

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

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BIRTH: 1921, Dunaevtsa

SPOUSE: Lazar A.

August 1921, Odessa

CHILDREN: Anatoly A., 1954

PARENTS: Nuchim G., 1889-1942

Chana G., 1895-1942

SIBLINGS: Usher

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

I decided to be a doctor when I was a child. I liked medicine very much. I felt I needed to be a doctor. My parents wanted me to have a good education because they themselves didn't have the opportunity to become doctors. When my parents were young in Tsarist Russia, the Jews were in the Pale. Jews were restricted from living in the cities and couldn't receive education. But after the Revolution the slogan was, "everybody is the same." My parents believed at the beginning of Soviet power that Jews would have these rights. It was true then, because before the Second World War, I had the right to enter medical school.

I was born in 1921. My parents Nuchim (born 1889) and Chana G. (born 1895) and our family lived in Dunaevtsa near Chmelnitsky, 400 miles northwest of Kiev near the Polish border.

My mother didn't work but stayed at home to raise the children. My father worked as the chief of a kind of store that distributed merchandise to workers organizations. After the Revolution, goods that were taken from the rich

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were sent to such stores. It was the beginning of communism and there was no selling. The goods from the rich were given to those in need. There everything was in the hands of the government. It was a storage place where a worker's organization like "Unit 10" or "Unit 20" could apply for coats, for example. It was just for clothing.

My brother Usher was born in 1924. He was very bright and wanted to build something, to be involved in engineering. He was the best in his class in mathematics.

Communism: the Promise and the Threat

The family did not talk about politics at home because it was after the Revolution and everyone thought it changed things for the better. They could study and learn and grow up to their own level of education and position or occupation.

In the 1930's when Stalin was killing people who held high positions in the party, no one from my family was killed. But because of what was going on, my family did not feel secure. Every night when my father went to sleep,

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he prepared things in case someone came during the night to arrest him and take him to prison. So that he would be ready, he laid out matches, salt, and clothing that he would need if they picked him up, because there would be no time to gather necessities. They would take him and that's it. The people who were arrested when I lived in Dunaevtsa--I don't remember that any of them came back. In 1939 I went to Kiev to study and after the war started I did not return, so I can't say for sure. After the war, there was the short period when Rehabilitation started, when after the death of Stalin in 1953, those who survived were able to return.

Medical Studies during the War

I lived with my parents until 1939. Then at the age of 17 I left to start medical studies. I began in Kiev, continued in the city of Novosibersk (near Lake Baikal in Siberia) and then finished in the eastern part of Russia at the Medical Institute of Alma-Ata (in Kazakhstan, which borders China). When the war broke out in the western portion of the country, to protect the students in essential fields, the government relocated us. I was part of a

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cadre, students who began studying in Kiev, and then were relocated to the east.

Dunaevtsa was very close to the Polish border and when the war started it was occupied for some time, and during the entire war I received no mail. Only after the war I could visit. There were different rumors. The first time I was relocated I knew nothing. But when we were farther east, we heard stories though no one knew exactly what was going on until after the war.

We didn't think about ourselves. We hoped our parents would be alive and that the war would finish soon. Each month the propaganda was that the war would be finished in another month or two months and in a few months everything would be okay. So we never thought about anything else but our relatives and work.

Wartime Conditions

Nobody helped us and we were ragged and hungry. America sent parcels to Russia and some of us received some

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things but it wasn't enough. It was very hard but everything was for the warfront. All industry worked for the front and they produced nothing for civilians. But none of us cared how we looked. When we lived in Novosibersk it was very cold in winter and there was nothing in the store to buy. We went to the (open air) market where everything was very expensive. We bought one pair of boots-- *valenke* in Russian, made of wool-- hard wool. Another girl and I took turns with these boots. She wore them one day and I, the next day. One pair for two of us.

During World War II the students at the Alma-Ata Medical Institute lived in confined space, six or seven to a small room. Even after the war it was difficult because the country was destroyed. There was no transportation. We lived near the hospital, five blocks or so and went on foot.

In those days I always woke up early while it was still dark. To get food for breakfast we students stood in line. Food was not only scarce it was very bad and we would be hungry all day. A very small cafe served the area and we had to show our ration card. After standing in line perhaps thirty minutes to an hour, we might leave without

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getting served because we had to get to class on time. We spent all day with an empty stomach. One of us might start in line earlier and we'd help each other. When we were served we received hot water and something resembling tea (nobody knew what it was) and a piece of bread.

There were many people around me in the same situation. I wasn't alone and together we hoped everything would be better. It was just hope that kept us strong.

Students had limited access to textbooks. There was one book and five students. Sometimes we read together. We had a lot of practice classes and our professors' lectures compensated for lack of books. Lectures were excellent, better than the books. Professors were well educated and spoke five languages.

