

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

LENA GORYUNOV

BIRTH: 1954, Kiev

SPOUSE: Serge Goryunov
married in 1979

CHILDREN: Eugene, 1980?

PARENTS: Clara Volodarsky, born December 22, 1925
in Skzira

David Kleyman, born March 1, 1926, Volodarka

SIBLINGS: one brother, name not given

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Fayga Lyubornsky

Joseph Volodarsky, killed during World War II

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Ida Shiteif

Simon Kleyman (Yiddish name was Shelek)
born in Volodarka, killed during World War II

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of
Chicago

NAME: **LENA GURYUNOV**

DATE: April 30, 1990

INTERVIEWERS: Gail Neiman and Ruth Goodman

I was born in 1954 in Kiev, which is the capitol of
the Ukraine. My father and mother were from Kiev too.

I studied in the Kiev special English school. We
studied English, as a foreign language, from the first
grade. For ten years I studied English - my parents pre-
pared me for America from my early childhood. --- That
was a joke. They did a lot for me but some of this wasn't
too helpful to me. They wanted to give me a good
education.

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When we were young we did not make any decisions, our parents thought for us. They decided, of course, until we were about twenty. I respected my parents, I trusted them, and I knew that they tried to do what was best for me. For Serge, too, this is true. I have a very good mother-in-law, she is my best friend. So I think that he did what she suggested.

The history of my family is the same as almost all Jewish families in Russia. My mother's cousin left Russia in 1924, after the Revolution. My mother's mother was not allowed to leave because the door was closed at that time and the family was divided. A brother and sister were in America and another sister and brother stayed in Russia. During the years when Stalin was the leader of Communist Party they did not receive any information from each other. Only in 1978 were my mother's two sisters in Russia and I saw them for the first time in my life. I had heard about them but had never seen them. Now we keep in touch with them. They are in New York with their families and their children and they are American.

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My father and mother and my brother with his family, are in America for two months. They are very happy here after a tough time. Before, in Russia we got all bad news about *pogroms*, about anti-Semitic groups, Jewish discrimination, and we were very worried about them. First of all, what was difficult was that we were separated. It is very hard for all mothers to know that you can't call your daughter every evening, you can't ask her everything about your grandchild. Nobody knew if we will have a chance to see each other again. It was very hard when some left and others stayed behind. We were very afraid, so when they came here we were very happy.

As you know, policy in the Soviet Union changes every day so we were very afraid that something might happen and, who knows? Four years ago Gorbachev opened the gate but he can also close the gate and that's it. That is what happened ten years ago. You know a few examples of this, that some people came here and the parents or children did not get to come because Brezhnev closed the door and that was that.

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It is hard to describe our concerns about this because they are now here! You know, when we were in Italy and we got calls from them that we were supposed to meet them on such and such a day, but what could I do about it?

My father used to work as some kind of mechanic in Russia. He could not get a higher education, he was not allowed to enter the university. The time after the Second World War was a very hard time for all people, all around the world and especially in Russia. Both my grandfathers were gone, after the war, they were killed in the fighting. It was a very hard time for our family.

The Post-War Period was a difficult time for all Soviet people because during this time all the livestock, factories, etc., had been destroyed. A lot of people died on the battlefield and probably you heard about Baby Yar. All Jewish people in Kiev were killed and it was a major tragedy. Fortunately, all of my parents and grandmothers had relocated from Kiev and they survived. After the war, when my mother, my grandmother, returned back to Kiev (my grandfather died during the war, he was killed). She worked hard to raise her four children. My mother was

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seventeen so at that time she worked and at other times she took classes at the Institute because she wanted to be something special.

When my father and his mother returned from the capitol of Armenia, the apartment where they lived at the beginning of the war was filled with other people and they did not want to allow my grandmother to live in her old apartment. They had relatives who allowed them to live with them for a while. These relative's of my father were the neighbors of relatives of my mother and so they met each other. Later they were married.

My father took classes and when my brother was born in 1947, just after the War, there was nothing to eat and it very hard time in the life of most Soviet people. My mother told me that he was born too soon and was very weak. He could not walk on his own until he was about seven years old. Because my mother was very weak and the child, of course, was also very weak.

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Then, when I was born in 1954, in the Soviet Union, - even now! - clinics and hospitals were in terrible condition. Antiseptic conditions are very bad. You can imagine how it was in 1954, and my Mom got an infection in her blood and she almost died. She wrote a letter to my Dad about my older brother, his name is Yury, and she asked my grandmother to raise Yury, and my Dad to raise me.

