

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

**BETYA "G"**

**Gynecologist**  
**Medical Institute of Tashkent**

BIRTH: Chernovtsky, Ukraine, 1954

SPOUSE: Boris, Tashkent, 1947  
Mechanical Engineer

CHILDREN: Alexander, 1975  
Albert, 1981

PARENTS: Sima P., 1924-1941, Bershed  
Shaya Z., 1921-1975, Bessarabia

SIBLINGS: Alla

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

WOMEN'S AUXILIARY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS OF  
CHICAGO

NAME: BETYA Z. G.

DATE: July -, 1990

INTERVIEWERS: E. Snyderman and M. Hirsch

(Her husband, Boris, is also present, his comments are in parentheses.)

I was born in Chernovtsy, Ukraine in 1954. I had a big family -- my grandmother, my mother and my father. I had one sister, Ella. She is older than I, and we all lived together in one apartment -- not too many, just five. We had three rooms. It was a big apartment, it was built by a Rumanian so the apartment was very nice.

My mother was a mathematics teacher, she worked at school and my father, he worked in a business in the production of soda water. It was a shop. He was a supervisor, like a manager. We had a comfortable life. My

**BETYA G.**

childhood was Okay, I didn't feel there were any difficulties.

I stayed mostly with my grandmother when my mother was at work. Just for two or three years before school, I had, it was like a babysitter, but she taught us how to read and a little bit of math and even German. When I was six, I could speak German but now I don't remember any words. It was like a small Kindergarten. We were three, sometimes four children, sometimes just two of them. It was private. It was not allowed by the law. She, the teacher, is in Israel now. She was a Jewish woman born in Chernovtsy.

People who were born in Chernovtsy were well educated people because Chernovtsy was previously Austria-Hungary, and then it was Rumania before it was turned into the Soviet Union in 1940. All the people who were there then knew Rumanian, most of them knew Hungarian, and they knew German. She was a well educated woman who had studied in gymnasium, and was trained like a teacher of the Kindergarten.

**BETYA G.**

My grandmother, Golda Stein, was illiterate. She was very smart, but she was not educated at all. My parents thought it would be better for me if I went for some hours, maybe four hours a day, to spend with other kids. It was impossible to get into a Kindergarten especially in Chernovtsy because it is a small city and that's why they decided to let me go there.

My grandmother was a housewife. She was the youngest daughter of a big family of eight brothers and sisters. She was the smartest woman because she was left alone at the age of thirty-five and she raised the children and she had a little business. When Chernovtsy was burnt down after World War II, she opened a small store and made money. She was born in 1905, so she was forty when the war was over.

My grandfather died in the war. We don't know exactly how he died. We don't have the certificate about his death. He was lost. Nobody saw it. She was left without a pension. Thousands of people had the same experience.

**BETYA G.**

My grandmother opened a small grocery. They also had a small store in the village of \_\_\_\_\_. During the time from 1925 to 1949 she was like a housewife. They opened a store and then closed it in 1925 because Stalin changed policies. Children could not study if their parents had a business.

My husband's, and my, grandmothers were sisters. We are second cousins.

Our grandmother spoke Yiddish to us. I know Yiddish. I can't speak it now because English interrupts it, but I understand every word. I cannot say that my grandmother was very religious but she knew all the traditions, all the Jewish holidays. We knew Passover, we knew Purim, we knew Rosh Hashona. We had a home celebration when it was possible. It was very difficult, but we were able to get matzos for Passover. The matzos were made in a synagogue. (The Jewish people made a little company and made it underground and sold them to other Jewish people.)

In Tashkent it was possible to buy matzos. (Different towns had different customs.) Our aunt from Tashkent sent

**BETYA G.**

matzos to Chernovtsy to her sister. (They sent matzo from Israel.) My father's cousin has lived in Israel for maybe forty years and sometimes he sent matzos to us. My mother and my sister all live in Israel now.

I started to read when I was five. I went to school when I was six and a half. It is very interesting, Jewish children were a little bit ashamed that they were Jewish. Chernovtsy was a very Jewish city, and half of the kids in my grade were Jews. It was easier for me than for my husband. In Tashkent there weren't so many Jews. The level of anti-semitism in Chernovtsy and the Ukraine was much higher than it was in Tashkent.

Almost all my friends were Jewish. We had to keep all our traditions inside the family and could not bring them to school. Everybody knew that I was Jewish because of my name and especially my father's name, Shaya. It was not Russian. I often asked my parents, "Why did you call me Betya?" All my life I was not Betya but Beba and was used to this name because Betya was very Jewish and a strange name for Russian people and Ukrainians. When my sister was sixteen, she had to get a passport and my father wanted to

**BETYA G.**

change his name to Alexander because Alexander and Sasha are the same. But it was not possible.

