

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

**YURI B.**

**Machine Building Engineer**  
**Byelorussian Polytechnical Institute**

BIRTH: 1954, Minsk

SPOUSE: Larisa Z.

CHILDREN: Lionel

PARENTS: Lev D., 1914-1963, Barisov  
Genya F., 1919-, Podulska

SIBLINGS: Yakov  
Fayina

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

NAME:       **YURI "B."**

DATE:       June 11, 1990

I was born in Minsk in 1954. We lived well from the Russian point of view. I worked hard and [by the time we left the Soviet Union] we had a flat and a nice car. If you would ask people who lived in Russia, "Is this good?" they would say, "it is very good."

When I was eight years old, my father died. My mother raised my brother, sister and me without any help. My mother's family was killed in the Ukraine during the Second World War, my father's father was killed in Byelorussia during the war, and my father's mother died when I was born - in the same year. My mother, a pediatrician, worked [was gone] 10 hours a day at two jobs, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. and

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from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. I was the youngest. My brother Yakov, the oldest, and my sister Fayina took care of me. My mother prepared food for the whole day. We had breakfast and dinner together with mother. We only fixed our cold lunch. In those days I believe my mother slept no more than five hours a night. She prepared our clothes and our food.

We lived in a government apartment with three rooms - two rooms plus a kitchen. The children slept together in one room. When I was [married] and we lived with my mother-in-law we lived five people in two rooms for eleven years. One room was a dining room and the other a bedroom.

Living so closely with other people, I think, taught us how to get along. I believe we learn something from every situation in our lives. If we have trouble and we solve the problem, then we have learned something. I think my mother taught me to be a good man. She didn't have time to sit and study with me. Sometimes she told me about her life and set a good example for me. I hope to bring her here - and my mother-in-law, too. I am working to bring them over. On the 13th of July they and my father-in-law

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have an appointment in the American Embassy. I believe in six months they could be here.

My mother had a very difficult life. She was one of eight children and her oldest sister was married before the second war and lived in Chabarovsk, the far east of Russia. My mother was born in Sotanov, Kaminetsk Podolska. After the Bolshevik revolution and before the (second world) war, it was possible for her to get an education. At that time a lot of Jewish people were still in the government, from the revolution, and though it really was not easy, at that time it was not as tough to get an education if you were Jewish.

The difficulties were worse after the war in the 1960's and 70's. I tried to enter medical school but couldn't because university and medical education and radio-electronic education were closed. Certain things were restricted to Jews.

My father finished automotive technical school before the war and went into the army until 1953. He fought against Germany and won a medal in the Japanese War. He served in the far east of Russia near the Pacific Ocean from the end of World War II until 1946. He met my mother

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in Chabarovsk, a town near the Japanese border. My mother finished Chabarovsk Medical University at that time and stayed to work at the University and met my father and they married. My brother was born in Chita and I was born in Byelorussia, about 10,000 kilometers away. My mother worked then like a Byelorussian woman with one job. While my father was in the army she traveled with him and worked as a doctor wherever he worked. After I was born, my father, mother, brother and sister lived in Minsk.

I knew I was Jewish. I heard it a lot of times in my life on the street. Today I discuss this problem with someone I work with from Yugoslavia. He can't believe that in Russia it's hard for the Jews. When he worked in Yugoslavia with Jews, he didn't know who they were. In Russia everyone knew because of the stamp on our passports and we filled out a lot of forms with this information. This man is sixty. His aunt's husband (uncle) was a Jew in a [concentration] camp and his brother also.

So we didn't really have a Jewish life. We didn't celebrate Jewish holidays. In Minsk, capitol of Byelorussia, there are one and a half million people but only one small synagogue large enough for fifty people. It was very

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dangerous if someone knew you went to synagogue because you would have trouble with your job and organization. We did listen to Yiddish music and we would celebrate together. I remember my mother and father danced together and liked this music and my brother played accordion. My parents spoke a little Yiddish when they didn't want us to understand. My mother finished seven years in Jewish school and could read and write Yiddish. There were no schools in Minsk that could teach Hebrew or Yiddish [when I was growing up.]

Maybe my parents would have liked to have more [Jewish culture or religion] in their lives. Here you see people smiling. In Russia people look very serious. Here people look for fun, they look for food and clothes, for good time, for rest. When people can laugh and tell jokes, when I see that people have pleasure, I like it. My son and I whenever we discuss the problem of moving to a new country, and each time he thanks us, saying he's glad to live here. And I am too, it's true.

I was talking today with this man from Yugoslavia. I told him that all my mother's family was killed in the

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Ukraine and it was not by German people but the neighboring villagers.

