Rachel: Today is July 6, 2006 and I am here with Vladimir Yampolsky the who has agreed to be interviewed for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project within the Elliot and Judith Cohen Oral History collection part of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum

Thank you for being here today. Would you mind giving us your last name and spelling it and telling us where you were born?

Vladimir: Thank You, Rachel. My name is: Vladimir Yampolsky name spelled V L A D I M I R last name spelled Y A M P O L S K Y. I was born in 1956 in the city of Odessa¹, formally Ukraine part of the former Soviet Union now an independent country.

Rachel: Could you describe your early life there and your family?

Vladimir: My mother came to the town with her parents when she was four or five years old, her parents were very traditional, religious Jews it goes back to the traditional Ukrainian Jewish Community when there was no real choice everybody was of the same denomination the same Jewish faith. My grandmother and grandfather did not think about ever breaking away or not being observant. It was basically a part of life. Most of the Jews were confined to small villages called shtetls² the place where they came from was the little village of Romanov to the big city of Odessa. My grandfather Shiva Kotlyar, it was the Kotlyar family on my mother’s side as the last name suggests he was a cutler. He was making cutlery. As a matter of fact, I remember when I was a toddler having been bathed in a tub that he made by himself. He was working on making big capacities for wine it was a shtetel where rich Polish and Ukrainian guys called magnates had wineries and he was making huge cylinders of wine that

¹ Odessa or Odesa is the third most populous city of Ukraine and a major tourism center, seaport and transportation hub located on the northwestern shore of the Black Sea. Odessa is sometimes called the "pearl of the Black Sea," the "South Capital", and "Southern Palmyra".

² Shtetles or Shtetlekh were small towns with large Jewish populations, which existed in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. Shtetlekh were mainly found in the areas that constituted the 19th century Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire, the Congress Kingdom of Poland, Galicia and Romania.
went underground. He would be lowered into one of these cylinders that were probably between twenty and twenty-five feet high and he would be putting tin all over it. Grandmother would come and lower his breakfast and lunch into the cylinder. When they came to Odessa he continued making all kinds of household utensils and working for what was now a Soviet winery in 1928. He was a great specialist of his trade. Life was difficult. The Soviets did not pay him very much money, but sometimes they used to bring him fresh produce to his house. The wife named Bruha Kotlyar did not work. She gave birth to nine children four of whom survived among them my mother who was the youngest. One of her sisters died in an airplane crash the other sister died back in Russia and the other immigrated with her. My mother died six months ago. Both the sister and my mother are buried in the Arlington Cemetery. This was my mother’s side, on my father’s side I don’t know much about them. They died early both the grandmother and the grandfather died before I was born. My father divorced my mother and he immigrated to the United States in 1978 if my memory serves me well. And he also died recently.

Rachel: And what did your parents do?
Vladimir: My father was an engineer and my mother was a music teacher.
Rachel: and what were their names?
Vladimir: My father was named Lev Yampolsky and my mother was named Dora Kotlyar.

This was basically a generation for which observance was lost. They were brought up during the Soviet Era. There were no remnants of Judaism in the household, but we knew that we were Jewish, because in the Soviet Union they put your nationality into the passport and that was a source of discrimination back then. In Russia Judaism preserved itself so successfully, because the Jews did not mix with the Slavs or Gentiles therefore it was quite obvious from the facial features who was Jewish and who was not. Some Jews in Russia tried to change their nationality. Here in the US nationality means citizenship, but in Russia it meant your race or ethnicity. The common joke was don’t try to change your passport they will beat you on your face not on your passport. My father was drafted into the Soviet Red Army to fight against the Nazis when he was 17. He was wounded decommissioned; recommissioned wounded again recommissioned a third time and then later discharged from the military. He finished his war when he was 19. He was greatly affected by it mostly physically huge scars all over the body.

Rachel: What did he tell you about his war experience?
Vladimir: He did not tell me very much about his experience. He did not like it. He only received one medal and later threw it away somewhere. He hated talking about it. There was nothing unusual about that when I was growing up. The only unusual thing about it was that he was drafted into the army when he was so young I mean, seventeen years old it almost like a child.

Rachel: Seventeen is very young.

Vladimir: They drafted him from Odessa and it was around Odessa that he was fighting.

Rachel: You were talking about the passports earlier, so could you describe this experience if he had stood out as a Jew?

Vladimir: I obviously wasn’t observant my mother wasn’t observant I mean it should be passed down to you from somebody, my parents were not observant and I don’t want to say just my parents the whole generation was lost. People who were born after the 1917 Revolution the Great October Socialist Revolution\(^3\) were basically bound to become atheists, because it was suppressed by the government. It wasn’t suppressed so much for being anti-communist as to associate, they didn’t want anything to do with being Jewish. I mean if you are in a school class and all of your peers and friends will ridicule you and even your teacher will ridicule you and say that it is stupid and shameful and going backwards in time and history. Forward meant being a promoter of Communism, to be a Young Pioneer and later Komsomol\(^4\) which was a young Communist Party that was on the level of society. At home the parents did not pressure because they knew how much hardship it would bring to their children at school. If you are instilling something in your children at home and then you tell them not to mention it at school, you are basically instilling a double standard which is not good for anybody especially not for a young child. At home you say you believe in a certain thing but at school you have to believe the opposite and act accordingly. That was the mildest affect on your life. If you did not succumb to that mild pressure and you persisted, and there were people like that maybe one or two in a typical community then they tried many different tools at their disposal to pressure you. As far as the parents were concerned they could be summoned to the director or manager.

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\(^3\) The Great October Socialist Revolution was a revolution led by the Bolsheviks (majority leftist faction) and Vladimir Lenin. It was preceded by and built upon the February Revolution which overthrew the autocracy of Czar Nicolas II. The October Revolution took place because the workers were dissatisfied with the provisional government.

\(^4\) Komsomol is roughly translated from the Russian as the nationwide union of Communist youth. It was essentially the young people’s Communist party.
at work and talked to threatened to be fired. Children could experience difficulties in school and that would set you aside almost like a traitor. Russia is and was back then not a very tolerant society. If you are different here in the US, it’s your personal story. If you are different there people hate you, because they will think that you consider yourself to be superior. Being different here is good being different there is bad. They could fire you from the job on the pretext of being different.

Before the Revolution, Odessa had 140 synagogues. When I was growing up there was 1 that caught on fire accidentally on purpose maybe three times so if you wanted to go to a synagogue there was no possibility.

Rachel: So, you never went to synagogue?
Vladimir: No, I never went to a Synagogue.
Rachel: Why not? Is it because it was too risky?
Vladimir: As I mentioned, there was only one synagogue there was no service on Friday I assume there were services on Saturdays. My mother didn’t go so how could I go it was far it was far it was very far on the other side of town.
Rachel: Do you remember the name of it?
Vladimir: There was no name, it was Odessa synagogue. My mother visited the synagogue once a year when she had to get matzos for Passover because my grandmother was still alive. My grandfather on my mother’s side passed away in 1963. My grandmother was still observant she prayed in her house and kept kosher until she died in 1985. But it was an island within the family: for example, we knew that we could not enter her room with a ham sandwich during Passover you knew you could not enter her room with bread you had to have matzos. But the only way to get matzos in the former Soviet Union was to buy flour it was fixed amount five or six kilograms then bring it to a synagogue and exchange it for matzos. That’s why those matzos tasted so good. My grandmother Bruha Kotlyar was a great lady, she always did everything by the book, for example my mom would always buy her a live chicken and bring it to our 2nd floor apartment. It was my first experience with a live animal. And my grandmother would hang it up in the kitchen pray over it and circle it over her head and later she would take

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5 Kosher is types of foods that conform to the Jewish dietary law (Kashrut). Primarily derived from Leviticus and Deuteronomy (the 3rd and 5th books of the bible).
it to a shochet\(^6\) and he would finish the job in a kosher way and then my grandmother would make a kosher chicken soup or Russian borscht\(^7\). Every Passover that I remember the matzos would be locked away in a cupboard and I would have raids until my grandmother would catch me. For me the best treat was to read a book and eat matzos. It did not matter whether it was Passover.

