

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

SERGEY REZNIKOV

Moscow Institute of Oil and Gas Engineering
1987

BIRTH: October 8, 1965, Moscow

SPOUSE: Marina P., May 23, 1966, Moscow
Married, 1990

CHILDREN:

PARENTS: Gennady Reznikov, April 16, 1937, Moscow

Sulamith Shternberg Reznikov, August 11, 1937,
Moscow

SIBLINGS: Vladimir, May 16, 1970, Moscow

Michael, 1979, Moscow

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Wolf Baruchovich Shternberg, 1903-1964, Dunaevtsa

Malka (Malvina) Rubinstein, 1906?-1984, Dunaevtsa

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

Lev Reznikov, 1904-1979, Ukraine

Sofia Libinson Reznikov, 1907, Byelorussia

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

West Suburban Synagogue, Oak Park, IL.
Hillel, University of Chicago

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centes of Chicago

NAME: **SERGEY REZNIKOV**

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INTERVIEWER: E. Snyderman, with Margaret Witkovsky

(Sergey, you were born in Moscow in 1965. Can you tell me your earliest memories?) My earliest memories? (Who lived with you at that time?) My earliest memories go back to the time when I lived with my parents and my grandparents from my mother's side in their communal apartment in the center of Moscow. Then my grandparents were both alive.

(What does communal apartment mean?) A communal apartment is where several families share the same apartment. Each of them have a room or two, but they have a common kitchen, bathroom, hall, if there is one. It's like living with roommates at the university with the only

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exception that you do not choose your roommates and you're assigned and registered at this address. There's nothing depending on you.

(You can't change that apartment if you want to without government permission, is that right?) You cannot simply change it. You can swap it with somebody. If you both agree, you can file with the local authorities for their approval - it's up to them - and if they approve this exchange, you can change it. But usually it's subject to some heavy official regulations. There's a great deal of bureaucracy involved in this. Also, what I try to stress is that living in these communal apartments is common cultural heritage for residents of big cities. These communal apartments are a part of many people's background and culture. They can easily recall the atmosphere. Sometimes you get good neighbors, roommates, sometimes the roommates are extremely bad.

(What is your recollection? How was it when you were little?) My grandparents had very warm and good relations with another family that lived in the same apartment. So I cannot say anything wrong. I cannot complain about

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them. But I also know that in the apartment where my father lived before he got married to my mom, there were several nasty people who were able to do a lot of bad things. There is a saying in Russian that an argument is on the level of that in a communal kitchen. So when you are spitting in someone else's soup, or [laughs]... (Oh, people really did things as bad as that?) Yeah! This is the level of what is called a communal kitchen argument.

(What family stories do you remember hearing as a child?) I heard a great deal of family stories. My grandmother lived a very interesting life. She liked to tell stories. For instance, about how she was saved on several occasions when she was on the brink of death. For example, my grandfather worked in an airplane design bureau and he participated in the design of a big passenger airplane of that time, the middle '30s. That airplane was considered a big achievement for Soviet industry.

(Do you know what plane it was?) It was called the 'Maxim Gorky'. It had seven engines, one of the biggest passenger airplanes of that time. There was only one machine actually built, and it was about to make an air

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cruise for the people in this design bureau and their families. The tickets were distributed. (Like a maiden voyage?) Yes. And a lot of people got those tickets. But my grandfather didn't. Either he was so lazy or he just didn't ask for them at the proper time and there was an argument at home and my grandmother was complaining to him that he's so slow and lazy, and he didn't manage to get her the tickets for this air show, and they would not be able to attend this maiden flight, as you say. It was a really big show on the outskirts of Moscow.

This huge airplane took off and flew and was surrounded by small airplanes that escorted it in the air. One of those small airplanes came too close and hit the big one and it crashed, and all the people aboard died. On a big Moscow cemetery there is a huge memorial plaque with a picture of this airplane and the names of people who died in this crash. There were like fifty people aboard. It was in the mid '30s, and fifty people aboard was a big number. So this was one of the stories my grandmother told me, about how she was miraculously saved.

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(So she entertained you when you were small with stories?) Yeah. (Do you get a sense of what the family history was from the stories your grandmother told you? Sometimes the children don't listen to their parents' stories, but the grandchildren are fascinated, and you might have a different sense of the family history than your mother would...) Well, the family history is different from my father's side and my mother's side. And from my father's side, we have a wonderful man, my father's uncle, he's more than ninety years old, and he's strong, healthy, I hope...

(Where is he living?) He's living in Moscow right now, and he's very religious. He attends synagogue almost every day. He's like a patriarch. He's the keeper of our family traditions. It is he who tries to bring the whole family together on different occasions. (What is his name?) His name is Samuil. His last name is Libenzon. That's my father's mother's maiden name. He and his sisters have different spellings of their name. They were registered, they got their papers in the '20s or '30s and it often happened that brothers got different spellings of their names on their papers.

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(So he kept the family together...) He kept the family together... (Would you say he imparted the religious feeling to your father...) No, the religious tradition broke entirely. At the generation of my father there was no passage of religious traditions from my grandparents to my parents. It might be that my dad told you the story about his parents speaking Yiddish at home, and his older brother shouting at them, telling them to stop, because it was the time of this rampant anti-semitism in the Soviet Union after the second World War. It lasted into the terrible years - '48 to '53. And so when the parents tried to speak Yiddish, my father's brother shouted at them, "Stop, you shouldn't do this! You have to forget it if you're going to survive! So stop speaking in the presence of Gennady! He's young and he can go out and tell that his parents speak Yiddish on the street and he'll bring harm upon us."

So there was no religious traditions, no culture, almost no national feeling. It was all suppressed in the 1940's and early '50s. So my parents had to start again in the '80s.

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(Tell me when you became aware that you were Jewish? What effect did that have on you?) I was in kindergarten and kids were mocking and teasing one another. They were calling each other *zhid*. I'm sure you know this word. And I was participating in all of this and I didn't know what it meant. When my mom heard me telling to someone, "You are a dirty *zhid*," she was astonished and at home she explained to me that I should never ever call anyone by this name because we are Jews ourselves and this is a dirty word that is used to call us.

For a long time I could not quite understand that we are different from other people. Because indeed we weren't different. We were the same. We didn't observe any traditions. We didn't observe Jewish holidays, at least as far as I know. Maybe my parents knew, but I didn't know any. The only thing that distinguished us from the rest of the population was the fifth line in our internal passports.

(You didn't get to bring your internal passport with you, did you?) No, it's impossible. (You have to turn it in...) Yes, I had to turn it in, in order to receive my

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exit visa. (How old were you in kindergarten?) Five, six years old.

(At home did you have responsibilities. For five years you were the only child at home, so maybe you were the baby the first five years. But after your brother was born, did you have any responsibilities? Or were you just supposed to concentrate on your studies?) Honestly, I don't think that I had any special responsibilities at home. We had a very supportive environment and we were all supporting and helping each other, but there was no sharing of responsibilities. My mom didn't work for some time after my brother Vladimir was born. And also my grandmother, who lived separately, visited us almost every day to help us with housekeeping. She did shopping and she kept the house...

(So your mother's mother and your father's mother helped out with the family, or just your mother's mother?) No, just my mother's mom. My father's mom, she has very poor health, and she was not so energetic and industrious as my mother's mom was.

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(As you were growing up, were you aware of your parents' worries, their concerns. When did you first realize there were worries at home?) Do you mean this pre-emigration talks and concerns? There always were some worries, it is a normal course of things. I remember when I first became aware about the possibility of emigration. I can guess when my parents first became aware. Their friend emigrated in 1972. (So you were seven years old...) Yes. I didn't know anything at that time, but he was a very close friend of my father, and he didn't tell my father about his intentions and his plans. It was new and dangerous at that time, he just said to him once, "I'm going to emigrate to Israel." And my father tried to persuade him not to.

(Why?) Well, they were both young, energetic upstart scientists, engineers. I think they worked for some time in the same organization, and my father believed that everything could be achieved in the Soviet Union, that he could have a good career, and he had a lot of opportunities lying ahead of him, that he could manage to rise to some high level position in this engineering establishment, to become a chief of a department or something like this, and

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that would secure him a good salary and everything, but his friend probably possessed a better vision of the situation. Anyway, he said that his decision is final, and he's going to leave. He applied, got permission, and left.