From the days of the Tsar, the Jews lived in the Pale, places where the Jews were permitted. These places were primarily in the Ukraine and Byelorussia. There was a percentage in each of these towns of the number of Jews permitted to live, and perhaps one per cent were allowed in every educational institution; high school and university, one Jew for every 100 of every other nationality. After the revolution these laws were ended. The quotas became unofficial. My mother's family was not wealthy. My mother's mother did not work. My mother's father was a tailor.

At the start of the Second World War, my mother came to Satanov, her birthplace, and urged her family to move to [safety in the east] Chabarovsk, because within two weeks of the start of the war the Germans were already near Kiev. My mother's father answered her that Germans came to the same place in the first world war and never killed Jewish people and permitted them to stay in their homes. When the second war ended, my mother [returned and] tried to find out what happened to her parents. I was six years old and

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I remember we met a woman who told us everyone in this [Jewish] village died.

This village was near the old Russian-Polish border. After 1939 the border moved to Poland because there was an agreement between Germany and Russia, part of Ukrainian Poland and Byelorussian Poland would be ruled by Russia. There is a river near this place which was the border. Under the river was a tunnel that had not been completed. Shortly after the war started in 1941, to this village, Satanov, people from a neighboring village came with guns, before the Germans came, and took all the Jewish people and put them in this tunnel. They took large stones and [sealed the tunnel and] the entire village was buried alive there. Men, women, and children, maybe two hundred people. All the belongings in the homes, and the materials of the homes were taken away. Nothing was left. This old woman lived in a typical Ukrainian hut with a dirt floor, built of bricks made of dried grass and mud and too low to stand. [The materials from the Jewish homes were used to improve the Ukrainian huts.] After the war no one was punished for the crime.



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I saw [what was left of the village] and my mother told me about it. Eight people of her family died this way. I think she learned about it immediately after the war ended.

My father's mother survived the war. He had two sisters and his parents. On the second day of the war, June 22, my father went to the army. His family tried to leave Barisov but his father turned back because he became separated from his wife and daughters at the railroad station. He thought they might have gone home so he turned back to find them. They weren't there and when he returned to the station, the train was gone. He couldn't get transportation after that and remained in the town and died there. Nobody knows how.

My father won six medals. There are two levels of honors. The first level is medals, the second and higher level is orders. He had two orders and six medals. One medal was for bravery, one medal for the battle of Koenigsberg, a German town, and for saving Moscow, battles with Japan. He attained the rank of captain by the end of his army career.

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My brother was born in 1946. My parents were married shortly after the war. My father worked as an automotive engineer. In Minsk an organization was operating for automobile leasing for the entire city. He was chief engineer/administrator. It is hard to compare the living we had in Russia to the United States. What seemed like a lot in Russia is nothing in the United States. A car is a lifetime dream in Russia. In the United States anyone can buy a car. But we weren't hungry and we had enough of everything. My mother bought herself a new outfit maybe once in fifteen years but I had enough.

I felt my mother was different from other mothers, but she was like all good mothers who try hard for her children. My good friends were Jewish. In Russia I had good friends and neighbors who were not Jewish but I always remembered I was Jewish and wondered what they thought about me. I can't say that every time I went in the street I had trouble about my nationality, but I had a lot of trouble in my life. It wasn't religion but nationality. I felt more free talking with people like myself.

The first trouble I remember having as a Jew was in first grade. I think there was some in kindergarten but I

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don't remember. My son Lionel had a lot of trouble in school that began in kindergarten. The first time it was simple. A lot of names in Russia are used for Jewish people. There is a very strong synonym for a Jew - *Zhid*. In Polish this is not a bad word but in Russian it is. Every time I heard that word I was angry. It is a stereotype of a very bad person, a liar. When I read Russian literature, this word describes very bad people. Sometimes I would fight over this. In fifth grade, when I was about ten, one older boy tried to kick me and told me I should go to Israel. These people thought if you were Jewish you were not native, a guest and not a good one.

In 1978 my friend left Russia and I thought about it. I asked my family about it because I wasn't really serious about it. Today I think if I had left sooner, I wouldn't have wasted so much of my lifetime. If I had left ten years ago it would have been better for my son and he'd have been happier. But in that time when I thought about leaving Russia, my son was only a year old. I had to make money, a lot of problems because my son was born two months premature and was very tiny, only one and a half kilograms. For two years he was sick and he had trouble sleeping. We had to take care of him. It was hard for us to plan then.

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It's really interesting. After I had enough of the good life in Russia, I decided to leave. When I had a flat, a car, a garage, when I could buy a summer cottage. After I worked at my company for ten years and I had reached a certain level as engineer, I understood that this was nothing. I couldn't do anything good for my son, for my family, that my life would remain the same until I died.

