

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

VICTOR "M"

Architect
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PhD.

BIRTH: May 29, 1952, Moscow

SPOUSE: Mila K., 1954

CHILDREN: Larry, 1979, Moscow

PARENTS: Yevgeny M., 1927 -

Raisa B. M., 1925 -

SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of
Chicago

NAME: **VICTOR A.**

DATE: March 20, 1990.

Interviewer: Elaine Snyderman

I grew up as a small child in the city of Moscow. We lived in an area of many different kinds of families. There was no area in Moscow set aside for different backgrounds of people, they are all mixed, there is no division nor any nationalistic area at all.

There was no such thing as community in Moscow, it is a very big city, very homogeneous. Not separate communities at all, it is only in America that we have seen this.

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In our family, I was an only child. My father was a doctor, and my mother is a doctor, but they have now retired. My mother is a gynecologist and my father deals with infections - infectious diseases. Actually he was not in the Ministry of Health, he was an administrator for many years.

We cannot say how our standard of living compared to our neighbors because we cannot say that we were living in an area with a certain income, so I cannot compare the way we lived in this manner. There may be fine, highly educated, people and right next door would be very poor people. The neighborhood was really very mixed.

Our life, in comparison with our surroundings in Russia, was Good - not Bad. When I was living with my parents, we had a nice apartment, it was big, it was three rooms, I cannot describe it in detail. It was something like the apartment we live in now. But this was rare in Moscow. Usually people there live in tiny apartments. This was in a large building. Practically everyone in Moscow lives in a high-rise apartment, there is no such thing as individual houses in Moscow.

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The building was built in 1953, it was not too old. Actually, it was built shortly after I was born. Actually, I do not remember a lot from my childhood. I remember more about what it was like when I was older, in school - I mean, about fourteen or fifteen years old. Both my parents were working and I remember more about school than about my home. In Russia, unlike here, children can stay in school after their classes are over, until time for their parents to come home. I guess this is similar to what you call day care. Other than that, it was much like public school here.

It was a very good school, and I felt I had a nice childhood. I graduated from a specialized English school. I started studying English when I was in the second form, second grade - when I was about eight years old. But, I was very slow in English. We studied English four or five days a week, about 45 minutes per class.

It is difficult for me to remember anything extraordinary when I was growing up. I don't remember any special holidays or events. My parents were very busy, they worked

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very hard. Their salary was not very good but was good enough according by Soviet standards.

I was supposed to help out around the home but I was not very good at this. I guess I was a bit lazy, but the house was empty all day and it was very small, so there was not much to do. My mother prepared the meals, she would stop on the way home, to pick up the food for the evening meal, this is very common in Russia. I don't remember what time we ate our dinner when I was a child, but when I was older, it wasn't too late, about 6:00 or 7:00 PM. Not too late.

We did not really have a Jewish life in our home. But they don't let you forget that you are Jewish. On your passport it is written that you are a Jew - not Russian or Georgian, but Jew. My classmates in school knew that I was Jewish. There was a Register Book at school where everything was listed, name, address, nationality, parents, all stuff relating to the student. In all the people in my class, I was the only one who was a Jew. I didn't feel too bad about this, no one made a big issue of it. Of course, when I was very young, maybe I felt some discomfort because

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I was not like others, because I did not understand what this was, but it was not a serious thing.

My grandparents spoke Yiddish. They were around when I was very little and sometimes they spoke Yiddish together. Sometimes. They were much closer to the Jewish life before the Revolution. Both my grandfathers and both my grandmothers had good Jewish backgrounds, maybe not religious background, but they were brought up in the Ukraine, in Jewish neighborhoods.

There are a lot of Jewish jokes in Russia, you know, Jews themselves like to make these jokes. But there was nothing seriously wrong in my childhood about my being a Jew.

In my home, we did not celebrate any Jewish holidays. The tradition was lost after the revolution, especially in the big cities. If they existed somewhere, it was not in the big cities, not in Moscow. In Kiev? maybe; in Odessa? maybe, but not in Moscow. There were very few religious Jewish families in the city, not just religion, Jews tried

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to forget their Jewish background because there was a feeling that there was no missionaries any more, just culture. Everybody was different but there were no differences from one another. This was a very strong feeling in the country, especially among educated Jews. Those who were living far from the capitols, such cities as Moscow and Leningrad, not very well educated because - well they were continuing to lead a Jewish life, but not in the cities.

Some of the first political discussions I became aware of were when I was about thirteen or fourteen years of age. I remember they talked about - people all around were criticizing Communism, the way of life, and the politics. This was after Stalin but people felt it was safe to make these criticisms in your own house, among your own friends.

