[CD File 1.]

SANDY BERMAN: —for the Elliot and Judith [Cohen] Oral History Collection, contained within the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. Thank you, Irina. It’s quite a mouthful that I must get out before—

IRINA NIKISHIN: Thank you.

BERMAN: —I start these tapings, and I’m so thrilled that you decided to be a participant in this project.

NIKISHIN: Thank you.

BERMAN: I’d like you to just begin by speaking a little bit about your early years in Russia, what your parents did and where you were born.

NIKISHIN: I was born in Moscow, and my parents are originally from Ukraine, from Odessa, and they left for Moscow in the fifties. I was born in Moscow, so I became a true Moscovite. My heritage is Jewish, and I came from a family of—both parents were Jewish, and so were the grandparents. I was raised in Moscow in a very [unintelligible] society that Russia was at that time. I was completely assimilated with the Russian culture and Russian traditions, and I went to a school where I was perhaps only one student in the classroom of thirty people who was Jewish.
My father was an engineer, and he had a very prominent post with the Russian structures. He was very high in the administrative end. He was the chief engineer of the big chemical plant.

My mom was a medical student, but during the war she didn’t finish her studies, so she didn’t become a medical doctor as she was planning to be, but later she became an aesthetician.

I have an older brother, Mark. He got married very early in his age. He got married, and he moved away, and he was also an engineer.

We had a comfortable living in terms of our well-being and standards, and I would say we were well off. Basically, I can say that I had a nice childhood, safe, protected. But at the same time, I had a lot of incidents where I felt that I was isolated and I was singled out and I was picked upon, and that gave me a very uncomfortable feeling, and I remember that feeling very well.

BERMAN: Can you describe some of those incidents?

NIKISHIN: Yes. In school in particularly [sic, particular], children somehow knew that I was Jewish. It was something that we always tried to hide because we were ridiculed for being Jewish. I was called names, and I was called “Jew,” and you know how children are they’re cruel. They’re cruel, and I constantly knew that I was not one of them, even though, like I said, I had a very safe and protected environment. And generally, in Russia—you know, Russia was very safe; you could walk late in the evening. Nobody would attack you or touch you, and so in that sense it was fine, but at the same time, I always knew that I was different from the culture that I was within.

BERMAN: Do you think your parents felt the same way?
NIKISHIN: Yes, I know my parents felt the same way, absolutely. I remember my mother applied for a trip to former Yugoslavia, to go on a tourist trip. It was in the sixties, late sixties, maybe early seventies, and Russia was a closed country. Not too many people were let out, even to travel. But my dad, being with a privileged position, he had this opportunity to get that tourist deal for my mother to go. She applied, and she had to go through what she called an execution and a torture, [unintelligible] they’re questioning her and bringing her to tears. But, you know, she had to go through the sort of interviews, and they were trying to check her moral status and her patriotism and trying to make sure that she was a fit person to go abroad. And it was a very humiliating experience for her.

BERMAN: Travel visas—were they only allowed to other Communist countries during that time?

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes, only, only. You could never dream of—I have never been anywhere outside the former Soviet Union before I immigrated, so it was, like, not an option for me.

BERMAN: And I should ask, what year were you born?

NIKISHIN: I was born 1953.

BERMAN: And the family name.

NIKISHIN: My family name is Prozument. That’s my maiden name.

BERMAN: Would you spell that?

NIKISHIN: Yes, it’s P (Peter)-r-o-z-u-m-e-n-t, Prozument.

BERMAN: Thank you.

NIKISHIN: You’re welcome.
BERMAN: It’s so interesting to see the feeling of security and yet the feeling of being [crosstalk; unintelligible]—

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes.

BERMAN: —in the environment. But your father was able to excel within that system. Why do you think—

NIKISHIN: He was, but at the same time, you know, being a very intelligent man, a very well-educated man, he did manage to accept, but to a certain point. He always wanted to be director of that factory, but he could never become a director because he had to be accepted in the Communist Party to be considered for that position, and that’s not something that he wanted to do. And even if he wanted to do [it], I don’t think he would be accepted, because he was Jewish.

BERMAN: Did he fight for the Soviet Union during World War II?

NIKISHIN: No, he didn’t, no, no. His family was in evacuation. He was a younger man at that time and a student and got exempt from being drafted, and his family evacuated to Uzbekistan. They [unintelligible]. As well as my mother’s family, and that’s where they met.

BERMAN: That was wonderful [crosstalk; unintelligible].

NIKISHIN: [Laughs.]

BERMAN: That whole thing.

