

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

**SULAMITH SHTERNBERG REZNIKOV**

**Mechanical Engineer, 1954**

BIRTH: August 11, 1937, Moscow

SPOUSE: Gennady Reznikov, 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: Wolf Baruchovich, 1903-1964, Dunaevtsa  
Malkah (Malvina) Rubinstein, 1906-1984, Dunaevtsa

SIBLINGS: none

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

NAME: **SULAMITH SHTERNBERG REZNIKOV**

DATE: December 10, 1990

INTERVIEWER: E. Snyderman

(Let me begin by asking you your earliest memories growing up in Moscow. Can you tell me who lived in your home?) We had an apartment we shared with another family. You know, it's common. Each family has its own room. We had two small rooms in this apartment, and another room with another family and we were lucky they were Jewish, too. (How did you get along with the other family?) We were big friends. We lived like relatives. I loved them and they loved us and it was like a good family. An old Jewish woman, her daughter, grandson and daughter-in-law lived there.

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

Their daughter-in-law was a Russian woman. Her husband was the son of this old Jewish woman. He was killed during the war, and she lived with her mother-in-law, and she was a good woman. She was not anti-Semitic. Absolutely. In several years the daughter and grandson moved out (they received their own room far away). In the room lived an old woman with her Russian daughter-in-law. They divided the room into two small rooms. When I was a student she married and brought her husband. He was Ukrainian. I cannot say that it was just Jews he didn't like, because he didn't like anybody. During the Second World War he was a soldier. He lost his leg and he thought that everybody was indebted to him.

Our apartment was on the fifth floor, without an elevator. I understand that it was hard for him to reach the fifth floor with only one leg. But it was not somebody's fault. He was almost always angry with everybody and everything. At his work he had troubles because of it. Many people hated him. But we lived with pretty friendly relations.

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

(Do you still have contact with those people?) No, they live in Moscow now. When were leaving I called and said good-bye, but...

(You told me that your parents were both born in Dun-aevsta and that their families moved to Odessa, and that's where they met each other. You were born in Moscow. How did that happen? They were married in Odessa and then moved to Moscow?) They moved to Moscow and they worked in Moscow. (What kind of work did your parents do?) They were both engineers. My mother was a chemical engineer. To cover metals with anti-corroding materials...

(Galvanizing?) Yes. (And your father?) Father, first he worked with constructing airplanes. (Building airplane engines?) No. I don't know because it was secret. He did not talk much about his work - what exactly he did. I think it was constructing aircraft.

I was a very little girl when he lost his job. And there was a period when Jews lost their jobs. It was 1948. And my mother and my father became unemployed. (Both of them?) Both of them unemployed. (You were about eleven years old then.) Maybe it happened in 1947; and in 1948

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

they found work, I don't know how exactly. (So how did they manage if they were both unemployed?) That was hard. I remember how my father had to change his profession, absolutely, he changed his profession. And my mother, she found a job and got into her profession. She had a long way to go to work, but she worked. But I remember how she was looking for a job. She called and she went, and it was a long time. But her profession is very rare, so she found a job. And she was very good specialist. She was very sophisticated. The last years before she stopped working and retired, she was the chief of a big department, the third person in this plant. She was a very bright woman. (She was working in the city of Moscow?) Yes.

(But your father had to travel? Was he travelling to a further point in Moscow or...?) No, he found work in Moscow. But he had to change. How to say what he did...I cannot explain. (You can say it in Russian.) *Systema upravlenija*. [Administrative/management system.] *Automatika*. [Automated systems.] (Something like the assembly line where things were done on a conveyer?) No. System, an electronic control system. I remember he was sitting at the desk and he was studying and learning new

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

subjects. Like my husband, he had to change his job when we got refusal, and he changed his profession. He had to study. And my husband studied, and he knew that he knows it now. And my father was in the same situation. My father was a very clever man, he worked hard, he learned. He became a senior engineer, a head of a big group of engineers.

(Did you know your grandparents when you were growing up?) My father's father died long ago. I did not know him. I knew he was a dentist. But I remember my grandmother. She died when I was a girl. She did not live with us. She lived with her daughter. And my mother's mother died when she was a little girl. My mother was fourteen or fifteen years old when her mother died. (Why did her mother die at that age?) She had a sarcoma. (Cancer?) Yes. (Breast cancer?) Yes. She was a young and beautiful woman and it was a tragedy. [My mother's] father married another woman and it was very hard for all the children. The other woman was not a very good woman and my mother hated her. And she left the house and went to work to study.

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

I remember my mother's father. He lived in another city with his son. (So you didn't know your step-grandmother? You didn't know the woman that your grandfather married?) No. I never saw her. I think she was dead when I met him. It's after the second World War she died, I guess.

(Would you describe your parents as Communists? Did they think that the Communist way would make life better for them as Jews?) [laughs] No, no. My father - it was very funny. My father, he was a member of the Communist party, but he entered in 1942. It was a war. He had to do it. He worked at an aviation plant. He did not participate in the war because it was a very important job in this plant. They made planes for the war effort. He had to, but it... maybe my husband can explain it better than me... My father knew everything. He never told me about Stalinism, about everything. But he knew it. I don't know why he never told me. Maybe he did not want his daughter to have double thinking. But he knew, and he hated it. And sometimes, not sometimes, every time, when he took a bath or shower, he thought nobody could hear him, he said "Lenin is a [bandit]! Stalin is a [bandit]!. It

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

was Stalin time. It was then. I remember when I was a little girl, when he took a bath or a shower, he thinks nobody hears, and he said it for himself - what he thinks about the system! [laughs] And my husband heard it too, when we were married. We lived with my family. He heard it too.

(Your name, Sulamith, is a Hebrew name.) Yes, my father gave me this name. When I was a girl I had many troubles, the children said my name was different. They insulted me. And once I wanted to change my name. (Was this when you found out you were Jewish, or did you know you were Jewish before this?) Yes, I knew. And once I asked my parents why they gave me such a strange name, because in Russia, (and in America, too), Jews have Russian names. As usual, they name their children Russian names.

And I asked them why I have so strange a name, and then my father said that he gave me this name. He said, "I thought that she doesn't have a motherland, a language, she doesn't have tradition, history; she doesn't have anything Jewish. Let her have at least a Hebrew Jewish name." And they named me Sulamith.



**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

(I know it was outlawed, but I know your father had such powerful feelings about his background - did he try to practice some traditions in the home? Do you remember anything from the Jewish traditions in the home?) No, I don't remember any tradition. You know, I don't remember traditions. We did not celebrate holidays. They did not keep kosher. They did not know about it. But some feeling they gave me. I knew that I am Jew from when I was born. I don't remember, but I knew it. During the war we lived not in Moscow. We were evacuated to another city. I was four years old when the second World War began. I remember that at this time I knew it. I remember how we played in the yard with other children, and I knew it, that I was a Jew - maybe because of my name. The last name, too. And once for example when I had troubles, once I wanted to change my name. I was a teenager, and my father - not mother - my father said, "I want to talk to you. Sit down." And we sat and he said, "You know you want to change your name, but it's not the Jewish way. Jews don't do it. You cannot do it." And he explained to me that a Jew can be named only in honor of people who died. Sometimes they can change their name, but if you, for

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

example, are very sick. You have to die. You can change your name, my father said, "Maybe God thinks that it's not you who will die, but a person with a previous name, only in this case can you change your name. So you are Jewish. You cannot do it."

So, I don't know how they did it, but they made me be proud of being a Jew. They always said, "He's a Jew. Jews are very honorable. They're very smart. They're famous." I don't know how, step-by-step from when I was born they gave me that feeling.

(Were you closer to your father or your mother?) I don't know how to answer this question. (Because you've told me about your father a lot. He had a very strong influence on you. What about your mother?) I love my mother very much. She was an excellent woman. I loved her. Because you asked me about my father! No, I loved my mother, too. She always said, for example, about actors, about writers, she said, "He's a Jew." They gave me something.

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

(Did you know, during the difficult times, did they talk about their worries with you? Did you know what they were concerned about? For example, when they lost their jobs?) You know, I knew about it, because I heard. But they tried to prevent troubles. They wanted to give me... I understand it now! They wanted to give me a happy childhood, so they did not say anything about their troubles. They didn't tell me much. I knew about it, but they didn't ever say, "That's awful!" or discuss much.

(What do you remember from the war years? You were very little and you said you were relocated. Do you remember what city it was?) Yes, I remember. You know what happened... My mother, she worked then at a military plant, and my father worked at a military aviation plant. And we lived in Moscow and when the war began they could not leave Moscow, and I left Moscow with my father's sister. My father's mother, sister and her daughter and me, we left Moscow for Gorky.

We lived there, and from there we went to Chelebinsk in the Ural Mountains. And my mother came to the Urals, and I lived in the Urals with my mother. My father could

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

not visit us because he lived in another city, Irkutsk. He moved there with his plant. And then he moved with his plant back to Moscow, in 1943. In one year we returned - 1944 - in the beginning. Because in September I began to study at school.

(So you were relatively safe where you were located. They weren't dropping bombs on those areas.) Yeah, yeah. You know, they relocated the plant from Moscow to Irkutsk. (Did you have enough to eat during the war? Did you have warm clothes?) I don't remember much. I remember how I'd ask mother - she was a chemist and she received milk at work. And up till now chemists receive milk at work. I don't know why, but then she brought it home and made some kind of butter from this milk. I remember when she gave me this, and I asked, why don't you eat it? And she answered, "I'm not hungry, I don't want any!" But I was small. I was five years old. I don't remember much. I asked her why we always left home in the dark and came home in the dark. It was because she worked. (Do you remember who took care of you when she worked?) I was in the day-care. All children were.

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

(So after the war you went back to Moscow. Did you go back to the same place you lived before?) Yes. (It was there?) Yes, yes. And my father was there. We lived there in the same apartment.

(This is after the war. You remember that after the war the Jews were losing their jobs around 1947-1948.) I remember it. (Then your parents did get jobs, but not their old jobs. Were you affected by this in school? Do you remember any different kind of treatment from the teachers or the students?) You know, I can tell you a story about when I was in the first grade. The beginning - it was the first day in my school. I remember it like this day. It's a big room, desks, little tables. Our school was only for girls. At this time schools were separated for girls and boys. Stalin wanted it to be like in ancient times before the revolution. Girls study with girls, and boys study with boys. On the first day the teacher asked everybody, "What is your nationality?" And my name was the last on the list, because my last name was Shternberg. The first letter is "sh", after it only four letters in the alphabet. They are very rare letters, so as usual I was on the last place on the list. And the teacher

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

asked each girl to stand up and answer. And all the girls stand up, and each girl says: Russian. (Russian is a noun and an adjective, too.) But I sit in my place and think what will I say when it is my turn? Everybody was Russian. It was my turn, I stand, and she looks at me. I can't force myself to say Jew. I look at her, and she looks at me. And I say, "What do I have to say? Russian?" I cannot pronounce "Jew".

I can't explain - you can't understand being Jewish in Russia. On the one hand I was proud, but on the other hand I was afraid to say it. I was ashamed to be Jewish, you know - for others. I was proud for me because I knew I am Jew and it is good, because Jews are very good people. But I knew that other people don't like Jews. They treat them like they're bad. "What do I have to say? Russian?" And she said, "No, you are a Jew." The whole class - everybody turned. I remember it! I was seven years old. I cannot forget, if I recall it, I cannot suppress tears. I was so small. I couldn't pronounce that I'm Jew. I ask, "What do I have to say?" because everybody said "Russian," so I said "What do I have to say?" And she said "No." I don't remember that she was anti-Semitic. I was a very good

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

pupil. I had only fives all years. And I was a very loud girl, very brave. I was never quiet. And I was an excellent pupil. And I was very good friends with the girls. I never fought. And in the school my teacher treated me good.

But when I was in high school in ninth and tenth grades, the last grades, my teacher was anti-Semitic. We had many teachers, and some of them were anti-Semitic, and some of them were not. Because, I don't remember, but sometimes I heard it, and sometimes no. But my main teacher, she was exactly. She arranged it, and I didn't receive a medal. My husband - did he tell his story? He received a medal but his main teacher was anti-Semitic so he received the documents too late and couldn't enter Moscow University because it had a deadline. She did it specially because she knew that he wanted to go to University. And she delayed, delayed, delayed. And so she gave him the diploma after the deadline.

In my case, they did it differently and didn't give me a medal. If it were to happen with my children, I would go to school or I would go to the Board of Education, I would

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

fight, but it was 1954, and my parents were afraid to do anything. And they didn't do anything. They knew it's not fair, it's anti-Semitic. But they didn't do anything. They said they knew I was a good girl, that even without the medal I can enter institute. And so I did.

(So did you ever think about joining Komsomol when you were in school?) I was in the Komsomol. Everybody was in it! In our class there were maybe forty pupils, and everybody was in it. It was strange not to be. When my children were at school I said, "No! You cannot!" But it was strange, too, even when my children were schoolboys, even for them. But I said, "No." "Why are your boys not in the Komsomol?" they were asked. Sergey and Vladimir, my boys.

(When did you find yourself expressing your views differently from those expressed around you? Was it when you went to the Institute?) No. (Your understanding began and you were describing the way it began at the Institute. You started reading certain kinds of things. What was it you were reading?) Books. (There was a word for these books.) Books, but especially *Samizdat*. Self-published.



**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

(These were books that were banned from actual printing and distribution.) Yes. (They were typewritten and circulated underground.) Especially after 1956 when Khrushchev said for the first time about Stalinism, about the repression, about everything. It was after everything began. (In other words, Khrushchev was beginning to do in a very small way what Gorbachev did in a big way later.) Yes. A big deal, yes.

(But you started to say what Stalin did that hurt the Russian people.) But you ask me. I answer about politics. But everything about Jews I knew much earlier. From family, from friends of mine. (What did they tell you?) About everything, about work, about the institute, about treatment, about anti-Semitism, about everything.

