

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

LARRY "M"

Student

BIRTH: November 15, 1976, Moscow

SPOUSE:

CHILDREN:

PARENTS: Mila "M", 1954, Obuchava

Paul T., Moscow, father

Victor "M", Moscow, adoptive father, 1988

SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Arseny K., 1927 -

Nellie N. K., 1929

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):
Hillel Torah Day School

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of
Chicago

NAME: LARRY "M."

DATE: July 28, 1990

INTERVIEWER: Elaine Snyderman

(Can you tell me what your earliest memories are?)

Well, I remember a long corridor and I was always playing there. I had really a lot of toys in a huge box. I was always playing with my toys in that corridor and they were going down the stairs sometimes.

I also remember going to the hospital. (Because you were injured?) I don't remember why, but I remember I went with my Teddy bear and it was a little Teddy bear. I was five years old.

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(Who took care of you when your mother was at school or working?)

My grandmother. My mother's mother took care of me most of the time but in the beginning it was my father's mother. (And that was Paul Troytsky's mother?) Yes.

(Did your grandmother tell you stories or teach you any things?) Yes, a lot of fairy tales. (Were the fairy tales your father's mother told you much different from the one's your mother's mother told?) My mother's mother really did not tell me a lot of fairy tales. Actually, it was my grandfather who told me the stories, my mother's father. After the War, what happened, and things like that. He told me what part of the war he was in. (Do you remember any of those stories?) Yes, most of them were about sailing into Leningrad, he was a sailor. During the Siege of Leningrad. He told me a lot of stories like that, some of them were really strange, some of them were interesting.

(Could you tell me one interesting one, or just a little about it?) It was about his ship, trying to go through the river, into Leningrad. Well the ship was

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trying to go into the river and the river was frozen so they had to hit the ice with the ship and the ice would pile up, pile up, pile up, until they could not move anymore. Then they had to call a special ship that could go through the ice easier and have it show them the way.

I don't think that is a very interesting story, but that is one that I remember right now. He usually told me stories about how (?) got port (fork) (?), what kind of engine it had, how the cannon worked and the machine-guns, you know, anything like that. (So do you think you know how things work a little better than some of your friends?) I know a little better than other kids in Russia, and much better than most kids in America. Here, not a lot of kids have any interest in that stuff.

(Did you think that your friends were serious about school and about planning their future, even when you were little?) How little do you mean? (As little as you can remember.) No, I don't think so. They start to get serious about it in Third Grade. They talk about getting a job, and who do they want to be, what are you going to do in your life.... Also, we had much more like - well, I do

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not think it is a very mature thing to do, but we would like, fight in parties, with snowballs, and we would make strategies against each other and I was a leader of one of the parties because I could not stand anybody standing over me! (You called your teams 'parties'?) Yes.

We had team names, like our's was the English Party, some teachers were like 'English Queen', we also had 'German Queen' and 'French Queen' in our school. We were defending the interest of our class in the English. There were some other people involved, fighting with them and making some bad things happen to them, the whole thing was fun! (Were they teaching you History at the same time?) The started teaching us that in the Fourth Grade.

(Did you know at that time that you had a plan about growing up? Did you think that you might know then what you wanted to be?) Yes. I wanted to be a doctor. (In Third Grade?) Yes. (Have you ever changed you mind, as you got older?) No, so far so good.

(That's even before you knew your mother's parents, right?)

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Yes. They are both doctors but my great-grandfather of my real father, was a doctor and he was killed by Stalin. (Do you know why this was?) I think he had something, I don't remember what, he had some views on things that were not liked by Stalin.

(When did you find out you were Jewish?)

I'm not sure I remember that exactly. I knew it for a while before the time we left Russia, I did. (Did you know you were Jewish before your mother married Victor?) I think she told me about it. I wasn't very little, but with a little sense, anyway.

(Was your real father Jewish?) Yes. (So, though your mother's passport shows that she is Russian, she chose to marry Jewish men?) Yes. I don't think she really liked, or was looking for a Jewish man. I think she would marry a man who liked her, I don't think his being Jewish was a main point. (We don't know, though?) Well, I can't really say but that is my opinion.

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(Do you remember any Jewish holidays being observed?)
Yes, once. I was in Second Grade - no, I was in Kindergarten, yet. My mother and I and some others, I don't remember who exactly, went to a synagogue and I was sitting on the person's shoulders and I was looking around. I didn't know what it was all about. Maybe it was Simchas Torah. (How old do you think you were then?) I was probably five or six years old.

(That was the first time you were in synagogue?) I was not really 'in', the doors were open and everybody was outside looking. (Did you feel good or bad, are anything in-between, to being Jewish?) I felt that is was normal.

