**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**

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

**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**LILIA SHAFRAN UMANTSEV**

**Copy Editor**

BIRTH: February 23, 1953, Moscow

SPOUSE: Alex Umantsev,

Married November 29, 1986

CHILDREN: Boris, September 28, 1988, Moscow

PARENTS: Metta Shafran, 1923 - 1980, Moscow

Divorced

SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Sara (Sonja) Zak, 1900 - 1979, Latvia

Moses (Mikhail) Shafran, 1901 - 1969, near Moscow

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

Niles Township Jewish Congregation, Skokie

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago

NAME: **LILIA SHAFRAN UMANTSEV**

DATE: November 1, 1990

Interviewer: Elaine Snyderman

(earliest memories, growing up in Moscow)

I like to answer those kinds of questions. I remember exactly the place I lived when I was a little girl. It was just on the banks of the Moscow river just on the opposite side of the Kremlin. It was a great place. A lot of Muscovites lived in the center when I was a little girl. But now it's like, how to say, the business part in the center of London. All of us, we now lived and continued to live not in the suburbs but in the other side of this big city, not very comfortable. I lived twelve years in the center. I went to public school there. When our family moved, I continued to go to the same school because it was a special English school and I was interested and my family was interested in my graduating from this school. It was called, just the number, the name of the famous Russian critic of the nineteenth century, George Belinsky.

I lived with my mother, grandmother, my father, but for a short time. So the three of us. My mother's mother, her name was Sarah Zak. She tried to [impart Jewishness to me] but not very actively, I don't know why. She told me a lot about her family. She was born in Latvia, in a small town near Riga, the capital of the Soviet republic. But when she was born in Latvia it was an independent state, so she moved to Moscow when she was eighteen, a very young girl. The whole family stayed in this small town. She was born in 1900. She came to Moscow, I don't know why. She never told me and I didn't ask her. She decided to start her own life. She was very independent. She was very beautiful and decid­ed that life in this small town was not her future. [laugh­ter]

I never asked her, I really don't know why. She worked all her life as a cashier at the department stores in Mos­cow. She never continued her studies because her Russian wasn't very good. She spoke poor Russian. She spoke Yid­dish. That was her language! She knew a little Latvian but she never used it in Moscow. So she started Russian in Moscow. With her friends she spoke Yiddish. My mother understood Yiddish very good, first of all because her mother spoke with her sometimes, but not a lot, and because my mother studied German in school. It is very close lan­guages. I never understood exactly Yiddish. When she spoke Yiddish with her friends, I can only imagine what they spoke about, because their Yiddish had a lot of Russian words [I could understand a little].

My mother was an engineer in the building of power stations. She was an electrical engineer. So she graduated from the Moscow Institute. My father was also an engineer, when he left home we didn't see him at all. My mother didn't want me to see him and he didn't want to see me. I don't know why. I never asked. I last saw him when I was a very little girl. Probably he tried to see me, but I wasn't told about it. Maybe yes, maybe no. To tell you the truth, I didn't feel that I needed him, probably because I was a girl, maybe if I'd been a boy - I [found out] he['d died] not in 1965, but maybe five or six years later.

My grandmother took care of me. She got a pension so she didn't work. My mother told me when she graduated from the institute and started her working life, she was a Komso­mol leader because, you know, the people of her generation and the people of my generation, we really believed in Communism. Because we were grown on the Communist ideas and really believed them! She decided for herself that she had to enter the Communist party. And so, it was a story!

She was the Komsomol leader of such a big institute, everybody knew her. She decided to enter the Communist party and she was given two recommendations from the Commu­nists. It was the habit - who are known also as good Commu­nists - one of them was Jewish. So at the Party meeting when she was introduced as a Communist for all the insti­tute, and they were told that she's going to be a new young Communist, that she's a Komsomol person and had to be in the Commu­nist party. So she got refused. Only because she was Jewish. She was so upset. She told me this story several times. She couldn't under­stand, couldn't believe - (So she carried this around with her the rest of her life?) No! She remembers it, but she said thanks to God they didn't [let her in] because the events which happened after all, the rise of anti-semitism and everything that happened, the crash of all the system, she understood who were Communists in real life who were not true people.

