

VICTOR and LYDIA SLONIM. Born (Victor) 1950 and (Lydia) 1951.

TRANSCRIPT of OH 1684V A-B.

This interview was recorded on November 6, 2010, for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The primary interviewer for Part A is Becky Rosenberg; for Part B, Brandon Springer is the primary interviewer. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Brandon Springer and Becky Rosenberg. The interview was transcribed by Joan Nagel.

ABSTRACT: Victor and Lydia Slonim emigrated from the Soviet Union to Boulder, Colorado, in 1989. Victor, who is Jewish, describes many aspects of antisemitism in the former Soviet Union as well as the harsh treatment of dissidents there. Lydia, whose family of origin was not Jewish, describes employment and personal discrimination she experienced in the Soviet Union as a result of marrying someone who is Jewish. They both compare Soviet and American culture and describe adjustment to life in the United States, including the role of Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry in helping them to learn English and learn about life in America.

NOTE: The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets, some of which are clarifying additions added by the narrators after the interview. Answers in part A are to be assumed Victor's unless otherwise noted. In part B, answers are assumed to be Lydia's unless otherwise noted.

[A].

00:00 (Today is November 6th, 2010, and my name is Becky Rosenberg. I am interviewing Victor Slonim who emigrated here from Leningrad. This interview is being recorded for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interview is being filmed by Brandon Springer. So, we'll start off with when and where, in the former Soviet Union, were you born?)

I was born in Moscow in April of 1950.

(Were one or both of your parents Jewish?)

My parents were both Jewish.

(When did you learn they were Jewish? Did they practice Judaism?)

No, they didn't. It was practically impossible, I think, in the old Soviet Union. And, I didn't know that I am Jewish for a long time, but it was probably late school years.

(And, how did you find out?)

Um, sometimes, from tease, sometimes from some jokes. I think that I had friends of all nationalities, but started, probably, from 7th or 8th grade, I became aware of my nationality, and it was a lot of conflicts.

(So, you learned that you were Jewish from other kids kind of teasing you?)

Right, right.

(And, how did they know you were Jewish?)

Some fights, for example, I remember. [Laughs.]

(Do you want to tell us about that?)

Yes. They would say “Jew, Jew, Jew.”

(Oh, yeah? And you got mad?)

Yes. It was some conflicts, definitely. And, there are a lot of anecdotes; there are a lot of jokes about Jews. And, I started to be aware that it related to me. Before, maybe I heard, but it was abstract.

(So how did they, if you never knew you were Jewish until they started teasing you, how did they know you were Jewish?)

Two things in the Soviet Union—the first is the nationality that is written in your passport.

(Right.)

It is famous: fifth line, point [paragraph] number five. Everybody knows. Everybody can check right away, and practically no way to hide it or change it. It is with you all your life. Second is that most traditionally Russian last names are ending in “ov” or “iv” or something. “Im”, as I have, Slonim, means absolutely hundred percent Jewish ending. So, again, no question. And, on the birth certificate, they put nationality, so it’s not secret for anybody.

(Did your parents or grandparents or any of your ancestors practice Judaism?)

Possibly, but I don’t know. Not my father or mother. They came from Ukraine, and as far as I know, their parents practiced, but it was, you know, 100 years before my birthday.

(So what was it like growing up in the former Soviet Union? Where did you go to elementary school? What was your education like?)

Well, normal education started at seven years old and you go to school. It was all three in one building essentially, elementary, medium, or the high school. Education lasted ten years. You graduated and after that you can go somewhere or go to college. In my particular case, I was very interested in science from the beginning. So I was at first in regular school in Saint Petersburg, or Leningrad. After that, in chemical school, and after that in physical mathematical school in Leningrad. And, after that I graduated. I was winner of International Olympiad in chemistry. And I was taken [accepted] to Leningrad State University.

(Was it hard for you to get into these universities because you were Jewish?)

04:43 It was, I think, extremely hard. I think that they have, like, two percent—how do you say it, not threshold—upper limit for Jews. In my case, it was a little bit easier because, as I said, I was winner of International Olympiad and one of the gifts after this Olympiad was right to go without exams actually, to any university. But they still asked, required to pass all exams. And, you know, some people that I know and they are very strong people. They were not admitted to university. Typically, they got to not achieve, not acceptable grade in literature or in Russian language or in, you know, politics. So it was—

[Lydia:] They would find a way not to accept you anyway.

Well, yes, I can, you know, tell million of stories in reality. My friend from school, for example, who was maybe not winner of International Olympiad, [as] I was like in this sense. But he was very strong, a physicist, and he liked science. And, he was, you know, a person who participated in all Leningrad Olympiads in physics and mathematics. And he got two _____--two at Russian literature, and he was not admitted. He went to Vilnius, it was capital of Lithuania, he was from vicinity. And, they [his family] immigrated to Israel in two years. He was the best student of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. [Laughs]. He was not [admitted]. And after that, he was actually, you know—he was a quiet person with a lot of achievements in the United States. He went to work, and he was left at Bell Labs in New Jersey. He was laureate of many, many [awards], a great achievement, he should go to Leningrad State University.

Anyway, another guy who was—he was also a winner of all Olympiads that you can have. And, he was taking exam by [an examination team of 4 people] that we called Sonder Command [this may refer to sondercommandos which were work units of German Nazi death camp prisoners who were forced, on pain of their own deaths, to aid with the killing process]. It was shameful—we knew these people actually—and they just sit, four of them, around table and ask question from him all the time, mostly small things. And he was so strong that he managed to survive—like 40 minutes probably. But, after that, they started to ask question before he was able even to open mouth to answer. And finally, they say that three minus, it was almost like two [very low grade, not sufficient for admission]. And he was not admitted also to university.

So it was very difficult. It was a little bit more-easier to be admitted to some technical colleges in Leningrad. University was only one per big city, like in Boulder. But, Leningrad is still a big city, and, probably, it has like ten or twelve technical colleges, so it was much-more easier. The university was famous, and they particularly—they have special command of professors.

[Lydia:] _____ education _____. [too quiet to hear what she is saying]

It was probably the best education—winners of Nobel prizes at this place.

[Brandon:] (What languages did you grow up speaking?)

[Laughs] Russian and English [later corrected to be: Russian and German]. I studied German. I studied German at school. I studied German when I did PhD. But, you know, it was always very formal, so when we came here, it was, first three months, it was silent—no understanding until—I completely stopped understanding anything, even the few words that we knew. I started when we decided already to leave and essentially all roots were cut. I took classes, just from one English teacher. But it was half a year probably. She was very smart. She said that it's not enough time to speak, it's not enough time to write words, and so and so. Just take some book that you know in Russian and read even though you don't understand anything. Just read, many times in a row. And she was absolutely right, I was amazed actually.

10:23 I took Agatha Christie and, you know, after I read it five times—a book that I knew in Russian actually—I read five times, and I started to understand intuitively everything. It's interesting.

[Brandon:] (Did your parents speak Yiddish or Hebrew?)

Not that I know.

[Lydia:] Actually, I think they hide it.

I know that my uncle did understand Hebrew, but, again, he had—very tragic actually—he was a very talented guy. He went to study in Germany, and when he returned, he was convicted as an enemy of the people. He spent 17 years in Gulag, like in a concentration camp in Russia. At the same time, he was probably, I think, extremely talented person because he had patents in high-speed drilling, patents from anywhere in the world, from British Queen [laughs]. And still he spent 17 years there. It was incredible, actually, because he started to work [as engineer at plant], what he was supposed to be, but he was so good engineer that he eventually—the most talented people from this Gulag system were taken into special camp where they worked on some technical things. It is amazing that, not only he was there, he shared actually a group of engineers and he worked on this dream machine. But also this camp included Tupolev, who was general constructor of Soviet airplanes. And the guy, I forget [later added: Korolev], who did first Russian space

rocket. So, it was a big technical institution in the middle of Russia. He spent 17 years [in this camp.]

12:40 (Why did he go to Germany in the first place?)

