**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORTPRIVATE**

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

**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**ANNA GEKHTER**

**Accountant**

**Leningrad Financial and Economical Institute, 1976**

BIRTH: October 1, 1954, Bobroysk, Byelorussia

SPOUSE: Vladimir Gekhter, born 1950, Minsk

Manufacturing Engineer

Married in 1975

CHILDREN: Roman, 1976

Eugene, 1982

PARENTS: Zina Greenshpan, born June 27, 1926, Bobroysk

Naum Gomon, born August 15, 1918, Urovichy, died

1979

SIBLINGS: Simeon Gomon, still in Minsk

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS OF CHICAGO

NAME: **ANNA GEKHTER**

DATE: January 12, 1991

INTERVIEWERS: Sharon Rowe and Ellie Meyers

(Where were you born?) I was born in Bobroysk, a small town in Byelorussia, on October 11, 1954.

(What was life like for you as a little girl?) I don't remember anything in this town. We moved to Kirov. (You can remember Kirov?) Yes, I remember. (Can you tell us something about Kirov?) It was a middle-sized town, exceptionally Russian population. We were the only Jews. Maybe there were some other families, but at that time I didn't know anybody who was Jewish. I was growing up in this town. Kirov is in Russia.

(Why did you move there?) Because my father was in the military service and he was sent there to serve. And after awhile he was... He quit the military service and he decided to stay in this town. (Why did he decide to quit?) It wasn't his decision. (Who made this decision?) I remember minor details. I remember something about Khrushchev's policy to get rid of Jewish officers, that's it.

(He served during W.W.II?) Yes. (Do you remember any stories about this? Did he talk about this?) Never. He did not like it. (You know he didn't like it?) Yes. I asked him. I asked him probably several times, and he did not want to answer. He said it was not interesting. (Did your mother talk about it?) No. My mother was in evacuation so she did not know anything. (Where was she?) She was in Kuibyshev. They were running from Bobroysk to Kuibyshev and then they took a train to Kuibyshev. And she was there in Kuibyshev.

(What was happening in her town that she had to leave?) I asked her, why did you do it? She said that they knew already that German troops eliminate all Jewish people. (What year was this?) This was 1941, the very beginning of the war, because she said that her little brother was two years old, and they celebrated his birthday on the train. (Did she go with her parents?) Yes, with parents, with brothers and sister.

(Did you know your grandparents?) Of course. I know my grandmother, but I never saw my grandfather. He died in the same year when I was born, so I never knew him. (What did he do?) I heard he was working at a store; I don't know, manager of a small store. That's it that I know about him. (Did they talk about living a Jewish life?) I don't think so about my grandmother and grandfather. But my grandmother, she still celebrates some holidays. She's religious. (What holidays?) Passover and Hanukkah. Everything! But she did not give it to her children. I don't know how to explain... my mother is different. She never took after her mother.

(Did your mother have sisters and brothers?) Yes. (So maybe they celebrated?) Maybe, but I never heard about this. My mother was raised in a family where there were four children: two brothers and two sisters. She was of twins. She had a twin sister. She died eleven years ago.

(What language did your grandmother speak to your mother?) Russian. But sometimes she used Yiddish. (So your mother understands Yiddish?) She does understand, but I think she speaks a little bit of Yiddish. (Did your grandmother ever tell you stories about when she was a little girl?) The only thing I know is that she was very educated. I don't know where or what, just that she was very educated. She even knew French! It was so interesting. One day I asked her-- I don't remember what-- and she taught me a poem in French! I was so surprised, because she was past eighty years old and still remembered! (Is she still living?) Yes. (How old is she?) She was born in 1904, I think. Eighty-six. (Does she live with your mother?) Not in the same apartment, but in the same city. And they meet each other every day. (So she can take care of herself?) Yes, but my mother said that she's getting weaker. She used to be a very strong woman.

(Did she tell you stories about life during the war?) I just know that she never worked-- NEVER worked. She had four children, - and even twins.