**Rachel:** So, your grandmother lived with you the whole time you were growing up or not?

**Vladimir:** Yes, she did

**Rachel:** So, shochet was the only way to get kosher meat the rest of the time also?

**Vladimir:** For a town of a million and a half there was only one shochet and he did it at his own peril in his own house. It was all very hushed up, Jews would come, and he would perform the ceremony that was all there was no official butcher shop or anything like that. Authorities could probably shut it down completely, but there was no point it was practically nonexistent. Judaism wasn’t around it was basically the remnants of Judaism. It wasn’t just about Judaism in all fairness one could say the same about Christianity. Churches were demolished by Stalin. Of course, there were more churches in town than synagogues. One synagogue for every ten churches, but you could come into a church as well as a synagogue and there would be nobody there. On any given day there would be an empty beautiful building, stone architecture, stained glass windows, and wrought iron only really old people there for services. They basically kept it open for really old people unable to change for the progressive times, but you would never see a young person there. Back then being married by a rabbi or a priest was unheard of now of course it is different.

**Rachel:** So, when you were growing up were most of your friends Jewish?

**Vladimir:** No. Most Jews in those times had lived in the European part of Russia. As far as Odessa was concerned it was a more international city so it was populated by Greeks, Turks, Gypsies, Russians and Ukrainians and the street names reflected that: for example, you could

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\(^6\) Shochet is a person certified by a rabbi and a Jewish court to slaughter animals in accordance with Kosher tradition.

\(^7\) Borscht is a sour soup popular in several Eastern European cuisines, including Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Romanian, Ashkenazi Jewish, and Armenian cuisines. The variety most commonly associated with the name in English is of Ukrainian origin and includes beetroots as one of the main ingredients, which gives the dish its distinctive red color. It shares the name, however, with a wide selection of sour-tasting soups without beetroots, such as sorrel-based green borscht, rye-based white borscht and cabbage borscht.
have a Greek street right next to a Turkish street. It was a very picturesque city. This was the largest Jewish population in all of Russia. If you remember the largest Jewish population in the United States in New York City on Brighton Beach the heart of that city is from Odessa. They even have restaurants there like Little Odessa. Odessa greatly contributed to the Jewish immigration to the United States. As far as my friends in class with me there were probably one or two more Jewish kids and it was a lot because if one percent of the population is Jewish you had a random chance of having one kid we had two or three. Of course, anti-Semitism was rampant. We were all used to it as a part of life closest friends would keep it to themselves and would be more tolerant, but there were always one or two kids that could always tell you what they think and how they feel about you.

Rachel: Could you give a couple of examples of anti-Semitism that you remember from growing up?

Vladimir: There were so many, first of all, there were anti-Semitic songs and kids sometimes would invite to their birthday party and play those songs without realizing that you were Jewish. There was one song which when roughly translated from the Russian meant that if your community has no water supply that means the Jews drank all the water. In Odessa water would sometimes disappear in the middle of the day for no apparent reason. I would sometimes get into fights and was beaten up badly, but it was a normal part of life for Jewish kids and I was a boy, for the girls I don’t think it was quite the same. Kids basically repeated what they heard in the family: Jews are greedy they are cunning they try to get ahead at the expense of the other Russians, etc. and all those negative feelings were suppressed. Communists pitted people against each other. Russians and Ukrainians hated each other, and they hated several smaller nations, but the Jews were of course a great outlet for everybody’s anger. It was traditionally passed from generation to generation. What Americans believe about the Jews starting the Communist Revolution is not true. There were a few Jews in that movement like Leon Trotsky these people were out for themselves the Revolution movement did nothing to change things for the Jews, on paper, of course everybody was equal, but they did not do anything to eradicate anti-Semitism and there were times when it was not as rampant. For example, in the 1930s when there were other problems such as the remnants of
capitalism. But in the 1950s it came back because of the doctors and during Brezhnev’s era the 1970s it came back again. On the kids’ level it was always resolved in a fight and I was involved in quite a few of those.

Rachel: As you got older, what did you study or train to be?

Vladimir: Russia had a very good educational system.

Rachel: So, music school was a part of the regular curriculum?

Vladimir: No. Music school was optional, and you had to pay, but the pay was nominal especially for my mother because she was divorced at that time, but the pay was ridiculously small as I remember it was about fourteen rubles. It was optional, but the public school was compulsory just like here pretty much you did not have to go to music school, but you did have to go to public school. But since my mother wanted me to be a musician. As far as anti-Semitism on the adult level and you will probably come back to it sometime later, it showed itself a little bit differently. For example, one of my mother’s friends as she was walking down the street somebody pushed her for no apparent reason and she fell and when she fell in the middle of the street people told her, “get out of here and go to your Israel.” And when the public transportation was crowded, and somebody pushed you and then you turn around and they see that you are Jewish they could tell you to get out of there and go take a taxi which was inaccessible and too expensive or go to Israel. And the mentioning of Israel was pretty much like cursing out Jewish people. If you did not like something that they did, they would tell you to go to Israel. If you are standing in line buying something they will always try to cheat you out of weight if you ask for one kilo of something they would always give you 950 grams 50 grams less than a kilo. That is how those workers made their living and if you tell them they would tell you: Don’t like it, go to Israel. That was the kind of domestic anti-Semitism that permeated the whole society and the whole life there were splashes of really outrageous anti-Semitism when people were fired from work or not hired, but the other kind of thing was basically the backdrop of your life so at times you may not notice it. But you always felt it, you were always uncomfortable in public places you knew that you were always resented because of that and even if you had lots of friends among the Russians that was an exception to the rule.

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8 Brezhnev Era is the history of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982. It covers the period of Leonid Brezhnev's rule of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This period began with high economic growth and soaring prosperity, but gradually significant problems in social, political, and economic areas accumulated, so that the period is often described as the Era of Stagnation.
Rachel: You also felt daily institutional anti-Semitism?

Vladimir: Yes. They would not hire Jews for certain jobs like the diplomatic jobs where the people would be sent abroad, or for any other lucrative positions. Jobs had to have KGB\(^9\) clearance except for those cases when Jews were absolutely indispensable, for example, in the aviation industry where they could not get rid of all the Jews, because they were needed to complete the projects. And also, Jews were disproportionally represented in the sciences. But in most cases if you were a Jew working in a large factory or at a business you knew that you were privileged and to not rock the boat. And sometimes during the job interview they would even tell you that is the reason. In my case when I graduated from the Conservatory that was in St Petersburg, I tried to get a job with the local musical theater company. So, I came in, played for them an audition and later when I had the interview with the manager. He told me, “You played fine, we don’t have a problem with that, but you are Jewish.” I knew that anti-Semitism had existed there, but that was my first personal experience dealing with it. So, I said, “I can’t believe that you are telling me all this so directly and point blank.” They told me, “We travel all over the world, we go to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and it is quite possible that you would want to defect, so that is why we do not hire Jews.”

Rachel: So, the fear was that if a Jew went abroad that he would want to stay abroad?

Vladimir: Well, at that time anybody could stay, for example Mikhail Baryshnikov, he was not Jewish, but he defected, and they had this problem constantly, but that was only a part of it. Of course, they could hire you and not take you on the trip, because there was always a surplus of musicians and some would go on the trips and some not. But that was the case in all Russian orchestras they played politics. But at that particular time when I was interviewed for that particular theater it was in 1982 they told me point blank, “no, we don’t take Jews.” I was furious. I mean that was another impetus so to speak for immigrating.

Rachel: When did you first think of immigrating?

Vladimir: Well, I always wanted and even before I was married, my mother and I came close twice. To immigrate was a very grueling process stressful not so much dangerous, but extremely taxing you could lose your job before they let you emigrate and there was no

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\(^9\) KGB Translates as Soviet State Security Agency. It existed from 1954 until its collapse in 1991. It was succeeded by various Russian state security agencies including the National Committee for Internal Affairs (NKVD). It was run according to the same strict rules and regulations as the soviet army.
guarantee that they will let you. But you could lose your job in the process then basically pardon my French screw up all your life to the point where you can’t get back on your feet. So, my mom on her own never got over this decision we considered it. And then when I was on my own, married and had a son named Benjamin it was approximately the early1980s discrimination and anti-Semitism was only one part of it with that comes economic hardship. But there were several obstacles in our way. The first and most serious was that my wife wasn’t Jewish she still is not, and her father was in the management, he was the third most important person at a military plant. It was still the Cold War it was a number of years until we could realize it. And our situation was different we did not depend on him financially he was in Siberia we were in St. Petersburg so monetary wise we were fine. But we were living in a very difficult situation, as you probably know in Russia many people live in communal apartments one kitchen and one bathroom for three or four families we lived in St. Petersburg Leningrad at that time. It’s a beautiful city on the outside inside those beautiful historic buildings every apartment that belonged to one family was subdivided, temporary walls were put up. And what was let’s say a five-bedroom apartment became a five family apartment with each family living in one room so we lived in one room all three of us for ten years. And though I went on tour around the country and had a good career.