(Did your parents have any friends or family that were arrested?) Yes, they had. We knew about it. I knew about it. (And did you know why these people were arrested?) Yes, I knew; without any reason, like many thousands of people. (For example, can you name any names of people that disappeared or that came back later after they were imprisoned? These were Jewish people?) Yes, because my

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

parents had a Jewish friend. I remember last name - Borisov. It's like Reznikov. It's a Russian last name, but he was a Jew. He was arrested and he died in prison. And his wife was a friend of my mother, and she was doing very bad. She lived in very bad conditions. And after, how to say, after what was said about Stalinism, she tried to go to the office to find out about her husband. I know my mother several times went to court and said something about her husband and her husband and [...] friends.

(Borisov is a very well-known name. Was this person very well-known or am I confusing it with another Borisov?) Maybe, I don't know. I remember his wife and her name was Genya. (So this was very frightening for you to know about this?) No. (How old were you when you heard such stories?) I don't remember. I was a schoolgirl. I knew...

(Whose writing did you read that influenced you?) I don't know - we read so many books! So many books! Among them, [Varlamov], Solzhenitsyn is famous, and Mandel'stam, and Greenberg. We read many books, and I don't remember all of them. We read [Geylus], and foreign writers, for

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

example, Orwell. I can't remember... For example, Animal Farm. And we read a novel, 1984, and many others. So many ones. And we all began to find out. (Did you read A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich?) Yes, it was published. (That was available later to you, but not at that time, is that right?) No, it was available at just this time when it was published. We had this book. But after that Solzhenitsyn was bad. You couldn't find this book. They stopped publishing it.

(So now you're a student and you're studying engineering. But are you meeting now with friends who are discussing politics?) Sure. We were discussing politics. Everybody discusses. (You weren't afraid to discuss it then?) We discussed it between our friends. Yes, yes.

(So, while you were in school you met Gennady?) We were in institute. (The same institute?) No. We met accidentally. It was my friend's birthday. But her birthday was November 4 and she celebrated it November 7, on the Revolution holiday. We were there in the small room, in the apartment that they shared with other families. And she had a small brother and parents, and there were many

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

friends in this room. Then we decided to go home because of the parents and little brother. They had to sleep! It's funny because now the brother lives in Chicago. It's a very good family. He lives here.

I could not go home because transportation stopped at this time, and we, many students, went to another girl's place. It was far. But it was November 7, it was a holiday, and she has another party for the holiday. We walked there. So my husband was at the other party. And from the birthday party, many students came to this party and we met each other, it was funny, accidentally. If I could go home, I would go home, but it was late. Transportation stopped in Moscow at 1:00 a.m. It probably was a little bit more. I had to take the bus and metro and bus again and I knew it will be late anyway. So I went to this girl's place for the rest of the night.

(So you met and you evidently liked each other. How long did you go together before you got married?) It was in 1956 and we got married in 1958. It was less than two years. We were students. (So the year you graduated...) No, when we got married we [had] finished the fourth year

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

and then we lived together and studied and finished the fifth year. We were the same age and finished at the same time at different institutes.

(When you got married what were your living conditions?) We lived with my family because my family had two small rooms. My parents lived in one room and we lived in another room. It was small but it was our own room. At that time in Moscow it was SUCH a big wealth to have your own room. Couples usually have to live with families, parents. It's a big problem. (So you had a little bit of privacy...) Yeah. Very often friends came and visited us because we had our own room. Do you understand? (Yes.) It's hard to understand. We cannot live in another place-- it's too expensive for us. (And while you're a student the only money you have is what your parents give you, right?) Sure, and we had little stipends, not a big one, not enough for living, but if you study good and don't have low grades, you receive a stipend.

(You're life until this time is typical for young intellectual Jewish student couples. And then you have one child, your son Sergey, and you're working at this time?)

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

Yeah. I was working. By this time we had our own room in another apartment. (You moved before Sergey was born?)

Yes. Maybe it's not very interesting? My husband's parents, they received an apartment. In Russia you receive apartments from the state. Now we can buy some kind of cooperative apartments, but at that time -- only state apartments you can receive. It was very hard. The room where we lived - we lived in one room in a huge apartment. We shared it with seven other families. Eight families lived in one huge apartment. Each family had its own room. In one room lived my husband's family. In my husband's family [there was] the mother, father, grandmother and three sons. My husband left and lived with me. But his parents had two sons more and when they received an apartment, mother, father, grandmother and small boy moved out. My husband and his older brother lived in this room in that huge apartment. We shared, we divided this room with two windows. We invited workers and they built a wall. They divided this big room into two rooms and we had our room and brother had another room. I lived in this room with my husband. I worked and he worked. When my first son was born, my husband said, "You cannot live in

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

this apartment. It will be very bad and noisy and nobody can help you. You have to live with your parents."

And from the hospital I went with my son to my parents. So again I lived with my parents, and my husband lived in this room, and he visited us on the weekend. But he did not waste time. He wrote a scientific book and he received money for it and we borrowed more money and we bought our own cooperative apartment, (like a condominium in the States). We were lucky. (How old was the baby when you moved in?) Then he was two years old. It was 1967, we moved in our new apartment with our kid.

(Under what conditions was the baby born? In the hospital?) Yes. (And what was the delivery like? Was it a normal delivery; was everything okay? Were you treated well?) Yes, I fed him myself. (You nursed him?) Nursed. (But during the birth you had good care? The labor?) Yes. As usual in this hospital they made [...]. Usually there was good treatment. Sometimes no, but... (You felt it was okay?) Yes. (You took care of the baby yourself?) My mother helped me. She worked, but she helped. My father

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

worked, but he helped me too. He loved his grandson as only a grandfather can love, and this love was mutual.

My son, I asked him, he was three and a half years old, and I asked him, "Who do you like more? Mother, father, grandmother, grandfather?" (He had two grandmothers, two grandfathers), and he said, "The most I love my grandfather Volodya," because he loved him. He walked with him. He told him stories. He died very early, when my son was three and a half years old. When he looked at his grandson it was happiness on his face! I was so sorry when he died! Grandpa Volodya was his name.

(How old was Sergey when you went back to work?)  
Three years old. He was sick very often. So he was three years old by the time I went back to work. (Is that unusual to wait until your child is three to return to work?) Yes. Usually mothers work. They take children to day-care, to kindergarten. One father cannot support the family. But my parents helped us. Sure, my husband could not support us because we had apartment. We had to pay much money, because the state apartment was very cheap, but we bought an apartment, so it was not cheap! We had to pay



**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

money every month. But my parents helped us. But when he was three years old I brought him to day-care.

(You felt when you went back to work that you needed the money or that he was ready to go to school without you and you could work again? What was the reason you went to work?) I don't want to be only like baby-sitter, like housewife. And money too! It's not much. I cannot pull from my parents. Sure, I have to earn money too.

(Did you have any problem getting work?) You know, yes, it's a problem to find a job. And I went to one. I am a Jew. It's a problem to find a job. I couldn't find a job at once. But my father asked somebody, he asked somebody, he asked somebody, and they got me something.

(So you were working as a mechanical engineer. Could you describe the work you did?) We did different machines for the medical industry. You know, I did not tell you this story. I studied in the Institute of Printing. You didn't ask, but I never did work according to this specialty. Why? When students graduate from institute they receive a special paper and they have to go to certain

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

work and work there three years at least. They cannot go out-- they MUST work three years in this place. And this destination - the institute gives one to each student who graduates from this institute. And this is a place where people are needed.

(So this was a city outside of Moscow?) No, it was in Moscow. It was another research institute. They need people to work. They sent requirements to different institutes where students are graduating. It is common. It's a rule in the USSR, and so I received this destination.

That's the right word, destination? (When you use the word destination, it sounds like a place you travel to. So, do you want to say location?) No. The place I was sent to work. (Assignment?) Yes! Yes! They require for this research institute - they need people to work. They send the request to the institute where students according this specialty graduated. Each student receives this paper. The institute sent me there because they wanted. So this research institute... (We would call that a requisition.) They need maybe ten student engineers. The institute sent the ten and me among the ten. But when I came there, they said, "No, we don't need you." And they took only seven. And three engineers, me and other two Jews, they did not

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

take. This was required! They wanted, they needed ten, but they took only seven.

So I could find a job where I wanted. It was not easy either, and the same situation - my father asked one friend, another friend... And one friend arranged that I was admitted into the firm where she worked. I received a job. So it was chemical engineering. Not printing engineering! It was chemical engineering. When my son was born I did not work. I stopped working, yeah? When I had to find a job I found mechanical engineering for the medical industry. How? My father asks a friend who asks a friend, and so on. Only this way can you find a job.

Because if I went to any plant, they said, "No." They needed engineers according to my specialty, mechanical engineering, because they had huge list of different specialties they need. And I can't hear this again - "No, we don't need you." Every place I went to said, "Go there. They will take you."

I worked there until Michael was born. When Vladimir was born I did not quit job. I did not. (Who took care of

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

Vladimir?) You know, I had my supervisor, my boss was a Jewish man. He was a very good person. I asked him if I could work part-time. I worked part-time and my mother helped me to take care of him. And then after four years he began to go to daycare too. And my mother helped me, because she had stopped working and was on a pension. And she came and helped me.

(Did you ever have a dream of doing something different?) Sure. (In other words, you did what you had to do to make a living. What would you have liked to do?) Maybe, you know, I think it's not somebody's fault. It was my fault. I chose this specialty because I had only "fives" at school. I knew all subjects in school, and thought that I had to be an engineer because it's hard, it's good.

But I think it was a mistake because I love children. I could have worked with children. I love history. Maybe history? When I was an school girl I studied English, and I knew English maybe, the best in my class. And maybe to go to an institute to study English and I could be English

**Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov**

teacher. But nobody said, "Go into History, go into English! You won't be an engineer!" And my parents said, "You have to have a specialty." And an engineer is a good specialty. It was common at this time in Russia.

(Do you think that with the anti-Semitism you encountered - with that anti-Semitism could you have gone in to study English and History and been a teacher?) No, it's harder to enter institute where you study History and English. It's much more difficult. (But it sounds to me that things went pretty smoothly for you and the family until around the time Misha was born. Is that right? Or something changed around that time - the politics, something was different.) Yes, something was different. We decided to emigrate.

(What made you decide?) You know, everything! Everything. Step by step you think about it. We thought about it, we discussed it. Many people left the country, our friends and so on. And at last, you know, the most important thing in this story for each family is to make this decision for themselves. To myself. Inside our family to make this decision.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

**Second interview: SULAMITH REZNIKOV**

INTERVIEWER: E. Snyderman

Dec. 19, 1990

(We're going to try to pick up from our last conversation. We were talking about your desire to leave Russia, and you were telling how your dissatisfaction grew. Maybe you could give us more background about this and what it meant to be a refusenik; how you and your husband Gennady became refuseniks.) When we applied the first time in 1979, you know, my husband worked in an institute and he had secrecy work. It was not really secrecy work, but he signed papers so we can receive refusal on the grounds of secrecy. Do you understand what it means - secrecy? (Yes. He had privileged information...) Yes. The work was very important, the secrecy, but you know, in Russia, everything is secret, everything. And we think that maybe we can receive this refusal, but we applied nevertheless. Because we thought that we need to say that we want to emigrate.

(You needed to speak out. You didn't want to be afraid.) If we do not apply, that's our own refusal. We are waiting. Time will pass, will go, and his secrecy will

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

be over, and after this we will apply. No - it's not good, because in this case we are in our own refusal. Do you understand?

(Yes, so you're saying you couldn't wait until his work was no longer secret work because maybe they would say he knew all these secrets then.) No, not because of that. Anyway. We want to apply. We want to say, "We want to emigrate. We don't want to live here."

(Who did you talk to about this? Did you talk to other Jews like yourselves?) Yes. We're talking between ... with our friends and some of them applied, and some of them emigrated. Some of them were thinking about it, or discussing. Some of them wanted, but they did not have the possibility to do anything because of many, many reasons. There are many reasons. First of all, you have to decide for yourself. It's more important to decide, "I want it! I want it!" It's very important to have it inside, first. And when we decided, among my husband and me, we decided that we would apply immediately. And we applied. But before, my husband quit his job. He stopped working at this institute. It was very amazing for his colleagues,

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

because he had a very high position in this institute. He was chief of laboratory. I think he told [you] about it. (Well, we didn't get very far in his interview. We had a short interview. We have not finished.) You'll have time.

(Tell me a little bit. He did have trouble rising to that position, but he did become chief. That was good.) And then his supervisor, his director, they ask him, "What happened? Why are you leaving?" He said, "I will stop working. I've found another job." Without any secrecy, and we applied. We applied, and we received refusal.

(How long did it take for the refusal?) It took more than one year. We were waiting... It was the beginning of 1981. We were waiting and no answer. For that time it was a normal thing. They didn't give us an answer for a long, long time - many months. At last it was a party meeting of the Communist party, and I wrote to this meeting to complain. I wrote that I don't receive answer. They immediately gave me an answer - refusal! [laughs]

(At this point, Misha was born?) Yes. He was born in 1979. At this time we had an invitation from Israel, and



**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

he wasn't on this invitation, and we wrote him onto this invitation after he was born. When we was born, we applied, together with my Michael. (Let me say for the record, Michael and Misha are the same person.) Yes. When we thought what name to give him, that this name will be okay, because Misha, it's a simple Russian name, very common. And Michael, it's an American name. And Mashe, it's a Jewish name. They're close. At this time, when we applied, we were going to go to America - my husband and me, and Michael was born, and our sons were small (Sergey and Vladimir). They didn't think about it. But during the years of refusal they grew, they began to study Hebrew, they began to study Jewish traditions, Jewish history, and they decided to go to Israel. And my husband and my two elder sons, they decided to go to Israel. And one of our friends, she said, "I'm very glad that you received refusal. If you did not receive ... you would go to America. But now you would go to Israel." But we "over-waited" (waited too long) in refusal. And my sons decided to go to America. It happened in the beginning of 1988. They changed their mind. There were many reasons. But they decided to go. But I was strong. I wanted to go to America from the beginning.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(Why was that? Why did you choose America over Israel?) You know, there were many reasons for me. I can say the main reasons. First of all, I was afraid. I was afraid for Arabs, because there are many Arab countries, but Israel is a small country, and I was afraid. That was only one reason. The other reason was that I had very strong feeling to Israel, a very strong feeling. I knew, if I go to Israel, I would fight. I cannot be still. (What would you be fighting?) I'd be fighting with Arabs, you know. Political.