My parents had mostly Jewish friends. The Jews did have some common complaints that were different than the non-Jews, because of some persecution they experienced. No, not really persecution, more discrimination. To some extent, their opportunities were limited. My father definitely felt he had been held back in his field, because he was a Jew. It was difficult for Jews because Jews in

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general, were not allowed to have certain official positions.

How and when this all began in Russia, I do not know. But then it began to be a common State policy against Jews. I do not know why, exactly. None of my parents had friends who were arrested or anything like that.

I do remember one thing about the "Doctor's Plot" back in 1952. My father had graduated from the Institute, what you call a University here, in 1953. Just after the doctors' case, so he was not allowed to enter the line of work that he wanted to. This was research, it was not logical, but he was sent to work in a village. This was not only because he was a Jew, most doctors were sent to work in villages, like a charity, in the country, for the country, so it was not an act of discrimination. By discrimination, it would be that he was sent to work at a research institute in Moscow, but then he was not allowed to enter. He was good enough, one of the best, but he had to practice in a small city. We can say it was discrimination; it was not really a tragic situation but he was disappointed. He was qualified but he was turned away. Of course, he was

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not the only one who was not allowed to enter, both Jews and other Russians.

At a very young age I decided that I wanted to be an architect. My parents were pleased with this decision. I have some talent in drawing and architecture is a very well established profession in Russia. I applied and was accepted into the School of Architecture. Of course, the government paid for my education. This was one of the best things in Russia. I was typical in this.

Our life in Russia was very smooth, very good. My wife and I decided two years ago (1988) that we would like to leave the Soviet Union. My relatives left Russia, my cousin left first. Some other friends began leaving in the 70's. But, after school I ended my post-graduate course and then I had a very good job. I received my Masters Degree at the Moscow School of Architecture and then went to work at the State Company for Housing and while I was working I also did my research and dissertation for my PhD. This is not unusual in the Soviet. There are a lot of research centers where you can work and complete your degree.

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My dissertation was on housing, different technical devices that make things work better. All the architectural parts of housing. It has always been difficult in the Soviet Union to get housing completed quickly and efficiently to meet the total need. There is always a demand for cheap and typical housing. "Typical"- this is the policy of building in Soviet Union because typical, or standardized, housing is cheaper to build when the mechanical problems have been solved. If you are engaged in housing and the architecture of housing, this is what you are working toward.

I was interested in all kinds of buildings, and I had many different projects. I had entered this company and so this was what I worked at. I worked there for thirteen years, it became boring. It did seem that I would be doing the same thing over and over, not because everything was boring, I managed to do some interesting things, I had fun with some small projects, but it is difficult to stay at the same point for years and years.

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Those I knew, who had emigrated to the United States, no, no, a close friend of my parents went to Israel, but the friends of my age mostly went to the United States. My wife was also very interested in making a change. Things change so quick, I think I would have wanted to move on. The only problem was my parents. Don't forget, I have no brothers or sisters. I had been thinking of this for many years, since my best friend left in 1979 or 1980. Since then, we were seriously thinking about it. But, it was so far, it was so difficult to decide.

My wife and I had different work situations, I had a very good career, and some recognition. I had a book published. I had some very interesting projects. I built a series of small, modest houses and then I participated in several competitions and won several awards.

The State published my book. It was about residential interiors. It was written for the general public. They would learn how to arrange furniture, how to choose color for your apartment, what kinds of furniture there are, how to put together a kitchen, all kinds of things like that.

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So the government was trying to encourage people to live better, with more comfortable things. Of course, there are a lot of facts about Russia that you do not know here. You hear that Russians are all so poor, this is not especially true, at least in Moscow. The standard of living for educated people in Moscow is kind of high. People are more interested in culture, they do not watch so much television. They are interested in literature, etc., of course, they do not have the opportunity to buy cars and houses and they spend more time in cultural pursuits.

We had no problems when we made application to leave. No problems at all. This was in March of 1988. We got clearance for the States in June of 1988. Things were moving very quickly then. My parents were pleased with our decision. At their age, they felt making such a change themselves would have been very difficult. Yet they did not try to do this when they were younger. I would like for them to join us here, and they will apply. When, depends on our decisions. They will be in Washington late this year.

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We arranged and paid for our own transportation here and we arrived in November of '88. It took us several months to arrange everything and we came through Austria and Switzerland. Also, we stayed two and a half months in Austria and Italy, it was great, I worked there as a tour guide. I could use my knowledge of architecture in Rome and Venice. It was quite nice, we had a very good time in Venice. We stayed in Ladispoly, a little place near Rome where very many Russians live.

It is difficult to describe our life here in America. Things are very different here. Everything is new and difficult. There is some feeling that we should learn more about our Jewish background, but not merely from a religious aspect. Our son wants to learn more, to do more. It is interesting to see a Jewish Community and to find Jewish organizations.