(When your parents told you that you would be coming to the United States, how did you feel about that?) First, I didn't really feel it would be any fun, I mean, we had TV there, so there was nothing special about that. And I really did not take it very seriously. Then, when we actually left, I was very upset for a few, maybe even (minutes? months?). Then I started to get over it and now we are here (?)_____.

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(What did you think you would be upset about?) Probably about leaving my friends and my family, mostly my father. (Do you write to them?) Yes, I just finished writing some letters.

(When you left, two years ago approximately, do you remember what you were studying in school there?) The last thing that we did over there, that I remember, was Algebraic equations. Simplified. I was in Sixth Grade. They were not really hard. What I am studying now, with my Dad, is much harder. (This is your class work at Hillel Day School, that you are studying with your Dad?) No. My Dad is just giving me some problems to work. It really helps me.

(When you were still in school in Russia, did your parents ever talk about politics at home?) Yeah. I wasn't part of the discussion very often. I remember me and Dad were arguing about, usually just History, not politics. We were like talking about the Jerry invasion in Russia and how the Germans were able to conquer so much land and how Hitler came to power; and something about Lenin, and that he was Jewish, and how smart he was. And things like that.

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My Mom was always on the right side. She was very 'right'; not 'left' like a Communist; she was as 'right' as she could be!

(And your father?) My mother was much more conservative. My father is, I think he has an opinion to himself; which I like. He does not stay stubborn and by one idea, I think that is not wrong but it is not very good thing when you are in politics, or even talking about politics. Because, you have to see all of the visible situation, which even I don't do, for example, in the Israeli situation. We talk often about that. You have to see both sides of the question, and I see only one. And then my Dad always shows me the other side. So, it is very, very nice of my Dad, and very smart to see both sides, not just stick with the one side that he is on.

(When you came here, what was the biggest change for you?)

My family and my friends, in Russia, it was much more interesting to talk with them, the friends my age. We talk about different things - like politics, we talked about more mature things. From politics to things like

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mathematics or sometimes history, you know. We would discuss that. Here, all they do is play games. Okay, I can live with that. But most of them I know, are really not interested in learning anything. (Why do you think that is true?) Because most of the people I have met, which is not really a lot of people, but most of them I have met to judge, were people who were not very interesting to talk to. They did not have enough -- You see, it is a great way to argue, to know a lot, and the friends I knew in Russia were interesting to talk to and argue with because they knew really, really a lot. And they were interesting to argue with, because they could give you good arguments, not like here, you know.

(Was that because they did more reading?) We did much more reading there, much. (What were you and they reading?) The most significant book was probably The Three Musketeers, I read. I also read some books on Russian History, Ivanho, Tom Sawyer, and different things like that. (You were really reading in the world literature?) Yes. (What had you read in Russian literature?) I have read Pushkin, I read Gogol, and I read other Russian authors. Soviet authors, too. (These books are considered

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reading for adults, here in the United States, but children in the Soviet Union are encouraged to read the great classic writers?) Oh yes. It was absolutely normal, you know. They were usually simple to read. Sometimes it would be difficult to concentrate on a subject because sometimes the passages were long and things like that but still it was very, very interesting. It was probably the most interesting thing I did in Russia.

(This literature that you were reading, it was not rewritten for children? it was the original version?) Yes, it was the original version, no difference. The best thing I think that I have read here in English was The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. A friend of my Mom gave me a list of books, good American books, science fiction and others I might be interested in. (Would you say you read more for fun, or for education?) I read much more for fun. That is also why I read in Russia. Because, you know, when you read, it just seems like a different - part, fun reading, part, education, you get both.

Most of the books that you get education from are not like books from mathematics, but you don't really read

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those books too often. I read one. It was called Elementary Algebra, for example, and it had exercises that I had to do. I cannot say that it was a very interesting text, you know, but most of the books that I read are for education and for fun, I learn a lot of things from books.

For example, when we argue with my father about different things, even about my catching birds, I bring examples from books, without even involving my Mom, I bring examples from books. So, books really allow me an education and fun.

(In Russia, among your friends and classmates, were there many Jews?) In my class, there were. My friends were partly Jewish, about equal. (Were you treated any differently because you were Jewish?) No, no, absolutely not. (So you never had any bad experiences because you were Jewish?) No. It was absolutely no difference here, either. I think the people are even friendlier here than in Russia.

(Your friends here, because you go to the Day School, might be more Jewish friends, is that correct?) Yes. I

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still have other non-Jewish friends, too. (Do you feel very comfortable in both worlds?) Yes.