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: What about in the home? Did Jewish traditions play a part of your home life?
NIKISHIN: Oh, we did have some Jewish traditions. I should say that. As much as we knew, and we didn’t know that much. There was no one to educate us, and we didn’t have Sunday schools in Moscow. My grandparents were the only real model from whom I could have a history and insight into the Jewish tradition, so that’s how I knew what Passover was and how was celebrated Rosh Hashanah. We had one synagogue in Moscow, and we didn’t attend it, to tell you the truth. It was very risky. It was not something that was practiced. But for the holidays I remember that my grandfather and my father would go to that synagogue very secretively, in advance, and order matzo, and then we would have a box of matzos, a big box. It’s something quite—TV size box, maybe, that was made to order. They would bring [it] home, and we would have matzohs for the holiday, for Passover. So that was a wonderful experience. So, we knew about Hanukkah. We knew about the major holidays, but very few things, not in depth, not enough. You know, it was [unintelligible].

BERMAN: Right.

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1 Passover is a celebration of the Jewish people being led out of Egypt by Moses. The Pharaoh only let the Jewish people go after god had unleashed the seven plagues upon the ancient Egyptians. These plagues ranged from fire floods and locusts destroying the crops to the slaying of the Egyptian first born. The holiday is referred to as Passover because the Jewish people in Egypt were told to mark their doors with lamb’s blood so that the Pharaoh’s guards would bypass the Jewish houses and kill only Egyptian babies.

2 Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year celebration. The name literally means “Head of The Year” in Hebrew. It refers to the fact that centerpiece of the celebratory meal table should be the head of a fish.

3 Matzo is a special unleavened flatbread that is eaten during Passover. God had commanded the Jews to create this special bread for Passover celebrations. Kosher crisp matzos are made with wheat, rye or barley flour.

4 Hanukkah is a Festival of Lights. It is celebrated to commemorate the Miracle at the Temple during which one day’s amount of oil for the lamp had miraculously burned for eight nights. It is celebrated by the lighting of the Menorah a ceremonial eight-pronged candelabra one candle at a time for eight consecutive nights.
NIKISHIN: That was our practice. That was our life. We knew of course that we were Jewish, and my parents always told me, “You have to be proud of your Jewish heritage. At the same time, you must work harder because it will be more difficult for you to excel in whatever you want to do. You’ll have to prove yourself better. You’ll have to study better. You’ll certainly have to make an extra notch to achieve something.”

BERMAN: In school, you said that most of your friends were not Jewish.

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes.

BERMAN: But what about outside of school? Did your family generally associate with Jewish? families?

NIKISHIN: Yes, my parents had a lot of non-Jewish friends as well, but the closest friends were Jewish. Very interestingly, when I was about maybe six or seven years old, we got an apartment, and apartments—it’s a separate story about apartments in Russia. There were no apartments available. There ones that were built—they were meant for different families to share an apartment, so we were made to share this apartment with another family, and they were Jewish! And we were so excited because—and we became instant friends, and we were like one family living under the same roof, so it was a very nice experience.

BERMAN: Did your grandparents speak Yiddish?

NIKISHIN: Yes, they did.

BERMAN: Did your parents speak it in the home?

NIKISHIN: My parents spoke a little, when they didn’t want us children to understand what they were saying, but they were not as fluent as my grandparents, certainly. They knew better than I know, of course. I only know a few words, but I don’t speak Yiddish.
BERMAN: And how about dating?

NIKISHIN: It was difficult. Laughs. It was difficult. It was pressure on one side because in Russia at the time when I was growing up and being a teenager, the pressure was for the girls to get married young, because if you pass age 22, 23, that’s not a good sign, so it was difficult. Once a year it was well known in Moscow at the synagogue, at the Simchat Torah\(^5\) holiday, the Jewish youth would gather outside, and it was a very well-known meeting place for young Jewish people to meet. I have Jewish friends also that I made when I was in college. My closest friend, Irina, who was my maid of honor—she still lives in Moscow, and we go back—she’s Jewish, and we go back—our friendship is, I don’t know, probably forty years old. Laughs.\] So that’s very special.

I had some Jewish friends, but not too many. I had a Jewish friend who was in the parallel? class. Diana was her name. So naturally the two of us bonded. There was one more boy who was in that class who was Jewish, but that’s all, out of the pool of sixty people. That’s, like, two or three Jews, and that was it, so it’s a different story with the young people growing up in Ukraine. They certainly had a better chance of having Jewish friends.

BERMAN: Right.

NIKISHIN: The Jewish population was larger and more concentrated there.

BERMAN: Did your family, before your desire to emigrate—did your family discuss possibly emigrating, leaving the Soviet Union?

NIKISHIN: No, they didn’t want to leave. It was completely our idea, my husband’s and mine. I was married at that time. We had a child already.

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\(^5\) Simchat Torah translated means the “Joy of Torah.” A celebration meant to commemorate the Torah or the first five books of the Old Testament.
BERMAN: Discuss that a little bit first. Let’s talk about getting married.