In Russia, everything that went on at home, I could not go out and tell people because nobody would understand you. My father was born in a different society, not a socialist society, and his mind was very non-socialist, more so than the mind of my mother; but when she got married, my mother got used to his direction of thinking and especially my grandmother could understand my father because she herself was like a small capitalist in this family. I could not tell that we lived good, that I had everything at home. All the thoughts of my father were to earn money for his family to live well but it was not allowed, it was against the law. Therefore we were raised as kids not to tell anybody what was going on at home.

In Russia, Jewish people differed from people of other nationalities because, especially the Jewish man, knows that he has to get everything to bring home. The Russians and Ukrainians spent a lot of money for Vodka, and therefore nobody could understand what was going on in Jewish families. Sometimes they were in jail.....

**BETYA G.**

I could not tell anybody that my father bought a refrigerator when I was a kid. We could not get a television set before all other people bought them. I remember, it was in 1965. Even if we had money we would not spend it on such things because nobody should know that we could afford such things. From early childhood I knew that I could not tell anyone what was going on. It was the same for our kids too. If we had a little more money than other people had, we could not show this.

I was not really aware of a political climate against Jews. Everything had calmed down because in 1961 my father's brother was arrested because he had some golden coins at home. I think that was the main reason he was arrested. I don't know the reason because I was a small child, but he had to stay in prison for seven years because he had the coins at home.

(Many people were shot and arrested....) He was in the Ukraine, I think. I can't remember, I was a kid. I was six or seven years old. (He went to the Ukraine

**BETYA G.**

because my father paid money so that he wouldn't have to go to Siberia.)

I was afraid, and for all my childhood I was afraid of the authorities and maybe it was because my grandmother told me, "Don't tell anybody about anything."

We lived near a building, it was not a court, but in our town it was police headquarters, and when we passed this building, we went to the other side of the street, not to pass close to it. My grandmother was afraid and I was afraid all my life of this building. I had to pass it to go to school and I had to cross to the other side of the street because I was afraid of the authorities.

We never wanted even our neighbors to come up to our apartment, or if anybody came, we didn't want them to go to the room to see that maybe we had more than they had. Khrushchev's policy was the same as Stalin's, "Tell about your neighbor, when he has that is more than the average people." ( - and Andropov, he wanted the same policy, "You tell us about your neighbor. You tell us about your neighbor." On the street I drove my car and a man stopped me

**BETYA G.**

and checked me to find out what I'm doing! It was the same as thirty years ago with Stalin and Khrushchev.)

I know that all the time my parents were afraid of everything because, as I told you, my father made a little more money than other people, and everything had to be hidden. I know that my mother had, maybe two rings with diamonds, from her grandmother, from the father's grandmother even, she never wore them and it is the story she brought it to me. She could not wear anything to show that she was richer than other people. Therefore, I can tell you that even though we didn't have any difficulties in life, I was raised to know what I can't have, what I can't say, and I can listen but not speak. (My family was the same way. We were poor. We lived openly but many of the families who lived a little better than the Russian neighbors would be called on by the police.)

And people get jealous. When Khrushchev was dismissed and Brezhnev took his place I can't remember that anything changed in my family because my uncle was still in prison and everybody was afraid and nobody believed that it was something different because after Stalin it was Khrushchev,

**BETYA G.**

and about Stalin everybody knew (the children didn't know) but my parents knew that he killed a lot of people, and Khrushchev...

(Khrushchev wanted to change Stalin's policies, but towards the end he was the same as Stalin. And about Jews? he continued Stalin's policies. Also, many Jews were released from prison after Stalin's death. Before Stalin's death, was the Doctor's Plot. My father told me that when he was in Siberia, that there was a special place for Jewish people and he was under home arrest because he was a Jewish military doctor. When he told me about it, I didn't believe it, because he talked about it only when he was going to Israel. This was in 1978, when he felt it was safe to speak of it in the Soviet.)

After Khrushchev left, and Brezhnev came in, a lot changed, but my parents did not believe that it could be different. (She was only ten years old, she did not remember.)

When my uncle came home from prison in 1968, he talked about it but I didn't hear anything about it. I know that

**BETYA G.**

he experienced a number of things. I was a kid, I was six when he left, but he came home an old man. He was two or three years older than my father. After some years at home he changed, and got better, but he was like a sick old man when he came home. He was able to work.

(He sold seltzer water in a shop for the government like a service-man. He is still in Chernovtsy. He is going to Israel only now. He has a son in Israel.)