(What would you say are your earliest memories?) My brother's birth. I was about five. I remember that I didn't want any brothers or sisters. I was so selfish. [laughter] (What happened?) I remember I was very jealous, very jealous. I did not accept any signs of love to him from my parents. And I beat him up. Not when he was born, of course, but later on, we had some wonderful fights. (Where is he now?) In Minsk. (What does he do?) Okay, he's manager of a cooperative. His name is Simon Goman. He has a wife, but no children yet, because he recently got married. (Is she Jewish?) Yes. I even have pictures.

(When you were little, did your mother work?) Yes. As I remember, she always worked. She's a doctor. (A specialist?) She used to be a general physician, but recently she specialized in a certain field. Now she's a doctor who handles diabetes and hormones. An endocrinologist. (Where did she go to school?) At the Medical Institute in Minsk. (What did your father do?) He was assistant manager in a plant. (What did they make?) I really don't remember, because I already did not live with them. Before he was assistant manager of the plant that produced some parts for military equipment. I remember this. But then he changed his job and started being assistant manager of another plant. (Did he quit or was he fired?) No, he quit. Because it was a promotion.

(Do you know how your parents met?) I think so. My father came for a visit to his relatives and my mother stayed at this place because she had a practice like a young doctor. That's how they met. It was a small place in Byelorussia. I don't remember. My father was an old bachelor. He looked very young. He was 35. For a man in Russia this is very old for a bachelor. And my mother wasn't so young. She was twenty-seven. And somebody learned about that a young man came, and he saw her and fell in love.

(What was the neighborhood like in a small town in Russia?) It was a place where people were sent for some reasons, it was like punishment to send people there before the revolution and after. But after awhile, after the Soviets came, that was a place of military services. (Why was it a place of punishment?) I know. Because it was cold there. It's near the Ural mountains. Some famous people were sent there -- writers and revolutionaries. He stayed there after the army. My mother all her life hated this place. (How long were they there?) Let me think... more than twenty years.

(What do you remember of daily life?) We lived in a two-bedroom apartment. (A bedroom for you and your brother?) Yes. We had one to share. (Did your grandmother live with you?) No. I remember one time she came to visit us all winter and then she left. (Did you have a kitchen?) Yes, a kitchen. It was a third floor apartment. All apartments were small in that building.

(Did you have friends?) Yes, I had a lot of friends. I was very communicative. (Your husband said you didn't know you were Jewish there.) In Kirov? (How did you find out?) Okay. My father said to me. It was really interesting story, because when he said it to me, from very first moment I knew that I'm different from everybody and I hated this and I still did not believe that I was Jewish and not anybody in my class in my school was Jewish. It was a terrible feeling! And I remembered it all my life. (How old were you?) Six or seven, something like that. (Did he tell you before school?) I think it coincided. (Did any of the children tease you?) Very few. I would not say they treated me differently. It's only the idea of this that spoiled my life. But I remember just a few children in school-- not a few-- just one or two-- who said I am Jewish. That's it. (So it didn't affect your daily life at all?) No.

(Time with your grandmother-- did you have Hanukkah?) No, I don't remember. (Did you have Christmas?) We did not have Christmas. In Russia we celebrate the New Year. But we did have a Christmas tree. We decorated. And you know what is interesting? For the first time I heard that we are not supposed to do it HERE. I never heard about this. I did not know that a Christmas tree is something different from me, from my origins. (Because everyone did it?) Yes, even Jewish people. (Did you have matzos for Passover?) Yes. (Did you have a seder?) No. (But matzos...) I think even in Kirov we had matzos. Some people baked it. It was never produced like here.

(Did you have chores?) I washed dishes and cleaned the floor. You know, not like here. Without any devices! By hand! (Any other jobs at home-- for your brother?) He did nothing. Oh-- my mother made me feed my brother. She made me cook something for him. But I don't think I did well. Everything I made for him he put down the toilet. (He's five years younger than you?) Yes.