Rachel: So, you were working as a musician at that time?

Vladimir: Yes, yes, I was working in the state chamber orchestra great job I loved my job. And I had a lot of outlets I could get out for weeks at a time go to different parts of and see different cities and enjoy it. But then you would come home and there would be one room and anti-Semitism would always be there too. People, you know your neighbors, because they put people against each other in such a situation there would inevitably be conflicts in the living quarters. And of course, in any given conflict they will try to remember that you are a Jew you don’t have the same rights and all the trouble comes from the Jews. So that was domestic anti-Semitism.

Rachel: How was that affected by the fact that your wife wasn’t Jewish? How common was intermarriage at that time?

Vladimir: You mean how was intermarriage viewed by other people? They did not care they only cared that you were Jewish and of course they branded her at times for being Jewish even though it was obvious that she looked like a Russian fair, blonde and stuff like that. But in
that department, she was a very nice lady and she never succumbed to the pressure she did not care she grew up in a part of Russia where there were very few Jews she never even heard of the Jews before she met me. Actually, later on she learned, but she probably did not care she was pretty happy and in any case it was not the nicest people that would express themselves in that way. So, it usually worked the other way around when she met somebody who was an anti-Semite she probably hated them as much as I did whether they were anti-Semites or not. The living quarters were small and difficult to live in, so the life was stifling for three people. Many times, we had an extra room, because there was a spare room and we took it over, but that was unofficial and not a permanent situation. So, we had to emigrate not only because of the economic situation, but because I did not want my son to grow up in a society with double standards say something at home and something else completely different in public. Basically lying. When we grew up we did not notice that it was a part of daily life. You know the things you can say in public, maybe I am sure you know the history of the United states, but maybe something resembling that was during McCarthy era. You could say that you are dissatisfied with the government, but you could not voice it openly for fear of being labeled as a “commie”. It was much the same in the former Soviet Union only more severe.

Rachel: You just mentioned McCarthyism. During the Cold war how was America viewed or what were you told about America?

Vladimir: That’s a good one, America. Well, first of all the public perception was that life in the West particularly in the United States was better. The people were free to realize their dream of having a house for the family two cars in the garage and two chickens in every pot. But the official line shown on TV was always very black and dark, of course most TVs were black and white at that time anyway, but when it came to America to us the United States they always showed people dying on the streets from disease and violence. It was always the slums of Bronx and Harlem and they would always find homeless. I mean, it’s not too difficult if you go to downtown Atlanta you can always find homeless people. Of course, during Christmas time which is our New Years’ time they would always show happy little kids singing in kindergartens and say: Look at our country the greatest country in the world. But then as a

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10 McCarthyism is a vociferous campaign to identify alleged communists in the US government. It was conducted by Joseph McCarthy (a senator at that time 1950-1954). Although many people were accused of having ties to the Communists very few were communist party members.
contrast they would show homeless people dissatisfied with their lives. And the government they were always eager to tell their stories especially for a certain compensation. And if something did not work like in space or on some low technological level they would always show it. For example a flood that had nothing to do with the political system, fires or an explosion. America was always shown as a dangerous and unfair country always divided by class and income lines the so called Stinking Rich and the desperate and destitute rest of the folks and you don’t want to even think about living in those areas. And then there would be people that came from the United States and they would tell a different story.

Rachel: And that is how you would get your information from the people who came from the United States?

Vladimir: Yes, that’s right and that would be another example of a double standard. The people who came back from the United States they would bring gifts and gather with their families at a party and everything they would mention would be great on the personal level. And tell you that everything is great and the next day they have to make a report at the meeting of the workers at the factory, so they were given a point. Tell about how bad everything is and how desperate and destitute all the people are and how huge the economic divide is. And, of course, those people go and talk for an hour about absolutely horrendous conditions in the United States. And then they would go home and they would drink their whiskey that they brought back and they would give the gifts and they would be first in line to go back if they could.

Rachel: Why would the people be allowed to visit the United States. Would it be hard to travel there?

Vladimir: You would have the Russian Embassy that employed lots of people. You would have international exchanges like if you remember the Apollo Soyuz Project\textsuperscript{11}. There would also be a lot of sailors, diplomats, doctors some exchange was always present on some level. It wasn’t like North Korea and the United States some exchange was always there. It was minimal, but it was always there. The countries were hostile, but the flow of people continued. I mean those were two huge countries the United States and Russia, so the amount of people was relatively large. Also, a small amount of people had relatives and if you had relatives

\textsuperscript{11} The Apollo–Soyuz Test Project was conducted in July 1975. It was the first joint U.S.–Soviet space flight, as a symbol of the policy that the two superpowers were pursuing at the time.
during Brezhnev’s times most likely after much hassle you would be allowed to go and visit them. Most of those people were party members or nomenclature\textsuperscript{12} they lived good lives they could travel to the United States they had no restriction. We had a family friend who was a communist party member. In any factory or on any ship the first person was the captain or production leader the second was a communist party member. In some sense he was more important than the captain. Because under most circumstances the Higher Ups would listen to the communist party member over the captain. On the vessel it was called pompolit\textsuperscript{13} the second person in charge of the political and ideological state of affairs on that ship. So we knew one of them. He had served on the vessel, which was a container ship and there was a crew of about fifty to one hundred people on that ship so he would go with them around the world telling them where to go and which cities to avoid they could not go ashore one by one always in groups of two or more so they could watch out for each other. So, he would come home and bring gifts and tell us these stories about how everything in the United States was great and stuff. But when it came to the official speeches that he had to give to the people at work he would tell about one hundred percent terrible stuff bad, bad, bad everything is bad so there was a happy double standard always present in Russia.

<Begin Disk 2>

\textbf{Vladimir: } Anti-Semitism was rampant in Odessa. In my opinion, the Ukrainians were more anti-Semitic than the Russians. Maybe because all the shtetels were in the Ukraine, and all the pogroms\textsuperscript{14} were in Moldova in the Ukraine and southern part of Russia. You never hear about pogroms in Siberia or in the northern part of Russia. And, of course, Ukraine was a part of big Russia czar’s Russia. It was a province, big province, big land. It was an independent country or even a republic, I suppose, under the soviets. In fact, Ukraine was called Malorossia, which means Small Russia. So, there was Russia, Belorussia, which later became a republic, and Malorossia. Anti-Semitism in Odessa reached its height in the seventies. Short of pogroms, there were incidents of beating people up, inflicting personal injuries, jailing people

\textsuperscript{12}Nomenclature is the system of names in a particular field. In this case it refers to low level Soviet government workers that did not have very much authority.

\textsuperscript{13}Pompolit is the supervisory officer responsible for the political education or ideology and organization of the unit. They are intended to ensure civilian control of the military.

\textsuperscript{14}Pogrom is an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular, the Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe.
for small reasons. At the state level, it was expressed as not hiring people for any decent job. If you had a job and were holding that job, they probably would not fire you as long as you did not rock the boat and stayed true to your management, but if you lost your job and wanted to find a new job, it would be extremely difficult. As far as entering any public institution like a college or university the chances for a Jewish person of continuing higher education were very minimal if not nonexistent. So, if you wanted to enter college polytechnic college or conservatory it was common knowledge that they would not accept you. For example, Odessa conservatory which was good conservatory would not take any Jews, so if you wanted to continue your higher education, you go somewhere else. There was a point at which the St. Petersburg conservatory would take Jews, but only if you were really talented and could prove it, because it, not like here where you pay the money and you are enrolled. There you had to play an entrance exam; it was a very hard series of exams one of which was your main instrument, and you had to play a recital. So, you would play a recital and everything would be great, and at the end they would quite unabashedly tell you that everything was good you played beautifully, and you beat everybody else, but we are sorry, but we don’t take Jews. A lot of lives were ruined over this.