He went to study. Probably he had opportunity because he was born in 1908, I think. So probably when he finished school—I think, maybe I'm wrong—but I think that it was period when it was not so difficult to go study abroad. It was first years after revolution so probably [it was still possible to study abroad.]

(And then, why did he come back?)

He went to study. He didn't try to immigrate or something. So, he went back without any reservation. He studied. He has family and friends. It was not his plan, and he started to work and he started, actually, to design this dream machine. And one day he was [arrested].

(How many years after he got back to the Soviet Union was he put in the Gulag?)

I think one or two years, because he was taken to jail in 1937, it was famous—infamous—year in Russian history when million of people spent—

(And did they give any explanation for what exactly he was being--)

Oh yes, they said he brought 15 kilograms of explosive stuff to his plant, and he was going to explode it.

(He was planning on doing that?)

[Laughs] Of course not.

(Oh, oh, that's what they said.)

No, no, no—it was official sentence.

(And he was in the camp for 17 years?)

For 17 years.

(How—and did he survive?)

He survived. Even more, it's incredible. Actually people tried to interview him. He died now. He died like seven years ago. At the end, they achieved so [many] things inside of this camp that my uncle got the highest award of Soviet Union—technological—Stalin Prize. And because he was inmate, actually, his superiors got the award [?] but they gave

him money [?] what was very nice. So he got Stalin Prize and after, in 1954 Stalin died, and it was big, big amnesty and he was completely—

(And what was your uncle's name?)

Alexander, Alex--Alexander.

(And you had another relative who was also Naum Meiman, who was put in the camps--)

No.

(No?)

15:48 As far as I know, Naum Natan Meiman [Naum Natanovich Meiman]—

[LS: It is Olga's father.]

It is Olga's father, and Olga is wife of my cousin. So it's some redirection. He was fantastic scientist—one of the best probably in the world.

[LS: Probably Olga knows better about this—]

Yes, we don't know really much of detail. I only know that he didn't sign something and he was considered as a dissident. And even though he was very famous, [he developed one of the greatest] theorem in physics, that has his name actually. It's greatest [achievements] of Meiman: Pomeranchuk Meiman [theorem]. He worked with Pomeranchuk—it was another great physicist in Russia. But he was sequentially decreased in his scientific levels. He was full professor. After that he was, you know, not full professor. After that he was senior scientist of research. After that he was junior researcher. After that, it was like two years where he slowly lost all his academic degrees. They take one after another.

[Brandon:] (What were your interactions with Naum Meiman?)

I went to graduate school in 1974—graduate school was in Moscow, so I graduated Leningrad State University, worked couple years and was admitted to graduate school, and I lived there in graduate school dormitory, and during this period of time I met Misha and Olga Meiman many times. I probably even lived in their house for a couple of weeks. And at that time I met Naum Meiman many times. He actually helped me out—he gave some literature from his friends—mathematicians—with some formula that you cannot find in any book—so it was just professional help.

18:20 [Brandon:] (Are there any stories from that time that you remembered that stand out to you?)

Not about Naum Meiman, because I met him probably twenty times, but still it was—but my uncle in Leningrad, saw him of course all my life and—

[Lydia:] _____ so afraid and they didn't want to put families through such hard times.

Right.

[Lydia:] Also _____, they didn't share much.

So eventually he [his uncle, Alexander] went out of this camp. He was completely, how to say [word in Russian] [rehabilitated]. [Lydia says something.] All sentences were taken away and he started to work and he continued to develop this dream machine, and it was special construction bureau in St. Petersburg. And he was chief engineer, and Lydia actually worked couple of years [in that institution].

(Is that how the two of you met?)

No.

[Lydia:] No. That is a different story.

[Victor laughs. Lydia says something and Lydia laughs].

(So, since you lived in Leningrad, were any of your family affected by the Nazis?)

Not.

(No?)

Not. I think it's very different period of time. Definitely everybody was affected by Nazis in the forties, but I was born in 1950s, so I—

(Well, what about your parents? What were they doing?)

My parents—my father—actually his first wife died from starvation during World War II. So of course it's German—

(And then your father met your mother?)

My father was on front and he survived, and his first apartment, actually, in St. Petersburg was completely destroyed by bomb that went exactly inside of this apartment.

Definitely I cannot say. Everybody was affected by Nazis, but a little bit early in time when what I remember, it was already history.

(So do you want to tell the story about how the two of you did meet?)

[Lydia says something]

Sure. [laughs] Why not? I was in this school—boarding school in St. Petersburg—that was created actually [for gifted kids]. There are four such schools in Soviet Union—in all Soviet Union. It was in Leningrad and Moscow, in Kiev and Novosibirsk. And they were specifically created with closely related universities—and mostly teachers in school were university professors. And each of these four schools has very strong, very systematic education in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology.

And because it was only four schools for all Soviet Union, teachers—a team of teachers, actually—went through all cities in Soviet Union. And they performed Olympiads and they tried to find gifted children, and the winner of these Olympiads were invited to these special schools. So, as a result I had a million friends from Lithuania, from Latvia, from Estonia, from north of Russia—from everywhere. It was [only] five or six people actually from St. Petersburg for whole school.

So one of them, by the way, was son of the greatest Russian actor. It was Arkady Raikin. It was the best and most famous actors probably in Russia—and his son actually liked a lot biology. [Lydia says something and laughs—unintelligible]

Some of these guys were [from] Vilnius. And when we were close to graduation, they invited [me] to visit Vilnius. I never was [there] before. And I fall in love with the city—it's very beautiful city—very unusual, very—not similar to traditional [Russian cities]. It's almost Western city where you can get Kosher, for example. You cannot find Kosher in Leningrad. No restaurants, no Kosher, no anything. But there it was everything, and to me it was very Western-like city.

So I met his friends there and we started our friendship, and many times I came to Vilnius, and many times these guys came to Leningrad, and we walked, and we think, and everything was perfect. And one, the most close to me, actually friend, was getting married, and he invited us to his wedding. I was friend of this guy who is now in Israel. [Lydia says something] And she was in the same group and college as bride, and after that it was just—

(So you met at your friend's wedding? And what year did you get married in?)

In 1974.

(And I understand that your wife is not Jewish).

No.

(Was there any issue with that? With your family maybe wanting you to marry someone who was Jewish or—?)

At that time, yeah, my mother died in 1972 in the year when I graduated from the university. And my father, he never even mentioned, you know, the question of Jew, non-Jew. He was a member of Communist Party so it, I think, for him it was completely indifferent. Jew or non-Jew. I would say maybe I had more problems on her side.

25:33 (Can you explain that?)

[Lydia:] I'd better explain. _____.

(Okay. I mean just your side of the story, what did you feel like you experienced with your wife's side of the family and being a Jew?)

I feel proud to be a Jew. I thought that: poor people, they don't understand. It was more difficult, for sure—to overcome this resistance. For me—

[Lydia:] They just came once a year for visit.

(And, so how many years were you married before you decided to apply for a visa?)

We married in '74 and we left Russia in '89 so it was 15 years. We had already daughter. She was 14 at this time. My father died to this time. It was also consideration because he always said that if you will leave, it will kill me. It was definitely obstacle, and I worked in highly secret technological institute also. And when you get work at such institute, you gave subscription that you not only aren't going to leave, it was out of the question. You are not even going to talk to foreigners for 15 years. Again it was when this 15 years ended for me.

(What exactly were you doing at that job?)

I'm mathematician. It was work with lasers, and on computers to be sure—which can work and how they work.

(And the fact that you were Jewish, did that ever affect anything in your job?)

It was difficult, I think, actually to explain. It was—Leningrad had a lot of very interesting and very powerful scientific institutions. And being Jewish, it was impossible to go there—even so people just dreamed to take me to work. Believe me. But every time, everything was nice and friendly until you submit your passport to final—and after that their face changed, and they say that sorry, it was empty talk. We don't have any open position for you—it was like a switch. One day even she [his wife] was not taken for job where people actually wanted her. And she went [through] all medical exams and everything and last minute they knew that her husband was a Jew and they didn't take her.