We medical students lived in the *ovshazitzsa* (communal building) and the buildings of the medical institute and of the veterinary institute were on the same street in the same block. So Lazar, who attended the veterinary institute, and I met on the street. We lived close to each other. Lazar was from Odessa. You know the people from Odessa are special. They are strong-minded and

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do what they set out to do. And he saw me and he made up his mind. Lazar and I met in Alma-Ata and were married six months later in July, 1943. He is a veterinarian now. He had a good character. Not everybody was able to be like that. Maybe he liked that I was so different from him. He's alert and energetic and makes a lot of friends. I am different, more quiet and happy to be at home.

We Must Part for a Year

It was near the end of the war when I received my orders to go to Moldavia. I graduated from medical school in 1944. Men doctors went to the war service while women doctors were sent to a free area of Russia. Because of the lack of physicians, many of whom were killed during the war, I was sent by the Commission of the Medical Institute to the liberated part of Moldavia. We had to be apart. We worked hard and didn't have much time to write to each other. We knew we wouldn't be able to meet again until after the end of the war. I couldn't leave until 1946 when another doctor could replace me. When Lazar finished his education, he was told he could go to Moldavia but he wanted to go to Odessa where his family was.

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My Family's Fate

When the country was freed from the Nazis, I found out what happened to my family. They were killed by the Nazis in 1942. They were thrown into a mine with other Jews from this area. There were about one thousand Jews who were forced into the mine. My entire family, my father, mother and brother were killed. No Jew remained alive in Dunaevtsa. After the war in 1945, I returned to my native town and there were people who were not Jewish, Russian or Ukrainian, who saw everything and they told the story of what occurred, so I learned what happened. After the war Jewish people from the neighboring towns collected money and built the monument that stands in front of the mine.

We were four girls from Dunaevtsa who started out as roommates in Kiev. When the war started the others went to the army. I was the only one who was lucky enough to go to Novosibirsk to continue medical studies. I learned they were alive after the war and were able to finish their medical education after the war. But the parents of all of them were dead.

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When the war ended so much had been destroyed that it remained a struggle to find a place to live and food to eat. Doctors lived as close as possible to the hospital because they had to get there on foot. As a young doctor I saw many patients. In a typical morning, I examined 20 or more patients, on an exceptionally hard day --60 or 70 -- before going in to perform surgery. After that, I would go back to the polyclinic to check up on post-operative patients and then later, return in the evening to check-in new patients and examine them. During this period I was doing my own research and was one of the first physicians to administer testosterone (the only male hormone available in Russia) to women with breast cancer, using injections and oral medication. In one case this treatment helped a patient in the final stages of breast cancer to survive three more years.

Oncology was a very discouraging specialty. To be satisfied from my work was difficult. Oncology patients usually died. It was difficult and heavy but I was very compassionate and did my best and that's why the patients liked me. I pitied the patients and they felt that I put

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my life into helping them. I was the only doctor in the area but I had been a good student, had benefited from having good teachers, and the patients trusted me, knowing I did my best for them. I continued to be the only doctor at the district hospital of Moldavia for some time before other doctors arrived.

We Are Reunited in Odessa

When Lazar came back to Odessa in 1946 I returned there so we could be reunited. He had continued studying in Alma-Ata when I was required to go to the liberated part of Moldavia. He had graduated from veterinary school. Although we had known each other only half a year, during wartime that was enough. At the very beginning we lived for a very short time with Lazar's mother and then we rented different apartments over a period of seven or eight years. In Russia everybody rents apartments. Nobody owns an apartment. The reason for the temporary places was because of the poor living conditions, small rooms, no kitchen, no bathroom. It was just after the war and many buildings had been destroyed. In one apartment several

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families could be living. We kept trying to better our living situation.

Our Son is Born

I worked a lot and I was very busy and living conditions were not good. Anatoly was born in Odessa eleven years after we were married. He is an only child. Our way of life and cramped living conditions discouraged us from having more children. It was hard to raise children.

My own parents had been very religious and raised us with the traditions. My grandfather was a member of the synagogue, of the *shul*. The family was religious and kept the religious holidays. But this was a communist country. When I left my parents' home it was difficult to fulfill religious rules because doing so would have compromised my position.

I observed the holidays I remembered from childhood. I made hamantaschen, and we went to Lazar's mother's home for Passover, but holidays were celebrated only at home.

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The Doctors' Plot: Moscow to Odessa

In the beginning it didn't matter that I was Jewish when I started practicing medicine. After the war and later attitudes toward Jews changed many times. At the very beginning after the war there wasn't high anti-Semitism. That increased until it peaked in 1952 and 1953 until Stalin died. There was a time in 1952 when nobody would come to Jewish physicians. It was the time of Cosmopolitanism. It was the time when nine Jewish physicians from the Kremlin hospital were killed after the so-called Doctors Plot.