NIKISHIN: Yes. I got married I met my husband at a party. We started dating. I was 19 years old when I got married, so it was a very short mating period. He was five years older. He was graduating from the institute at that time. I was still in college. I was still in school. So, we got married. My parents didn’t really want me to get married. They thought it was too early for me, but we got married anyway. And so, we had our daughter, like, a year and a half later. Olga is her name.

What influenced our decision to leave was learning from others, from people who left and who wrote letters, and that got our attention and interest. And with all that, if we wanted to have a good life, a happy life for ourselves and our child, that was the way out for us, because with every aspect of life in Russia that you take, it’s not safe for you in terms of reaching your goals, so we knew that our child would go through a difficult experience, that she will have to prove herself. And not only that, it was difficult for me to get in the institute. It was terrible. My mother got me tutors, even though I was an excellent student. But she wanted to make sure that I would have an excellent chance to get in, that nobody would pick on me and say, “She didn’t know that material; that’s why she didn’t pass the exam.” So, we didn’t want the same for our child. I didn’t want anybody to call her “Jew” when she was in school and for her to be disappointed in life because she was Jewish. That’s not fair.

So that’s when we started to hear from people. We had friends who were planning to leave, and at that time it was not—

BERMAN: What years are we talking about?
NIKISHIN: It was late seventies. We emigrated in 1978, so it was around 1975, ’76 that we started to think and talk about that, and it was not a safe talk, and people didn’t share, and people were hiding the fact that they were planning to leave. It was not safe. You could lose your job. You could have all kinds of consequences. It was not safe for your family.

BERMAN: Who was the prime minister sic; general secretary of the CPSU there at that time? Was it Leonid Brezhnev?

NIKISHIN: It was Brezhnev. Yes, it was Brezhnev, and James Earl “Jimmy” Carter was the president here. And that’s how our decision got finalized. We decided we would like to go.

BERMAN: What was going on in the world? Did events in the world, like the boycott of the Olympics, the invasion of Afghanistan—did any of those events [crosstalk; unintelligible] your decision?

NIKISHIN: I think the invasion of Afghanistan was not there yet. I don’t think so. I think it came later, but certainly we were paying attention to what’s going on in the world, absolutely. We also knew the people who applied to leave and were not allowed to leave and all the so-called refuseniks. We started to hear about that movement. There was a certain risk element when you applied to leave, and you always think to yourself, Oh, what happens if they don’t let you go? It was scary. I would say it was a risky process.

BERMAN: Describe the process.

NIKISHIN: We had to get an invitation. At that time, the way the emigration out of the former Soviet Union was possible or set up, of course, for Jewish people to leave, you
had to have someone from Israel to send you an invitation visa to go. It had to a relative, but we didn’t have relatives in Israel, so then we knew of someone leaving and going to Israel en route for Austria. We would give our names, and they would fill out the forms, and that’s how the visa came to us. That’s exactly what we did, and we received this invitation visa to leave, and then we had to apply for the exit visa, and we had to wait for our decision. It didn’t take long, surprisingly. It took about six months for us to get permission to leave. It was a shock. We didn’t expect it to be, because we heard of other cases where it could take a longer time, where people would be questioned, refused, and of course we had to be very secretive. My best friend, Irina, didn’t know. I didn’t tell her, as much as she was my very close friend.

BERMAN: Now, was this just your husband and you and your child, or were your parents—

NIKISHIN: No, no, it was just the three of us.

BERMAN: It must have been a heart-wrenching decision to leave your parents.

NIKISHIN: It was. It was a very difficult decision. It was difficult. The whole experience of leaving the country and going into who knows where was very difficult on us.

BERMAN: You have a wonderful command of the English language.

NIKISHIN: Thank you.

BERMAN: Did you know English beforehand?

NIKISHIN: I did. I did. I am a teacher by profession, English teacher and translator. I graduated from the Foreign Languages Institute in Moscow, a very well-known one. It’s
Irina Nikishin, page 11

called [unintelligible]. [Laughs.] So yes, I did, but my husband didn’t, and he started Spanish in his college, and that was a problem for him when we came to the U.S.

BERMAN: So, you got your papers, and then you were supposed to go to Israel.

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: So how did you end up coming to the United States?

NIKISHIN: We ended up here because we wanted to go to the United States. Israel was the ticket for us to get out, as it was for other Jews. The way the process worked at that time, we went to Vienna first, where we were processed by HIAS⁶, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Interestingly, a month ago I visited Moscow and Vienna HIAS⁷ offices, and they are in the same building where I was processed almost thirty years ago, so it was a very moving moment, very emotional for me.

Anyway, we went there, but we also had to meet with representatives of the Israeli agency, Zachnud, and tell them that we wanted to go to the United States. And then after waiting for our papers being processed, we moved to Italy, and we stayed there for a couple of months, waiting for the U.S. to accept us, going for our interview with the American Embassy and waiting for the exit package to be ready for us to leave.