(So how did you get out?)

But, it's still Soviet Union. It was impossible to go in 90% probably of institutions. But it was few military technical institution that they considered that you—if you are already there that they didn't care, really. So if you passed entrance to this kind of institution, they thought that you will work there all your life, and you never will go even to talk to foreigners. It's okay. In this case _____, and here it is okay. So in this place where I worked was exactly—it was completely secret—one of the most secret Soviet institutions. When you are there, you are there. They actually—I started to work before graduate school—and they were very hesitant to allow me to go to Moscow to graduate school.

30:06 (So what made you decide you wanted to leave?)

I would say combination of all this rules, and it was period of time when it—you know, it's accumulation [of conditions]. The more I lived, after graduate school it was the same story. Institute where I did Ph.D., actually was happy to take me—happy. And chief of department was trying to take me to work and I had PhD in two years essentially, so that was good. And they were not able to take me. Exactly for one reason and one reason only—it was Moscow [and I was a Jew]_____ in Russia.

And even when I came back, I was not able to stay in Moscow, and I went back and I try to find job and I spent probably half a year before I found similar to my first job—job where essentially it was medical institution where probably 90% of employees who were Jews and in this case, it's okay. Even though it was not my specialty to do that, so you feel it all the time. Whenever you're trying to find job, it's—90% of cases—it's prohibited.

But end of '80's was very dangerous period anyway because we were watching TV and everyday they have six hundred seconds [?] program and everyday they have this guy who was journalist and presented this program, he showed “here stolen Jewish child was taken for ransom and killed.” So she became crazy about our daughter. And we just dreamed of this moment. Plus, technically, it was period of time, 15 years, period [of secrecy] ended.

(Did you know anyone whose children were taken?)

No. Not personally, but it was so much talk. I didn't know personally. But again, it was atmosphere. You can feel it. You can feel very angry conversation in tram, in metro, in subway. People just hating each other, and you can feel it. Even—I think we try to do it as fast as possible, you know, just not to risk. Because it sounded very truthful.

(And how many times did you apply for a visa?)

It was—we applied only once; we were lucky. But they said that they lost our documents, so—essentially, this process in Russia, you apply, you gave your documents, you give application and after that they say to you how your question was resolved. In our case, [months]: no, no, no, not anything. Like five months—and all this application

process takes six months. One month before the end, I started to call everywhere—where I could. They say finally, one month before deadlines essentially, they say we did forget to write to you that you're permitted to leave.

(So you only had one month?)

It was crazy.

(How did you get involved with BASJ or meet people from there?)

We were lucky, you know. We came to Boulder because Misha Plam was here. And when you came—there are different cities of course in America—when we immigrate, we actually, we don't know especially at that time where we will go. Because you cannot immigrate to United States. You can immigrate only to Israel. But even to Israel, they don't give you permission to immigrate to Israel. They give this exit certificate essentially. They take passport. They take [away] Russian citizenship, and we should pay for it. People should pay for education that they get in Russia.

[Lydia:] We didn't.

We didn't—before us it was. But we paid to lose Russian citizenship. And after that they give small piece of paper that said that destination country is unknown. So you leave Soviet Union. You are not Russian citizen anymore and destination country is unknown. In fact, you have no [citizenship] at all, essentially. Now, what was the question?

35:44 (So you didn't know about the Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry?)

Not. Not before. Yes. We wrote to Misha Plam and at this time and we went—path was actually through Austria. You go from Soviet Union to Austria and from Austria to Italy. And from Italy, if somebody is guarantor for you in the United States, you can go—or you cannot go—and it was actually very difficult period of time because at that particular moment, United States decided not to accept Jews anymore. Because it's now democratic, the Soviet Union.

(So how long did you wait?)

So we were in Rome, and it was minimum amount of money, but still _____, but we were there two or three months and at that moment actually America stopped it.

(And why didn't you want to live in Italy? Why did you want to live in the United States?)

We cannot—

[Lydia:] It's not our choice.

[Victor:] It's not our choice. The only thing that we MIGHT choose was actually Israel. But we wanted to leave for America.

[Lydia:] But every country you go, you need to go to consulate.

[Victor:] Oh yes, all this Austria and Italy was just intermediate state, various state.

[Lydia:] It was very hard work over time—for Soviet Jews.

(So when you came to Boulder, what was it like stepping off the plane into America?)

First of all, I was so sick that I almost died, so I had 40 [degrees]—

[Lydia:] temperature.

[Victor:] 110 probably [laughs]. I always count in Celsius. It was difficult. I was completely sick. They tried to help.

[Lydia:] I can remember very well.

[Victor:] It was flight, actually—charter flight without any stops—without anything. So we spent like twelve hours in Rome airport before we were put to this plane. And I was lying on the floor because I didn't understand which country I was in ☺. And when we finally came here—to Denver airport, and Misha and Olga actually met us, it was new—completely new life. And at that moment it was actually, I think, mechanism of this action. You still meet somebody who is your guarantor and they put some money to Denver Jewish Center, I think. Yeah?

[Lydia:] Uh—I—it doesn't matter.

[Victor:] So, it doesn't matter, but when we finally went to Boulder—

[Victor and Lydia both talking]

[Victor:] No, no, no. I was sick. But after that we met BASJ _____ and they actually help a lot. It was very difficult period of time. It's completely new life, new habits, new friends, new people—everything is new.

(So where did you live when you first got to Boulder?)

When we came first day, it was October of '89. We came to Boulder and Misha and Olga at that moment rented some apartment on Arapahoe and 55th, as I remember, and they rented for us just neighboring apartment. It was very nice, and I remember a million of things that are excellent, actually, to remember.

40:02 One thing, for example, is that we never had Halloween, and we came exactly two days before Halloween.

(You never had what?)

Halloween. Halloween.

(Oh, Halloween. Okay.)

And we came two days before, so apartment manager came to our apartment to ask something, to say something with his five-years-old daughter—and this girl has a whole bunch of, a whole plate of candies and asks her, “Trick or Treat.” She [Lydia] didn’t understand even a single word, what it means, and looked at me. I didn’t know what to do either. So she took one candy from this poor girl and said, “Thank you.” [Laughs]. We have no clue. [Laughs]

And after that she started to ask [tell that]our bathroom didn’t have any curtains inside, so she started to ask apartment manager why we don’t have curtain: “We need curtain.”

And he said that it is up to you. “Go and buy.” Who knows what he said at that moment.

So she cried so many times that she wants curtain, that he went to store, bought curtain, put this curtain.

A lot of things. I didn’t understand even single word at this beginning. She was asked one day, “What’s up?” She looked at ceiling. It’s difficult, not very nice.

I like Boulder and America so much from day one.

(How old was your daughter?)

When we came here, she was 14.

(So she started high school?)

Yes. She graduated Boulder High School. She started English as a Second Language. She graduated and went to New York.

(Was it hard for her? Not speaking the language and just coming to school?)

I think very hard. And the most difficult thing probably was complete cut of all friendship—all her friends were there. And they were very afraid. She tried to wrote million of letters at the beginning. Nobody answered. Nobody even mentioned—so I think it was difficult. And of course English is very difficult. Fortunately, her English now is perfect. It is perfect.

(And so how did you--so you got involved with BASJ from Olga and Misha?)

I think so—yeah.

(And what did they do for you?)

BASJ? Oh. BASJ is great. First of all, they met each coming person. And sometimes they met people at the airport, sometimes in Boulder, sometimes, whatever it is. They help. They started to talk to us, because we didn't know anything. It's impossible to explain. You know, it's a completely different life. So they tied to each of us some tutor, and it was great experience. I remember my tutor not only taught me English, what was good, but also explained how to drive [ride on] bus, for example, how to go restaurant. She took me at some Boulder mall, and we went from Chinese restaurant to some Italian pizza, and she would come [and help me to order]—It was _____.

I was—when I started to work at the university, I went to conference in Monterey in California. And my boss was actually somewhere playing golf, and I have no clue. I was hungry like crazy so I went to—harbor?—someplace there. And they have pizza by slice, but I have no clue how to ask.

