**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**

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

**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**ALEX FRIEDGAN**

**Mechanical Engineer**

**PhD, All-Ukrainian Polytechnical Institute**

**Kharkov, 1987**

**Dissertation: Stress Analysis Metal Structures of Cranes**

BIRTH: May 25, 1959, Kharkov

SPOUSE: Anna, January 18, 1959, Kharkov

Married in 1979

CHILDREN: Mark, November 9, 1979, Kharkov

PARENTS: Leo Friedgan, civil engineer, October 12, 1934, Kharkov

Lilyan Lishnyevsky, June 18, 1936, Dnepropetrovsk

SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Anatoly Lishnyevsky, 1911?-1977, Kharkov.

Headed company that installed telephone lines

Chana Etta Belenky, 1912, Kharkov, homemaker

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Ben Friedgan, 1903-1975, Kharkov, sold life insurance.

Bella Vishnevsky, 1905-1988, teacher in elementary school

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

J.C.C.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS OF CHICAGO

NAME: **ALEX FRIEDGAN**

DATE: May 23, 1991

INTERVIEWERS: Elaine Snyderman

(What do you remember about growing up in Kharkov? Who lived in the house with you?) We lived with my parents alone. First we lived in the house. We occupied one room in the apartment there that had some more rooms, which were occupied by other families. When I was about seven, we moved to the apartment that we rented from the government. (How many rooms?) Two rooms and a kitchen. (Just you, your mother and your father? For the Soviet Union this was pretty good to have that privacy?) Yes.

(Your grandparents also lived in Kharkov. You had two sets of grandparents. Did they have any influence on you? Did they help take care of you while your parents were at work? Your father, Leo Friedgan, was a civil engineer and your mother, Lilian Vishnetsky, was a production engineer in shop technology for a machine shop. Who took care of you?) The first year of school my grandma, Bella, was with me during the day after school. (Bella Vishnetsky, who was your father's mother. She had been an elementary school teacher?) She was retired by that time. (Did she teach you anything about the history of the family?) Almost nothing. (Do you think there was a reason for that?) Maybe there was.

(Did anyone on your mother's side of the family teach you anything about family history?) No. (Anna said a little earlier that you knew that your mother's mother in World War II, during the evacuation, was a laborer and supported the family that way. Do you know where they were evacuated to?) Yes. They were evacuated to Tashkent. We still have some relatives there in Tashkent who stayed there. (Who are they?) Sisters of my grandma, and their children.

(Would you say that there was any Jewish tradition in your family as you were being raised? Do you remember any Yiddish being spoken or holiday celebrations?) My grandpa from the side of my father, he went to synagogue, but I didn't hear anything religious from him. (He was able to go to the synagogue that you can remember?) No, I was told by my father that his father went to synagogue. (So your father may have had some Jewish education?) I believe so, but I didn't have any.

(Did you know you were Jewish as you were growing up?) Yes. I was reminded a couple of times. (Tell me about that. At school? On the playground?) More on the playground, because at school I was one of the first students; it was difficult to remind me of that at school, but it was sometimes on the street. (What did they do ‑ call you a name?) Yes, called me names and pushed me around. (One at a time or more than one?) It depended. Sometimes. (Were you afraid?) It wasn't that often. (But while it was happening it must have been frightening?) It's not the best thing to have happen to you. (But you're smiling now, so whatever it was, you overcame it. Did you tell your parents about it?) No. (Why is that?) I believe that was the code of behavior ‑ never tell your problems to your parents. (Is that a Russian thing?) Yeah. I don't know how it is here, but over there, children have more separate life from their parents.

(Did you have any jobs to do at home?) Yeah, I had some. Like help with the garbage, and to clean the house, things like that.

(Who were your friends?) During the school time I had a couple of friends. (Were they Russian children, Jewish children?) I had one Jewish friend and one Russian friend, like the best ones, during school. (To this Russian boy it didn't matter that you were Jewish?) Yeah. It didn't mean anything.