(You would have gotten involved in the politics.) Yes, because I had and I have now a very strong feeling to Israel. (Nationalist leanings...) Ahh... (What is your feeling - Israel should be just for Jews?) Yes, just for Jews, because I understand that the situation that is now, Jews and Arabs, there can't be peace on this land. There can't be. Because Arabs want to fight. It cannot be peace.

The next reason was I don't like the weather there. It was important for me. Even in Chicago in the summer, I

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

don't like the hot weather. A very important reason for me was my vision. I have very original vision. I can see only horizontal lines and I cannot see good vertical lines, so Hebrew letters for me are all the same. I couldn't read Hebrew letters, you know, Hebrew alphabet, because thick horizontal lines and thick vertical lines - I don't see them. I see only horizontal lines. So when I open Hebrew book - all letters are the same for me. I said I can't learn Hebrew ever! So there were many reasons more, many not very important. And I wanted to go, and I said, no, we will go to America.

(In 1981 they refused you. And I know that some people who received refusals were not considered refuseniks. But you were considered refuseniks. Why is that, because you were outspoken?) Because many people received refusal, were waiting until maybe last year, when the door was opened and many people could emigrate. But we did not wait. How to say - we fought. (You struggled against the system.) Yes. (By struggling against the system when refused you get the name refusenik, is that it?) Yes. Every half-year, we applied again. We wrote letters. (Who did you write to?) To OVIR. It's a rule.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

Every half-year I could apply. I could apply only twice a year. (Every six months.) We applied and nothing changed... We wanted to emigrate, and nothing changed. We asked them to give us permission, and they said no. They said no, you had security, secrecy....

(You were not working at this time?) No, I did not work. When you apply to OVIR, it was a rule, you had to bring paper from your work. It's written, "You work at this place, (at this firm), and you don't have debts, and we know that you want to emigrate to Israel." It's necessary. It was necessary to be written. So, if you ask for this paper, everybody in your work knew that you wanted to go to Israel. Sometimes they did not want to give people this paper. And they did not want to give this paper to me. It was a big scandal at work. They did not want to give this paper, and I struggled with the director, supervisor. Of course they gave me this paper because it's against the rules not to. If I work, they must give me this paper.

(What was the name of the place you were working at?)  
It was Mechanical Design Bureau for Medical Industry... I

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

don't know how to translate it. (What was your work there?) I was, in Russian, it's engineer designer - draftsman. I drafted big drafts. (Of equipment?) Equipment for medical industry. (Can you give us an example of what kind of equipment?) Different machines, automatic equipment that make different things for medical industry. (Machines that stamped out or in some way helped...) For example, last work was a machine that made a frame for glasses. They cut the frame for glasses. They cut this (stem...) That's the work I did. (So it's highly technical, very specific industrial design work in the medical field.)

You know, it doesn't depend on your work, it depends on the people who give this paper. If people are friendly, if people are good, then sure, they give you this paper. If people are afraid that something will happen and somebody asked why you have in your work people who want to emigrate, they say usually, "Go away. Fill out this paper: quit your job. After that, you can apply. If you quit your job, we'll give you this paper for OVIR." (So in your case they absolutely refused to give you that paper.) But after a couple days they gave me this paper. They could

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

only force me to apply to quit working. They wanted to force me to quit working.

(So what did you do after that?) This paper was given to OVIR. (But you continued working there then?) If I go to another work, if I found another job, they would ask me, "Why did you stop working at your last place?" Because everybody in Russia has a special "Labor book." In this book it's written all your jobs - when you begin, when you stop, next job... every person, every man, every woman who works - they have this special "Labor book." (Do you still have that book?) No, I left it in Russia. It's not necessary in America.

(You didn't consider it a souvenir to bring with you.) You know, we cannot bring here original documents. We can bring only copies. We did copies in Moscow and brought here, but my "Labor book" was given to OVIR when we left. (You had to turn it in...) Yes. Our passport and our "Labor book" we must give to them.

(So how long did you continue working after you got this letter for OVIR?) After this time I did not work

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

because my Michael was born. I could not work. (They would not let you go back.) No, they could not fire me, I could come back when Michael was one year old, but it was undesirable and I quit. And I had my "Labor book." If, for example, I found another job, I come there, they open my book. They ask, "Why did you stop working in this medical bureau?" I could say, "because my kid was born." But they call by phone - what happened, how did she work... "Aha, she wants to go to Israel!"; "We don't need you." So it was absolutely impossible to find another job. Moreover, at a new job - every half year we applied to OVIR - I would have to take new paper from new job. My husband - he worked in the same place, at the same work, so it was not a surprise for them when he asked for a new paper!

(He gave up his job as chief of the laboratory in, what was it, 1979?) No, he stopped working in 1978, and he found a new job, and he applied when he had found a new job. (His new job did not pay as well, I imagine, as the old one.) Yes. And his salary was reduced when he took paper for OVIR. But he was not laid off. Because it was luck, it was a good situation. He's chief of his

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

institute. He was - how to say - retired - and new people came, and many people left his institute, many people who worked there, they left. So they think that they need new people. (Why were people leaving?) Because all directors left, and many, how to say, supervisors, president and vice-president - they left. And many people left. New people came. (Was it retirement, or were they reassigned to other places? Why were they leaving?) The president left, he retired. Supervisors in the Ministry didn't approve (didn't confirm) him, because he was 65 years old. So he left. The vice-president left. Many people left. And a new director and a new president came. And many people did not want to work. Many people left. They could find better jobs easily. So they needed people. They needed him, they didn't fire him, didn't force him to quit his job.

(This is on the new job.) Yes. (What was he doing on the new job?) He had to change his profession. He became a computer programmer. He learned it. He studied himself and learned it.



**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(Did he make enough money to have the family live where they could have enough of what they needed?)

[laughs] You know, it's an interesting question, because, you know, in Russia, one man cannot support a family, especially, I did not work. He was the only one in the family working, we had three children instead of two, and his salary was reduced. And he had extra jobs. Yes, he, how to say, first of all, he was a tutor. He had children, and he taught physics. They came to our house several times a week. He received money from that. What else... He received scientists' articles. He edited articles, scientific articles. (Where were they published?) In special magazines. "Technical Information." Mostly it was translations from English. He translated and edited them, these articles. (From English to Russian?) Yes. Moreover, we sold many things. (What were you selling?) For example, we had a piano. My sons learned to play the piano. I bought it on credit. I paid the credit off. So we had a piano. It's big money in Russia. We sold it. I sold my fur coat. (Who bought your piano?) It's not hard to sell something in Russia. It's hard to sell something in America, but in Russia it's not hard to sell something good. Because everything is difficult there - to buy

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

something is difficult, but to sell it is not. (What kind of piano was it?) It was a simple piano. We bought it in a regular store. (A Russian-made piano?) Yes. (What kind of coat was it you sold?) It was sheep. It was funny - my friend, she left for America, and she sold it to me. And when we got refusal and needed money, again I had to sell everything that I could! And we had a good library. We had many books. We sometimes sold our books because it was very hard to buy good books in Russia. My father loved books and bought many books, and my husband, too. When we needed money, we sold books. [laughs]

(Were you able to obtain *samizdat* books?) Yes. (Was it important to you to have those books or not?) What do you mean, "to have?" (To read them.) To read? We read at home. We gave them to other people. They give to us. We listened to Voice of America. When we were in refusal for several years, Americans and people from England - they began to visit us. Not from the beginning of refusal - maybe in 1984 they began to visit us.

(You began to get letters? How did these people find you?) You know, usually they just visited us. We give

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

them other names of refuseniks, phone numbers and addresses. And they give our names to other people who visit us, who visit Moscow. And other people can visit other refuseniks.

(Who were some of these people - you said Congressmen and Senators?) Sometimes. Usually they were tourists. (Do you remember any of their names?) My husband remembers. You know, he has a big copy book where he wrote names. Names are difficult to remember. (Were there any people from the Council on Soviet Jewry?) Yes. They visited us. It was the last year, in 1988 - they visited not our family, but they visited the refusenik community. (So you were part of the refusenik community - you were able to give each other support in some way?) Yes. I think that we did a big job. We made the list of refuseniks. It was not my idea - it was the women's idea to make this list. But it was a women's group and women would meet and said it's necessary to make a list of refuseniks. It was only talking. But I said, if we need to make a list, I can find the names of refuseniks in my telephone book, I can call them, and I will ask them if they know other refuseniks. And I started to do it,

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

because everybody knew that it's good to do. But nobody did it, but I began, and I did it.

So I had many people, many addresses, many telephone numbers, and I called people and I asked, "Can you take your telephone book and say names of other refuseniks?" And they told me other names and telephones, and I'd call them and ask the same question. So I made a list. I typed it with my fingers because even though I had a typewriter, I'm not a typist. So I made this list and called other cities and they sent out a list from Leningrad.

How to say, first of all, I asked people, "Do you want to be on this list?" Because some of them said, "No, we don't want to be. We want to be silent, to sit and to wait." But some of them said, "yes." They wanted to, because we would struggle. We will try to push authority to let us go. So some of them said no. Some of them said, "Yes, we are refuseniks, but just now we cannot go, because of circumstances." For example, one woman said, "I will wait until my daughter graduates institute." Some of them said, "No, we are afraid." Some of them could say, "My son is in Soviet Army. I can be still and quiet or he will

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

have troubles in the army. I don't want to be on the list." And after the son came back home, she will sign the list.

(You had a list of people who were willing and ready.) To struggle, to try. (To take the risk of whatever...) Yes, yes. (How big was that list?) [laughs] That's a question. All the people I could reach. There are many people I could not reach. So we had a list of refuseniks whom we know, and who want to be on the list. It was very interesting. Some of them said, "Oh, I'm so glad you called me because all our friends left. We think that we are alone in refusal, because all our friends left. So we are so glad to be together!"

(Which of your lists was bigger - the list of people who wanted to be known, or the people who wanted to be not known?) Known, known. Maybe ten people said no. (How big was your actual list?) Actually, in Moscow it was 200 families. It was different, because some people received permission and left, and some received refusal. In time, we found out when someone was an old refusenik or a new refusenik and I wrote them on this list. But approximately

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

it was 400 in Moscow, Leningrad and several [other] cities. I could not say it's a whole list, because nobody gave us the information. Not OVIR! Only people whom we could reach.

(So you called long-distance to Leningrad...) To Leningrad, to Odessa, Kiev, Minsk, Khar'kov, Penza. Gorky, Talinn, Riga, Vilnius. Not much. I knew people in Irkutsk. They called me because they have troubles - they want to apply. You know, we had some kind of magazine about Jewish life - it was *samizdat* magazine. It was written there, "Now there is a list of refuseniks. If you want to be on this list, call Sulamith Reznikov, phone number, and Tat'iana Rosenlit, phone number." (Do you still have a copy of this list?) No. It's a pity. I thought we can not take it through Customs. So I left all my papers. But I left all my papers to another woman who took this list of refuseniks and maintained it. So if I knew I could, I could take it here. Maybe I will try to ask somebody...

(So you were really working full-time at home then?)  
[laughs] Oh yes! It was so funny, because our phone was

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

busy all day long, because some people called me, and some people I called. (How did you pay the long-distance bills?) I paid. It's not very much in Russia. Somebody had to do it. I didn't talk much time. (What percentage of the people you talked to would you say got to leave the country? Would you say half of them have left already? More?) More.

In my list? now? I talked to Jen Freid [?] maybe a month ago. She invited us to a concert, but it was a week day, at 7:00. If it were a Saturday, we could, but it was a Tuesday and my husband could not - he works late. But I have talked to Jen and have asked her if there are other refuseniks now. She said there are 400 new refuseniks there in Moscow, or in the Soviet Union, I don't know - on the list. But refuseniks that I made on my list - most of them have emigrated, have received permission. Because they struggled, I think. They struggled. They bothered the authorities. Most of them left.

You know, there is part of refuseniks named poor relatives. It's people who cannot receive permission from their relatives. If I want to emigrate, I have to receive permission from my parents or a paper where it is written

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

that they are not alive, certificate of death. If they are alive, I have to receive permission from them to emigrate. If I divorce, and I have a kid, I must receive permission from my [ex-]husband. So if you have children... So many people cannot receive permission from parents, from spouses. They're named "poor relatives." There are many refuseniks who cannot receive permission. They are in refusal because of this. OVIR doesn't let them leave without that permission.

(Speaking of families, it is unusual for someone your generation, which is also my generation, in Russia, to have more than two children. Sometimes you see people with one child, or two. So you really did something...) You're right. Among our friends, we were only one family with three children. (Why was that?) I love children! [laughs] (Would you have had more than three if you could have?) Yes. When my first son was born I said to my husband, "Let's have more." He said, "No, I cannot support more!" When was my second son born? You know, my father died, and I suffered much. I loved my father, and he died so suddenly. It was so big sorrow, and I cried very often, and my husband decided that I had to have a new baby. And



**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

it happened and I had a son. He was named in honor of my father - Vladimir. And then we had two kids - for Russia, it's enough. Two children - "Oh, they have two children!" Because in Moscow, most people have only one child. Maybe now they have two children, maybe it's more common. But in my time, common was to have only one child. And we had two children.

If somebody asked me how many children I have and I answer that I have two children, they say, Oh! And I say that if I were able, I would have more. And it happened. I can explain. My husband did not want to have more. And when I knew I am pregnant I said, "I will." So I had a third baby. People look and say, "You don't work, you have three children!" (This was after the reunion of your department at the institute?) This is twenty-five years after we have graduated institute. We had a meeting in a restaurant. There were approximately 70 people. Everybody wrote his name, address, phone number, place of job, and how many children he or she has. And when I looked at this list I saw that only I had three children. The other people have one kid, or two children. Nobody but me had three children, because it's a very rare thing in Russia.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

And I was the only one woman who didn't work! In the USSR both must work - the husband and wife - to support the family.