(And this was your new job?)

Yes. It was job in Boulder already, and I went to conference—international—without English. So people were very tolerant, really. So I tried to push my dollar [to salesperson] and [laughs] I have no clue how to order this pizza. So it was difficult. English is very difficult, actually.

So first thing, they gave us tutor. I had tutor. Lydia had, actually, Sara Jane Cohen, so it was also very good.

45:06 And they helped a lot.

Second thing that somebody suggested to BASJ that people mostly needed TV. And somebody—very generous person—bought essentially TV for everybody who was coming. It was fantastic. Because it was best way—first of all I didn't understand anything, really. We watched TV all three of us all the time without really understanding, but when you repeat—I remember even now—“if I can do it, you can do it.” And it is good, you know, American sentence that I would never imagine to know. So it was very useful.

You know, a lot of stuff—once, for example, our daughter was sent to Jewish summer camp—and BASJ actually took her, I think—all expenses. We needed to pay \$500 more, and we didn't have this, of course, at that moment. And Roxanne Bailin actually helped us and paid this money—also from BASJ. So they help as much as they can. And it is very helpful.

(So it sounds like your daughter went to a Jewish camp. Did you go to a synagogue? Did you get involved with Jewish life once you were in America?)

We tried—yeah.

(And what was that like for you? Did you ever go to a temple?)

It was. I liked a lot singing, for example. Everything was nice. But at the same time, it's so unfamiliar, when you never touch [in Russia]—. So everything good, but we didn't participate really a lot.

(And do you do that now? Are you involved in synagogue at all now?)

Practically not.

[Lydia:] After we left Boulder, it's different because you have synagogue in Westminster; it's more close than Boulder to drive. _____ usually it's hard to go on Fridays.

[Victor:] I try to actually to help also to Bill and to BASJ also as much as I can—I remember it was some movie about judicial system in Soviet Union—Bill did something, and so I tried to help. We also tried to help newcomers.

And everything is fine with synagogue, but—

(Does your daughter identify as Jewish?)

She knows perfectly well, but I think she also--

[Lydia:] She is married. She married Jewish guy, too, and she lives in London with him. It's different generation.

48:10 (Yes. So you were talking about—before—that your first job—what was your first job?)

[Victor:] It was three or four months after we came here so I got some tiny vocabulary [chuckles], and I went to university, and I met actually a few people who worked at JILA, Joint Institute for Laboratory Astrophysics, at university. It's one of two towers. People who worked on very close things to my PhD. So I met them. It was Sidney Geltman and Chris Greene, and I tried as far as my English allowed, to explain what I did, and they were actually very interested in theoretical physics—it's a different kind of development in Russia—and so they were very interested, and they tried to help somehow. So I worked one year, probably, at JILA. It was not really clear what this position—something between research assistant and student assistant.

(And then, what did your next job entail?)

And I worked one-and-a-half year, probably, there. So it was nice because for me it was extremely helpful. First of all, it was computer. So I was able to work. Second, you talk and talk and talk. I went for a couple of conferences. It was, you know, extremely useful, helpful for language. And after that—Boulder—Colorado, actually—participated—it was huge all-American [scientific] project - supercollider—

[Lydia:] —simulator. [project was called Superconductive Supercollider Project—SSC]

[Victor:] Okay—supercollider. It was big fight between Colorado and Texas, and Texas won it and started to build it, but they needed scientists all around the world, so they gave some money, some grants to all universities—and in particular at CU, and I went to entry, and I was accepted to _____ physics group as a research assistant, and I worked there three years, until the supercollider project was closed. And after that I started to look for job, because I had programming skills, you know, almost from childhood. I finally I found. Since that I work as a software engineer and software developer in two or three companies.

51:23 (Have you returned to visit the former Soviet Union?)

Yes, once. We went to—in 2002—because I had huge nostalgic feelings, and it seemed like everything was so good there, and I just need to go. And we went summer 2002, and we visited two weeks. I was completely sick—at the very first moment when we stopped there. I never was such sick in America. So we visited friends—it was good to visit. But at least my thirstiness—completely gone. I don't really want to go second times. It was foreign country—where you happen to know a language.

(Right. So do you still talk to—do you have family or friends that are still in—)

Not family, but some friends, definitely—and we are talking, by Skype, for example.

(Oh wow!)

And we exchange e-mails, and I would be happier to invite them there, but I am not going really in the nearest future.

(So all of your family is out then?)

My family all died. So we have only friends, _____ practically. I think our only relatives—Misha and Olga Plam. [Lydia says something.] Oh yes, we have another cousin.

(And, who lives in Colorado?)

No, she lives in Rochester, New York—upstate.

(So I guess my last question is do you have any other stories or anything else you'd like to say?)

Boy, I told you so much! [laughter]. [Lydia says something.] Yeah—I just enjoy it. [More laughter] Conversation.

(Thank you very much.)

53:38 [End of Part A]

[B].

[What follows is an interview with Lydia Slonim, with additional participation by Victor Slonim, conducted by Brandon Springer. Becky Rosenberg is the videographer.]

00:00

(Today it's November 6, 2010. My name is Brandon Springer. This interview is under the auspices of Maria Rogers Oral History Program at the Carnegie Branch of the Boulder Public Library. It is one of a number of interviews of people who were involved with Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry. Today we are at the home of Victor and Lydia Slonim, two New Americans and former refugees from the Soviet Union brought to the States by Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry. This interview features Lydia Slonim, and is being filmed by Rebecca Rosenberg.)

(Lydia, we will begin with when and where you were born.)

I was born in Lithuania in 1951, close to Vilnius—it was some kind of suburb. And went in Lithuania—went to high school. After that graduated from college and, like Victor says, when our friends' wedding, we met each other. It was in 1973. In 1974, we got married and that's how my life begins.

Before that I really never met Jewish people; didn't know much about them. Even in my family, you know, the way they're talking—not good things, but I didn't pay attention. Finally I met Victor, and I thought, my God, what were they talking about? [Laughs] They are normal people. [laughs] Very smart—much smarter than my—others, you know. And we went through many things. I went through many things, you know, but I still loved him very much, and we got married and, of course, all my relatives and parents were against it.

But in Russia, in this case I didn't listen parents, and it was hard life until our daughter was born. When our daughter was born, they accepted, finally—my daughter and Victor and everything. They loved Maria, my daughter, very much. And I don't think you [speaking to Victor] felt like left, no? You were okay, too. [laughs] Maria saved you.

We moved to St. Petersburg. I moved to St. Petersburg—no first we moved to Moscow, and we used to live three years in Moscow. And I was not allowed to work in Moscow. It was kind of hard, but my parents helped me—they took Maria, and I found some kind of work—under Victor’s name, it was interesting story. [laughs]

But anyway, after Victor graduated we moved to Leningrad, and our daughter was about three years old. And I got job which was—I got job in—Victor told already—in his uncle’s company with drilling equipment. I was working in planning department. I’m not sure why they’ll take me but because uncle worked, you know, he can be [like good] resume for me. And we worked, I worked, like for about—how many?—fifteen years. And after that, our daughter grew up, and she was, she is very talented. She always was in the art, and behind you guys you see her pictures that she painted when she was fourteen. [Victor says something]

That’s St. Petersburg that she painted.

[Victor:] _____ the place where we lived. And she did it from memory.

(Becky: Wow.)

[Lydia:] Right. She painted from her memory. Anyway, after that we decided—I decided to put her into art school for—after fourth grade and fifth grade, you can apply for art school. And you need to pass exam. And, of course, she pass exam but they didn’t take her. And I understood why.

(Why?)

Because of her father.

[Lydia:] You know, on every application children goes to, starting from kindergarten, you need to put parents’ nationality—mine and Victor’s. And after our daughter, when she is sixteen, she can choose nationality—whatever she wants.

[Victor:] Sometimes you can’t go even to kindergarten.