(Do you feel that your family participated in any kind of Jewish community life? Was there any sense of Jewishness that connected outside of this family?) That I know of, my parents helped other families with clothes and things like that. (You mean poor Jewish families?) Who would these have been ‑ refuseniks?) No, just poor families. (So there was some sense of Jewish community? You knew they were Jewish. Why were they poor?) Their level of living was just lower than ours, so my parents helped the way they can. (So did you have a more comfortable life?) Yes.

(What holidays do you remember celebrating?) Most of all birthdays, Victory Day - May 9. That was it.

(Did your family seem different from non‑Jewish families when you were growing up?) The difference was I believe in the cultural level. It was higher than that of our neighbors. (For example?) Like they read books. They understand the situation in the country. (Did they let you hear the discus­sions about the situation in the country?) Only when I was more or less grown up. (So they were careful to guard their discussion from you?) Yes.

(Do you remember any kind of Jewish wedding or circumci­sion or burial? Anything Jewish?) No.

(How did being Jewish affect your thinking?) I believe it's more like a level of conscience, cultural level. (Of consciousness of being on a different cultural level?) Yes. (Would you say your parents, when they read the newspaper, could read between the lines? Could tell when something was being withheld?) Yes.

(Did you have vacations together as a family? Could you travel?) Yes, we had vacations together. We went to the Black Sea, most of all. (To a resort?) Yes, to the resort. (What was the name of it?) Yalta. Most of all it was the small place near Yalta, because we had a place to live there. (A dacha?) No, just the company that my grandpa worked for, as I understand it, had a couple of houses there so they can rent them. (Which grandpa?) Anatoly. (He was the grandfa­ther who was the head of a company that installed telephone cables.) Yes. (Those must be nice memories that you have?) Yes.

(What kind of school did you go to? What kind of education were you getting in grade school?) It was the average school, average urban school, because the level of rural schools is much lower. I would say average urban school. (Did you know at an early age what you wanted to do?) No. (When did you know what you wanted to do? Did you get to study what you wanted to in school?) In school we had only one program, so there was nothing to choose from. I was good with mathematics, physics, in science. I didn't like that much literature. I'm a more technical person. (So you thought you'd do something with mathematics?) Yes.

(When you wanted to go to institute, were you able to go to the one you wished to go to?) I talked with my father and we decided not to jump high because of the lessons of the previous generation. So I went to a technical institute and didn't go to a university. Actually I wanted to go to Moscow University but we decided not to. (So you went to the Kharkov Automobile Institute?) Yes. (You got your Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering?) Yes. (Was this a good education?) More or less. (And the reason you chose this and not Moscow University was because you thought you could not get in?) Yes. (And why did you think you would not get in?) Because when my father was at the same age and wanted to go to the university (and he was an honor student at school as I was), they didn't take his papers.

(When your father would have wanted to go to university it would have been in the Fifties?) 1952. (Why do you say that with that expression on your face?) At that moment the pressure on the Jews was the highest.

(This was after the Doctors' Plot, the accusations Stalin made against the Kremlin doctors. So when you went to the Automotive Institute, did you feel any different from the students there? Were there a lot of other Jewish students?) Yeah, we had a group of Jewish students. (What percentage would you say were Jewish?) Around five percent. (What was the population of Kharkov at that time? Was the Jewish population about five percent?) I don't know for sure. And I say five percent, and that was in our specialty, because all institutes tried to keep the quota, but the percent was higher in our profession. (In your specialization?) Yes. (You had a higher percentage of Jews than the population?) Yes, and higher than average in the institute.

(Did you join the Komsomol?) Yeah. (How old?) When I was at school, seventh grade. (Would you have been able to join the Communist party if you had wanted to?) I doubt it. I never tried, but I doubt it. (When you finished at the Kharkov Automobile Institute, what year was it?) It was 1981.

(Did you go to work then?) Yes, I went to work. Actually I wanted to work at the same institute because at that moment I had been working for two years in a research position. We had some results at that moment so that my chief told me that the research that I did was a quarter of the Ph.D. But the head of the institute decided the other way round. They decided not to take me, but to take another student.