Rachel: So where did you go to the conservatory?

Vladimir: I graduated from St. Petersburg, but I lived for a couple of years in the Far East so I started in Vladivostok and then transferred to St. Petersburg where I graduated. It was impossible to get, not totally impossible, because nobody would prevent you from playing and trying, but afterwards they would just tell you that you are wasting everybody’s time not only wasting time, but especially in my case the boys were drafted into the army. So if you get into an institution, that would give you a postponement while you study. So, it was a gamble and a bad gamble, because you know that you are not going to get in and on top of it, they will take you and put you into the army. They will very rarely accommodate you into the musical ensemble, so you will go in and serve, and by the time you come out of the army, you will forget what you have learned, and it will basically ruin your career as a musician. So, Odessa was taboo in the seventies for any Jew to try higher education. I have a friend; his name is Greenberg. He lived in Odessa, he now lives in Los Angeles. He plays for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He was told not to try Odessa; he tried four times and failed. He was not eligible for the army for medical reasons. He tried four times and failed. By the fifth time, he made it
into Moscow conservatory, and Moscow conservatory is much higher, so it was obviously anti-Semitism and nothing more that prevented him from being able to make it into Odessa. He took private lessons with a professor, and the person giving him the lessons charged him a lot because that person did not want to lose his livelihood, and at the end my friend asked him: You are a Jew and you got into the conservatory. How did you get in? So, the Professor smiled at him and said, “I happened to get here much earlier, at a different time.” So, at the state level that is how it worked: they would not hire you or let you into an educational institution, so if you wanted to progress and advance you had two choices, you could either leave your town and go to a place where anti-Semitism was less rampant, or sometimes even you had to change your trade, or to immigrate to the Land of Opportunity.

Rachel: How did Communism affect what music you were allowed to play?

Vladimir: We are going into specifics now, but it’s a funny situation, any composer who had immigrated from Russia like Stravinsky, like Rachmaninov, or any musician like Chaliapin later on, Rostropovich, I mean, there was a maxim in Russia that you could not be a great composer or a great musician unless you were a great citizen and a patriot. It’s the law it’s like Newton’s Law of physics, you can argue with it, but you can’t change it. It’s the final truth. And of course, they would try to prove it. For example, Rachmaninov, we did not study anything that he wrote after immigrating, period before that point everything was good, everything was great. The First Concerto, the Second Concerto, and after that period – nothing. I don’t remember chronologically if the third one was written in the United States or in Russia, but we did not study it. Much the same with Stravinsky, while he was in Russia and was a student of Rimsky Korsakov, everything was great but after he immigrated he became forbidden, everything after the Firebird we barely touched him. It was slow stagnation kind of sinking into the swamp of depression, nothing good. The same with Chaliapin, we did not know anything after he had immigrated, and of course my time was Rostropovich, and I can tell you a funny story. Rostropovich was the best cello player arguably in the world at that time, and after he immigrated they basically forced him to immigrate because he was friends with Solzhenitsyn, he supported Alexander Solzhenitsyn who was a sworn enemy of the State. He was basically the baddest person that you can think of. Rostropovich supported him, and even gave him shelter at Rostropovich's dacha in Moscow. They restricted him in his tours around the world and basically created lots of obstacles for him. You can learn it better
somewhere else not from me. So, basically, I was in Vladivostok, and all of a sudden, the word of his immigration had spread gradually but once I had gone to the store and wanted to buy one of his LPs, and I could not find it. So the salesperson said, “Wait a minute.” And usually when you go into the store at that time you could find ten or fifteen of his recordings: it was like a staple of the cello performances, I mean, everybody would study off his LPs. Nothing to be found, no recordings, that was very strange. So, I went to another store, and the lady over there was very ignorant: she said that she had never heard of the guy. So, I thought to myself, of course, you have heard of him. So, then I went back to the conservatory, and I had learned that he had immigrated from that point on everything was clear, he was gone. Once a week, we had political information class where a hundred people would gather in one huge room, and our political party member would tell us basically what to think about this or that political process and basically what to think about the world of politics. So, I asked a question about Rostropovich, and they told me that he had immigrated. Therefore, his LPs had no value, so they were taken off the shelves. That was the first time I met face to face with the Soviet system. There was one hundred people in the room, and I had a bet with friends that I would say something about it. And I was so ticked off because we were almost professionals, we were about to graduate from the conservatory because the system in Russia was different before you could go to the conservatory you had to go for four years of college. So, it was ten years of school, four years of college, and four years of conservatory before you graduate and become professional, unless you wanted to get your doctorate which takes even longer. You are still a student but at the same time you are as professional as some of those teachers, but on a slightly lower level. So, I decided to take him on. I got up and asked. I respect your opinion on matters like politics and party history, but wouldn’t you give us credit as musicians? I mean he was one of the greatest musicians and performers of his time, so why he all of a sudden literally overnight just became useless not of any value to anyone studying the trade and be condemned. And also the entire world is looking up to him as the greatest cello musician, and I don’t think that you should tell musicians how they are supposed to be viewing it. He did not like it at all, he was a little bit rebuffed everybody was jeering and sneering, and so I sat down. Little did I know, I would have to pay a price that summer. I would have to pass a party history exam and go back to Odessa for enjoyment, forget about studying for two or three months, and go home like you came from Maryland to Atlanta. I did not pass that exam, it was postponed, I had to
take it again and then again, it ruined my summer I had to stay by myself in the dorms and now I understand that I was a pretty lucky guy, he did not view me as an enemy. He saw me as a disobedient child, he saw it as a childish escapade and he wasn’t pursuing to kick me out of the conservatory, which he could have done. Another friend of mine who tried a practical joke, they handled it differently. Every autumn the students would have to go for one month to help the agricultural workers to collect the harvest. It could be potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, whatever you go into the fields for one month. You live in the barracks, and you work. If you don’t do it, they will kick you out, they will expel you from the institution. My friend was one of the most talented piano at the conservatory, and there was another party lady who taught at a different level. That guy whom I mentioned, he was teaching communist party history but there was another class called scientific communism, and that was one of the last exams you had to take before graduating. If you don’t pass it, you don’t graduate. This is really the last one you could pass all your other subjects, your instrument, chamber music, but if you don’t pass that one you, don’t graduate. So, they always held you on a short leash so to speak, so till the last moment you cannot allow yourself any freedom because you know that they have leverage. So, that autumn they were in the village. The whole group was going to work, you know, unpaved roads, young people twenty-one or twenty-two years old. So they are walking, and by the side of the road they see a puddle, and, in the puddle, they see a pig. So, to backtrack a little bit, that lady’s name was Emma Vladimirovna, and she was disliked by everybody. She basically had no life, her whole life revolved around that subject. Everybody always hated that subject, scientific communism was always the most boring, uninteresting, most difficult to learn. It was always up to them, up to them up to administration and the teachers to let you through to let you pass or not, because no one could really learn it. It was a huge book of horrendous boring stuff, and to pass it you needed to study for a year. You needed to forget about playing your instrument or anything else, because it was like a bible, and even then, it was questionable if you would memorize it. So, they used it as a floodgate to pass or not to pass, and that lady, Emma Vladimirovna, she was a teacher, and they did not like her at all. So, that young man as they were walking, they see the pig. So, he comes up and talks to the pig, Emma Vladimirovna, get up, please. Everybody immediately broke into laughter and jokes ensued, so it was a riot. Sure enough, somebody passed it to her, there was always one person. So, they passed it to her, and he never graduated from the conservatory. She killed him on that exam. He was talked
about as a gifted piano player, a brilliant guy. His career was thought to be skyrocketing. She killed him on that exam, he did not pass, and there was no recourse. He could not take it again, it was a final exam. He wound up drinking and the last time we heard of him, he was playing somewhere in a restaurant somewhere in a provincial city, so basically his life was ruined over that. My case was much more cheerful, that guy simply decided to give me a lesson. It was a hard lesson, but it was hard enough for me to understand you either open your mouth and speak the truth when unsolicited, or you shut up and deal with it if you want to graduate, if you want to learn what you came here to learn, and that was a good lesson, one of them.