[Lydia:] But in kindergarten when we put Maria, they told me to put nationality mine, because Jew nationality is not good for you.

Anyway after fifteen years—Victor—this period ended with secrecy, whatever he worked. And Gorbachev came to power, and I didn’t have parents at this time. Victor didn’t have parents, and we didn’t have much to lose. We decided to open better life for our daughter and, of course, for us.

And we apply for immigration, and Victor already told long story, lost documents—blah, blah, blah. But they gave us one month to leave, but it was enough. We left almost everything—we just took two suitcases total and we left.

Anyway, after we pass some—what in Leningrad we pass? You know, this, when they check you? Don't look at me like you don't know.

[Victor:] Say it in Russian

[Lydia:] In Leningrad, when you pass board, you know, in Russia, they check you—

[Victor:] Custom.

[Lydia:] Custom. When we pass custom, I started to cry with Maria and because—finally it is over! [claps and laughs]

[Victor:] It was exactly _____. They cried.

[Lydia:] Right.

[Victor:] They have really strict search—they search everything. So they cried heavily, and I was so happy—first time—

[Lydia:] Anyway, Victor was very happy, and we were of course afraid because it's a new country, and now it's no language—nothing. Even, you know we have relatives—Olga and Misha—but still—anyway we went through Vienna, after that Italy, and we were quite _____. And since they lost our documents, and that time was open border to America, because all our friends who left before us like half year, they go in Italy—waiting until border will be open. Anyway—

07:11 (You said that you took two suitcases.)

Right.

(How did you decide what to take with you?)

Whatever comes to your head—underwear, pillow, what you have. A few plates. I took what I took—one pan, one—you know—whatever you think it will be necessary for first time leaving.

[Victor:] Ninety dollars in cash was allowed and they search us.

[Lydia:] And where I was? After that we came to Boulder, and thanks God to Olga and Misha Plam who are our sponsors and, you know, at least we know who to ask because it was first days. And BASJ was doing first steps at that time, you know. We were not first family but, you know, one of first after they created organization. And in the beginning Olga and Misha were taking care of us, of course—renting apartment, told him how to write the checks, you know, at least how to say “thank you” and things like this, because I didn't speak any English.

[Victor:] Don't grab candies from little children. [laughter].

[Lydia:] They took candies and gave it next day as apology for me, I know that. [More laughter]

Anyway, of course, first job Misha helped me to find—at least he help me to set up interview, and I was accepted at Neodata at that time in Louisville. And of course this organization was sold several times and I worked over there twenty years.

But back to BASJ—like it was month after we came—probably two or three months, I don't remember exactly—this organization was already formed, and of course they were helping a lot of for us. Everyone had tutor. Even our daughter, Maria, had a tutor. We can ask question. At that time I was taking accounting classes. I didn't know many words. Even though I graduated—I have like [bachelor] degree in economy—but it was Russian degree. I wasn't familiar with terminology even. And Sara-Jane helped me a lot. And any questions, I could ask about classes, about real life. I got tickets, she [explained to] me what to do with this ticket. [laughs] I was driving—was not good driver! [More laughter and Victor says something in background about a u-turn].

You told me to do it. I know. [Victor says something else: _____ go fast _____ no clue how to do it]

10:21 [Lydia:] Of course we got furniture. We got all those things we needed, because in two suitcases you didn't put much.

(So you just gave us a lot of information. I'd like to backtrack a little bit and sort of touch on some of the major points you covered. Maybe starting with—tell us about your last night in the Soviet Union. What were your feelings?)

Last night in Soviet Union. I remember it very well. Even [during] last week old friends were coming. We had tons of friends—that's how we live in the Soviet Union—survive through friends. Everyone was coming, coming, coming—saying good-bye. We didn't sleep. Last night it was bye-bye party—a lot of friends came and my relatives came from Poland. I have relatives in Poland.

And they came because Victor told, you know, a lot of children will be kidnapped because of money. You know, if you live in Russia forty years, you have some things. You sell. You have some money. You know, and my aunt from Poland, she was taking care of my daughter, because we had a lot of business to do like immigration business, sign papers. And she just took care of my daughter. She just kept her hidden in the apartment. That's it. Because teenagers—14 years—she doesn't understand. She run to play, you know—run out of apartment. She was not allowed to do that.

And last night we didn't sleep. We slept probably two or three hours and all our friends came in three cars—put us in the cars and took us to airport.

(And how did you feel about leaving?)

It was kind of like twenty-three years ago. It was—on one side it was sad and another side it was a lot of hope for new life—at least for my daughter. I didn't know much about my life, but I knew my daughter will have better life and we decided to come.

[Victor:] They cried. They cried.

[Lydia:] We cried. We cried. And we don't know why. [Laughs.] We didn't like Soviet Union. We didn't cry because we are leaving. We cried because probably it was a lot of things unknown for us. [pause] Scary. Scary.

(So then, to go back even further, can you tell us a little about what it was like to grow up in the Soviet Union in the fifties and in the sixties—and as someone who is not a Jew—what was—?)

[A short section of unrelated talk] To grow up in Soviet Union. All I know, my father was in concentration camp, not because he was Jew, but they took him because it was time—we never talked about it—and we grow up like everyone else. You know, I—we never had Jewish family around us, because it was like Polish neighborhood. Even we belong to Russia, but before Second War it was part of Poland, and all people around were like Polish people. They speak Polish language, and I graduate from Polish language high school.

I didn't know much about a Jew until I went to college. I went to college in 1972, and my first friend, Galla, who is now in Israel—she was my friend. And that's how I met, you know, her friends and after that, Victor. And even Galla told me, before I got married to Victor, “You [should] think what you are doing.” And I thought, what's she talking about? [Laughter.] It didn't come to my head even. Of course after I got married, and they resisted job for me and other things, you know, I understood. But, childhood—it was nothing special for me. It was just regular childhood.

15:26 (Becky, do have questions?)

[Becky:] (Yeah, I was just wondering if your father wasn't Jewish, why did they put him in a concentration camp. Was he ever given a reason?)

No, it was Second War, you know, everyone fights against Nazis, not only Jewish people. He did too.

[Brandon:] (What he a partisan or was he part of the army?)

Yes. Yes. It was part of this war effort, he fight.

(So he wasn't part of the official army—he was—)

Well, he was very young. He was like fifteen or sixteen years old and he didn't talk much about this. I know he was in concentration camp but it was in Lithuania—concentration camp—it wasn't, you know, those big camps. And he survived.

(But he didn't talk about it much after that?)

No. No. Never. I ask what they did in concentration camp. He told me, “worked”—that's it. You know, Russian parents—they kind of parents, they avoid talking about bad things to children. You know, they just want to avoid it.

[Victor:] They teach. Every mother teaches, teaches her children never to speak about anything—even to close friends.

[Lydia:] It was not open society and, of course, especially in Victor's work, you know. They cannot talk about his, because children sometimes can speak some things they shouldn't know. They know where to speak and what to speak, to whom to speak. It was dangerous to give them truth. How it works and how this world is different. Right? That's why we don't know much about—

[Victor:] We know, actually, much.

[Lydia:] We know much but—

[Victor:] Only because we read some books and some _____.

[Lydia:] But parents avoid us—avoid talking.

[Victor:] But parents never talked. I know that my Uncle _____ had talked maybe two words about his seventeen years in the camp—

(Brandon: How did that make you feel—the silence about those subjects?)

[Victor:] We grow up in these conditions. First nature—very bad—

[Lydia:] We didn't ask if parents they didn't want to talk to us. That's it. We don't ask. If they want tell us something, they will tell us. And of course we adore our parents and we never argue with our parents. It's not like here. [Laughter]

We never tell anything but about whatever parents say—it's correct—always.

(Can we pause for one second?) [break in recording]

(Brandon: So we left off talking about your childhood and growing up. You went to university. What did you study?)

When I went to the university?

(What did you study?)

Oh, what did I study. I graduated from civil engineering institute in Russia and I study economy. In Russian work, I was economist. Here as I know [it is] financial something, maybe analyst? I don't know, in America, what it is.