(Then what happened?) I started to work at the Hoist and Crane Conveyer Company. (How long did you work there?) Until I emigrated from Russia. (I have here that you did get your Ph.D.?) Yes, it was in evening school. (While you were working you went to evening school ‑ the All‑Ukrai­nian Polytechnical Institute in Kharkov?) Yes. (From 1983 to 1987?) Yes. (Were you able to use the research you did?) No, it was in another area. (What area did you do your disserta­tion in?) It was about cranes. Stress analysis of metal structures of cranes.

(How did you meet Anna?) We met at the resort, when I was a freshman at the institute. One of the friends that I was with studied at school with her, so he introduced us. (Did he want to introduce the two of you? Was that a plan?) No. (How long did you know each other before you decided to get married?) A little more than a half a year. (What year were you married?) It's twelve years now. (So 1979?) Yes. (Did your parents know each other?) They had heard of each other.

(Do you remember what your wedding was like?) Yeah. (Was it done in a state wedding palace?) They have special rooms for that. (Did you have a party?) Yes. We had a party at home, and then we went to Moscow for the honeymoon. (Was that your first trip to Moscow?) Before that I was in Moscow when I was very young. I was there for a day.

(So you were students together...) Yes. (I know that Anna's parents helped out quite a bit.) Yes, they did. (When Mark was born, it wasn't too difficult? But you were living with her family, right?) Yes. (Was that hard on you? You were used to more privacy?) It was Okay.

(Why did you decide to leave Russia?) I didn't see any future for me. I had reached the highest level that I could. I had nothing to do there anymore in terms of a career. (You got your Ph.D. and were still working at the Hoisting and Conveying Machinery place, and it was a dead end for you?) Yes. (You wanted to better yourself and there was no opportu­nity?) That was one of the reasons.

(Were you concerned about anti‑semitism?) I say that was a dead end because of the anti‑semitism. (So the fear was being held down. But was there any fear that went beyond that? Was *Pamjat'* active where you lived?) Yeah, I heard about some cases, but I've never seen that. It wasn't obvious to me.

(You were a student when the Gorbachev *glasnost* policy began. What was your reaction when you started reading more about history ‑ a truer picture of history?) At that moment I did know some of that and I could guess about the rest, so it wasn't much of news, like information. It was interesting to read about. At first I thought maybe it can help the country. But I don't think that anything can help that country. (You think it's doomed?) Yeah.

(What do you think is going to happen? Gorbachev is asking for hundreds of billions of dollars of help from the West.) They have to give up the empire. Only then they can move in any direction economically or politically. I don't know whether they want to give up that. All other countries gave that up a hundred years ago. They live and prosper, but that country ‑ they want to be a great country, the greatest empire. (It's an empire now and it's crumbling...) I believe they're crumbling because they are an empire.

(When did you first learn about the Chernobyl disaster?) I turned on the radio set to the Voice of America. (How many days after the incident?) I believe it was May 2nd. (About a week afterwards?) Yes. (What was your reaction?) Stupidi­ty. I think it is a stupidity. (Were you angry?) No. (How far is Kharkov from Chernobyl?) We were pretty far so it didn't concern us like a disaster. It was trouble for the region, but it wasn't the prime concern of ours. (Were you worried about the food supply?) I could worry about it, but there was nothing I could do about that. (But you thought about it?) Yeah. I could not check products.

(Now that you're here, can you feel more emotion about what happened, or are your feelings pretty much the same?) I had more emotions there. (Were you angry?) It's a poor country. The feeling was they never ever can do anything properly.

(When you decided to emigrate, what steps had to be taken?) We asked our friends that were out of the country about an invitation. Then we worked with the Russian bureau­cracy. We applied, did all the paperwork. (So your friends or family in Israel arranged the invitation?) Yes. (How long after you applied did it take?) We applied in January and received a letter in May. Right at that moment it was a very short period of time to apply and receive.