BERMAN: In Italy, was the Joint Distribution Committee there?

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: Offering classes and assistance in—

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⁶ HIAS Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. A Jewish charitable organization founded by Jewish refugees in New York City in the year 1881. Its main mission is stated as helping resettle the world’s Jewish refugees in the United States.
NIKISHIN: Assistance. Not so much the classes. I don’t remember the classes being offered. Assistance, yes. Both in Vienna and Italy we received assistance for our housing, for food, for living expenses. It was modest, but it was fine. It was fine.

BERMAN: So, you were in Italy for two months.

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: And then you arrived in New York?


BERMAN: How did you end up in Atlanta?

NIKISHIN: We had friends who came here first. We didn’t know anything about Atlanta, and they landed here, and we decided to follow them, and here we were in 1978 in Atlanta, one of the very few first families coming to Atlanta.

BERMAN: Can you describe your first impressions of the South and Atlanta?

NIKISHIN: Yes, it was shock. [Laughs.] It was a big shock to me. It was very different from the city setting I was from, from Moscow. Atlanta was very different from nowadays Atlanta, at that time, and I certainly was not—I don’t know, I was not expecting to be living in that sort of like suburban setting. It was difficult for me to adjust. I was depressed in that initial month. I was feeling very sad, and I was nostalgic and homesick, and I was questioning my decision, and everything was different: the city, the setting, the culture. It was a difficult adjustment for me. But I imagine for most of the people who immigrate, it’s the same experience.

BERMAN: Where did you live?

NIKISHIN: We lived on Buford Highway, Buford Valley Apartments, and that’s where most of the Russian families lived. Yes, we had a two-bedroom apartment.
BERMAN: Was the agency here, Jewish Family Services, helping resettle at that time?

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes, we were resettled by Jewish Family Services. They were making all the arrangements for us for the apartment, for our financial assistance, for all the proper referrals, for our child to go to a daycare, Beth Jacob first and then to Hebrew Academy. So, we were received very well by the Jewish community here. My husband was the first one to get employment and started working I think in about a month after our arrival. The economy was good at the time. It was not a big problem that he didn’t speak the language. And so that piece worked well with receiving [unintelligible]. It really worked well.

BERMAN: Do you think Jewish Family Services did a good job in trying to [unintelligible]?  

NIKISHIN: Yes. Oh, yes definitely. I think they certainly spent enough time with us to understand our concerns and to help us in our initial resettlement in terms of getting food and clothing and furniture. We had the furniture, I remember, they gave us for a very long time. It was very nice furniture. It was donated. It was nice furniture. There was food in our refrigerator when we arrived. So, it was amazing to us that somebody was taking such a good care of us. We didn’t expect that, to tell you the truth.

BERMAN: Just to go back one minute. A question that just came into my mind about your family. Describe your parents’ feelings about your emigration.

NIKISHIN: My parents had a very difficult time with us leaving. As much as they wanted the best for us and our lives, it was a very traumatic experience for them. Of course, for every parent to separate from their child, I think it’s a nightmare. And my brother, who stayed still in Moscow, he emigrated probably a year and a half later, but he
did live too with his family, so at that point, when my brother left and we were the first ones to leave, they decided that they would leave, too, that they couldn’t bear staying there, behind. It was difficult for them because of their age. They were not old yet, but it was a difficult age to make a big change in your life, and they were in their late fifties. So, they wanted to stay, but with their children and grandchildren gone, they followed us. So, they came. I believe in 1982 they came to Atlanta first, and they lived here for one year and then they moved to New York.

BERMAN: Is that where your brother is?

NIKISHIN: No, my brother is in Chicago. Our family is all spread. His wife’s family was living in Chicago, and that’s how they went to Chicago. That’s how the decision was made.

BERMAN: And why did your parents go to New York?

NIKISHIN: They went to New York because they didn’t assimilate in Atlanta that well. It was difficult for them in terms of culture. New York has more to offer. The Russian immigration there was certainly flourishing. They had more the Russian culture being present there, with the theaters and events, and my parents were a part of that culture. Even though they weren’t English, especially my father, Russian was still pretty much their culture, and they wanted to be there to enjoy that.

BERMAN: I’m sure for you Atlanta was a culture shock because we didn’t, especially in the seventies, have that much culture going on.

NIKISHIN: Right.

BERMAN: As compared to life in Russia.
NIKISHIN: In Russia. It was a big culture shock, and we wanted to leave initially. We wanted to move to a different state, and we were considering Chicago. My husband went there for some job interviews, but didn’t like the winter in Chicago, and that’s how we decided to stay, so here we are, still here. Our daughter has gone up—interestingly, she’s in New York now, too, so we are the only ones living here in the South still.

