

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

NAUM GINSBURG

PhD, Physician, Cardiologist
Medical Institute, Kiev, 1956

BIRTH: April 8, 1912, Zhitomir, Ukraine

SPOUSE: Polyne (Paulina) Shmilkina, Pediatrician
born Zvinigorotka, Ukraine, 1913

CHILDREN: Isaac, March 2, 1936, born in Kiev
Boris, 1947, resides in Tel Aviv

PARENTS: Berta Kaabak Ginsburg, 1883-1973
Boris Ginsburg, 1871 - 1938

SIBLINGS: Manya Ginsburg Goldstein, 1910-1984

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):
Ezra Habonim Synagogue

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS OF
CHICAGO

NAME: **NAUM GINSBURG**

DATE: October 30, 1990

Present: wife Paulina, son Isaac.

Interviewers: Margot Hirsch and Cele Shure

Birth date is April 8, 1912 in the town of Zhitomir, which is near Kiev. [Information in brackets has been incorporated from the second interview, 11/27/90.]

(Do you remember when you were little where you lived, how you lived, and with whom?)

Before the revolution, my father graduated from [Kiev] University in Pharmacy [1903] and he had his own pharmacy in Zhitomir. We lived in an apartment. About 200,000 people lived in the town. My mother didn't work. My sister, who was two years older than me, was a professor.

Naum Ginsburg

[She studied chemistry and received a Ph.D in biochemistry in 1962.]

(Do you remember who you played with? Was there anti-semitism?)

No. Before the revolution we didn't feel it because the town was for Jewish people, and most of the people who lived there were Jewish. The doctors and the pharmacists were mostly Jewish. In that time in Russia there were percentages of Jewish people who could go to medical school and university, and my father was in the 1904 war with the Japanese and he was a hero, so he could go. My grandfather was a math teacher in a gymnasium and my father received a good education because his father taught in a gymnasium. My grandfather worked as a doctor in the 1904 war with Japan. My uncle was a very famous doctor so he took part in 1904 too. Grandfather lived in Ananieve... I don't remember him. [My grandfather's two brothers were doctors. My grandfather was born in the south of the Ukraine. My mother's family was from Lithuania.

(Are there Jewish cemeteries in Zhitomir?)

Naum Ginsburg

No. During the second world war, they were destroyed. Most of the people went East because there was less fighting there. My father's family came to Zhitomir from Kiev. In 1903 my father studied at the university, and my uncle moved to Zhitomir and started his practice as a doctor and my father opened a pharmacy and worked until 1917. And we lived there until 1930.

(What do you remember about Zhitomir about your family, etc.)

Before the revolution my father had a pharmacy, and we lived very well. After the revolution, the government took the pharmacy and things became difficult, so we moved to Pulino. My father, mother and sister moved into a one-room apartment. We lived on the salary my father earned at the pharmacy. I went to school in Zhitomir and finished in Pulino, seven years of school. The men, my father and I, went to Pulino and the women, my mother and sister, stayed in Zhitomir because my sister finished school there and then went to "college" in Zhitomir, so my mother needed to stay. The distance between these two towns is about twenty miles. In 1917 father and grandfather moved to Pulino. My sister Manya went to Kiev and enrolled in college in 1927-

Naum Ginsburg

28. Mother moved to Pulino in 1927. For about three years they lived apart, and after that my sister graduated and went to pharmacy school in Kiev and my mother came to Pulino to be with the family.

(How did you live, did you find anti-semitism, effect of revolution)

After the October Revolution there was a lot more anti-semitism. There were a lot of Jews in Zhitomir. This was a Jewish region. My father couldn't find a job because he was a Jew. The town's government organizations were German. In 1918 the Germany army was in these places. The Jewish people ran to places where there were Germans because they were afraid of *pogroms*.

[The Jews felt safe with the Germans.]