I have relatives here in Chicago, they have been here for eight years. They sponsored us so that we could come here. It did not cost him anything, but he sent a letter saying he could take care of us, as close friends. We liked Chicago because it is a big city and we came her also

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because we were a bit afraid of New York. There is not a good Russian community there (what does 'bad Russian' community mean?) --- Well, there are specials always on cable TV, we watched them and then I saw those very sharp characters and there are a lot of problems. There is a sort of Russian-Jewish Mafia there in New York.

Architecture here in Chicago is very good, the technical field here is very good, we felt it might be easier to find jobs here.

When we came to Chicago we stayed at my relatives house for a while, three weeks. My relative had applied through the Jewish Family Service here, so he referred me there. Also we went through HIAS, because they had contacted him when he came over and interviewed him. They contacted him to see if he was willing, or able, to be a sponsor.

We started working in March. Our son was able to start into school right away. He had studied for two years in the special English school. He had a comparatively easy time at school, he had close friends that he knew. He also

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makes friends easily and is much more secure than others. It was not difficult for him. At first he went to a public school, but then we received a scholarship for a Jewish school, Hillel Torah. But, we feel that there is less education for him here than there was in the same grade in Moscow. He is now in the seventh grade and in Moscow the seventh grade is very serious - physics, chemistry - very technical. Very serious in literature. Lots of competition in sports in Russia.

We don't feel there is a conflict between what he is learning at the Jewish school and what he learns in the family.

In Italy and Austria we got a lot of help from the Joint Distribution. Our way of life in Russia was very different, we did not have any money. We sold what we had. What we earned there went toward the necessities, not for a car, or things like that. We came on the standard route, Italy, Rome and then the United States. We worked there while our papers were being processed. When we arrived in Chicago, the Jewish Family Service paid for our apartment, they gave us food, they gave us contacts, they gave us medical insurance for a certain period of time - which was

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very good. The Family Service helped us, with school, with counseling and guidance. The supervisor we dealt with was very good. She was Russian, she had been here about fifteen years, her name was Ida Bichkopf, she was excellent.

Now I am working for the second week on my second architectural job. My first job was with a medium-sized architectural firm. I am now at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

What I miss most about Russia is my parents. In Russia there is difference between Russian, Jewish or Georgian. Here we are all Russians. If I had Jewish friends still in Russia, I would be concerned about them. Things change very quickly and It is amazing for us, we were not concerned about ourselves when we were there, but the change has been so quick. *Glasnost* has been good in many ways, but Jews are having a more difficult time. I hope that our parents are not in any danger. I don't think that they would allow actions against Jews in Moscow. The population in Moscow is well educated and I don't think there is a large background there for this movement. I

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hope so, but things are completely different since we are here.

Pamjat'? -- they are difficult but I don't think they have real support. But, people are so afraid of everything, they are so full of anger against the government, against the system. They want to find someone to accuse with their oldest faults, their historical faults, the Jews are obvious, some of them were the highest, first Communists. Of course, they were thrown out completely from the party, and the high ranks of government, completely from the higher ranks. As a rule they were allowed to be engaged only in Science or Industry but not in official circles.

ADDENDUM:

I think that you are not right when you say that all Russians hate Jews. It is the common anti-Semitism that is everywhere else. For hundreds of years there have been many Jews in the Soviet Union so anti-semitism is higher there than it would be in China where there are no Jews..

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You are wrong when you say they don't want us to leave, they are pretty good to them - "Go to your Israel" they say. It is not that they invited me because they wanted to convince me, not they, themselves, but there is in Russia an official point of view or policy and it is the official action that you are doing if you are an official on the Civic Council. So if you are an official you have to give the official party policy and opinion first and, on the other side, you want some things yourself. So they wouldn't even try to convince me now not to leave Russia but -it was a policy!

Somebody convinced them that they must try to persuade people into not leaving, so they try to convince them, especially young people, not to go. Particularly the well-educated ones. Now they are concerned that a lot of well-educated people are leaving. I have an architectural degree and this is a very highly educated level. But they are now letting all Jews go. They didn't want us to leave simply because this is the official policy. I don't know why, I think they are concerned about the political base of Russia when so many people are leaving.

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ADDENDUM, August, 1990.

(You said something about your father suffering discrimination after the Doctors Plot, and after he finished at the Medical Institute in 1953. You said that he was sent to work at a research institute but then he was not allowed to enter.)

I wouldn't say that it was a real suffering from the system but it was, of course, one of the cases of discrimination. Because, after graduation among the best my father was sent to a very prestigious research center, in Moscow. The best students are usually sent there for prestigious research work, to gain their Doctorate Degree and so on.