BERMAN: During this process of emigration, were you aware that there was a movement beginning in the States to help refuseniks or people who were in the Soviet Union to emigrate?

NIKISHIN: We heard of that, but the information was scarce because of the cold war. We didn’t know what to believe. We were brainwashed, and that was terrible, the way people were brainwashed in Russia against the United States, and the United States was always an enemy. I understand the same went here. So, we had information. It was, like I said, very scarce. We didn’t have much knowledge. We did hear here and there from somewhere, some rumors from someone listening to the radio broadcast, but that was very dangerous even to talk about that because you could end up in jail for telling the wrong joke, a political joke. You could end up in jail. So, it was scary.

BERMAN: Was there an interview involved with your leaving? Did they interview you personally?

NIKISHIN: I don’t remember us being interviewed per se. You mean in Russia?

BERMAN: In Russia.

NIKISHIN: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think they interviewed us. I think it was mostly through the paperwork and forms that we had to fill out. I don’t remember us going for the interview in Russia.
BERMAN: Did you ever contemplate going to Israel? Was that ever a part of your—

NIKISHIN: No, no. To tell you the truth, no.

BERMAN: What about your other family? Did they think about going to Israel at all?

NIKISHIN: No. Of course, we were, my husband and myself and child, were the first ones to leave, so they followed us to be in the same country with us.

BERMAN: Because I know that Israel was pushing for you to come there.

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes, they were pushing for us to come, and they were very clear in their interview that they wanted us to go there, but we kept pushing for U.S.

BERMAN: Okay. So, we get to Atlanta, and you were describing how hard an adjustment it was, but can you talk a little bit about some of the specifics, like the shopping and the travel and—

NIKISHIN: Yes. Oh, yes, yes. Everything was so different. Everything was wonderful on one hand; surprising and shocking on the other hand. So, you had to completely adjust and learn the whole new way of life. Everything was different. Shopping was—I remember the feeling. I remember who were living in Atlanta at that time. They took us to a Kmart, and we had an allowance, I think, to buy some household items, and I wanted to buy some bath rugs for the bathroom, and when I saw the assortment and the colors and the textures, I was just—I remember that incident. We were all at Kmart, and I was just standing there and standing there. They thought something was wrong with me, because by that time they became so-called Americans, and they all knew what Kmart was. But I couldn’t decide because of the availability of things that were there, and that was amazing to me.
And the same, I remember, at the grocery store. In Russia we didn’t have the same kind of grocery stores. We had farmers’ markets that are wonderful. They’re more expensive, but at the grocery store and coming to Kroger was a major shock to me. I remember Kroger on Buford Highway. I couldn’t choose what kind of cheese I wanted to buy. I couldn’t know possibly what all the packaging was. Even though I read English, it doesn’t matter. It’s the variety. It’s the items that are there. It’s an overwhelming experience. It’s great to have this experience, but it’s overwhelming. It takes some learning tools to cope with that.

So, everything was great. We bought a car. We had a car, and I started driving. I took driving classes in Russia, but I didn’t drive a car. It was a big car, and it had the feeling of luxury and being able to afford this beautiful car was an amazing feeling for us. So, we were very happy with getting things and getting easy access to merchandise. It was like you didn’t have to fight for it; you didn’t have to go under the black market to find something, to pay extra.

The meaning of the holidays started to have a different meaning, too, because in Russia when you were preparing for the holiday, you always had to have a list to find items, to purchase them, to be able to pay extra to get what you wanted. Here, everything was available. You just go in and buy it. It’s just a matter of your having funds to buy it, but everything is available here.

So yes, I remember that it was a big cultural adjustment for us.

BERMAN: As much matzoh as you want.
NIKISHIN: As much matzoh—and different kinds of matzoh, too, so that was an interesting experience to us, too. We only knew one kind of matzoh, which was wonderful, as far as I remember the taste, but different varieties of matzoh, we never heard of.

BERMAN: It’s so interesting to me to hear you talk about one aspect where it must have been—it was wonderful, the shopping and the purchases and being able to have a better economic life.

NIKISHIN: Right.

BERMAN: But the other part was just difficult, the social aspect of the new culture and adjusting to a new life.

NIKISHIN: [unintelligible] learning the culture. It certainly took time for us to start to understand things. I remember we went to a movie, and it was, well, maybe a year after our arrival. We want? movies to see if we understand everything, and the same was with a comedy show. We didn’t understand. even though I spoke the language, there is so much in the culture that you don’t know what they were meaning by this and that or referring to this or that character. You had to catch up.

BERMAN: Do you remember the first movie you went to?

NIKISHIN: Boys from Brazil, I think. That was the movie.

BERMAN: Oh, good movie!

NIKISHIN: Yes, it was, Boys from Brazil. And then the next one was Saturday Night Fever.