In 1986 the Chernobyl accident occurred. It is only 320 kilometers from Minsk and from that time we couldn't read about it because Russian newspapers published very little about it. We learned about Chernobyl a week after it happened. We learned of it from Swiss radio. It was before the May Day celebration, and everybody went to the demonstration in Chernobyl. After that we learned we couldn't use the food. In the newspapers they told us not to eat onions because the bulb is underground and absorbed a lot of radiation.

If I can't eat onion, how can I eat cucumber or other kind of vegetable? There was no reason for this. That's the typical Russian way. Someone tried to write an article

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that we shouldn't eat this food. But where were we going to get other food?

It was difficult to buy any food in Russia, let alone without radiation exposure. After that somebody checked the article, and [censored it] and we could read only part of the article. When we were on vacation, we met a woman who worked in the medical department that checks pollution. She told us that all people who worked there signed that they never will tell about conditions of Minsk and other towns. They checked on the radiation levels of the water and soil.

When my mother and mother-in-law write us letters now, they have more information, and they tell us conditions are even worse. If you know you are going to die because of the food, the air, and you can't change it, it is different than if you don't know. If you know you're going to die, then you don't want to work. Chernobyl was the last [straw]. I had to think about my son. I left Russia in 1989. That means we were there with these conditions for three years.

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The situation in Russia was worse and worse everyday. During recent years, the official publications - newspapers, magazines and journals were not censored as much, and we could read more of the real situation in Russia. Economists were writing articles about conditions. Food and clothes cost more money. It's bad. I would see that pollution not just from Chernobyl but from Byelorussia was worse all the time. [For example] a lot of places were mined for potassium salt, a special kind of chemical fertilizer, and big holes remained after mining. Rain caused these holes to fill up with water. For fifty kilometers around these abandoned mines all of the plants died. Why? These chemicals in the water were so concentrated that all the surrounding vegetation died. A lot of villages are now deserted in these areas. I read that if in the spring there would be a lot of water from melting snow and rain, this area would grow bigger and bigger and bigger every summer. These holes were huge and more of this potassium salt was polluting this water.

[Pollution] was happening everywhere in Russia, not just Byelorussia. Every river - fish were dying. Who owned this river? Who owned this land? Nobody cared about it. Everybody who came to work in these places was only

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concerned about himself, about what the bigger boss can get more for himself not the country. He would only be there for a period of time. People who lived there left the villages and went to towns.

Communism was a good idea. Like believing in God. Everybody will have what he is earning. But how can it be if nobody cares about it? It's not just that the system broke down. We had time to think about it. If I thought about it though, I could say something. If I said something, [I would be arrested] and die in the camp. Everybody tried not to think about it. And so we lived and worked this job and didn't tell other people. That's all. When Brezhnev was General Secretary, we could talk and it wasn't so dangerous. But I read about the time during Stalin and if people criticized the government they'd go to prison and die there. Now I can laugh afterward. It's strange.

My wife's uncle who lived in Minsk told one joke at a celebration during Stalin's time, and they bought a cake with a drawing of the Kremlin on the cake. He said, while cutting the cake, "now we'll cut out the Kremlin." Someone who was at this party wrote a letter to the KGB and [her

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uncle] was arrested and died in prison. It's strange.  
People who live here can't understand how this could be.

A book that was published "underground" in Russia came into my hands and I learned about the Stalin period. I read Solzhenytzin for the first time five years ago. I read more interesting books and high level literature. Vasily Grossman, a Soviet writer, wrote a very good book in two parts about 25 years ago when Kosygin was president. He told Grossman the book would never be published in Russia. The book waited 20 years until it was published.

Recent articles and books have given us knowledge that we should leave Russia. Because not me nor anybody can change it. The party apparatus is so huge and powerful and every decision we should make must be discussed with the party apparatus. It's such a long way from this point to the point where things would be better and someone would give permission. So the good would be lost.

For my job, for example, I worked as a project engineer. There were problems with machine building equipment. There wasn't enough equipment to build machines. In Russia it was decided that every plant that produced any kind of



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equipment should build machine building equipment for itself. This was a true political decision because every engineer understands that if I produce refrigerators, I can't produce equipment for producing refrigerators!

The decision was that one plant which produced cars and large trucks should produce equipment for building these cars. We (the special design bureau) created the design on paper for the equipment but it was not possible to make it. It was a political decision. They asked our plant to build this equipment and subcontract it for additional money. It means that this company should arrange for another company that has the [means] to produce it. It's very difficult, a long way off. Every plant would lose a lot of money to build this equipment. One chief engineer of a large automobile plant told me, "If I build this equipment, I can't build the machines on the plan." (Every company in Russia has to meet its plan.)