I had almost no work to do around the house because of my grandmother and she didn't want anybody to interfere with her in the home. Just a little bit. I studied. I had some hobbies and one of these was English. I studied it as a child when I was seven or eight. I didn't want to study medicine. It was my friend's father's idea maybe. My sister already was at the medical institute at that time and I wanted to be a teacher of English. It was my hobby then.

I then wanted to perhaps be a teacher of Chemistry because my mother was a teacher and all my life I thought that I would be a teacher too. It was not a big decision

**BETYA G.**

for me. I studied well at school and it was not a big difference for me where I went to study. I decided I would study medicine just before graduation from school.

(They had a neighbor, and she was a gynecologist, and the neighbor was a very good friend.) She died in Israel. (She taught about being a doctor of gynecology.) She was a good friend of our family and maybe she is one of the reasons that I wanted to go to medical school. The second reason was that we just had two institutes in our city; there was a university and a medical institute and nothing more. My father didn't want me to go study any other place in the country, and that's why I went to the medical institute. I never thought that it was bad. I was seventeen when I went to the Medical Institute. I was there for six years. I started at Chernovtsy, and then I graduated in Tashkent.

I met Boris when I was ten. (I met her when she was ten and I was seventeen. At ten years old I didn't decide about marriage, but when she was sixteen I decided that I would wait for her and we were married when she was nineteen.) His father is my mother's cousin. When he was

**BETYA G.**

seventeen he went to his father and together they went to the grandmother and I was also there. (My parents, all my life, were separated. When I was seventeen, my father took me to Bershed. All the relatives from all over the Soviet Union came to Bershed to see me.)

It was an unwritten law to accept maybe two Jewish people for one course, for the whole graduating class. It was around two or three Jewish people. (In the Soviet Union there exists a law, not on paper, but an oral law about the percentage of Jews everywhere. In the medical institute especially, they accept only one percent, not more.) It was different for different towns, but Chernovtsy was a Jewish town, so only one percent, not more, was accepted.

In 1974, there was a big trial, about corruption, with maybe twenty people from the Ukraine. Two of the people who were arrested were the directors of the medical schools in the Ukraine. They were asked, why didn't Jewish people go to medical school without paying to be accepted? And they told that it was an unwritten law that every year before the admission tests for medical school, they got

**BETYA G.**

calls from the heads of the cities that you can accept this year just two or three Jews to your medical school so you'll have to decide who to accept. It was an unwritten law, but it was a law.

(Many high level people wanted money from the Jews because they knew that Jews had money.) Many of the officials took money, it was a big source of income.

I usually studied well and all my marks were A's. But once, I took an after-school activity at an English translation bureau of medical literature, and when we had to get the certificates as translator of English medical literature, everybody got it except me. All my friends were invited to a big party. My friend was a Ukrainian, and everybody knew that I knew the language better than anyone else. They were very disappointed. She went to the dean of this English course and asked about me, why didn't I get the certificate? He said, "We will discuss this question later." She was not Jewish. She was Ukrainian but she was a very good friend of mine.

**BETYA G.**

At medical school I didn't have many problems besides the one situation because I studied well. The only problem was to get into the medical school. When I graduated I was sent to a place where I didn't want to be. I was over in Tashkent and Tashkent was short of doctors in ambulances. Even though I graduated in Obstetrics and Gynecology, I could not practice in that area. For three years I had to be a general practitioner in ambulances in Tashkent.

I got married in 1974. In Russia, usually people get married much earlier than here because you cannot earn money even if you are nineteen, and when you are twenty-nine you have the same amount of money as before you got married.

My family left in 1979 to Israel. The biggest problem for everyone, except for maybe people who lived in Tashkent, was that when they applied for leaving, they could no longer work. They had to spend any money they had saved and use it just for living expenses. It was maybe six or seven months to wait for the results of the request to leave. They had to sell all their possessions because you could only take with you a limited amount of things.

**BETYA G.**

They took things for living -- some of the furniture, the linens, they took as much as they needed. We did not take as many thing with us as they did. A lot has changed.

(Betya wanted to leave Russia ten years ago.)

I would have been happy to go to Israel with my parents. (I had my mother. My mother didn't want to go where my father was. She believed everything about communism. She still believes it. She was born in 1917, the year of the Revolution. She was raised together with the country.)

She was an engineer, but she was very poor. She spent all her money on us. The last twenty years she was poor, because she had spent her money. She helped us to raise our children. She had a house. She lived together with us. She didn't want to go to Israel. It was before Gorbachev showed us all the "dirty laundry" of our country. We saw what other countries had. I opened my eyes, I understood what this country will have.

