

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

ALEXANDER UMAN

Electrical Engineer

BIRTH: 1948, Kiev

SPOUSE: Irina Chervonsky Uman, 1957, Kiev

Married in 1978

CHILDREN: Vladimir, 1981, Kiev

Igor, 1988, Kiev

PARENTS: Wolf Avram Uman, 1910-1965, Kiev

Sara Karachunskaya Uman, 1918-, living in Israel

SIBLINGS: Nellie, 1941, resides in Israel

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

Sholom Sunday School
Jewish Community Centers

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of
Chicago

NAME: **ALEXANDER UMAN**

DATE: September 12, 1990

INTERVIEWERS: Margot Hirsch and A.J. Strauss

(We are here to visit you and we are going to discuss your life and what you can remember about your parents, or your grandparents, as far back as possible, and to get the feeling of how it really was for you, all the way up to today.)

(We know you were born in Kiev, is that correct?)

Yes. I was born in 1948, in Kiev.

(How far back can you remember? Do you remember anything from before you went to school? Do you remember where you lived?) Yes. I lived in different places. At

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first it was in a house, and then we lived - three families in one apartment. It was a building with four apartments, and in each apartment there were three families. It didn't have bathrooms, we went outside. This was in Kiev, and it had gas heating, first it was coal heating and then it was gas. But most of the time it was gas, it was far different than the coal. We would boil water - it was a different stove for cooking than for heat.

I had a sister. Her name is Nellie, she is seven years older than I. In the apartment there was my mother and father, Nellie, myself, and two more families - not related to us. One of the families was Jewish, the other was not. (Did this make any problems because two families were Jewish and one was not?) I don't remember about this, I was too young.

My mother took care of the cooking and cleaning for our family. She worked outside the home. I had a babysitter, sometimes, when I was small. A lady. When I was born, she was there already.

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(Do you remember anything about what the day was like when you were with the babysitter?) I would have said "no", but now I remember this. I was just very little and the babysitter wrapped me around and around to keep me warm. I was about a year old and it was very uncomfortable! I don't remember this myself but my mother told me that the sitter almost suffocated me!

(Did she tell you other things about when you were little? Were your grandparents still alive when you were little?) I did not meet my grandparents then, they were both lost during those years, during the war. We don't know if they died or were just lost. My mother was living with relatives after the War, not with her parents, her parents had died. My father's father disappeared too, we knew he was a long time dead, but we did not know where or how he died. This happened because of the War, not because of politics. They were plain people.

I know that my grandfather on my mother's side died from tuberculosis. I don't know the cause of death of the others.

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My mother is alive. She lives in Kiev. She would like to leave Russia, but whether for the United States, or Israel, she doesn't know because my sister lives in Israel and my mother is undecided. She is about to apply for her visa, but it is harder to get for the United States, at the present time.

My father had a brother and a sister. The sister is in Kiev now and his brother is in Sverdlosk, it is a city in Northern Europe, in the Urals. My uncle is dead now, and when he was alive he wrote regularly to us.

My mother had a sister in Dnepropetrovsk, which is in the Ukraine.

(Once you started school, did you stay in the same apartment, or did you move?) I lived in the same apartment except for seven years. Then I finished seven years of school and I applied to a technical school.

(Can you describe the neighborhood where you lived? Was it mainly Jewish, what did it look like? Where did you walk to? Where did you play, that type of thing.) The

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neighborhood wasn't Jewish, but there were some Jewish people. In our block there were about ten Jewish families. There were about thirty, thirty-five children. And they were all in the top ranks for learning, they were better than the others at school.

(Did you celebrate anything Jewish in the house? I know that you talked about Hamantaschen at Purim, was there religion, or not?) No. I knew, of course, that I was a Jew. I knew it too early. Because the atmosphere about Jewish people was very negative and children knew this from an early age, from when they were four or five years old. There were bad, or mean, Russian children who made a point to tell them they were Jewish and therefore bad people. This was everywhere, everywhere. So we didn't have to get religion - we were Jewish!

(When you played, did you play with Russian children and Jewish children?) At my children's ages, I played with all different kinds of children. But later, when I was about thirteen or fourteen years old, I was with only Jewish friends.