When I was four months old the doctors allowed us to leave the hospital and to come back home. When she was at the hospital it was necessary to feed her better, with good food, vegetables. My father was forced to stop his classes and find a second job, and a third job, and he never had a chance to finish his education. He needed to work many jobs to be able to get better food for my mother and his children.

Probably in America, children don't have this, but when children have very, very, big head, out of proportion to their body, it is because of lack of fresh air, lack of sun. This affected me. Because of lack of nutrition - the Russian word translates to scurvy in your dictionary. Then, after we were at home, everything became better and

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better, and I know that doctors suggest to give these little kids, Vitamin D.

About Baby Yar, our parents and our friends, all Jewish people, and not just Jewish people, know about Baby Yar because it was a tragedy. There were a lot of Jewish people who were killed during this time and it was a tragedy of Soviet people that the government at that time didn't want to tell people that, in this place, were killed so many Jewish people. And the rest of the people asked them to build a memorial there for the memory of all generations. First of all, the government didn't want to do this because of the Jewish people there.

They put in New Russian that there were no Jewish people there. They put up a big rock with a sign that says that Jews during the Second World War and a lot of Soviet people and members of the Communist Party were killed. But this is a special place where a lot of Jewish people were killed. It is true a lot of other Russians, writers, poets, Ukrainians and a lot of other intelligent people were gathered there and killed. They read the poems and they told very warm words, it was September 29th, I

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remember that day. The Government did not allow it as a memorial. The police did not allow people to go there and place flowers.

My grandmother with my Dad, and my second grandma with her children were evacuated. A lot of people were evacuated at that time. I think that they saw that most of their friends were evacuated and I think they did a very smart thing and left too, to save their children.

My mother was the eldest one in the family. She had two sisters and one brother. The brother now has his family in Israel and the sister is still in Russia. My mother, thank God, did get a higher education and she worked as a bookkeeper and accountant. They tried to give their kids a good education like most Jewish parents want for their children, the best they can. We studied English and then Music and Sportcraft and we grew up like all Soviet children but, as I remember from my early childhood I had some problems in school and during all my ten years at school.

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I remember exactly that in my school and my class I had many classmates who abused me - they called me 'Kike.' You can believe that when I was a small girl I didn't know what that meant so I asked my mother. I said I didn't want to be a 'kike.' And my mother explained that 'Kike' is a very dirty word and it means Jew. She said, "I am a Jew and your grandmother is a Jew and your father is a Jew. Are we dirt?" So, I knew they were good people and that it wasn't so bad to be a Jew and that those people who called me 'Kike' were probably stupid and not to mind what they said. My mother taught me that you are supposed to study hard and do very well, get the highest marks, because you are Jewish. You are supposed to be ten times greater than your classmates. This was my first lesson.

So the next time when they tried to call me these names I could defend myself. And one boy, I bit him, and when my parents were called forward to the principal I explained everything and it was all right. I knew that I was a Jew and when anybody tells me ---.

During the ten years in regular school I got only the 5's, they are the best marks you can get in Russia, like

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A's here. So in those ten years I got only 5's. There is a great award for the graduates, the best students are supposed to have only 5's for all subjects and I had ten examinations after ten classes to get my certificate. One of these exams was to write an article about Ukrainian literature and some poems, I don't remember exactly. The teacher of Ukrainian Literature gave me only a 4, so I did not have any chance for this award. I was upset and I can't explain my feelings at that time, it was incredible to me.

I wanted to go to the University or some prestigious Institute. My mother hired two tutors and so I had 5's in my school, I was supposed to do my homework, I started in English school, I had a lot of things to study, to learn, to do, and after my school I studied more than my school programs demanded.

This I did to be able to pass the test to go to the University, but I couldn't go to the University because I am Jewish so - but I passed all tests for the Agriculture Academy. The main students of this Academy were kids from

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the country, from the rural areas, and the level of education there was low and, on this level, my knowledge was huge so I passed all these entrance tests and I was admitted to this Academy.

As I said, most of the other students were from the country and most of them were very strongly anti-Semitic. I had a very hard time there. At the time I was studying at this Academy there was some office that checked everything, what is good, what is bad and what is wrong. They checked all the time, I don't know how to explain. There was one institute in Kiev at that time where Jewish kids would pass exams and because of the way it was set up, it was very difficult to study. There were probably three or four people for each desk. Here you pay your money and you can study what you want. In the Soviet, it is different. You are supposed to pass tests and when you pass the tests and you got good marks, you can take classes at this Institute.