(Is there any kind of conflict between the very religious education you get in the Day School, and the fact that your home life is not religious?) Not really, just sometimes my teachers some of them, start talking to me about having a lot of non-Jewish friends. You know, that is the part I do not like about that school. Because that is not true, it does not mean anything. There are some Jews who are worse than some Gentiles, and there is no problem about that, it is true, and we can't argue about that.

They tell me - - for example, my good friend, a Russian, whose name is Deema, well, a teacher said that he was using drugs because they live in a neighborhood where a lot of people use drugs. That is not fair, because she was judging, she was looking in his locker, and she was bugging him for the school year. I don't think this is the right way to come to a situation. She was getting him in trouble a lot of times.

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(This was here?) Yes, he is Jewish and he comes to Hillel Torah. He told me they even were talking with him about it. (There were kids in the neighborhood who approached him with drugs?) Yes. Of course, he is a very smart person, one of the smartest Russian kids in America and he was smart enough to say, "No." (Was that a problem in Moscow? Were there people who would approach kids and try to sell them drugs?) No, not really. Well, some teenagers would like organize themselves but they would not sell drugs, not that I know of. Organize themselves to get together to breathe in glue, for example. Because they didn't have any drugs there. They did, but it cost a lot of money to get them so - they would use stuff like that.

(Why do you think they did that?) There were two reasons. First, they tried to prove themselves. The same way people everywhere try to prove themselves. They want to prove to themselves that they can do something that is 'cool'. The other reason is that most of the people who use drugs are very insecure people, who cannot hold themselves together and say, "This is not really cool."

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(What about the dietary laws they teach at school?
how do you feel about those?)

I find those very difficult, because most of my life,
so far, I have lived without those laws. It is pretty hard
to go and change now.

(Do you remember eating any food -- ?) Matzo. I had
matzo about two days after I went to that synagogue for
Simchas Torah. Well, I knew there were Jewish organization
but I really was not interested, I had problems of my own,
my friends, - I really didn't have --. (What did you think
the first time you ate matzo?) Dry, it was very dry. We
did not put anything on it, we ate it plain. (?)
and egg.

(Do you remember eating any other foods, that would be
considered Jewish foods?) Fruits and vegetables! (Well,
I'm thinking about foods like - , some people talk about
gefilte fish as a Jewish food.) I don't like that. I ate
it in Russia. I had eaten strudel but I didn't know it was
Jewish food.

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(Did you ever have Hamantaschen?) Could you explain to me what that is? (Well, Hamantaschen, on Purim, are little pockets of dough that have fruit fillings, or poppy seeds in them?) The little triangles? No, I never had those in Moscow, only here.

(What about any other kinds of Jewish ceremonies? have you ever been to a Jewish wedding? or a Jewish funeral.) No, I don't - No.

(This is tough for me to ask, but it is on the list. What about the ritual of circumcision? Do you know anything about that?) I was circumcised here. When we came here. It was not frightening, and it was not really painful. (Was your father circumcised?) I have no idea!

(You are at a point in your life where you may, or may not, go back to a Jewish Day School. Would you be upset if you didn't?) Well, that depends on _____(?) Actually, I could live with a Jewish Day School. Without being upset. Of course, I might be upset leaving my friends that I have there. I'm used to that kind of change. I've

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changed seven schools in my life and it was nothing special.

(How do you explain the fact that you are such a steady person? and so mature for your age?) I don't know, I try to control myself. My father always tells me, "You always have to be in control." (But not everyone can do that.) It is very simple for me, to control your feelings and not to show them. But sometimes I just let them out of control. My father calls that "the theater" because then I start acting like I am on the stage! But I try to control myself.

(If you were going to draw a map of your future life, what are the things you would put on that map?) Okay. Sailboats, after medical school, then a house on a lake, or a house on the ocean. Good food, that is the important thing for me. Lots of fish. I liked fishing in Russia. I used to go fishing with my uncle. It was against the law. You see, there is a way, you can catch fish for nothing, just a stick, right? So what we would do was get a stick and on the string put a lot of hooks so a lot of fish would get caught on one string. Some people would get a lot of

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fish with dynamite or with a net, but we didn't do that. It wasn't on a river, it was a lake. I don't remember the name.

When my uncle's friends were over there, we did not catch anything at all. We caught a _____(?) fish. We started with a normal fishing pole and we got five fish. This was my mother's brother, Sergei.

(To go to medical school, what are you going to have to do?) I am going to have to get a very good education. (Where will you go to high school?) I haven't thought about that yet, I don't know a lot of high schools yet. (Are you more likely to go to a Jewish Academy, or to a public high school?) Public high school, I think. But I hope that after I finish that school I will be able to go to a good college.