(Childhood memories, celebrations, Yiddish, school)

Some Jewish holidays were celebrated by the family. But the family spoke mostly Russian because my mother was from Lithuania and my father from the Ukraine. The language is not the same. My mother spoke some Yiddish. My father and mother spoke it, but mostly they spoke

Naum Ginsburg

Russian. [They spoke different dialects of Yiddish.
Russian was their common language.]

(weddings, etc.) My cousin got married and there was
a *chupa* (bridal canopy).

(We know that a lot of being Jewish was lost. When and how
did this change?)

(Isaac: I think this happened much later.)

My father was not religious. I can't remember my
grandfather because he died before I was born. I remember
my mother telling me that when she married, her father [who
owned an iron factory] walked [on iron piping he laid down
on the street especially for the wedding from the synagogue
to the house, meaning they would have a strong life. It
was something temporary for the wedding party.].... This
was before the revolution. He was a rich man.

(school before higher education, teaching methods, friends)

I remember the Komsomol, and I didn't belong to it.
In Pulino, on the Jewish holidays, the Komsomol people were
fighting, they pushed the Jewish children to work in the

Naum Ginsburg

gardens, in the fields, so they couldn't be religious. So these children and I would fight the Komsomol leaders. We went around to houses on bicycle and posted notices that all Jewish children should go to celebrate the Jewish holidays. After that the government talked with the parents and they had problems. [Some children were expelled from school. I was too. But my father had lived in the town a long time and talked to the chairman of the school and then I was allowed to return.]

(after grade school, did you know you wanted to be a doctor?)

Yes. I was from a doctor's family. So all the time I planned for this, and my father talked about it. ...but I was very small. So I studied by myself, then went and took the medical school tests in Kiev, and in general got all A's, but in Ukrainian I got a C, so I was in the fourth category.

The first category is workers and farmers, the second is children of workers and peasants, the third is civil servants and the fourth is children of civil servants, and the fifth is [all other]. So I was in the fourth category.

Naum Ginsburg

So I worked for a year on a newspaper, 1930, then entered medical school in 1931. I graduated in 1936.

(was the school good, was there a lot of politics)

In the college there were a lot of political subjects. And there were political organizations, the Komsomol, which I never joined. I didn't like the political stuff. But I liked medical school. These were difficult years. There were some students who didn't have any education before, but got in because they were members of the Communist party. In these years there are some political trials and some of the students are in these trials because they were in with Trotsky. Some professors were fired from their jobs. There are some good students but they can do nothing because you could be killed. The trials were beginning in 1932-39. I wasn't very afraid because I was young. But some of my friends were involved. We couldn't discuss this openly, only with close friends. My friends were good kids, mostly Jews, the kind who never joined the Komsomol. Two of them became famous professors, Mina Epstein and Ephim Lihttenshtein. The first one was a doctor and the other in biochemistry. We were friends after medical school. We used to play chess. Bunya Zamekovsky was chess

Naum Ginsburg

champion of the Ukraine. Two of them have died already,
but Mina is still alive.

(did anything happen to you in school because you were
Jewish?)

Yes, of course. I was first in my class and was doing
really well, but no one Jewish can go on for the Ph.D. So
all of us had the papers and have to go serve somewhere.
So I went far from Kiev to a little town (station) to work
as a doctor [for the railroad in Old Oskol near Kursk]. My
professor, a famous (Jewish) Soviet professor, his name was
Max Moyscevich Gubergritz, helped me. I worked in this
town for four years, and then I could go back to school.
This was in 1940. Then the war came in 1941.

(marriage)

We got married in 1934. She was a student, too.

(So in 1936 you went to this small station to work, did you
bring your wife with you?) Yes. (Then you went back to
Kiev to graduate school and after that in 1938 came back to
Oskol, and in 1940 back to Kiev. In 1941 the war began.)
Yes. (When did you have children?) (Isaac: I was born in

Naum Ginsburg

1936 in Kiev. My mother was a student. She started school, she had a summer garden, ..[in Old Oscoll]; it's not too far now, but at that time it was twelve hours by train.)