(So you had three pregnancies and three children?)  
Yeah. (Because some people have many pregnancies...) No, I was healthy so I had three children. (But for some people it's not a question of health, it's a question of having an abortion. That seems to be from what I can tell, the most common form of birth control in the Soviet Union. Did you have access to birth control?) We did not want kids... (So you were able to get birth control.) Yes. Not like here. (Some sort of contraceptive was available to you.) Time. (You planned it.) Yes, we planned it. I knew, I tried to know the time. (So a natural form of prevention where you figured out when you were fertile and when you weren't.) Yeah. But when I knew I was pregnant with Michael I said no abortion! I will have the kid. I was forty years old when I was pregnant. When I had Michael I was forty-one. And when I came to the doctor and she asked me, she said, "No, you're pregnant. I think you'll have an abortion." I said "No," and she looked at me. She was so surprised, because I am forty years old,

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

and says, "At forty-one you want to have a baby!" And I just said yes. She looked at me like I am crazy!

(So when you had the baby, and I ask this question because I know it depends on where you are and who you're with, were you treated well? They knew that you were not a young mother...) I felt myself young! (Did they treat you well? Did you have good care?) Yes. They worried a little bit, but I had a good delivery. Everything was good. I remember how the doctor was surprised, because at forty years, they (women) prefer abortions. But I said no, even at fifty years I will have a baby! I love children!

(So you got your baby Michael, you're busy keeping up the list of refuseniks, and you're having visitors now from America and England, and what do these visitors do - do they promise you anything, or do they just come to...) They just come and talk. You know, it was very big support for us, moral support. You cannot imagine - it was so big a support. Sometimes they could bring a gift. Sometimes it was not moral support, it was material support. I could sell this thing, for example, a tape recorder. But the most support was moral. We knew that we were not alone.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

In our struggle, we have support from the outside. If, for example, my husband and me, somebody, was arrested, I will call to America, and everybody will know about it. When we went to demonstrations, it was not a very pleasant deal. But we invited foreign correspondents so their countries can know about it.

(What happened at a demonstration?) I explained to you about support. (Yes.) Sometimes these people called us from other countries and they could ask us how it's going, how's your refusal. (Someone like Marilyn T., made those calls. Was she the person who called you?) No, she could call to Jewish community. It is usual people who visited us and went back to their country - they could call us and they wrote us letters. It was very pleasant. We felt this support. We felt that we have many friends out of this country, many friends in America, many friends in England. It was very important for us. It was not only words. Some people could say only polite words. "It's very nice to meet you. Very nice to talk to you." It was real support for us. They support our spirit to struggle, to wish, to wait.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(From 1984 to 1988, you felt that your struggle was not alone, that you were active in the refusenik network creating the list. When did you find out you were going to have permission?) It was a miracle, because in the Spring we received refusal. It was in April we received refusal. And my son, Sergey, he applied alone because he decided he can emigrate alone. He did not have security job. He did not have any secrecy. He did not have reason to be refused. And he applied alone. And at the end of July, he received refusal again on the grounds of secrecy. His father's secrecy! It was the end of July. After that, he went on vacation.

After vacation, in the beginning of September, he decided to struggle for permission. It was September. In the beginning he wrote letters, he wrote complaints to Communist Party, to the Supreme Soviet. In the beginning of October I was at home. I received a call from OVIR and the woman said, "Did you receive refusal?" I said yes. "Now I think you will receive permission." She did not say, "You have permission." But, "Now I think soon, maybe, perhaps." But I knew it meant permission. I immediately

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

said, "Can my husband stop working?" She said, "Yes." And I understood that it's permission.

I called my husband, and I told him we received permission. And he said, "You know, I'm talking to my supervisor." He had a very good supervisor. And maybe it was break for lunch. They were talking, and my husband just said to him, "I want to stop working because I don't have time to do my refusenik work." He many times said to me, "I must stop working because I have too many jobs in refusenik community that I don't have time to do it. I must stop working." I said he could not stop working because we needed his salary. We had such talks many times. When I called him he said, "Just now I said to my supervisor that I want to stop working. My wife doesn't let me." And I call and say we have permission! He stopped working immediately! [laughs] And I called my eldest son and I told him we have permission. He began to cry! He was so glad, because we waited so long to emigrate and it was so sudden. (Was he married yet?) No, he was not married, but he had a girlfriend. He did not have time to marry. (So did they marry here?) Yes. (But she was able to come?) It's a long story.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(So how much time between your learning about this and your departure?) It took much time because first of all, it took much time to receive papers, visas from OVIR. Then it took much time to buy tickets. Now it's a big deal to buy tickets. Everything is a problem in Russia. So I could buy a ticket only on the end of January. So we left January 22, 1989. And we arrived here May 11, 1989. It was the usual way, Vienna and Italy. We waited for papers from the American authorities. (Who sponsored you here?) Our sponsor was the friend of my husband.

(When you came, what was your first impression?) My first impression... They met us, they prepared slogans. It was good. We were very tired. It's a long way. Nine hours between Italy time and here time, and the plane was late, so we didn't have sleep. It was much more than 24 hours. It was the longest day in our life because we woke at maybe two a.m. and we go to sleep at maybe 24 hours plus nine hours between, so it was a long day. But they met us. They prepared dinner and flowers, a good apartment for us. (the same?) No, a different one. We lived there three weeks until we got this apartment.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(Did you have any special help from the synagogue or congregation in Oak Park?) Yes. They helped us very much. Rabbi Zabachnik. Many people in this congregation gave us different things. People who leave Russia can't bring everything. They can bring only suitcases. (Were you able to bring your family pictures?) Pictures, yes. But people from the congregation gave us old furniture, dishes, pans. We didn't have anything. It's very important, because we needed to buy everything. Furniture is very expensive in America.

(So your children are all in school.) Yes. (Gennady has work.) Yes. (And you are working part-time doing childcare. Now, how do you feel about the future. What are your plans?) I don't know. I want to find a job, that's my dream... At a Jewish agency. I want to be a social worker, for HIAS. I applied. Just on Monday I had an interview. She said she cannot say yes or no because she has many people to interview. She doesn't know exactly. But maybe I will find a job at a Jewish family service somewhere. Because it's the job for me to help people, to arrange for them what they need. It was the job



**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

I did in Moscow when I was in refusal. We had a women's group and other people came and they needed advice and support. We did it. I did not think much about my activities when I was in the group, but I wanted to give you to read about activities when I was in refusal. It's written about... (This is part of your resume, then.) Yes. It's about my Jewish activities. (They list you as being part of the Jewish refusenik community from 1984 to 1989. As a leader of the group Jewish Women for Emigration and Survival in Refusal.) It begins at the end of 1987.

(This was the center of the refusenik community in Moscow.) Yes. There were several centers in Moscow. One of them was our women's group, because we organized different events for the Jewish community. I'll explain it to you. (It says you compiled and maintained a list of known Jewish refuseniks in the USSR. You organized the center for refusenik information and mutual support.) I can explain this point. Before our women's group, there were many refuseniks. They were visited by people from other countries because they were refuseniks. And some of them tried to struggle, tried to do something, and they tried to go between people who knew each other - five, two, seven

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

people who knew each other - they could go to demonstrations, to ask authorities something. When we organized our women's group and organized a list of refuseniks, it was some kind of Jewish community, because every event, we called everybody. I had in my women's group some kind of information center because there were several women. I could say, "You will call these people, and you will call these people, and you will call these people." And all the people were informed about events. We go to demonstration, or we go to Communist party about requirements. There were many events, some meetings, and we informed everybody in Moscow, because we had the list, we had the phone numbers of everybody. We could inform everybody.

We had people in other cities who did not have phones. I wrote them letters. I wrote them letters about how it's going - how are you, how is your refusal, did you receive permission. They wrote me letters. (Were you typing these letters?) No, I can't type. After I typed "the list" many times, they found computers, and other persons did these lists on computers. I did not need to type it with my fingers, because it was necessary to do several copies to give this list to everybody. When [J... b... it was

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev, when Reagan came. You know, we gave this list to different American representatives, to Congressmen, to [Shifter], he was a helper. Schultz, he was human rights. In the department, I don't know how to say, (in the State Department) Yes. We had meeting with [Shifter]. We gave him our list of refuseniks. We gave this list to every available representative. I think Reagan had this list of refuseniks who wanted to emigrate.

(Was this at the first meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev?) Yes, it was the first meeting in Moscow. I want to say about [...]. We could inform everybody in Moscow about events, and sometimes we informed other people in other cities, and they could come. Sometimes they come to Moscow to the demonstrations. (So weren't these demonstrations risky?) Yes, it was risky. Years ago it was dangerous. You could be sent to prison. But times changed. From the meeting of Gorbachev and Reagan in America, it was December, 1987. There was a big demonstration in Washington, maybe 200,000 - do you remember this demonstration? (Yes.) There was a demonstration in Moscow too, the same day, December 6th.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(This was rallying for the refuseniks, for people who wished to leave the USSR.) Yes, it was a big demonstration of refuseniks. You know, from this time there were many demonstrations. Sometimes, it depended on the situation. The militia was always around. Sometimes they did nothing, just watched. Sometimes they took you to the militia. (They arrested people?) Yes, they arrested people and took them on a bus and drove you to the militia and forced you to write why you were at the demonstration, where is your slogan. It depended on the situation.

For example, on December 6, they did not take people to the militia, because there were many, many foreign correspondents. That was why. When it was big demonstration in January 1988, they did not take people to the militia either. Why? Because there in Moscow was a big delegation of human rights - Helsinki, you know. (Helsinki Watch?) I forgot this name. They were representatives of this Helsinki committee. They watched this demonstration, so the militia did not arrest us.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

(So in the winter you bundle up...) I said it depends. We had several demonstrations when we were arrested and taken to the militia. (You were arrested?) Yes, several times. But I said, either they arrest or they don't arrest - it depends on the situation. When Reagan came and we had demonstrations, we were not arrested, and we had demonstrations of only women and children. Michael participated, too, because on June 1, in Russia, it's Children's Defense Day. On this day our group organized a demonstration of only women and children near OVIR.

The militia brought buses - we knew these special buses - in which we are placed when arrested, and then driven to the militia. I saw these buses, but they did not use them, because only children and women, and many correspondents because it was June 1, and Reagan was in Moscow. So it depends on the situation. But they would arrest us, put us in a bus, bring us to the militia, keep us in the militia several hours. Of course they force us to write this. We never wrote anything. Once I was brought to court. They charged me ten rubles for illegal demonstration. I said it's not fair. In the militia they searched for my slogan. I brought my slogans here. I can show you

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

my slogans. (This was Michael's.) "I am the same age as my refusal." (He was nine years old then.) He was nine years old. When he was born he became a refusenik. I had several slogans. (It's a piece of cloth. And ink. And Michael's is a pale pink on white, and yours is a brown, and in Russian it says..) It's written, "Ten years without secrecy. How long will we have to wait?" What secrecy? Ten years passed. Secrecy finished ten years ago, how much longer to wait!! It was one slogan. I have another one. I put my slogan on my neck. (It's on old linen.) I was taken to the militia. Nobody could find it. I'd put it under my coat. They did not know where my slogan was. They tried to find my slogan. Because usually they took everybody's slogan and tore them, but they saw them. But they searched me - they searched my purse. "Where is your slogan?" I said, "I don't know. I lost it because..." This one is written: "Human Rights from Paper to Life." (*Prava cheloveka s bumagi v zhizn'*) Once when I was holding this slogan and a woman said, "Oh..." Because she thought that in Russia we had human rights! But in Russia nobody had human rights. I can't explain this slogan, only in Russian. (*Prekratit' proizvol i bezzonnkone v voprosykh vyezdvov*) Stop... In all questions about emigration, there

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

was no law. Up until now, there was no law about emigration, about leaving the country. Just yesterday I called to my daughter-in-law's parents. I asked, "Did this law make?" They said no.

Every day they promise this law. Up to now there is no law. Everybody in authority could do what they wanted without any law. Sometimes when we were at demonstrations, people came and asked us, "Why are you standing here; what do you want?" Some of them, they don't like Jews. Some of them were very unfriendly. Some of them were very interested. But some of them were very angry. I remember one woman came and said, "Why do you want to leave?!" I asked her, "Do you like Jews?" It stopped. "That's why. That's why we want to leave this country." Another woman once said to me, "You Jews - you don't work. You only eat our bread." I said, "Yes. Let us go! Let us leave! We don't want to eat your bread! We don't want to live here! We want only to leave!" She didn't know what to say more! [laughs] Do you understand? (Yes.) Some of them were very unfriendly, because we are Jews. (Say that in Russian again.) *Prekratit' proizvol i bezzoakone v voproxikh*

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

vyezdov. It disturbed them, you know. We must do it! We want them to throw us out! So it wasn't very pleasant to go to demonstrations. Some of them did not go because they were afraid.

(Was there ever a time when you were afraid?) I was afraid, but we had to do it. We needed to do it. (Did you ever feel you were in danger?) I can't say "danger." Fear, yes. Scared. Not very dangerous, because of support from America. Because we invited to our demonstrations foreign correspondents. Because of publicity. We tried to do everything openly, so everybody would know about it.

(What's the most frightening thing that happened?) I don't know. I can explain what I was afraid of most. I was afraid only for my children. Sometimes militia could beat people that are arrested. They could kick and punch. (Did that happen?) Yes, sometimes. I was afraid that my husband and son will be beaten. I wasn't afraid that I would be beaten because I'm a woman. But I was afraid for my husband and son, because they are men. (They were there too.) They had to do it, go to demonstrations. We had to do it. It was not pleasant. Maybe now there are many



**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

different demonstrations, but two years ago, it was pretty bad.

(You still want to help in your community, and you want to do some of the same things, the organizing and counseling things and activities with the Soviet Jewish people here around you, which is interesting because many Soviet Jews just want to get on with their new life and not really look back on the past, and want to be part of America.) Sure, I think they want to be part of America too. Because, you know, once we discussed this question with our friends. They asked me where I wanted to emigrate - to Israel or to America. I said, "To America." He asked me why. I explained why. He said he wanted to go only to Israel, and that most people who want to go to America want to assimilate. Because they feel such big pressures to be Jews in Russia, they want to go to America and assimilate, not know about anything, not remember the past. He thinks. And I think maybe, some of them feel so, but nevertheless, I feel that many people come here and they only feel themselves Jew. Many.