In 1985 I forced them to apply for leaving. It was just when Gorbachev took power and everybody talked about joining their families. We applied, and in three months we

**BETYA G.**

got a refusal to leave. Then I went to the head of the organization, OVIR, to ask why. I said that I had my mother there, my sister there, his father there, his brother there, everybody there, nobody is living here in the Soviet.

He said, "When your parents left this country they left their citizenship. They knew that they were leaving family here, but they left their citizenship. Therefore they are not your parents anymore. Your sister is not your sister and your mother is not your mother because they are not Soviet citizens, and you cannot join them because our politics says that we cannot allow you to go to the enemy country, Israel." He was the head of the Republic Immigration Bureau in Uzbekistan, where we had to apply to leave. We could then only apply to go to Israel. Only now can you apply for the United States.

Everybody believed that America wanted war and that it wanted to destroy Russia. I never believed anything in this country. I had learned to read between the lines. When my father died, I didn't believe in anything that was going on in Russia. He was put in a prison, and he died in

**BETYA G.**

prison. He was just fifty-three when he died. He was in prison because he wanted my sister to study in the state town. He had to give money to transfer her from one city to another city. A lot of people were involved.

He died from a heart attack in prison. It was just seven months that he was there. During the trial, only my mother could visit him. She couldn't learn anything about his life in prison because she was in a small room and in it was a table and a glass was between her and him, and there was a telephone. She could speak to him only through the telephone. He couldn't really tell her anything because people were watching and listening. He could not write to her before the trial. There is such a law. He could not communicate with the family.

He was in prison six months before the trial, from April to September and he could not write any letters. The trial lasted one month. He was sentenced to spend seven years in prison. He died after serving one month of the sentence. After his death, I didn't believe in anything in Russia.

**BETYA G.**

After they refused us in 1985, we had to change our jobs. (Betya was a housewife and I found a job. I was a mechanic in a big garage. This is a little job for Russia.)

After we were refused we decided not to try it any more. We did not know that so many people from Moscow had already started to leave. We benefited from the change of politics in 1988 and were able to leave the country that same year. From 1986 to 1988, I worked at a hospital as a gynecologist in Tashkent.

Tashkent is a very different kind of city because if we had been in Ukraine, we never could have found another job. (Tashkent was a very big city like Chicago. I found another job, supervisor of a design department of textile machines.)

We could find work. I worked in a big hospital. We could just live from our salaries. We earned approximately 180 rubles a month. He had a big salary - 300 rubles a month. We could pay for our apartment. Before we left, we had a big apartment. Our big apartment was 23, maybe 25 rubles a month, together with electricity, maybe 30. It had three bedrooms, but that was only for the last two

**BETYA G.**

years. Before that we lived in one living room, one bedroom apartment for five people, after Boris' mother sold her house.

Our sons didn't have problems in school when we tried to leave because we left in the summer. When we left the country, the situation had changed a lot. No one told you, "You are leaving your own country, your country raised you and gave you your education." It was in 1985 and 1970 when everybody looked at you as an enemy of the country

(When we lived in Chernovtsy, every week, one person left our department. Many Jews worked together in the design department. And every week we had a meeting about their leaving from the trade union. Maybe in the United States, the unions can give some advantages, but in Russia it was just words.) But every week it was a meeting, and another Jewish person would leave, and they would say, "You are bad people for leaving the country." Then, the next week the person who said that would be leaving. In 1976, a lot of Jews left Chernovtsy.

**BETYA G.**

(Every month, each office had a meeting. Everybody knew what we talked about. It was a routine, a formality that began in 1917, a rule. Many times I thought about joining the Communist Party. It could give me a chance to advance my career. Before, I believed everything about Communism because of my mother. Later, I changed my mind. Betya said, "You can choose - me or the Communist party and your career! Your main career is our family." Fifteen years ago there was a quota for the need. Every nationality, every occupation, the party got only workers, not Jews.)

Many have to pay money to join the Communist Party. (I know from Tashkent many people, like a high level teacher at the Union Institute, who paid money to join the Communist Party, because there was a small quota for this level of people in the Communist Party. Now the Communist Party wants everybody. I think I could not have joined because I am Jewish. The opportunity to join came only twice in my life. When I was a soldier in the army, my captain offered me the opportunity to join the party. But I was a soldier for only one year and for the Communist

**BETYA G.**

Party, people around me would have to know me for one year to give the recommendation.)