(And you arrived here October 28, 1989. Was your passage from Russia to this country pleasant or difficult?) It was pleasant and difficult. (What were the difficulties?) They were more organizational, I think. I had seven people and I had to move all their things around, and organize them, rent the apartment. (Your in‑laws, your wife's parents...)

But it was really nice to see Italy and Vienna. (The first place you stayed overnight ‑ what city was it?) We stayed in Vienna for nine days. The first day wasn't the best because of all the logistics, but then we saw Vienna and walked around the city. We saw the people. The people are different on this side of the Iron Curtain. (In what way?) They are more self‑proud. They have more self‑esteem. You could see that. (In the way they walk?) The way they behave themselves. More confident.

(Then where?) To Rome. We lived in a motel for a week. Then we spent a month in Italy, in a place near Rome. (When you flew from Rome, did you fly to New York?) We spent a couple of hours there. (Who met you in Chicago?) The friend of my father-in-law met us here. He moved us to a motel There we spent a week. Then we rented an apartment. Isaac's friend helped us a lot. (Do you still see him?) Yes. He is a very well‑organized man himself. He organized everything and it went very smoothly. We had no problems at all.

(Did you find this townhouse for yourselves?) Yes. But the first place he helped us to find and to rent. He co­signed all the documents that needed it, and he drove us to the Social Security place and helped us there. (What is his name?) Boris Silverstein. (He's employed here?) He works as an engineer.

(How long did it take you to find work?) I started to work in January. (Did you know English before you came here?) Yes, I studied it before. I knew it pretty well at that moment. I had some problems because the pronunciation differs from the one that I learned. (You learned a more British English?) Yes.

(Are you in the same job that you started out in?) Right now, yes. (Where?) I work for Sears. I'm a computer programmer. (You studied computers here or you knew it before?) I knew computers before. (Did they train you on the job?) Yes. (Are you pleased with the work?) I used to work on a higher level. (What are your prospects for rising, for growth on this job?) I had to start all over again here. Yes, I have prospects. (Based on your preparation and your work now, what are your hopes for the future on this job or other employment?) I don't know. Right now I can't say.

(Have you joined any organizations, a synagogue, since you've been here?) We've gone to Ezra Habonim a couple of times. Our son is at Shalom center. Through this we went to the synagogue Am‑Shalom. We liked that. There were pleasant people there. (Are you members of the J.C.C.?) Yes.

(So now you've bought a home?) Yes, it's nearby. There is a Russian Jewish community over there. It's going to be nice. (So not only do you want to be in a Jewish community, you want to be in a Russian Jewish community...) It's easier. (Because of the language?) Because of the language most of all. (And a common history, maybe?) Yeah.

(What have been the rewards here so far?) The dreams were higher than reality. (So you had to come down to earth a little bit?) Yes. (Are there some rewards, though? What do you feel you've gained by coming here?) I feel more free here. My life over there was guided more than here. I couldn't do that, I couldn't move whenever I wanted.

(What do you miss from your home in Russia?) I miss my parents. I miss my friends. Actually they are here, but not in Chicago. (In New York?) Yes, most of all. Some in Israel. (What do you hear from your friends in Israel?) They like the life they live now. (How long have they been there?) We are here a year‑and‑a‑half, so they are there three‑and‑a­half years. (So they had a chance to settle in before the Persian Gulf War...) Yes. (Did you hear from them during or after the war?) We called afterward. They were Okay. They are in Haifa.

(Have they commented about the condition of the Soviet Jews coming in at this time?) No, we didn't ask them. (In the paper we're reading about how hard it is for them to be assimilated right now...) Right now it's very hard because they have to assimilate and the country has to adjust.

(Was there anything special you had to take with you from Russia to bring here?) I have my arms. The family.

(Now that you're here, is it important to be part of a Jewish community? Do you think it's meaningful to belong to a synagogue?) Yes. For me it's more traditions than reli­gion. (So you would want Mark to learn about the Jewish traditions?) Yes, and I want to learn myself. (When would you learn?) I read books. (Have books been recommended to you?) No. (Are there any of the Jewish rites of passage that you think would be important for Mark, like circumcision?) That's going to be his decision. (Has it been discussed?) No, not yet. But the time will come.