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

It's nice for me. I like it because many of them go to synagogue. They began to celebrate Jewish holidays, because in Russia they did not know it! I remember when we were in Italy and there it was Passover, and the synagogue gave matzos to everybody in the family - gave, not sold - matzos. It was a long line of Jewish people. They had a list. They signed who received or not. And many of them tried matzos. They did not know how it tastes. They did not know Jewish holidays. Some of them had it for the first time in Italy. Because in Russia, we were Jewish only in our passports. We were Jewish only to be bad, to be second-class people. We were not really Jews because we had - nothing! Not language, not history, not tradition - nothing!

(What made you different as Jews, aside from being told that you were Jewish? Was something different about you from the Russians?) Yes! (What was the difference?) I don't know. I got it when I was born. I got it because I felt it from the outside. I told you about my first day in school. (Yes.) I knew it. I could not pronounce this word. I was seven years old! (But were you different. Was it just because the Russians feared Jews. Was there

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

something different about the Jews in Russia, really?) No. Nothing different in reality. The same language, the same traditions, the same holidays. We were in refusal, when I bought matzos the first time in synagogue. (The Russians MADE you be Jewish.) Yes, they forced people to be Jewish! Sure! Some people, if they could change the passport and write in that they are Russians, they would do it with big pleasure, because it was bad to be Jewish!

If, for example, what was for me - I'm looking for job. I came to a person and he says, "Yes, we need you. I will give you this work..." He wants to give me this job. He needs people. And he says this to me because I don't look like a Jew. He thinks I am Russian. I write application. He looks at it. He changed his face! His face changed immediately and he said, "Call me in two days." I call in two days and he says, "No, we don't need you. We don't have work for you."

**Sulamith Reznikov, 2**

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

**Third Interview with SULAMITH REZNIKOV**

DATE: January 9, 1991

INTERVIEWER: E. Snyderman with Margaret Witkovsky

(This is our third interview. There are many stories we want to hear. But we just learned that the men in your family, except for the youngest child, Michael, were circumcised in Moscow. Can you tell us what happened, when and how the decision was made, and who did it?) Last time I told you that my children and husband and everybody began to study Torah, tradition, Jewish history. They made the decision to prove themselves Jewish. So they decided on circumcision. But they did not have it done when they were born. It was very dangerous to do it in Moscow. They cannot do it openly. (It was forbidden, right?) It was forbidden, and the KGB threatened people: "We know who does it and we'll arrest you..." So it was very dangerous.

We found friends, they were religious friends, refuseniks. They took us to people who knew a doctor that

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

did it. One doctor did this operation, he was a surgeon. He worked in a hospital. (He was a refusenik?) He was a refusenik, but now I don't know his last name. Everybody called him only his first name because it was underground. We met in our apartment. Several people from the synagogue were present. When it was my children, my husband present in that room. We had a very big table. (A surgical table?) No, it was our dining table. (They used it as a surgical table?) Yes. It was wide and long. We put a big tablecloth on it. The doctor brought his instruments, everything. We closed the door. We did not open the door because it was very dangerous.

And after that, I don't know, because I was in another room, they said several "*Bracha*" after that. And we had "*L'chaim*." How to say, it was made with tradition and religion. It was not a simple operation like in hospital. Do you understand? It was not one day. My husband had it and my children too, later. It was twice in our house. (What year was it?) My husband, it was 1984. And my children, in one year. When my husband wanted to do it he asked my children if they wanted to. They said no. In one year they said it to my husband themselves, "I want to do

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

it." Both of them said it. In one year! My husband did not ask them. So, it took place in our apartment twice.

It was not only my husband or my kids. As usual when this doctor did it in somebody's apartment, there are many people who are there. The first time when my husband did it, in our apartment there were people from Leningrad, Batumi, from Moscow, from Yerevan. (Where?) Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. And they came to Moscow especially to do it.

And when my sons had it done, there were several people from other cities and from Moscow, too. Because it was necessary to have good operating room. (Did they have any kind of anesthesia?) Yes, sure! (What was it, a local injection?) Yes! He's a surgeon. He said he cannot do it any other way. He was an excellent surgeon.

(So that was really a major transition for the family. That was an enormous commitment. They weren't just rendering lip-service to this. They really completed the covenant, so to speak.) When my husband had the circumcision it was very funny? Not funny, scary.

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

To show how it was dangerous. It had to be in another apartment. In the apartment of our friend, his son had to have it. He had some medical problems and he wanted.... He was eight, maybe. But it was necessary to do. If people knew that it will be in his apartment... It was far away from our house. You had to take public transportation to get there. And everybody, several persons who are going to have this circumcision, they knew this address. They came there, the doctor came. And these old men from synagogue came. Suddenly some foreign people came to visit this refusenik family. It became very dangerous to do it in this house, and they changed.

My husband called me and said, "We're coming to our apartment. Prepare something quickly!" So the husband stayed at home to talk with the visiting people and the mother took her kid, and everybody took taxi and came to our apartment. Many people came because they were afraid to do it in that apartment, because if foreign people came, the militia or KGB could come - anything could happen. They changed the apartment immediately. They started the operation later in our apartment. (The father was sort of

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

like a decoy. So he was not present at the circumcision?)  
He was visited by people. Mother took care of the kid.  
(Those are powerful experiences.)

(When we ended our discussion last time there were some interesting stories you said you wanted to tell me. You said you knew people, Russians, who looked Jewish, and because they looked Jewish, they were treated like Jews. And then you said there were Jews who looked Russian, and therefore passed as Russian, and didn't have many of the problems that...) They did have problems... (But in a different way...) For example, many people couldn't recognize that I'm a Jew. They thought I was Russian because I am light. And Jews in Moscow, they look different. Most of them have black hair. People didn't think I am Jewish. It was very funny when I tried to find a job because many Americans say, "It's hard to find a job in America too."

American people say it's hard to find a job because there are many people who want to find a job and there aren't many positions. But in Russia it's quite the opposite. There are many positions. If somebody applies for this position, usually he is admitted. When I tried to



**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

find a job, first of all, while we are talking he's very glad. He explains to me what I will do, what my job will be. After that he tells me to write the application. I write it, and his face just [changed]. He says to call in two weeks. In two weeks I call. "No, we found another person. We don't need more."

It was many, many times with me and with my friends who looked not like Jew, but like Russian. Sometimes something could help. For example, my husband's brother had a friend. He had absolutely Russian appearance, but he had a Jewish last name. Maybe Katz or something. He married a Russian woman and took her last name. With a Russian face and a Russian last name, he did very good, I think. (He had a good career?) Yeah. (What did he do?) I don't remember exactly. I knew this story because my husband's brother told it many times, like a very bright example! It was his friend. (Did he totally assimilate? He denied his Jewishness?) Maybe he was Jew in passport. But as usual in documents and at work it is usual to pay attention to the name. Only when you change your work you fill out application. If you work at the same place, it's important name. (It seems like their children's passports

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

would still say "evrei" because their father was Jewish.)  
No, no. They can take the mother's nationality.

When you go to receive passport, when you are sixteen. You take a special application to the housing office where you live. They send this application to the militia. You fill out this application and you write which nationality you want. You take your mother's or your father's passport. Moreover, if your mother and father have different nationality, they want you to write Russian, not Jew. I remember I had a friend. He was Jewish and his wife was Russian. For his first son was written "Russian", but for the second son, he wanted to write "Jewish". When he went to the housing office [housing authority], and he writes Jew, they began to persuade him, and they put him to sign this paper several times. They didn't want to write in Jewish. Maybe they want to turn Jews into Russians? I don't know exactly.

But my friend, quite the opposite, she was absolutely Russian, but she had Jewish appearance, I don't know why. And once I said to her, "Anna, you look like Jew." And she said, "I know it! I've had many troubles at my work."

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

(Did she give you any examples?) She did not want to discuss it. You know, for Russians it's offensive to feel themselves Jewish, to have troubles.

(What happened when you finally got your invitation? Did you get one from Israel or the U.S. to get your visa?) From Israel. Now you can receive one from America if you apply to OVIR. But a couple of years ago, you could apply only for an Israel visa. They forced many people, not just Jewish, but Russian, Lithuanian, to receive invitation from Israel. Maybe the authority wanted to consider them like Jews, to count like Jewish. I don't know why, but there was only one way - to receive invitation from Israel. I knew many people, not Jewish, they received the invitation from Israel. They left for America, for Australia, where they wanted, for Europe. But they must have an invitation from Israel - only Israel. And one point more, for example: we had a friend, a refusenik, his daughter lived in Australia. He received an invitation from his daughter, but they said no. You can apply only for an Israel visa. Why? I can't explain it.

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

Second point. If you're going to go to Australia, America, Europe, if you receive an invitation from any country, not from Israel, and you receive permission from authorities, OVIR gives you a foreign passport. You are Soviet citizen with foreign passport. You can live abroad. If you receive invitation from Israel and you apply and you want to go to Israel, and you're a Soviet citizen, they don't give you a passport, they give you only paper, a visa. You are deprived of Soviet citizenship. Moreover, you must pay for it. When they give you permission, you must pay 500 rubles for being deprived of citizenship! So we could receive an invitation only from Israel.

(So you received your invitation?) Yeah. (Who sent it to you?) Nobody knows. It's written name. After that, we received many invitations from another person. We didn't know, because we didn't have relatives. (Was this done through the Council on Soviet Jewry, do you think?) No, it's from Israel. Somebody arranges it, to send it to people who don't have relatives in Israel.

(You got your invitation, then what happened...) Then we applied to OVIR. (This is after being refused several

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

times. How many times were you refused?) You know, the first time we applied, we got refusal. After that, every six months you have the right to apply again to OVIR. "I want to emigrate, my desire did not change, and I ask you to discuss my papers and give me permission." If there is any change, you send a paper... For example, when my mother died, we sent a copy of her death certificate. Every change, we sent them.

When my son graduated from school, we must change everything. It was funny when he graduated from school. When he turned sixteen and received a passport, he had to bring a new application, because the application is only for person who has passport. And my elder son did not have passport. We had application only for my husband, my mother and me. When my son turned sixteen, he must do his own application. But he was in school. When I brought it in, OVIR said they couldn't take this application. They said, "He must go to school and receive papers from school." I explained to you how everybody had to receive papers from work. It's written: "this guy works here. He doesn't have debts. We know he's going to emigrate to go to Israel. The same paper will be given to your son in the

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

school. If he's a member of Komsomol, they have to eliminate him." I said, "He's not a Komsomolets!" She said, "If he's a komsomolets, he has to be eliminated!" I said it again! Three times she said it. "We need this special paper from the school that he doesn't have debts." "Why this paper?" "Because everybody in this school has to know that he wants to emigrate to Israel."

Especially, she said just to me in OVIR, this woman. So he did not fill this application when he studied in school. And he didn't fill it in. After this time! In a short period between school and institute! (Because he went to institute.) When he graduated school, for a short time he did not study at school, he didn't study at the institute. So he filled this paper, this application. He brought it to OVIR. After that he went to institute, so he didn't have to bring papers from institute. Only after he graduated institute and began to work - only at this time. He could apply again. Because if he went to institute to ask for this paper.... it was very dangerous. We had to find different ways! Do you understand?

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

(What was the date when you got that invitation?)  
Invitation? We received several invitations from Israel.  
(So the last invitation was where they finally responded?)  
No, they actually did not need new invitation. The invitation lasts only six months. After that you need to receive a new invitation. We have a new invitation. Because if you receive one, you can receive several. The last we received in 1988. (Then how long did the processing take? Did you know at this point that this invitation was the one that was going to...) No. When we were refused, it was not so important, this day. It was not very important. Because we are refuseniks. For example, the last refusal we received was on April 15.

After that, my eldest son applied alone. He received invitation and applied alone and received refusal at the end of July on the grounds of secrecy. In October we received a call from OVIR and she said we had permission. The date of invitation was not important for us because we were refuseniks and we fight it. There was only one way to receive permission, and that was to fight, to be inconvenient for authorities. It was the only way for a refusenik to receive permission.

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

We have an example. It was some refuseniks, they were very silent. They did not fight, and they did not receive permission. But everybody who fought on my list, most of them received permission. There are new refuseniks now, but I don't know the reasons, because I'm here. The people who were on that list, they fought it and they received permission.

(So you're still in touch with friends in Moscow?)  
[shakes head no.] (No? Everyone you're close to is out?)  
Yeah, everybody emigrated.

(Now you're here. I know that you were helped by the rabbi of the Oak Park Synagogue. That was a major thing. Obviously, somehow you're connected to the JCC. I know that Gennady goes there and Michael goes there. That makes us feel good.) Yes. Shalom school. He attends public school. My son has some Jewish education, Jewish feeling, traditions, he has to know something, to feel himself Jew. We explained much. I think if we move somewhere, certainly he will attend Jewish school or day school. It depends on the neighborhood. We're going to move to Oak Park very



**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

soon. The school is in the synagogue - it Jewish day school four times a week. (It is a Jewish day school or after school?) After school. (The day school is a full program.) No, not a full program like in the north suburbs, no. After school.

(In different ways I've asked this question, but I want to hear how you would say this. You've been through so much, and there many families who came out of Russia who say Russian, and it just says Jewish on the passport, but so what? But you have a stronger identification with being Jewish. Why do you have this identification?) We want to know that we have roots. We think that we have. We are very proud to be Jewish, of international Jews, how they helped us. They helped us very much. I told how they helped us, our spirit. Not only spirit. They wrote us letters. They tried to get us permission. They fought for us. (So you felt these people cared about you. And you knew that it wasn't just a surface thing. You knew it had to do with roots.) And I feel that Jews, I was very proud, I felt that they feel like Jews, that they helped people. They helped not only us. They fought for refuseniks, for other Jews in Russia. We felt it.

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

(So the identification is almost something mystical - you can't really explain it. You could just say you got help from these people, but there's something much deeper than that. You could've had the help without the circumcisions, for example. You didn't have to go that far.) It was only the idea to prove to himself "I am Jew." We knew several persons who came from other cities. One came from Batumitz, Georgia. South. He did not need it. He wanted it, because he is Jew. He has Russian name. But he wanted.