BERMAN: And how about the first television comedy you watched? Do you remember that?
NIKISHIN: I don’t remember. I remember watching a lot of Dynasty. [Laughs.]

BERMAN: That’s [unintelligible]. Well, that’ll certainly move you into the culture quickly.

NIKISHIN: Yes, and then Brady Bunch with my daughter.

BERMAN: You also mentioned that your daughter went to the Hebrew Academy.

NIKISHIN: Initially, she did. I think she went for one year, and it was a difficult adjustment for her because she had to learn two languages at the same time. She had to learn English and Hebrew.

BERMAN: How old was she?

NIKISHIN: When we arrived in U.S., she was four. Yes, she was four. She turned four in Vienna, so yes, yes. We arrived in U.S. in December of 1978. So, it was difficult for her as a child. And she had a difficult adjustment period, even with the childcare. I remember when I would take her to Beth Jacob, and I would come to pick her up and she would still sit in the same corner, and it’s not like the teacher was not trying, but she was being a very shy child, so not used to being away from me, and all of a sudden in a new environment with strangers, speaking a strange language, so it was a shock for her. And when she went to Hebrew Academy, we very much liked that idea of her going to a Jewish day school, but the experience was a bit overwhelming for her, learning two languages. She was not learning fast enough to make good progress for her age, and we transferred her to—at that time I think we moved to Sandy Springs and we transferred her to a public system school.

BERMAN: Do you feel that too much was asked of you by placing her into that environment initially?
NIKISHIN: I think so. I think so. I felt bad when the principal, Dr. Frankel? Franco? who was a wonderful man at that time. He was the principal of Hebrew Academy. And he called my husband and myself to talk to us at the end of the year, and he told us very gently that he was considering for Olga to repeat the same class, and it was a shock for me. In Russia, only the worst of the students were made to repeat the class, so it was very humiliating for us, as parents, as being achievers before, ourselves. It was something that even though I understood the challenge and I understood where he, as the educator, came from, I couldn’t agree to that. It made me feel very bad for myself and for my child. I felt she would be ridiculed. You know, I had all these insecure feelings that a Russian child would have. So, we took her out.

BERMAN: What about other aspects of Jewish life? Did you try to get involved in other areas: synagogue life, organizational life?

NIKISHIN: Not really, to tell you the truth. I was asked to speak when we came to Atlanta. I was asked to speak at the synagogue. I don’t even remember which synagogue right now. Because I spoke English, I was asked to speak about our experience coming to U.S., and it was a big deal to me to speak at the synagogue and speak about my experience. I did it.

And the only horrifying experience that I had from that meeting was that after my speech, after I talked about us and living previously in Moscow and all that humiliation and anti-Semitism and coming here and our goals and expectations, the audience that was very warm and very welcoming—they started to ask me questions, and I didn’t understand what they were saying, so that was a terrible, terrible shock to me because the English language that I was taught previously in Russia was so different from their—you
know, Southern English. So that was a sort of humiliating experience for me, not to be able to understand what people were saying. It was—yes, it was very different.

BERMAN: Describe the experience, though, of suddenly having religious freedom to celebrate the holidays any way you wanted to.

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes.

BERMAN: What was that like?

NIKISHIN: It gives you a good feeling that you don’t have to have this fear, because you want to do what you want to do and because that is something that is part of your heritage. I cannot say that our family is observant, but we like to go for High Holidays to the synagogue, and this is something that my daughter does, too. So this is a good feeling, that nobody will report you because you go to the synagogue or some of the neighbors will see you and make the phone call and you could be questioned or arrested or I don’t know what, or your safety would be at risk.

So, we could do whatever we felt like going. We could go to the synagogue, we could practice if we wanted to, we could celebrate holidays, so it was a wonderful feeling that you don’t have to fear anything anymore, that you could be yourself.

BERMAN: Practice or not practice.

NIKISHIN: Practice or not practice. You are yourself. You don’t have to have this fear because you are Jewish nobody will tell you, “You’re Jewish, and that’s not your place. You cannot be here.”

BERMAN: What about friends? Are most of your friendships within the Russian community, or not?
NIKISHIN: We have both, but most is within the Russian community, yes, yes. And, you know, with my daughter, who grew up here and became very Americanized—but very interestingly, she didn’t even speak good Russian when she was growing up in Atlanta, but when she went to school in New York, she met some Russian friends there, and that’s when her Russian started to come back and became better and better, and she has both Russian and American friends. And I am very happy with that, too.

BERMAN: When you get together, do you speak English, or do you speak Russian?

NIKISHIN: We speak Russian. In my family we speak Russian.

BERMAN: That must be a nice feeling, to have that, with your friendships—

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: —to be able to revert—

NIKISHIN: Absolutely.

BERMAN: —to the tongue that you grew up with.

NIKISHIN: Absolutely, absolutely.

BERMAN: The comfort level.