I know that I could not have joined the Communist party because I am a Jew, because I know that in my hospital where I worked right before I left the country, there was one doctor, a year or two younger than I. She was a best friend of the head of the hospital, who was an Uzbek, not a Jew. The head wanted her to join the Party, but she was refused because she was a Jew. There was a quota for doctors and a quota for Jews.

(My second opportunity came when I worked in a big plant in Chernovtsy. Many of the people were workers and for the plant it was a big quota. The workers didn't want to join the party. I had an offer from them to join. This time, many of the Jews had left Russia. I had a good friend in the department, because when I looked for a job in Chernovtsy, it was very difficult for a Jew. When I went to this department, I think now I was not a Jew to him because I lived in the biggest town and I could speak another language. I made a good impression on him and he

**BETYA G.**

became my friend. I had an opportunity to join the Party but....)

I wouldn't let him. We didn't really argue about this, I just told him never go to the Communist Party! (I had a high level position and my boss was a good man. He wanted to keep me and he gave me an offer for the Party. He was the secretary of this construction bureau. He is the one man who writes me letters now.)

I was afraid that I would not be able to become a doctor in the United States. The only thing I really wanted was to leave the country - anywhere and anyhow, just to leave the country because it was the only thing I could do. I hated everything there. I think my father's death was the worst time in my life. The second worst thing I told you about was how the man told me, "Your mother was not your mother because she is not a Soviet citizen." That was very upsetting, it was terrible.

The third bad thing was that I told him, "Okay, you do not allow us to leave the country forever, but I will go just for a visit - I haven't seen my mother and my sister

**BETYA G.**

for ten years." He told me, "No, it is an enemy country, we cannot accept your application to go for a visit." So I didn't have any opportunity to see my relatives, and I didn't have anyone in that country, so I decided I had to leave. Anywhere and anyhow, just to leave the country. It made no difference to me where I went, just to go anywhere.

I miss nothing from Russia. I don't lie about it. As for my fear, I passed the medical residency exam so fast, I didn't expect it. I thought I would try it for three years. We arrived in November, 1988. I passed the exam in January, 1990. I will start the residency the first of July.

I hope, if I become a doctor here, my sons will have the opportunity to study in good colleges. They have everything here. They always have a future, because in that country, we did not have any future. I told our older son, he is already fifteen, he is going to high school this year, that I hope he knew this. He is studying computers and I think this is his future. As for my small son - I don't know, he is too young. He is like an American. He

**BETYA G.**

speaks English perfectly. He says to me, "don't speak it if you cannot."

I want to become involved in the Jewish community but I don't have time. Our small son is going to a Hebrew school at B'nai Emunah synagogue. We'd like to be a member of the synagogue if we could afford it. We want to get things that we missed in our lives. This year we spent Rosh Hashona with Shelley Stone's family, and for Passover. It is fun, it's so interesting to know about it, especially about Israel. Our dream is to go to Israel to see everything and to study. Boris knows Jewish history very well, from what he could get in our country, he knows everything. I never had time for that.

(Several months before we left Russia, I was very sick. All my life I had believed what I was taught. When I knew about the truth of the past of the country, I couldn't believe it. I had believed Communism was a good idea, I worked for them. But when I read about the truth, I understood that I was stupid. I could have left the country ten years ago. I had risked losing the opportunity to leave for my children, for my wife, for myself, everyday. One

**BETYA G.**

man in the government could say "Kill them." and they would.)

When everything became open in the newspapers, Boris became ill and went to the hospital. He was so discouraged that he believed them all the time, and everything was false. It was a country with no past and no future. I tried to treat him myself for three months, but nothing helped. He was in the hospital for a month. The same day he was discharged from the hospital, I called my Mom and I told her we were leaving the country. She could not believe it because just two months before I had asked her to send me an invitation for a visit.

We were on our way to Israel, but when we got to Vienna we changed our minds. It was through the Joint Distribution Committee, HIAS. We were rushed. (They asked, 'who wants to go to Israel, come with me.' Only two people went. We both wanted to go to Israel, but my mother decided, because of my father living in Israel, she didn't want to share me with my father. We promised my mother not to force her. If possible, we would go to the United

**BETYA G.**

States. She came together with us. She didn't have anybody.)

The last thing that happened when we left the Soviet Union is that the customs officer wouldn't let me take my wedding ring, because he saw it was too big. It was just plain gold, but it was big. And we bought it sixteen years ago and it cost 170 rubles. Now it is worth much more because gold is more and more expensive.

We did not have a religious background. We did not have a past so it will be easier for us to have something in the future. We would like the children to have something to believe in. We may not be religious but we will study Hebrew and if there is an opportunity for us to join a synagogue, we will want to. I just want to say that it is a pity that there are still Jewish people left in Russia.