(What did you do to keep your family strong and together?) I don't know! I loved them! We were together. We were sticking together. We explained everything. We discussed everything. Not only relatives, we were friends with our children and to each other. My mother, when we applied in the beginning, she did not want. She was so afraid. "Don't say this on the phone! You will be imprisoned!" We explained to her, we got her to read Exodus, you know. We tried to explain it to her, not to force her. To make her feel the same, think the same. She's Jewish. I was so scared for her. But she died in

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

1984. I made the mistake about the circumcisions - my husband was in 1983, and my children in 1984.

(Were there surprises when you came here?) Everything surprised me. (What did you expect?) About feelings, about how it looks, what? People? I like the people. Chicago people are friendly. Every day I'm surprised. Bus drivers, train drivers. They open doors. People in Russia! Never! You run to the bus. He sees you and shuts the door and goes! You can't imagine. I walk with baby and everybody says, "Hi!", and smiles. People are friendly. You cannot compare with Russians. They are very angry, evil to each other. Evil is the right word. In transport they hurry, they push. They're very unfriendly in general.

People here are friendly - they never scold each other. Rarely? But I didn't hear it, I go to the store, sometimes wait in a long line. Nobody goes without line. In Russia, everybody wants to be first. Nobody just stays in line silent. (So that was a surprise for you.) Yeah, because we were told that in America people are mean to each other, that Chicago is a very bad city, many

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

factories, no trees. In Chicago, there are many plants, in general, in residential areas! Many trees, parks. We were so surprised!

(Were you disappointed about some things here?) No. No, no. Honestly.

(What do you miss from Russia?) Only language. Only language, understanding language. I would like to understand everything. Like cinema, like books, to read. I cannot do it here. To feel language, not to understand only, but to feel idioms, everything you said, not just to understand. I can say a word, but I can't feel its impression exactly.

(What are your hopes for the children here?) They will have their own choice. They will have what they want - to do, to study, to live, because in Russia they could go only to this institute, not where they wanted. Only the institute that admits Jews. There were several institutes in Moscow - only technicians. I think my son will tell you the story about how he tried to enter Moscow University. He studied physics and chemistry. He was very

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

bright. He could not study in Moscow University. He had to go to another institute and change his profession. It was upsetting for me. I started to cry when I told this story, because he was such a good boy. For years he went to special classes. He was a very successful student. At school, but something he attends twice a week. Many different classes for children.

He was very bright and he couldn't go to the university. So he turned to be a mathematician. He's smart and bright. Now he's a graduate student at the University of Chicago. He received his Master's degree, and now he's working on his Ph.D. Maybe he would have chosen something else? I remember when he began to study mathematics in his institute, he would say, "If we go, nevertheless, I'll turn back to chemistry, biochemistry and physics."

It's sad because he became a mathematician and now it's hard to change it. But he says maybe he'll study physics later. Vladimir? When he graduated school there was only one way, to go to the institute and study applied mathematics. He was very successful. Now he is at the University of Illinois studying liberal arts. I can't

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

explain. He didn't have choice in Russia. Here he has choice. They will do what they want.

I want to make some comments about some things I said last time. Maybe it will be interesting for you, what I was afraid of. I said when we went to demonstrations I was afraid they will beat. But most of all, I was afraid that my son will be taken to army. (I did not tell about it.) Because it's not the American army. (Sergey and Vladimir?) Yes. It's worse than prison. Some people prefer to send sons to prison, because he refused to go to army, than to send him to army. Because in the army they can be killed.

I knew two examples. I worked in the same room with a woman whose son, who was Jewish, was killed in the army. And when I asked her if she found out what happened, she said no. She didn't want to find out. He was standing and somebody shot him. (Not during battle or anything....)  
No.

The second example, in 1990, this last summer, my friend, she's absolutely Russian. She had two sons. The elder one was in the army. He was killed this past summer,

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

in 1990. (So this had nothing to do with being Jewish...)  
The army is dangerous... (For Jew or non-Jew...) Yes.  
Army is dangerous. You may be killed because of  
relationships. In the army it's very bad. One story:  
There are two different Islamic lines. So in Russia,  
Azerbaijan and Uzbeks. It's like Iraq and Iran. There was  
a big fight. They killed each other. They said to  
Russians, not Muslims, you will lie there. We won't touch  
you. And they killed each other. Many people preferred  
prison. And we were refuseniks. It was more dangerous,  
because after army, we would receive new refusal on the  
grounds of secrecy. So we were very afraid of the army.  
(That was your biggest fear after all, that your sons would  
go to the army...) Yeah.

(Other comments?) About the women's group. Our wom-  
en's group was organized by Judith Ratner in 1987. She  
lives in Israel now. She's an activist. She's a chemist,  
I guess. There are several women who began this event.  
But after demonstration in December, most women received  
permission. Maybe one or two remained from this group.  
(Of what year?) 1987. December was demonstration. So  
when I came there and began to make lists of refuseniks,

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

there are many new women in this group. Now this group exists, I guess. What I wanted to say - I was not the first organizer. But what I made, I made lists, some kind of information center. I was not one leader of women's group. I'm shy to say so. But it was some kind of committee. We decided what do to, what we were talking about, what to write. But why I said I was a leader of women's group. First of all, it was in my apartment. Second, everybody called me and I called everybody. Everything went through me. If they wanted to know something, they called me. We prepared what to say, we had meetings twice every month. I was like chairman. But it's not like I was leader of Communist party! We had a committee. I wasn't the only leader.

(What do you hope for yourself?) Here? I want to find a job, to work. I can't even say to earn much money. I want to do something useful. (You knew you were part of the pulse of what was happening in the refusenik community and you'd like to be with the pulse here...) When was election, you vote for Democrat or Republican, for Hartigan or Edgar. I know Jewish vote for Democrats, no? (In this particular case I think they were both decent men. And



**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

there were Jews working for both of them. I know that Hartigan had been helpful and had been a guest at a JCC function. But one of the leaders of the federation was very close to Edgar, so I think...) Because I wrote an article about Hartigan and when he was asked why he chose politics, he said only politics and the church helps people. And I can't do medicine, but I want to help people too. I can't be a politician, but I want to help people. I said Michael can be a doctor to help people.

(So you're interested in doing some sort of social work?) Yes. It's my dream to drive. I have bad vision, but I'll try. I have to take the tests.

(You are talking about moving to Oak Park.) It's close to my husband's work. It's a Jewish area. There is a synagogue and Jewish school.

(Is there something I didn't ask or something you'd like to talk about at this point? Do you feel we've covered the important things?) Maybe something we did not say, but we will talk with my husband, and maybe he will

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

say. And my son. He can tell many stories about Jewish things at his institute, but his own life.

(Are any of the refusenik women you know here in Chicago?) Yes, but they don't work like refuseniks. Yes. Not many, but yes. Because when I was leaving, I gave all lists, many papers I gave to another woman. In a few months she received permission and she gave them to another woman. Now she lives in Chicago. So I don't know where all documents and lists are. I want to work, but I don't know quite how to do it here. It can be done in America.

We lived on the second floor. Once I was standing on the balcony and watching my sons walking to school. After them there were walking two guys, two schoolboys, and one boy says to another boy, "Look: big Jew and small Jew" - about my two sons! I can't believe I'm hearing it. They're small! We say, "with mother's milk". My sons began to play chess at maybe ten years old. The other boy says, "I will have red and you will have blue, because Israel has blue color (on the flag). And I am Russian, so I get the red figures." I asked Sergey, "How did he know that you are Jew?" He said, "I don't know."

Sulamit Reznikov, 3

\* \* \* \*

Evgeny and Lidia's story as told by Sulamith: In the Ukraine, in Dnepropetrovsk there are many Jews. It's an anti-semitic place. There are no foreigners. Closed cities. So authority could do what they wanted. In Moscow, in Leningrad, there are foreigners, journalists. I told you about the demonstrations. We always hoped that there would be journalists. We invited them. They were somehow our defense. Eyewitnesses.... They saw, they took pictures. So we knew we are not alone. They had eyes. But in the Ukraine the authorities could do what they wanted to do.

(What year is this we're talking about?) S... years. He is Jewish, her husband, Evgenii. He didn't finish any high education, college, but he's a pretty smart guy. I don't know exactly his occupation, but in general he is a poet. He visited Moscow, Leningrad. He knew many poets, dissidents. He was some kind of free-thinker. He wrote poems but did not publish. And now he has many poems - Jewish.... I don't know about what he wrote before. He's a poet. Erudite. So he was some kind of dissident.

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

But then he turned from dissident to Jewish thinking,  
history.

I don't know exactly what years it was. He's approximately the same age as us, maybe one year younger. We are 1937, him 1938. So maybe he was not so strong Jewish because everything was Russian. My children, they're not different from their friends. The same life, the same things, books. But I am Jew!

You know how Russians don't say "we", they say "they", "Jews," "they". The difference was really only in passports, because we couldn't study anything. So when I explained when my father gave me this name he said I didn't have anything Jewish, no history, now tradition, no motherland, nothing. At least Jewish name. So when did he turn Jewish? In 1957 he was brought to KGB, and they asked him about his poems, about his activity, about what he goes to Leningrad and Moscow for. And they suggest that he work with them, but he refused. It was 1957.

In 1964, he was again brought in because he read publicly Josef Brodsky's poems. Brodsky was prohibited in

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

Russia. He was brought to KGB. In 1971 he was arrested and brought to the KGB again and they asked him about different things. They had many things about him, his dossier. He was accused of many things, about his poems. He reads poems about Soviet power, Stalin and so on. But the story begins.

He married a woman, Lydia. Just before this arrest, they got married. About her I will tell you later. It's another story. After that he was arrested and his wife was arrested by the KGB. The guy from the KGB tried to persuade her to leave her husband, saying he'd be in prison. But she refused. She cried, "Let my husband go." In 1979, they applied to emigrate to Israel. I cannot tell you details. I'll tell you in general, because it's written in Russian. They had many troubles in their apartment. The windows were broken. They lived on the third floor. People cried, "*Zhidy*, go away from this country or we will kill you without any punishment because you are Jews." They complained to the militia, but the militia said that broken windows in your apartment is not prohibited. They received refusal without any reason. Refusal. It was years that people received...

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

My husband's work was secrecy, but they received it without any reason. They lost their jobs. It was a hard life. Many times they couldn't find jobs. In 1983 the KGB came in search of their apartment and found narcotics. They took baking soda or something, and would say, "it's narcotics. You keep narcotics." If they want to accuse someone of something. (You remember the Ukrainian ...Albert, who was accused of having narcotics and his wife had her brother in this country and it was published in the newspaper. It's a normal thing. If the KGB wants, they can find a gun in your apartment.

He told me this story of how they found these narcotics in his apartments. They brought special dog, trained to find narcotics.) The dog didn't find anything. Then this guy began to look for himself. They had a huge library, many books. He took one book, did not find. In the third book, he found narcotics. So in 1983 they found narcotics, but really they were looking for Jewish literature and different books of Jewish history and his own poems. And he was arrested and was put in prison for two weeks, how to say, interrogation.

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

He was asked about his contacts, his people in Moscow. He knew refuseniks in Moscow. He did not say anything. KGB Major said, "In our city there is no Jewish spirit. We will try to do everything so it will never be here in our city." They complained when he was freed. He was returned the baking soda. They look like narcotics - henna and baking soda. It was 1983. And he could not find job and he found a job in a synagogue like person who cleans - janitor. He cleaned yard, street. In Russia you have one for your building. For example, in our apartment building we had a couple of *dvorniks*, people who clean the yard. He began this work and he was a janitor and he maintained the boiler. He had so small a salary, 30 rubles a month. You can't imagine how small this is.

When he began this work, this is when the sad story begins. Once he began to work in synagogue and had Jewish feeling, he turned the synagogue not only order, he turned synagogue into important Jewish life in synagogue. Because as usual, only old men attend synagogue. And he tried to give new life to synagogue, and Jews began to gather in the synagogue, and the place became some kind of center for

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

Jewish life in this city. He brought matzos from Kiev on *Pesach* to people. And the authorities did not want this Jewish spirit in the city. They decided not to imprison him, to kill him, but to break his spirit, but to discredit him. They wanted not only to break this spirit. If he's discredited, the people won't trust him and it will be very bad. In 1985 he was arrested again, about narcotics. They searched and found narcotics and knives. They could find a nuclear bomb if they wanted. They took books about Jewish culture and history, his own poems, tape recorder, typewriter, famous Russian poet Tvardovsky, it was published in *samizdat*, but they decided that his poem... they said this anti-Soviet literature.

And his wife begins to complain to different places because he's arrested. He's in KGB in prison. She begins to go to the city authorities, to Kiev, different places where she could complain. At last, she came to Moscow. And in Moscow, on Gorky Street, the central street in Moscow, she was arrested. She was brought to a psychiatric hospital and was told that she was an addict. They said they will cure her of drug addiction, because she was very thin.



**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

Now I will tell you about his wife. This is a very sad story. She's a Russian woman. Her father is Russian, but nobody knows who her mother is. Her father had a wife and when he was in the army, it was every person must serve in the army two years. When he went to the army, he served in Siberia, in a prison camp. He had an affair with some woman, and she had a child. Probably she died, because when he returned home, he brought this girl, and no woman. But his wife hated this girl. This woman, (his wife), was written her mother. But she hated Lydia all her life because she wasn't her daughter. The only one who loved Lydia was her grandmother, and she told her this story (that they didn't know her real mother). She was only one or two years old when he came back home with her.

(Was this the father's mother who was the grandmother?) Yes. He loved Lydia. She had a very hard time when she was a girl because her mother hated her. Her grandmother was a simple Russian woman. She knew herbs. She knew some can cure things. She taught Lydia to use herbs. So she never took medicine, because she only took

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

herbs. She never took medicine. The second point: they did not have kids.

She was working as a nurse and was in the hospital and the doctor cured his patient with hunger. I have her different copy books showing how she signed different things where they cured people with hunger. They keep hunger for a long time. That cures some diseases. She studied it when she was a nurse. Because they did not have children, she began to cure herself with hunger to get pregnant. When she was arrested, for the first time she was pregnant. What a coincidence! At this time, when she was arrested, she was pregnant.

