

LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT
The Soviet Jewish Oral History Project of the Women's Auxiliary
of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago

ANATOLY A.

Surgeon
Ph.D., Kiev Medical Institute, 1986
Odessa Medical Institute, 1976

BIRTH: July, 1954, Odessa

SPOUSE: Lia A.A.
March, 1958, Odessa

CHILDREN: Leon, 1983
Natalie, 1987

PARENTS: Lazar A.
Inda A.

SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of
Chicago

INTERVIEW: **ANATOLY "A."**

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INTERVIEWER: Elaine Snyderman

I was born in Odessa, 1954. My mother was an oncologist. My father was overseeing the veterinary-sanitation inspection in the rural area.

Before I started school I remember my grandmother - my father's mother - took care of me. Then I went to *yasli*, a nursery school, until the age of four. It was Okay. Then I went to kindergarten. Supper I usually had with my mother. My father was often away on business trips. I was the only child and did everything by myself. Nobody helped me. From time to time I remember I was afraid to be

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alone. Then I would phone to my mother. Our neighbors had a phone. We got a telephone only when I was grown up. I went to watch TV with my neighbors. We couldn't buy a TV until 1964. I remember Pesach and Purim. I remember Purim because I liked to eat Hamantaschen. I remember Pesach because we spent it with my grandmother. I remember matzoh and horseradish, salted eggs.

When I was a child I didn't like being a Jew. I remember coming to my mother and saying I don't want to be a Jew. The boys around me decided that Jews were bad people. As a boy I wanted to be like the others. When I said I didn't want to be a Jew, she said, "You're a Jew." And I said no. Mother's cousin, a very clever woman, tried to persuade me that to be a Jew was very good and it was impossible to change a nationality. I don't remember if I cried. In time I got used to the idea.

The consciousness that I was a Jew, a particular kind of nationality, came to me much later, at the end of school, about 15. I don't know how my peers knew I was Jewish. Maybe their families discussed such things. But in my family we didn't touch this subject much. It was a sensitive question. If you try to speak a lot about it, it would not help you to live. You start thinking about it

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and it is not helping. You have to live in such a community and if you wish to have a social life you have to use the rules of the community.

I don't remember discussions about politics. Only when I became a student. In Russia, the official opinion which you can read about in newspapers, is just the opposite of what really is. It's very difficult to get information about what's happening with the Jews. But everybody knew if you wished to go to the medical institute, your percentage was only five percent. You could only be in that five percent of students and it came from the Russian government. If you would come to the medical institute you would have a lot of problems-- because you are a Jew. Nobody tells you anything about it. It's very strange. You come to the medical institute and you say, Okay, I'm a Jew. Have you any discrimination? No, they would say, we like Jews. But you see, official people have two faces. When you ask them about Jews they show you one face but when you start to do something as a Jew they show you the other face. But they show you "underground."

I didn't have much discrimination. I had discrimination when I entered the medical school but I passed all

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the exams and then came to it. Maybe the chief of the medical institute at that time was a very good person. My wife Lia couldn't go to medical school in Odessa because of that quota. And her father was afraid that she would be failed. My parents were afraid too but they didn't want me to leave Odessa. That's why I attempted first to attend the institute in Odessa but if I had failed I would have tried to attend in another town. I was 16 when I entered medical school and graduated at 22. In the sixth year of medical school I specialized in surgery. I was in the science circle from the second year on. This research organization helped me to become a surgeon. I continued research investigations all my life. In 1986 I earned a Ph.D. I got my diploma but I wasn't really a physician.

I had to practice another year, an internship. For the next three years I worked in a position, "young physician," which is residency in the USA. I had some privileges, for example if something happened to a patient I had a curator who looked after this patient and I was not the single responsible person looking after a patient. After three years I become a surgeon. I did an operation and someone tried to help but it's not typical. Usually you come into life after internship, you swim as much as you can.