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(Did anything happen that --?) It happens with everybody, all the time. (I know.) I cannot tell you what happened but nothing in particular. It happened so often that I cannot think of anything unusual. It was the way we lived in Russia.

(Did your parents tell you anything about how it felt to be Jewish? It sounds very unpleasant, How did you make peace with it?) I am very different now, than I was then! When they baited me I decided to give in and not to fight it. I always told my nationality, every time. I never hid it. I had some fights, of course. It was very common, nothing special. I don't know what to tell you. (You must have had feelings.) I felt very frustrated and envious of the others, because it seemed only the Jews were hated by everybody. I could not take it peaceably, I could not live with (?)

(Do you remember any incidents in school? Anything that happened that was very unpleasant or unfair?) Yes, you know, at school children have the subject of Literature and Russian and Ukrainian writers were very often anti-Jewish, especially in the Ukraine. So you can picture how

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I would feel reading aloud from the text and everybody listening and what I was reading was very unpleasant about the Jews.

(What did your parents say to you if you came home and you said, look what we have to read in school, it is very difficult to deal with. Was there any advice that you got from your parents that helped you deal with this?) They told me what I could see for myself, that all the people who were around us - the Jewish people were very good and not bad - so I knew that what was written was not true. But this is what was taught and we could do nothing about it.

(How about the teachers? Were they unfair, or do you think that you had a definite disadvantage, did you like them, or not?) Yes, I felt I was at a disadvantage. Sometimes my Jewish religion was a case for unfairness, an act against you (/ ?). But teachers were all different people, they acted differently. You know, in general, every non-Jew is exposed to many of the same things, but each person has their differences and their families are different.

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Some of them fought it, or they were ashamed of it, but most allowed them to talk.

(In your home, what did you celebrate? Did you celebrate birthdays, the national holidays? How did you celebrate?) Usually when we celebrated something, people came to the house, family and friends, and national holidays were just a day without work so, it was just like that. Sometimes we would go to a park, or something like that. But, as to meanings that was not my experience, after I had these holidays, very early, I began to hate them. After I was eighteen years old I was against Communism, and I never was a member of the young people's group, the one after the Pioneers group.

(Your father and your mother worked? What did they do?) My father was a dispatcher for truck, to deliver things. And my mother was a cashier at a store. In Russia, all the stores were owned by the government so she worked for the government not for private people.

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(Did your mother cook foods that you knew were Jewish or not?) Yes, she did, she made gefilte fish, and strudel and, you know, sweet beef meat? brisket with fruit.

(Did you ever discuss politics with your parents at home?) My father hated Socialists, my mother was more moderate about this, so they never discussed politics at home.

(Now, you were telling me about when you were young at school, they you went to the high school, and you made a statement that about the age of eighteen you knew you did not like Communism. What made you all of a sudden decide this?) Because I - it wasn't a slow process, because at that age I finished my school and I went to school for an education and I cannot get the type of professional education that I wanted. I always wanted to be an engineer, but I wanted to be in a different field, and I wanted to be a scientist, in Physics, that was my interest, but for Jewish people it is very hard to get into these schools, and I tried six times to get into the school that I wanted. But, even though I had all high marks, I was never even considered.

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(Because they would not take Jews in?) Yes. It seemed to me that way. I don't want to think about me, I know that all Jewish people find it very hard to get into the right college.

(Where did you go to engineering school? in Kiev? or Moscow?) In Kiev, yes. They accept Jewish people there because nobody wanted to go there, except us. It was the education by mail, correspondence school. I worked at the same time I was studying. I worked -- in America, it is a draftsman, in Russia it was different. I was a drafter. But it is different than in the United States. In the United States, a draftsman is a very good profession, in the Soviet Union, drafter or engineers are a very low paid profession. That's why they let us go into this profession.

(You were working as a draftsman while you were studying, before you finished the engineering school?) Yes, I learned how to draft in my work place, so it was nothing so difficult, because I had some drafting classes back in

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school. I worked as an engineer, also, before I finished the college degree.

