Old Lives, New Lives: Soviet Jewish Women in Minnesota

Interview with Jane Sinitsky
at the Sinitsky home
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Linda Schloff and Diane Siegel, interviewers

Q: We're going to start by just beginning with some of your family information. We know your name and your address and your telephone number. What's your birthdate?

Sinitsky: I was born actually 1952, July 27th.

Q: Where were you born?

Sinitsky: In Leningrad, Soviet Union.

Q: Did you live anywhere besides Leningrad?


Q: Until you came here?

Sinitsky: Right.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your education?

Sinitsky: I graduated from the college and got the profession teacher of German and English.

Q: What college?

Sinitsky: The Pedagogical University of Leningrad, named after Herzen.

Q: That's a university?
Sinitsky: Sure.

Q: You graduated with a teaching degree?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: Then were you able to teach?

Sinitsky: Yes. I taught for one year and a half at school, and then I had to break because I was just throw out of school, which was my experience for the first time, over a very anti-Semitic person, so I had to break down in the middle of the year, which is very strange. I went to the library just to assist the librarian for nine months.

Q: Tell me a little bit about what happened. How did that happen?

Sinitsky: As a matter of fact, I was very young, so right after school I was very good prepared. I myself finished the school with a special German program and then the university.

Q: How old were you?

Sinitsky: I was twenty-one.

Q: You were young.

Sinitsky: Yes. The director of school, she just didn't want to have me at school. The person who was responsible for the placement of the students pushed her to take me. After this person retired, she did everything to get rid of me. This was my first experience.

I went to the library because I couldn't find a job in my profession, and worked like a year in the library. Then I was transferred to the information center, where I could do translations, because I knew languages. At the same time I found a part-time job at the Institute for Civil Engineers and began to work there as a teacher in evenings, only evenings and part time.

Then later I found a job in the State Teachers College as a teacher of German and English, and I worked there the last five years before I left. This was a good place for me. They prepared the teachers for elementary schools. So it was not the college level, but professional school.
Q: You were teaching teachers?

Sinitsky: Future teachers, yes, because of the foreign language requirement over there.

Q: When you found all of these jobs, did you have to use your network of friends?

Sinitsky: Sure. I never, ever was taken from the street.

Q: Or from a list of jobs available. How did that work, Jane?

Sinitsky: How is it working? The first time I lost my job, it was my first experience, so I just didn't have any source of relief. I called all of my friends, if there are any possibilities for me. A relative of my husband, she was working at the library, and the librarian's work is paid so bad in the Soviet Union, they're always required, librarians.

Q: You mean they're always needed?

Sinitsky: Always needed. Always needed. She talked to her director from the small library, like a district library, and they told me that they had a place for me for seventy rubles a month.

Q: Which is what? Not very much money?

Sinitsky: That's not very much money, yes. It's very, very few. Little money.

Q: Compared to what? What would you have earned as a teacher?

Sinitsky: Like one-third. Something like that. And then working there, I began to look for jobs seriously. It took me a long time. Actually, my director helped me a lot, because she knew some people in other places and she transferred me to the information center because she wanted that I can use my knowledge.

Q: Which director is this?

Sinitsky: Of the library. So I came to another step, to the information center, the big school, and then later I asked the
foreign language department did they need somebody, and they took me for part time.

Q: But it was through people you knew.

Sinitsky: Oh, yes.

Q: How about that last good job?

Sinitsky: The last good job, I just knew that the school will be open, and my father was a teacher, also, and he knew many people and he was involved in this search also.

Q: He helped you. Let's go back to your parents. Tell me your mother's name.

Sinitsky: Tamara Sinitsky.

Q: When was she born?


Q: Where was she born?

Sinitsky: Odessa, south.

Q: And your father's name?

Sinitsky: My father's name is Semen.

Q: Sinitsky.

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: When was he born?


Q: Where was he born?

Sinitsky: He was born in a very small place not far from--it is called Lybny. That's Ukraine. He was born when his parents were in the Red Army. His parents, as Jewish people, were very active in the revolutionary movement in Russia. Then later his father
was persecuted in 1937 during the Stalin time, because he was in the Army.

Q: Was that your grandfather?

Sinitsky: That's my grandfather. So, actually, my father was born in this small place where their division was at that time, and two weeks later they came to Moscow, and he lived in Moscow before he went to the front in 1941 during the war with Germany.

Q: Who did?

Sinitsky: My father.

Q: What happened to your grandfather?

Sinitsky: That's another story. That's a very long story. So my grandfather did a very fast and good career in the communist society.

Q: Had he stayed in the Army?

Sinitsky: Yes, he joined the Army. He was nineteen. He met my grandmother there in the Army, and they came to Moscow. He was sent to the military academy because, as you probably know, all the other old staff professionals were killed through the Red Terror. The communists needed a new generation of their own intelligentsia, and they tried to train their own people. They grew very, very fast. My grandfather actually was a military man, and he was sent to the military academy. I think it was in Leningrad, and later for four years they lived in Leningrad, then they came to Moscow, and he grew up very fast. He was a very talented artillery constructor.

Q: When you say "grew up very fast," he moved up the military line?

Sinitsky: Yes. He made it a career.

Q: And the fact that he was Jewish didn't matter?

Sinitsky: No, not before 1937. Not before this time. My grandmother, she was also a German teacher, so my father just
wanted me to be the same. In 1937, when the time of repression came, so my grandfather, as everybody else from the command staff, was taken, but he was not killed. This is really, you know, surprising, because all of his friends and co-workers were killed. Why he was not, because he was a constructor. He was an engineer, actually. They let him work in the prison.

Q: Was he sent to Siberia?

Sinitsky: No, in Ural. So my grandmother was taken, too. My father was fourteen without parents.

Q: Where did he go?

Sinitsky: She just put him into the train and sent to her sister, and her sisters were afraid to have the child. They sent him from one relative to another through the whole summer. In 1937, in May, my grandfather was taken. Through the whole summer, he (father) traveled through the country from one relative to another, and then finally the youngest sister of my grandmother took him. She was married to a Russian man who actually told, "That's enough," took a bottle of vodka, went to his village, where I don't know--they lived near Leningrad in a small village--took a bottle of vodka to somebody, to the director of the school, and told him, "I have a boy. He doesn't have any documents. He must be taken to school." And my father lived there for one year until his mother was not free again.

Q: She was or wasn't?

Sinitsky: His mother was.

Q: Was free again?

Sinitsky: In two years.

Q: He lived in this little town.

Sinitsky: This little village. It was a little village, and he lived with his mother's sister and her husband. They didn't have children, actually. Maybe because of this they were so good to my father.
Q: Did you know them?

Sinitsky: Sure. Not him. I knew her. He was killed during the war. My grandmother came back and take my father to Moscow again, home. It was 1939, and she was free because my grandfather refused to work until she would be free. He was a very talented constructor. They let her go. It was '39. In '41 the war began, and my father was, from the first moment, on the front.

Q: How old was he then?
Sinitsky: Seventeen.

Q: Where did the grandfather go during the Second World War?

Sinitsky: He was in prison all the time.

Q: Still?

Sinitsky: For ten years.

Q: Even though he was needed so badly?

Sinitsky: He was working there in the Urals.

Q: He did get out of prison, however?

Sinitsky: No.

Q: He never did?

Sinitsky: He did in 1947. He was out of prison, but my grandmother died at that time.

Q: Before he got out?

Sinitsky: Before. He got out, but he was not permitted to live in big cities. So he had to work outside of big centers for five years, and he came back actually in 1953. So my mom told me my father was already married to my mother. So right after the war, my grandmother moved to Leningrad because she had a sister, one sister, I told you, and another one
in Leningrad, and she wanted to be far from Moscow. She moved to Leningrad. She just changed apartments.

My father was in the Army, so he came back to the Leningrad apartment, to his mother, but she died beginning of '47. My father was in the Army, I think until the beginning of '50. They married in '50. Yes. His regiment was located in the Ukraine, not far from Odessa, so when they had free time, they went to Odessa. This is how he met my mother.

Q: In Odessa.

Sinitsky: In Odessa.

Q: How did he meet her?

Sinitsky: I think he had a commander in the Army, a Jewish man. His wife just wanted to switch her sister with my father.

Q: So she fixed them up.

Sinitsky: She fixed them up.

Q: Set them up, as they say today.

Sinitsky: Set them up.

Q: That's what my kids say. How did your father get his education then?

Sinitsky: In Odessa.

Q: He was seventeen.