NIKISHIN: Yes. Well, a native language is always a native language, so you’re naturally drawn to it and it’s easier for you. It’s more natural to speak in your native language.

BERMAN: And here you are, working for a Jewish agency.

NIKISHIN: I know. I’m very proud of that. It’s an amazing thing to happen in my professional life. I started working for Jewish Family and Career Services now, the same agency that resettled me. Rhoda Margolis, who is our director of our counseling services—she was my caseworker at that time when we came, so we still work together.
It’s amazing that I can be involved now on the receiving end and work with refugees that come here to U.S., and with someone having this experience, I feel it makes a big difference because you have the empathy.

BERMAN: Just for the purpose of the tape, tell me your title and exactly what you do.

NIKISHIN: Yes. I am resettlement program manager with the international services, and I oversee the resettlement program. We resettle Jews from the former Soviet Union as well as Iranian religious minorities as well as asylumists from all over the world. I have this wonderful privilege to work with so many different populations and help them adjust.

And I also supervise healthy family programs [sic; the Healthy Family Program]. It’s a wonderful program. It’s new. We’ve had it for three years now. It’s through a grant with the Department of State. The goal of the program is to provide refugee populations, different refugee populations with the tools to be supportive of their families and for their families to stay stronger. So basically, that’s what my job is.

BERMAN: So, you work with the Russian community, the Iranian community, I’m assuming the South African community, or not?

NIKISHIN: Not necessarily with the South African, even though we have asylumists from Africa. We’re resettling [unintelligible] from various countries in Africa: from Congo and Togo and Zimbabwe and Ivory Coast.

BERMAN: These are Jewish families?

NIKISHIN: No.

BERMAN: No.
NIKISHIN: No, these are non-Jewish families. These are the families that are persecuted that come to U.S. because of their political situation in their country and threat to their lives, because they could be either active in political or [unintelligible] movements and ask for United States to give them asylum. If they are awarded asylum, under the U.S., asylumists? now have the same privileges as refugees, and so we can enroll them in our program, in our matching grant program.

BERMAN: That’s wonderful.

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: That must be very rewarding for you.

NIKISHIN: Oh, it’s an amazing feeling. It truly is. I love what I do, and my job is very important to me.

BERMAN: I can tell, from just speaking with some of the people you’ve recommended for this project, that they also love you.

NIKISHIN: Oh! [Laughs.] Thank you. Thank you. It’s very nice.

BERMAN: Just some specifics. Did you have a Passover seder when you first came here?

NIKISHIN: Yes, we had volunteers, a wonderful American family that was assigned to us, a Jewish family. They were a family of husband, wife and two small children, and the first seders were they invited us to their house, and it was an amazing experience because it was something that—the traditional way of celebrating, other than eating matzohs and gefilte fish, we did the whole seder, and we learned how it could be done and how it’s practiced and how the matzos were hidden from children, and so that was an experience for us, and we enjoyed it so much. But also, because we were so welcomed in that home,
because of all the attention we got from that family and their friends, it’s almost like feeling like these are your relatives, those people. We never knew them before, but they were so warm and welcoming that they embraced us. It was a wonderful feeling, like being part of their family.

BERMAN: Do you remember their names?

NIKISHIN: I don’t remember their names. It’s a shame, though. We grew apart somehow. You know, you start to get busy when you resettle in a new country, and there are, like, priorities to find a job, to start making a living, so there were things that we started to get busy with in our adjustment to the American way of life. We lost track of them.

BERMAN: Has your husband adjusted as well as you?

NIKISHIN: He did in a way, because he had to start a job, and he felt the responsibility on his shoulders, being a provider for the family, but it was difficult for him because he didn’t speak the language, so it was more challenging for him, and he had difficulty learning the language. Everybody is different. So, it was tough for him to make the adjustment.

BERMAN: What does he do now?

NIKISHIN: Right now, he is in real estate. He had a very long career. He’s an engineer by trade, and initially he worked as a maintenance engineer. That was his first job, at the Tower Place. Then, being very entrepreneurial, he started a business with our friends, and we had a Jewish deli on Buford Highway. After that experience, he became interested in the car business, and he went to trainings, and he started working for various dealerships [unintelligible], and then he started his own business, so he became very
successful. He had two car dealerships, and he was able, [unintelligible], were very successful, but that’s because of his business practices and his hard work. He’s a workaholic, and he works so hard. He was able to purchase properties. And then we sold all this, and then he wanted to retire [laughs], but then he realized that he must do something; it’s not like you can sit and do nothing. So, he’s in real estate now. He’s also interested in trading. He’s doing day trading. So, he’s all over.

BERMAN: That’s wonderful, though. What a story?

NIKISHIN: Yes.

BERMAN: That’s quite something.

When did you become a citizen?