(Where you worked, was it a big factory of some kind?)
It was like a large contracting company. It was a place where projects were developed. Buildings, electrical parts and it was the only available job for me or for other Jewish people. It was not like it is in this country. In Russia, it is not a good profession at all, people laugh at you if you are an engineer because they are very poorly paid. In Russia, everybody has -- everybody receives a poor amount of money, some people can manage, some people who work in factories, you know. Where they provide two meals a day, it is almost ? they laugh sick? every day they, you understand, and that is why the people who dealt with me were very rich people because of the jobs they had.

So the engineering jobs were available for Jews, nobody else wants them.

From 1968 to 1973 when I was working as a draftsman and taking the correspondence courses.

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(When did you meet Irina?) It was in 1976. No, in 1974, rather. Wrong date, that will give me trouble! My wife and I met because we worked at the same company.

(Was it important to you to marry a Jewish girl? Did you look for one?) It was just natural. I never thought of getting married before I met her. I am not telling you this because there is not mixed marriage in Russia but, for me? For me it was important because it was natural. Our families did not know each other.

In Russia, there is no such tradition to have a family decide about a marriage. They met each other when they came to the court for our marriage. They all met at Irina's home. (Was there anything Jewish about your wedding?) Nothing important. We were married at the Palace of Marriages. We celebrated at a restaurant afterward.

(Then, where did you live?) At that time I had my own room in my own family's apartment, again. It was in a flat with three families again, but not with our parents. It was a three-room apartment and in each room lived other

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families. They were not Jewish and our room was about half the size of this room. After that, we had Vladimir in the same room. But this time I had trouble with my Jewishness.

(What happened?) We lived with very simple people. They did not hesitate to say things and especially at this time I had trouble with K.G.B. It happened that I was at one party, we were just talking, politics and everything else. The party was in my neighbor's street, I worked at another job. I was working as a field engineer and I was not paid much. This was in Kirovgrad, in the Ukraine. I was only there about a month. So it happened that the place that I went to, was a Jewish gentlemen. I lived in a hotel, and this man invited me to the party, and this party was one other and now I know that he worked for the K.G.B.

He told them about me, that I said something, that I said this, that I borrowed some dollars -- (Do you remember what you said?) Yes, it was so long ago. At that time, this happened when the Korean jumbo jet liner that was shot down. It was in the time of Andropov, it was in 1984.

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(It is interesting for me to know.) From what he said, and from other things he said, -- I didn't know at that time, at all, that he had reported me. And, after a month, people from Kiev wrote to me and told me that some gentlemen from K.G.B. approached them and asked them about me. And told them to write down evidence about me, some were from where I worked, and it so happened that there were not high-spirited people, they were drunk and they did not like me too well anyway. They were afraid of the K.G.B., and the K.G.B. forced them to write so they gave evidence.

They told everybody around me about me and they did it in such a way that it seemed I was infatuated, that I was wrong about this. That I was afraid about this. It was about a year after that, I was invited to K.G.B. Headquarters for an interview. Invited, yes, I refused to attend. This time two officers took me to their office and asked me questions, it was about five or six hours and my wife knew about it and she was very worried. They showed me all these papers and they told me, here - these go back and back, a year - and one even before that. You are anti-semitic, and you are "so-and-so" and they wanted me to sign

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papers about some evidence about this time when I was in that area.

At this time they didn't allow Jewish people to learn Hebrew. Hebrew was a very big - - it wasn't allowed at all. Then they did not allow anyone to learn Hebrew, at all. They were very strange about languages, you know. They were looking for some Hebrew teachers; and this is the way they did it. They frightened the people into giving evidence. They said they were going to put me into prison, but I said that I could not tell them anything. That the man in Kirovgrad was a nice person, and we went to theaters and mutual cultural interests and that was all. But they pushed and pushed me and the next thing they were saying that if you don't write a paper, we may tell all the people in your work place that everybody else who put this in writing are going to appear in a meeting and give evidence and tell everybody about you.

It was easier for me to go - there wasn't any question of treason in the paper. So with such a meeting, I cannot survive on the job, probably. It is not so bad, a meeting,

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no, I never got this before in my life, to me it was stupid. And after all this, it was only a threat.