One company which produced other kind of machine building equipment that would produce our automatic line for our factory, came to our factory and asked for an explanation of the drawing. Sometimes as a joke we would ask this engineer about this thing. We [explained] we

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could make this project, my boss and I, in two months for 5,000 rubles, for example. They answered us, "We have 20,000 rubles for this project." It means that the government gave him 20,000 rubles for this project but it's difficult for them and it's new equipment for them.

My boss said, "You can call the chief engineer of our company and ask him, maybe we can work as self-contractor for your company and we can design it after work. I will do the [design] work at home, for example, and plan this project for the other company." But when they called our chief engineer and asked him, he refused them. He thought that if we work at home after the job, it means that we will work on it perhaps during their working day. If we work eight hours during the day and go home and work four more hours on the other project, it means we won't work as hard during the day. This guy spent 20,000 rubles for this project and built a machine that was worse than we would build. It was a lot of money. Then nothing happened. This project was refused because automobile plants could not produce this equipment. A lot of money was wasted.

Money is paper in Russia. We can make new money, is the belief. A person could for example trade 100 dollars

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for 1500 rubles. If the official coefficient between the dollar and ruble is 60 kopecks for a dollar, the black market coefficient is one dollar for 15 rubles. That's the real [value] of a ruble. It's very difficult to understand how a country as rich as Russia, so much land and native resources in the ground, wood, and huge territories and two oceans and a lot of seas. This country could be the richest in the world but it's one of the poorest. What has done it? Only the wrong system.

I couldn't solve the problems, [the deteriorating environment and an unworkable system]. What would I have in Russia? When I had the things that were the dream of all Russian people, I understood that it's nothing because I couldn't solve anything.

Now in Minsk, the situation is the same as it was in Chicago in 1920. I saw the movie "The Godfather" about crime in Chicago about people who [demanded] money from others. The film was about mafia, people who killed people for money and asked if you opened a business to pay for it. This institution is now in Russia because more freedom is now the Russian policy. The police are weak now. There is

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no law against taking money from someone else. It's difficult to sue in this situation. You can read in Russian newspapers that a lot of groups make crime together. These people come to any place where a business is opened (now small businesses are allowed in Russia) and ask the owner for money to pay every month to these people. If you won't pay, they will break your equipment.

And who will give you back your money? First of all in Russia, you can't insure your property. If I have a car and somebody damages it, and I get the money back, I'll get 5,000 rubles, for example. But a new car would cost 20,000 rubles.

It means that [the criminal stands on firm ground]. An athlete like a boxer who is, for example, thirty-five years old, who doesn't have any other kind of training, could come and demand money from me. These people don't protect you from the other group that might go after you. It's easier to make money this way. It can happen because for the first time the situation in Russia is not tight enough. Everybody can know who has money. If I have a business, I must have money.

JCC WOMEN'S AUXILIARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW ON JUNE 25, 1990

SECOND INTERVIEW: YURI B.

(I never really understood why your father died when you were eight years old. Could you explain?)

He had a stroke. He was very ill, my father. A blood vessel in his head was broken. (Like a cerebral hemorrhage?) Yes. And he was in a small hospital, in a clinic, and he was supposed to stay without any movement because this is a very dangerous situation. And he was transported to another hospital and he only lived one day after that.

I told you that he worked very hard in his office and he was a soldier. It was a difficult life for his family. I do not know what would have happened if he were not working in this place. I only know that he died.

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(You mentioned that before you left Minsk you saw some Mafioso types taking over, are you aware of it happening anywhere else?)

Oh yes. It is in every town in Russia. I told you that I read about Tashkent, it is the capitol of Uzbek Republic and there were forty-seven groups (individual gangs) in Tashkent alone. This was officially published in Russia. Published about Moscow, about Chita - that's a place in far-east Russia. It is in every place.

When I lived in Russia I had some - I can say business - but then I said that I was working two jobs. One was in the factory and it was a hard job. Then my friends and I, we played at parties. That means that when people celebrated a wedding, they would ask about a special place and music and people could talk or tell about (like a master of ceremonies) traditions. In Russia, in Byelorussia, when one celebrates a wedding party and when people eat or dance, this musician should make this time more entertaining. For example, in a wedding party, as a rule, are about one hundred people. This means everybody has different interests, one may like to dance, one like to eat. One may not like anything but I can tell him

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something interesting and he may enjoy himself. Everybody should have fun from this and musicians should try to make this happen.