(And at that time, what did you do in your leisure time?)

At that time, like every student, we went to movies, we read books, we went to theaters, talked to friends—we had a lot of friends in colleges. We were not allowed to work like in America students do. In Russia, at that time when I studied, you didn't work. You just have studies and leisure time. That's it—which was kind of nice because they pay you stipendium, you don't need to work—but you need to keep grades up to get it. That's all.

20:17 (And then, did you meet Victor when you were in college?)

Yeah, I was in fourth year in college, right? In college we have five years study. I was in fourth. And I met Victor. Yep.

(And what was your family's reaction?)

Oh my gosh. It was like how many? Fifty years ago? [laughs]. I don't want to say anything bad about my family. but it was not good. It was not good at all.

(What about your non-Jewish friends? What did they think?)

Friends—different. At that time all my friends were from college, you know. And I lived in dormitory in Vilnius, and they said mostly nothing. And I lost quite a few of them. They didn't want to have anything to do with me, but that's all right. That's life.

(Do you remember what they said?)

They didn't say anything. In Russia, when you're not friends with somebody, they just go away and keep in different clique, in different company. And they don't want you; you don't need them.

(Becky, do have another question?)

[Becky:] (Yeah. I was just wondering. Do you think your family didn't want you to marry Victor because they didn't like Jewish people or because they were worried about what would happen to **you**?)

Of course, they were worried about what would happen to me. Of course, they worry. They knew much more about Jewish people than I knew, because they had experience,

you know, and they knew Jewish people not allowed to work, you know. People don't like them. People tease them. It's hard to get education. Of course, they didn't want such life for grandchildren, even—not about me—they were worried about grandchildren, mostly. Personally, Victor—they didn't say anything bad. He was very smart guy, you know. They knew that he was very smart, but grandchildren were the question.

[Brandon:] (And then were you ever discriminated against by the Soviet state for marrying a Jew?)

Who?

(You.)

After I met Victor, of course they didn't take me for a job. You know, I was not allowed work where I wanted to work. As a matter of fact, you know, when you fill up application, you know, you do everything about yourself. Of course, I'm not Jewish—they take application. Afterward, you need to pass physical exam. You pass physical exam—bring to them, you know, when you're healthy, you're allowed to work and to do this job. And after that, you know, they give you different application when you put everything about your parents, nationality, where you going _____, blah, blah, blah and, of course, husband. When it comes to husband and they see Jewish, they told me, "Sorry, your position was eliminated."

I told them, why did you send me for physical exam, you know—why didn't you know before? They didn't know before. Yep. It was—and, of course, with Maria it was same problems. And I think she didn't have any future in Russia at all. Right, honey?

[Victor:] No. She was the same kind. She was not accepted to art school for children.

[Lydia:] She painted much better than other people who were accepted. I went to look what she painted to pass exam. It doesn't matter.

[Victor:] Whenever you go to work, you need to fill application about yourself, about your parents, about your husband/wife's, about your grandparents, about your—

[Lydia:] It depends on job. If it's good job, they check you, like, three generations back. But if it's like secret, high secrets—so they can check—

[Victor:] There may be a place that you can be admitted no matter—Jew, non-Jew, _____ education because they know for sure that you can't leave them _____.

25:05 [Lydia:] And it's true, it's not true. Yes, they will take Jew, but they have like, you know, two per cent per company or some kind of percentage. If you get lucky and get into those percentage, they take you, but if it's not—not. And of course you have—

[Victor:] And the same with university. At university it was very strict.

[Lydia:] And you need to know somebody in the company, you know, to give you references. If you don't have references—you didn't tell about references [Victor is talking in the background] but it's always _____.

(So are there any other instances that you remember of discrimination because you were married to a Jew or because your daughter's father was Jewish?)

[Lydia:] It didn't feel nice all the time, you know. You feel some kind of, like—you don't understand why most of the time. But I'm glad I don't have to deal with this anymore. Here is different. And Victor is happy. I am happy, and of course, our daughter achieved a lot of—by her age—a lot of—she couldn't dream about achievements she got here—in Russia at all.

(To go back a little bit more, can you tell us about your wedding? What was that like in the Soviet Union?)

Our wedding. Honey, you tell him.

[Victor:] It was actually Jewish wedding.

(Was it?)

[both talking].

[Lydia:] Our wedding? Or our daughter's wedding?

(I'm asking about your wedding.)

[Victor:] Yes, it was very short. [Lydia is laughing.] Graduate school at that moment in Moscow. We came to some [phone rings].

[Lydia:] Let them leave a message.

[Victor:] We came to some _____ [phone continues to ring—voice announces who is calling.]

[Lydia:] That's okay. I call her back. Our wedding. I was in college at that time. Victor was already in graduate school in Moscow. I was in college in Vilnius and our weddings were in St. Petersburg. You know, I came from Vilnius, Victor came from Moscow. It was just civil ceremony; of course nobody of my relatives came and nobody from parents came. I was kind of alone. Victor's father was here and Victor's friends were here. I didn't have any relatives, any friends, anybody.

[Victor:] And we had nice party, like for three hours. After that went to train and left to, I think, Estonia.

[Lydia:] Yeah, we went for honeymoon. We just left everyone. [Giggles.]

[Victor:] We went to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and back to Moscow.

[Lydia:] It was just civil ceremony. That's it.

(So there weren't any Jewish aspects to it?)

[Victor:] No. But wedding where we actually met was completely Jewish ceremony in Vilnius. He a Jew and his bride was a Jew. And it was so interesting. I saw first time real Jewish traditions.

[Lydia:] Right. But in our wedding, since civil ceremony, never was any aspect because in civil ceremony like here—you know—you go to a judge and some kind of ceremony _____. If you want like Jewish aspects, you need to go to synagogue and have, you know, different weddings. In Leningrad, it was forbidden. In Lithuania, my old Jewish friends, they have Jewish weddings because it was not so tight like in St. Petersburg.

[Victor:] As I said in the beginning, Vilnius was very western-like city and whole republic was taken by Soviet Union in 1940, and they hated Russia. And they still have and had at that time a lot of Jewish tradition, and they have much more freedom. In St. Petersburg or in Moscow, I couldn't imagine. Because everybody who would visit such Jewish wedding will say "bye bye" to university, to college, to work. [Continues talking while Lydia is talking]. Unconceivable.

30:00 [Lydia:] It was just KGB around and cameras. You know, they just taking pictures. If you want to survive, you know, you just stay away.

(From the synagogues?)

[Lydia:] Yes.

[Victor:] Even if you go to synagogue, they have a lot of people with _____. They immediately find—make photograph of you and they will find you in a couple of days where you graduate or something or do your work. And after that they either take you—throw you out of university or something much worse—like jail. So it was religious propaganda. It was called religious propaganda and it was one of the worst violations of work. This [was true for]any kind of religion. It was secular state. No religion. Religion was prohibited everywhere. But especially for Judaism. It was double [crime].

(So did you ever try to go to synagogue ever in the Soviet Union?)

[Lydia:] Here. Just here. Yeah.

(And it was your first time going to synagogue?)

[Lydia:] Yes. Sara Jane taught me some prayers, you know, and even I started to study Hebrew, but it was complicated for me, because I didn't know English and two languages to learn, it was very hard. Maybe later—now when I have time. [Victor says something] Right and yes, when we used to live in Boulder, we were pretty [close] to Har HaShem.

(Becky, did you have a question?)

[Becky:] (No.)

(So you spent fifteen years after you were married in the Soviet Union and then what was it that made you decide to leave? Before you decided to apply for exit visas, what was it that really made you decide now is the time to leave?)

[Lydia:] A lot of things. A lot of things. First of all, by that time, you know, our daughter wasn't accepted to art school. It was a big thing. Second, I just got tired of this dizzying things around, like blah, blah, blah, behind your back at work. Because I work with all Russian people. I was one only different nationality. I wasn't Jew but still they knew my husband was Jew. And even they say joke, they told, you know, "Forgive us—it's about a Jew." Forgive us! Okay.