I don't want to use bad words, but I can't say two good words about them. They were dishonest people. The most dishonest people were Communists. [She had finished with this.] She understood it maybe at once, maybe a year later, but she told me about it when I became a teenager because she didn't want to tell me about every­thing when I was very little, because I wouldn't understand exactly, but she wanted me to understand exactly about all of this, you know?

(Jewish holidays, etc.)

The only Jewish holiday which we celebrated was Pass­over because I never saw in the Soviet Union a Jewish wed­ding, Jewish funeral, nothing, never, because it was so difficult to see. People were very afraid. I only know about when maybe two or three men were impris­oned when they tried to teach other young people Hebrew. It was in the early 1970s.

(school)

We had a beautiful life when we were children. First of all, a lot of Jewish people lived in central Moscow. In these years there wasn't [a lot of] anti-semitism. The [rise] came... probably it started in 1967-68. It was the year after they called it "Israeli Aggression". We didn't know what it is, what it means. We thought they told us the truth. Some years later we read that it's not true, of course. But it was a shock. When they told that these aggressors had occupied Arabic countries. Now I couldn't tell for sure what did they tell exactly, but it was a terrible time. It was very difficult for Jews because you can hear on every corner "you, Jewish nose, you Jewish face". On TV, in the newspa­pers, propagan­da. Probably 100 times a day they told about it, they didn't stop.

My mother [was discriminated against] because she was wanting to get a promotion. She didn't get it. No one told her it's because she's a Jew, but it was very clear. Not only [was she not promoted], but several people, only Jews [weren't promoted].

(How did you feel?)

You know, first of all, I have to say that not only me, but a lot of my friends, we hadn't an opportunity to read something about Israel, but we loved Israel! Even then. I never thought [badly of Israel]. The only thing I didn't believe but I can't tell something for the defence of Isra­el, because I wasn't familiar with the policy. I didn't blame Israel or the Arabic countries. I was on the side of Israel, but I knew nothing about - so, I know a lot of Jewish people who blamed Israel, the aggressor, and so on. I was sixteen years old. I was very much surprised. I couldn't discuss this subject in school or on the street. Only with my friends. The only thing my mother said to me was, "I do not think it is true. I don't know exactly what happened, but I do not think it is true. But, do not speak about it at school with the other girls and boys. Keep silent about it."

My friends were only Jewish. Only Jewish. I didn't separate, but I started at this school, at the very center of Moscow. In the [rounding] of the houses where the people with high social level lived, I started with them, with the students of such parents, whose parents were artists, in science, some in government, a lot in the military. To tell the truth, they were very intelligent people, their parents and the students in the school. And I never (me and my Jewish friends) we never felt, you know, that we are, - nobody showed by the fingers that you're a Jew. Now it's differ­ent. A lot of teachers were Jewish. In Moscow be­cause all over the country, in Russia, if you go 30 miles south of Moscow, you'll never find, not never, you'd have a hard time finding Jewish families in Russia. Near Moscow and deep Russia.

But in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Moldavia, you'll find a lot of Jewish people, because this is where they were allowed to live under czarist Russia. They stayed. They didn't move. Some of them moved to Moscow after the revolu­tion, I guess.

(When did you want to be a journalist?)

I didn't decide that I wanted to be a journalist when I gradu­ated from high school in 1970. For three years I tried to enter the Institute of Foreign Languages, but forget about it. They didn't explain why. I had to pass four exams - English - To enter this institute [there are] four exams. I needed to pass the exams with two Bs and two As. They couldn't give me a B when I passed the English exam because after school my English was excellent, you know, very good -- pronunciation, grammar, everything. So then it was history of the USSR, Russian language-- also excellent, and compositions. And they gave me a not very good grade for Soviet history. They said I wasn't well-prepared.

I hadn't the opportu­nity to discuss because you're a professor and I'm going to be a student. She said, you're not well-prepared. I can't give you a B. I have to put C. I have to tell them, please ask me other questions, ques­tions no one can answer. Three years I tried with success of zero. I worked at school, some secretarial work, and then I was sick and tired of this and my mother says I have to try something else because it's impossible to be without a profession. I have a "humanities" kind of mind. I'm not good with technical science stuff. So I start to look for what I can enter. I found nothing.