(When your father quit the army, were there political discussions?) At that time, no. First, I was so young. Second, it wasn't acceptable at that time to discuss. (But later on?) No, but I heard that he did not do it himself. He was forced during Khrushchev's time. It was his policy to get rid of Jewish officers. And after World War II there were a lot of Jewish officers who stayed in the army after the war. (Was he a member of the Communist party?) Yes. ((What happened after he quit or retired-- still a member?) He was an accountant after he quit, and I cannot explain. It was at a big department at the same plant where he later was assistant manager.

I have one memory about these days. He was working so hard that my mother went to his office to meet him because he was never home on time. And she was so angry and mad at him because she thought that he preferred to be at work, not to be at home. I don't know why he did it. He was really smart. I don't think he did not manage with his job. Maybe he was afraid. At that time he did not have proper education for this job.

At that time he was studying at the Moscow Financial Institute. He was studying by correspondence. He would take his homework, assignments and everything to where he lived and would prepare it and then come back and pass exams and submit all materials. This is some kind of education. But he still had his diploma of higher education after this institute. But it happened later. At that time he was working and did not have education.

And the story I'm going to tell you, it was one time he found, he came to work and he found on his desk or maybe in the drawer, he found a paper, was drawn a swastika and it was written "*zhid*"-- you know this word? Kike. I accidentally saw it in a magazine. It's a dirty word. He was so upset. To be exact, he was so frustrated.

(How did he get the job if he wasn't prepared?) Oh, he was. He did not have higher education. (What did he do in the army?) He was a regular officer. He dealt with rockets, ballistics. But before World War II he really was an accountant. I don't know how he became an accountant. (Before war an accountant, then army officer, released from army to a factory?) He was a regular accountant. (So he found this note...) Yes. (Yet he rose to assistant manager.) Yes. (So he overcame...) Yes. He was so hard-working and smart. His character was so strong-- an officer. A very persistent person.

(Did your parents have friends in Kirov?) Yes. (They weren't Jewish?) Yes, they were. Some had Russian wives or husbands. But there were three families that were close to ua. (Non-Jews?) Yes. I remember my mother had such good friends. They were so good. They were older than my parents.

(Does being Jewish affect your thinking?) I was always afraid of any words being said to me. I was always afraid someone would say something to me about my nationality. I knew I was silly. It was me. (Did it change your behavior?) After I came here, I think so. Even sometimes now I still... feel a little bit squeezed when I hear at work when people say something about Jews. (You feel timid?) Timid, yes. (The body language says timid.) But to tell the truth, I have not suffered very much from this. I would not say it. That's what is strange!

(You're afraid of what might happen.) Yes, ahead of time. (Bud did anything happen because you were Jewish?) A little bit. Sometimes. You know you can't always live without incidents.

(Like what?) When I graduated from institute it was the type of place for me to work-- they send papers-- they always do it like this in Russia-- they determine your place before you graduate-- so I was sent to Minsk to one place. And the lady, the manager of this department did not take me! Ok, she did, but she acted like she did not want me. That's what I remember. She told me I'd have to go to a collective farm to pick potatoes and that I have to go on business trips, but I had my son, a one-year-old, and I couldn't do it. And I was scared of doing this. I wasn't prepared for this, so I went to the manager of this organization and said, I can't do this because I have a little baby. He was kind to me and found me a place. So it was a little incident.

(Who did collective farming?) Everybody, but they didn't have the right to send a woman with a little child. (But who went?) Everyone. Even mothers. This is duty! Every autumn, every fall, we went there and stayed there for one week and came back and then go back after awhile at harvest time. (In the Spring, too?) No.

(Did you ever take vacations with your family?) Only three of us together without my father. My father always took vacations by himself. He was very dedicated to family... devoted. I think so. We took a vacation with our mother. She took both of us, me and my brother to Minsk every year, because my grandmother was in Minsk. And my mother couldn't live without her mother.

(You started school at age five?) Seven. In Kirov. Ten years of school. (You learned English?) Yes. (Did everybody in your school?) Yes. But you know, this begins from grade five and this is two lessons a week. [HUSBAND: Everybody learned, but nobody knows.] Exactly, because when I started learning again two years ago, before coming here, I discovered that I knew nothing. (Because we use a lot of idioms?) To tell you the truth, it's not British English.

