

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: March, 1958

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July, 1954, Kiev

CHILDREN: Leon, 1983

Natalie, 1987

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SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

I was born in Odessa in 1958. My grandparents were doctors. My mother and father were engineers. They both finished institute studies in Odessa. My brother Mikhail, an engineer, is four years older than I. Except for a few years in Tambov, where my parents were assigned after their institute studies, I spent most of my childhood in Odessa. When my mother's father died and my grandmother was alone, our family moved back to live with her.

We observed no Jewish holidays until the last years when my father's mother lived with us. She told me about her childhood in a small Jewish city and how they celebrated the holidays. After I got married my mother-in-law who was also from a small Jewish city and a religious family told me about them. But during my first twenty years I didn't know anything.

The Internal Passport

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One reason I knew I was Jewish was because of the Soviet Internal Passport. If you try to travel anywhere, everybody knows that you are a Jew. It looks like this present my brother sent me. It's a joke: the "Odessa Citizen's Passport." Here line by line, just like in the real passport, is listed your family name, your first name, your father's name, when you were born, and on the fifth line, your nationality. In my passport it was *Evrej*, which means Jew. Other passports might say Ukrainian or Russian.

I was five when I first realized I was Jewish. Among children you can hear, "don't play with him, he's a Jew." It's difficult to appreciate now but sometimes it hurts when a child plays with you and calls you a name you know is bad but you don't know why. I was young when my mother died, and father worked and traveled a lot, and my brother entered the institute in Moscow. So I stayed alone at home most of the time and had no opportunity to speak of this. It may have happened once or twice in my childhood but I just remember it because it hurt. You knew it was better not to speak of it and it was better if nobody knew you were Jewish.

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As a child, I didn't like my name because it was a very Jewish name. If I said it, nobody needed to ask my nationality. It was obvious. I liked my given name but not my family name because it is Jewish. I asked my father why he had such a name. But you can't change your name.

It's difficult to say whether I would have married somebody who wasn't Jewish. As I grew older I understood that I was Jewish. My friends were Jewish and I never considered that I could marry someone who wasn't. I lived in Odessa, a city with many Jews. In my class at school there were maybe twelve Jewish boys and girls when we were thirteen years old. We had a lot of Jewish teachers.

We knew that it was almost impossible for a Jew to get the gold medal, the highest award in the public schools. We accepted the Russian attitude but weren't afraid we'd be hurt because we were Jews. I had some Russian, Ukrainian and Bulgarian friends. But most of my friends were Jewish because when there was a difficult situation the Russians would stay apart and not be involved in your problem.

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This is the way it was and at the end you liked it when you understand what was going on. It's hard to explain in English. I know I had a more difficult way and my way was different from all others. At the end I liked that I had to struggle more than others to succeed. I liked to be first and I liked that I was able to be first, even though I was a Jew.

Halfway to Siberia

The Russian and American educational systems are different. In Russia you finish public school after 10th grade. If you wish to study medicine you attend a medical institute for six years. You attend public school ten years, then institute, six years. Then you spend three years on the job --a total of nineteen years. In Russia we had to pass an exam before we could enter the institute. They say the institute is like college in the U.S.

Sometimes public school teachers would just mark in the Jewish student's permanent record, "good" instead of "excellent," even if all your marks had been excellent. I had all "excellent" marks from the time I was ten, and my

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father wanted me to get a gold medal because if I was able to get it I could enter medical school with only one exam. If I passed it with a mark of "excellent" I could enter medical school without any problem. At the end of the last year of school, the tenth year, I had all "excellent" marks. Still, my father had to come to talk with the principal because I was not on the list for those qualified to receive the gold medal. They averaged my score at the end of school and hid the true average. So I had the top grades but did not receive the gold medal to prove it. I had to take all the exams. That was the first problem.

The next problem was that to take the exams I had to leave Odessa to go to Saratov, which is like traveling from New York to San Francisco, six hours by plane from my city.