(This was in 1972 - that was pretty rare....) Yes, it was extremely rare! (How do you explain how he got out so easily?) Well, a few people got out. (Maybe because there wasn't a threat, it was so soon...) At that time, there was not yet a wave of emigration. Maybe they really considered cases on some personal basis and they found no personal objections to the emigration of that particular person. But I know that for many years to come, my father would repeat the same thing: that he's very angry at his friend because he didn't engage in that argument, and he didn't try to persuade him to leave. He just said, "I'm going to leave," and he left.

(Because he might have been persuaded at that time...) He didn't make any effort to persuade my father at that time in 1972. And now this man lives in America. He first went to Israel and spent maybe ten years in Israel. He rose to become a prominent scientist and then went to

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Europe. He lived for several years in Europe, and then received an invitation from an American university. Now he teaches at some university.

(While you were growing up, do you remember any Jewish rites of passage in your family, anything like a bar mitzvah, wedding, anything like that...) No, no. We were pretty ignorant of our Jewishness right until... Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe that was my impression, but I can tell clearly only about myself. I was absolutely ignorant about my Jewish heritage, about my Jewishness up until the late '70s, when we applied and became involved.

(Nonetheless, were you different in some way from your Russian friends? You had Russian friends as well as Jewish friends, I assume, growing up...) Well, probably I had only Russian friends. We lived in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Moscow; it was a new development area, so-called "sleeping neighborhood" where there are only high rises, only high huge apartment buildings and people who live there work elsewhere in the city. (Bedroom communities?) It was a bedroom community.

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People who lived there were not all white collar. There were a lot of blue collar people. In the school I attended, I believe, there were quite a few students from white collar families. So at that time I had no Jewish friends. At least right now I can not recall anybody who was. Maybe somebody was. But first of all, I didn't pay attention to it. I knew that I am Jewish. I knew that I have to hide this and not expose it in order not to be beaten.

(You feared attack by some of the tough kids....)
They were not particularly anti-semitic. They just needed a cause. (So this would have been enough of a cause?)
Yes. I played the role of class scapegoat for several years. (So you were different from the others?) My achievements in sports were extremely poor. I was weak, and I could not defend myself. I was intelligent in the sense that I preferred reading to playing football outdoors.

(Did the teacher make a distinction between you and the other students?) Some teachers did. Actually, this is not the best part of my memories because, in fact, I lived

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my life, but it was sort of unconscious in the sense that I didn't fully realize what I was doing and what it was and how it was. And now what I think when I recall my early school years, I didn't recall any emotions. It seems to me now that then I acted like a robot. (So you suppressed your feelings?) Yes. My feelings were quite underdeveloped at that time, and they began to develop in high school.

(Did you tell your parents what was going on?) Yes, I usually told them. (What did they say to you?) Different messages. My father urged me to train, to become stronger. To do push-ups and everything. My mom tried to defend me by going to school and talking to teachers and trying to bring the parents of these hooligans and have them punished. (Were you ever hurt?) Well.... (If you wanted them punished they must have done something....) There were a lot of fights. Three people in our class were from families with criminal background. The older brother of one of them was in jail at that time for a street fight with a knife. So they were normal, no, not normal, abnormal of course, but they were a typical Russian family where the parents are drunkards and do not pay attention to

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their children, and the children are brought up on the streets and inner yards of these big apartment buildings. So they start smoking at twelve. They start drinking alcohol at fourteen. They carry knives and cigarettes in their pockets, so you'd better not get into arguments with them.

There were not many people, maybe two or three like this in my class, but there were situations when I was forced to confront them. I knew if I didn't perform well... (Was it one-on-one?) Sometimes. I do not remember. (So you may have been beaten...) I was beaten on several occasions, but it was not pure anti-semitism. Just a general situation of scapegoat in a class. (But you were the scapegoat?) I was the scapegoat in my class for about nine years. (So from kindergarten on?) From first grade until the ninth grade.

In ninth grade I got extremely tired of all of this. I persuaded my friend who used to say to me, "I like you despite the fact that you are Jewish." He was really a good friend for me at that time. He was very strong and he had trained in all possible martial arts, so he did

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wrestling and karate and everything. And I persuaded him to bring me to his karate class. He trained me personally everu dau for quite a time, for maybe half a year. We would get up early at 6:00 A.M., and go to the school yard where no one sees, and he would teach me karate. After that, after I picked up some of it, he brought me to his karate class and I trained there for about a year. Then once I was again challenged and I fought back, and pretty successfully. It was a kind of a miracle. A real scoop. "That guy struck Reznikov and Reznikov struck back and knocked him out!"

So, that, for probably the last year in that school, people knew that I was able to stand up for myself. (How did you feel about that?) At that time I was very proud. I came home with bruises, but I was very proud that at least I showed to one of my old enemies who used to tease and offend me for many years, that I can strike him. (This was someone who had tormented you over a period of time...) Yes, for several years.

And maybe my poor performance showed my brother, Vladimir, the negative model he decided he must avoid. He

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was quite the opposite. You saw him. He's a very strong person, and from the very beginning, from a very young age, he decided he must defend himself. He trained and trained. When he asked me something, I would tell him, "I'll give it to you if you make fifty push-ups right now," and he would fall on his knuckles and make push-ups on his knuckles to show me that he deserves it. I encouraged him to be strong, while not being very strong myself. He grew up very strong. He's much stronger than I. We used to argue when we were both younger, but it's very dangerous for me to argue with him now.

(So as far as school goes, you seem to have had a successful career. What were your aspirations as far as your professional thoughts. What did you want to do?) In school I was interested in very many things. I was a great fan of science fiction for maybe seven years. I read nothing but science fiction. I was very interested in the sciences - physics, chemistry and mathematics, especially chemistry. At that time, in seventh grade, I discovered chemistry.

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(Did you have any connection to Komsomol?) No. When I was in high school we were ready for application and probably had applied, and I knew very well that I should not join Komsomol.

(Why do you say you should not have?) At first it was a practical consideration. Because when one applies for exit visa to OVIR, one has to leave Komsomol. If you leave Komsomol, you have to announce the reason - that you intend to go to Israel. So if I were a Komsomol member at the time when we applied for emigration, all people would know that we are applying. This is what we tried desperately to avoid. We managed to avoid it, somehow.

(Was that a hindrance to you, not to be in the Komsomol?) Not at early stages. If you are young, then the Komsomol membership sounds almost like a privilege. They decide if you deserve to be admitted to Komsomol. But when time passes and they discover that you do not strive for Komsomol, then the attitude changes and then they try to drag you in. They encourage you to apply for Komsomol. After all, what they're worrying about is the bureaucracy, the paperwork. They need to make reports. They are glad

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if they can report to the regional Komsomol committee that 100% of the students are Komsomol members. And this is often the case.

(The Young Pioneers is really for younger children, right?) Yes. In the first grade they are called *Oktjabrjata*, Children of October. So they invite the students to a ceremony after classes and they give a badge that looks like a red star with a picture of young Lenin inside to each of them. So everybody gets admitted to this *Oktjabrjata* organization in the first grade.

In the third grade, almost everybody gets admitted to Young Pioneers. This is also senseless, because there is no real distinction between being a member of the Pioneer organization and not being a member. But again they line up up students after classes one day and put these red neckties on and give smaller badges with a red star with flames.

(What year did you enter the institute?) In 1982. In school I was interested in chemistry. I did pretty well. I was winner of city Olympiads in chemistry for high school

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students. I wanted to study chemistry and I prepared for the entrance examinations to Moscow State University. (So you did not want to go to an institute, you wanted to go directly to the University?) Yes. I wanted to go to M.S.U. to the Department of Chemistry. And this was where I applied first. (How old were you?) It was 1982, so I was sixteen at that time. I had just graduated from high school. (That's a typical age for graduation?) Usually people graduate at seventeen, but I got admitted to first grade a year earlier... (Because of your academic...) Yes, I was admitted at six years, of course I could read and write and do basic arithmetic while most of children go to the first grade at the age of seven.

