

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

GENNADY REZNIKOV

M.E., Moscow Automobile & Road Construction Institute, 1959
PhD., National Research & Scientific Power Source Institute
1971

BIRTH: April 16, 1937, Moscow

SPOUSE: Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov, August 11, 1937,
Moscow
Married, 1958, Moscow

CHILDREN: Sergey, October 8, 1965, Moscow, resides Chicago
Vladimir, May 16, 1970, Moscow, resides Chicago
Michael, 1979, Moscow, resides Chicago

PARENTS: Lev Reznikov, 1904-1979, Ukraine

Sofia Libinson Reznikov, 1906-, Byelorussia

SIBLINGS: two brothers, unnamed

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):
West Suburban Synagogue, Oak Park

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of
Chicago

NAME: **GENNADY REZNIKOV**

DATE: December 2, 1990

INTERVIEWER: Elaine Snyderman

(We talked about where you were born--in Moscow.)
Right.

(Your parents are Lev Reznikov and Sophia Lubinson Reznikov. He was born in Yunechah in the Ukraine in 1904 and your mother was born in Orsha in Byelorussia in 1906 or 1907. How did they come to Moscow?) After the revolution my parents came to Moscow. My father was an active young communist. He believed the Soviet regime would help Jews to get equal rights and to become equal with all other nations. Communist slogans were so attractive. They promised to make all people equal, to give them all rights and chances to be happy.

Gennady Reznikov

(Your father had strong beliefs, did his family experiences cause his activism? What were his parents like?) His father was a worker at a mill, some kind of middle level. He was a Jewish person in a small *shtetl*. His father had four children and he could make money for living of his family. So my grandmother didn't work. She was a housewife.

(What kind of education did your father have?) My father went to *cheder* and he learned Hebrew and Jewish history and Torah and so on. I don't know exactly how long, how many years he attended *cheder* and then-- I don't know. (Did he go to public school?) No, no. (He could read and write...) He knew Russian. But at home they spoke Yiddish. So he talked Yiddish with my grandmother, only Yiddish. (Do you know anything about your father's mother's family?) No, nothing.

(What about your mother?) It's a difficult question because her parents died with she was six. Her mother died when she was just four or three, and her father died when she was six. (How did they die?) I don't know. Maybe her

Gennady Reznikov

mother had cancer, and her father - I don't know the reason. (Who raised her?) Her elder brother and her sisters. She and two brothers and three sisters. Her parents had six children. All the children were older than my mother. She was the youngest. They helped her to grow up.

(Your parents met in Moscow?) Yes. (Why was your mother in Moscow?) Her sisters got married and their husbands went to Moscow and they took her with them. (What kind of education did she have?) She had a little school. She attended school seven or eight years, seven or eight classes. She didn't know Hebrew. (She went to Russian public school?) Yes, and she had the low education, maybe seven or eight years of school.

(What are your early childhood memories?) We lived on Arbat Street. We occupied a room in a very huge apartment. In this apartment lived eight families. There were forty people in one apartment. This apartment consisted of eight rooms. In each room lived one family. And each family had three-four-five people! So it was awful! It was a communal apartment. (How many children in your family?)

Gennady Reznikov

My mother gave to the world four sons. One died when he was four. I was the third son. My older brother was born in 1929, I in 1937 and my younger brother in 1950. So, she met my father in Moscow. Really, husbands of her sisters acquainted her with my father and they got married in 1928. And then our family began.

(What are your early memories? Were you ever alone?) We lived in one room. (Did you share a kitchen, a bathroom?) Everything. It's a real problem because everyone goes to work at the same time. So every time you're in the toilet it's a problem for the other people. (One bathroom for forty people?) Two toilets and one bathroom. And always people were standing in the corridor expecting that you leave [knocks on table]. So it was a real communal apartment.