Sinitsky: Yes. He did it in Odessa during his duty at the Army.

Q: While he was in the service?

Sinitsky: While he was in the service. He studied at Odessa State University. History. He had a really long story, because he was not taken to many schools he applied [to] because of his father, who was in the prison.

Q: How about because of his being Jewish?
Sinitsky: Both. It was both. But you know, right after the war, it was not a very high anti-Semitism in Russia before '37, and especially during the war when Germans brought these feelings to Russia, the people began to divide again, everybody, according to the nationality. After the war, anti-Semitism was very terrible. Beginning in the late forties, it was absolutely impossible for Jews to get some kind of good job or get good education.

My mom graduated the university. She was a lawyer, but she'd never find job as a lawyer. Never. My father wanted to continue to have an education like his father. He dreamed to be a plant constructor, something like that. He tried to apply to military academies and military schools, and even once he was taken, but after the first test, all the papers which were together in his notebook were taken out and he was thrown out of the school. It was already after my grandfather came out of the prison, so we never know what happened, but my father lost this opportunity to study. He could just go to the province university evening classes in Odessa. This is how he got his education. It was a very hard time for Jews at that time, beginning fifties. It was the time of cosmopolitism, something like that, it was called in Russia.

Q: That's what it's called here.

Sinitsky: They were like public--I don't know how it's called--juristic processes? For public. They made the courts for public to show how awful the Jews are.

Q: You mean show trials?

Sinitsky: Show trials? Especially for Jewish doctors.

Q: Oh, yes.
Sinitsky: It was really--I know that from my father's aunt, who was in Leningrad, too, so two sisters were in Leningrad, the younger one moved into the city after her husband was killed on the front, and they were all together. It was always fear that something happened in the family. It was just awful.

Q: Your mother, although she studied to be a lawyer, worked at what?

Sinitsky: She never worked as a lawyer. So she finished the
university. I was born right after, and I was one year old, so he was studying at the university in Odessa, evenings, and he finished and he got a job in Leningrad at the evening school.

Q: Doing what?

Sinitsky: Teaching history to the kids who lost their parents during the war. It was a very hard job.

Q: Teaching history of what?

Sinitsky: Of Russia. Russian history, international history, old history, new history, mid-age history, everything.

Q: Do I understand from what you're saying that to go to school at night doesn't hold the same importance as going to school during the day?

Sinitsky: It's not so prestigious. The education is less good, and it is very hard to go through because you have to work during the day and study in the evening, and you have to do the same, have the same exams and tests. So not everybody who is studying evenings finishes school.

He got a very low paid job in Leningrad. So he got the first vacation, and he wanted to work at the pioneer camp. Pioneers, that's the young children. They went together to the pioneer camp to take me out of the city. I was one year old. Not to pay for the dacha. To get money during the summer. He wanted just my mom also to try how to work with kids, because this was one opportunity that he could provide for her to find a job, maybe together with him. She began to work with kids like--hard to explain. She was working with pioneers, so just watching kids. She looked like she liked that, and he found a job, this kind of job, for her at school.

Q: When they went back?

Sinitsky: Back to the city, yes. Then like in two years, she went to the pedagogical vocational school, like I worked, to get the diploma for the elementary school teachers. She worked as an elementary school teacher her whole life, for forty years.

Q: She liked it?
Sinitsky: Yes, she was okay. She just agreed with this, what to do.

Q: She had to do something.

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: And your father went on?

Sinitsky: My father began as a teacher at school, evening classes, then day classes. Then he wanted to study his whole life, and he was forty-seven when he finished his Ph.D. dissertation.

Q: What did he write his dissertation on?

Sinitsky: Methods of teaching history in the middle and high school. He is in pedagogy.

Q: I'm interested in where your parents were politically. Were they part of the communist party?

Sinitsky: No. My father was not taken, actually. Never.

Q: What did he think of it?

Sinitsky: You know, if you were working with kids, you just should follow all this stuff.

Q: "The stuff" meaning what? The party line?

Sinitsky: Yes, the party line and the ideology. Otherwise, you couldn't work there. All this was the life. They couldn't find anything else in the life, so they were in this. My mother, never. But my father, yes, because he said he should. He should teach history in the way it was written in the books.

Q: Right. I'm sure he did.

Sinitsky: He had many troubles during his life, very many, because he was Jewish. After he finished his Ph.D., he applied to teach at the Pedagogical Institute, where I finished, university level, and he was taken. They did a big file. He actually was responsible for taking students to the practice, to schools, and
look at them during the classes and analyze.

Q: Student teaching.

Sinitsky: Yes, student teaching. His boss, she just asked the students then after how was he doing everything, and he did a report that he was preparing very good the classes which explained the opening of the second front during the World War II, and didn't pay attention to the rule, for example, of the Soviet Army in the World War II. He worked there like half a year and he lost his job. He went back to school. So if I will tell you the whole history, it was just awful. It's not awful; it was life. You know, we were very upset, very tragic sometimes, but we were also very happy. We had wonderful things in our life.

Q: Are you an only child?

Sinitsky: Yes. How could they afford? [Laughter]

Q: More than you.

Sinitsky: Yes. They never could.

Q: What kind of Jewish life did you have?

Sinitsky: Me? Not at all. Just my friends. I don't know. Maybe it was just instinct that we joined each other always. But we always knew Passover in our family, always. I don't know how my mom knew that. The co-worker, she had one Jewish one. I don't know. What did we do for Passover? We always knew about Passover, and my mom always did a gefilte fish. Later we bought matzah at the synagogue. My father never did that. His parents never did that; they were communist, actually. My grandfather, sure.

Q: That was going to be my next question. Did he have any Jewish life in his growing up?

Sinitsky: You know, my father's father, he came from a very Jewish family, from a very small shtetl near Kiev. They were so poor and all of them belonged to the revolutionary movement. There were like nine kids in the family, and they were all involved in the revolution. This was just one hope for changing the life, and they
were so open to this hope, and they were so just—I don't know. I don't know why. It was their life. They hoped in this, and they really achieved, at the beginning, something. They went to big cities, which was impossible. They got education, which was impossible in the past. At the beginning, they felt it was probably freedom for them.

Q: Of course.

Sinitsky: Then later it was nothing. You see the end of the story. We're here.

Q: How about your mother's family? Did they do much in the way of Judaism?

Sinitsky: More. My mother's family was more traditionally Jewish because they are from south. Her parents were not educated people at all.

Q: Why from the south? What made it more so from the south?

Sinitsky: I don't know. They just lived in Odessa. She was born there. She was just one child who got a high education in the family, and they were eight. Most of them were dead already. So her father never read, never could write, and her mother was also not an educated woman. This was a very nice, very warm family.

Q: Did you know them?

Sinitsky: Yes. I can remember my grandmother, but she was wounded during the war and she was deaf. She couldn't hear. I was like fourteen or thirteen, she died.

Q: Did she stay in Odessa?

Sinitsky: In Odessa, yes, with her children. She lived with one, then with another on, and it was so. Sometimes she came to Leningrad. I remember she was in our house for some months.

Q: Did you use to go to Odessa to visit your relatives there?

Sinitsky: Yes, yes.
Q: Did your relatives speak Yiddish at all?

Sinitsky: They did.

Q: Do you understand any?

Sinitsky: Yes, sure. I speak German, so no problem because of my German. Many Yiddish words I studied from them, because they never spoke to each other in Yiddish, but the grandmother, she spoke Yiddish to the children and they understood. My mother left, but the other sisters, yes. My mother lived more with an older sister than with her mother, because my mother was thirteen, they were together leaving the city, and they were bombed on the way. My grandmother was wounded. Then my mother was taken by another older sister who was sixteen years older than she. Since that time, she lived with her. Then later she came to Odessa, back. She was like eighteen. She went to the university, and it was not such a close contact with the mother.

Q: Disrupted. Sure.

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: What about the friends that your parents had? Were they also Jewish friends?

Sinitsky: Mostly. Mixed, but mostly Jewish. Most of the friends were from my mother's university time, some, and some later from work, usually. Mostly Jewish or mixed.

Q: When you had friends in school?

Sinitsky: My best friend . . .

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Sinitsky: They just couldn't walk in your shoes.

Q: But when you were a kid, for instance, what was there to understand? How early did you understand that you were different?
Sinitsky: Five, six years old.

Q: What made you understand that?

Sinitsky: Because I was called. I was always called by my classmates. They just--

Q: How did they know?