(Serge: Because education is free of charge in Russia. So for people to be admitted to the Institutes they have to pass first round exams. A lot of them don't

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know the subjects too well so a lot of people try. All the Jewish people are never admitted to the Institutes because there are a lot of other people who are trying to enter. At the time Lena is speaking of, a little child could pass these exams and there was a committee from the police who checked for bribes. Some representatives were at the exams to see how students answered the questions and that they got the correct marks. There are two written exams, and two oral exams. They were checking to see if a student could not answer the question and if he still got a high mark, then there is either something wrong with the student or with the teacher.)

In the Soviet Union, they had three kinds of educational programs, a day program, an evening program - for those who work during the day. If you are a student at the Institute you are supposed to be there every day, five days a week. If there is a lecture, you are supposed to be there. The third kind, you are supposed to study by yourself with books, with literature and do some work and send assignments to the teacher and if your work on the assignments is good you are supposed to come to the Institute to take an exam and if your work is good you are

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supposed to take another subject. You need not be in the same town as the Institute. A lot of people in Russia have this sort of higher education but a lot of them do not have knowledge. They enter the Institute and spend the four or five years but really acquire no knowledge.

(Serge: A lot of people simply pass the exams and get this certification or diploma and not study. In Russia you can have a diploma and get paid less than a worker because a worker is the most important class. Sometimes, if you have a diploma you are paid less, particularly if you are an engineer. You get paid less than a laborer. So this higher education in Russia doesn't mean anything financially, but our higher education is very helpful for us here.)

In my primary school, there were a lot of Jewish kids. So my friends were only other Jews. Some of the teachers were anti-Semitic and in my early school years I did not understand that this was because I was Jewish and that the teacher might be an anti-Semite or not. I could not understand what happened to me or what was wrong with me. I

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asked my mother, "Mom, what is wrong with me, why don't they like me?" Because we were Jewish.

I knew I was Jewish because my grandmother spoke Yiddish and my father and mother understood it and they spoke - not very good - but they spoke Yiddish. When they wanted the kids to not understand - they spoke Yiddish. There was a time when I saw that to be Jewish was a shame, because when my grandmother began to speak Yiddish on the street, my mother stopped her. My mother was afraid. She was afraid for her, she didn't want her to be abused. If you are Jewish, some people don't like you, they can call you 'Kike' and you are supposed to swallow this. Not to answer. It is not very pretty to hear this kind of thing.

My mother grew up in a religious household. My mother's grandfather was a very religious man and in a very small *shtetl* he was the man who took care of the matzo and sold this matzo to people. It was a family legend that he was very religious and he could not refuse matzo to anyone who needed it on Pesach. He would sell what he could and then he left matzo for his family. My great-grandmother (I was named after her, she was Leah and I am Lena) and my

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great-grandmother would say, so-and-so needs matzo and cannot afford to buy it, and my great-grandfather would say, "Okay, give him a little bit." Another one and then another one would ask and he could not refuse. My grandmother noticed that the matzo was the same amount as what they started out to sell. It was like a miracle! And when she said, after this, the like was changed, like more and more and more.

My mother told me about this family story, but we did not keep the Jewish customs in our house. I know that we have Pesach and we were supposed to eat Matzo. My mother prepared very delicious dishes and we children liked these dishes, but we did not know anything about why we ate them, or were supposed to eat them.

When we were students, we decided to go to the synagogue and my husband was there. While he was there, his mother was got a call and they told her, "If you don't want your son to be dismissed from this Institute, you should tell him that he will not never go there again."

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In Russia we celebrated Pesach and Rosh Hashonah and Chanukah, because my mother always gave me Chanukah Gelt.

(Serge: But we celebrated all these holidays only in our house-)

We celebrated with relatives and friends. You could not talk about these holidays with your friends on the job or at work, because, first of all, they could not understand them. You are always afraid to tell that you celebrated Jewish holidays.

(Serge: We did not celebrate too openly even in the home because there were always small children around and if they asked what we were doing, and we told them, they would go out and tell their friends.)

We never told our son that he was Jewish and he did not know about this until we came here. It is a problem to know the right way to handle this. Then he told us, when we were in Italy, that now he understands why his teacher in his Kindergarten didn't like him, why she did such and

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such things to him. We never allowed him to walk with his friends without any parents or grandparents along.