(How far was it to the institute?) It was far. (How did you decide?) I think my father decided. He wanted to see me with higher education and we were talking-- what kind of education would be better for me. I wanted to be in trade. You know trade? To be a manager in a store, but he did not want that. He explained that it's not for me, I'm too honest to be there. Yes, in Russia that's a common thing. (Can you explain that?) They steal a lot. I don't know how to explain. Somebody who fools people. If you don't do it, you won't stay there. If you don't do what they order you to do. If you're in trade, forget about any honesty. (Black market?) Some kind of...

(How old were you when you went to Leningrad?) I was about seventeen and I went there myself. (The government said it was okay?) It was no problem. (Did you know anyone?) Yes, of course. I had my aunts there, my father's sisters. I lived with them and they helped me. (How many years?) Five years. (What was it like?) It was wonderful. (What years?) 1971-1976. (So you got married during that time?) I got married between the fourth and fifth years. (Did you have a lot of friends-- Jewish and Russian?) Actually, I did not have Jewish friends! I think so. I don't know why. My cousins,-- yes. They were friends with my cousins-- not my sisters. I used to call them sisters because we call them sisters. Not blood sisters but sisters. They were friends with my sisters. I had some friends but they were not Jewish. Let me think. We did not have Jewish girls-- we had Jewish boys in our group. We had one Jewish girl.

(Do you remember things you did as a student?) Of course I remember! [laughter] I was studying. I would go out... restaurants, dancing. Mostly dancing, probably. My friends were Russian, now I don't know why. I did not look for Jewish friends. That's interesting. I almost got married to a Russian! (Who was he?) He was an officer-to-be. (You met him at the institute?) No, I met him on the train.

(Tell us the story.) It was a long time ago. I met him in a train when I was coming back from holidays. We were dating for two years. (Did your parents know him?) Yes, they knew him. They did not want him. (Why?) Because he was Russian-- just because he was Russian. Now I understand that they were right, and that it wasn't life for me with Russian officer. Now I understand them very well, but at that time I was so silly, I was young.

(When did you meet Vladimir?) This other man left to his place to serve and I stayed in Leningrad. It was later that I met Vladimir. I think two years after this. I met him in 1975. (Where were you?) I met him in Minsk. (Why did you go to Minsk?) For holidays. (You were introduced...) No! He introduced himself to me. [laughter] He called me up. (He'd seen your picture...) Yes. (How long before you decided to marry him?) That's funny. He insisted. I didn't want to. I don't know. We got married four months after we met.

(He wanted a Jewish wedding-- was that important to you?) I did not care, absolutely. (Was there Jewish music?) It's tradition to play Jewish music at a wedding. (No one bothered you?) No. (After ceremony, a small party?) A big party! We invited 100 guests! (Any toasts? In Yiddish?) Yes, I don't remember, but I think relatives said the Yiddish toasts. My father knew Jewish weddings well. They said things-- *mazel tov*. They knew words. They said something to us in Yiddish.

(Feelings of this onto children-- from marriage to today, with all these experiences, what does it mean to be Jewish?) Now I have a good attitude to this. You can't be afraid. I have a good attitude toward this now, I know my children did not have time to feel there what I felt as a child -- maybe Roman a little bit at school, but... (How would he have felt it?) In school-- *zhid*, that's it.

(What about now?) Everything is Okay. Here everything's Okay. Especially in Skokie. They just could say Russian. That's not so insulting, so offensive.

(Do you have any religious affiliation at this time?) No, unfortunately not. (Do you go sometimes?) Yes, for holidays we'll go to synagogue. (Teaching your children?) I haven't thought about it yet. I am happy that they are happy. They should be Jewish. They are not afraid of hearing something bad about nationality.

(After your marriage, did you go back to Leningrad to finish school? With Vladimir?) No, I was alone for a year. He stayed in Minsk because he was working. I was pregnant at that time. After I finished my school, in two months I gave birth to my oldest son. (Then back to work?) Not at once. I stayed at home one year. He was born in Minsk.