(addressing Isaac: So he was away from Kiev. Your mother and you were in Kiev.)

(Isaac: In 1938, when she was done with school she moved to where my father was. In 1940 we moved back to Kiev. In the Soviet Union a Ph.D. takes three years. My brother was born after the war in 1947.)

(in Kiev during the war)

I went to the office where you enlist. I volunteered because I wanted to fight fascism. Paulina and Isaac went to the Far East. (Paulina: It was a difficult journey.)

(Isaac: We went to Volgograd. Conditions were very hard. We had no apartment. We had to stay in a stadium [with other refugees] and my father had gone to the army. We had no money. My mother's father would sell some of our clothes for food.)

Naum Ginsburg

I volunteered for the army during the first days, June 30, 1941. All the people from medical school have military classification, like Lieutenant, Captain, etc. I worked in the medical unit of the army. We went with the front lines of the army. We went southwest of Kiev. And then we crossed the Dnieper, and went southeast of Kiev. I was in the reserves. The town was called Krasny Ulich. There was fighting going on. [son: The army was very bad. The Soviet army ran from the Germans. They lost a lot of people. So my father was very busy as a doctor, working in a hospital.)

(Did you feel anti-semitism in the army at this time?)

(Is the word reserves correct here?) Yes. From the reserves they made the regular army.

(The army was very bad--what does that mean?) The army was badly organized. In August 1941, near Krivoy Rog, our division, the 253rd, was organized hastily, in too much of a hurry, poorly armed, and couldn't fight against the Germans, and so south of Krivoy Rog our division was defeated. The first 253rd division was formed near Nikopol' in July 1941. We fought the Germans near Krivoy Rog in August 1941. They fought and lost in August 1941. After the

Naum Ginsburg

253rd division was defeated at Krivoy Rog, the remainder of this medical unit became part of the 99th division. I was sent there. I was chief of the medical battalion in the division. I was a captain.

At this time, when we were in the East, people in the army are afraid, and they rob from the army. And the Commissar told me that I had to become a member of the Party. At the end of 1941, I became a member of the Party.

The commissar because he was afraid he put the papers in the fire. (Burned them? What papers?) His personal papers, a personal matter. (Is the commissar Jewish?) Yes. Pisetsky; he was from Zaporozhe. He was afraid and burned the papers about the meetings. (Army records?) Party records. When they organized army activities meetings, they wrote minutes of the meetings.

(When did you [Naum] join the Communist party?) This is [the real question] because I was a chief of this battalion, the commissar said as an example I must go to the party. In another case if I didn't join the party I think that the KGB, in the army it's SMERSH, and they could

Naum Ginsburg

arrest me or do something with me if I didn't. (The commissar wanted you to join the party as protection for him?) Not as protection for him, but as a protection. Because there was a panic in the army and many people were deserting, so I joined the party as an example for others not to be afraid.

(Was this membership helpful to you later after you served in the army?) No. In the army there were practically no commanders of my level, commanders of battalions, who were not in the Party. So in order to be a commander you really had to be in the Party. (But after?) No, it wasn't a factor.

(Were you able to be in touch with your wife?)

No, not at all. I wrote letters to my uncle in Moscow. I got letters from my mom and sister in August of 1941. In September I sent just a small piece of paper.

(Isaac: At that time we were in Astrakhan, a city on the Volga river. We moved from Stalingrad to Astrakhan, on the Volga.)

Naum Ginsburg

(Did Naum ever hear from you?)

No. Only in September of 1941.

(then what happened?)

Starting in October of 1941 our troops became active for the first time, and we made an attack, and it was the first time I'd ever seen German soldiers and tanks, and the German army was retreating. Then the Soviet army moved into the Ukraine, and our troops went to Kharkov. It was in the spring of 1942. In May of 1942 the German army made another attack and they succeeded in surrounding us.... This included the 57th, 6th, half of the 9th, the Pushkin tank corps, and many other parts, which fell into this trap.