Rachel: And that was before you moved to St. Petersburg?

Vladimir: Right, right. I graduated from St Petersburg.

Rachel: Can you go back to the time before when you had a chance to immigrate, but you were denied the opportunity because your father in law?

Vladimir: Finally, when my father in law was getting ready to retire, we started to figure out we could now pursue what we wanted. It was a difficult decision especially for my wife because she was ethnic Russian. She had Russian roots on one hand she wanted to immigrate, of course everybody wants to immigrate, and it was hard for her having a Jewish husband the opportunity to immigrate was given to the Jews on the premise that they would reunite with their folks their relatives in Israel. It was the one channel and then you would detour Israel if you had decided and go to the United States. The United States gates were open at that time it was 1989 and it was almost the end of that time the end of the Empire. It was Gorbachev he opened the flood gates as that famous piece in the Sorcerer’s apprentice and did not know how to close them. It wasn’t his intention to dismantle the system, but in effect that’s what he did, because once you open it it’s very difficult to go back and close those liberties that you once allowed so the press was opened up and with the press the grip of the KGB was lifted.

Immigration became easier so we had an invitation to Israel from my relative he is actually playing the horn in the Tel Aviv symphony in the Israel symphony, so I persuaded Tatiana my wife and we decided to do it.”

Rachel: Was it always your intention to immigrate to Israel or did you want to go to the United States?

Vladimir: No my intention was always to come to the United States, because part of it was my wife she wasn’t Jewish and changing countries would be difficult and stressful for her even
more if she had immigrated into a different culture and society that is centered around religion and job opportunities for musicians in Israel at that time much less than here in the United States a lot of musicians changed their occupation altogether so I am not sure that Israel would have been a good option for her, but the United States was ok. So we embarked on the project it was expensive and grueling still, although much easier than before at that point you did not have to go through a public condemnation. Before during Brezhnev’s times you had to go through a public meeting of the place where you worked whether it was a factory, school, plant or whatever and you would be condemned. I mean that’s the official line there would be several people taking part in condemning you telling you what an ungrateful person you are scum of the earth this country gave free education and everything that you own you always owned everything to the Soviets everything till your last breath. You are not earning your living you are giving your living you are being given your living so you are always in debt to the country and of course they would condemn you they would expel you from the job, they would fire you, but before that, because you have to get their signature it was a part of many conditions many different stipulations you have to be a part of that witch hunt a part of that show. And you can’t skip it so they tell you that you are coming and being a target, so they put you on a pedestal and falling short of spitting at you everybody tells you that you are a traitor and you are this and that. And then, of course there are many people who sympathize and who would do the same, but they don’t open their mouth and tell you. So that was the custom before Gorbachev. I didn’t have to go through that stuff, but still there was a lot of signatures a lot of bureaucracy really big I mean immense and still at the end you did not know if they would permit you or not. On top of it you must revoke your citizenship, they strip you of your Soviet citizenship, but not just strip you also must pay for it so you have to pay to be stripped off a huge amount they won’t let you immigrate with Russian citizenship as it was later my brother came with Russian citizenship and he has dual citizenship not at that time you had to renounce your Soviet citizenship and they would charge you at that time if I am not mistaken seven hundred rubles per person which was an enormous amount of money and an average salary was one hundred and fifty rubles so that was five or six months of your earnings for every person including the child nobody liked it I mean that was a rip off. Certain amount of your possessions you could take with you certain amount it was too expensive to carry or to send by mail and certain amount they would not let you take, for example they would not let you take
any decent musical instrument you had to pass through a special commission they would evaluate your instrument and if it presented any kind of value they would not allow you to take it. If it is a relatively modern instrument not like an old-fashioned Italian or French they will make you pay full amount you had to pay again like you didn’t buy it before and then they will let you take it. So, people tried to beat the system especially if you were working for a good orchestra several of my musician friends tried this they would take their instrument out of the country then come back and start the immigration process over with the instrument securely in the country to which they were going to immigrate. But I had a modern instrument so I just had to pay the full amount so it was relatively easy for us to immigrate it was one of the happiest moments in our lives because Gorbachev had made it fairly easy for the people to immigrate, because it always worked this way. Either Russia would not let you out and the United States was always accepting at that time during the Cold war and stuff. Later on when Russia opened up the immigration process to anyone who wanted United States put a brake on it so now it’s very difficult to enter the United States, but now it’s easier to leave Russia so it’s always being equalized the stream of immigrants was being equalized, but I was at the time when it was still the perfect balance United States would still allow you to come in. I mean as far as Jewish immigration goes and Russia would still let you go fairly easy just pay and go through all those bureaucratic procedures and you can leave so it was a fairly easy process we said goodbye to Mother Russia and left in October of 1989 bound for Vienna spent about a month in Vienna under Sohnut then a little bit less than a month in Italy until our immigration stuff cleared than in late November of 1989 we arrived to Atlanta. Amazingly most amazingly Russian immigrants who did not have a relative sponsoring them were sponsored by Niana which a New York Jewish Organization is a small number were sponsored by several large cities like Chicago or Los Angeles I never heard about Atlanta and no one in my immediate surrounding did too, but we were sponsored by the Atlanta Jewish Federation. I did not know anything about it, but I did not mind, because for some reason I did not want to immigrate to New York City. I knew that it had a very large Russian community that would make it very difficult to break away and integrate into society people live there for ten or fifteen years without speaking any English and they live basically in exile as opposed to making a new home, making new

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15 Sohnut is the largest charitable Jewish organization in the world. Its mission is to create bonds between Jewish people, their culture, the land, and to build a stronger Israel.
friends, learning the language and trying to integrate. You never fully integrate to the point where you feel at ease like in your own country where you were born, it’s impossible, but maybe 95% if you have a special gauge that you can measure then it is possible, but the first few years were stressful, extremely stressful, but we had several friends here who helped us.

Rachel: You already had friends in the U.S?

Vladimir: No we did not have anybody as I have already explained to you there were a few bitter people that did not get permission to come to the United States and were camped out in Italy and one of them claimed to know anything and everything about the United States and so we came to him and asked him what is Atlanta and he told me it was a horrible place he was bitter about the United States so he rained on everybody’s parade so to speak so he said it was a horrible place about one hundred and twenty degrees of heat of course in centigrade it was a different number but it was a swamp, malaria and it was racially not a diverse city, because it was 99% black. Well, we came here in November it was beautiful weather we were brought to Sandy Springs and we were happy to see that none of those predictions were realized none of them held true. We were happy to that it was a beautiful time a beautiful city not urban at all like we were accustomed to in Russia or like New York or Chicago especially it was eighty nine and Atlanta wasn’t as much developed as it is now but even now when you fly over you see endless green kind of forest speckled with a few buildings like downtown and Buckhead, but not much urban sprawl that you can see from above and when we landed it was the friendliest environment you know, birds, squirrels we did not see anything like that in the Russian urban surroundings you won’t see a squirrel inside the city you won’t see so many birds and possums and all kinds of other wildlife it’s like at that time we thought wow we are living in a resort basically a resort so it was a good time at the beginning it was a shock.

Rachel: So, what were your first sensations and thoughts when you arrived?