Because I could never enter medical school in Odessa in the first place, I had to go to Saratov. My father took me there. Only one Jew was allowed for twenty others in Odessa medical school. In Saratov it was easier because it was halfway to Siberia from the European part of the country where there is a large Jewish population. Since Saratov was very deep in Russia, I think less anti-Semitism

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showed up there, especially fifteen years ago when I entered.

A Pretense Reveals the Truth

After the exams, I had scored an average of 20. The maximum score you can receive is 25. All who get 20 can enter medical school. But when they made a list of those who could enter medical school, my name wasn't on it. Then I sent my brother who was in Saratov to speak for me. He pretended he was the student and said, "My name is _____ and I passed this exam with 20 but my name is not on the list."

They said, "That can't be because we accept all boys with a score of 19." My brother came back and told me, "If I were in your place I could enter but you cannot." In this case they wanted boys more than girls! But before my father left he talked to the dean of the faculty who was Jewish. He showed him my diploma from school and that I was excellent and received an award, a "*Grammata*," a certificate like a gold medal in special subjects. It showed you had a perfect score in the subject. I had this

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"*Grammata*" for biology, chemistry, literature and math, though I had no gold medal. So after all this, I went to the dean and I was allowed to enter medical school but I didn't receive either a stipend or my student ID.

For one year I studied without a stipend and without ID. And only after that year they agreed to take me into the regular course because I had excellent marks on all my courses for the year. In the third year I received a higher stipend. They have these for students who study well. Students who don't do well don't receive stipends and those whose studies are excellent receive a higher stipend, 25 percent more than others. After the second year I received only the higher sum.

So I entered Saratov in a six-year program but my family was in Odessa and my father didn't want me to stay in Saratov. However, they had a lot of Jewish professors and the level of the school was much higher than in Odessa. After 1953 or so there were no Jewish professors in Odessa and the medical school was not better for it. I studied in Saratov and liked it much better than when I went back to

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Odessa. I liked the students, the teachers and the professors. It was just that I was lonely away from home. That was the only problem. My brother's wife was originally from Saratov and the first year I stayed with her mother. And then I moved to a student dormitory.

There were six or seven of us from Odessa, all Jewish, who had to go elsewhere for medical school. And we went back together to Odessa for our school vacations. It would take six or seven hours on a night flight. We would leave at nine in the evening and get there at five or six in the morning. We traveled from Saratov to Odessa and back.

Saratov is a very large city of 600,000 or 700,000. It had a lot of museums and theaters. It was on the Volga. You could travel by ship for two days and visit islands. Or you could go to a good art museum. It was twelve hours by train from Moscow. If I wanted to go from Odessa to Saratov it was 48 hours by train. A lot of Moscow theater groups visited Saratov theaters. We were able to see the best performances. And the tickets were much cheaper than here.

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Another Temporary Setback

I was 22 when I came back to Odessa. My father wanted me to come back sooner but it was impossible. They didn't want to accept me. It takes two years to transfer. In Saratov it was easy; I filled out the application and I was told that in Odessa they agreed to take me. I said goodbye to my friends, left my address for them to write and came home with all my belongings.

But when the school year began, I was told there was no place for me and I was forced to return to Saratov another year. So I spent four years in Saratov and two in Odessa.

After six years in medical school, we had the first year of internship which is like a seventh year of study. We had a chief of internship and we worked at the hospital in different programs such as infectious disease, pediatrics, and gynecology. I was in the Odessa City Clinic #7. I had a good chief for my internship and I liked it. I worked with kids for two or three months in each different specialty such as hematology, infectious disease, early

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childhood development, and pediatric internal medicine. After this I took my exams, received my certificate, and I could practice pediatrics anywhere in Russia.

I Refuse My "Orders"

But after you finish medical school you receive an "order" to go to a special place where you must work for three years. You have to repay your education in this place. The "order" resembles residency in the U.S.

At 24 I had some trouble getting my assignment. Again I was one of the best students but was not given a choice. I was assigned to a small village but I didn't want to go there and I wouldn't sign the "order."