Sinitsky: Because you know you have to report this, even in the library card you fill out. You go to the school library. Nationality, it's written there.

Q: I see.

Sinitsky: And in the class book the teacher has, it's written. So everyone knew.

Q: It isn't that you necessarily look anything.

Sinitsky: And you look different. Yes, sure, it's possible, too. I look very Jewish always. You know, it's not hidden. Never. It was very painful for the first time when I knew that, so I just asked my mom, "What is that?"

Q: What were you called?

Sinitsky: I was called like evreika (Jewess) at school, and I told to my mom, "Why do they do that?" She told me, "Yes, you are Jewish." So I was crying. I didn't want--because, you know, everyone was just raised like it was so bad to be Jewish. Same thing was with my son, absolutely the same with my older son.

Q: In what?

Sinitsky: In the same way when he recognized that he was Jewish. He was just so upset. He was terrible.

Q: How could you do that to him.

Sinitsky: Yeah. He couldn't believe that!
Q: So were there no positive aspects to being Jewish in the Soviet Union?

Sinitsky: Never. There's a wonderful joke about that. Let me tell you a joke. [Laughter] The people are working at the plant, and Jewish guys are working together with the Russian people and everything is okay. Suddenly this Jewish guy, he hears "Dirty Jew" or something like that.

"Who did say that? You did?"

"No, I'm working with you for twenty years. How can you imagine that? It never came to my mind."

"You did it!"

"No!"

"Ah! Switch off the radio."

Q: Oh.

Sinitsky: Okay? Because never the information was positive. Jewish people, Judaism. If they say the word "Jewish" it was always negative information.

Q: Among the Jews, though, didn't they have a feeling that they were better workers and smarter?

Sinitsky: I don't know. Maybe sometimes. Maybe. You know the illness of Russian people.

Q: Yes. And they don't drink as much.

Sinitsky: And Jews never did. [Telephone interruption. Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: I've had this impression that some of the Jews felt that they were better workers mainly because they didn't slack off from drinking.

Sinitsky: Only because of this, you know. You had to do something about your life if you are Jewish in the Soviet Union. You have to think more, you have to try more, just in order to survive. Otherwise, you will not have your life at all. Jews used to help each other very much, always. I don't know why.

Q: Tell us what it was like growing up. What kind of things did
you do other than go to school?

Sinitsky: Other than go to school? I loved theater very much, so like very young, going every week, and movies. I mean, not just go to the movies. Movie history and movements in the art and theory a little bit. So it was interesting. I learned a lot about that. Literature, also, that belonged to my education.

Q: When you talk about art, were there shows or was there any information about the Russian constructivists?

Sinitsky: That's a good question, because, you know, in Russia many things were just closed for the public. Maybe because of this we were anxious to know about that, about the American movie art, for example, but we couldn't find anything about American movie art. More about Italian or French and a little bit Sweden, but not about America. They bought usually the American westerns or social movies with many problems existing here.

Q: Like what?

Sinitsky: Like about black people, persecution against them, usually. But we saw, for example, "Kramer Versus Kramer." [Laughter] Was nice. So we knew "Frances." You know this movie? "Frances."

Q: I don't know. Francis, the talking mule?

Sinitsky: No. "Tootsie." We saw "Tootsie" with him, also. What is his name?

Q: Dustin Hoffman.


Q: Did you know Dustin Hoffman was Jewish?

Sinitsky: Never. But you know, in the movie "Kramer Versus Kramer," he's showing that he is from Brooklyn, so we could understand that he is probably. If he is from Brooklyn, he is.

Q: And money wasn't a problem?
Sinitsky: It's very cheap. Very cheap.

Q: Theater, too?

Sinitsky: Theater, too. Always. It is cheap and you can go, and all exhibitions from all over the world. So if they had something, we just ran. Leningrad itself, that's a museum. You have always something to see there. We got together with our friends, just having a good time. Camping is very, very popular.

Q: Did you go to the Komsomol camps?

Sinitsky: No.

Q: Why not?

Sinitsky: I don't know why. We just camped with, for example, the people with my class. We went camping to the lakes.

Q: Did you have dances?

Sinitsky: Sure. At school. Beatles were very popular at the time I was studying at school. And Vitsotsky [phonetic] began to sing. You don't know the name? Vladimir Vitsotsky? A very popular Russian bard. He is poetry with guitar. Very popular.

Q: Let me go back a minute. Were you in a day care program when you were very little while your mother worked?

Sinitsky: Yes, always. Day care, kindergarten, school, after school. Yes, typical teacher's child.

Q: And your mother worked all that time.

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: How did you meet boys and your husband?

Sinitsky: [Laughter] I met my husband--this is my second marriage. I was married before. I was very stupid. I married. I was eighteen. When Dennis was born, I even wasn't nineteen.

Q: Oh.
Sinitsky: Yeah. But he's a good child. Was also a Jewish man, but he was older than me, like fourteen years older, and it was really hard to be together. I was too young, probably. It was not a very smart idea, but it was experience.

Q: How did you meet him?

Sinitsky: At the theater. We were together--actually, I was looking for the tickets, because you cannot buy tickets at the cashier because always they are sold out. We used to stay in front of the theater and asking the people for extra ticket. He was asking for the extra ticket, too, so we got acquainted. In two years, I was back at home. So anyway . . .

Q: And you had a child.

Sinitsky: Yes, with me. Dennis.

Q: I have a question. Tell me a little bit about the apartment you grew up in.

Sinitsky: Apartment? Oh! It was not an apartment! It was actually two rooms in a big apartment. Two rooms, and we had one, two, three other families in this apartment. We had two rooms and we had three other rooms where lived three other families.

Q: So these are communal apartments.

Sinitsky: Communal apartment.

Q: Did you share the kitchen?

Sinitsky: The kitchen, bath, and lavatory.

Q: What about these other families? Were they families of people who also were of the same sort of social level? Same educational level?


Q: They weren't necessarily friends or anything?
Sinitsky: No, just people we never knew before. They were just sent by state there. They got their room there, and that's it. You had to live with them.

Q: Chance. It's chance.

Sinitsky: Chance.

Q: Were there large conflicts, or did you try to keep things smooth?

Sinitsky: I can't tell you anything because I was eighteen. I actually left the house, the home, and then I came back. We got the third room because I was with a child. We had just one woman in one room. All the other people got their apartments at that time already, and they were not so crowded. And then when I met Leonid--

Q: How old were you then?

Sinitsky: I was twenty-one. He was nineteen. He's younger.

Q: That's the way we all should go, you know. [Laughter]

Sinitsky: I am telling you this story, it's like it was not me; it was somebody else. [Laughter]

Q: How did you meet him?

Sinitsky: At a friend's. He was studying in Leningrad. He is actually from Odessa. He came to Leningrad to study at the college.

Q: Is this a particularly good--is this a feat for a Jew to be able to study in Leningrad?

Sinitsky: From small cities?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: Sure.

Q: So you're very special.
Sinitsky: Yes. Moscow is better. He went to Moscow, but they failed him. He was very good. He had wonderful grades, As, straight As. But they didn't take him in Moscow. He was taken in Leningrad, not very famous, but good school.

Q: What about you? Did you have trouble?

Sinitsky: At the university?

Q: No, I mean getting a position at the university.

Sinitsky: You mean to study?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: It was very hard. Very hard.

Q: What did you have to do to do it?

Sinitsky: To pass exams, but they always knew who is Jewish. Just across your names they put marks. It was very popular to study foreign languages, prestigious and popular, especially among Jewish, because this was not closed for Jews.

Q: I see.

Sinitsky: Okay?

Q: Why wasn't it closed for Jews?

Sinitsky: Because you know, you just know what kind of specialties are closed and what kind of specialties are not closed. For example, I couldn't go to the state university in Leningrad; it was impossible. But it was possible to go to the Pedagogical Institute. So my husband wanted to be taken to the Physical Institute in Moscow. He was denied. He went to the Leningrad Institute for Electronics--how did they call it?--for the Air Force. So he studied there. Because we just knew. He wanted to try. I didn't try. I knew. So just my father, he told me, "You will go there, and that's it." I never tried.

Q: What year were you married to Leonid?
Q: You said your first husband was Jewish. Did it matter to your parents who you married, if you married a Jew or a non-Jew? Did it matter to them?

Sinitsky: Sure.

Q: Did it really?

Sinitsky: Yes. It was impossible. I never would marry not a Jewish person.

Q: You told us about an aunt who had married a Russian, right?