So I applied to Moscow State University. We were already refused visas at that time. So I was clearly aware that my chances to get into the University were low, so I had to design some back-up plans. This was possible also because the exams at Moscow State University are given in July and the entrance exams to the other institutes are given in August, so if you fail at the university, you still have the chance to be admitted the same year to some other institute. This is crucial, because of the army.

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While I'm speaking about this admittance to the universities and institutes of the Soviet Union, you should keep in mind that this is not the question of prestige or profession. First it is the question of avoiding the draft into the Soviet army.

(The army itself, even in peace time, was a bad place to be?) Sure. Especially for Jews. (What happened to Jews in the Soviet army during peace time?) They are discriminated and humiliated. That's normal, and this happens to everybody in the Soviet army, I believe, but to Jews it happens to a somewhat bigger extent. (So you were going to do your best to avoid it...) In order to avoid the army, and this was also the reason my parents hurried to get me enrolled in school early. People are drafted into the army at age 18. Since I graduated at 16, I had two years to try. So even if I failed to be admitted to an institute or university the first year after graduation, I still had the second chance. Only if I failed the second time I would be drafted to the army. All of this was consciously designed by my parents to give me more of a chance to avoid the army.

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So first I applied to Moscow State University to the Department of Chemistry and at that time I already had several Jewish friends. We monitored each other's successes and failures. I was told that this chemistry department is the most liberal department in the whole University and, as a Jew, I had a chance of being admitted there. I wouldn't dream of being admitted to any humanities or other school. There were just a few departments where a Jew's being admitted was possible at all. We took these entrance tests, and all my Jewish friends were admitted to the school, but I wasn't.

I managed to meet a very anti-semitic professor who gave me a very unfair exam which lasted for more than two hours, while the average time for an oral exam is ten to fifteen minutes. I was given questions clearly out of the range of the school program. I even managed to answer them, but nevertheless, he gave me the lowest grade he could.

I went to appeal this grade and they told me that the grade I got was not yet the lowest one, (the lowest one would mean admitted failure, while the rest meant that I

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can still compete) and I am still eligible for admission. And they said that I exhibited bad manners on this appeal, and that if I don't stop, they will transform my grade to the lowest, so I will be out of the competition right away. "Listen young man, you still have a chance. This is not the lowest grade possible. You can still compete, so go on and..."

[SIDE 2] I believe I performed at the top of my abilities. I trained hard for a year and a half before. I was clearly at the top. But nevertheless I failed because of this grade in physics, and... (You failed to be accepted at the University...) I failed. They didn't accept me. I performed very well, probably much better than I've performed since. I was absolutely at the top of my form. Just a few remarks: I remember the name of this professor who knocked me down on this test and just recently I discovered his name in one Western publication where he's described as one of the leading activists of *Pamjat'* Society.

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Also, that was the examination in physics, and after that, when I was admitted to another institute, I was the captain of that institute's team in physics, and we made it to the Moscow City Olympiad in physics among undergraduate students, and we won the second place among non-majoring undergraduates. So I believe I knew physics pretty well at that time for the level I was required to exhibit on this test.

(So what was the institute you attended?) I attended the Moscow Institute of Oil and Gas Engineering. This is one of the well-known Jewish refuges for refused students. Because there's no official gradation of course, but people know that the institutes and universities in Moscow, and there are about forty colleges and institutes, are divided into several clear categories. There are several institutes where no Jews can be accepted, ever. Jews know that and don't even try. And there are some institutes where Jews can be admitted exceptionally if they perform extremely well, or if they have some connections, some protection, and the Moscow State University is one of them. And there are also several institutes everyone knew where

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the policy was fair, and that resulted in incredible number of Jewish students. Jews just flooded these institutes.

(So at the institute you were comfortably in contact with other Jewish students?) Yes. The institute I was in was well known for its fair policy of admissions and for this huge percentage of Jewish students. It was not a totally Jewish institute. There were just a few "Jewish" programs. In my program in mathematics, there were about 70 or 80% of Jews in every group. There were groups where just two people out of twenty would be non-Jewish. While the average number of Jews in this institute was kept to a reasonable level, three or four percent, in order not to disturb the authorities, it was a well-known "Jewish" program.

(Were you a member of any student organizations?) There were none, except for Komsomol.

(According to my notes here, in 1983 there was the creation of a Soviet Public Anti-Zionists Committee. Do you know anything about that?) Oh, yes. It didn't affect my life much. We discussed that among those whom we

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trusted, and I have to say that in this, being refuseniks, we were very cautious not to let other people know that we are refuseniks. I had many Jewish friends, and very few of them knew that we intended to emigrate. To be Jewish meant just to have the fifth line in your Internal Passport saying that you're a Jew. To oppose the official ideology, to want to emigrate, was something entirely different. Of my Jewish friends in the institute, almost no one knew at that time that I am a refusenik, that I wanted to emigrate, that I read *samizdat* books, that I meet with other refuseniks. That was a forbidden thing for discussion and I tried to avoid it.

I was not the only refusenik at the institute. There were other students who were from the refusenik families and we knew each other. We didn't discuss anything in public. We met in some private places and if we were sure that no one is hearing us, we would discuss something really important to us as politics, refusals.

(Were you gaining access now to some of the forbidden books, *samizdat*?) At that time, I read a number of books that were forbidden to be published in the Soviet Union.

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Now I have, of course, more access to them. I do not think that *samizdat* is a big problem in the Soviet Union now. Many of these books were published since then. (But at that time was it a big deal for you to read those books?) Yes. We were afraid. We knew cases when people were thrown into jail just for having a copy of some forbidden book at home.

(How did you get the books? Through your own family?) Mostly. My parents would get them somewhere from their friends and give them to me. And I almost never exchanged those books with my institute friends.

(Aside from the secrecy that you observed except with a trusted friend, how did life as a *refusenik* work for you? What were the changes that occurred?) It was simply a double life. The life went on two different levels. On the public level it was normal, as usual, but I tried not to participate in political debates with my friends because, as I used to say, the empty barrel makes more noise. I thought I was not an empty barrel.

(At this point, were there some traditional practices introduced into your home?) Yes. Historically, even when

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we applied for emigration, we were not so much aware of our Jewishness, but then we gradually got involved with the refusenik community. (This was about 1982?) It was about 1980. We applied in 1979. I believe my parents made the decision to emigrate around 1976. My father started looking for another job, because at that time he held a classified position. It was absolutely impossible for him to apply for emigration while still holding this position. At this time he was already the father of two, so he had some responsibility. He could not just leave this job, and he had to find a new one. For a Jew in the Soviet Union, it's very difficult to find a new job. Probably the only thing possible, is to get it by someone's recommendation, to use connections.

But since he wanted to apply, he didn't want to do any harm to his friends who had to recommend him, or who had to take the responsibility of accepting him in their organizations. So he said openly to his friends that he's going to apply for emigration as soon as he gets his new position, so if they offer him a position, they should be aware of that. And no one could take responsibility for that.

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So finally, in 1978, I believe he managed to find a decent place with a salary only half of his previous one. So he took this position and he asked for Israeli invitation, and when the Israeli invitation came, we applied almost immediately. It was in October 1979. And at that time my parents already had several refusenik friends, and they became involved in the refusenik community in Moscow. It was then that we began receiving these books, the *samizdat*, and books published abroad, and started to read them. Only then, and in 1980, we really became aware of our Jewishness.

I remember in 1980 there were Olympic games in Moscow. The authorities were very much afraid of unauthorized contacts of Soviet citizens with foreigners. So they demanded that people who can leave the capital do so. In particular, they demanded that all schoolchildren be taken away from Moscow at the time of these Olympic games. We had no dacha, but our friend who was a prominent refusenik had a dacha, and she invited us to her dacha to spend the whole summer there, two months. It was like a refusenik club because people would come and go and would discuss all these matters over and over again.

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(Can you tell us her name?) Her name is Tsilia Moise-
evna Shwartzburd. She is in Israel now, so I can tell you
her name without any fear for her. A lot of people from
Moscow knew her because she was very supportive to
everyone. There were always crowds of people in her living
room. People would come and go and ask her for advice and
consult with her on various different matters. She would
provide us with *samizdat* books and she would introduce us
to her friends, her refusenik friends, so we would
establish contacts with them. (What was her occupation?)
I don't know. Her husband worked with my father. They
quit the work at this institute on the same day.