But it was just the period of the Doctors Plot, in 1953, so my father was not allowed to enter and the only reason for that was because he was a Jew. And he was sent to a small village to practice. Although most of the doctors in that period were sent to small villages for practice, so I don't think it was a real suffering or very cruel discrimination. I wouldn't say so, but it is unfair

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and it was a one of the cases of anti-semitism. That is what I would think.

(You, yourself, felt that you had not experienced anti-semitism, but you knew that your father had?) Yes. (How come you didn't? how do you explain this?) You know, there was a certain circle in Moscow, now everything is changed, by the way. I am speaking about my time being after my Institute, after my School of Architecture, in certain circles of architectural institutions and offices and studios, where there is no problem of anti-semitism. Sometimes, it is a little bit exaggerated, the suffering that Jews came through, or are coming through, in Russia. I am not comparing it with the times now, because all this *Pamjat'* and all this Fascist stuff, it is disgusting, a very terrible thing. But, when I was young, after the Institute there was no such environment that you could say was unbearable for Jews. I don't think so. At least I didn't experience it.

(Since you have been here, have you felt yourself changing in some ways? in adapting to the American way of life?)

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It is difficult to say, certainly we have changed, and changed a lot. We have changed in our attitudes toward life, in our attitude towards perspective of our life, in our - I should say - responsibility for ourselves, for me and for our family. Which I feel is much stronger here than in Russia. I feel much more responsibility for our family and for our future. (Why is that?) Because, the work situation is more tough, and though we are really much better, much better than in Russia, and we enjoy this life, I am aware that tomorrow I can lose my job or I should save some money for my retirement, for example.

I should save some money or do something for my kid to enter college, or enter university, a problem that we didn't have in Russia. We want it to be a good university, a good college. Now we can't even afford to think about a good education. I mean, paying from our own pocketbook, with our own money. All this I call responsibilities.

I am praying my parents will come here in a year or two, and I will be responsible for them. They should begin a new life here, they will have no money, no savings, and

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so I will be responsible for their life, more than I would be in Russia. Lots of things like that.

(Would you say you have some regrets?) No. I am not saying that. On the contrary, I say that maybe this is the real life what we are dealing with here. You know, in Russia, maybe you are more sure in your future - maybe. But, what future is there? It is minimum money, it is being under the yoke of full politics, that is the future that we had there. We won't think about that. We have known these problems, some of us, but some of the things in Russia we liked better. For example, education. The problem of education is solved much better in Russia than it is here, I think so. Maybe I will change my mind. But now, it seems to me that it is much better there. The free education is a very good advantage. I think it is a crucial advantage in Russia. That may be the only thing that I can regret in the United States.

(At this point, we are summarizing, I thought I would give you the opportunity to make some sort of a statement, if you wish to, to sum up your observations and I am curious as to whether you found any kind of a kinship here,

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a linkage with other Jewish people, even though the practices here are different than the practices there. Or did you feel that these people have really nothing to do with you but they are offering opportunities to Soviet Jewish immigrants?)

Certainly, all the environment in the United States makes me to understand that here belongs a certain group of people, which is very clear here, and you should know and should understand and feel yourself a part of the Jewish community - although you are not religious, or so. And certainly I feel myself more Jewish than I felt in the U.S.S.R. Because of the fact of some kind of discrimination or persecution or unfair attitudes, since I was a Jew - it is like a negative experience to be a Jew. Here, I have a positive experience of being a Jew, of belonging to a certain community, and I enjoy that!

(Have you been to any Jewish weddings, funerals, or circumcisions in the Soviet Union?) No. (Was your father circumcised?) Yes. I was not. Because my parents were very far from any religious tradition. Although they did not forget that they were Jews, and they felt very deeply

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that they were Jews, but, they didn't seem that they were close to religious tradition.

(Now, your son has been circumcised here, would you consider being circumcised?) No. I didn't think about that. I didn't feel this was necessary.

(Your identity with the Jewish population, is it something that you can define any more than you have?)

It is difficult to say, for example, when I read in the newspaper here, it always says the Korean community, Black community, another kind of national community and when I read that I felt that I have my own community. This is my own Jewish community, of the Jewish population of the United States. I did not feel that in Russia. In Russia, I simply had a stamp in my passport that I was a Jew and that is why I was not the same as any others. Here, there is a feeling that I have. I'm not sure if that is clear, or not.

(Is there any other comment that you would like to make -In terms of the things we have discussed, or even something that we haven't discussed?)

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No, nothing, maybe you have something?

(I think that you have answered most of my questions,
and you are the kind of person I could ask questions of,
indefinitely. Thank you.)