Sinitsky: Yes. I wouldn't. Never marry a Russian person.

Q: Did this feeling come from you or come from your parents? Were they giving you signals?

Sinitsky: From my parents and from me. From everybody.

Q: What would have been the problems in so doing?

Sinitsky: It is hard. I see now my cousin, for example, she has a Russian husband. He is still not, you know, a person [unclear]. It is hard. [Telephone interruption. Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: We've gone back a little bit, because we've discovered that these grandparents are so important to children and to their grandchildren. You're telling us about when your grandfather finally moved to Leningrad. Go ahead now.

Sinitsky: My grandfather, he came back to Leningrad in '53. I was one year old. Even not one year, just a few months. He came in March, actually, right after Stalin's death. Then in two or three years he got married, because his wife was dead. He got married and they got a very good apartment because he got back his rank. It was after Stalin's death.

Q: He was reinstated?
Sinitsky: Exactly his rank. It was a little bit lower, one step lower. He got all his medals.

Q: His rank and his pension.

Sinitsky: His pension. He worked in a very good military--I don't know--research institute, doing not very important, but some projects.

Q: And he had this nice apartment.

Sinitsky: He had a very nice apartment, two rooms for two people. It is really good.

Q: His own kitchen?

Sinitsky: His own kitchen, his everything.

Q: Did you spend much time with him?

Sinitsky: Yes. Weekends. Every weekend I was sent over, because my parents never had time for me, which is okay.

Q: Did he use to tell you about his early life, you know?

Sinitsky: No.

Q: What did he mainly talk about?

Sinitsky: Israel.

Q: Israel! This is the communist talking now?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: Why Israel?

Sinitsky: He was just thinking all the time, "How is Israel developing and what's going on in Israel?" He bought the best radios to listen to Israel Voice. Especially after he was sixty, I remember him. I was eighteen [when] he died, so he was like sixty-nine. I remember him after he [was] sixty. I just remember him listening to the radio and talking, "If I am so old to go there, you will go there." He told me always that we have to do
everything; they exist. He told me this all the time.

Q: So his communism, in a way, was transferred into Zionism?

Sinitsky: You know, he lost his communism in the prison. Absolutely.

Q: That was going to be my next question. Did he become disillusioned?

Sinitsky: He lost everything, and he had something to live on. This was probably—he loved poetry, he gathered the books written by the poets. This was his hobby, and Israel. All maps and everything during the Six-Day War. The Six-Day War, I remember wonderful. We were with my father in the kitchen, which was shared with other people, and they were sleeping at night and we were listening.

Q: Were you listening to Voice Israel?

Sinitsky: To Voice of Israel while the war is going. I cried! I told him, "They will lose!" And my father told me, "Don't worry. They will never lose." It was something.

Q: Did you go out and celebrate afterward?

Sinitsky: I can't remember that.

Q: Was there any celebration in Leningrad?

Sinitsky: In Leningrad. How can you say that? To study Hebrew, you could get three years of prison, just to say one Hebrew word.

Q: But we had been told, when we had interviewed people who came from Kiev, that people used to gather in front of the synagogue on the High Holy Days.

Sinitsky: That's possible, yes. We went also. At the time we were in school, we went Simchas Torah. That was just on holiday, we came to synagogue with Leonya (her husband).
Q: Outside?

Sinitsky: Outside, dancing. No, inside, too, but there were so many people, just young people, and we were dancing outside, singing on our own, because we never had music.

Q: Was it illegal to do that?

Sinitsky: Lots of KGB people and many students were caught and thrown out of the universities.

Q: They were?

Sinitsky: They were. There was always risk.

Q: This was after the Six-Day War, right?

Sinitsky: Yes. Yes, beginning seventies. I was at school.

Q: You took the risk.

Sinitsky: Yes. My father never knew about that, because he would tell me a few nice words about that. It was risk. It was risk to lose everything you had. And so hard! Achieved so hard to be at school and then to lose everything.

Q: So why did you do it?

Sinitsky: It was interesting. We went there with a company, so few people came. But many girls just went there to meet boys, because people wanted to have Jewish boys and Jewish girls, and they went there.

Q: I was thinking, when you talk about all the negatives about being Jewish in the Soviet Union, and yet you go ahead and say you wouldn't think of marrying a Russian, this would be one way to erase that word "Hebrew" or "Jew" from the passport. So why not take one way out and make it easier for the next generation?

Sinitsky: Oh, not for me. I don't know why. Some people did. I know even Jewish people who just wrote down for kids "Russian," paid lots of money, did everything just to get the passport. We never did.
Q: It sounds like there was something that you were still proud of.

Sinitsky: Many things, actually.
Q: What?

Sinitsky: Because I was Jewish. [Laughter]

Q: So even though they told you it was awful and despicable, you didn't believe that.

Sinitsky: They can't tell me anything. Show me another people who can live on the earth the 6,000 years. We never find other people. Maybe this is our fate to live in different places, to be thrown out of this place and to continue life in another one. But this saves our people, you know. Who knows? This is unique history. Sometimes I don't like Jewish people, which is normal, I think. So Jews are different than everybody else.

Q: That's right.

Sinitsky: But there is something which is--who knows? I never know that. My mother told me just one time in my life--it was shown the basketball game, because it was final, so the Russian team fought against the Israelis. One time in my life we saw Israeli people as representatives of their state. It was in the final because they fought with Russians.

Q: They were playing the Russians. Otherwise you wouldn't have.

Sinitsky: Yes, sure. My mom told me, "You could be raised in this country (Israel), eating their bread and breathing their air." We were so upset they lost. I was so upset, I cannot tell you how upset I was! My mom told me, "Ah, you can be here, but you are looking over there anyway."

Q: You can be in Russia, but you were looking over the fence.

Sinitsky: I just was with this team, and that's it. And I don't know why. I can't explain it. You probably wouldn't, either.
Q: I don't know.

Sinitsky: You have different education, probably.

Q: Your grandfather was big on Israel. Did your father and mother have any--

Sinitsky: My mother, always. My mother, yes. My mother actually was very Jewish, always. That's from the family.

Q: Would she have liked to have gone to Israel?

Sinitsky: No. She wouldn't leave Russia if I wouldn't.

Q: She wouldn't have left if you hadn't. I think we hear that a lot.

Sinitsky: Yes. You know, they had their life over there in Russia. They had their friends and work and respect from work, you know, and my father was so busy during his life, he didn't want to hear about that. We always were thinking about leaving, because, you know--

Q: When you say "we," who's the we?

Sinitsky: My husband.

Q: Your husband and you. Okay. Now, why were you thinking about leaving?

Sinitsky: Because, you know, even my parents, having such a difficult life, were not so much persecuted because of their Judaism than we were. They still had a little bit hope and opportunity to jump in their life, which we didn't have anymore in our time, seventies.

Q: What changed?

Sinitsky: Anti-Semitism was growing and growing. At the time I grew up, it was awful. So seventies was the time of stagnation, you know, where everybody, Russians were drinking, you know, nobody was working, everybody was stealing, no morals, no hope, nothing in the society. For Jews, everything closed and you always felt you
were worse than others. And they always knew we were not competitive to them. It's a terrible feeling.

Q: So you and your husband had talked about it early on?

Sinitsky: Sure. We wanted to leave right after we finished school, but we just couldn't because he finished school--I told you he finished school for aircraft, something like that, and the guy from his school was denied. He was a Refusnik. We just didn't try, because we knew what it was to be a Refusnik in the Soviet Union.

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: So it was impossible. You know, if I would have reached parents who can fit us, but we were on our own, so we couldn't.

Q: Where were you living after you married?

Sinitsky: With my parents.

Q: The second time, too?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: For how long did you live--did you get an apartment of your own?

Sinitsky: We had these three rooms, that apartment. Then I had my father's two aunts, I told you, and they had also two rooms in another apartment. We moved all together in one big apartment.

Q: These are your father's aunts or your father's sisters?

Sinitsky: No, two aunts. One aunt died, this younger one who saved his life, and then the older one lived with them until '82. We moved together in '78.

Q: So this was a communal apartment?

Sinitsky: It was just a big apartment where we lived all together, but just relatives.

Q: That sounds very nice.
Sinitsky: It was very nice, a big apartment, but then we separated. My parents got a very good one and we got a very bad one, but this was just for us, two rooms for me, Leonid, and Dennis. When we got this apartment, two rooms, and everything, so--apartment, life [unclear] apartment.

Q: Tell me the children's names.

Sinitsky: Dennis.