But they said she was too thin. "You are obviously a drug addict. We will cure you from this." She said, "Don't cure me. First of all, I never take medicine. Never. And most of all, I'm pregnant." But they gave her shots. More. She lost the baby. They gave her different injections. First it was in Moscow. Later they brought her to Dnepropetrovsk. Listen to what happens. She is in the hospital, getting injections. He is in prison. KGB required that he refuse his Jewish spirit and thinking and

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

ideas. He said no. The KGB gave her so many injections - she said: her mother hated her all her life, but when she saw Lydia in this situation she began to cry. She turned into this condition. She did not understand anything. After that, they showed her to her husband. Her husband was told to change his views or your wife is like this. He agreed to make a film on TV that will say "I refuse..." I asked Lydia if she remembered this date with her husband and she said no. She was so... She said, "I can't explain what they did..." What they did, they gave her I think hormones. She said she was covered with black hair all over her body. In a couple of months it was gone. But you understand what they did with her? Three years after this hospital, in three years, she didn't menstruate. I don't know how it is now, but three years after, she didn't. Because they made something awful with her in this hospital.

He agreed, he made this show on TV. They taped it and showed it in Dneiprpetrovsk TV. After that it was trial. There was a court trial and he said, "Yes, I had narcotics..." Whatever was required. He was sentenced to two years in prison. Was she released from the hospital?

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

Only after that, the trial, after everything was over. They kept her like hostage, because they needed to force him. She began to look for job. I can't explain, it was so hard a life!! In one year, he was released earlier because he worked hard. He came back to Dneiprpetrovsk. They tried to receive invitation from Israel. They tried to emigrate. In short, they received invitation, they emigrated and now they are in Israel. What is very sad in this story? First of all, it destroyed a good man, his good reputation. Health. He has heart problems. I don't know how to explain it. It was so awful! She lost the baby. She's a young woman. They don't have babies.

And when they came back, the other refuseniks didn't want to know him. They did not like him.... But what I wanted to say, we were refuseniks. We lived around other refuseniks. I cannot tell this story about them without a cold feeling. I want to help them. I don't think badly of them. Our refuseniks, they didn't like them. They lived a normal life, their only fear was to be put in prison. They had their children, wives, friends, everything was destroyed. Nobody was in KGB hands. They (refuseniks) were not through it. When I saw Lydia and Evgeny for the first

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

time, I looked into her face. They were telling this story to my husband. Our friend who was a refusenik, he knew them. They came to him. But he didn't want to deal with them. He brought them to us because, he said, "Gennady is very honest and fair. He'll listen to you." (Together we studied law.) So they were in our home and were talking with my husband and telling him this story about their life. And I came home and began to listen with one ear because they were telling this story to my husband, not to me. I listened and realized: it's awful! And I looked at her face and I saw her face! There was pain, anguish, fear, that people do not believe them, do not understand!

[TAPE II] ...I saw this fear on her face, you know, because other people did not understand, they did not believe, they did not feel. It was not fair. I remember, this is what he said: "Gennady is friend, he will listen. And I will go." I wanted to help them. Because I felt like they felt. It is not all story. It's not a common story. They emigrated. What I wanted to say, but first... When he did his show on TV why did refuseniks turn away from him? Well, he said something about several refuseniks in Moscow, but these refuseniks had already left the

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

country. They were in Israel, he knew it. Only one refusenik he said, she was in Moscow. She was a very famous refusenik. And soon after that she received permission and left. Nobody suffered from them, from his words on TV, nobody!

And I wanted to ask why our refuseniks did not help them? When the story with narcotics happened in Kiev, I told you: with Elbert, it was big noise. Another refusenik came there and helped them, they made noise in America, they made big noise! This was an awful story about Lydia and Evgeny. She was in the hospital, she suffered. He was in prison! She was tortured. Nobody helped! Nobody said a word. And now they turn away. It made me so sad.

(How do you interpret this? What is your interpretation of this? Of the refuseniks' attitude towards them. How would you explain this?) You know what? I would like to talk to refuseniks about it because by this time, they left Russia and lived in Israel. Only once I talked with Kosharovksy's wife. Do you know Kasharovsky? He was a famous refusenik. They are in Israel too. He is a good guy. He knew this couple, Lydia and Evgeny. And I talked

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

to his wife, "Now she (Lydia) is in Moscow, they want to emigrate, too." The wife said, "Oh no! He said on TV about his refusal from his Jewish views. He denied..." and so on. They were in the KGB's hands. They do not know what it means.

I knew before this story long ago I knew another story. Our very good friend, she knew one person, and after he was broken by the KGB, she said, when she met him, it was absolutely another person. I cannot tell you this story because it was long ago. I did not know this guy about whom she said. When I go to Israel I will visit her. She is a very good woman, and I will write this story. He was Jewish, this guy. After the KGB, he began to work in a Christian church, at a small position. The KGB made something with him, I don't remember the details. But I remember when she told us this story she said, "This person, you cannot say any bad word because after the KGB..." And his wife and children and friends, they turn away from him again. It was long ago, this story. But she said that when she met him she understood what it means, KGB, because he was an absolutely different man, a different personality, different thinking. Different

**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

feeling. "He recognized me, I talked to him." (But he was brainwashed, in other words...) He was broken. Nobody was in the KGB... How can anybody say nobody suffered!

(Would you like to see some sort of an official letter come from the group that you were with to that couple in Israel?) No. They live together, husband and wife. He published his poem in Russian in Israel. He said he will send me the book, it's very nice. But they're not very happy there now. She said that there is very much bureaucracy. I don't know exactly because she didn't want to talk. She said, "I want to come here and we'll talk. I'll explain." I know it's not very nice. I think that former refuseniks don't want to know him, I think! Maybe they don't have friends. I don't know. But she isn't very happy. I know he published, but it's not a very big deal.

(So you'd like to see more help forthcoming if he wants to come here?) To help her. She wants. Something with heart treatments. He cannot leave, but she can come to America maybe to visit, maybe to live. When she comes here, I will try to help her. She's a good nurse. She worked with children, she loves children. (Is she working



**Sulamit Reznikov, 3**

in Israel?) Yes, as a nurse. You know, it's not usual story. It's interpretation. No friends. Maybe now he is considered like Jewish like [prisoner] of Zion. Maybe it gives him friends. I don't know, but I know all this torture. I know it. He says, "I could not allow my wife to die, to lose my wife." To destroy her absolutely. She was destroyed! There are many sides to this story. I talked to another couple of refuseniks... [tape ends]

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auziliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

**SULAMITH REZNIKOV - ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

(From handwritten copy explaining other taped comments.)

About the Jewish "Experience":

Me. I told you that at four years old I knew I was a Jew: when the war began in 1941 I was almost four, then we went into evacuation, children there teased me because of my name.

I told you about my first day at school. I told you I wanted to change my name because I felt myself uncomfortable, children teased me.

I told you the story about the medal. Why was the medal important? If you have a medal, it means only "fives" - you can enter the institute, university without any exams. Other girls who were good pupils but who never had only "fives," they had "fours" and "fives" - they received medals because the teacher improved their grades during the last month.

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

I had only "fives" all my school years, but did not receive it. I had to take exams. In the USSR all exams but one are oral and the teacher has the possibility to do what he or she wants: to mix you up, to ask things that are not required to be known to you, to exert pressure and so on. When I had exams, one teacher tried to fail me this way. When I studied in this institute I found out he was a furious anti-Semite. I told you when I graduated institute I was not taken to a job despite of their own requirements. My parents' friend helped me to get a job.

Several times in my life I tried to get a job. Never could I do it myself without friends' help. There were many vacancies, and engineers were needed but not Jews. I don't want to talk about everyday anti-Semitism. It's everywhere and always. I've forgotten much.

My husband. He will tell you himself - I hope. But I'll tell you something now. When he graduated seven grades he decided to enter aviation school. His family was very poor and in that school he would receive food and clothes. Despite his excellent knowledge, he was not admitted. When he withdrew his application he noticed on

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

the corner of the piece of paper the erased word, "Jew". He studied at school so excellently that teachers could not deprive him of the medal, but they could prevent him from entering Moscow University. How? They gave him his documents too late, after the deadline to the university. In institutes the deadline is much later.

He had to go to the institute. He was the excellent student again, he received "red diploma" (only "fives"), but again he received the Jewish experience: when he graduated for the assignment he was first on the list because of the "red diploma", and he had the legal right to choose a job. But he was refused, he received not a good job. When he wanted to change it he became unemployed.

How did it happen? He was admitted to a research institute and, naturally, quit his job, he came the research institute with his "labor book" but the chief of the personnel department (in the USSR it's a KGB man usually) said "No." My husband looked for any job. To search for a job - it's a nightmare. Maybe he will tell you himself. At last he got a small position. In nine

**Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

months he received a call from the research institute,  
"Come here quickly." "What's the matter?" "Our chief of  
the personnel department is on vacation. He is absent."  
My husband was taken to work at this research institute.

Is it possible to remember everything?

Sergey. He learned he is a Jew in kindergarten. He  
was born in October, it was summer, so he was less than  
five years old. In kindergarten children attend the same  
class, same teacher every day. But in the summer because  
of vacations every week they have a different  
teacher - from other classes. Once my son had an excellent  
teacher. My husband and I liked her very much and told my  
son, "What a perfectly good teacher you have now!" The  
next day after kindergarten my son said, "You said the  
teacher is good, but ha-ha, no, she is a Jew!" This day  
his education began: we explained to him... He was a  
mentally developed boy, very bright. At one-and-a-half  
years old he began to ask about letters and at three he  
said his first word himself. At five he read like an  
adult.

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

I often saw in kindergarten: teacher is absent, children are sitting around my son, he is reading them a book. But physically he was not strong, was often beaten up. Boys who beat him do not forget he is a Jew. At school several teachers were clearly anti-Semitic, they permitted themselves to say anti-Semitic things. The history teacher was furiously anti-Semitic. He gave my son lower grades. Once I asked him why. He said, "Look at Lena's copy book. It's so nicely written, and look at your son's copy book." I said, "But beauty of the copy book doesn't reflect knowledge in history." He many times said anti-Semitic things. Once he beat my son since my son drew a mustache to somebody in the history book. (All the children did it.) His name was Sidorov. Now he is in "Pamjat'". (Somebody told me this.)

The most sad story is about my son's "entering" into university. We knew that physics and math are absolutely closed for Jews in Moscow University. But chemistry. Four years he studied in chemistry group in "Pioneer Castle". He took part in competitions for schoolchildren in chemistry, biochemistry, and physics. He was a winner, has around sixteen certificates. He was so bright and sophisticated, but could not enter the university. I

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

cannot remember this story, I begin to cry. And the same reaction I have when I hear the same stories with other children of our Jewish friends. He studied math in the institute. He graduated with a "red diploma" (only "fives") but the same situation: like his father: he could not get the job that he wanted.

Vladimir. Children did not beat him because he was strong; he could beat back. One year he even learned to wrestle in order to be strong. When he had troubles he fought. As usual, all children in the summer live in the summer camps. Some of them one term, some two, some three. These camps are overnight camps. They are very cheap and available. I never let my sons go there, I was afraid for them. Once Vladimir wanted very much to go, he persuaded me long and I let him go because my friend was working in that camp. She was a doctor and signed him: her son.

In that camp he had many troubles. He went back home soon, but he did not tell me about the troubles because he did not want to upset me. I know that children teased him and he fought. He doesn't like and doesn't want to remember his troubles.

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

When he was four or five he asked, "What does the word 'university' mean?" Father explained. Vladimir asked, "Will I study there?" My husband said, sadly, "Never, never in the world will my sons study in the University." We had not decided to emigrate by that time, so he meant Moscow University. Technics is not his mission. He is a humanist. In his math school with very high demand to each subject he studied perfect, but the best was "composition." A strict teacher said that he is the best in the class. Even in America he had an "A" on English composition. Nevertheless, after graduating school he entered the institute to study math. He knew that Moscow University is not available for Jews, absolutely, especially if you want the liberal arts, something in the Humanities.

I am sure he told you the story about how he was nearly eliminated from school because of celebrating Purim. I asked the teacher, "What is the crime?" She exclaimed, "He ate ritual food." She meant *hamantashen* - cakes with poppy seeds. You know, at Russian "Paskha" Russians bake "kulich" and "paskha." They are real ritual food, people bring them to church and the priest consecrates them. This



### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

"ritual food" at the Russian Paskha is sold in each store, and all stores are state stores. But it is a difference: Russian "ritual foods" and Jewish...

What I want to add is that applied math is the most difficult and most prestigious department in each institute, it takes a biggest competition to get there. My sons got there in different institutes and studied successfully even though it was not their mission.

We left the USSR and Vladimir can choose what he wants. "They" didn't have time to put obstacles in his way. But for Sergey they had time to do it. Perhaps. If he would be in America he would be a physicist, chemist, biochemist.... Sometimes he said, "When we leave I will study physics, chemistry..." But we did not leave. He graduated from the institute, he became a mathematician. He is working on his Ph.D. I am sure he will be a very good mathematician. But... This thought makes me sad.

And what about my husband? In Russia he had one way - to be an engineer. He is an excellent engineer, Ph.D., but in non-antisemitic country he could have another

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

specialty. He was a very big talent. Our sons picked up from him. He could be a physicist, journalist, actor, lawyer, doctor or something else. Any way, he could be excellent. I say it not because I am his wife, I know it. But he had only one way - engineer.

You know, my husband and sons are an example that in the USSR Jews cannot develop their possibilities, cannot get the best out of themselves. It gives harm to Jews. But to the country it gives much more harm. Huge harm.

#### Several Stories.

My son invited his classmates to our home. They played, talked. They were around eight years old. I was usually in the kitchen and I heard what they were doing. Once I hear that two girls are arguing, then they are scolding each other, "You are a fool!" "No, you are a fool." "You are an idiot." "No, you are an idiot." "You are a Jew." "No, you are a Jew." I knew these girls, their families, I am sure they did not learn it from their parents. Maybe from other children? In general,

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

antisemitism is part of the environment. "Jew" in that country is a synonym for "bad."