(So there really was an impact on your life because of
becoming a refusenik.) Yes. (In some ways, it sounds as
if it became more exciting and enlightening...) Yes, it
was very exciting. Even now I must confess that I miss
some spiciness of that refusenik life. [laughs]

(In Moscow, your mother became one of the leaders of
the women's group...) But that was much later. That was
only in the last years. (Was it 1982?) No. (1984?) She

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became involved around 1988. So she was actually on the surface of the movement for maybe two years. It was 1987. We knew a lot of active people. But we didn't take an active stand in terms of publicity until 1987 when I graduated from the institute. It's the same old reason. We were afraid that if we surfaced in the refusenik movement, I could be expelled from the institute and drafted into the army. So as soon as I returned from my camps, as soon as I am sure I am getting the rank, we changed our way of life. (So you're using the military as a metaphor here for school?) No. (You really went to military camp?) Yes. (I didn't catch that.) Actually, that's quite another story.

(So you attended military camp with other students your age?) Yes. (And this was required of you?) Yes. If you do not object, I can digress and tell another story, because this is a common point of confusion. If you want to understand Soviet life, this is quite an important thing - the relation to army. the role of army inside the society. The Soviet constitution says that army service is the holy duty of each Soviet citizen. In the commentary law, it's written that only males between the ages of 18-28

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are subject to draft. The draft is for two years in the army, or for three years in the navy, and it says that every young man can be drafted.

In practice, they draft almost everybody, with virtually no exceptions. The only possible way to avoid the draft is to have some serious medical problems. And the medical problems should be really grave in order to get deferment. One has to be either a mental patient or literally crippled. Also, the full-time students had the right to defer the draft until graduation. And then here comes the first interesting point, that in most technical institutes, there is an obligatory military training program, which all male students must attend. This military program leads to the officer rank. So if you are admitted to an institute, at graduation you will be given a diploma of higher education, equivalent to an American B.A. or M.A., some degree, and also you will be given a military rank in reserves. So actually, I was a Soviet Lieutenant in the reserves.

Here's the second fine point, that the Soviet army needs privates in much more quantity than officers, and if

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you don't have an officer rank, you can be sure that you will be drafted as soon as you turn eighteen. But if you manage to defer the draft until graduation, and you manage to get your rank, there is some odd bet if you will be drafted or not. Not every institute graduate who gets his military rank is drafted.

The third fine point is my Jewishness. When privates are drafted, no one cares what is their origin, because Jewish private or Russian private, it doesn't make any difference. But they clearly try to avoid having Jewish officers in the army. So if a Jewish boy managed to be admitted to an institute and get through and obtain a rank, he can be almost sure that he will not be drafted. Formally he can be drafted at any minute, but they just don't call him.

The statistics show that if maybe one out of ten institute graduates must go to serve for two years, and if you are Jewish, it is virtually impossible that you will go... there are so many Russian graduates. So although I never had a guarantee, I was never secure that I will not

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be drafted, I was almost sure that I won't. So this was my relationship with the Soviet army.

(During this same period, it must have been while you were at the institute, your mother told me that your brothers, if I have this right, your father had a circumcision. Is that correct?) Yes. First my father decided to get circumcised. It was very dangerous at that time. And it was really a great deal of conspiracy involved. So they changed places. They avoided saying on the telephone the exact words. They tried to use some other words to describe this. Still we don't know the name of the *mohel* who conducted the operation, because he was a doctor. He held some official position. He was a surgeon in some hospital. He was deathly afraid that if it becomes known that he makes these circumcisions, he could be imprisoned. So my father got circumcised.

In a year, we decided that we wanted to be circumcised too. My brother Vladimir and I, were circumcised in April 1983. The funny story about that is the next day after the circumcision I had that military training at the institute when I had to be in the uniform and march. It was pretty

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painful the first day. But I managed to get through so no one suspected that there's anything wrong with me. [laughs]

(That means that if you did this very extreme religious rite, that there were other religious practices now going on in your home?) Yes, at that time we became very interested in learning. Basically, what we were after was the knowledge. We had to know the difference between Menorah and mezzuzah.

(Did you have access to the Bible?) Officially, of course, no. The Bible was, I wouldn't say forbidden, but it wasn't published officially. It was confiscated wherever possible. (Did you have an opportunity to read what is known as the Old Testament?) Yes, I did. Also, because my father's uncle was active in the Moscow synagogue, I believe he gave Torah to my father so we had a Torah in our home, and that was pretty rare. Honestly, I didn't read it at the time. It seemed to be a long and boring book. I was young. But then when we became interested, it was around 1983, I was just at the beginning of my studies at the institute, and we organized a group of study. First we began to study Torah and Judaism and traditions. (Were you studying in Hebrew?) No, in

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Russian. Later on we tried to study Hebrew. We all studied Hebrew for several months, but we abandoned the idea because it's a difficult language. I just didn't have enough time...

(I'm curious as to what your reaction was when you did read the Bible for the first time, someone who's raised basically in the Russian tradition of Communism and atheism. What was your reaction to the creation, for example?) First, I was never raised in the traditions of Communism. Communism was around me, but I was taught not to let it in. So it's like if you are swimming in the dirt. You are dirty outside, but once you are home you take a hot shower, you are clean. It was the same with this Soviet ideology. While not opposing it openly in school and with friends, and in other public places, I always knew, not always, but from maybe the fifth grade, I knew that this is all complete propaganda and lie and nonsense. So I didn't believe in Communist ideals, probably after the age of ten or eleven.

It was when my parents broke some early ideals that were inspired in school. I came home and gladly told my

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mom and dad that we were told such great stories in school, but they'd say, "Listen, this is all nonsense. Imagine this and try to analyze it critically and you'll see what they're trying to praise..."

(Who were they talking about in school, Lenin?) Lenin and the Soviet heroes, not Stalin. The name of Stalin was erased completely. By then there was no mention of him either good or bad. The whole period of time was as if there was no history of the Soviet Union. We knew the name Lenin, and the next name was Brezhnev. That's it.

But when young schoolchildren are admitted to this Young Pioneer organization, they are usually told the story of young communist hero, Pavlik Morozov. This is a story which presumably happened in some Russian village in the early 1920s when there was a Young Pioneer, Pavlik Morozov, whose father was a kulak, and tried to hide grain from the authorities. Pavlik Morozov reported on him and his father was arrested, and then he was such a great hero and the whole village praised him, and the local authorities shook his hand. But then his relatives plotted against him and killed him in the forest, and so he is a great martyr.

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This is just a typical propaganda for young Soviet children. This guy's picture, and martyrdom, the ideal for Young Pioneers. When I came home and told my mom that we were told such a great story about Pavlik Morozov and they tried to make me analyze it logically. They didn't tell me this right from the beginning, but they made me arrive at the conclusion that his heroism was that he reported on his own father, and this is what they try to teach, this is what kind of role model they are trying to give us. This was probably one of the first holes in my Communist ideology. It happened for some time, but probably at the time when we decided to emigrate, I was not at all subject to this ideology, and I rebelled.

(Let me bring you back to that question - I hope it's not an embarrassing one - when I asked you your reaction to reading the creation for the first time.) Well, you see. (Did it seem like, for example, a fairy tale to you, or did it strike a chord... or did it mean nothing at the time?) Well, I'm a mathematics student and I'm inclined to think mathematically. I was given the idea that something has to be considered as an axiom. If it is a good axiom or a bad

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axiom can be only shown by the future, by what can be derived from it. But you can not judge an axiom by itself.

For example, if I say that the modern world is just 5,750 years old and you say that they discovered some fossils in the ground that look like they are three million years old, I can say that this is an axiom. Now we have 5,750 and these fossils in the earth were created 5,750 years ago, and they just look three million years old. So there is a logical escape from all of this.