The Doctors Plot was supposed to have taken place in Moscow with professors at the Kremlin Hospital but the newspapers published a terrible rumor that spread like circles in the water: that Jews were trying to poison the whole population. The impact was felt strongly in Odessa where there was a high percentage of Jewish doctors. Most doctors felt that the situation throughout the country was becoming worse. In 1953 it wasn't officially claimed that Jewish doctors had to be fired, but patients, especially in out-patient departments, hardly came to them. A Jewish

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doctor could wait for eight hours and see no patients in a day, unless the patients were Jewish. And it was terrible on trains, trolley cars or buses. I heard of Jewish doctors being thrown off the bus, even if it was moving. Many preferred to walk rather than ride and take the chance.

A professor at the hospital where I worked recommended me as a good physician for a position as a teaching assistant in surgery at the Institute of Medicine. I would have liked to teach. Later he told me that unfortunately he couldn't help me because I was Jewish. If I had been accepted, I would have been able to start my dissertation on breast cancer but that was possible only ten years later.

I began by doing general surgery but became interested more and more in oncology of the breast. For almost twenty years I specialized in that field and patients came to me from all over the city and other cities as well. I spent a lot of time with my patients and shared everything I could with them.

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Last year I worked in the out-patient department. I did not continue to perform major surgery. I felt I was too old. Instead I saw patients and acted as a consultant in oncology for doctors with unusual cases from all over the city of Odessa. One day a week I performed minor surgery that didn't require general anesthesia.

After Stalin's Death

After Stalin died, things actually did not improve and in some ways became worse. My daughter-in-law couldn't go to medical school where she wished. For a short time everyday life became easier. People were not as afraid of being sent off to a prison camp to die. The situation in the country wasn't so awful. And it wasn't so hard to get food. But for a Jew like my daughter-in-law to get an education and for me to move up in my occupation it was not better.

Attitudes changed a little but not much. The attitudes of neighbors varied as in other countries where there are educated people and those who are not. It depended on their education and the attitude toward other

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nationalities from childhood. If your neighbors hate you, they say that you're a *Zhid*, but if you have a good attitude they like you as a person. I was a very friendly person and liked to communicate with my patients or the neighbors, and the neighbors' attitudes toward me were good.

Once I could have joined the communist party but no one in my family was a member. It is difficult now to explain why I didn't think about politics but it was at the time I started medical studies and liked my work and had no time to think about politics. It wasn't something that would stand in my way if I didn't join.

But the problem was that when I had a goal, I was thwarted, my ambitions cut off, to succeed, to attain a higher position in the hospital. Nobody said you're a Jew. They would come up with an explanation why I didn't get the position. It was a cover for anti-semitism. The slogan was that all nationalities have the right to do what they want to do; but under the table the government did what it wanted to do.

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I Didn't Want to Emigrate from Russia

At my age it is difficult to emigrate to another country. I was satisfied with my work. I had money. It is difficult to go to another country where you have no money. But Anatoly and his family came to Chicago in December, 1988 and the anti-semitism increased in Russia. Nobody knows where this will lead. We left everything in Russia. We came on a guest visa which has expired. We are trying to renew it. Emigration is not an easy situation. Our family applied together in Russia two years ago to leave. We applied first in 1980, but we were ignored. Since that time the attitude between the countries (Russia and the U.S.) changed. There was a new president of the U.S. and Brezhnev changed his politics toward the Jews. I don't know exactly what happened at that time but we were ignored. We didn't try again until 1988. Anatoly and his family received permission but Lazar and I did not. They left Russia in 1988 and came through Austria. We came here as guests. But now, we left everything in Russia, and its impossible to go back and we've applied for political asylum to the U.S. They came in 1988 and we arrived in October, 1989.

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We didn't have a choice. It was hard. When your children live with you, you try to live with the difficulties. When the children are gone, you don't want to remain in the dangerous situation. The neighbors changed. They stopped being friendly and treated us as enemies. Because the Jews of Germany were well-educated in 1933, the general population resented them. The situation in Russia in 1990 is similar. In 1933 the Jews who thought it was a temporary situation put their lives in the fire. The Russian Jews don't want to repeat that mistake.

The instability there makes it impossible to predict what will happen. It seems better to stay here. All our friends are trying to leave Russia. They write to us. "It is very dangerous, don't come back. Stay there."

Because I received my education at a Soviet school my attitudes from the very beginning changed from the beliefs of my parents. All my life I never believed I would live somewhere where it would be possible to return to Jewish traditions. Now I feel that it's very good to be able to do this.

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I'm not at an age where I would choose to leave Russia in order to change my life. I came here because my son and his family are here. Now I want to give my grandchildren as much as I can. I can't work here because I'm too old to start over and although I am studying English, I don't know the language. At school I studied German not English. It's another kind of medicine here, different methods and prescriptions. I might be able to help Russians here but not as a physician.

All my life was spent in difficult times. It started like this and continued that way. It seems to me I could have done more if things had been different. I didn't achieve what I might have in this life.