My friends' daughter was in the third grade. Once somebody in the class asked her, "Who is she?" (her last name was not Russian). The girl answered, "I am a Jew." Children surrounded her and looked at her with amazement. It seemed that they saw her for the first time and that she was a strange and unknown monster. Do you know why? First, because she said it herself - "I am a Jew"! And you know what they asked her? "Are you from Israel?" Every question was about Israel. It shows that in their minds Israel and Jews come together, so intense anti-Israel propaganda in the Soviet Union is actually anti-semitic, anti-Jewish propaganda.

My cousin was an officer in the Soviet army. He wanted to study in the Military Academy. He tried three times (three years in a row). He passed exams most successfully but was not admitted. After the third time he decided to complain. He came to the General and told him his story. The general said, "Well, right now I'll find out what is the matter." He made a call, listened to the

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

answer, and then turned his face to my cousin. "Why do you take me in it? Why do you take me for a ride? Why are you bothering me? You are a Jew! Turn around and go!" He was a General and did not need to be polite or to lie. He told the truth.

"Education." "Jewish Education."

I had splendid parents. They loved me and I loved them too. My father's father was a dentist, my mother's father was an accountant, both my parents were engineers, excellent engineers. I was their third baby. Two newborn babies before me died in hospitals because of the doctor's fault. When I asked my mother, "My father gave me an unusual name, what name just you wanted?" My mama answered, "I was so glad that at last I have a live healthy baby that I didn't care about name - at all! Your father went to the department of registration - I did not say anything, when I came and said he named you Sulamith, I said only 'Okay.'" My parents wanted more children but the war began, after the war they were about forty, life was hard, antisemitism grew, so I don't have brothers and sisters.

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

My parents didn't talk to me about politics, did not explain. Why? Now I try to realize it. I think there were several reasons. 1) They thought: She'll live in this country all her life, she cannot change anything, let her think that everything is good, right and fair, that this country is beautiful. In a popular Soviet song there are the words, "I don't know a country better than mine, more free..." and so on. 2) They wanted that I have at least a happy childhood. 3) they did not want me to have double thinking, I could say something at school and have much troubles. There was one more reason, of no small importance: Even though they knew about the country, the system, nevertheless they thought that to live there is better than in another country, say, "America, country of imperialism, capitalism, all people are enemies to each other" and so on.

You know, Soviet propaganda is a very powerful thing! And they were not able to receive information because of the "iron curtain."

But about antisemitism, about the "Jewish problem" - they educated me. First, like all children, I

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

absorbed what I heard: talking, reactions to events, attitude toward them. I took it in from my parents and from my "environment." I try to remember if they talked to me about Jewishness, about problems. It's hard to remember something specific. I believe they did. I told you that at four years old I knew I am not the same like other children, I am a Jew. I am sure they explained something to me because when I met these cases I was prepared. I knew I was a Jew, I knew how to treat words, relationships, and so on. I told you a story about my father, how he explained to me why I must not change my name. I told you how he explained to me why he gave me a Jewish name.

When our first son was born, we discussed the name for the baby. My father said, "Give him a Jewish name, Rafael or David." I began to laugh. I said, "Pa, he'll live in this antisemitic country, I don't want him to have troubles! I'll give him a typical Russian name." My father was strong. I want to tell you one more story about him.

When I was a first year student I fell in love with one Russian boy, my classmate. He was a good boy, tall and

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

very, very handsome. We were just good friends. He came to our home, we studied together, we went to movie theaters. I was sure he fell in love too but he never said a word. He was not an assiduous student so sometimes he had troubles and discussed them with my father. You know, my parents liked him because he was nice and very polite. After the second year he quit the institute and with a group of students went north to build "building of Communism."

After several years he lived in Moscow and rarely we met each other with our old friends. Once we remembered student years and he said he loved me. Then I asked, "Why didn't you marry me?" He said, "I had a talk with your father and said I wanted to marry you, but he told me, she must marry only a Jew." I said, "My father never told me about it, now he is dead and you can make this up." He answered, "No, it's true. I hesitated to quit institute but after that talk I stopped hesitating."

I remembered that he had a one-on-one conversation in another room, but I thought it was about school. This is my father! I remember he told me something when his mother

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

died but I don't remember concrete words. I think he educated me non-obtrusively, without pressing. My mother was different. she could say, "I don't care who you'll marry, I want him to be a good person." But just she gave me the feeling about "Jews are good." She always told me, "He is a Jew. She is a Jew." About scientists, famous people, writers, composers and so on. Once we read or heard - I don't remember exactly - American article about three people who gave the most influence to Twentieth-century culture: A. Einstein, K. Marx, Freud. My mother said, "Look the three are Jews." She told me stories about Jews who were treated unfairly because they were Jews and so on.

She was really a "Jewish mama." She helped me all her life to the last day, till her death. She gave us some money, she bought things, she helped with my housework. She babysat my three children. She lived far away but she always came to babysit if needed. I could call her and say, "Ma, we are invited to a party. Can you come or not?" She always said, "I know if I don't come you'll be at home and Gene'll go, so I'll come." She had to take bus, metro - two lines - and the bus again. It took more than an hour, but she came.



### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

When she moved into another apartment closer, she took only one bus. She came to help me with my housework almost every day. I said, "Ma, have a rest, I can do it myself." She turned angry and said, "No, I come here to help you, if you don't need it, I'll go home!"

When we decided to emigrate, she did not want to, she was afraid for us, she thought that to live in Moscow is better than to live in another unknown country. Do you know how I persuaded her? Easy. I said, "When we will come to another country we will not be able to find a job soon, but you are retired, you will receive a pension from the beginning, you will help us. We need your help." My mother wanted "to give" and she was glad to give. Even up to now I miss my parents. Even my husband could say, "Sometimes I would so much like to talk to your father."

You asked me, Elaine, when I began to understand about the system? I try to remember.

When I studied in the institute we read so many books. It was not *samizdat*. These books were published. I can

**Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

recommend to you an excellent book At the place of Execution: the Literature of Moral Opposition by Gregory Silirsky. This book was translated into English and published in the USA with the title, A History of Post-War Soviet Writing. It's a very interesting book; it gives the whole picture of Soviet published literature of the moral opposition. Thus you can understand that we could pick something up from literature that went through censorship. Then we became older and could realize it ourselves.

Then was 1956 and the Party meeting where Khrushchev told about Stalinism. Then in 1956 I met my husband, Genady. He was much more advanced politically. Then we began to read *samizdat* - underground typed books and articles - and to listen to "Voice of America." And more and more.

We so early began to understand about Soviet system that we could become dissidents, I am glad that we did not become this. Why? Dissidents want to improve the system, everything in the country, they want to reform and so on. We realized that it is not our business, we are Jews. Jews in that country are considered guilty of everything bad.

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

It doesn't matter what Jews do, they will be bad and guilty forever in that antisemitic country. We understood: we don't want to change, to improve, to fight the system. No. It's not the Jewish way: Jewish business. We must leave. We will live our own life, we will feel ourselves Jews how we want and understand it. And nothing and nobody will press. We want to do it for our children and future generations for ourselves. We don't want to live in the USSR, we want to leave!

In 1978 my husband quit his very good, highly paid job because it was connected with some "secrecy" and could be reason to receive refusal. In 1979 we applied for exit visa. Approximately at that time we began to get different books about Jewish history, Israel, the magazine "Israel Today," books and magazines published abroad. We got "Jewish History" by Cecil Roth in Russian. I remember it was a photocopy, very small print, and I read it with a magnifying glass, all 800 pages. My husband and sons read this book too. In 1980 we got "Exodus" in Russian. I remember it was exactly 1980 because I thought that Vladimir at ten years old is too young to read it. But he read it at once. We read much, we educated ourselves.

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

Formerly we were just Jews, at that time we received some knowledge. We met friends who were in refusal too and educated themselves.

In 1983, exactly, my sons and husband began to study Hebrew and Torah. In 1983 foreign Jews began to visit us. We felt that Jews support Jews. We appreciated it very much. They supported us materially, especially morally, they brought us books. My sons studied Torah in 1984 in different groups for youths. They educated me. Maybe they wanted that I keep kosher and other rules. Some of our friends turned religious. Some just kept rules. I remember a period that Vladimir wore *kipa* and so on. You know what I told them? "The most important is what's inside, not outside. Is it good to wear *kipa* and to fight with your brother? You have to feel right, act right, you have to be honest, good, fair. It's the most important! Spirit! Not appearance!"

I believed it and taught my sons it. I don't know when my sons began to understand exactly they are Jews and what it means to be a Jew in that country. I know that we always discussed everything in their presence. About

**Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

politics. About Jews. My mother exclaimed often, "Why do you talk about such things in the children's presence!?" I always said, "Our children have to have the same views, the same opinions, they have to see things like we do." She was afraid, she went through Stalinism, she could say, "You will be imprisoned." And often we told our sons, "Never, ever say to anybody what you hear at home, which books you see, otherwise we could be imprisoned."

I am absolutely sure that whatever my sons think when their education, Jewish education began, they really received it always, constantly from birth. I told you that Sergey clearly realized at five after our talk about his kindergarten teacher. Vladimir approximately the same age. I remember one conversation. He was about seven years old. We were talking about somebody who was going to marry. I said, "Jews should not marry non-Jew." "Why?" asked Vladimir. I told him a story.

I had a friend at my job. She was a good Russian woman. I am absolutely sure she was not antisemitic, but when we once fell out she said, "You are a Jew, everybody Jewish is so... and so..." I don't remember her exact

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

words, only the meaning. She wanted to say something bad to hurt me, so she said "Jew." You'll never be the same if your wife is not Jew, and more. You and your wife have to have the same views and same feelings, troubles and treatment of them, the same spirit and so on. I explained it to my small seven year old boy. I don't know if he remembers it now or not, but there he understood it.

#### About Judaism.

In general I am not religious. I don't keep shabat, kosher, don't go to synagogue. But I know that Judaism is mine. But for example, Christmas, church - no. In Russia we put tree up before New Year. First it was not connected with Christmas, just New Year fir-tree, new year tradition. Second - we did not know that it is not Jewish way. Now I know and never be able to put new-year tree up. I like Christmas beautiful trees, decorations, but I feel it's not mine, ours.

When I found out about "Jews for Christ" in Chicago I felt awful about it. No! It's wrong. When my good friend, Russian woman, not antisemitic sent me a greeting with "Christmas and New Year" I asked her, "It did not

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

occur to me to greet you with Purim or Hanukkah. Why it occurred to you to greet me with Christmas that gave to Jews, Jewry, so much suffering up to now?!"

I know there were many Jews who adopted Christianity and became famous Christians. I think it's wrong. I think they felt and other people felt it. I knew one "Christian" in Russia and one "Jew for Christ" in Chicago, they both impressed me the same: they were very staunch (a kind of) but I heard in their words excuses. They explained and explained but I heard them justifying themselves. I have a friend who knows a woman - a Bahai. This Jewish woman had many troubles in her personal life. She was very unhappy. She needed something. I believe if she would meet at that time, say, a good person, maybe a Catholic missionary, she would turn to Catholicism; or if she would meet good Jewish religious person she would turn to Jewish Orthodoxy, but she met good Bahai person and turned to Bahaism. It is understandable. But I hate it.

When my friend said that Bahaism is very good and "maybe I'll think to go there" I had so negative a reaction. I said, "You are adult and can do whatever you

**Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

want. But my attitude to it is so bad. I consider it like apostasy." She said, "You don't even go to synagogue, how can you judge me?" I said, "I have a feeling." I feel I am a Jew. I want to be a Jew or I don't want - I am a Jew. This is mine - Judaism. That is not mine.

I am sure that my sons and husband feel this way too.

About Jews from the USSR.

There are many articles about "Russian Jews," much is written. I cannot say anything new. But you asked me. So I tell something.

Soviet Jewry is a special kind. They were not real Jews, they were not able to find out about Jewish history, traditions, culture, language, songs and literature, about Jews in other countries. My friend graduated from Moscow University. Her subject was History. She told me that in "History" there was not one word about Jews. Like Jews don't exist in world history.

Most Russian Jews had only Russian history, songs and language, culture and tradition, only "Great" Russian



### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

literature and still of life. Children had Russian names. My Michael's teacher once asked me why I have so strange a name. She is surprised! I explained. She asked, "Why did he name you that?" I said, "There are in your class an Uzbek girl with an Uzbek name and a Tatar boy with a Tatar name. And you are not surprised. But if a Jew has a Jewish name - it's strange."

Soviet Jews were deprived of anything Jewish except the word "Jew" on passport. It's on the one hand. But on the other hand they were treated like people of second quality, second rate. They were Jews, not the same like Russian. Do you understand this situation? And one point more. Soviet Jews are people from Soviet system that spoils everybody and everything! And these people, Soviet Jews, come to America. And you ask why many of them don't look nice.

First reason - they don't have much Jewishness, but it's not their fault, I explained it. Second reason - they are spoiled by the Soviet system - awful system. Third - every nation has right to have different people: good and bad, clever and foolish and so on. Many people

### **Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

come. Most of them are simple people from the Ukraine. Emigration is a very hard thing. Sometimes during difficulties the worse traits are displayed. If you asked why they left... Most of them left in order to escape antisemitism and injustice. Some of them - to escape Jewishness to become American instead of "people of second-quality." I think that there are not many of them.

There are people who left because of bad economy, hunger and radiation. There is a big group more and not many people in America know their reason. I can tell you. When in the USSR were published openly books, articles and many stories about awful Soviet history, about Stalin, repressions, prisons, camps and so on. Then they found out about it (they did not know it before) and when they at last learned it they were seized with terror, they realized it is necessary to leave that country.

I think they will live in this beautiful country America. Some of them will acclimate, some of them will come to Jewishness from Russian adaptation. Some of them will be Jews like they are now. I believe in America every one of them will be happy.

**Sulamith Reznikov, Additional Comments**

Dear Elaine! My husband has read my oral history. You know what he said? "Listen, we live in this excellent country, we have troubles but they are normal troubles and worries about job, children, health, it is a normal life! I have already forgotten about that nightmare! And now I read and remember. It is so awful! I doubt that I will be able to give my interview! It's so frustrating!"

But I believe it is only an emotional reaction and when he will be available he'll tell you his story. He has much about his "experience," "education," refusenik activity and so on, much more than me.

Sincerely, Sulamith

Excuse me for the many mistakes. I send you a tape. On the other side are nice Jewish children's songs. April 18, 1991.