In this "order" they include the place where you will do your internship and the place where you will work for three years. Because I didn't want the assignment, I didn't sign, and so I didn't work for more than half a year. During this time I struggled with them to get

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permission to stay in Odessa. Finally, I ended up in an outpatient department in Odessa.

Did I ever think it was not worth fighting the system? Maybe it had to do with my character. Officials haven't liked me all my life because I won't sit back. I say what I want to say. Even here in America.

An "Old Maid" of Twenty-four When I Marry

My future husband and I met through our parents' friends. We had studied in the same school and lived only one block from each other in Odessa. Most of our married Jewish friends met each other during school or institute years. We met at the time I finished medical school before I started my internship. Some of our friends met as we did but I don't think this was most typical.

Most early marriages are during student years at the institute or university or medical school. I was 24 when I got married. The average is from 20 to 23. It depends on your education or what part of the country you live in. In the Baltic republic the average age to marry was 25. In

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Ukraine, 21 or 22 was the average age. So I was an old maid!

Our wedding was in a special place, a kind of city hall with a restaurant. The food was just what they served there, no Jewish dishes, of course. Most of the guests were our relatives.

After we were married my mother-in-law invited us to celebrate Jewish holidays. Three or four times a year she prepared gefilte fish and different dishes from matzoh and even cakes from matzoh meal. At Pesach we could get matzohs in synagogue and she prepared everything. It was a little bit different from here, but we observed tradition most on Pesach, because we were married at that time, so every year we had a Pesach table.

Traditional Foods without Tradition

When I was growing up after my mother died, it was my job to do the cooking. I did what I could and knew how to make some Jewish foods like latkes, but it wasn't to observe traditions. My father's mother taught me how to

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make gefilte fish and other dishes. I did it just for fun, not for the rituals. It didn't have to be shabbos or a holiday when I made chicken soup with mandelen or matzoh balls. I just knew these foods from childhood and prepared them on any holiday.

Our Family Increases; Our Careers Rise

Our son was born when I was in internship. His father was in Kiev on his "*ordinatura*." He was doing his clinical studies and got his Ph.D. there. He came to pick us up after the baby was delivered. He stayed a week and then had to go back.

I don't know why but five years later, when I came home from the delivery after our daughter was born I knew it was impossible to live in this country anymore. From appearances everything was going up for our family. I had a good job. I finished my three year course and started working in a hospital as a neonatologist. I had a good salary. My husband finished his Ph.D. and started working in Odessa's largest hospital as a surgeon.

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But he had begun with problems because he was a Jew and wasn't assigned work during regular hours. He had to have only duties at night or on "*somaviation*," an ambulance plane service. Such cities as Odessa, which is a large city, have a lot of hospitals, medical schools and professors. The level of medicine is high. But in the small towns in the Odessa region there may be no clinic at all. If you have a patient with difficulties that the doctor there can't manage and the patient may die, he calls the large city and there's a special plane that takes doctors from the large city for consultation to the patient's home. If it's too bad he picks up the patient and transports him to the large hospital.

All doctors in large clinics have duties and they have one or two days a month on call with the ambulance plane service. The clinic where my husband worked was the largest clinic in the region for doctors who worked only on this service. But it was hard work and nobody wanted to do it. He was the one on the staff that did it because he couldn't have gotten into the hospital any other way.

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It was like residency here. Thirty-six hours he could be away from home and return at 12 at night or later, because of these duties. He could come home and two hours later a car might arrive to take him somewhere else. It was a hard time. Finally at the end before we left, he was able to start working regular hours from 9 to 6. He had received his Ph.D. and they agreed to take him on the regular staff of the clinic. It's prestigious for the clinic to have a doctor with a Ph.D. He might have been happy to stay, because at the time we were getting ready to leave, things were turning better for him. He had a good salary and regular hours. In the future he might have been able to advance because they assigned him where he might have become a department chief. We lived at the highest level when we left.