I had some connection with people. In Russia they call it to spawn business. That means I try to find people for whom I can play, I should find place where I can play. I had played for wedding parties about ten years. We had to pay the government out of the money we collected. Here you would call it a tax. Your own business was very difficult then, now it is more easy but more dangerous. I made from this party music job, two times more money than I earned at my regular job.

I only played until I knew some people who tried to make their own business and these people had a lot of trouble from the Mafia. That means that it was really dangerous because they would listen on your phone and if they know that you had some money they would come to your house with guns and knives and ask about the money and if you don't want to give it up, (this has been published too) they actually shot people. This never happened to me because I didn't have such a big business. I only heard

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about these things but we all knew that the Mafia is a very big thing now in Russia.

Someone who works with me now, he is from Moscow, and he received a letter from his brother, who still lives in Moscow, and he wrote him something unbelievable is in Moscow now. The price for everything is so high that almost nobody can afford it. He told me that strawberries now, official cost is thirty-five rubles for one kilogram, but average actual salary rate in Russia is now one hundred eighty rubles per month. This means that one kilogram strawberries costs almost one quarter of a month salary. So the only ones who can afford strawberries are those who have their own business.

(You saw things deteriorating in Russia, you said there was nothing you could do to make it better. Do you think everybody feels that way?)

I think that everybody who thinks about it is very sure. If you have a lot of problems and no time to think about it - you know you have to spend at the time in lines waiting for food, then you can think about things. But usually you only have time to think about today, not tomorrow, or life in general, just today.



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(What made up your mind and when did you decide to leave?)

To tell the truth, the situation is such in Russia now that everybody would like to leave. Not only Jews. And we received letters from our friends who lived with us on our floor in the apartment. As a rule, in Russia, all people live in what may look like houses but they have many stories, 8, 9, 12, 16, and in every floor live four or six families in four or six flats. Our neighbor wrote a letter to us, she is a Russian. She wrote that she would like to leave from Russia every time she writes. Her husband is in the communist party. Her father-in-law was a colonel in the Russian Army, not too high.

Good people who still live in Russia and do not make any deals which are against the law, they understand that they can't continue to live in this condition.

When I had an invitation from Israel, without this I could not have left Russia. This was very difficult to get at that time and maybe almost impossible now. We didn't have close relatives in Israel, which means no one to invite us. I asked my mother-in-law and her cousin went to

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Israel as a tourist to meet with her relatives. We gave her a copy of all our papers and the information and where we lived and she took it with her. She was there in June of 1988 and the invitation came on the fifteenth of October.

Then I had to start thinking. Because nobody can know what will happen in two days, in two weeks, in two months, in Russia! And if you ask about permission to leave Russia, from that moment you are almost against the law. Not so bad now, it was more difficult earlier. But we didn't know what would happen with those people who try to make something different from the government policies and everybody in Russia is afraid of what might happen in the next two months.

When, in 1980, some people stayed after they asked for permission to leave Russia, and they couldn't find jobs, they couldn't live in their apartments, it was very difficult. In time - ten years! - they got out. I really had no choice, when I started to think about what could happen if I stayed in Russia, it was a difficult decision. But, when I think about my son, about his future, I knew that I should take this step. I told you that I could see the

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situation in Russia and I could see no solution to the problems. Now it is an even worse situation.

I talk with people who came here a half year after me, and people who came here as tourists and still was suppression and anger and I am glad that I made the decision a year ago.

After I got the invitation I began to fill in all the papers. I had to fill a lot of papers where I should make descriptions of all my relatives, where they were born, where my grandfather died and I should take permission from my mother and my wife's father and mother. And their permission, that they did not need money or support from us and we could leave. When we had filled out all the papers we gave it in to a special organization in Russia. It is part of the police and it is called the Department of Visas and Registration - OVIR, it means the Department that works with papers for people who should go traveling or leave from Russia. We presented these papers and we waited about two or three months, because we filled papers for us and for my wife's parents and they had permission before my wife and myself. But my mother-in-law was quite sick and she decided she should stay in Russia.

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In the middle of July we got permission from the Soviet government about leaving Russia. I stopped my work in January of 1989 and we left the 23th of March. In my situation I didn't have a special work, when I had permission I would go to the Personnel department of my office. But before, when I fulfilled all obligations for leaving Russia, I went there and the chief of the Personnel Department would sign on my work load that I would like to leave from Russia. I was a project engineer, that means that I should draw other work. I wasn't a chief. But people who work as a teacher or as some kind of a chief, as a rule, they should leave their job. How can you do a good job of teaching if you are planning to leave Russia?