(So your father was an ardent Communist?) Yes. (How did he feel about this type of life for his family?) First of all, he didn't have any choice and he saw that everybody around him lives in the same conditions, except for high-ranking party bosses. (Did he have rank?) No. When he was twenty, he was an active young communist, a member of

Gennady Reznikov

Komsomol. Unfortunately, I can't say that he understood -
[interruption]

(You say that people misunderstand the conditions; you feel strongly about those misconceptions. How would you describe those misconceptions?) I will try to describe my understanding of the misconceptions, because I have met a lot of American people who do not understand all our troubles. Every time they look at the troubles from the outside, and, as a rule, all of that is exaggerated - all these troubles. But they were real troubles, they don't need exaggeration. Because, you see, real grief, real tragedy don't need exaggeration. When you see people are dying, then there's no place for exclamations and so on. It's a real tragedy. It's very difficult to find a proper level to express in words these situations. As a rule, all newspapers, all reporters always try to find hot spots to exaggerate all events. The same picture in this case, I guess. So it's really difficult to find appropriate words to describe the real situation in order to help good understanding.

Gennady Reznikov

(So as a child growing up in these conditions-- this was normal.) Yes, it was normal. (So knocking on the bathroom door...) Normal. I was not hurt by all these conditions because it was my normal everyday life. I got used to this life. I did not know anything else. That's why I could not imagine anything else. I could imagine that it could be different, but it would be some kind of a dream, not real life.

(So while growing up, your family had private conversations, or could people overhear them?) First of all, let's remember the time we're talking about. It was the Stalinist era. That's why nobody was so brave to speak aloud of political problems, political troubles, political concerns. So if a wife and a husband spoke about something, they spoke privately, so that nobody, nobody else could hear.

(When did you begin to hear things?) I did hear. The first person to speak openly about political problems was my elder brother. He was eight years older than I and he read a lot of books. He was sharp enough to understand that this life was awful and that we lived in abnormal

Gennady Reznikov

conditions. And he spoke loudly in our room in this communal apartment. My parents were so afraid of his speeches that they tried to shut him up. I was, as all other children, I caught all these new ideas very fast and I began thinking of these words and began to compare official propaganda with real life, and I found a lot of discrepancies. He was the first person who taught me to analyze and understand life. I'm very grateful to him.

(Where is he now?) Oh, he died in 1979, the same year when I applied for emigration. When he died he was fifty. (That's young!) He was fifty. He died in 1979. He had a heart attack. He had his first heart attack ten years before that. His name was Yefim.

(Did he have trouble with the authorities?) He was interrogated. When he was twenty, a group of young students-- he belonged to this group-- I don't think they had a name, but they met in the Lenin Library and discussed books and political events and so on. They didn't have any specific goal. They were young and free, they were all at a very dangerous age, they were near twenty. Some of them were arrested. He was investigated and interrogated.

Gennady Reznikov

(Where did they take him?) They took him to the militia station. (Who arrested him--the KGB?) In Russia, secret police is always secret. So everybody was arrested by the militia, and behind them was the KGB. When secret, it's always secret.

(So he was taken to, for example, what's that famous center...) On Derzhinsky? Lyubanka? They took him to the militia station and interrogated him. He was very frightened. He was afraid he could be arrested. But fortunately, they let him go. (How long was he there?) Not more than several hours, but he was interrogated two or three times. They didn't have any proof that he was an active part of this group. (Was this a Jewish group?) This was long before Jewish discussions. It was in 1949, so it was... (But there were Jewish groups...) No, no. As a rule, in all of these groups, Jews had a part, they played a role, because all Jews were very active in Russia. So if you know that something happens, you can be sure that Jews are always involved. Because Jews were very active -- like yeast.

Gennady Reznikov

(In your family was there a recognition of being Jewish, an attempt to be Jewish?) No, it was very scarce. My grandmother was a real Jewish woman. She and my grandfather knew all Jewish things. (Mother's mother?) No, father's. (Did she live with you?) Yes. She was the only one of my grandparents that I knew. She went to synagogue every Saturday before the synagogue was closed in 1948. That day she returned from the synagogue in tears because it was the first time she couldn't pray! It was horrible, because it was the beginning of all these troubles with the so-called "cosmopolitism" in Russia. In the process of the so-called "Doctors Plot," "Murderers in white".

Do you know that at the end of his era, Stalin organized a process against the doctors? All these bloody things began in 1948. In 1948 all synagogues in Moscow were closed. All Jewish activity has been prosecuted. Jewish theater was closed, so everything. Then the anti-Jewish campaign began to grow. (And it was just the opposite in your household...) Grandmother was very religious and traditional. But the next generation, my father and mother, tried to assimilate. They tried to

Gennady Reznikov

become Russians. It was really a dangerous time to speak Yiddish. Nobody could speak Yiddish in the street. (Did you know Yiddish?) No!