I was the one who started bothering my husband about coming to the United States.

"Pamjat" and Open Anti-Semitism

But we saw that everything was getting worse around us. There was *Pamjat'*. Because Odessa is a very Jewish

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city, it has two or three Jewish cemeteries and my mother and grandparents are buried in one of them. One day we visited and found broken monuments and broken graves. In Russia when you have money you try to build a monument in memory of the dead. It can be made of marble with something inscribed in Hebrew or in Russian. We saw that they just broke some of these monuments. They're expensive and difficult to put up but they look very beautiful.

How can you feel when you see such a thing? The whole city was talking about it. My family's graves were not damaged. They just damaged the central aisle where the most prominent and most expensive monuments are. Everybody who comes there sees it. In Russia there are monuments surrounded by fences. You just see what's between the aisles and you can walk and there are a lot of trees. The Jewish monuments can be very large. A Jewish star can be two meters high in black marble and you can't see beyond the second or third row from where you're standing. I think they broke what was in the center so that everybody could see it was broken. Around the same time, a park was built over another Jewish cemetery. They just took machines and they leveled everything and put trees there.

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How can you feel and what can you say? It was just a job for some people and they did it.

Like a Return to the Period of the "Doctors' Plot"

People couldn't read the true facts about the anti-Semitism behind the Doctors' Plot trial when it happened in 1953. But people who are still alive remember what went on then, of people being thrown off buses. And even now since everything has turned around in Russia, my friends and my husband's aunt write in letters, that it's dangerous to travel by train, tram or bus because you hear a lot of anti-Semitic talk and you're afraid that something will repeat again. I think it's become worse since we left because when we were there it wasn't as open.

My brother lives in Lipitsk, a small city in the middle of Russia, not far from Saratov. He doesn't write that he wants to leave. Most antisemitism is on the border near Poland where there are more Jews-- in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia. In the middle of Russia, where there are one or two Jews in a city, nobody cares, but where there are many, it's a problem.

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Chernobyl: How It Reached Us

The Chernobyl nuclear station accident was before May 1. I remember very well. We were going to go camping with friends in Riba, which is not far from Odessa, and were packing tents in our cars. Because the first of May is a labor holiday in Russia, the whole country gets three days vacation. My mother-in-law came to our home on April 29, the day before we left. She said, "Something happened in Chernobyl." She heard it on the radio, the Russian broadcast, just news that something happened, as if something happened in the bakery. Nobody realized what was actually going on. So we took the kids and brought food. We stayed on the banks of the river and we used the water from the river. We lived all day under the sun, under the sky. All three days, just days after the accident, when the radiation level was very high. It would have been better just to stay home.

Kiev is twelve hours from Odessa by train. It's far but not too far to have an effect, depending on the wind. They say the winds blew in two directions, to the south and

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to the north. In Sweden and all the Baltic republics and a piece of Byelorussia, they received a high level of radiation. We were in the other direction, the Ukraine, and I don't think that it was very high. What was bad was that we didn't know about the accident and we stayed out and used water from the river. Rain and dust go down into this river and we used it to prepare food for the kids-- for everything.

Since then I think that in Russia they've learned about radiation. That year I was pregnant with Nathalie and I was taking advanced courses. I spent three months in Kiev and nobody told me it was bad if you're pregnant to go to Kiev, which is 120 kilometers from Chernobyl. Now everybody knows that they have to take kids out of Kiev three or four months a year for their health. Now we receive letters from our relatives and friends from Kiev and they write that they didn't know anything and they stayed the whole time there and the kids ate everything like strawberries and whatever they could. What will happen nobody knows. Now the newspapers, television and radio are reporting everything. But you can't change anything.

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The government didn't educate the people as they should have at all. All those years that we were in Russia, even we doctors didn't know the danger, even when I was pregnant with my daughter and went to take an advanced course in Kiev. The only thing that was said was after my course. When I was five or six months pregnant, the professor who gave me the exam asked me, "How do you feel about being pregnant here? Are you bothered or not?" I said, "No, I'm not." And she seemed to agree. I don't think she knew any more than I did.