So the religion is a pretty logical thing. It doesn't lead to any logical nonsense. Judaism is built very much like mathematics. It axiomatizes something, the Torah, for example. If you believe that everything written there is true, than you can logically derive everything else. I believe for 4,000 years of Jewish practice, Jewish scholars didn't arrive at any contradiction, and this shows that this axiomatic system is not contradictory. So there was no big controversy for me to accept Judaism as something new for me. First of all, it didn't come to me in one day. It was like seven years, a period of gradual development. I started reading books. The first book I read on the

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subject was Herman Wouk's *This Is My God*. It was a translation from English, an American book, where he explains the very basics of Judaism to laymen. So it was not a big shock and a big surprise for me.

Also, we had a relatively good teacher, and he tried his best to read himself and to get educated. When he explained something to us it wasn't just the reading from the Torah or Tanakh, but he tried to read commentaries and he tried to discuss things with us and we gladly participated. It was a group of about ten people.

We gathered once a week at someone's apartment for probably two years. It was a very strict conspiracy at that time. We didn't discuss anything with friends. It was very dangerous for him to do this. It was also dangerous for us, but his risk was much higher. (Was he also a refusenik?) Yes, he was also a refusenik. Then, as it often happens, we grew out of him, because he was not a big scholar, just an enthusiast. He read the same books that he gave us to read. So he was an enthusiast, and I'm very grateful to him that he pushed me down this road.

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But then we grew out of him and it was not more interesting to be there, and so this group dissolved. (What year was that?) Probably 1986; from 1984 to 1986. In the meantime, we had one failure, when one of our students told to someone that she attends. And somehow this information leaked to the authorities and our *moreh* was visited by the KGB. They warned him to stop, and he was courageous enough not to stop. We continued. We were of course a little afraid and a little shaky each time we gathered, but it was also some excitement about that, that we participated in some risky business.

(So by the time you were able to leave, you were fairly well-educated as a Jew, probably as well as many students who go through Talmud and Torah here, if not more so.) No, I wouldn't say that. I know very little Hebrew. I just know the alphabet and a few words. My knowledge doesn't go beyond twenty lessons for beginners. I do not have systematic education. For example, he gave once a lecture on four different commentaries on the first two words in Genesis. He said that there are seventy pages of commentary in the Talmud to these two words, and he tried to give us a flavor of how it could be possible to write

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such a long commentary on just two words. He gave different aspects and views on this. But this was on just one topic. I feel that I clearly lack systematic education, so I wouldn't say that I am more knowledgeable than the regular Talmudic students.

J.C.C. Women's Auxiliary Oral History Project

Second Interview: **SERGEY REZNIKOV**

DATE: January 21, 1991

INTERVIEWERS: E. Snyderman and M. Witkovsky

(I'm going to ask you to repeat, Sergey, what you said about using axioms when you meet a new idea. We were talking in terms of when you first read about the Creation and read the *samizdat* or whatever kind of Bible. But the Bible wasn't easily obtained, is that right?) Well, I'm not exactly sure, but I think that the Moscow Synagogue is permitted to bring a limited number of copies of the Torah and distribute them among the members of the congregation, but this process is very heavily supervised by the authorities, and they want to make sure that the person is frightened to death before he or she can get these copies. So

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actually, I never saw copies on sale in the synagogue, but I can admit that this might be the case. If so, they should be pretty expensive. But it's not *samizdat*, anyway.

(That would actually have been manuscripts that were circulated underground.) Yes, manuscripts and photocopies and xerox copies of the photocopies of the manuscripts. (So you had said something about axioms...) If I understand correctly, the question is about the reconciliation of my previous knowledge with the new version of the world offered by Judaism and by the Torah. Maybe mathematical reasoning helped me, but the problem that an average person can have with that, he can say that this sounds reasonable or this sounds unreasonable so the idea that the world was created in six days sounds unreasonable to me, but as I understand this, this idea of being reasonable or unreasonable is based on our previous knowledge, and our previous knowledge is based on something, and continuing backward this way we will come to some axioms. So the idea of being reasonable or unreasonable in fact rests only on the fact if it contradicts something.

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Well, in fact it doesn't contradict anything. It does not contradict our experience, because of course we didn't witness the creation, and it doesn't contradict our modern knowledge, because these are just two different systems of axioms, and so the real criteria for evaluating the seriousness of some idea is whether or not it contains some self-contradiction, but not whether it looks reasonable or unreasonable to our sometimes, or rather often, incompetent view.

(After our first interview, we observed how clear and organized your ideas were on presentation. You said, "I gave many such talks to visitors who came to Moscow." That would go back then, to the *refusenik* years that you started to tell us a little bit about. You made it sound as if the most intense portion of that time was between 1986 and 1988?) Yes. The most intense portion of our *refusenik* life, our so-called activity, yes, probably.

(I know that each of you in some different way participated. You told us about the circumcisions that you and your brother, Vladimir, had, that your father had. It was very dangerous for the *mohel*, or the ritual surgeon.

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So your family had made a major commitment to Judaism by doing those things. But also, there were other things you were doing in a very organized, and you could say political, way. What was your role specifically?) Oh, I don't know. I've never thought of some specific role. I just participated in everything that was going on around!

(Did you actually go to demonstrations, for example?) Yes, I did. I was detained once for three hours among the other demonstrators. (How big was the group that was detained?) It was difficult to estimate because people were forced into different buses and they were driven to different police stations. In our department there was a group of about twelve or thirteen people. So I can estimate that the total number of people participating in the demonstration was something between thirty and forty. And this was part of weekly demonstrations in Moscow that took place in 1988 for almost half a year, I think. Once a week, on Thursday afternoons, people would gather on the stairs of the Lenin Library, this is central Moscow and the biggest Soviet Library, it's a big building, and this place was chosen as the stage for the weekly refusenik demonstration.

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People would come weekly and at this time the militia would wait with their buses and people were sometimes beaten, sometimes not. People were thrown into buses and taken away to these police departments. They tried to interrogate us and sometimes, several times, they organized formal prosecution and there were administrative trials, but they never invoked criminal code as they used to do in the past. Basically that's why we were there.

(You felt that because the world was aware of what was going on, you weren't likely to be put in a dungeon or something like that?) Yes, that's exactly right. So our best shield, and our best support and protection was the attention of the West. We knew that we are watched, that we are monitored, so we felt very safe.

(Who were the leaders of this? Your mother said that she could not take the credit as the leader of a group of women who did the networking, who created the list of refuseniks from around the country. But she was one of the leaders ...) Well, maybe. You see, it was also, regretfully, a matter of politics. And not only politics

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in our relations with the Soviet authorities and the West, but also the politics between refuseniks themselves. And so there was some amount of struggle for leadership. In fact, when it became clear that the activity is not immediately punishable, then almost immediately, several refusenik groups and unions emerged.

One of these women's groups was lead by Judith Ratner. She's now in Israel. She was clearly the sole leader of that group. And right at that time a second women's group organized, and there was an amount of competition, I believe, among those two. They tried to act separately, and they both did a lot of good things. But as I say, the group I am talking about is Judith Ratner's group.

And then, later, Judith Ratner got permission. This was right immediately after my mom joined the group, so she attended the first meeting of the group maybe a week or two before Judith Ratner got permission. So then the question arose, where the group will gather in the future.

There was another woman who offered her apartment, and then she also received permission to leave immediately. By

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the way, she is living in Chicago now. Her name is Nella Kleiner. Then my mom offered our apartment for the meetings of the group, and the group decided to meet at her apartment. She was given papers and the proceedings of the group, so in the beginning her role was more like that of a bookkeeper. Then she took a more and more active stand in the group.

She was for several months, maybe half a year, very busy involved with the compilation of refusenik lists. She and several other women took this duty upon themselves, and I remember we were all very angry at her that she didn't... (Didn't what?) Basically we had to do dishes and wipe the floors. We had to cook our dinner because mom was speaking on the phone and typing and correcting records...

(It was a good experience ...) That was also a very painful thing to do. I understand now that in America with modern technology, especially with computers, it's so easy to change everything. But we had no computers, only typewriters. And if something had to be changed, you had to retype the whole page. So she retyped those lists dozens of times.