In this time, it is not so difficult. I remember how it was in 1980, when somebody tried to leave from Russia. After they filled the applications for leaving, people who worked with them, could not have additional money. In Russia, we can take only part of our salary in money. For example, I work for a month and I have one hundred rubles. If the agreement which I brought you is good, I can have additional money, perhaps fifty percent. This additional

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money is not stable, it depends on chief of our office to decide who would have this money.

When, in 1980, people left Russia, other people who worked with them could not have this money, for three, four, five months. It is not much but it is additional money but we all the time think about. It gives us something extra to buy something with. I heard a lot of discussions about, why should we work with Jewish people, when, if they leave, we can't have our money? But now it is not so because so many people try to leave Russia that it is not so much excitement for other people.

For example, when I fill application, I should get a signature from chief of party office in my company. I didn't, I never was a member of the communist party, but these people should sign. After that I should go to Komsomol chief of young party organization. After that the chief of the labor organization should sign this paper. They all have to sign that I don't have any debt to them, they give me permission to leave. But, I saw that these people don't wish me luck, but they don't wish me bad luck. I saw some hostility, but not from the people who had to sign the permissions.

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To tell the truth I never wished to go to the communist party because I understood that if I am a member of the communist party and I am Jewish, I couldn't take any good level in any department anyway. Now it doesn't matter. In other times people who tried to take a higher position had to be communists, but it was not for Jewish people as a rule, whether he was a member or not. It is very difficult to be a member of the communist party. For Russian people it is a real advantage because it means for these people if they want to make good money or a good job position they should be a member of the party. And, in every place there are schedules about how many people should be a member of the communist party and what kind of people can be a member. Not only with the communist party, with all things. Because in Russia, very interesting thing, if you read any book which calculate statistically the conditions, you can see a same percent of people in every year. Members of communist party: 50% are Labor people; 30% are from collective farms; 20% are people from intellectual work, professionals. From these people you will see 55% are men, 45% are women, for example, in this area, in this area, and in this area. In the area of labor for example, 30% with Eighth Grade education; 60% with

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Tenth grade - I'm only trying to tell you that statistics in Russia, are not real statistics. People who work in our government make our statistics, which means that every place has a schedule of how many people they can take as member of communist party and what kinds of people can be a member.

If, for five years, there weren't any place for a Jewish member, that means no Jew could be a member of the communist party. Or anything. Because there was a very funny situation, you know that in Russia there are only three or four big factories which produce automobiles. Our company, where I worked, built some equipment for one of the factories. This factory produced a big car, a car which would be used for a family car. This car looked like an Italian Fiat. The Soviet government had a license to produce this car. We built some lines for this company.

After this was scheduled there were two or three people who should have special recognition from the government, medal or an award. I think maybe it is the same in the United States. I told you if somebody, if I am a soldier and I fight very well, I can have special kind of medal and the same situation is in the factories. There

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are some special awards for people who work very well. And if you earn this kind of award, when you retire you will have certain rewards.

And this was scheduled for some people who should receive these awards. And there were some people who really worked hard and should have this recognition, but they couldn't fit into the statistical description. One medal and award assigned, was given one man who worked maybe very hard, but didn't make anything special. And when everybody heard about it, all the people were very excited. Why did this happen? they asked. There were a lot of people with good minds who made a lot of things for this company. After that somebody, I don't know who, talked about the schedule and said that these people should be first, the Ukrainians; second, someone without a higher education; he should be the same age. And when someone checked and found maybe five or ten people and they selected this guy.

(When you left, you had to pay for your own airline ticket and what were you allowed to take with you?)



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We could take with us, two suitcases each. Which meant six suitcases for our family. So we knew what we could take and what we could not take. We could not take any jewelry. Of course, anybody who was more than eighteen years could take five pieces of jewelry. The cost for each should be not more than two hundred fifty rubles. Not much. We didn't have anything.

If I had a good piece of jewelry, like a ring, I could sell it before we left. But it is very difficult as doing this is against the law. If it really has a high value it would be very hard to sell. First, I could not know the real value of it. If the ring is with diamond, I should go to Moscow, and in Moscow there are special organizations to tell me what the value is. But, if I went there and asked about a ring which cost about one hundred thousand rubles, after that I think that I can cross border because KGB knows that I have this ring and that I would take it with me and I would have a lot of money. And I can take no money out of the country. We can change ninety rubles per person into United States dollars when we leave. Ninety rubles for each person. It means that when we crossed the Russian border we had three hundred forty dollars.