(Then you got work as an accountant?) Yes. (Where?) The place which was assigned to me. (Did you have a choice?) No, we never have a choice. But I think this is better to have a certain place where you have to work than to go and look for something. We called it free diplomas and you go wherever you want to go to look for a job. Especially for Jewish people that's not good. Because I remember the case of my cousin from Leningrad. She graduated from a polytechnical institute and she couldn't find a job because she was Jewish! And where did she get a place to work after institute, --I don't know. We call it distribution of places. And nobody wanted to take her. There were representatives from manufacturing and plants, and nobody wanted to take her because she was Jewish. That's why I know that free diploma is not good.

(So you had only the small problem with the woman...) It was the department where I was sent. She did not want me to work with her. So I went to the boss and he said, okay, I'll give you another place in a different department. It was a little different from my occupation. That's why I wasn't satisfied. You know standards? Booklets. They describe how, what some kind of materials and cloth should be done, and I had to follow the standards in instrumentation. It was a little bit of economic work, but not quite what I wanted. (Was it competitive or cooperative there?) Cooperative, we had a good environment.

(Were their professional organizations?) I don't know what you're talking about. (Were there political organizations?) For me? No. In the system where I was working, it was not so easy to be member of Communist party because they accept people who work at plants and collective farms. We were the intelligentsia, people with higher education. It wasn't because I was Jewish. It was hard for everybody, even Russian people.

(When did you decide to leave Russia?) In 1988. I thought, I felt that something was wrong. Something was not doing good. I heard that everything was going to be worse and worse for Jewish people. I don't know. It was like seventh feeling-- sixth sense. (Your husband mentioned Chernobyl...) No, it's not the reason. It's minor, not major. (Did you hear about anti-semitic feelings?) Of course, of course I heard about this and sometimes felt it. People maybe not in relation to me, but talks, anecdotes. If something happened, always Jewish were guilty.

(Did you feel more because more Jews were allowed to leave Russia?) It was such a period when Jewish people left Russia, in 1978-1979. At that time it was very strong anti-semitism as many were leaving it grew up. (Why?) I don't know why. (*Glasnost*-- more?) I think so. In 1978-1979 the anti-semitism grew because the officials did not want to teach, to give education and work to people because they were Jewish, because they thought they're still going to leave Russia. I think this is the reason.

(What happened after Chernobyl?) I did not take it seriously. I never knew about this. I thought it was far from me. They said it was just a little nuclear thing. Then when we learned more and more about it, it was scary. (How?) We read more and it was a period of *glasnost*, and they started publishing more material about Chernobyl. I don't know why. We were listening to American radio in Russian. We did not understand English then! It was scary for our lives, for the lives of our children. I still think they did not say as much as they should have said. They still lied to us.

(Application to emigrate-- what happened?) At work they did not know. I kept it in secret. When they learned, by this time, I quit my job. Yes, I'm chicken! I already did not work there... They were very kind. It was a different time, not like 1978-79. They sent me best regards and wished me well. They treated me well.

(Your mother and brother?) I think they felt good also about my leaving, but my mother, - she did not want to go with me, and my brother, I still don't understand why they stayed there. And now they want to come because they see that everything is getting worse. (Is your brother's wife Jewish?) Yes. (Now they want to leave?) I applied for them, but now it takes a long time.

(Why did you come to the U.S. not to Israel?) To be honest, everybody wants to go to United States, not to Israel. And I wanted to go with everyone. To be honest, I was afraid of war. I have two boys. It's so small territory. And this war, it's terrible.

(Why Chicago?) Our friends sponsored us. Otherwise we would go to New York. We considered to be accepted by an organization like J.C.C. and they have a similar organization called NAYADA in New York for people who don't have any relatives or friends. (Your friends were from Minsk?) Yes. (How did you meet?) Accidentally, some friends came to our house and brought them. (How long have they been here?) One year more than us. (Preparation was easy?) It is better now. (Release papers?) No problems. Regular attitude -- nothing. That's good, because I'm so sensitive in these things.