Q: Is that his Russian name?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: D-E-N-N-I-S?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: And his birthdate?


Q: And then you have Slava.


Q: And his birthdate?

Sinitsky: He was born June 20, 1981. After we got the apartment for us, we quit, had the second child. We just couldn't--we were six years married at that time.

Q: Then Leonid went to work as what? Did he go to work for aircraft?

Sinitsky: Never. [Laughter] He was maybe the third on the list for getting jobs after he graduated. He was not taken by anybody, so he was an electronical engineer, but not as a designer, at the production process in a plant, radio plant, something like that.

Q: So this was because of anti-Semitism?
Sinitsky: Sure. [Laughter]

Q: I know you're laughing, but I feel we should put it down on the tape.

Sinitsky: I'm laughing, but it's normal for that life.

Q: I feel I have to put it down for whoever listens to it, who doesn't understand the problems of growing up in the Soviet Union.

Sinitsky: Yes. It's not easy for Russian people, too.

Q: No.

Sinitsky: Much easier than for Jewish, but also if you don't have connections or money, you would never get anything. It's hard.

Q: We seldom talk to people who have lots of money and connections. I suppose there was somebody.

Sinitsky: But you know--

Q: Those people didn't have to emigrate.

Sinitsky: That's true. They're still there. They're still there or they left because they just fear the mass, the crowd.

Q: Was Dennis also in day care?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: While you worked.

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: It was okay?

Sinitsky: He was in day care, then in kindergarten. It was not okay.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]
Q: I always hear about trying to juggle taking care of your child and standing in lines and going to get food and all that kind of thing, you know. Was that so? How did it work for you?

Sinitsky: Sure. You know, it's hard to explain. The Soviet Union is not the normal country. Everything is not normal. I actually didn't stand in lines so much. I found connections. [Laughter]

Q: I see. Okay. So tell me an example of your connections.

Sinitsky: For example, I just knew the butcher, a Jewish guy, who sold to me meat, and I just called him that I need this or that, and he just sold meat. I don't know where he took it. Maybe he had stolen that. I don't know. Or he worked for the shop. You know, I don't know.

Q: Did you have to do something for him?

Sinitsky: I just paid him. That's it.

Q: So it was money.

Sinitsky: It was money. Or I could buy some stuff at school where I worked, so through [unclear] we got some sausage, some fruit, some vegetables. So you could buy during the day.

Q: Was there enough time to do all this, get yourself together and your job together and your kid together?

Sinitsky: Yes. How to explain? The people do not work as hard as here. I worked actually eighteen hours. So for teachers it's not like here. For example, you're so tired to have six hours a day in class. In Russia you have to have just eighteen and preparations, then preparations whatever you want--nights, mornings, that's your time. You have to be in classes eighteen hours a week. That's the norm. I had not more than twenty-two. It was not so hard. I had a Saturday, Sunday, and one day during the week off.

Q: Really?

Sinitsky: They put my schedule like that, and the whole summer. So I could manage some things. I worked a lot always. I had
private students. I worked at the exhibitions as an interpreter, trade exhibitions. I did lots of stuff.

Q: So that was a way of making more money?

Sinitsky: Yes, to support the family. Sure. My husband did also his best.

Q: But it took both of you, really.

Sinitsky: Both of us, yes, so we could exist, I think. We could do some nice—you know, to go on vacation.

Q: Where did you go?

Sinitsky: Usually to Odessa. He is actually also from over there, and his parents were there, so we went there to be on the sea, and during summer to get fruits and vegetables.

Q: Were there more fruits and vegetables available there?

Sinitsky: Sure, because that's the place where they grow all the stuff.

Q: So it's harder to get in Leningrad?

Sinitsky: Much harder and not the same taste. They have really good stuff over there.

Q: That's interesting. I wouldn't have thought that about that, really.

Sinitsky: Just to take a walk through their bazaars is a wonderful thing. They are full, especially in August.

Q: Good things to eat.

Sinitsky: Wonderful vegetables and fruits and melons, watermelons.

Q: Did you go out with other couples?

Sinitsky: Yes. You mean restaurants?
Q: No. What did you do when you went out in Leningrad?

Sinitsky: We didn't go to the restaurants at all in Leningrad. We didn't like that. It was very expensive, first, and, second, we didn't like that because, you know, who could go to the restaurants? Who has much money. And who has much money in the Soviet Union? The people who trade. The atmosphere was just not nice.

Q: What do you mean, the people who trade?

Sinitsky: Who trade. Like marketers.

Q: How about Soviet officials?

Sinitsky: They have probably special places. Okay? So we usually visited our friends. We just got together, had good parties, or went to nice places, went to the suburbs, went for walks. I don't know. What did we do? Went skiing when I was young in wintertime. In summer we usually went to the beaches. What else? Theater very much. Theater, concerts. Usually to museums with the kids, parents. That's the life.

Q: With your husband and child, did you celebrate any Jewish holidays?

Sinitsky: At home? No. Just we? Never. For the first time, here this year, Passover. Slava brought it from school in Russian, and we did everything. He gave me a list what I should buy. [Laughter] I went through the shops according to this list. For the first time in my life.

Q: You had gefilte fish, though?

Sinitsky: Everything.

Q: Your mother's.

Sinitsky: But we didn't do everything according to the rules. We'd just celebrate like a usual Russian party. But my mom did something from matzah, like pancakes from matzah, with eggs.
Q: Yes. Okay.

Sinitsky: And fish. She did just good things, and we always celebrated all the holidays together. We were very close with parents. You know, I don't know why. Just the life was so that we were more dependent on each other. I bought for my mother. If I saw, for example, without any lines, tomatoes, I bought for me and for her. And she got something for me and for her. We helped a lot to each other, who could do what for who.

Q: When Dennis was little, would your mother still have some little Passover celebration?

Sinitsky: Always. Always.

Q: So you did do something.

Sinitsky: Yes. Every year we did Passover. I can't remember if it was at the university, we even did Passover not only with the parents, but with some students. We just got together, just because it was Passover, celebrate, had a bottle of wine. Not kosher, but . . . [Laughter]

Q: Was it fun to do it this time?

Sinitsky: Yes, very much fun.

Q: Did you have others besides just you?

Sinitsky: Yes, many, and my friend who is now in New York. We usually came to her apartment because they didn't have any neighbors in the apartment, so we could do it.

Q: You could do that without being overheard. Is that what you mean?

Sinitsky: Sure. Even sing. We'd sing.

Q: What did you sing?

Sinitsky: "Hava Negillah." [Laughter]

Q: [Laughter] The one that you knew, right?
Sinitsky: We knew just this word "Hava Negillah," la, la, la. [Sinitsky sings a short song]. You know this song? *(Trinken a bisl wein)*

Q: I don't think so.

Sinitsky: I think this is a wedding song.

Q: Was that sung at your wedding?

Sinitsky: Yes. My husband's grandmother, she knows it. We always sang even songs in Russia about Jewish life. They came from Odessa sometimes, so full of humor, this kind of thing, but in Russian.

Q: Interesting.

Sinitsky: A different life.

Q: What about Dennis' growing up? You had mentioned before that he came home crying the same way you had.

Sinitsky: Dennis. He was two years old. I was with him again with my parents, and actually my husband knew him from the beginning. He had connections with his father during all this time, until we left. They're very good friends with Leonid. That's not a question.

Q: Could your first husband have stopped you from coming?

Sinitsky: No.

Q: Because of the child?

Sinitsky: No. He could stop me, yes. We didn't apply before we got his permission.

Q: Okay. But he didn't stop you.

Sinitsky: He didn't stop, because he left also. He's in New York.

Q: Oh, he is?
Sinitsky: Yes. So we tried to give Dennis the best education we could. He went to very good schools in Leningrad.

Q: When you say very good schools, we always think that the schools are going to be the same all over. Is that not true?

Sinitsky: No, that's not true.
Q: How do they differ? And what are your choices?

Sinitsky: There are schools with different programs, with special extra programs. For example, school with math program, with language program, and so on.

Q: They're sort of like magnet schools here, then, right?

Sinitsky: Absolutely. If you do not belong, if you do not live in the place which belongs to this school, you do not have any access to be taken to this school, so you have to put all your connections, you know, and strings to get your child into this school.

Q: Do you have to move then? Do you have to use your connections to change apartments?

Sinitsky: We didn't move, because it is not so easy like here. Different story.

Q: They find a place for the child and then he travels a further distance.

Sinitsky: Yes. I brought him to school every day before my work.