(What happened in helping the wounded?)

The wounded people were given medicine and then moved to the hospital, and the people who couldn't be moved were taken care of right there. The people who could be moved were just transported to the hospital, because this part of the hospital is in the front lines. If they couldn't fight anymore they could go home to their families. In order to get out of this encirclement, we looked for a good place,

Naum Ginsburg

and this was across the Donetsk river. And the place was a little city near this river, in the Izyum region.

Southeast of Kharkov... Here on May 18, 1942 we, the 57th, the 6th and part of the 9th army, were in a circle.

(Did you break out of the encirclement?)

Yes. Our division broke out of the encirclement by fighting and got away. When we crossed the river, on May 18, 1942 many of the medical people were shot with machine guns. Many people perished.

(Were there any other Jewish doctors working with you, or who were killed?)

Yes. Dr. Kriycher, Dr. Kaminer, Eisenberg, Kreiterove and many others.

(now, out of encirclement, what happened)

Then the troops went to Stalingrad.

(want emotions, feelings about everything)

(Isaac: It's hard for me to translate)

[Pause] I think those were hard times but we must live.

(So he was extremely patriotic?) (Isaac: Of course.)

Naum Ginsburg

Before, I got letters from Moscow about the family saying, I "can't find a place." Then I received letters from you and could calm down. Things on the front were very upsetting.

(Did you bring any of these letters?)

Maybe. We'll look.

(Did he ever get to see you during this time?)

(Isaac, Paulina: No, never, never.)

(Who were your friends in the army?)

For the most part, Eisenburg, also a doctor from Kiev. Then with most of the other doctors. There were [others] who lived nearby, and we met when we had time. Neimer Kostekovsky, who was a Jew. I still have a letter from him.

(Stalingrad...)

We were stationed north of Stalingrad, at a factory where they made tractors, to the right of the river. In the beginning the Germans were very strong, and they killed a lot of people. Some of the Soviet troops were killed,

Naum Ginsburg

part of the medical corps, some of the doctors. So it was a difficult time. Transportation across the Volga is very difficult because it's a wide river. The Germans would fire across the river and people would be killed trying to cross it. In January of 1943 the German army began to lose its position. The winter was very cold and hard. They began to die. March 2, 1943, the German army gave up. There was never any time away from this. The first time I came to see my family was in 1944.

(after Stalingrad...)

After Stalingrad, we went to Kursk. We were pushing the Germans. During this time, June 1943, I was shell-shocked (contusion). We were near Svedlogorsk. I didn't go anywhere. After two or three days I went back to work.

After we were in Svedlogorsk, the 8th contingent, led by Chukov, was sent to become part of 1st Ukrainian contingent. His army was...[end of tape]

(When you started moving with the army, chasing the Germans, what were your feelings?)

Naum Ginsburg

Of course we were feeling better and better. By this time I became a major. I received medals for Stalingrad, and the Order of the Red Star. After the move through Dnepropetrovsk, I received another Order of the Second War, of the Second Level. There are two levels.

(We have in front of us the Order of the Red Star, [order of World War II of the First Level and others including two Medals for the Battle of Stalingrad and the Battle of Berlin....])

I stayed in the army and ended up in Berlin. (Did he go all the way to Berlin?)

We crossed to Poland.

(What were your feelings when you saw what had happened to the Jews of Poland and Russia?)

When we occupied Odessa, we saw the first Jews. There weren't German soldiers, but mostly Rumanians.

(Where and when did you see the first Jews in Odessa?)

Well, we ran around the west, around the southern Ukraine. First we went to Krasny Rog, and then through Odessa. Our division was a bit north of the city, but we went to Odessa and though we were there only 24 hours, we saw old Jews, sometimes with children, who weren't killed thanks to the

Naum Ginsburg

fact that Odessa was occupied not by Germans, but by Rumanian troops who, for money, didn't kill them.