(How do you feel you rank with your classmates? Supposedly, you should have a language handicap but it seems to me that you sound like a native speaker. When you came over, did you know English?) Oh yes. I had studied English in the Soviet Union from the Second Grade. First we

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spent one hour a day, and then in Third Grade, it was ninety minutes. I don't think my language and vocabulary developed good enough because I want to have an English accent. A real British accent, not American. I could probably develop that if I went to England! I really wanted to go to England, from the time _____(?)

If I could, I would like to go to England, both before, and after, I go to medical school! (Well, as long as we're making plans here, if you had your choice of any place to live in the whole world, what country would you want to live in?) England. I like it, it is ancient, there is a lot of sailing, British accents, nice food, nice people and the Beatles. (When did you first learn about the Beatles?) In Fourth Grade, my Dad told me about them. I have heard their music, and I have one disk of their's in Russia. A regular phonograph record, not compact disk.

(Have you ever studied a musical instrument?) No, just my voice, I learned that in school. I do sing. I don't study voice anymore. I would like to play guitar. I will try to find a school for this.

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(If you go on to a public school, do you think you will want to continue being Jewish in your practices? whatever they may be?) Well, you see, I am not really a religious person. I don't think that I have to be religious to be Jewish. Some people say you do, but I really do not agree with that because Jewish is a kind of _____(?) here. I mean that it is not really a religion, it is a group of people, who live in a certain area and have certain traditions. And, religion is only part of those traditions.

(What do you see as some of the other traditions that are not religious, to be Jewish?) Probably, living in Israel is one of them. But that is not absolutely necessary because it changed thousands of years ago. I might like to visit Israel but I think it is too dangerous a place to live in. Well, it is not because I'm scared. It is because the level of life is very low there. That is what I heard from people who really know about that.

By that, I mean that it costs more to live there. Here we live like this, but maybe in Israel we would not be this comfortable. (How would you compare the level of life

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here to the life you lived in Russia?) It is a jump up. Apartments are better here, schools, and services.

(But to go back to the ethnic differences, you said that you wanted to be Jewish but without the religious practices? Is that what you meant? What other practices are Jewish and not religious?)

Okay. Four of them I already said. Being nice to other people, but that is the main thing about Judaism, as a religion, you know. There is one main concept and all of religion is about it. And the concept that you should do unto other people the way you want people to do unto you. And this is a concept that should be in every single religion and I think that as a real Jew, you know, that is the concept that a Jew must follow.

(So for you, then, Larry, it is an ethical thing, more than it is anything external in the way of any kind of practices. For example, do you think that you would want to belong to a synagogue?) I might, but wouldn't be excited about it. (Do you have thoughts about whether you would want to belong to a religious synagogue, such as Orthodox; a Conservative, which is less traditional; or a

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Reform, which is the least traditional in their practices?)
Well, you know, what I think is that the Orthodox is the real, true religion. And Reform or Conservative are just the easy way to do it. So, I think that if you are going to follow anything, you should follow Orthodox, and if you don't follow the Orthodox rules you shouldn't go for Conservative or Reform. To me they are really like not believing in the religion.

(Is this a view that came from your family, from your school, or from yourself?) This came from myself, from being in different synagogues. It is from hearing their points of view and hearing different people.

(What, to you, is the best that American life can offer you? taking in all your views about ethics and other things?)

There are two things that I think are really very, very important to me. They are freedom and liberty; and, of course, the opportunity to do what I want. (Can we do everything we want?) I mean in the law. I mean, I could be a Senator, I could be anything I want, actually!

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(What do you miss about Russia? I know I asked you that before but I wanted to give you an opportunity to add anything you wanted.) My friends and my family, first. Probably, some pieces of nature, I don't know. Like the little animals, the environment. Some birds - - I never saw birds here like the Russian sparrow. To me they seem different. The Russian sparrows are little and they are kind of playful and they are much more interesting to watch. Some of the other places there I miss.

(What places are you thinking of?) I'm thinking forty-three kilometers from Moscow. There is a small forest, and it is filled with mushrooms, and flowers and berries, and the light and shadows, with the light with such a position it gives you very good look on how nature really should be. (Do you think you might ever go back to see these things?) Yes, definitely. I think I might go back in about two years. Not with my family, just to see my friends. I feel empty.

(Do you think that any of your relatives or friends there, will come here?) Yes, I think so. Sooner or later.

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(Is there anything that I didn't ask you, that you would like to talk about?)

I don't think so. We have covered a lot, it was a pleasure.