I will tell you why we didn't tell him. My mother used to work when I was 3, 4, 5 years old and I was supposed to go to the Kindergarten and then I was supposed to go to school; to be among the Russian Ukrainian kids. Ten years ago we were refused by the Russians. For ten years we hoped that our dream would come true - and we will leave the Soviet Union.

Eugene was able to get into Kindergarten but not for a long time. Most of the time he spent at home or with our mothers. He was only in the first grade, at school, for three months before we left. So it was not necessary to prepare him. We got a teacher to teach him English; he studied English in Russia.

I was twenty-one when I finished Agricultural Institute. Serge and I met shortly after I graduated from this Institute. I did not know what a Bar Mitzvah was then and I had no way to meet Jewish boys. In Russia, boys and girls like to go to dancing clubs. Some of them like to

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meet and go to the Museums or to each other's apartment where parents were, for the warmth if nothing else. They would listen to music and watch TV and speak about many different things. A lot depends on what each person wants to do. Most of our time we spent playing different games. We would take one word and we would create from this word another different word.

We knew each other between three and six months when we were married. We were married by a judge, not in a religious ceremony. We signed the papers and that is it.

I think that we were very lucky, it was eleven years ago, and you know that most young couples had to live with their parents and this is a big problem in Russia. We did not have a one-bedroom apartment or a two-bedroom apartment. We had a two room apartment. We were so happy from the beginning, Serge and me, without any parents, without any suggestions and we built our family by ourselves.

How we got the apartment was an interesting history. Go ahead, Serge.

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(*Serge*: The trouble in Russia is that you can't rent an apartment or buy an apartment. Everything belongs to the government. To get an apartment you have to go to some office and --I cannot even explain it so that you can understand it! You will maybe get put on a list, not only because you want an apartment but how many square feet there should be in this apartment for the number of people. Is there less square feet per person than there should be in this rate? Then you cannot be put in this apartment. For example, you live five persons in an apartment where there is such-and-such square feet. If you divide this square footage by the number of people, you will have the rate for this apartment. If your rate is less than the official rate, you can move, or be put into another apartment. You might have to wait for five, ten or fifteen years to get this different apartment.)

You know what people did? They decided to have another baby so they could get a larger apartment!

(*Serge*: The only way you can get an apartment without the long wait is to exchange with someone else. So, we did

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this. My in-laws, all five of them, had this three-room apartment. Not three bedrooms, just three rooms, there were only two bedrooms. And we changed with other people for two different apartments, which was the only way to have separate apartments.)

The other people were all related and they had two separate small apartments and they preferred to live together. We all met together and made this exchange. But -- it should be approved by the government. You have to get any move approved. We had to give a bribe to get this approval. It was money. It is always dangerous to make a bribe, not only for Jewish people, if the wrong person finds out, you can be sent to prison.

We had to take this risk because it was very important for us to live separate. We decided to have our own life. It is almost a common policy in the Soviet Union, bribes here and there.

Russia is a fine place to live for two weeks; Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad - there are very many sight-seeing places. A good place to visit but not a good place to live.

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It was incredible at that time In Russia to have your own apartment - separate. We had our own two very small rooms and we were very happy there. We were only married three or four months when we decided to leave Russia, but we were refused.

I was working as a research engineer and Serge was working as a computer programmer in construction - Civil Engineering Institute - he is so smart! He made all these pictures and I think they are very beautiful. We left our jobs, --

(Serge: We were dismissed from our jobs. I was working in the Civil Engineering Institute and I was dismissed from all my classes, everything. And during half a year we couldn't find any job!)

We sold all our books and our carpet and tape recorder and I worked like a baby sitter and Serge had some students that he helped prepare for their examinations. Both his students and the children for whom I baby sat were Jewish.

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(Serge: We couldn't find any jobs, because when we came to a new office and asked for a job, we had some interviews, and everything seemed to be going well because our knowledge was good. But when we came to another place we were asked, "What did you do before?" We had to tell where we had worked before and they called to this office so we couldn't find jobs.)

(It is hard to explain why we left the Soviet Union. It is almost impossible for Jews to live in Russia even now when they have the *Perestroika*, I don't believe in it. All the Jewish people are living in constant danger. There is almost nothing to eat, almost nothing to buy in the stores, they are always trying to find somebody who is guilty for his, so the Jews are easy to blame.)

(We wanted to have this little guy here, but we couldn't leave Russia and we had to spend ten more years there.)

When we told our parents ten years ago that we wanted to leave Russia, they were so scared. They didn't allow us to do this, they didn't want us to leave.