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(So your mother described her role pretty well. Your father, we didn't have a chance to find out. We're supposed to complete his interview. What was his status in the group? Was he considered a leader also?) Well, he was not a member of this group, it was a women's group. (Right, but the refusenik group in general...) Well, there was no such thing as a refusenik group in general. There was a refusenik community. The people knew each other and maybe there was a refusenik network. But we avoided to use this word because it could allude to some kind of conspiracy and make the impression that we are going to do what in fact we did not intend to do. So it was a refusenik network. We knew each other and usually communicated privately, by phone or by inviting people to visit. So if more than five people gathered together, it was already an event.

I believe my father was well known in this refusenik community, especially in the last years. (He had already written a book, hadn't he?) No, he doesn't write anything. (I don't know why I thought he had written a book....) No. He was in the initiative group of the Moscow Symposium. A

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group of refusenik scientists decided to organize a symposium on the problems of secrecy refusal. That was, I think, late in 1987.

He had written a paper for the symposium. He analyzed the publications about refuseniks in the Soviet newspapers, and he tried to read between the lines. He also worked in the organizing committee and edited submitted papers. Some people brought articles to the symposium that were too sharp and biting. They had to be made less sharp and so openly directed against the government. Other people were just the opposite, they couldn't say anything specific about what they wanted to write.

I was there. (Doorkeeper?) I was a doorkeeper. There were several. Young people were standing at the doors. We had to watch people coming. If the militia would come we would have to warn the people inside. I also answered telephone calls. There was the now-famous Peter Arnett who is now the foreign correspondent in Baghdad. He was then in the Moscow Bureau of CNN. I met him in Moscow several times. He came with his camera people. Then also several big figures called from abroad. I remember Senator

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Edward Kennedy calling and speaking with refuseniks. So it was a big event.

(How long did this symposium last?) It lasted for three days. There were several sections. There were about thirty reports prepared for this symposium, but it took several months to prepare, to select the papers, to select the speakers, to organize the meeting place, and to get in touch with foreign correspondents.

My dad also participated in work teams of refuseniks like the Legal Seminar. It was a group of refuseniks organized to study the legal aspects of refusal. They tried to prove and document the fact that they are held illegally, that this is against the Soviet law to deny visas on the ground of secrecy.

(You had during that period many visitors. I'm wondering, aside from the celebrities, were these people able to accomplish something for you? What were they able to do? Who were they?) Mostly they were Americans, but also a lot of British. Most of them were Jewish. They were given our names, addresses, and phone numbers by

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concerned support groups in the West. They would come and they would bring something; I'm not ashamed to say that we are very grateful for the material support they provided to us and probably it amounted to a fourth of our income at that time.

(Explain why that was important.) My father had to leave his position as an engineer before he could apply for emigration. He managed to find a position with a salary only half of what he had before, and he had a family of five at that time. We had a very big home library, several thousand volumes. We were selling it during all our years of refusal. That's how we survived. His salary was clearly not enough. Also there was this material help from the West. People brought small and simple things that were easy to sell in the Soviet Union, like cosmetics and magnetic tapes, sometimes recorders and books, pens, electronic watches and stuff like this.

(Was there a black market where you could sell these things?) Several things were sold using this way, but generally there was much trouble and it required much effort to sell through the black market, so mom usually

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took these items to second hand shops in Moscow, and they readily accepted everything, especially foreign-made stuff.

(Was your mother working at this time?) No, she wasn't. (She stopped working when Michael was born. At that time, she told us exactly what the circumstances were... So now you're in school? You're missing some school for the symposium, let's say, but basically you're a student...) Right.

(When did you meet Marina?) I met Marina right before we got permission to go. (Really?) Yes, it was two months before we got permission that I met Marina at the synagogue. (Was her family also a refusenik family?) No, not at all. Her family is in Moscow. Now they consider emigration. (What kind of work do her parents do?) Her father is an engineer and her mom is a music teacher. (So for them it was tolerable, whatever their life was there... So why was Marina at the synagogue?) She was in a group of her friends. After all, she's Jewish. One of her friends I knew was very active at that time in Jewish culture. She worked as a waitress in the first Jewish cafe in Moscow. She took Marina along and that's how we met.

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(So you must have known very quickly that you wanted to marry her?) Well, yes. (Is that what we call love at first sight?) Maybe. Probably. (So that complicated your departure somewhat...) Psychologically.

(You met Marina the month before you received your papers. When did you receive your papers?) We were first telephoned in early October 1988, and we were told that we'll get permission soon. And in three weeks we got the postcard from OVIR notifying us that permission is given. Then for a month I was trying to quit my job. They didn't let me go. I had graduated a year before, and according to the Soviet regulations, I had to work at the same place for three years. Education is free, but in return, you are a slave of the State for three years. They don't say anything about emigration. They say that for three years you have no right to change your job. So you are assigned some position and you have to work there for three years. But I told them that I'm not going to change my job. I was changing my country!

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But they didn't dismiss me and for a month I fought. They had to sign a letter proving that I am fired. Only after this could I get my visa, proving to the authorities that I have severed all the ties with the Soviet life. I had to give up my Moscow residence. I had to obtain the paper that I am no longer employed anywhere. I had to bring reference from the military proving that I am not registered as a reservist, etc. (You never had to spend any time in military training at all...) No. (Not even our equivalent of the ROTC?) I don't know what that stands for, but I was in a military camp for a month, and it was part of my basic program. After all, I was given the military rank of Lieutenant. (That's right. I remember you had that wonderful experience...) I still remember the happiest moment of my life - the moment when I crossed the gate of the military camp... coming out. We were all singing and dancing and chanting.

(So in late November you severed your work relationship. And then when was it you were going to leave for Vienna?) We left Moscow on January 22, 1989. (So when were you married?) We were married four months ago, here

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in America. (So one of your tasks when you got here was to bring Marina for a visit?) Yes.

(Now we have to go back. I will ask you what happened while you were at the university. You had some kindred spirits. There were other Jewish students like yourself. The degree you received was what, the equivalent of a B.A.?) It was a standard Soviet degree which is somewhere between Bachelor's and Master's, probably closer to Master's. It amounts to four and a half years of instruction after completion of high school. And then half a year of independent work on a thesis.

(But you didn't complete a thesis, did you?) I did. (What was it?) I tried to optimize a work schedule for a large factory. I wrote my thesis and received my degree, and I worked for a year after that.

(So this thesis did not engage your finest effort?) Pardon? (This thesis wasn't something you were inspired to do?) No, I was very much interested in that at the time. I realized that I had nothing better to do in the Soviet

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Union in the case we were to stay, so I was prepared to embrace it, and so I did.

(Are there any highlights of your life at the institute, anything that you wish to recount, anything you remember that's noteworthy?) The thing I like most to tell is our refusenik activity, because this is what I believe makes me a little different from the rest. As for the institute, I had a lot of friends and I still keep in touch with many of them. We had a very good company. I hope we will meet sometime together outside the Soviet Union. But many of them are still there. I can tell you how we spent our vacations. (So your vacations were spent in refusenik activities?) No, I meant my institute friends and our kayak trips. But the refusenik activities were something else.

I said at some point that I used to live a double life. Until 1987, our main concerns were not to reveal that we are refuseniks to anyone who is not a refusenik himself, of course. In April 1987, there was an idea to organize a so-called second generation of refuseniks. I was part of it. We were children of refuseniks, sometimes

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very longterm refusenik families. We gathered and organized in order to consolidate our efforts to get out, and to promote awareness in the West and to attract attention to our situation. The most of the last year and a half in the Soviet Union was spent in this activity with the second generation refuseniks group. So we met with foreigners, with visitors. We had visitors from various Jewish organizations and groups. We fought for publicity. We tried to draw attention because we felt it was the only thing that would help us to get out...

(What year were these activities taking place?) It started in early 1987, although I may be wrong. And it continued, well, probably to the departure of most of those who participated. (So were you able to get good publicity?) I do not know exactly of any major publicity. I know that letters that I signed appeared twice in the London Times, but of course I was not the only one who signed them. And we were monitored. That was very important. I had a support group in London. A girl from the group called me every week, once a week, just to make sure that I am alive and not in jail, that everything's fine. She would ask me about new developments and I would

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tell her everything I know. This was clearly designed not for me and not for her, but for those who were tapping my telephone. So they knew that I am monitored. So they cannot get away easily if they arrest me.