So my mother suggested that I go to some kind of col­lege connected with proofreading. My Russian language was very good and you have to have this. So I entered this college without any difficulty because it's not the high level of education, just the middle level. And they don't think about anti-semitism at this level. It's difficult and strange to understand, but they just didn't want Soviet Jews to get the high education. They allowed us to have the middle education, not the high. After this I started to work as a proofreader. After this I decided to get into the univer­sity.

(What did you really want to do?) I wanted to be an interpreter, to translate technical articles, to trans­late, to help in translation with groups of foreign tourists. (Would it have given you more opportunities had you gotten into the Foreign Lan­guage Institute?) Yes, because to graduate from this institute, it was very prestigious.

(Editing a journal)

It was not very big. It was a trade journal in hydro­elec­tric power stations and nuclear stations. Like Cherno­byl. It was like our child, the institute where I worked. The journal was part of this institute. The project, first of all, it was all over the Soviet Union, project institute of the power stations building. It was a little scientific part of this institute. They like to call big institutes in the USSR ["All-Union"], a national publication. We pub­lished twice a month, and abroad bi-monthly. Because this institute did projects in the so-called third world. It wasn't a real subscription because you could buy it at the stores. But it's usual, the main readers of this journal weren't all people, the narrow specialists. A circulation of maybe 2,000, but I'm not sure.

(the workplace)

There was some socializing with some of [my co-work­ers]. They were Jewish, too. (How did you know this?) First of all, as usual, it was on the faces, then the last name, and if I saw a person for the first time and I saw that his or her face was Jewish and their last name is Jewish, I usually tried to ask this person some simple questions. After answering those questions I would decide for sure if I am right or if I am not, because you can see a person with a real Jewish face and name but he's not Jewish. It could be a mistake, but... [laughter] The questions, not a trick question, but a roundabout question. Maybe I was wrong when I told you I will ask questions. Sometimes I'll start to talk about something that connects only to Jewish life, and if they answer in the way I would like to hear, [then I know].

(Camaraderie among Jews at work?)

Well, as you know, we did our own thing, but if some­body asks for help, I'll do it with pleasure, not only for Jews, but anyone. A lot of people tried to cooperate, but there were some who didn't want to. It depends on the person. To rise you needed to be a member of the Communist party and not Jewish. I did have opportu­nity, but it was very difficult. I worked there twelve years. I started working there when I was in proofreading college. To tell the truth, I had an unusual working life because I was promoted several times. But it was the only case. I don't know why but it's true. For other Jews, it was difficult, very difficult for them.

(What were your job titles?) Because we were part of the Insti­tute, we had the same job names as the engineers had, like project leader, senior engineer, and so on. We hadn't [ ] working names. When I began as a proofreader I wasn't a proofreader, - I was an entry level engineer. Then I became an engineer, then I became a senior engineer. Then my last description was chief senior engineer. I did edit­ing. But I was promoted in the job title and in money. But the kind of work remained absolutely the same. It was interesting [work] for me. I don't know how it is in Ameri­ca, but in the Soviet Union a lot of people work in the technical fields. They're bright engineers, but they can't express their thoughts in a good literary way. They can write the articles, but it's so difficult to read - such poor language - in order for other people to read it and understand what they're trying to say, so it was interesting to me. I like the Russian language very much.

(How did you meet your husband?)

I like downhill skiing. I like it very much, so I decided to go downhill skiing in the North, very north of the Soviet Union. Well, you have to have the name of this town, Murmansk. Do you remember during the second World War it was the second front and the government of the U.S. helped to Soviet govern­ment. They sent everything-- food, tanks-- from Alaska to Murmansk. (Why is it good for ski­ing?) They have mountains, first of all. Chair-lifts, single or double, Czechoslovakian. They're not very com­fortable, but it's very cheap to go to this part of the Soviet Union. It's not very comfortable to live, but to ski, it is good, a lot of snow, blue skies, but cold, very cold. It is two hours by train from Murmansk. Twenty-four hours from Moscow to this town, Kirovsk.