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(Serge: The Jewish people who lived in Russia a long time were frightened of almost everything. Either they had to do something outstanding or they were very scared. Because they were always threatened by other people, so when they heard of our decisions they were afraid for us. We tried to explain to them but they didn't understand us.)

They said: Why have you decided to leave? You have almost everything, your apartment, your friends don't have such an apartment! You graduated the Institute, you have a nice job, who knows what the future may be? A lot of people who left during the war suffered, they had nothing to eat.

Now, Serge's mother and my parents talk, they feel guilty that they didn't allow us to leave. They gave us a bit of a hard time, our parents were not happy that we wanted to leave.

After seven or eight months, I found a job with a very low salary and I was very happy when I found this job. A month or so after me, Serge found a job.

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(Serge: When she found this job they didn't want to take her, but it was a very small position and they needed somebody and they decided that even though she was a Jew, they would hire her. In Russia, Jews were never allowed any positions in Personnel Departments.)

(So, her brother's wife helped me to find a job in her organization. She asked for me and I was hired there for a small position. Of course, all the time they called my previous job and they were told who I am and why I wasn't working so much. Then we decided to leave the Soviet and we decided--)

to have the baby!

After Eugene was born I stayed at home for three and a half years. We kept our apartment and Serge kept his students. In the Soviet Union, the rent is very small and for electricity and gas the charges are very small. Food took almost all our salary.

All our Jewish friends applied to leave and they are now all in America. Some of them left Russia ten years

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ago. We were refused then but maybe they applied one month before us and were able to leave. No explanation was ever given for our refusal.

(Serge: It is very easy to protest against Russia when you live here but it is very difficult to protest when you are in Russia. The Russian Government does whatever it wants to do.)

We listened to the Voice of America in Russia and Radio performance from Canada. We listened to all the Russian radio stations and we knew almost everything that was going on in America. We heard the news, but what could we do? - Nothing.

We left Russia in December 1988, we went through Austria and Italy and then came here. We arrived in America on March 14, 1989.

Serge learned English and Eugene, too, in preparation for coming here. I was busy like a squirrel, I was in all the stores in Kiev. I went to Moscow and Leningrad, to buy some things that I could sell in Italy.

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(Serge: I will explain, when the Jewish people leave Russia they are allowed to take only two cases per person and \$150 per person. So, we had \$450 for our family and six cases. Each suitcase could weigh not more than 20 kilograms, forty pounds. It is nothing. We sent a lot of personal packages of pictures and books in three parcels to our aunt here.)

We brought a huge library of Russian books here. We want Eugene to learn to read in Russian, but he doesn't want to. We bought some cameras to sell, and binoculars to sell, some Matrioskas and vodka to sell in Italy. Of course the Joint supported up and gave us some money. It was not enough.

They wouldn't allow us to take out jewelry, even my wedding ring. I had to leave it with my mother. Now they have decided to let it come out. She brought it here, so now I have my ring.

Our friends who came here before us had told us about just about everything you see here. They told us that you

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have to work hard here. The most important thing that we were supposed to bring here was the language. My husband had his friend there, computer programmers too, and they told him what he would need to know, which computer languages, which systems and he studied in the Soviet Union. We arrived here on March 4th and on March 28th, he was in his first job interview, and they hired him.

(*Serge:* My friends were very helpful and it is now the same job that I did in Kiev, because everything - computers, software, hardware, are the same. Sometimes I think they were stolen from the U.S.A., because they are all the same.)

My husband's parents came with us but my parents did not have an invitation so when we arrived here we called New York to a woman who prepares the invitation. We brought this invitation here and some man from Kiev who was my guest here took this letter to my parents in Kiev, in his pocket. He called them and gave them his address and they went and picked the invitation up.

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The worst time for us was in Russia when we were refused, it was terrible. We didn't know what to do, we didn't know what would happen, or what the future would be.

(Serge: We couldn't find a job and in Russia if you are out of work, you are treated as if you are doing something against the law, because all the people should work. You are treated like an parasite.)

The hardest thing when we arrived was the language. We studied English in Russia, we could read, but we could not understand it here, it became just noise. The best teacher for Serge is being on his job but not mine because now when I work I speak Russian.

(Serge: We were afraid because in Russia we were told that it is very dangerous to live in America, they kill everybody, the streets are dangerous to walk in the evening and even in the daytime. But we can walk at anytime; it is very quiet here.)