I think they really did not intend to send me to prison, it was only to put pressure on me and make me afraid. But at the end they said that I could go, but if something else ever came out, this was the last time that they could let me off. But I wasn't sure, because sometimes they could tell me one thing but tell my friends something else.

At the same time, they fought against anti-Jewish people, but they fought against Jewish culture and Jewish thought. They didn't like it, of course.

My neighbor, in my flat, he told them everything about me. He said that I listened to the "Voice of America" on the radio. I did, but - - and, by the way, he was an officer of the Soviet Army. He was a Captain, and after that, he went to prison. He took bribes, he took bribes for soldiers to stay in Kiev for their (*tradaht?*)

(When you chose an apartment, when you chose where you were going to live, how did you get there? Could you live

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in an apartment where there were only Jews?) It might have been possible. I tell you how people get an apartment in Russia. In Russia, the government gives you an apartment, you cannot choose anything. My parents lived in this flat before they returned after the evacuation and they government gave it to them after that. This building was up for demolition because it was old and we got the next flat in a new house, and we didn't choose it or say anything. There is no question about, "Do you want to live with Jewish people?" No. We went where space was available.

This apartment where we were living together, we changed two-bedroom apartment with me, my mother, my sister, her husband and their daughter. We traded this flat with other people. So they went to their apartment and I went to this other one. It is not by your own choice.

(At your place of work, could you have ever gotten a higher job, with more money, or do you think that it would always have been the same?) It is not simple in general, but for Jewish people it is quite hard to get ahead but some can manage it.

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(When did you decide that you wanted to leave?) That was decided about fifteen years ago. (This was before the episode with the K.G.B.?) Yes. I had not applied to leave though. I applied in 1979. This was under Brezhnev. In their department there is not such strict order, I don't believe the ones who questioned me knew about my request to leave. I don't know for sure.

When I applied to leave in 1979, it did affect my job. When I first applied, to leave Russia, I did not have a relative in Israel who sponsored me. It did not have to be a relative, just some one who would send me an invitation. Nothing happened, because at that time the emigration was over.

Everything was changed, the political situation had changed, Afghanistan had become a problem, and many other things had changed. The government took a whole different direction at this time and they didn't allow any more emigration. Because emigration was a toy for a short time between United States and Soviet Union, about the grain, about money, about a lot of different things. At this time

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the trade agreements were broken off and they broke off all relationships between these two countries.

(So, how many years did it take? did you have to re-apply?) Yes, I had to re-apply again. I did that in November of 1988. Altogether, it took - we went from Russia in April of 1989. We asked permission to go to Israel, everyone did that. We flew from Moscow to Vienna. In Vienna, we stayed for ten days. Igor was eight months old at that time.

We were met in Vienna by, not HIAS, it was another agency, I think it was Sackmut, an Israeli agency.

Because my wife had a cousin who lived in Chicago and in Israel we don't have anybody. So we decided to come to the United States. My sister went to Israel after I had already left Russia.

After Vienna, we went to Italy, to Rome. We were in Italy for two and a half months. We were given money from HIAS to use for living expenses. They didn't provide housing, they just provided the money. From Rome we came

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straight to Chicago, because our cousin was here. We arrived in Chicago on the sixth of July, 1989.

(I want to go back a bit, there is something I forgot to ask. I wanted to know what experiences you had when the Chernobyl problem came.) After a while we knew that it was very dangerous. (Did you know right away?) We knew because we were an educated people, you know. It happened Friday, and Monday I was in my work place and somebody was discussing the situation with another person. There was a map and that's how I knew.

(I was wondering, because you did say that you listened to the Voice of America, and they announced it as soon as they knew.) Yes, but this time I had not been listening. Chernobyl was the 26th of April.

(About all we could do was pray, I prayed. - Irina)
It was... it was terrible outside (?)

(Did you go to work, did you have to go to work?)
Yes. On the 8th of May, Irina went to Moscow, because we

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were afraid of what might happen with the children. After that, they were with my aunt in Dnepropetrovsk, and ? ?