(So Mark is going to be going to Am‑Shalom and to overnight camp?) Yes. (So the rewards so far we've touched on a little bit, is there anything else? I think the fact that you're buying your own home is a big deal.) Yeah. (To you to be able to achieve that in such a short time is pretty remarkable...) You see, we work together, my wife and I. You're right, for this short time, it's a great result.

(If you had a list of wishes, have them all come true, what would some of those be?) First I want to see my parents here. They should be here in August. Actually, I want to travel, to see the world. I want to see what will happen with my son. (What do you hope he's going to be?) I hope he will find his way in life. He has some time in life before he has to make his main decisions. (Does he show any inclinations at this young age? He's eleven.) Actually, he is good in a couple of areas. He's good in technical things and his writing is good. He has a good imagination. We'll see. (Where is he at school right now?) Nelson Elementary School. (And he'll transfer when you move?) Yes. It's going to be Gemenee Junior High. [MARK]: If we do go, I want to go to District 64. [ALEX]: We were told it's a good school.

(How would you describe your personal philosophy?) Can we skip that? (Is there a reason you don't want to talk about it? It doesn't have to be more personal than you want it to be.) It's hard to say in two words. I have to think about that.

(One thing that's interesting to me is to see the family dynamic. In this country we see the family is not as strong as it used to be. A lot of families break up, and I know you have that experience in the Soviet Union...) The better the country it is, the less stable. (The materialism has some effect on the family?) Yes, if life is very hard, you have to think about the basics. You don't think about your own pleasure. You have to think about food, things like that. If life is easier, you have time.

(Are there any special books you've read in Russia that have helped shape your thinking?) I read a lot of books, but I can't say what specifically. Most reading was for pleasure. (What did you read for pleasure? Does anything stand out?) I read a lot of entertainment books, adventure, science fiction. (By Russian writers?) By Russian writers or translated. Like Jules Verne from French, Main Reed, or Jack London. Hemingway. (What about something like the James Bond books by Ian Fleming?) I read one there in English. Actually I read some thrillers there. American.

(How are you going to keep your family strong and together? You're bringing the family together. Do you feel this responsibility on your shoulders?) Do I have to feel that big responsibility? (It's not for me to say. I'm just asking because it's a remarkable family, and I don't know if there's a responsibility that goes with being a member of this group or if that's just the way it is...) I take it as it is.

(Is there something I should have asked you about that I didn't, or something you would like to discuss or mention?) I believe that the battle for Russian Jews to emigrate was very important. (How do you think of this battle, as a human rights issue, on a political level, or on an organizational level?) I heard about it from the radio, and my father was talking that Russia sold its Jews for wheat. And it's very important. We knew that somebody needs us, so somebody's trying to help us.

(When did you first learn that something was happening?) When I was in grade school. (In the 1970's?) Yes. (Before you were married. 1976‑1980 was when Carter was President. Do you think it was before 1976?) For me it was not Carter.

At the moment that we married it was the previous wave of emigration. Everybody made their decisions ‑ stay or leave. At that moment my parents did the decisions; they decided to stay. Maybe because of my marriage at that moment, maybe because their friends didn't move. (Do you feel that was a mistake at that time?) They made the decisions. Now I make my own. (So you're not blaming them for that decision?) No. (It's just a decision that was made...) It was done. (And then you made your decision when you were an adult and could do something about it...) Yes.

(Was there anything else about this battle to save Soviet Jews you wanted to say? You know that there was a movement here to save Soviet Jews. Is this something that you would do also now that you're here. I know you're bringing your parents over, but would you try to help others the same way?) Yes. (Through organizations, or donations? How would you go about it?) Through donations and I would use time of my own.

(You've sort of been telling me about your personal philosophy, is there anything you'd like to add to it?) I

think we can close now.