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I left my car there for my sister, but I sold some other things that we had. I sold them and I had maybe ten thousand rubles and I left this with my mother-in-law. But I know other people who had much money in Russia and now these people change this money. I know that if my relatives need money I can ask these people and their relative can give Russian money to my relatives in Russia and I should give them American money here. It is very complicated.

It is not a good situation. I told you that co-efficient between ruble and dollar from here means that for fifteen rubles I should pay one dollar, but the official co-efficient for half-ruble it is one dollar. That is a real difference. Between the official co-efficient and the black market one.

We did not take a plane from Russia, we took a train from Minsk. From there we went to Brest, a town on the Russia-Poland border, from that place we took another train. We put on our suitcases and then stopped in Poland for maybe six hours. This was in Warsaw and there we spent some money.

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It was difficult, because when we bought the tickets in Russia, the tickets were for Austria. We should travel to Austria but we should change our train in Warsaw. When we arrived in Warsaw we found that we could not use our tickets on the train. This happens to all people who travel. These tickets were sold without a place being available. I can't move to Austria but I did not have a place for it. We had one friend in Russia who had another friend in Poland and this friend met us at the railroad station and he had a special agreement with the people who sell the tickets. He met us because we knew we would have this kind of trouble with the tickets.

He agreed with people who could sell tickets and he bought these tickets for us because there is a special kind of Mafia in the Warsaw railroad station and they ask you about dollars. You can really spend all three hundred dollars you have on your next tickets in Warsaw. You can sell these tickets for anything you want. And what kind of money could I have? If I crossed the Russian border, I shouldn't have Russian money. I shouldn't have Polish money. I only have the ticket and three hundred dollars. And the people in Poland know I should only have this kind of money.

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And when we put our luggage on the train, the official people who work on this train told us you have only three seats but we don't have place for your luggage and you should take the luggage and pay for a place for it. In Warsaw, the trains stay in the railroad station only twelve minutes. During this twelve minutes I should put away my luggage. This train worker said, "Well, I can take it out." After that, I knew about it and I give him some present but this is a common practice. But it was a difficult time.

When our train arrived in Vienna, we took out all our luggage and people met us and it was wild, there were maybe one hundred - two hundred people from Russia. There was one person from HIAS who met us. He told us step by step, the luggage should go here, you should stand there. He had all the names of the people who came and he got a lot of luggage carts and he called somebody to put the luggage in the carts and took it to the place where these people should be.

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All these people from Russia were scheduled to go to Israel but when we were in the HIAS two days after we arrived in Vienna. We were in Sackhmut, an Israeli organization, and HIAS and everybody was asked if we would like to go to the United States. When I said that I would like to do this, they asked if I had any relatives in Israel. I told them "No." I have a friend there and cousins here. And nobody asked me any more.

When we were in Russia I had a lot of friends who left before me. And I read their letters in Russia and I know that before, no one was asked about Israel. I was surprised because I thought that everybody who lived in Russia is prepared for anything but everything can be changed. It is strange, but it is the psychology of people. It is difficult to change.

They had a place for us to stay, not in Vienna, but near to it. And when we were in HIAS they gave us money. On the second day, but on the first day we could buy food by changing some of our dollars.

On the second day, when I said I wanted to go to the United States they asked me who could be my invitation. I

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had some friends in Chicago who had worked with me in Russia. I called them and asked them if they would give me an invitation to Chicago. And I told their name and we put the name on the application. And after that we waited maybe two weeks and moved to Italy.

We took a train to Italy, first we were in Rome, then after one week we moved to a place about thirty-five kilometers outside of Rome - Santa Marinella. It was hard there because we couldn't find a place to live. We had some money, but in that time, this money wasn't enough. In that time, there was so many people that I think HIAS could only do so much for us.

We waited for a time for an appointment with the American Counsel. At that time we should prove that we are refugees. I don't know, I think it is political and you should know it. We should explain why we can that we are leaving. What happened to us in Russia? Why was it difficult for us? And the first time we had some official appointments in Rome and in Ladispoli, a place near Rome, with HIAS. After all the papers were filled we had an appointment at the consulate and discussed the same problem with the person at the consulate and after this we waited

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about ten days until we heard from them and after that, we could qualify as refugees.

I decided we are lucky, because people who came here on other status - not as refugees, have more problems than we do. Now we can see people if we have some problems, and if we can't find a job. The American government will help us to become citizens. The people who came here with other status cannot get this help. It is very difficult when we think about relatives who live in Russia who have the same appointment with the American Embassy in Moscow, if he decides to come here and asks about permission to come here. Will he have an appointment with the American Embassy in Moscow? and after that, if he will have good counsel. But if all the relatives look like my mother or a relative of my wife should come here without any medical support we can, in any case send for them. I like it. But I think that it is very difficult to support all one's relatives in the States.

Everybody in Italy tries to understand how the people from the American Consulate can decide who is refugee and who is not. I don't know how it goes. Because when I was in HIAS, I heard a lot of different stories, this was maybe

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the sixth or seventh place where we discussed this. Everybody spoke Russian and the translator translated. I could hear what everyone told. It was so exciting, but it seemed that when I told my story, it was nothing.

The people from KGB questioned one man and put on a chair and used a rope and they asked him something, I didn't hear what. But it seemed so strange, how can this happen? And everybody knows everybody and somebody would write a strange story, because nobody knew what they should write. It is not always all the truth every time. Somebody would say something had happened to him and it had happened to somebody else.

Nobody knows what the people from the Embassy need to hear. Everyone is confused.

After we got the refugee status we were in Italy another two weeks. First we flew to New York and after two hours came on to Chicago. Our friends were there to meet us. I was so happy to see them because I could not speak any English.



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I was very lucky in finding a job here. I wrote a resume' and asked my friend to correct it because I couldn't write proper English. And I took some information from the Chicago Tribune and sent the resume'. I had some appointments, suddenly I found the place where I am now. I came there and spoke with the owner and his firm should have a good future. They have a big agreement with Korea. The firm is not too far from here.

I never designed these kind of machines in Russia but it is all right. The work is different than Russia, because there I worked on the drawing board, here I work on the computer. I am not sure of the future here, because I don't know what will happen when we finish this big project. I don't know what will happen to the firm. Maybe some people will be let go by. But now I feel more comfortable about looking for the work.

When I came here I didn't know about the level of engineering in the United States, whether or not it was higher than in Russia, and I had nothing to compare it to. Now I see that I can work the same.

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My wife is a computer programmer. This is what she did in Minsk. She had to learn a lot because it is a different kind of computer, another kind of computer language. At first she studied from the book and then she took small advanced courses at the University. Her professor told her that she does fine and this made us very happy because we didn't know how we could work in the United States.

When we first came here it was hard to find an apartment of our own because we didn't have any money. This apartment is not as comfortable as how we lived in Russia but that is not important. I am so glad that we are here and my son eats fruit every day.

I am afraid that an explanation of what I miss in Russia, you don't have that kind of time. I can't begin to tell you which is the a better side. Russia is such a huge country and every republic is so different from every other republic. Even three hundred years of Russia has not made them same.

It is very difficult to change something. Who lived where makes such a difference. Ukrainians produced bread.

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Byelorussians produced potatoes. Some republics can mine minerals. Some republics can produce, for example, Uzbek can only produce cotton. It may not be real cotton, it is only the first steps, they only produce the raw material. Some other republic uses the raw material. When Lithuania asked about independence, Gorbachev took all the products away from them, and Lithuania doesn't ask about independence now.

I have friends in Russia that I would like to see again. And, I love Russian literature because I can understand it. And it is a very rich literature. I like the Russian language because it is my language. Maybe in time I will feel differently. I know people who say they don't miss Russia, but they speak Russian at home. They also try to have their children speak Russian too. It is part of our life.

I think that I might be in Russia sometime and I didn't see a lot of real interesting towns in Russia. Because I didn't have time. The first time I have ever moved my family was to America. I might go back as a visitor, maybe, but I am not sure.

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For the future, first, I want to help our relatives in Russia so that they can come here. If they can make it, I will feel good. They are all people I like and I want to have them near me. For my son, he should do well in high school. And we should all be good American people and then I will feel good.

I know what I think would work for my son as a career but he should decide. But I try to put him on the right way. I think that in time he will understand the United States better. Even now he feels more comfortable than when we first came. Now he is fluent in the language. He goes to public school here. I asked him if he would like to go to a Jewish school. I told him that in Russia we didn't have any religious education, there was no cause for it. When we were in Italy, he went to school. His school was in a synagogue. The first time he was very excited about the Jewish community. After that, when his teacher was changed, the teacher told him that the Jewish religion was best religion in the world. All other kinds of religion are not as good.

When my son came home, he told me he would not go back to this school because the teacher told him a lie. If

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other kinds of religion are not as good as the Jewish religion, everyone could see this and everyone would be a Jew. It was a difficult time for us and he didn't go back to that school.

All the people who have helped us are Jewish. There are two families who have helped us. One is the Galens (Leslie) (they live in Highland Park) and the second, they live in Lincolnwood, the Bernsteins (Harriet). They have come to our house and did some things for my son. Sometimes they play games with him. And sometimes we go to the synagogue with them.

You know, people cannot live alone. We should be with somebody.