And, they knew that I'm not afraid of speaking out, telling the details, naming names, and that I'm giving her all the local news: like the fact that some vandals broke tombstones in the Jewish cemetery, or some people got new refusals, or this person was humiliated in OVIR by officials, the news of this sort. So, we were all determined to make ourselves as much uncomfortable to the authorities as possible, so that we put them in the position so that they have to decide either to put us in jail, to arrest us, or to give us permission to go. That was the main stream of all the refusenik activity for all those years - to make ourselves unbearable for the authorities, exactly to that extent, to make them willing to let us go.

(So the second generation of refuseniks didn't mean the younger refuseniks, but those who wanted to get out in the next wave, is that it?) No, the name of "Second Generation of Refuseniks" referred to us as refusenik

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children. It was not us, but our parents who applied first. We had grown up in refusal. When we compiled an appeal to the Western organizations and support groups, we listed... I participated in this, I can probably recall most of that statement. The basic idea was that the West knows about the struggle of Soviet refuseniks, and all the details are highlighted, and there are many support groups and coalitions and they do fine, but this is not enough, until everybody who is willing to go can do this, this is not enough. We would like now to draw attention to the situation of second generation refuseniks, the children of long-term refuseniks. We claim that our situation is even worse than the situation of refuseniks in general, because in addition to the common refusenik problems, we have unique problems of our own. And then we would list the features that distinguished us from the bulk...

For example, suppose I am a child in a family of secrecy refuseniks. My family was refused to go because my family had security clearance ten years ago, and ten years ago it expired. And so, now I'm grown up. I'm more than eighteen years old. I'm an adult according to Soviet law, and I want to apply by myself. I have no clearance of my

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own. And I apply for emigration to OVIR, and OVIR does not accept my papers. They say, "We cannot break your families. Our task is to reunify." They say they cannot accept my separate application because I am part of a family. So that is the first obstacle. The second obstacle was genetic refusal, so-called. (Hereditary?) Hereditary refusal. If they accept my papers, they refuse me on the secrecy grounds. I had no secrecy. I never had access to anything. I had no clearance. I had no classified job. But they say, you are refused because of secrecy. I ask whose secrecy? Sometimes they do not answer. Sometimes they say, because of the secrecy of your parents.

I applied by myself as part of my personal effort to get out. I applied alone, separately from the rest of the family. And I was refused, of course, because of this secrecy consideration. And I demanded that they give me details. Whose secrecy is this? Is this my own secrecy or my father's secrecy? But they didn't answer anything, they just gave me the letter: "Your application is refused because of security considerations." That's it.

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(To come back to how organized your replies were to some of the questions, which were obviously under topics that you had addressed in the past, like education or organized religion or persecution. You handled this very well. So I would like to ask you in what capacity you spoke of these matters. Was it as a member of your family speaking to visitors, or was it in this group the second generation of refuseniks, or both?) Both. We didn't give our group any organized structure. We even avoided to use the term "organization". There was something criminal in the way the word "organization" sounded. It implied some organized activity, and we were taught by the past that we should not call ourselves this way. We didn't have formal leaders and formal distribution of responsibilities. We called ourselves the "second generation of refusal movement", just as if we were a crowd of people running together in the same direction.

(How old were the people in this group?) The youngest were probably sixteen, and the oldest were thirty, thirty-five. (Did you actively recruit, or was it just...) We invited refuseniks. We had maybe sixty people on the list, and maybe twenty-five of them participated actively. Maybe

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ten of them gave their time to doing things like writing letters or preparing speeches, and I was among them.

(Were you encouraged by the changes that were taking place in the country, by the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting. Were you encouraged by the release of Sakharov and Sharansky? Did these things have any impact or give any impetus to what you were doing?) We were encouraged by the belief that the times have changed, that we will not be arrested or drafted into the army immediately after taking any such action, and our belief of course grew out of many factors. These warm relations with America and the release of the prisoners of Zion, were just symptoms of this general thaw, as we saw it.

(Is there anything else of significance from that period that you would like to discuss, because otherwise I'm going to go forward to your coming here...) I don't know. I still do not understand if this is a sociological project or historical project. (It's more historical. We're trying to get a picture of what your life was like there during these years. For example, I wondered how much the disaster at Chernobyl affected people in terms of their

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leaving. How did you react to that?) First of all, in the first several days, maybe the first week, there was such a confusion. No official news was announced, no official report. On the first day, the radio said there was an accident at some nuclear power plant in the Ukraine, and that was it. At first, we could not estimate the scale of this catastrophe. It came only later, several months later.

The explosion took place, if I remember correctly, on April 26, and it was a week before the May Day vacation. I had a tradition to go on a kayak trip for several days outside Moscow on this May Day vacation. I remember that as we prepared and packed our bags we discussed that maybe it's better not to go because the rain could be radioactive. But then we dismissed all this, and we camped for four or five days outside Moscow. Then we returned and were told that the threat was so big that the special artillery was surrounding Moscow and they were given orders to shoot into the clouds with some special shells that induce rain, so the rain falls outside Moscow and not on the city.

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(That's the first I've heard of that. Because everyone in Moscow seemed to feel pretty safe. But you were aware that this had happened...) We did not understand the scale of it, and still I do not feel I can get the impression just by the number of people evacuated from the area. So clearly it was something more anecdotal. People used to joke. This is the typical reaction of the people, that if something happens, they try to make something funny out of it. They just mocked it. There were numerous jokes about the Chernobyl explosion.

And one almost fairy tale I can tell in regard to this. The foreigners are usually forbidden to travel outside of Moscow. In Moscow there is the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language. It is a special institution for foreign students where they learn Russian language and literature. I had American friends there in this institute, and they stayed in Moscow for nine months or a year. We had a long friendship. And one girl told me the story that she agreed to be taken illegally by her friends in a car to Kiev and so she went with her friends and stayed in Kiev, and she planned to stay more, but suddenly something changed in her host's plans, and they drove her

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back from Kiev to Moscow, and it was right before the explosion. So she escaped the Chernobyl explosion by some eight hours.

(I used the word *samizdat* in terms of the Bible which is, of course, inappropriate, but you did have access to *samizdat* literature.) Yes, I did. (Did we talk about that at all - what you were able to read during that period?) No, probably. Let me think. They fall into several distinct categories.

One is Jewish traditional and religious literature, supplied mostly by Chabad people. These are translations of canonical texts and commentaries to them, and books for beginners and literature like Magilat Esther, the story of Esther or of Passover, the Haggada. The second category would be the pure dissident *samizdat*. It focused mainly on the tragedy of Russia and the Soviet Union, especially during the Stalin years.

Before the truth about the labor camps and the extermination was published in the era of *glasnost'*, all was documented and supplied in books that were distributed

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secretly, books like *Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn and other books of the same type, and personal accounts of people who went through all of these horrors, and analysis of the history of politics and historical books on how Stalin rose to power. Clearly Stalin and his heritage was a point of fixation of this dissident movement, and I regard as an extremely clever step by Gorbachev that he made all this public. He let the steam out, and that reduced the pressure greatly, because it was almost half of what they wanted to say - the truth about the past.

There were also books about the current situation, and the Chronicle of Current Events... (Roy Medvedev?) No, he was a historian who wrote about the past. He wrote about Stalin, about Khrushchev. But the Chronicle was done by Sakharov and his friends. It was an account of the current violations of human rights and just other events in the Soviet Union. And there was also literature, the art that was banned in the Soviet Union. This way we read many books like Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and 1984 by Orwell and other things. And also, *samizdat* published the work of Soviet writers who emigrated, and thus were prohibited from being published in the Soviet Union for a long time. The

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officials were not so much afraid of the contents as of the name of the author.

(So this was another education that you were getting simultaneously?) Yes. (Maybe we should skip ahead now, because more important than your actual travel experiences from our point of view would be the reaction you had on coming here. Number one, I want to know if you felt you got the education you needed and wanted before you got here?) I got the best education in the Soviet Union, but that was clearly not enough. I could not get more in the Soviet Union because of the anti-semitic bias that exists everywhere, so now I'm continuing my education. That shows that I was not completely satisfied with what I had there.