Perhaps Anatoly and I knew more than others because he has a distant relative who works with "A.S.": atomic power stations, in the main office in Kiev. He got much more information but he knew only levels of radiation, where it was bad or worse such as the river. But nobody realized how long it would be bad for the population. They thought that when a year passed, everything would be okay, not that it would be worse from year to year. I think that only now they know the problems. The last letter that we received from my friend in Kiev said that the government, through city hall, gave all the women permission to have three

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months vacation to take the kids under twelve years old away from Kiev. They can go anywhere if they have relatives or money. This allows women, while they take time off, to keep their jobs with two months pay so they can take the kids away. They can't solve the problem of the air.

Once we agreed to leave we needed someone to sponsor us. My mother's cousin left Russia ten or twelve years ago and lives in Chicago. We wrote to her and she agreed to fill out the papers.

Nathalie was born in September. In April we got the documents from OVIR and in September we got permission to leave. It took a year after we decided.

Help from Many

When we arrived here we were met by Jewish organizations and we received support from them. We came December 20, 1988. The first ten days, we had help finding an apartment and the Jewish Family Service gave us a very good

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case worker who helped us get Leon into Jewish kindergarten.

It was at this time that we talked about having Leon circumcised. We had come to the Jewish community and he had started to go to Jewish kindergarten. He was five-and-a-half then but he understood a lot and knew that most of the kids were circumcised and he knew that he was a Jew. I think we decided all together. My husband is a surgeon and didn't think that a boy has to be circumcised. He believes every part of the anatomy has a purpose, even the appendix. He agreed to the circumcision because there was a medical reason to do it, not just a religious one. Leon had a constriction but in Russia when he was three months old they refused to operate on it. They just made a tear in the constriction. I think it should have been done anyway but in Russia it was impossible.

I Am a Stranger Here

Though I'm glad to be here, I miss Russia. Because everyone speaks English around us and it's not our native language, I don't feel at home here. I don't like to go

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out. It's difficult to explain. You can't say what you want to say. You can just speak. It's not your language. You can't explain your feelings. You can't explain what you want. It's not like home.

We're Soviet Jews but we were Russian; we were not Jewish. Because we never practiced religion, we never did anything, we just knew that we're Jews. But you know it's like a label. It's not our feeling, We never were an entity like here.

"The Most Bright Feeling"

It was a great surprise here when our American friends the Shapiros took us as guests at a circumcision in a house that was not very big but full of people. They were saying, "*mazel tov*" and "*simel tov*" like a whole family. I can't explain it but it was the most bright feeling or bright expression for us, that these people came from the job or somewhere but they felt that it's all in the family. That it happened for them, that they got a new member. Here, I like that the Jews are together. In Russia, you never feel that you are a member of something large. You

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have your friends, your narrow circle. But here the Jews seem like a large family with something in common. So I think there is a difference between American and Russian Jews. It's community. Because in Russia there's no community.

Now the language is easier but a year ago it was a large problem. When we came to the synagogue and everybody started to smile and talk and ask questions, I couldn't answer because I couldn't understand. I felt that they wanted to do as much as possible to make us feel comfortable. We were surprised at so much attention and so much concern. Before I started studying so hard for the medical exams, I felt I'd go to the synagogue near us. I don't feel as much like a stranger there as I feel in the street.

"From Our Own Efforts"

I hope that we'll pass our exams and start working and everything will be okay. I hope that we'll be able to help our children choose what they want, because they will not have this problem with language. Their native language

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will be English not Russian, so when they choose to do something, I hope we'll be able to help them.

And I hope here we'll have independence. I mean independence in doing as much as we can on our own, to be able to do what we want to do. I hope that in time we'll be able to do it without any help - not our parents', not the Jewish Federation's, or anyone else's. And what we'll have will be from our own efforts.