Q: How long did it take you to get there?

Sinitsky: It was not a long time. We went from one part of the city to his school, and I worked not far. So I knew what school I wanted to bring the child, because I worked not far. So I just chose the school with English, actually, program. He went to the school. He began to study English. He was in the second grade.

Q: Were you thinking about moving? Did you choose English because it was closest to your work or because you were thinking about leaving?
Sinitsky: I always thought about leaving, and I always told to my father that he did a big mistake, made a big mistake to put me into German school, not into an English one. [Laughter] English could give much more opportunities for the person in the Soviet Union than German, for example. I just felt it myself. I wanted that my child knows a foreign language badly, because I knew it is important. I wanted that he knows another culture, he reads other literature, he knows other people with different psychology, with different points of view. You know, it is very interesting. It is very important for the child to know and for his education, just part of the education, but not to give extra if you can. I wanted to give it to him.

Q: How do you think the education there compares to the education here?
Sinitsky: The basic skills, I mean, in theories, are much better there, especially elementary, middle school, and high school levels. But what they never taught and are not teaching the kids is to think independently, which is very valuable here. I don't know.

Q: So there are pluses and minuses.

Sinitsky: You know, it could be another maybe project to compare the systems over there and here, but they have many pluses. The first plus, I think, over there, this is the education of the teachers. So the teachers are specially trained in the Soviet Union. Here you will not find this. You have an educational department, but that's not the same. The education of the teachers, I mean in the good schools, not in the province, but the good schools, is much better.

Q: More highly trained teachers.

Sinitsky: Teachers. Also I cannot say about every teacher. You know, it's hard to say in general. But you can find in each Russian school many very good teachers. I think my son was very lucky because of the teachers.

Q: He had good teachers.

Sinitsky: He got very good teachers.
Q: What grade was he in when you left?

Sinitsky: Over there? He finished high school.

Q: He was all done.

Sinitsky: He finished eight classes in this particular school with English program, and he moved to the school with math and physics program, and finished that. So he's finishing next year there at a university having many credits from the graduate school. He's taking classes at graduate school already, and he is just two years in the University of Minnesota.

Q: What is his field of study?

Sinitsky: He wants to be in theoretical physics. I don't know if it's practical enough. [Laughter] He wants to be a professor.

Q: His English was really good?


Q: He had studied all that English.

Sinitsky: His English was better than all of us. He began here to wash dishes.

Q: Very good.

Sinitsky: Very good.

Q: It's an American way to go. That's right. Did he have problems with anti-Semitism in his school?

Sinitsky: Some teachers. You know, he didn't, because he didn't live as an adult over there. He was never stopped. You know, you begin to be stopped at the university. So this time you go to the university is a very, very difficult time. So before you are dependent on your parents and on what your parents can do for you. So we just could put him into this school. Then we didn't try anything to put him into the math school because he was taken. He had really good results, you know. They had like Olympic games in math and physics, like competitions in the city, and he was in the
first twenty kids in the city, so he got very good—you know, they just couldn't deny his documents. We never tried to do anything. He was taken to the math school. But after the school, for example, they had a class of many Jewish students, I would say 35 percent, 40 percent, and no one went to the university.

Q: Oh, my.

Sinitsky: No one. They all went to the colleges. They didn't try, even.

Q: They didn't try, even? Why not try.

Sinitsky: Because you will be taken to the Army.

Q: Oh.

Sinitsky: You lose a year. You will be eighteen. You have to go to the Army.

Q: I see. How long are you in the Army once you're in?

Sinitsky: Two years or three in the Marine.

Q: It's better than the twenty-five 100 years ago when your grandparents first came.

Sinitsky: For a Jewish kid, more than enough.

Q: Were there dangers around Jewish kids in the Army?

Sinitsky: Very much. So much violence. They just do whatever they want. What is an Army? They take kids from all over the country, from all places, villages, you know, Kazakhstan. Almost everyone is together.

Q: They can mold you into a Soviet citizen.

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: [Laughter] You don't think too much of that. And imbue you with the ideals of Soviet society.

Sinitsky: I would die if my son had to go to the Army. I don't
know how I would stay through this.

Q: Is that why you decided to leave? Was this some precipitating factor?

Sinitsky: No. Just this guy who was together with my husband at school. You remember? Who was denied. He got permission.

Q: What year was that?

Sinitsky: It was December '87.

Q: And as soon as he got permission, you--

Sinitsky: So we applied March '88.

Q: Your time had come.

Sinitsky: Sure. Because we understood that after [Mikhail] Gorbachev came, that probably they do not stop this level of the people anymore.

Q: Because you weren't important enough to be kept back. Is that what you're saying?

Sinitsky: Uh-huh.

Q: How did your parents react?

Sinitsky: My father was sick. It was very hard. It was so hard, because, you know, Diane, I can't understand him. He built this life. He fought so hard during his whole life to get the little bit comfortable level of existing. Finally he had this apartment like for six years, for him and his wife. He lived always in the communal apartment. Finally he, you know, was respected, he was already retired, but he continued to work. It was comfortable work. He could earn some pension plus his salary. You know, then suddenly go to the zero again.

Q: Yes. His life turned over.

Sinitsky: It was a shock for him.
Q: Am I hearing that he assumed that he would go with you?

Sinitsky: No, he assumed that he would lose first his job.

Q: Because of your application.

Sinitsky: Sure. First, his job; second, all respect. The people feared to meet with him, to say hello. He just was upset with all these ideas. He didn't state that he would follow me. I asked him. He told me, "No. Please, not now."

Q: Did this happen but you applied anyhow? Is that correct?

Sinitsky: He told me at that point, "If you want, do it, but don't touch me now."

Q: But you needed this permission, is that correct?

Sinitsky: Yes. He gave me.

Q: Your parents did come subsequently.

Sinitsky: They're here.

Q: I can understand where they come from, because how do they know, at their age and stage, that it's going to be better? They don't know, really.

Sinitsky: I think it's going to be better there. We never know.

Q: How do they know that coming here will be better?

Sinitsky: They didn't know.

Q: They didn't know.

Sinitsky: No. But he told me that he just felt he cannot live without seeing us.

Q: That's what he decided later?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: After you had left.
Sinitsky: After we left. He told me, "We just can't. Mom is crying all the time." She raised both boys, and it's impossible.

Q: When you say she raised both boys--

Sinitsky: What is it?

Q: Yes. What does that mean exactly?

Sinitsky: Dennis, we lived together. When I came, he was two. Then four years. Then we married, Dennis was four, and then four years we lived together. Dennis was eight after we moved out to our apartment. All weekends, and same thing with Slava, and then summertime. Mama was always coming to let us go out. For example, Slava was born, I was at home for one year.

Q: Slava was born when?

Sinitsky: 1981. I stayed at home for one year and then Leonya began to work just second shift, to sit with him in the first part of the day. I was working. But he had to leave, for example, at two, and I came at four. And my mom came after work to be in the house in between. So they were always with us. She helped a lot.

Q: And you wouldn't be able to manage very well without, even though there's day care, etc.

Sinitsky: Sure. They were a big help. They are even now, you know. They came.

Q: How did you happen to come to Minnesota? [Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: There was no information?

Sinitsky: No information.

Q: About sex education.

Sinitsky: That's because of the mistakes I made in the beginning.
Q: It just isn't taught at school, and people get pregnant.

Q: And Mama doesn't tell you.

Sinitsky: No. It's just not the topic that people talk about. It's terrible, you know. It's part of them. I don't know what craziness. I don't know. It is very, very bad, because the people are not educated. They don't know what to expect.

Q: Did your mother tell you about what would happen on your wedding night, for instance?

Sinitsky: No.

Q: Your friends? You talked with your girlfriends about that?

Sinitsky: No, I don't think so. Nobody.

Q: So you were entirely unprepared?

Sinitsky: Unprepared.

Q: If you had daughters, would you do it differently?

Sinitsky: I think so. I did it with my son.

Q: That was my next question. I mean, that information is necessary for sons, too.

Q: Today it certainly is.

Sinitsky: We had some books and he asks questions.

Q: You do your best. Let's see. Where were we. I was interested in why Minnesota. How did you happen to emigrate to Minnesota?

Sinitsky: I had a very good friend. Do you know Leiderman, Michael and Anna?

Q: Yes, I know who they are.

Sinitsky: Their daughter worked with me together at the information center for three years. We were very close friends. We wrote to each other all the time. She just told me, "Come here.
It's a nice place." She was in North Dakota. She married a man from North Dakota. She found a Jew in North Dakota. [Laughter]

Q: Who?