My grandmother spoke with my father, but my elder brother tried to prevent that because he was afraid that I would speak Yiddish in the street and that it would be dangerous for me. (When did you realize what it meant to be a Jew?) At the same time. I was eleven years old. (It was dangerous to be Jewish...) Dangerous and very unpleasant because all my so-called friends teased me-- "zhid". (Around age eleven or sooner?) Sooner. I remember something from when I was seven.

(So you're getting older, and your parents are concerned...) But they did not try, they were so frightened, but they could not do anything! But nevertheless, they did not want to deny that they were Jewish. (Let me try: they knew they were Jewish, but they felt that they weren't Jewish, so they felt it was being imposed on them. They felt themselves to be just Russian like everybody else.) Yes, yes. (The Jewish part was not important...) Right.

Gennady Reznikov

But they were wrong because all Soviet propaganda - news, radio - tried to persuade people that Jews are so bad, that Jews betrayed Russian people. All bad features, all bad qualities characterized Jewish people. Everything you can read in the newspapers and magazines: stories about bad Jewish people with names, with typical Jewish names. Nobody wrote that he is Jewish, but they wrote Isaak, Solomon, and so on. All Jewish names, Abramovich, etc. It was an anti-Jewish campaign. You see, average people like my parents couldn't understand, so they, as I see it, they believed all the newspapers so they blamed these people. Because it was not Jewish people, it was specific BAD people. So they, with all other Russians, said that those bad people did bad things.

Now I will try to explain some double thinking of my parents. As you know, double thinking was the common way of thinking in the U.S.S.R.

My parents wanted to be like all other people, like Russian people. They wanted to be unnoticeable people, common people. They wanted to be undistinguishable. It was a safe way to survive. It was the easiest way. The

Gennady Reznikov

Soviet regime liked people who were like all the rest, and hated and persecuted those who tried to keep their individual features. It was one side of a coin.

But, at the same time, when my parents heard about somebody's marriage, their first question was if he (she) was Jewish. That was very important for them. That is why, since my childhood, I had know that I must marry a Jewish girl.

So my parents tried to assimilate but something in their mentality was strongly Jewish.

(Were the people in your apartment Jewish, non-Jewish?) Mixed. (Did they treat you differently during this time?) I cannot say that they all treated us differently. Because some were anti-Semites, and they treated us differently. Some were normal people. So, I cannot say that all people, but some of them. If they're anti-Semites, they'll treat you that way... in your everyday life, in your apartment... but something official... but it was a bad time because Jews were fired from their jobs. This is the late '40s and early '50s.

Gennady Reznikov

1948-1953, even '54. So those six years were terrible, awful.

(Was your father working?) My father lost his job.
(As...) He was an economist - some kind of accountant.
(Working with the distribution of goods and numbers?) He played with numbers. He had one column and another column, rows and columns, like math exercises. (So things were shipped based on his numbers?) Right. (Central planning?) From central planning he got these figures and divided these figures among... so it was some kind of distribution system. (What kinds of goods?) He never saw the goods, only numbers. And it was very simple work because he knew all the figures and so in the future he just wrote almost the same. (Not a challenging job?) NO. No job satisfaction. Low salary.

(So he loses his job...) Then he found the same kind of job at another place because his friend took him. You see, in Russia we could live only because we had a very good relationship between people and people get very low salary anywhere, that's why if [in the U.S.] you have one person who does this kind of job, in Russia this job takes

Gennady Reznikov

maybe ten to twenty people. (So you could have 10-20 people doing the same job...) Right. (So one person could leave and the job would go on...) Right. (So no one was essential...) No one was essential. That's why you know every job has - every boss knows exactly how many people he can hire. He can hire maybe five or ten additional people, because it was a state system. (A lot of waste?) Yes.