It was at the beginning of 1986. So I went with my girl­f­riends, four of us. And fortunately one of them broke her nose, because if she hadn't broken her nose I never would have met my husband! We three lived in one cabin and she lived in a hotel. And we decided to go visit her be­cause we didn't see her for five days and suddenly one of us met her at the bus stop and she was in such bad condition. We said, "What happened?" and she said, "I broke my nose!" So she told us to come over. So we had to go visit her. She was so unlucky. When we came to her room there were a lot of people there, maybe ten. We were happy that she was not alone. Among those people was my future husband. She said that she worked with him at the same institute. She introduced us to him and then, so, we decided to meet the next day, all of us, my girlfriends and I, to ski together. Then we invited him to our place. Then he invited us to his place, with him and his co-workers. He was also Jewish. And then it was time for them to leave. He was also from Moscow. And he said he'd meet us when we arrived in Moscow. And then we started to see each other and then we married. Finally we discovered that we lived and worked not far from each other, but we had never met it Moscow. He's a physi­cist in solid state metals research.

(Was his friend a refusenik?) Yes. (Could he work after he applied to leave?) Yes, with great difficulties. He wasn't allowed to go to symposiums and conferences abroad. He got a lot of invita­tions because his name was very famous in this field. And then he lost part of his salary, his prestige, but he had a family, two kids, a wife. The children were young, they were in school, so he had to support them. So he had to work. He was happy that they didn't tell him - - He needed some money. Nobody [else] would [have] hired him. He had to stay.

(your wedding)

It wasn't a Jewish wedding, unfortunately. It was in the small circle of our friends because we didn't have money to go to the restaurant, have the big wedding. Ten people came, which was in the apartment of my husband. It was in the center of Moscow, so it wasn't hard to reach, right near the Metro. (What kind of ceremony in an apartment?) We didn't get married in the apartment. We came to the apart­ment to celebrate after the marriage, but the marriage itself was in the government office. A people's deputy - stupid words. We enter this room, on the right side is the orchestra. They performed Mendelsohn's "Wedding March"; seven young women with their violins, beautiful music. This woman, the people's depu­ty, I don't remember her face. She said the usual words which she has to say. She asked first of all if I want Alexander to be my husband. Well, it's the same in the church, in synagogue under *chupa* or without the *chupa*, so yes, yes, and then she started to teach us how to behave in the family: what are my rights and his rights, what he has to do, and I have to do, and that we have to love each other. So it is the same words but in the Commu­nist manner.

(Did you wear a white dress?)

No, dark pink, because I can use this suit everywhere, but a white dress is very expensive. We tried to do our marriage not expensive. (Where did you live?) We moved to my apartment. My mother died in 1980 and then I lived alone. My grandmother died in 1979. It was very little, two separate rooms, a small kitchen, a small bath. We had furniture, etc. (Birth of son?) Before we left the Soviet Union.

(When did you want to come the U.S.?)

My husband wanted to come ten years ago. But he wanted to go to Israel. His parents asked him not to do it because they don't want to leave the country because they thought they would never find a job in Israel and so on and so on. They had a hard life. (What do they do?) His mother was a pediatrician and his father was also an electrical engineer. When they graduated from the institute it was in 1952. When Stalin started the campaign against Jews, against doctors, the Doctors' Plot. It was the campaign against Jewish doctors and all Jews.

His father is a brilliant engineer and all his marks were excellent and he had no opportunity to get a job, so he gets a job in a small office and an entry-level position. And his mother, she had to stay at the institute and do her Ph.D. but she hadn't the opportu­nity to do it. She found a job in the institute of the medical offices but it wasn't her dream. She wanted to be a gyne­cologist, but she hadn't this opportunity; only the position of pediatrician [was open to her], and she had to study at night to do pediat­rics. And then their lives stabilized and they were a little afraid to move, so they asked him to stay. And he was a good son and decided to stay; he's the only child. He loved them and could­n't leave them. (They're here now?) Yes. They came in May, a year after us. So he had this dream 10-11 years.

As for me, I never thought about it. But after the death of my mother I started to think about it because I was all alone. But I was afraid to do it alone, because I knew that it would be very difficult to do it. And then when we met each other, we started to speak about it, in 1988, the best friend of my husband suddenly left the country and it was very difficult to get the Israel visa. They tried to get it for eight years and finally they got it and they got it in a month. (the visa - difficulty because of Israel or Russia?) Only Russia. They sent it from Israel a lot of times during eight years, but the Soviet government stopped it, and this visa never reached them. But finally the last one reached them. It was the time when the door opened a little bit and they jumped through the open door, and then they suddenly closed it again for three months, and then open again and they start to open and open, when it became not a door but a gate.