(The first time Eugene went to school here he could hardly communicate with other people, but it was a Russian Jewish transitional school and all the students were from

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Russia. Then, in the summer, he attended Apachi Camp and then we recognized that our son began to speak English. Even with his Russian friends, they speak English! Sometimes they speak Hebrew and sing Jewish songs. It is important to us that Eugene knows he is Jewish and what this means for him.)

We now do the blessings on Shabbat, and we have a Matzo cover here and we had a Seder.

(*Serge*: Not a real Seder because our parents didn't know how to do it. My mother cried at the Seder table because she had never had this before. Now our son can teach us how to do it. We did not have time to learn because we have to work hard here, you understand. Our son showed us and my mother knows a lot of Jewish songs and she likes to sing them.)

We have a lot of Russian neighbors who are our friends now. Serge's mother lives with us. She is sixty-three and she is now doing homework, she studies in Junior College. My parents live five blocks from us.

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We are in America more than one year now and sometimes we cannot remember how we arrived. Our first impressions are confused. I remember that when our plane landed, everyone started to applaud, after that I don't remember anything, there were all kinds of officials and everything.

Then on the plane from New York to Chicago, everyone fell asleep except me. I was so nervous, I was praying. Not because I was not concerned about the flight but about our life when we arrived. We had flown in Russia. We had a relatively middle class life in Russia. Our parents were not in service work - like hairdressers, sales persons in department store.

(Serge: In Russia, there is a shortage of everything so the people who are next to all this stuff are supposed to be rich.)

One pair of shoes costs about 50 rubles in a store. And even with this sum, you cannot buy the shoes in the store. On the black market you have to pay even more, about 200 rubles. Usually the person doing the selling

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works in a store, then they can steal something and sell it someplace else.

We had a women's rest-room in the Institute where I used to work and somebody who knows such a person, calls to everybody and we run in the bathroom and see what he or she has. Sometimes, at the end of the month, the stores may have something in stock, usually the stores have empty shelves. If they are not empty, there are not the kind of things you would like to buy.

Half the years of my married life I think I spent standing in line to buy food, to buy clothes, to buy everything that you need in your home. When we came here we knew this was very different in America. We saw it in Austria and Italy so we were prepared. We understood that it would be this way here.

(Serge: This is a card which allows you to buy one kilogram of sugar in a shop. If you don't have this card you cannot buy. You still need to pay your own money, but without the card you could buy none. Everybody gets these cards each month. If you don't need it, - but usually

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people need more. We brought these cards to show our children what it was like.)

In Russia there is really not anything on the shelf. Sometimes there is no salt, no sugar, no tea, no coffee. Sometimes we receive letters from our friends, saying they are out of this or that. We really cannot send to everyone, we would have to buy out a Dominick's because we have so many friends still there. Because of the lack of everything, people in Russia are very angry and they are looking for a victim - a scapegoat to blame.

Our friends there are afraid to be too clear in their letters because nobody can be sure that no one will read the letter before we do. Before I send a letter back, I check every letter before I send it because I do not want to make trouble for my friends.

(*Serge*: For many years we were concerned for our son, because he needs to grow up and we felt he needed to live in another place than Russia. We always wanted to come here and after we got this guy, we decided to do our best to come here.)

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You know, about Eugene, we tell him only that we are trying to do. We didn't want to bother him about everything around him, about the Soviet Union, etc. We want him to be a person and if he will be smart enough to be a doctor or a lawyer, that would be fine.

(Serge: We also understand that it does not matter here if he is Jewish or, I don't know what. We feel that he should learn and know what everyone around him knows, to be on the same level.)

I don't want to lie to you, that when we decided to leave Russia that Chernobyl was a huge influence. We lived about 50 or 60 miles from this town. We didn't know anything about this disaster. We first heard about it from the Voice of America. America told us first what we had to do, that we had to have some treatment, some cure.

(Serge: This was four years ago, and the Russian government didn't tell anything to people. A lot of people lived in the places where it was impossible to leave. The level of radiation was very high and we tried to keep our

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son safe so in four days when we knew about this disaster, Lena took him to the train and she went to Moscow to stay with relatives, and then her mother came to her there and they travelled around a bit.)

We couldn't understand all of it. What did it mean? It happened on a Friday night and I was in the market on Monday, at work, and my friends asked me "Did you hear about such and such?" And I said, "Where's Chernobyl, where's Kiev?" We couldn't believe that it was so dangerous. We couldn't believe that the Russian government would not allow people to leave this place. Now we understand. For half a year our son stayed with our parents out of Kiev, but then he had to come back, because we had no place for him to live anymore. All this time we were in Kiev, we locked all the windows, we made the wet cleaning every day and we tried to get our food from Moscow, we bought food especially for our son from Moscow. We had to go to Moscow. We went on train, it took one night, ten hours. But a lot of people didn't believe it and they ate whatever they could buy in Kiev. We had to buy in Kiev but we asked from what area, what village, the food came from. We tried to keep ourselves well, we did our best.