(Was your mother working?) Yes. I forgot the name of the position. *Prodavets*, a saleswoman. (Did she enjoy her work?) Oh, no. [in dictionary] Saleswoman. Oh, no, like shop assistant. She weighs the food, even bread. Cut it, weigh it, and take your money. Sausage - so she worked in a food store. That's why we had enough to eat. She worked as a saleswoman. (She worked at the counter--a counter clerk?) Yes. Sometimes she sorted the vegetables. (She took care of the produce section, too...) Yes. That's why we got additional food.

(Were you frightened?) We had a very low level of living. We never got enough money from one payday to the next. So that's why all the problems. That's why from age fifteen I decided to join military school, because they

Gennady Reznikov

promised to provide a uniform and food. So I tried to help my family because we didn't have enough money to live. And at that time I understood that I was a Jew, and that the doors were closed; that I couldn't join because I was a Jew!

(So what did you do next?) When I was seventeen I graduated from school. I was first student in my school. I had a gold medal. I had straight fives. I could not bring this medal with me into the United States. I used some kind of... (go-between?) Yes. My very good friends brought it here, and I can show you this medal for excellent success in sciences.

(What were your ambitions?) I tried to enter Moscow University. I failed, not because my knowledge was poor, but because I was a Jew. I was free of exams, but I should have a so-called interview with someone at this University, and I failed this interview. (Was it a big disappointment?) No, I was already prepared for that. I knew my real place in this life. That's why I understood that all my preconceptions were right. So then I entered the Moscow Automobile and Road Construction Institute. It was a second-rate institute. And in five years I graduated

Gennady Reznikov

from this institute with all As, no Bs, all honors. I couldn't get a good job because I'm a Jew, the same situation. But nevertheless I always tried to find a place that corresponded with my ambitions-- maybe not my ambitions, but knowledge. (Interest?) Interest, my mind. I would like to use my knowledge, my abilities.

(What did you want to do?) I was very strong in math and chemistry. I was very strong in all subjects in school. That's why I'm able to do any kind of research or scientific work and that's why I tried to find this kind of work, but it was impossible, and only because of my Jewishness. (When you show your passport?) Yes, yes. (Reznikov isn't a Jewish name...) It's a mixed name. There are Jewish people and non-Jewish people with this name. But, when I showed my passport, even before because I should have filled out the "*anketa*" [form], item Number Five was nationality, and I should write "*evrei*" - Jew. And after that everything was finished.

It was a funny story because a lot of people in industry were required, so there were a lot of vacancies. Long lines were in front of personnel departments in many

Gennady Reznikov

places. I was in these lines, and everybody before me and after me was hired, and only I was not! I heard a lot of explanations: maybe my education isn't exactly corresponding to this place; they don't have positions, but people after me got jobs at this place. It was awful. So I know about all these problems not from somebody else, but I felt all these troubles with my own skin.

My skin was very sensitive to all these problems, because I spent a whole month - I worked every day, eight hours a day - looking for a job. But in Russia it's something different than in the U.S. In Russia you can go to the place and go to the personnel department and talk. So you have a chance to have an interview at any place, with no limitation. That's why every day I had a lot of interviews. Every day. Eight hours a day I was interviewed and interviewed and interviewed for a whole month. And all the people who were interviewed before and after me received offers.

(Now what happens?) I found one place, the Institute of Engines, where they needed me, and they offered me a job. Then I went to the personnel department after talking

Gennady Reznikov

with the chief of the engineering department. The chief of the engineering department had a vacant position and he offered me the job. But when I came with my papers to the personnel department, I was told that there were no vacancies. After that I found a job at an aviation plant as an engineer. Because, it was very strange, because there was a department at this aviation plant where there worked only low-educated people, exclusively women. They needed an educated man and nobody came to them because the salary was very low. I agreed to work with these women for a low salary. And I made a big success at this aviation plant. After nine months the chief of that engineering department at the Institute of Engines called me and said that the former chief of the personnel department had left for another job, and now a new man cannot refuse to hire me because he does not have enough power, and maybe I would try again? But now I had a job and so when I tried to leave this job they didn't want to permit me because I was a very good worker!

Nevertheless I left and I began to work in Engine Research Institute and I began to study fuel cells. It was an absolutely new field, nobody knew about fuel cells. And

Gennady Reznikov

I began to study, to learn the literature and so on. In nine months another organization (National Research and Scientific Institute of Power Sources) tried to organize some kind of laboratory for research of power cells, and at that time I was almost a specialist in that field. There were no specialists in the field at that time. (Now, in Chicago, my firm could find nobody except for me.)