(Where is Dnepropetrovsk?) If you have a map, I can show you.

(As far as food or anything when the Russians told the people, did they do anything to help or protect you?)

(Irina: we had a television program about Chernobyl and a radio program about Chernobyl and they said what we should do with food -) and to boil things many hours to get rid of the effects (but they said that everything was all right and don't worry, don't worry, it is not dangerous and all will be all right.)

(When you were in Russia and Gorbachev came into power, did you feel a tremendous change? Did you feel a change in the way things were going? Did you feel a little freer? Did you believe that anything might change?) I didn't believe like that, (I hoped. - Irina). We hoped, I did not believe that it was possible to change. Now? something has changed.

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but - it was only in this area because Gorbachev is worse (?)

(When you wanted to leave, what was your main reason for getting out of Russia?) There were many reasons. All of them were mine. I didn't want to be hated; I was Jewish, and I wanted to be Jewish; and I want people around me to be tolerant about it. I want my children to be Jewish, to have a Jewish education, to be free and to choose for themselves a way of life and that I was afraid for their lives too, because I knew at that time that it was very dangerous, because of the past history of Russia - it is full of *pogroms* and if anything goes wrong at all, the Jewish people would suffer. I was afraid for my children.

(When you got to Chicago, what feelings did you have?) I don't know. I think that after Vienna, I did not have such strong feelings. The fact of freedom came to me there. Vienna was so beautiful, we were there in Spring and after the North, it was so beautiful. America, it was hard to react to as strongly as the reactions to Vienna. I know I was happy to be in Chicago, too, but it was different.

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(What do you really like about America, and what do you not like, because there is such a difference in the two ways of life, so I would feel that you have feelings on both sides?) I had prepared very well, I had read many books about the United States and by American authors and I had read them in English and I learned the language by reading these books. I read Saul Bellow and Isaac Asimov, and Bela ??? and many other American I knew myself. I don't tell you that I know everything, but I had a feeling that I imagine that Americans feel in Russia.

(There has to be some culture shock. Life is totally different, is it not?) It is different but in a good direction. I found out that Americans have some anti-Semitic people too. But I knew about it. But to know about something, and then to feel it; it is different. But I know that even if Austria felt like heaven after Moscow, I know that there is still anti-Semitism there. We have heard the statements about Waldheim, the stories about his being a Nazi, and the people there do not seem to mind, they seem to be happy about it.

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(After you arrived here, how long did it take you to find a job?) It took me about five months to find a job. Irina found a job too. Only she is working right now, I am without. I worked for about three months, on a contract, and the contract was over in May and I have been without a job for the three months since. It is difficult. I have to feel that there is nothing wrong with this, that this is the way it is.

Vladimir goes to school; and he goes to Sunday School at Arie Crown.

(What are your hopes for the future? What is your goal? what would you like to do?) I wish to find work in my profession. And I want a good Jewish education for my children.

(Is there anything about the future that concerns you?) I don't know. I cannot say right now.

(Is there anything you miss about Russia?) Well, only our relatives, our friends but --

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(Is there anything that we should have asked about your life, that we didn't? Is there anything you would like to add about your memories, about your family and your life in Russia? Anything like that.) We have been impressed by the help of other Jewish people when we arrived in the United States. And HIAS and how they helped them. It was very unusual because in Russia there is no tradition for helping people. Even in Russia, the Jewish people did not help and other people who live in Russia are also in a difficult situation. They are afraid to be seen with other Jewish people. I didn't blame them for this, it was just the situation was very hard. Even after seventy years, it was very hard.

You have to be free of dangers, of hardships, to be able to help someone else openly. In Russia, we are Jewish by what it says on our passport, that is all. But Jewish tradition has disappeared.

(If your mother still cooked some Jewish things, she must have remembered some things from her parents. Usually with the Russian family, if you can go back far enough, they were very Jewish!) Yes. We used to live in separate

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townships. I know that a lot of the American Jewish tradition came from Poland and Russia.

(Do you have any pictures, or any documents, that we might possibly look at - you would get them back - only for a few days?) No, we did not take anything like that.