[Victor:] I hate it. It's really cheap habit. Forgive us. [In voice of those telling the joke:] "It's not against you. It's not against you guys."

[Lydia:] And after that our daughter was fifteen, I thought if I won't leave now, I would never leave. You know, I need to get away, and of course I was afraid for Victor because at this time, that kind of freedom started, you know, and people can talk, you know, and Victor likes to talk. And sometimes he tells things, you know, you can get—

[Victor:] It was Perestroika time, and it was radical change.

[Lydia:] Drastic changes. And I didn't believe it—

[Victor:] Actually in Russian culture. And she didn't believe it. I didn't believe it.

[Lydia:] I didn't believe in Perestroika. I knew it will end.

[Victor:] We started to read books that we were forbidden for tens of years. We started to see movies—oh, scary movie about Stalin time—and they were on shelves for like thirty years, and the directors were killed already a long time ago. We started to see, and literature was exploding. All magazines were full of stories and novels, and it was extremely interesting time.

[Lydia:] Right. And mostly, of course, our daughter.

(So tell us about your first day in Boulder. Where was your first meal perhaps?)

[Lydia:] First day in Boulder. We came to airport. Olga and Misha met us. Victor was very sick and of course they took us and afterwards we seen Boulder [from sightseeing place], we took 36 highway, and we thought this is Boulder. We first looking on the Boulder. Okay, I was looking. It was very nice. It was nice day, and they took us to our apartment. We used to rent apartment on 55th. What was first new [thing]?. It's hard to say. Forgive me, but I don't think I remember. It was meal, of course. We eat something. [chuckles] But it was before Halloween.

[Victor:] We came two days before Halloween.

[Lydia:] We were very tired as a matter of fact because we flew from Rome to New York. In New York we spent like two or three hours, sleep at hotel. Afterwards they took us to airport again. After that, we flew through St. Louis. Afterward to Boulder. It was kind of very long. And before that, we spent like all night at airport, and Victor was sick. We traveled like two-and-a-half days, you know. It was very exhausting trip. And probably, you know, if it would be shorter, I would remember much more.

36:26 (What were your first impressions of American culture?)

First impression of American culture—first impression. [sighs] I understood they were people like me. They are talking language I don't know. [laughing] What they're talking about, I don't know ever. I was trying to say something, and all I know—“Welcome to America,” I need to tell, “Thank you.” Because only one sentence Olga teach me first day. [laughs]

But in time it got better, better, better—more you learn language, you know, more interesting it becomes—life—and more interesting when people understand you, and you understand them. They have very similar needs like everyone else, you know. At work I talk to mothers, you know, and I make some friends. It's people like everywhere else.

[Victor says something in background].

[Lydia:] Oh, very friendly. They were helping me, you know, especially at work, you know. I needed help a lot of—because of my English, and nobody told me no. They always help me.

(What aspects of American culture were most different than Soviet culture that you noticed?)

Friendship, I would say, right?

[Victor:] Yes. I wanted to ask first, in good sense or in bad sense or just different?

(Both. Both good and bad.)

[Victor:] In bad sense, I think it is much less friendly because I think that the only way in the Soviet Union to survive was to be close with your close friends.

[Lydia:] May I edit?

[Victor:] Sure. Yes.

[Lydia:] What he thinks friendly—like in Russia, we can drop on your friend two o'clock in the morning. You don't, I think—you can drop anytime to your house. You don't need to call up, no appointments. It's different. You need to let know people, which is good, because I didn't like—

[Victor:] You have much more close relationship in a small group of your friends in Russia.

[Lydia:] In Russia, family, friends are equal—the same: family, friends, you know. Here family is family. Friends are friends.

[Victor:] _____close circle of friends. Here is everybody is much more individualistic.

[Lydia:] They are friendly.

[Victor:] They are very friendly.

[Lydia:] Very friendly. Very nice people.

[Victor:] Here you can live without them. In Russia, you can't survive. It was only place where you really can breathe and talk.

[Lydia:] But it's just different—different culture from Russia. That's all it is. But nothing, I cannot say anything—

[Victor:] So I would say if this is transition from good to bad.

[Lydia:] It's not bad, really. It's just different, honey.

[Victor:] Opposite. It's so much—you're scared in Russia very often. People hate you, and you can read it in their eyes. And here I never saw in this circle of people who I saw. It is friendliness and much better, you know, in much different sense. In Russia they hate you. They, they—

40:08 [Lydia:] But not friends, just people.

[Victor:] Just people. As I said, the psychology is completely different. Look, a very small group of people whom you can trust, with whom you can talk, with whom you co-exist. You change.

[Lydia:] Talk openly about politics, about religion.

[Victor:] _____. Everybody hates you.

[Lydia:] Here is friendly—all over—right.

[Victor:] Hate you at the first opportunity. Here I would say opposite, at least my feeling.

[Lydia:] People are very friendly, very nice.

[Victor:] There are no such close group of people, like in Russia. But at the same time, everybody else is much more friendlier than—maybe it's very stupid, what I am trying to say.

[Lydia:] No. It's a little bit different, but I prefer live in this world.

[Victor:] But of course, people aren't afraid here. There—everybody afraid and everybody—

[Lydia:] I speak openly about freedom, about religion, about politics--which you never have in Russia. No way, which is very nice.

[Victor:] But it was a big joke that in Russia you can joke about your boss at work, but never joke about President, because it is a way to jail. Here—opposite. [both laugh].

(Is that how you feel too?)

[Lydia:] I don't know. I never joke about my boss. I never had comedy of boss.

(If we can pause for a second.)

(So you mentioned that the first time you went to a synagogue is when you came to Boulder, Har HaShem.)

Correct.

(What was that experience like for you?)

[Lydia:] It was really different, because I didn't know much about religion. I had to learn a lot, and of course it was Sara-Jane around me all the time who was teaching me and making even tapes for me. At that time I didn't know much English. I barely could

read it. But I liked it. I liked people a lot, and I wanted to know much more about religion and, of course, Sara-Jane helped me a lot of—

(And did you learn more?)

Yes. I know more than Victor does. [laughs]

[Victor:] It is true.

(Is there anything that surprised you?)

[Lydia:] Surprise? No. It was no surprises because I don't know to whom to compare even what. It was just whatever it is, it is. You accept it. That's it. Or you don't.

(What did you find most interesting?)

Most interesting. In Jewish religion, I found that you believe in God, not like in Christian religion you believe in Jesus, you know. It's like certain person. Here it's God. It was different whatever I read it about—different religions, you know. And it did make sense for me—much more than to believe in certain person. And God is God, one and everywhere.

(So tell me more about Sara-Jane. What your experience was with her and maybe some stories about learning English.)

Tons of—don't know where to start it. Sara-Jane speaks perfect English, you know. She speaks slowly. I don't know. It's Sara-Jane or it's because of her job—you know—lawyer—speaks perfect English. She was pronouncing every words for me. And I make—mix up so many words like ripe and rape, for me it was the same [laughter] you know, just one word. I was trying to tell like I have rape pear or something, you know. She was correcting me. And like socks, you know. Socks, I know socks but it has different meaning, too, somewhere else. She helped a lot. Every question I had, I always could ask her from day or night, and she would answer me.

[Victor:] Bill helped a lot. Bill, not Sara-Jane, when we bought our first house.

[Lydia:] That's true.

[Victor:] In Boulder, we have no clue about real estate.

45:49 [Lydia:] Buying.

[Victor:] Buying. So Bill went through all documents, helped me—

[Lydia:] Right.

[Victor continues:] —to understand everything, and Sara-Jane always made a _____ tried to improve English and—

[Lydia:] Right. They helped. In English.

[Victor:] Yeah. I think we even have somewhere even now English language tapes that she prepared for us—is perfect.

[Lydia:] Pronunciation. Right.

[Victor:] Bill has much more American—much more difficult, for us, language, but all words _____. The easiest, first English speakers that we start to understand. And TV actually helps a lot. It's very stupid. Repeated question—what helps a lot.