Vladimir: So we were brought to Sandy Springs, Willow Walk. I don’t know what the name is now, but it’s right inside 285. Casey Crossing, I believe he converted to Judaism a young man he is still young, but at that time he was twenty something. He worked for Family Services so he met us at the airport and brought us to our apartment and when we entered the apartment and saw the living room, the huge kitchen and the dining area we were absolutely flabbergasted and so we sat down on the couch and he asked us if we liked it and we said is this all for us of course this was all for us so he asked us why don’t you go in and see the entire
place so we asked what entire place he said there was more bedrooms out there so we went in and saw that it was a two bedroom apartment which we did not think existed so we went in and discovered another room and another room and another area and we couldn’t believe that it was prepared for us it was a shock it was quite a shock so the refrigerator was stuffed with food and there was basic furniture and he left us for the weekend told us that if we needed him we could call him, but basically he said he will see us Monday so we got out and started our exploration of the apartment complex and the neighborhood we were walking around and somebody passed us by and said hello or how are you and of course we didn’t speak English at that time hello and goodbye was pretty much the extent of it and if it was how are you or how are you doing we of course didn’t understand it so I asked my wife if she knew him and she asked me if I knew him and we were very surprised that he was talking to us of course there are people who would talk to you in Russia we called them schizophrenics or sometimes people would talk to themselves. At that time cell phones weren’t as prevalent and commonplace as they are now, but if you take a person from that time and put him on the streets now and he sees people talking to themselves it’s a perfect case of schizophrenia if you don’t know that they are talking on the cellphone which you don’t see immediately in their hand so that custom in Russia you don’t talk to strangers you don’t even make eye contact with strangers it’s just a little bit different culture and the next person said the same thing probably greeted us and we could not figure out why the people are talking to us we almost felt threatened we thought that if somebody is smiling and saying something about us was there something written on our foreheads like. You don’t come from right here? it was very strange the first two days we went around we went to the grocery store on the corner and we waited for Monday for Casey to come back basically exploring stuff it was beautiful, as I mentioned the birds and the squirrels Benjamin was in heaven I mean lots of place to run around without any traffic inside the complex.

Rachel: How old was your son at that time?

Vladimir: He was eight. It was an amazing feeling, but even before when we left Russia I mean it was here after we left the airport after the grueling checking points when we were in the airplane and the pilot spoke to the everybody over the intercom and said that we had crossed the border of the Soviet Union the people just exploded started opening bottles of whatever alcohol they had started drinking, cheering, toasting each other then was a month of
shock in Austria it was a beautiful place. Immigration was an absolutely great time for us. We lived in Vienna, so we lived there and we visited all these stores. We did not have very much money there, but it didn’t matter. Then we lived in Italy for one month and our case was easier than most of the immigrants for one reason. As I mentioned, we lived in a communal apartment. One of the neighbors was a staunch anti-Semite and just a hateful person altogether.

We and Benjamin ate in a communal kitchen and I asked him many times not to smoke in the child’s face. He would come in there and he would be smoking all over the place and he did that and many other things probably on purpose. We had several altercations with that guy sometimes even physical. He would go and try to provoke you into a fight which a couple of times he did successfully. I won’t go into details about this and when police came he screamed lots of hateful things about the Jews and when we were immigrating. I went to the district policeman and told him, “Do you remember when we had all those problems?” And actually after a while we had a hearing about this in the court and the hearing did not go our way, because of the anti-Semitic court and because of that we thought that we better get going and speed the process up. So, when the immigration became the right idea I came to that guy and said, “Do you remember we had an altercation on the basis of race?” He said yes so, I said could you possibly give me a paper about it. I mean just a paper stating what happened without taking any sides. Amazingly I don’t know why, but he gave the paper it was just a paper stating that we had a court hearing based on this and that and there was animosity based on race between our family and their family. So when we came to Vienna the American immigration clerk was listening to hundreds of cases and many people would not get permission to enter the United States. It was a very tense and stressful situation, what people do not realize is that United States would rarely consider economic hardship as the basis for Resident Alien Status only racial discrimination anti-Semitism was one form, but most people did not experience it. On the level where they could verbalize it, you know talk about it so they would come up and start talking about hard living in Russia, but the truth is there are so many countries around the world where people don’t have enough food that this would not constitute a basis for granting the status and yet was difficult to prove people would always lapse into these you know anti-Semitism was almost like for us, but the economic hardship was real, I mean people don’t understand that if you present like I have ten kids and only one person is working that’s small and the apartments are horrible quarters people think that it should create sympathy it does
not. Well, it was my turn to be interviewed so I mentioned that briefly then I talked about the conservatory stuff and the job interviews that I had and at the end of it I almost forgot that I said. I have a paper that proves domestic anti-Semitism and I gave them the paper with the big official seal of police on their part it was pretty silly on the police part if he only knew what he was giving me but he gave me the paper. He easily could have refused it I mean he was not obligated to give me that paper, well when I gave them the paper it created quite a splash he said, “Excuse me I need to get out he left his desk.”Aand I don’t know what he did he went to his higher up and presented the paper I mean you don’t always get a document from the Soviets with a police seal stating that the person was discriminated against that caused a big splash so he came back half an hour later and asked us. Would you like to go to the United States now or would you like to go to Italy first? So, we looked at each other with Tatiana and said: we don’t mind to go to Italy. At that point we knew that our fate was sealed that we won’t have any problems, so we went to Italy and approximately twenty days later we received in the mail the permission. It was the Atlanta Jewish Community.

Rachel: So, what continuing role did the Atlanta Jewish Community play when you were in Atlanta?

Vladimir: We were fed and provided apartments for three months. We were taken to job interviews. In my case I think Jewish Community Family Services did a pretty good job, I should command them later on. When my brother immigrated there were a couple of people that considered that they don’t have to help us as much as in my case we didn’t know anybody we didn’t have anything else the Jewish Community was the only thing we has so if they gave us half as much as they did we would still be considering it being very lucky. We were given a modest amount for food and apartments were paid for and once in a while we were taken for job opportunities. We were kind of nudged to take a job even if it did not correspond to our education or the occupation that we had before, but not pushed violently we were never pushed. They were all non-musical jobs like Waverly Hotel like maintenance and stuff, but in the end I knew that I would have to take one I didn’t expect that anybody would feed me forever. The most difficult part was that I didn’t speak very much English and Jewish Federation made a few contacts for me, but bottom line, I knew that I would have to feed the family so finally we took maintenance jobs in the apartment building where we lived so for several months it was vacuum cleaning and stuff and I’ll tell you more about it later, but the
Jewish Federation helped us. It was the only entity that took care of us and for three months it was a lot. I lived all my life in Russia in the former Soviet Union for my entire life I didn’t have anything from the state. If one day I lost my job then I lost my job. I didn’t get a penny. I don’t know what would be then I would have to take any job, but in any case there is no welfare program whatsoever there is nothing and nobody who would help you in any way so in a country where you did not grow up in a country where nobody knows you from Adam to get such help even for three months it was pretty much, you know, shocking. We were and we are forever grateful for this. It was good. It was very helpful I guess if the Jewish federation did not help there would be some individuals that would, or I would have to find a job on my own, but it made the transition much smoother and more humane.

Rachel: How did you learn your English?

Vladimir: Well, we came without any English whatsoever so whatever English I learned I learned here. So pretty soon I started taking free-lance musicians. I was very active the first five to seven years I took any freelance music job I could get my hands on jobs with Macon Symphony, Columbus Symphony Charleston Symphony. We traveled all the time and when you are in the car for two or three hours with free-lance musicians and they speak nothing, but English and it was like shock therapy. I mean you get yourself into that environment for three or four hours and you try to understand. I learned on my own. I didn’t believe and I still don’t believe in having any teachers. I have my own way of learning and I would recommend this to anybody because when you have a teacher that teaches ten to fifteen people you get only one tenth or fifteenth of the teacher’s time no matter how talented the teacher is or how progressive the system might be. I found my own way and it was pretty efficient the way. I see now as long as you understand what I am saying I consider myself successful. So I basically slept with a dictionary for a number of years. I listen to NPR all the time turned on the TV and also friends we were very hospitable invited people at the time in part it was selfish. We wanted to learn. Jewish Federation introduced us every family who immigrated were given sponsors people who do not necessarily give you money in our case they didn’t give us money, but people who befriend you take you out show you around and stuff and we were introduced to an absolutely great family. We are still friends Richard and Debbie Miller Richard is the owner of a drug store in downtown Atlanta. Also, his drug store became famous at one point when Paul Mccartney made a picture for his album “Run, Devil Run” he took a picture of that store and
put it on the cover. So, Richard and Debbie Miller had befriended us they had two kids who are both grown up one had recently married, and I played at her wedding Mandy and Brian Richard and Debbie’s children and they live in east Cobb lower Marietta around Johnson’s Ferry.

