a basic reason. All his friends already left. He was older than me, six years older. So his friends already discovered everything and left. And he was latest because he just got married and nobody knew how long it would be, if emigration will be closed or open ten years later or was going off tomorrow. So we couldn't plan anything. We just decided and were trying to do something and unfortunately we couldn't. But all the people who decided a couple of months before [had] already left. We didn't know. They played a political game. Jews were like wheat/meat. They sold the Jews and bought the wheat/meat. Like money. The same kind of game that Gorbachev is playing because it's nothing different.

(How did you know you were Jewish?) I remember. My parents didn't tell me. Maybe they did but I don't remem­ber. I remember an interesting case. I was five years old. My parents just moved to a new apartment where we lived for twenty years. I played with my friend. She's still my friend, she's in Leningrad now. We played outside in the yard in front of the house. Another girl came. I remember her particular words. She asked my friend Tanya, she's a natu­ral Russian-- she's not Jewish-- she asked her: "Why are you playing with this girl? She's a Jew! Why?" And my friend said, "Why not?" insulted, because she didn't under­stand her, and I didn't know why I paid attention because I didn't know what it meant either-- I was five years old--younger than my son now. But I remember that I paid atten­tion to that. What's wrong, why nobody could play with me, why does she ask my friend? She was angry, upset.