[Lydia:] About Sara-Jane—she was coming every week, you know, like it was job almost for a whole year. Poor Sara-Jane. In her busy schedule, she found the time, you know, to spend at least an hour a week with me, and we always we're fighting with Victor, because I thought: Sara-Jane is my tutor, not yours. [laughs]. He had different tutor but—

[Victor:] I'd like to be all at once at the same place, and Maria asked a lot of questions, and I tried to ask—

[Lydia:] Right. And of course when Maria arrived to say, you know, she can—looked at English, you know—

[Victor:] It was really friendly help. It was _____.

(So she tutored your daughter, too?)

[Victor:] Not formally. Formally, the woman—Karen Schad [?]¹—and Lydia had Sara-Jane.

[Lydia:] Yes. She tutored everybody. But we were trying to get so much English, you know. Victor was trying to be close to me. I was trying to be close to Victor. Maria was around all the time. You know, because everyone had some questions, you know. By this weekend, you know, it was quite a few questions for everybody.

[Victor:] _____ to know. You don't how to get to bus or go to sale.

[Lydia:] Even to write a check—I never had a check. What is credit card? I don't know.

[Cross-talk]

[Victor:] So, we talk a lot.

(So what was your daughter's experience adapting to American culture and learning English?)

[Lydia, sighing:] At that time, I think it was very hard for her. You know, all teenagers, 14-years-old in America, of course, they have a car. They have some kind of job. They have parents who can provide for them. They can go, I don't know, bowling, whatever. She didn't have this opportunity. At first her job was at Wendy's, I think, she was cashier.

[Victor:] It was all American Dining.

[Lydia:] American Dining. After that they lay her off. After that she was at Wendy's, but she worked hard to get some money for fun, because we didn't have much. And, but it was good thing because she understood what money means from very early years. And it motivated her to get education, to get higher education, because she now has master's degree which was not so easy for her—she got this master's degree, and she was working and going evening to school. It was hard for her, but now, now, she is all right, I think.

[Victor:] It's very nice.

[Lydia:] It's very good job. If she got job in London, you can imagine.

(So what did she get her degree in?)

[Lydia:] She graduated Parsons School of Design. It was bachelor degree and—

50:03 [Victor:] And Fine Arts.

[Lydia:] —and Fine Arts.

[Victor:] And after that she had—

[Lydia:] Master's degree, NYU—it was Baruch College.

[Victor:] Major, please. MBA—in business.

[Lydia:] MBA. Yeah, it was NYU—part of Baruch, Baruch College—in New York. She graduated. [Note: Baruch College, CUNY]

(And now she's in London?)

[Lydia:] Yes, she's in London. She had a lot of offers, you know, everywhere, but she choose London, because her husband is in Moscow. And from London to Moscow to fly it's like three hours. And from New York to Moscow, it's like eight hours. It's hard to see each other. From London they can meet more often.

(And what does she do in London?)

[Lydia:] She works in CMS Marketing Company, and I think she is top advert person in company, what it means advert person—[laughs] I think it's kind of management

[Victor:] She's _____ manager. I simply don't know what she does exactly.

[Lydia:] Yeah, but she's a manager.

[Victor:] In New York she worked as a graphic designer. She prepared presentation paper.

[Lydia:] Yeah, but it was in New York.

[Victor:] She hated all this mathematics and physics I tried to teach her.

[Lydia:] Never ended good. I was butting in them all the time. Didn't work out. Didn't work out.

[Victor:] So she liked to do things with hands.

[Lydia:] She liked art much. She liked paintings. But now she doesn't paint—it's just hobby, it became—

[Victor:] She liked, actually, this Jewish camp a lot.

[Lydia:] For her, it was good things because it was introduced in religion a lot of, you know, and really, and they celebrate Shabbat—everything over there. It was new thing for her, too.

[Victor:] I remember that she was very excited and happy about that.

[Lydia:] Yes.

(So what was her wedding like, then?)

Hmm?

(What was her wedding like, to her husband? Was it a Jewish wedding?)

[Victor:] Yes.

[Lydia:] Yes.

(What was that experience like for you two?)

[Victor:] I was so nervous. I tried to prepare my speech.

[Lydia:] It was nice, you know—our children now, it's like 35 years old and they did everything for themselves, you know. And they knew a lot of people, you know, and rabbi, you know—everything was organized but Maria did a lot, you know. We just came to weddings. It was very nice weddings, and Victor finally got into suit and tie. He did it second time of his life.

[Victor:] Yeah. I wore tie third time in my life.

[Lydia:] Third? Okay.

[Victor:] They tried to repeat it—my father's speech.

[Lydia:] Right. It was very nice.

(How did it feel like for you to see your daughter able to have a Jewish wedding.

[Lydia:] I'm very glad, and I gave her opportunity, and she can use it. And she did. That's her life—whatever she chooses, she will be.

(So to change subjects a little bit, when did you get citizenship in the United States?)

[Lydia:] I think after five years.

(Five years. And what was that experience like?)

[Lydia:] We were very proud, right?

[Victor:] Exciting.

[Lydia:] Exciting.

[Victor:] I was SO proud.

[Lydia:] And finally we have SOME citizenship. We were something somewhere.

[laughs] Before that, it was just alien, whatever it was.

[Victor:] Especially when all this five years, we were NOBODY. People without ANY citizenship.

[Lydia:] Right, except for me the work permit.

[Victor:] _____ in Russia, actually, who takes birth citizenship from you. And we didn't have ANY citizenship, actually. I was very proud.

[Lydia:] Yeah, it was very nice. Misha and Olga took us to restaurant, you know. We went to synagogue and tell Sara-Jane and, you know, it was nice.

(What did you have to do to become a citizen?)

[Lydia:] Study history. It was like hundred questions.

55:05 [Victor:] Don't do any crimes.

[Lydia:] No. That's joke. Of course you need to live perfect life. But here we have like hundred questions which we need to study, get answer, but of course we study much more. We read a lot of books, you know. We wanted to know more history than those hundred questions: how many stripes in the flag, we knew anyway. But we prepared.

(And was there a ceremony here in Boulder before a judge?)

[Lydia:] No. It was in Denver. In Boulder, we don't have it.

(So, to sort of wrap of, can you compare the progress of your lives now to what they would have been like had you stayed in the former Soviet Union?)

[Lydia:] No. It's very hard to say. I can only compare my life to life I used to live in Soviet Union. Right now it's different Russia. It's completely different. Before we left it was different, and now it's different. But who knows how it would ended in Russia, my life now. But I didn't expect anything good, but our friends they live different lives, you know. Some of them are rich, some of them are not. But it doesn't matter really. It wasn't my goal to get rich here or to get rich over there. Whatever I wanted, you know, like normal life for me, for myself, for my husband, of course _____for my daughter, I think I have_____ it.

(So do you have any regrets?)

[Lydia:] No. Because I've came to America it was best decision I ever made in my life. Best. Best.

(Are there any other stories that you'd like to tell us that we didn't get to talk about?)

[Lydia:] I don't know about stories. It was so many.

[Victor:] Only jokes.

[Lydia, laughing:] It's hard to remember, you know. But mostly of course we are thankful to Bill and Sara-Jane Cohen—especially to Bill who organize this BASJ and who helps so many people, included us—and who brought opportunity, you know, for all Dushanbe because mostly I think people are—came from Dushanbe, because you know—

[Victor:] It was also very different. Let me interrupt you. It was also very different because we always felt that people help you without asking anything in return. What was very unusual—they just help us—so helpful. This tutors, this TV. They didn't need anything from us. I never remember such situation in Russia.

[Lydia:] Like, in Russia, if you help one person—

[Victor:] Yes, it is always something—

[Lydia:] —in return. You need to give it.

[Victor:] Nobody does anything—only your friends sometimes help for just for love of you, but everybody expects something in return. And they even will not try to do anything. Here it was, you know, pure help.

[pause]

(Thank you very much.)

[Lydia:] You're welcome.

58:45 [End of Part B. End of interview.]