<End of Disc 2>

<Begin Disc 3>

**Vladimir:** Richard and Debbie Miller took us around Atlanta first for fast food. It was great. It was Krystal and boy did it taste good especially the french fries. We didn’t have anything like that at that time in Russia. It’s a great way to get introduced to America through fast food. Then they invited or took us to their house several times. We didn’t have a car yet and around Atlanta. Richard tried to make some contacts as far as private teaching was concerned, but it wasn’t extremely successful, but it was all up to me. I had to learn English better before I could accomplish anything because you have to communicate with people in order to teach if you can show that’s good, but you have to convince people that you know what you know. It’s a matter of publicity which is basically an art in the United States. And then there was another family Phyllis and Wayne Lazarus and we got a glimpse of American life through them. They invited us to their house several times for dinner for Shabbat big family they have three children Wayne is a lawyer and Phyllis was very hospitable. I am not sure if she worked at that time when we met later on when brother and mother came to Atlanta Phyllis and Wayne helped them too.

**Rachel:** When did your mother and brother come?

**Vladimir:** They came two and a half years later so it was ninety-one.

**Rachel:** What did you have to do to get them here?

**Vladimir:** I was there sponsor, but since I was not yet firmly established myself not quite on my legs that’s when I ran into problems with the Jewish Federation. If I may speak I thought that time Jewish Federation tried to use me as a vehicle for their immigration at that time I was barely making ends meet financially and as much as I love my brother I thought they would get more help than they did which is a little sponsorship for three months. At that time that lady Rosa Collette was I would say least helpful and made me a little bit resentful, because not only did they not want to present themselves as sponsors they wanted me and my family to assume full financial burden and they made us take out a loan which I did. The
resentment that I have is that they presented themselves as the official sponsor. The government would not let my entire family enter unless they signed off on official papers making themselves the sponsor and at the same time making us carry the entire burden financially so they made me take out a loan and not give the money to my brother directly and at the same time they cut and shaved off a part of that loan for themselves and the money did not trickle down to my brother though they promised that it would so in fact they made me take out a loan. They took that money and then after two months they started to push them off that help off the welfare, you know and when I tried to reason that there was more money and to give my brother more time to look for a job and to find the job. They told me that it was no longer my money. It was the money that the Jewish Federation was now in charge of. And I am not sure, but I don’t think that the financial arrangement was fair at that time. I felt a little bit resentful, last say, but we got over it. My brother is fine now he is gainfully employed. He is a musician also in addition to this job he also took a job in Naples, Florida. Naples Philharmonic played with them for a number of years and then decided to change his career and became a bow maker. He studied bow making in Los Angeles and then in Seattle. He came back to Atlanta where he started. He is repairman. He repairs violins, violas, cellos and bases for school systems and for individuals. He has also done it for some Atlanta Symphony players. He is very good at repairing bows.

Rachel: What is your brother’s name?

Vladimir: Jacob or Yaakov Yampolsky and Olga, his wife. I helped her she graduated from Emory and now she teaches at the Clayton County School System.

Rachel: Do they have any children?

Vladimir: They have one daughter Eva. She graduated from Emory and now she is back at Emory with her internship teaching and studying for her doctorate in French literature and French language quite an accomplishment. My son Benjamin, he is graduating this year from Southern Polytechnic he is a computer guy and he is also very successful in his field.

Rachel: And your mother came with your brother?

Vladimir: Yes, all four of them came. My brother’s family and my mother after a couple of years she got her place at the retirement community on Piedmont and Roswell Road and she lived there for about fifteen years until she passed away last December. And she learned English pretty good for someone her age and she really enjoyed Atlanta. She loved to travel
and explore on her own on the Buckhead shuttle. They later opened the Buckhead Shuttle she was always a curious lady and loved to communicate with people even without being perfect in English and all in all I think she was happy, of course the ideal situation would be to stay in the country of your origin if there are no problems. This was a great country, but if you can’t then I think that the United States is the second best place to live and she was comfortable. Both of us were there to support her. She had a nice apartment and she later on got Social Security so in that department she was safe and at the same time she knew that there were people in Russia who were completely destitute especially the retired people they live hand to mouth and there are no guarantees. Government pensions are ridiculously small and the people are starving sometimes and my mother knew it. It is hard to immigrate and change your way of life when you are sixty something years old it was hard for us it was easiest for our children they came when they were seven or eight.

Rachel: Where did your son go to school?

Vladimir: He went to Hebrew Academy for a couple of years and when we divorced with his mother with Tatiana. She did not feel compelled to continue his Jewish education and she had more say in the matter, so she put him into public school which is good. I am glad he got a slice of public education in mainstream America. There are pros and cons in public education versus private, Eva, my brother’s daughter my niece went to private institutions all along private schools then Emory, so I am learning it from her the good and bad of that way of studying so no regrets they both got a good education.

Rachel: Well, beyond your involvement with the Jewish Federation Family Services what other involvement have you had with the Jewish community?”

Vladimir: Well, the first experience we entertained the Jewish community with my wife she is a piano player. We were invited immediately to one of the Jewish Community’s annual meetings. It was I believe in nineteen ninety or ninety one nineteen probably and we played an evening of entertainment as a duet piano and violin and then other than that I was a member of the Jewish community for several years and sometimes donated money toward their school. I volunteered a couple of times during their fundraising campaign sitting in that big room calling people on the phone and trying to raise. Whatever success it contributed I don’t know that is basically all. I mean I don’t play any major part, nor do I work for their organization.

Rachel: The people you invited, did you ever spend holidays with them?
Vladimir: We invited, as I mentioned we weren’t very religious back in Russia. Here I figured the society is much more centered on religion, I mean it’s a pretty religious country I didn’t expect it to be when I first came, but I learned that here the people’s identities are formed by the religious community if you are Christian you go to church, if you are Muslim you go to a mosque, if you are Jewish you are you know and there is nothing shameful about it much less dangerous so I figured if I am Jewish I should learn about my roots so we started going to a synagogue. Not immediately, we were busy the first year, so we started going the second year. We went to Beth Tefillah which was Orthodox. Little did I know I started at the hardest place. I was a member there for about ten years. It was the time when the two Yossi were rabbis Yossi Lehrman and Yossi Nu. I learned as far as the extent of learning customs and holidays and stuff. I did not go as far as learning Hebrew. It’s still on the agenda, but I don’t know when. And Benjamin got a basic introduction to Judaism through the Greenfield Hebrew Academy. So at least he knows the basics. And then I brought my mother. It was pretty successful, it was funny she was grateful to me for bringing her back to Judaism. I didn’t bring her back to Judaism I took her there a couple of times and then she just took it to herself. Of course, if I didn’t somebody may be would have, but it was a good idea and it was another outlet how to reunite with the community otherwise I would never meet so many Jews, the synagogue was the place. It was amazing to me to see young generation kids growing up in the tradition, how naturally it comes, it was amazing to me how two cultures Judaic and the modern secular culture of America how they coincide and blend and even if they don’t blend how they coincide and live together. Now I have become accustomed to it, but at the beginning it was you know shocking. People would be openly wearing their going to the grocery store in kippas¹⁶ wearing Judaism on their sleeve so to speak where as in Russia it would be like inviting extra trouble I mean nobody would wear a kipa in Russia, but if you wanted to wear a kippa it would be like attracting extra attention it would be like taking a public stand like putting Anti-Communist on your forehead. Nobody would put it at that time. It was amazing to see how people live here freely and don’t know any other way and express and it’s not shameful. Gradually, I changed my perception so it’s almost natural for me now, but at the beginning it was shocking just shocking.

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¹⁶ Kippas A brimless skullcap worn by Jewish men in accordance with Orthodox rules and traditions. It is meant to remind men of the importance of covering the head before God.
Rachel: You can go to a grocery store and buy matzah.

Vladimir: Right buy matzah, buy gefiltefish. They have kosher department in the grocery store. People fly on the plane and they ask for a kosher meal or are offered a kosher meal. And teaching in the public schools. You have right on the secular calendar officially days for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover as holidays and you can take the day off and that is respected, and you never have any problems explaining it’s how tolerant and good the society is with different religions. It was amazing to see all that stuff.

Rachel: And you mentioned schooling, so you were teaching music?

Vladimir: Yes, I was a freelance player in the beginning and then I taught music in a studio Melody Line in Lawrenceville and one day a lady entered and offered me a job with the school system. I never applied I never looked for it. She said, we need an orchestra teacher. I said, well, I don’t know what kind of animal it is. She said, no biggie we will introduce you to the right people and as long as you are a good musician you can do it.”