(What kind of condition were they in?) In very bad condition, thin, clothes were torn. In Poland, near Lublin, we didn't see any Jews, only camps. We saw the equipment they used to kill people [at Maidanek.] (Were the Jews already liberated?) [ed.note: Maidanek was a death camp.] We didn't see any Jews.

(What was horrible in Poland?) I don't remember. We were in Lublin, then on the banks of the [...] river for quite awhile, south of Warsaw, then to Poznan. Poznan was encircled by a German officer corps, and then we went to the [Oder] river. (What did you find in the streets?) The buildings were more or less preserved. There was absolutely not the kind of devastation that there was in the Ukraine. The people mostly hid, but some met the Soviet army well. But the tragedy of complete demolished towns as in the Russian countryside just wasn't there.

(Did you understand at that point what the Germans had done to the Jewish people?)

Naum Ginsburg

Before the war it was well-known that ghettos existed, that camps for the extermination of the Jewish population existed. We knew even before the war that the Germans, in 1933 with the coming of Hitler, started to kill Jews. I had a friend who hated Germans. And when we surrounded the Germans and came across a wounded German officer, we were forced to help him so he could say what it was necessary for him to say to our commander. That was extremely difficult, because for my comrades and myself, it was simply disgusting to help him.

(So you had to help him because of your medical training?) Yes, because I was a doctor and the army needed the things that the German officers knew about military equipment and so on. I didn't treat him myself, but I watched. After the surgery members of the Soviet army took him away. After the war had ended, in Berlin, when the inhabitants of Berlin started crawling out of their basements-- tortured children-- we gave them medical treatment. Once in Berlin, we were in the Berlin zoo and saw a wounded monkey which had been shot in the arm. We did some surgery and after that, many years later, I saw a movie in which this episode was mentioned, but after the surgery in the movie the

Naum Ginsburg

monkey was presented to a famous Soviet marshall. But it didn't really happen that way. (Did the Germans eat the animals in the zoo?) Yes.

Jews came out when we arrived, and we saved them. In Poland we tried to help, but it was horrible.

(Isaac: The propaganda was that everything was fine....}

(Did you sense yourself as a Jew in the army?)

This feeling came back right after I got out of the army.

(You crossed Poland and part of Germany and end up in Berlin.)

Yes. That was in 1945. Here I received the award-- Order of World War II, First Level. Then we went to Weimar. At this time, because I was a physician, I became the chief of the hospital for... in Weimar. This was in the suburbs of Weimar. Because Buchenwald is near Weimar, I saw those places. After the war there were many people in the army, political people, who told the Jewish people that they didn't take part in the war. (So this was the first time you felt it personally?) Yes.

Naum Ginsburg

(How long were you in Weimar?)

First I was in Weimar, and then our hospital moved to Eynna, until 1948. In 1947 our second son was born. From 1946 to 1948.

(Is there anything else about Germany?)

I don't know what's interesting. I could talk about a lot of things. I studied how medicine is organized in Germany, hospitals, there were some good professors. At this time I studied electro-cardiology. My wife studied biochemistry. She had a major surgery in Germany. It was very important because in the Soviet Union at that time they couldn't do that kind of surgery.

My father has a couple of friends, one of them, Vovtsy, of the doctors' trial. First he had been a general in the Soviet army. Then he was a chief therapist in the Soviet army. When he came to visit to see how things were going we had a party at our home.

(Back to the USSR, to Kiev in 1948...)