(But it adequately prepared you, though, for your studies here.) Well, I was admitted to the University here. When I was there, I didn't have much choice, and my first concern was to be prepared for the work there and for life there, because I was not completely sure if we will get permission, and if so, when. I had to prepare myself for the long stay in the Soviet Union, and I got exactly that sort of education. This is why so many Russians

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coming to the United States are trained as engineers or computer programmers.

(What was your biggest surprise when you arrived here?) Everything was a great surprise. In fact, there were so many surprises that I cannot say which one was the biggest. I can clearly remember the first cultural shock. It occurred in the airport in a public rest-room when I went there and discovered bathroom tissue and paper towels there in place. I was stunned. I was not prepared to see this. You see, in Russia, it is unbelievable, it's impossible to have such things. The first visitor would take them with him because they are free.

(Were there some misconceptions you had before you got here?) Yes, I imagined the West somehow before I came here, but the problem is that then I had the imagination, and now I have the information, and since the information is much more solid than those images that I had, the real knowledge just almost entirely replaced my images of what I thought America will look like. (Was it better or worse than you thought it would be?) Sometimes better, sometimes worse.

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(Did you go to another city before you came to Chicago?) We landed in New York, of course. We were driven from JFK to La Guardia airport. We flew to Chicago from La Guardia. So I had a glance of New York. Before this we were almost four months in Europe... (In a way that was a transition that eased you into the United States...) Yes, in some way it was easier. The difference between the United States and Europe is not as much as between Europe and the Soviet Union.

(In Chicago, what was your first impression of Chicago?) Very miserable. I rode the "El" downtown from Rogers Park. When you look out of the window you see these poor houses, badly built and dirty and these old ads there. Probably they weren't painted for the last half-century or so. I almost had a depression when I first saw this, the backyard of America. (So you were a little bit disappointed, then. You didn't anticipate the seedier side of life here...) I was prepared to accept whatever it was going to be. It just didn't correspond to my dreams.

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(Can you give us a notion of what your dreams were like about this country?) I could imagine a beautiful street, but I could not imagine this back alley.

(What do you miss of Russia? Your friends?) Most of all, and almost only I miss my friends and relatives, the people I knew. I do not miss the landscapes and the views from windows. In my opinion they're all decorations that can be changed. First and almost only, the people. I also miss the Russian countryside a little, because I'm a hike-aholic. In Russia I used to hike and camp and go on kayak trips. Also, just a little, I miss of course Russian language and culture. Of course, I'm much more relaxed when I speak Russian. I am dreaming now of the time when I will be able to chat with my American friends as easily and with as much relaxation as I do this in Russian.

(What was your reaction to the teaching at the University of Chicago? Was there a big difference from your institute, or is it much the same?) The teaching here is on a much higher level, so it's difficult to compare, but here it requires much more from the student. I had a lot of spare time while I was a student in Russia. I could go

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out every night and I could skip classes, but now if I skip a couple of classes I will then have a hard time catching up.

(Your family has been unusually strong in the wake of a lot of difficulties - the period of being refuseniks, living from hand to mouth, what was it in your family that kept you all so buoyed up, in good spirits?) That's a very difficult question to answer, mostly because I have nothing to compare. If I had lived, for example, in two different families, then I could compare. But this is my family. In my view it is normal because I haven't seen anything else. (But you know that American families aren't necessarily so strong...) We had this common goal and we felt that we must be together in order to accomplish anything, and there was also maybe a little paranoid idea that every split in the family will be used against us immediately by those who are watching us and listening to our conversations. Also in America people can easily separate and find an apartment, after all [laughs], where in Moscow it's nearly impossible. I was lucky enough to have my own separate apartment in Moscow, but I was clearly an exception. My friends envied me, and when I got permission, I heard that

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some of my friends said, "Look at those Reznikovs, they're crazy - they're emigrating and they're returning two apartments to the State!"

(Now you're here, and you have your own apartment here, so to speak. You seemed pretty involved with your family even now. Do you think that American life will weaken those bonds in some way?) I don't know. (Do you still feel that you're as together as you were when you first came?) We came all the way together. We were together in Europe. We came together to America. You can compare us to other families and say that we are maybe something unusual, but from my standpoint I don't see anything unusual in our family because it's my family!

(Did you have cousins in Moscow, other extended family ties?) Yes. (Are they emigrating or they still there?) There are other members of the extended family still in Moscow. Some of them will emigrate. I don't know much about this. (But they weren't part of the refusenik community?) No. (Because it sounded to me like the refusenik group became part of an extended family...) Sometimes, if they decide to go all together. But in our case my parents

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decided to go, my father's parents refused to go, and my mother's mom agreed to go, but she didn't live to do so.

(You said you were married four months after you arrived here.) Excuse me, I was married four months ago.

(What was the date?) I was married on September 9, 1990.

(Was it difficult to bring Marina over for that visit?)

Yes. It is difficult to obtain Soviet permission to leave, and it is difficult to obtain American permission to enter.

(Can you tell us about the wedding? This would have been a Jewish wedding?) Yes, we were married in a suburban synagogue here in Chicago. (In Oak Park?) No, it was in Northfield. It was a Jewish wedding. (Her parents could not be here.) It was impossible. But there were a lot of people.

(Do you have any personal philosophy that you would like to share with us?) You will be bored to death. I have so much of it! (We could talk maybe about your hopes for the future...) They're quite uncertain.

(What would be the best possible scenario?) The best possible solution would be if Marina's parents come because

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she misses them very much. (But you wouldn't make plans until that's for sure...) I have some small plans. I have some professional plans. I plan to obtain a Ph.D. in Mathematics in the graduate school here, and I plan to visit Israel as soon as I am able. (Do you want to teach?) Probably.

The problem is that it looks like the major achievement of our lives we have already accomplished.

(There's a letdown because that was such a... experience...) Yes. The main thing is already behind you. And before I never hesitated to name a wish. In Moscow there was no doubt, there was a wish that came out almost automatically, without second thought. Now I have to think about what I really want. Now it's time to think about what I want in life. But it's much better to be able to ask those questions and to answer them.

In the Soviet Union life was like a train going on the rails. You cannot turn. No changes - your life is determined. And this is what complicates life for many Soviet immigrants in America. We are not used to making

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decisions. I tried to calculate - in the Soviet Union, I believe a person makes maybe four or five decisions in his life, when choosing an institute, when marrying, when looking for a job. You never make any simple decisions. If you go to a grocery store and see cheese there, you do not ask questions about what brand of cheese this is, you just grab it. In America, the simplest case is when you come to a grocery store and you see fifty brands of cheese and you have to choose! This is the simplest type of choice one has to face.

(I'm going to rephrase my question. When things were the hardest for you, what was it that kept you going, what kept your spirits up? You must have had some philosophy that kept you operating. You were struggling for freedom...) But we were living too, so it was not completely wasted time. The philosophy, well, my basic claim to the Soviet system is that it is immoral. In America, there are also a lot of lacks and disadvantages and contrasts, but it looks more natural. In the Soviet Union, things seem unnatural, and often just immoral. As for emigration, we used to say when we tried to persuade someone in Russia, if you do not do it now, then this problem will not

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disappear - it will face your children. Your children will have to face the burden of the decision.

(So in a way you had a philosophy a bit like Toynbee, who said that history is on the side of the just, and maybe, you talked about the context of history and the Jewish people, you saw the survival behind you of the Jewish people, and you felt it would continue in some way...) I never doubted that we must leave the Soviet Union as soon as we can. It was crystal clear after all I'd read and watched around, after this dirty flood of propaganda falling on our heads every day. I would like to see all of my friends out of there.

(Well, I think we've covered the ground, unless there's something more you'd like to say.) If, for example, you were interested in the history of the refusenik movement, I could tell you in greater detail about that, if you're interested in a psychological perception of the world, I can probably tell about double life and double thinking and refusenik status as nine years of living with your suitcases packed and ready to go

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on first notice. So when you try to start any new enterprise, when you meet a girl for the first time and you go to date her, you always had in mind, "What if I start to date her today, and tomorrow I'll get permission?" And this is indeed what happened.

(Your worst fears came true...) It was not my worst fear - my worst fear was that we would never get permission.