NIKISHIN: We became a citizen back in 1986. It felt great to us to be U.S. citizens. I remember the oath we took. I remember—it was nerve-wracking because you had to take the exam, and when you take an exam there are certain feelings of, like, what if you fail? But anyway, we passed the exam, we got our citizenship, we took the oath in the big auditorium with people from so many countries. It was wonderful. We celebrated being citizens. Every year we celebrate the day when we arrived in U.S. It was December seven.

BERMAN: Pearl Harbor Day.

NIKISHIN: It was back in 1978, so every year we celebrate that many years living in U.S.

BERMAN: That’s wonderful.

NIKISHIN: It is wonderful. I’m thankful to God that we made this decision and we came to live in U.S. Visited Russia recently, and I had a very good time, and Russia
changed a lot, and we all know all the changes, becoming a different society, and I enjoyed my visit so much, but I thank God that I don’t live there anymore. It was amazing to visit, but then come back here. And that became my home, and I feel very good here.

BERMAN: Well, that’s a wonderful way, I think, to end this interview, but I don’t want to miss anything, so I want to make sure that there’s nothing that I may have missed that you’d like to talk about: feelings about leaving, feelings about coming. Is there anything [crosstalk; unintelligible]?

NIKISHIN: We talked about the feelings, and I hope I was good in portraying the picture.

BERMAN: Wonderful.

NIKISHIN: The other feeling that I remember so well and so vividly—both my husband and I remember this moment: when we left Russia and we were on the plane to go to Vienna and landed in Vienna and came out, and we were with that crowd of people who came to a different life, to a new life, it was a feeling, a scary feeling that I remember, a feeling of uncertainty because you’re not in control and you don’t know what happens next, and people and agencies and governments are planning for you, but you don’t know.

And we were brought from the airport in Vienna—we were met by a designated person and transported to a place where we were waiting for sort of coordinator to bring us money to go and buy some food. And it was a room full of people with children and some crying. It was very chaotic. And our daughter, who was four at that time, almost four, Olga—she saw another child eating an apple, and she wanted an apple. She said
she was hungry. They didn’t have anything. And, you know, we felt so bad. I can still 
cry when I remember this moment of us, being grownups, not being able to give your 
child food when she wants to eat. And that was the first time I ever saw tears in my 
husband’s eyes, because it was difficult for him, too.

But it was a moment that you must live through. It was immigration. It’s never 
easy. In Vienna, we were evacuated several times because of the terrorist threat, so that 
was a different experience for us, too. So, it was not an easy experience to be an 
immigrant, a refugee. It’s something that I wish people don’t have to go through this.
But to get to what you are finally and to what to look at the result and that your life here 
in this country—thank God.

So that’s all I have to say.

BERMAN: I do have a couple of follow-ups now. First, your husband’s name.

NIKISHIN: Yes. His name is Val, V-a-l. It’s short for Vladimir. Vladimir is a very 
difficult, very popular Russian name, but very difficult to pronounce, so he abbreviated 
himself into Val. His name is Val Nikishin.

BERMAN: And I guess my last question, which you kind of inspired me to ask, is what 
do you think is the difference between someone like you and all the countless people who 
chose not to emigrate? What do you think gave you that courage to leave, and leave 
early, when it wasn’t so common?

NIKISHIN: Yes, that’s true. I think that, interestingly, my husband was the first one to 
bring this idea into our family and to make it a plan to go. I think that it was certainly 
scary for us to do this step, considering what was going on and what was involved with 
that challenge and with that risk. I am so glad that we found the courage, and we did it.
And I must give credit to my husband again, because he was the one. He was sort of like the mastermind, so he had the vision, and that vision was a part of our decision making, and I’m so happy that I agreed to that vision because it could be difficult. And you saw many families where the parents didn’t want children to leave, and they didn’t. Or there were controversial issues involved, and it was difficult for husband and wife to be on the same page, and that affected their decision making. But I’m glad that I agreed. I’m so happy.

BERMAN: Do you ever look back and say, Wow! I did that!

NIKISHIN: Yes, yes, especially when I was in Moscow. I was in Moscow twice this year, and everybody offers jokes, like Irena doesn’t go for years and then she goes twice in the same year. Yes, the last visit that I had in April, in May, walking through Moscow and thinking, this is my city. I grew up here. I lived here. Is it possible? Is this really me? Did it happen to me? Wow! I made this. I’m here, but I will leave. I’m here as a tourist, but I will leave. I have a different home, and I love that home.

BERMAN: Well, we’re glad you came.

NIKISHIN: Thank you. [Laughs.]

BERMAN: And this was a great interview.

NIKISHIN: I’m glad the people like you that supported us, that made it possible.

BERMAN: And we’re so appreciative of you doing this interview. Thank you so much.

NIKISHIN: Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate it to. Thank you.

[End of interview.]