(Chernobyl)

We first heard about it on TV. Three days later they announced it on TV. It happened on Friday and they told about it on Monday. Only on Monday. So a lot of people got radiation in the Ukraine. (your reaction?) I worked in this field. Immediately I assumed, -what is it? What is it? But I understood it more when I came to the job because a lot of Jewish people worked in our institute. Once they hired them, then they kept hiring them, to try to get Jewish people to invite their friends. (So you looked at Chernobyl from a Jewish point of view?) I looked at it from a human point of view. It is strange to think about it; it is a tragedy for all people. Everybody was talking about it.

(What was the main point of the discussion?) People who worked in this field understood a lot better than other people what hap­pened, and what's going to be after. (Pre­dictions?) They said that it is the same catastrophe as Hiroshima or Nagasaki but more, because it was more powerful and they also said that they would never stop this nuclear reaction, that it would go and go and go. And they made a [sacrifice?] and it is nothing. It's still contami­nating under the ground. The radiation is getting worse and worse. Only now people understand, but it was four years ago. Everybody was all right, nobody died. I mean, after the radiation itself, not the fire. But they start to feel bad and lose their hair and teeth. Something happened with their bones and their stomachs and so on and so on and finally they understood that it is radiation and nothing else.

(How long before it showed up?) I think three years. (How many people are affected?) Nobody knows. I think thousands, because not only the Ukraine, but also Byelorus­sian and then it goes to Lithuania, and then to Norway. It goes abroad. Nobody can tell, but more than the Soviet propaganda count. (your husband's reac­tion?) He said just the same, that it's a catastrophe.

(Was your decision to leave the USSR affected by this?) No. (What motivated you to apply to leave?) I can't tell for sure, but when I became pregnant I understood that if we stay my child will be raised here in this country and I can't imagine how it will be! I under­stood exactly that it won't be better, but only worse and worse and worse because at the time of *perestroika* and *glasnost'* started and there were such [words], it was only words and worse and nothing else. I never believed, never, because it was so clear. I can't imagine how people believed him, how American people believed him. Because on his forehead it was written with such letters-- "I am lying, I am lying, I am lying!" (So you have no faith in Gorbachev?) No, I never believed him.

(So you wanted to leave for your child?) First of all because I was sure that he will feel the anti-semitism more than I. I do not want him to live and feel the same as I did because it's terri­ble. (So your husband was glad you agreed about leaving?) Yes, but it wasn't a question. We never discussed it. We decided immediate­ly. We opened our mouths at the same time. In one voice we asked our friends who left to send us visas from Vienna because at that time it was possible to send visas from Austria. (When did they leave?) February 28, 1988. (When did your visas come?) We got them May 7, 1988. In two months. (After visas-- how long to get permis­sion from OVIR?) Four-and-a-half months.

(What did you take?) This watch was bought by my grand­mother and she gave it to my mother and she gave it to me. The watch and chain. They are gold. When it was bought, the price was low. Then the price of gold in the USSR became higher and then they started to look at the weight of your gold. (When trying to leave the country? At Customs?) It was a rule where you are told if you're leaving the country: one wedding ring, one other ring, no diamonds, one pair of earrings, one chain. But each [piece] has to cost - they put [a limit on the value]. Everything has to be very cheap. So it was impossible to bring the [cheap] gold thing. But it was cheap and became expensive. They said I can't take it with me because it's very expensive. The customs officer said we're robbers -- if each Jew takes a golden thing!

(Do you have photographs?)

I have the old family pictures. They go back to the parents of my grand parents, my great-grandparents.

(your son's birth)

He was born in a hospital. I had good care because a friend of mine's father was in very close relations with the direc­tor of this hospital where I delivered my baby. That's why I had good care. I had some problems and stayed ten days. (Would someone with the same problem have received different care?) This problem wasn't my fault, but the doctors'! (Did you have surgery?) When I delivered my baby, some of the placenta stayed in my body. So they had to check. In five days there was a lot of bleeding and they had to clean it up. Some kind of abortion, but it was with anaesthesia, local. It was good, I felt nothing. But when I delivered my baby they gave me anaesthesia and that was because of my friend. But there [were] other women who weren't given anaesthesia. I was in labor sixteen hours. They gave me partial anaesthesia. They gave me a shot into my back/spine and I felt nothing during fifteen hours and then they said that was enough and then for one hour I had to deliver my baby. That was terrible! [laughter]