Rachel: And what grade was this in school?

Vladimir: It was high school. So, she introduced me to the coordinator of fine arts of Gwinnett County and he hooked me up with a couple of teachers who became good friends of mine. One of them was Norman Burnell and Brent Stewart and a couple of others so I learned the requirements. At the beginning it was a part time job and then it became in two years a full time job and I also taught for about five years at Georgia State teaching viola there. It was part time. There was no full time then.

Talk about how you earned your doctorate?

Vladimir: Doctorate. I went back to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1999. Entered the doctorate program there. Studied with Andrei Dogadin one of the best viola players in Russia.

Rachel: So, you had to go back there?

Vladimir: No, I was visiting. I took certain courses online and then had to go back for recitals, so I went back every six months for three years. It was sort of my ambition always, because I did not play certain pieces I always wanted to play for viola, so I went back and then Dogadin came here there were great couple of workshops and recitals here. It took me three years and I graduated with my doctorate

Rachel: Congratulations that was amazing.

Vladimir: That helps when you teach.
Rachel: So besides that, have you been back to Russia?

Vladimir: I have been back a couple of times. Once I organized a trip I took a couple of friends and took them to Russia. After that I went back quite a few times. It wore off a little bit. I don’t want to go back for a while. But I went quite a few times it helps me to put everything in perspective see how life develops in Russia firsthand dynamics of what’s going on and that proverbial nostalgia I never had it, but it helps to visit. I took Benjamin the last time I went just to show him the place where he was born, and it was emotional for him too and I still have a few friends.

Rachel: Any family left there?

Vladimir: In Odessa my cousin other than that we also sponsored another cousin with her husband and children and their children her grandchildren, so we’ve got quite a few people now.

Rachel: Everybody is in Atlanta?

Vladimir: Yes, everybody is in Atlanta they call me Columbus now I discovered the place, man.

Rachel: So, what was it like to go back as someone who knows?

Vladimir: Every time is different, because Russia is changing very rapidly. It’s a free market, but I would not consider it a Democracy. It’s a free market, but with a huge amount of government bureaucracy, corruption, mafia and the dynamics of that political process are not bringing Russia closer to Democracy right now. I think it’s going backwards. As you probably heard Bush and Cheney are expressing concerns and that political process trampling over democratic institutions in Russia, so it just reconfirmed my decision that I made seventeen years ago that I made it right deciding to leave the country. Though in all fairness to say there are some new synagogues. I think it’s like a trough in the waves. It’s a period before anti-Semitism will become more rampant and prevalent I think it was and still is a good time to leave Russia. I don’t think that Jews belong there, especially in our time when we have Israel. You can immigrate in the best case scenario to Israel, of course, but if not to the United States and not subject yourself to the danger. Majority of the population still consider Jews as enemies in more ways than one. I mean Christianity here and Christianity in Russia are very different. I don’t know if I should go there, but Christianity in Russia and Christianity in the US are very different and not only because Russian Christians are Orthodox and American are
mostly Protestant and Baptist, but also because American Christianity does not consider Jews as enemies at least not since the Pope the previous Pope I mean John Paul offered forgiveness. Jews are not considered the enemies of Christians. They are considered lost in their beliefs or divorced, but not planning you know deliberately planning to undermine Christianity purposefully. It’s a different religion the goals don’t coincide, but in Russia the Jews are considered enemies of religion. It’s funny because 99% of Russians probably don’t know that Christ was Jewish if you ask any common folks on the street who was Christ they will tell you he was Russian. I mean I am serious they never think about it. He was Russian, as far as Jews they know that Judah was a Jew but the rest of them were good Russian people. It tells you and it permeates the society that’s the basis of their Christian attitude and then there is the government always ready to clamp down on Judaism so basically what I am saying is it was a good time and still is a good time to leave Russia. But there are folks who do not see it that way. There are people who feel that you need to die in the same place where you were born. They love the place where they were born. They are afraid of changes they are afraid of new stuff. They think that the evil that you know is better than the evil that you don’t know they think you better cope with the people and the situation and the government that you know and not go to a place where you are not guaranteed anything. There are still Jews who don’t ask anyone what to do, me or you. So back in Russia it’s a long story, Russia is a big subject I am not sure if I am answering your questions, but today in Russia as far as Jews are concerned there is a little bit more freedom, because there were a few synagogues built and I don’t have intimate knowledge of how it plays out when you are looking for a job. I think it’s a little bit better, it’s definitely better than what it was in the seventies. I am not sure if it is better than it was during Gorbachev Era, because during Gorbachev it was basically opened up and now as far as I can see democratic processes they are folding it up gradually. We know that at least one Jewish guy was kidnapped Yukos the head of Yukos he is now in jail maybe not because he is Jewish. We know another Jewish guy Abramov who is the Governor of Chukotka of all places and he is the owner of one of the English soccer teams and almost bought Lordship there and he is in the government I mean it’s amazing and he is Jewish. Abramovich, I believe is the last name. I think that when you talk about Russia corruption is the number one thing and if you play by the government’s rules and you are Jewish you’ll be fine, you know.

Rachel: Sounds like you feel that you made the right decision.
Vladimir: Absolutely, absolutely.

Rachel: Do you have American citizenship?

Vladimir: Yes, I do.

Rachel: How did you get it?

Vladimir: Typically, when United States takes somebody under asylum status or resident alien you wait five years. After three years of living in the United States you get a Green Card and after five years of living you get citizenship. So, I’ve been here seventeen years, I got my citizenship twelve years ago.

Rachel: How did you feel about becoming an American citizen?

Vladimir: I was very proud.”

Rachel: Do you remember the ceremony?

Vladimir: Yes, of course, it was downtown at the INS center. It was a funny situation, because it was if I’m not mistaken after the Oklahoma City bombing and we were waiting for the ceremony to start there was some delay and we were sitting there waiting and waiting and one guy became displeased with the situation so he got up and went to the bathroom probably to take a smoke and left something behind the chair so everybody immediately jumped up to see if it was a bomb because he had cursed everything he was so displeased out so he got up and went to the bathroom and when he came back everybody already sang the National Anthem and the ceremony was over and he became a citizen the same as everybody else and he went and got his certificate and stuff. So it was a usual procedure I enjoyed it a lot especially after so many years of being without any kind of citizenship, you know, you don’t belong, because as I mentioned we didn’t have any so you don’t belong anywhere so we were ready to get any kind of citizenship, of course, the United States was the country of our new home and we were very proud, later on my mother got citizenship and she was proud she learned all the questions and all the right answers.

It was a learning curve for her and so now everybody is my brother and his family

Rachel: And now you have your Ph.D. and you continue to teach.

Vladimir: Yes, DMA Doctor of Musical Arts I continue to teach with a public school and I teach orchestra and I continue to freelance playing sometimes teach privately not always only when I feel that I need extra money and in my free time I am sailing on lake Lanier during summertime because as they say the best three things about teaching June, July and August.
So, having such a long vacation I sail the Atlantic. I sailed to Bermuda a couple of times up and down the east coast BVI, USVI and this summer I am going to sail along the west coast of Ireland.

Rachel: That’s amazing

Vladimir: It should be fun I will report back to you

Rachel: Is there anything else you would like to share about your thoughts and experiences?

Vladimir: If this my soliloquy is going to be a part of the exhibition I would like to mention once again that I am grateful to the country, grateful to the Jewish Community and it’s amazing how things worked out in the end and to friends like Phyllis and Debbie and Richard who befriended us along the way and found the time, because I know that life is stressful in the United States and everybody is busy making their own living at the same time. People found enough room in their hearts and enough time in their schedule to help other people whom they did not know. There is another lady whom I would like to mention Marion Kent who plays with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and she is a viola player. Very eccentric person, but amazingly kind lady. She also helped us. She helped a lot she was amazingly helpful. She helped me professionally and she helped us in many ways its people like her, you know it’s very important to have friends in a new country not only for practical reasons, but because you don’t fully integrate into society until you have people around you someone whom to talk to and celebrate with. So, I would like to thank all those people and life goes on it’s not the end of it so let’s do this in another fifteen years hopefully if I am still around.

Rachel: Thank you very much.

Vladimir: Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS