

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

LYDIA GEKHTER

Dentist

BIRTH: November 7, 1922, Chirnigov District, Ukraine

SPOUSE: Raphael Gekhter, deceased 1970, married 1944

CHILDREN: Vladimir, 1950

PARENTS: Berta Koltun, 1896-1977
Marc Halip, 1894?-1935

SIBLINGS: Rosanna Halip Simonova, 1921-1985, died in Russia

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS OF CHICAGO

NAME: **LYDIA GEKHTER**

DATE: November 15, 1990

INTERVIEWER: Ellie Meyers

(Where were you born?) In a small town, Chirnigov district in the Ukraine. I was born November 7, 1922.

(When did you marry?) December 9, 1944. (Where?) Frunze, Kazakhstan, during W.W.II. I was evacuated and met my future husband...

(Can you remember anything about your family history?) I didn't know my grandparents from either side. I don't remember anything. They died at a young age. My mother said that her mother died of diabetes and her father died... (Your parents?) Mother didn't work. Father was a boss of the trade

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department of the KGB, - the secret police. (What was he before the revolution?) In Russia he was a civil servant.

(What are your earliest memories? Holidays?) I remember Soviet holidays. I knew about Jewish holidays like Passover, but we didn't celebrate them.

(How did you know you were Jewish?) I knew that my father's mother was Jewish, so I considered myself Jewish.

(Anything Jewish? Holidays?) No, never. We had matzoh, but the usual things-- Passover, we didn't celebrate them. My childhood was at the time when people were eliminated for being Jewish.

(What language was spoken at home?) Only Russian. No Yiddish. My mother talked Yiddish with the neighbors and my father sometimes, but rarely, and not with me.

(Do you remember any family stories?) I remember how my father died and how I lived. I lived well. We had everything. My childhood was very good. (So it was happy?) Yes.

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(What kind of home did you have?) We rented a house with two big rooms, a big kitchen, a porch. We had a big garden, all this for four people. It was a brick house. We had running water from a pump in the back yard.

(What kind of neighbors did you have?) Our neighbors were Russians, cultured people, professors. They were very rich and let us rent the house. (Was there anti-semitism?) No. (Did you have chores?) No. My mother did everything. (Who brought in the water?) Not me, of course. [laughter]

(Soviet holidays) There's May Day, and November 7, the day of the Great October Revolution. By old style it's October 28, by new it's November 7. My parents and everybody loved me because I was the youngest. I took advantage of this. (What did your sister do?) She studied. We even had a maid. (No Jewish life in the family?) No. (Was your wedding Jewish?) No, because it was during the war.

(Did your family discuss politics?) No. I was just a child. I was only eleven when my father died. Father had two sisters. They helped us. One was married, the other not. (You lived together?) No, not in the same house.

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(Did you seem different than a Russian family?) No. I was young, I didn't know anything.

(Did you take vacations, travel?) No, nothing.

(When did you go to school?) I was seven. It was a normal elementary school, we learned to read and write and everything.

(How did you become a dentist?) I graduated from high school and entered the medical technical institute and worked until the war. When the war came I was evacuated from Priluki and worked in Frunze. When the war came I hadn't finished my classes. I studied for two years in Frunze but couldn't support myself with my limited money so I had to quit the institute. After the war I came to Minsk and entered the dental institute to become a dentist. (Exams?) I passed them all well in Frunze. (And in Minsk what happened?) I graduated from dental school. By the time we came to Minsk, my husband had graduated and could work, and I could study. (Why dentistry?) I liked it. (Was there a choice?) I graduated,

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but couldn't find work in Minsk. [We] left Minsk for Chichtov, by Lake Baikal.

(Where did you meet your husband?) He was in the hospital during the war and I was working in the same hospital. He was Jewish. (Did it matter that he was Jewish?) Yes. He was very handsome. He had bad wounds in his head and leg. I was a nurse there. (How long was he in the hospital?) I had a girlfriend - we met in Frunze - who had a boyfriend lying in the same hospital and when we got together he [my husband] went out and saw me and fell in love. His family was from Minsk.

(What did he do in the war?) During the war he was on the front, serving as a Lieutenant in the tank division. He was wounded trying to cross the Dnieper river. His parents got a note that he died during the accident. After awhile he turned out to be alive, but his wounds were so severe.

(How long until you got married?) In a year or year-and-a-half we were married. (Where was the wedding?) The wedding was in Frunze. My mother was there. My sister was at the front. His parents came to Frunze. But what kind of wedding

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could we have? We had a little party during the war. (Was it a government wedding?) No, we just registered at ZAGS.

(How long were you married before you went to Minsk?) The war ended in May of 1945 and we left immediately. A year and a half.

(Dental school?) I studied there three years. (What did your husband do?) At that time he served in the army near the Manchurian border. He was a doctor.

(After the war you were sent to Siberia?) [ANNA: He was a military doctor. He had to obey orders. That's why they went to Siberia. It wasn't punishment, --it was a rule.]

(Did you work as a dentist there?)

(Did you feel different because you were Jewish?) No, never. But when we came back from Lake Baikal, after eighteen years, my husband didn't receive a promotion because he was a Jew. This was in the 1950s and 1960s.

(What do you remember of the Stalin era?) I remember the Doctors' Trials. [ANNA: I remember a case connected with the

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famous Russian actor, Samuel Mikhoil, a leader of the Jewish movement in Russia. I think in Moscow. He was killed by car when he visited Minsk. And I asked my father why he was killed, and my father said because he was a Jew.]

(Your sister married a Russian?) Yes. (That was OK?) Yes. She got married at the front.

(Where did you work in Siberia?) It was a small house and a small room in this house and I worked there. I was alone. Just one dentist. It was a resort town. There were springs which they heated up and used for cures.

(Then back to Minsk?) His parents petitioned to get him and us back. His parents lived in Minsk. (To whom did you petition?) To higher authorities. He was still in the army. He asked for a transfer and they gave him one. But by this time he was already sick, although he didn't know it was lung cancer.

(Did you experience anything being a girl and a Jew in school?) I had some cases I know when my grades were lower

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than they should have been. Sometimes I had to retake exams or something.

(When to Minsk 2nd time?) 1968. My husband died in 1970. [ANNA: In Minsk she couldn't find work as a dentist, so she started working as a nurse. But at that time she was a senior nurse.]

(Did *glasnost* change anything?) I didn't like it. It was like a mess. It was bad for us. Nothing good came of it. (Anti-semitism?) It was a nightmare. Government anti-semitism didn't become worse, but people could now say everything.

(Why did you come here?) I couldn't live there. I couldn't work. Because my children left, I left.

(When did your heart condition arise?) It started in 1976. I had problems with my heart. I had a bypass here in the United States. It was a heart attack. I was put in the hospital [there]. I was given I.V.s.

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(What do you think about the U.S.?) Very good. I like it here very much. There's no comparison with the Soviet Union.

(What are your dreams for everyone's future?) I want you [to Anna] to have good kids, a big house, a doctor or a lawyer. Then I would be happy.

(Anything else?) That there would never be war. Peace. Happiness for everyone. And I want my grandchildren to go to good schools.

My husband told about when he was wounded, Germans pushed and kicked him and left him alone to die. At that time his parents got the note that he was dead. It happened at the time the regiment was surrounded.

(Did you feel yourself to be Jewish in Frunze?) I didn't feel anything like that.