Sinitsky: Cary Geller. You know him?

Q: We know him very well because Diane has family in North Dakota and the Gellers' parents were interested in North Dakota Jewish history. Cary gave the Jewish Historical Society all that material, and Diane has been putting it in order.

Q: I put all that information that Cary Geller had gathered on a database.

Q: And now they live here, the Gellers.

Sinitsky: The Gellers came here.

Q: I haven't met her, but I've only met him, and he seems like a very nice guy. Small world.

Sinitsky: He is. She is also very nice, Inna?

Q: I would like to meet her. That's very interesting. She ended up in North Dakota.

Sinitsky: Yes. She has an absolutely different situation. She came here, she was twenty-five and married him in five years and made a career here. She was a programmer analyst. Then she married to him, broke with her job, went to North Dakota, had two children, and they came back. They have two daughters.

Q: It must have been a terrible culture shock for somebody from Leningrad to end up in North Dakota.

Sinitsky: Yes. She dreamed to come back to Minneapolis. She is so happy to be here. She is [unclear] every day. It is so nice.

Q: When you speak to the Gellers, tell them that we have this connection through the Jewish Historical Society now.

Sinitsky: Very interesting.
Q: The Leidermans, her parents, had come here, too?

Sinitsky: No. I actually didn't know them very well, but Inna called the Jewish Family Service of St. Paul, where she came, actually, eight or ten years ago, and asked if there is a possibility for a family like we were.

Q: Is this in '88, still?

Sinitsky: Yes. We came here October '88, where the flow of emigrants was very, very little. We came right after the Refusniks, with the Refusniks together. Late '88. The highest level of emigration was like September and summer of '89. I was in the Jewish Family Service already, working there.

Q: Did you go to Italy first? Did you go through Vienna?

Sinitsky: Vienna and Italy.

Q: How about the process once you applied for emigration? Did anything bad happen to anyone?

Sinitsky: I lost my job.

Q: Immediately?

Sinitsky: Immediately. He told me he would never sign any documents if I will not give him the paper that I will not continue to work.

Q: Who told you this?

Sinitsky: My director. It was just awful. I didn't expect that. He was a young man, like early forties, very intelligent. I had a group, and the girls that were finishing school, and I had to put them through all the celebrations and all the tests. I didn't expect that.

Q: What was his reason?

Sinitsky: He was so frightened. I thought he would die from this fear. He told me, "So. You write that resignation and I will sign
your documents." Then my husband told me, "Oh, no, I will not say
the same," at the plant where he worked. "I will tell them I go
for a visit. Because if I lose job, how will we live?" We were
afraid that we could be denied. Who knew? He told them that we
were—he filled out everything with a pencil, went to them, signed
the paper. They took it away and typed it. [Laughter]

Q: He typed up something else?

Sinitsky: Yes, that we'd leave for Israel. Here he put with a
pencil that he is visiting his relatives in Israel, and that’s it.

Q: I see. Okay. So at work they didn't care at that point. Then
how long did it take before you got permission?

Sinitsky: Very fast. We applied March 14. We got permission May
28. May 30, Mr. [Ronald] Reagan came to the Soviet Union. It was
a big group of people.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

Q: So your timing was perfect. Reagan was coming. You got your
permission two days before. Then when did you leave?

Sinitsky: August 20.

Q: Oh, boy.

Sinitsky: It took us just two months to come here. Inna called,
and they prepared all the documents, all good and fast.

Q: You flew to Italy?

Sinitsky: No, we flew to Austria first.

Q: That was great for you, wasn't it?

Sinitsky: Oh, no. Yeah.

Q: Was it not?

Sinitsky: Yeah. My son told me, "Here, you can translate for us
everything!" I was in a big depression.
Q: Why?

Sinitsky: You know, to be separated from the parents. I was in very difficult feeling. I was in depression, and that's it. I didn't want to see anything. I just wanted to lie and sleep, and that's it. But we went to some museums. They just pushed me and pushed me, all three of them. The smaller one didn't understand what was happening with him at all. It was hard.

Q: Sure. It is hard.

Sinitsky: In Italy I was much better. Italian, you know, the memories are much better for me.

Q: There's something about Italy that lightens everyone's spirits.

Sinitsky: Ah! Wonderful country. Even they don't speak German, which I understood. Austria is a very cold country. The people. I mean the people. But Italy, everything is beautiful. Beautiful, that's the word for this country.

Q: And people look like you, don't you think?

Sinitsky: Yeah.

Q: You feel more comfortable.

Sinitsky: Oh, no problem.

Q: I always feel more comfortable in Italy.

Sinitsky: Italy is so beautiful. They're just so open, very nice. They're beautiful, they look wonderful, their clothes look wonderful, so tastful in everything. Wonderful sunshine, beautiful churches, paintings.

Q: Delicious food.

Sinitsky: We did everything on our own.

Q: But the fruits and vegetables are beautiful.

Sinitsky: Yes.
Q: Okay. So you came here and you found the way was prepared for you? Is that correct? What did the Jewish Family Service do for you?

Sinitsky: They found wonderful volunteers for us. That's first. It's Ann and Hirsch Specter. They did a great job, just wonderful job. They rented apartment and bought furniture, and the refrigerator was full.

Q: Where did you live when you first came?

Sinitsky: In the Walkowitz Apartments. We were so lucky!

Q: On St. Paul Avenue?


Q: So that was great.

Sinitsky: We were lucky. Nice place.

Q: Did you go to International Institute?

Sinitsky: Yes, I went to the International Institute for one and a half months, my husband for three weeks. We began to look for jobs.

Q: Your husband for only three weeks?

Sinitsky: Because he began to look for a job. This was another job. He had to be at home during the day. Actually, he began to work in--

Q: Did he speak English.

Sinitsky: A little bit. His English is not so good, even today. He is very comfortable. He is talking and communicating and working. Everything is okay, but he is not fluent. That's it.

Q: Why did he have to be at home during the day?

Sinitsky: Because of looking for a job. He was on the phone the
whole day.

Q: But how could he be on the phone if he just spoke a little English?

Sinitsky: He studied what he should talk on the phone. Slava's first words in English were, "I am electronic engineer from the Soviet Union. May I look what you're doing in your company? I am so interested to look how you work here." [Laughter]

Q: That's what Slava said first?

Sinitsky: Slava said first, because he heard this so many times during the day! [Laughter] It was very--now I can remember this like fun, but--

Q: It wasn't then. It was a pretty tense time, right?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: And then did he find a job pretty quickly?

Sinitsky: Three and a half months.

Q: That's not bad.

Q: Well, it must have seemed like an eternity, though.

Q: It really isn't, though.

Sinitsky: I don't know.

Q: Did you compare your situation? Were there other Russians living in the building that you could--

Sinitsky: Never. I'm not the person who is comparing. I don't know why. I just know what I want.

Q: Because it's sort of comfortable at some point to know how other people are doing.

Q: Did you become friends with the rest of the Russian community?

Sinitsky: We knew many people who came before. Not many people
came. We were shown to the rest of the Russian community as newcomers, and everyone was very interested because few people came. We were the first. They invited us. Many of them invited us to their houses and talked to us, and this kind of information we gathered, all the information, all the time. We were very friendly with everybody, and we visited everybody. We used every chance to get together with the people.

Q: So you became part of the community.

Sinitsky: Sure. We became part of that community and it was very nice. The people really supported us. It was very much supportive.

Q: Have you remained friends with some part of the community?

Sinitsky: From that time?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: We are not close friends, but--

Q: Friendly.

Sinitsky: Very friendly, like Inna Braginsky. I love this family very much and have very much respect to them. The Govses, too. I like them very much. They came earlier than we, like four or five months earlier. Then Mila Green [phonetic]. You know Mila Green?

Q: I don't know.

Sinitsky: Mark and Mila? You know them, probably. We are not close now. We do not get together now. I don't know why. Because they get their friends and their families. We've got our friends and our families. You know, during this two years, so many people came, and we were like a stem.

Q: You were a stem and there are now branches.

Sinitsky: Yes. But when we are getting together, meet each other, it's always nice.

Q: Now, Jane, who are the people you are friendly with? Are there
other people from the Soviet Union?

Sinitsky: Inna came here, and I'm very glad to have her here. The Gellers. We are very, very close friends.

Q: You said that she worked with you in the Soviet Union?