And you know what, the reason I did not want to leave Russia ten years ago was because I was, you know, in the Komsomol, the organization for young people. This was at school, everybody joins. (In Leningrad?) No, in Kirov. Komsomol includes members from 14 to 28. (What did you do?) Nothing. (Benefits?) No benefits. We had meetings, that's it. (Political?) Sometimes we discussed something about politics, sometimes to go somewhere. It's just an organization for young people. Of course if you're not a Komsomol member, you can never become a member of the communist party. (So as a member it wasn't important to leave?) No, --that's not it. I was afraid, because at that time they had a big meeting. I remember one case where one girl left Russia at our work. It was a big meeting and they discussed her and they were saying bad words about her, like put a brand (seal) to her. (So you were afraid?) It was inevitable. I could not avoid this. Since I was a member of the Komsomol, I couldn't avoid this.

(Were you afraid of repercussions against your family?) Yes, but not just my family. At that time it was terrible, even if you go with somebody, when you escort people who are leaving Russia, they took pictures. They reported to your work and you could even be fired from your job. My mother-in-law remembers this. She did not go to the station with anybody because she was afraid of this.

(Now that you're here, what do you feel kept your family strong and together?) I lost my fear of being Jewish. This is the most important thing, I think. I'm not afraid that anyone will say things to my children in school that they are Jewish.

(What are your greatest rewards, where do you get happiness from?) I remember when my husband got a job. (The children?) They are happy with school. (Except that it's too easy?) Yes. At home they do nothing. (Disappointments?) Sometimes. When people tell me story that Jewish people were not treated good. My first impressions of being here-- somebody said to me that Jewish people are sometimes not treated good here in America. (What did you think America would be like?) I think nothing was a surprise to me. I expected to see America like it is.

(Did you see TV about America?) Some shows with Phil Donahue and I knew at that time about America only good things. There are a lot of good things, and everything is free and you can go anywhere and choose, you know.

I heard about America from -- maybe you know him, he's famous-- it's Vladimir Pozner. (The journalist?) He was born in France and then he emigrated. But his parents were Jewish, that's probably why the emigration was during World Ware II. And it's interesting, he came back to Russia and stayed there. (In 1974 when Solzhenitsyn was sent away...) There were just rumors. We were so surprised Pozner went back. Some people, they left America and came to Russia three-four years ago. I forgot their names, oh! Lakshin was his last name. He was a biologist. (That surprised you?) Yes. They lived in Moscow and she complained that she didn't have a dishwasher. She's crazy! Why did she do it!?

(What is your personal philosophy?) First of all, I want to say that I'm happy that I'm free -- free to be everything that I want to be. And in disregard of who I am, Jew, non-Jew. I am happy that I do not need to think about this because of any teasing or discrimination and that's why I'm happy because I believe my children will never have this feeling that I had, this fear of being Jewish. (Your hopes for them?) To be happy.

(Any other questions we should have asked?) In general, I think I told you everything. Nothing special. (It is special.) But you know what, I can't understand why my mother -- she so suffered because of being Jewish, and she didn't leave. (Why did she suffer?) How to explain... I don't know, maybe special... It's hard to explain, but everywhere when she came or visited, very often she could hear "*Evrejka*"-- this is "Jewish", or "*Zhidovka*". Sometimes even patients would say, "go to Israel and treat people there." That's a common phrase. (Why didn't she come?) I don't know. But now she wants to. I think she didn't want to go because she had mother. Now she agrees to leave her. I don't know why the change.

(And your grandmother?) I never heard from her about leaving Russia. She's religious and follows traditions. She's really kind of Jewish, not like me. She would never leave Russia because she doesn't want to abandon the graves of her husband and children.

And when I came here, at thirty-four years, and I'm free. And I'm not used to being religious. (Do you want to be Jewish? The children?) For them, maybe, because they are young. For me, I also will try to change my life to the better. It's good, of course...

**Anna Gekhter**

J.C.C./W.A.

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