Naum Ginsburg

I had an assignment to go to the military hospital and work as a therapist in this hospital. I was a colonel by this time. I worked in this hospital. In this period in the Soviet Union there is fighting because of "cosmopolitanism". And many of these people are Jewish. In this period, I was fired from this hospital and sent to another hospital in Dnepropetrovsk, on the Dnieper river, in the Ukraine. The family stayed in Kiev and I went to this place. (Isaac: The family stayed in Kiev because I had to finish high school. In the Soviet Union, as you may know, to rent an apartment is not so easy, so we have a little room, so we lived in Kiev at that time. And when 1952 comes, then it's very hard to work as a doctor. People didn't believe these doctors because of propaganda. Because of the Doctors' Trial, my father didn't want to work at the hospital in Dnepropetrovsk because it was very anti-semitic in this period; because it was dangerous. So he wrote a report that he would move to another place. And because in 1953 Stalin died, after this period, father moved to Kharkov, the town in northeast Ukraine. This was November of 1953.)

Naum Ginsburg

In Kharkov I was the chief of the (therapy) department until 1969. And then I went to the army sanatorium. Then I worked as a doctor in the Kharkov clinic. And in Kharkov while I was working in the hospital I got my Ph.D. in 1962. In 1963 I received two more titles; I became a full colonel and Colonel of the Doctors of the Ukraine.

(Why did you decide to come here?)

Because of the children. Grandsons, granddaughter...

(But you're a hero of Russia, so your treatment must have been pretty good there. How were you convinced that there was no future there?)

(Isaac: There was a time when I was fired from my job because I was a Jew. At that time I was kept from the University, from the Engineering College, and I had two Masters and a Ph.D. And they were nothing. Still because I was a Jew I was fired. And some other professors were fired from the school because they were Jews.)

Naum Ginsburg

Even at that time, in 1976, I wanted to come, but I couldn't do it because I was from the army, and my son was in the military academy, so we couldn't leave.

(When did you first apply to come?)

I applied in 1989. We applied as a whole family. But we wanted to in 1976. So it was more than ten years that we wanted to come.

(Did you notice changes in the way Jews were treated...)

No. Of course in 1952 when Stalin was alive, things were worse. Of course there were changes after Stalin died. It became a good deal better. The government didn't do anything. Some people say there is anti-semitism in the United States. But what is the difference? In the Soviet Union, you have the government's anti-semitism, not just the people's. Now any change you have, the government didn't try to change things.

(Where were you when Chernobyl happened?)

Kharkov is not close, but not very far. At this time, a lot of people moved farther to the east. We heard about it at first after the first of May. Some of our relatives

Naum Ginsburg

were in Kiev. And we heard it from our relatives, not from the government. I invited them to come to us, but they would lose their jobs. But one of them, she sent her children to us....

(You applied in 1989...)

[Isaac: It was very fast. At first we went to Vienna, and then we moved to Italy, and stayed about a month. And then came here the 28th of September.)

(How do you feel about this country, how you compare it...)

[Sarah's translation]: Here everything differs, day-to-day life, life in general, the way people relate to each other, everything is better than it is in the Soviet Union. You have volunteers. People are very nice to us, and we feel that it's good for us. We didn't do anything for America, but America did something for us. One thing which is hard is finding a job here. My grandchildren have found jobs very fast, but my son can't, and I haven't. The second thing is most important. My other son didn't receive a visa with us. He was in the Soviet Union. Then he received a visa on the 6th of October. And he can't come here. So he moved to Israel. Our family is very close.

Naum Ginsburg

So at first we were very disappointed. But now we see that maybe we can see them...

(What do you hope for your grandchildren, and what do you miss from the old life?)

What I miss are my good friends and relatives. We had a nice apartment. It was enough for us. My grandson is here, and he speaks like an American. I think that he has a good future but my grandsons in Israel whom I haven't seen in more than a year, I wish they had a chance to grow up in a good country.

(How did you two decide to get married?)

After our first meeting, it was two years until we got married. But we lived very close. My wife's parents lived in the same building as my parents. We met at the Institute. My wife was in college at that time. And then when I graduated, we got married. The wedding was very simple, because we were very poor at that time....[END OF TAPE II, SIDE A]