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When there was the damage at Chernobyl Station, nobody told us, not radio, television, nobody! Nobody said it is very dangerous to stay here in Kiev - take your children and stay away as far as you can and as quick as you can. But we have friends, we had our radio and we could hear the Voice of America in Russian, and we did what they suggested and now we are old enough to understand that it is very dangerous for our kid and not only for him, for us too, but we did the best we could. We evacuated Serge's mother again. She didn't want to go - "You're crazy, its not so dangerous." Nobody understood.

(*Serge*: It is very common for the Soviet government to tell the people that everything is good, everything is fine, only good and they don't tell anything bad. The Soviet people didn't know about disasters, so many bad things happened in those years in Russia. And now that this *Perestroika* started, people started to hear many things from the government, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, we can see that it is not so good, it is really very bad.

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(It was like that all the time, even when World War II started. People didn't know exactly what was going on, because the government told them, "Our Army is strong and it will beat the Fascists." But, the Army couldn't win and one town had to leave and then another town had to leave and so the Fascists came close to Kiev and then people understood that we would be crushed by the Fascists and a lot of people started to go to the East. But the Russian Government didn't tell anybody to go. They indicated the only thing that should leave was important papers and important people.)

Nobody told the Jews, "You have to go. Go from here or you will be killed!" And a lot of people believed it would be all right and they were killed at Baby Yar.

This was the same problem after the Chernobyl disaster, nobody said, "You should probably go from here and take your child." It happened that the Ministry of Health told all the people it wasn't dangerous but they could do whatever they wanted. Now we know that it was very, very dangerous. But this is the common way in Russia, no one tells of dangers, only the good things, nothing bad.

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People didn't know anything because they didn't get any information.

(When the Chernobyl disaster happened, you could only get information from the American radio stations. There was a lot of information about medicines, and you should do this and you should do that. Russian Government said nothing, and this is usual in Russia. So people believed the government and they didn't know what was going on.)

I remember the last time when we were in the Soviet Union and we wanted to send our parcels with books here. We put this parcel in the seat on the bus and there was one woman and she didn't like this and she said, "Kikes, go away to your Israel." And I answered, "I'd like to, but it is very hard." So, you can accommodate for any condition. In the Soviet Union, in America, in Israel, people can adjust, so we can too. We adjusted to life in the Soviet Union and it was not a big surprise for us, to hear this kind of thing.

(Serge: What is going on in Russia now is not good. This *Perestroika* has been going on now for three years and

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it gets worse and worse each day. It will probably not be any good for some years. There may be another kind of Civil War or Revolution, I don't know.)

As I understand, we can't do anything, because the government doesn't respect people - people's lives mean nothing. On the contrary, when the government doesn't work for the people, they are very talkative. A lot of information came from different places in Russia. We know that in the forties, more people were killed than were killed during the World War. Killed by Stalin and his staff.

(Serge: It is very interesting. When we studied in school, the history of Stalin was not mentioned. It looks like it doesn't exist. I told you the government only tells you good things and what they want you to know about these times. Now we find that there is a lot of history outside the Soviet Union that we never heard of. Even now, a lot of students in Russia don't pass the exam about History because, everybody knows that the textbooks lie, lie, lie.)

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You should know that the History of the Soviet Union is a common subject in absolutely all institutes and universities. Not History of Soviet Union but history of the Communist Party!!! Makes no difference if you are artist or doctor, you should study this for at least three years. You have to know the history of the Communist Party.

They never mentioned any Jews being part of the Communist Party. They just talk about the Soviets - a new people. They never mention that the founders were Jews, or Ukrainians, or Russians. We got a bunch of magazines in New York, they are very, very progressive magazines from the Soviet Union. In this magazine they put all kinds of true information for people in the Soviet Union. They tell people the truth about their past history.

My mother, when I was already an adult, told us about some very, very sad stories about the history of those times. Like a history of doctors. A very famous history that most doctors in those times, who were Jewish people, and a lot of professors who were very famous specialists. They were big among the specialists in America and abroad,

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and they were Jews. Stalin was anti-Semitic and the government said that these people in the white uniforms were killers.