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I had three Jewish friends. One was very close to me and now he's in California. The other guys, we were close during the medical institute-- and then we lost each other. You see, there were problems. Let's say I would like to become a member of the Communist party. It's impossible for me. It's very difficult for a Jew to become a member of the Communist party. First of all the Communist party is a career. Who would like the Jews to have a career? Second, who would choose the future members of the communist party? The members of the Communist party who would like to take the kind of people that resemble themselves. And third, I didn't show every time my wishes to become an active member of the Young Communist League or Young Communist Party. And that's why no one put an eye on me.

This problem did not become my problem. It didn't stay before me and I didn't think about it. There are two political forums in Russia. The international forum and the local politics, the day to day events in Russia. Nothing had happened. Everyday they would say the same thing, "Work for Russia and we will look after you." It was everyday the same thing without change. What kind of politics? Real politics stayed hidden under a large cover.

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They don't say anything about Jews or people who don't like to live like everybody lives. They gave them the name-- dissidents. They tried to say nothing about that.

When Sakharov appeared, he was very popular, a great person, and when he told everybody the internal politics of our government is not good, immediately a lot of comments appeared in the newspapers that said Sakharov is a bad person.

First of all, nobody told us what Sakharov's dreams and ideas were. Nobody knew, and neither did I, what he wanted to do. And when an announcement appeared in the paper that Sakharov was a bad person, you learned that he did something wrong against the government and he was digging a grave for himself. It was impossible to get any information, any real information from the newspaper. That's why you haven't any information about political matters.

I knew that there must be another side to the story but I didn't know what it was. I know that this was a very famous person who was in research in nuclear physics and he was a three star hero but what he would like to say and why the government published this article against him, I didn't

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know. That's why internal politics were not interesting because you knew in advance what they were going to say. Our friends had the same kind of reaction when they read these things, depending on their character and education. As a physician in my generation I had Ukrainian, Georgian, Russian friends. There were few Jewish physicians in my generation; the situation for Jewish guys to get a medical education became gradually worse, especially after Stalin died.

I studied English before I started medical school, two or three 45-minute lessons a week. We read a little article and translated if we could. Nobody said to learn this language because it might help you. They paid much more attention to the Ukrainian language.

On holidays, we had one or two days off. Seventh of November is the day of the October Revolution in 1917, but now for the majority of people it just meant a day off. As a surgeon I usually worked. I lived with my family until the end of medical school and then I moved to another town. We stayed together for not just money and conditions but also social support. They helped me. I chose chemistry originally. But it was a very difficult way, but I knew at that time if I succeeded in entering the university for

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chemistry what would come after that? I would become a teacher. It was very difficult to move in research in chemistry as a Jew. And in science, your [development] depends on what kind of institution and what kind of research, the kind of teachers, the kind of people who surround you. Research didn't have any future for me and I didn't want to be a teacher. Friends of my parents were teachers but this specialty did not satisfy them. I didn't feel drawn to this.

My next choice was to be a doctor. I can't say I wanted to be a doctor from the very beginning of my life. Maybe my family, the books that surrounded me, maybe the friends of my parents who were doctors, maybe my mother's advice, but step by step, at fifteen I decided to prepare for medicine.

In 1978 I first thought about emigrating. I was in Belgorod-Dnestrovsk, about 100 miles from Odessa. The institute assigned me there. I was there for two years. In 1980 I first applied to go to the United States because I thought there was no future for the Jews in Russia. It is something you think about when you don't have an opportunity to fulfill your dreams. When this choice appears before you, you have to take it. In 1978 we

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actually first applied, but it was too late. It was the end of the opportunity. In 1980 they didn't even answer. Nothing was moving in Odessa. In Moscow they could still get out.

I returned to Odessa in 1979 and worked in an emergency hospital as a surgeon. In 1982 I went to Kiev and worked in the institute there. I met Lia in Odessa in 1981 and we were married in 1982. And then she stayed in Odessa and I went to Kiev. We were apart for two years. It was the equivalent of a fellowship here. When I returned to Odessa I worked at the area hospital, the largest in the city. Lia had just finished residency.