They invited me. But again the personnel department didn't want to let me join this institute. And, again, when the chief of the personnel department was on leave, my boss arranged this matter. So every time I had to overcome obstacles. Every time, so every step in my life I overcame additional difficulties and problems which Russian people never had and never knew. So I understood that I was not only a "second-rate person", but I was some kind of a specific person. Every time I should prove my right to be at this place. Every time I spent additional energy, health, time and efforts and so on.

But I was lucky that in 1962 I got a position as an engineer in this institute and I began to work in this field. A very new field. And I was a very hard worker so

Gennady Reznikov

I was told very soon that I can be promoted. But every time again, all my promotions were very small, and I was just behind all my-- how to say this? We were very young, as I said before, and ambitious. We got work that was in a very new field, fuel cells, and several people among them, we got work and we were-- I can't say talented, but we were a little higher than average level, and we were hard workers and maybe five or six of us were very good together, and all of them got promotions. I was always the last. So they all grew up in their positions and I was always the last one. Why? Only because of my Jewishness.

But nevertheless, I can't say that I could not get promotions because I got promotions and I became a chief of a lab, the highest level for a Jew. So I was in charge of a laboratory of thirty-two people, with two Ph.D.s in addition to me. At that time, before I got this position, I made my Ph.D.

It was a rather long story because my chief and some other people tried to stop me. Not really stop because they couldn't. I was like a tank. Not exactly, but something like that. I was persistent, consistent and a

Gennady Reznikov

very hard worker. Every time they tried to make me slow down. (What year did you get your Ph.D.?) It was 1971. (At the Auto Institute, what year?) 1959. But I was a mechanical engineer according to my diploma, but this was energy conversion, an absolutely different field.

(When did you get married?) Oh, I got married in 1958, just before my graduation. (How did you meet?) I met her... We celebrated the day of October Revolution. It's a great festival! [laughs] Because I remember that my grandmother knew that when Hanukkah comes and Passover she observes all of the traditions. (Did you have matzos?) Yes, it was very difficult, because you could buy matzos only at the Moscow Central Synagogue, only right before Passover. There were long lines, so she bought it. And I really admired her, how strong she was. She was very old and very weak and she really spoke Russian with difficulty because she was a native Yiddish speaker. Her first language was Yiddish. But she was wonderful and she made this for Hanukkah and she made this *latkes*, so, everything. (She did keep up traditions in the household?) Yes. She was the only one because my uncle made the same thing, but nobody else and that's why we didn't know what means

Gennady Reznikov

Pesach, Hanukkah, all other holidays, Yom Kippur, about all these Jewish traditions and history I knew only that I began to think of learning about them much later, 1970, when I got married.

(In 1958 you met?) I met her in 1956. It was October Revolution holiday. In Russia we have three official holidays, May 1, October Revolution and New Year. That's it. So we fell in love, and then we married. So we have a long family life.

(Did someone introduce you?) No. It was coincidence. I had a party with some of my friends, when I studied at this institute. And the hostess of this apartment where we celebrated studied at the Printing Technology Institute. So it was two student groups gathered together. So we got married. Her group celebrated the same day at another party, but it was too late and some parents came and they were to change the place, so the company came to us. It was really night when she came with other people to this flat. She was beautiful, red hair like the real Sulamith of the Bible! What can I say? (You can't describe it...) No, I can! I can! I can do it.

Gennady Reznikov

(What was she studying?) She was a student at the Moscow Institute of Printing Technology. (Did she work?) Yes and no. First of all, she couldn't chose the education the same as any other Jew, because she could not enter the University. She was very clever and brilliant, but nevertheless she could not do very well with her studies. She was a good engineer so she got a mechanical engineering degree. Then she began to work at the same kind of responsibilities [SK-tape gets too soft here]... So when people, parents and their friends helped her - we call in Russian *blat*, through connections, through acquaintances, so they helped her to get a job, so she was a low-level engineer. She doesn't like doing this work because she could not get a promotion and she was Jewish.