(Serge: In the early 1950s the Stalin government decided to move all Jewish people from the European part of the Soviet Union to the Far East. There was a very small area where they decided to move all the Jews. The only thing that saved the Jews, was Stalin's death. Because if he had lived a few more years all the Russian Jews would have gone to Siberia.)

(Serge: Actually, we had a lot of jokes about Siberia. There were really not so many people who were sent there.)

You didn't know about this, because you weren't interested in it. Okay. We weren't interested in this because we were a target and we worked very hard. We weren't interested in politics because we would read one thing in the paper and think about other things. You know, we were living together for ten years in the Soviet Union, we were

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married there. And during these ten years we didn't read newspapers. We would watch news on TV but that was it.

Our parents were not interested in these things. And we didn't discuss politics or Jewish culture in Russia. We did not discuss this in the family or elsewhere. We didn't know anything and we weren't interested in what we read in the paper because they would say, "This is good, and that is good." We could look outside and know that this was not the truth. So, we did not really get good information. We had no information except the Voice of America. And we could only catch this in the deep night when we were sure no one else could hear.

A lot of people, and our friends, also listened to this but no one tried to discuss it. You could be put in prison for this.

If people, for a long time, cannot discuss political issues, we tried not to do it at all. If you tried to go against the government, you could be put in prison. We were young, we had to study, we were very busy and we had our own lives to work on. After we were refused permission

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to leave in the Soviet Union we decided to live very quietly, especially when we, fortunately, found jobs. This record about how we attempted to leave Russia, it was all about us. The only thing which is allowed in Russia, is to work, work, work, and to read Pravda. But to really understand what was going on? No.

None of our close friends were ever sent to jail but we heard about those people whom we didn't know. Such names, and probably you can meet someone we know very well, and they would ask if we remembered so-and-so and that they were put in prison. People know not to ask dangerous questions. We did not want to get in trouble.

I know now that there are no Refuseniks left in the Soviet Union. Our friends were Refuseniks, they were very active as students but now they are ?

(Serge: They had a lot of trouble in Russia. The police would sometimes come to their house and make investigation. They reported first my girl friend's husband and made him leave Kiev. He was sent to Siberia.)

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It is important to us that our son understand his Jewish background because our culture, our Jewish history, was stolen from us, we had this stolen from us and we want Eugene to really be proud that he is Jewish. The same way others are proud they are Armenian, or Russian. That it is more important that he knows these differences are not important, that the kind of personality one has, and if you are a good and intelligent person, this is more important than anything else, in my opinion. Because a people without roots is not a good thing.

(Serge: It is hard for us to know what else might be important to tell you about. If you would like to know more about our life in Russia, or our life here, or the history of our families, I don't know what would be interesting.)

You know, we are thirty-five, and we lived thirty-four years in the Soviet Union. We had many sad, and funny, and interesting stories. I know we all have these stories, and I don't know which would be best to tell you. It is also hard, because of the English. Sometimes I can't find the right words to explain.

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I can say that I was very surprised here when I got my job in the J.C.C. and the first event we had there was the Shabbat Basket delivery and I saw maybe twenty or more American-Jewish families, young like you and we are. They came, all families, kids, even babies, and they took this basket and they spent the whole time with their kids and friends to do something very important to them. They took these baskets and they gave their time to say, "Shalom," to unknown people, to strangers. After a regular working day. And I understand that in America it is very good to be a volunteer. This we did not see in the Soviet Union. I think it is great, it is terrific.

(Serge: In the Soviet Union we didn't know anything about Jewish history or Jewish culture, or language. We knew that we were Jews, but what did it mean? There it was not something good.)

All our friends send their kids to the Shalom Sunday School at the J.C.C. Most of them send their kids to Russian-Jewish schools. I know that we didn't have a chance to do a circumcision on Eugene when he was born so we have

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had this done now. My brother now has two sons, eighteen and six, so next week we have appointments to have the circumcisions for the both of them. And our neighbors, our friends, they live upstairs, and they did the circumcision yesterday.

(Serge: We know this is not the most important thing, but people never knew about their culture and now they are trying to participate in all the activities. And it is very good for us.)

We go with Eugene on some Sundays to the school, and he likes it very much. He likes to go to school and to the Sunday School because they are always doing something very interesting.

(Serge: Once we were very surprised. We were strolling the street with our friends, and the children were playing and then we realized that they were singing songs in Hebrew. Our sons! They really enjoy this and they never did this before. It will come to be their nature the more they understand.)