Sinitsky: Yes. At the information center. She was translating into English and I was doing the same from German and into German. Other families that we are very close, my husband's relatives, Feingersch.

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: We're very, very close with them. My parents and his parents and his brother, you know. Is it not too much? [Laughter]

Q: That's quite remarkable that all of this family is being reconstituted here.

Sinitsky: We have the whole family here.

Q: Did you join a synagogue?

Sinitsky: I still don't know what synagogue do I belong to, but I think we belong to Temple of Aaron. On Rosh Hashana, we go to Temple of Aaron every year. When we go into the synagogue extras, as we say, so we are really busy. We're working. What to do? We have to. We have kids. We have to work. We go to synagogue, to Temple of Aaron, but we went a few times to Mount Zion. I like the synagogue, too. To the concerts.

Slava Sinitsky: To Beth Jacob, also.

Sinitsky: Yes, we went to Beth Jacob once, and he goes to Jewish school.

Q: You mean the day school?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: What was your decision for putting him in the day school instead of a public school?
Sinitsky: When we came here, he went to the public school for a year, to the ESL class as Homecroft.

Q: What school?

Sinitsky: English as second language. For one year. Then we decided to put him into the Jewish school first. We wanted that he gets a Jewish education and he will be not so stupid than we are in the synagogue not to understand anything, and just to show that you understand. It's an awful feeling. So because of this we do not go so often. We just don't feel comfortable to show. I do not understand that. That's not my fault.

Q: A lot of us who have been here all of our lives don't either.

Sinitsky: But he will. He will go through school. He will probably understand. He will know the tradition. He is teaching us.

Q: I guess we saw that about our children, too. Our children know much more than I ever did or ever will.

Sinitsky: Another part of our decision has been that he is among other Jewish kids. I'd like he has the success of Jewish kids of America, which is also very good. The classes are not too big. Small classes. He still has problems. He has problems in language. He will be ten. He doesn't read as fast as the ten-year-old American kids, you know, but he doesn't read as well in Russian. He reads in Russian and he reads in English, but not as the ten-year-old kids here. He is doing everything in two languages, and that's difficult for him. He is moving, but not as fast maybe as we wished. In this school he can get more attention from the teachers, and they are really fighting with him together through this difficulties, and they help a lot.

Q: So you are pleased with this education?

Sinitsky: I am very much, yes. I begin already to pay. If we will work, we will pay.

Q: How long did it take you to find a job when you came here?

Sinitsky: Three months.
Q: That's swift.

Q: You went to work for whom?

Sinitsky: For Berlitz Language School. I never thought I would work in America according to my profession, but I do. [Laughter]

Q: And what did you do for Berlitz?

Sinitsky: Taught German and Russian, both.

Q: Do you still work there?

Sinitsky: Yes, part time, evenings.

Q: Then what did you do after that? What was the next step?

Sinitsky: Next step was to look for stable job with benefits, because my husband lost his job after two and a half months. He even was not eligible for unemployment. So we had to go back to welfare to get medical insurance. We couldn't apply for money because he earned some money during this two and a half months, but we didn't have any medical insurance. In two weeks he was employed again. But during this two weeks, I just understood that I have to look for something which could cover the family, because I began to work like an independent person at the language school, doing some translations, doing some interpreting, you know. It was not too bad, but it didn't give me what I needed.

Q: So your first permanent job was--

Sinitsky: At the Jewish Family Service. But you know that I was invited first to the Minneapolis Jewish Service?

Q: No, I didn't know that.

Sinitsky: It was funny.

Q: What did you do at the Jewish Family Service?
Sinitsky: I was resettlement worker or something like that.

Q: Then was that a forty-hour-a-week job?

Sinitsky: No, just thirty. It was 80 percent, which was enough to have the insurance, which I didn't buy because my husband--

Q: Had got a job.

Sinitsky: I had the part-time job in the Carlton College.

Q: You drove down there to teach which language?

Sinitsky: Russian once a week during the whole year.

Q: Did you enjoy that?

Sinitsky: Very much. It was just wonderful. Wonderful.

Q: And then your next job?

Sinitsky: So then I began this in '89, in the summer, both in Jewish Family Service in July and then in September at Carlton. In June 1990, I was invited for an interview to Holy Angels, Academy of the Holy Angels. They just had my resume from a year ago when I was looking for a job, and they invited me for an interview. They gave me an offer.

Q: Where is that?

Sinitsky: That's in Richfield, very close. Nicolet and 66th Street.

Q: You teach what, Russian and German?

Sinitsky: Russian and German. Three classes of Russian and two of German.

Q: So you have an excellent opportunity to compare high schools. What do you think about high schools here?

Sinitsky: Different. Very different. [Laughter] I even took a group of kids to Russia in April. I just came.
Q: From what school?

Sinitsky: From the school. Five kids for two weeks.

Q: How did you find it?

Sinitsky: Very interesting. It was very interesting.

Q: In what way?

Sinitsky: You know, it's still an interesting country.

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: It isn't bad. It is beautiful. It is awful. It is not normal. It is rich. It is, you know, very rich culturally. They are in the process of changes, big changes, and I think that the communists do not have as much power as they used to have. There really is hope that the society will be changed. It will probably take maybe ten, maybe twenty years, but if they will really go this way of changes as they are going, because during this two and a half years I couldn't recognize the country. Private enterprises, you know, joint ventures, international companies, German shops, people have currency. In the past you could be sued for having currency. It was under the law, just to keep currency.

They really have changes, and anti-Semitism is now not so much from state as it used to be always much more from the crowd, which is [unclear] because of the economic situation.

Q: So it's extremely dangerous.

Sinitsky: It is. Now it's physically dangerous to be Jewish.

Q: Truly, physically?

Sinitsky: You can buy Jewish paper on the street. In Leningrad they opened the Jewish school at the synagogue and they study Hebrew. You can find the advertisements in the metro stations, that the people can take classes in Hebrew. I couldn't believe my eyes!
Q: That is pretty remarkable. But there's physical danger?

Sinitsky: But at the same time it is really dangerous for Jews to live there, because the people are so angry.

Q: And they blame--
Sinitsky: And they blame all of us as always.

Q: Who else?

Sinitsky: They blame Jews.

Q: Is it actually true that Jews have been beaten up?

Sinitsky: That's true.

Q: It is true?

Sinitsky: That's true.

Q: It's hard to know what is propaganda.

Sinitsky: I never see that, but I felt this possibility. The possibility is existing, because no law, no protection, not only for Jews. Nothing is--chaos in the country.

Q: Are people afraid?

Sinitsky: Yes. The people are afraid. It is dangerous to go out in the evenings. It's not nice to be there now. But the people live. I was [there] in April. Young people meet with each other and go, you know, through the streets and having a good time. Life is going on. They are not dead.

Q: No, as always. People don't give up. What were your expectations that the United States was going to be like when you came?

Sinitsky: My expectations, first, I don't know, hard to say. I just wanted to live in freedom, and maybe not being so young anymore, but to feel that you can do something in life. You never know what you could do there. You know? To try yourself on the free ground, where you--you know. And it was very interesting to begin. It was very hard then. It was very hard. I was never
pessimistic here. I was surprised, because it was hard for me to leave the Soviet Union. My husband was initiator of the whole story. The initiative came from him, actually.

Q: It did? Because he felt he couldn't get ahead?

Sinitsky: He just felt it's time that we have to go. We have to go because it will be not future for the kids anyway. Anyway, no future for the kids at all. But at the time we came here, he did [go] through his period of depression. He went through this. I didn't.

Q: And you didn't? But you had.

Sinitsky: I had probably in Austria. I don't know. But here, never. Because, you know, it is funny. One phone call can change your life. It is really the land of opportunities.

Q: What phone call changed your life?

Sinitsky: Somebody calls that needs you. You know? You never know. If you contact so many people. I was looking for my job through the Yellow Pages, and I found Berlitz through the Yellow Pages. [Laughter]

Q: And you didn't need this network of people to get you a job.

Sinitsky: Not me. Nuh-huh. He found his job through the technical journal. He opened the last page and found out the companies which are doing things he could be involved in, and he just sent his resume to them. [Telephone interruption. Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: We are in America. So could you believe that things were so straightforward here? You go through journals and you call up and they say, "Yes, we need you," or, "No, we don't need you." They don't ask you what your nationality is.

Sinitsky: Yes, they did not. We just felt that they don't understand if we don't have legal documents in this country or not. So we put into the resume then that we are legal and we can work and all the documents are okay.
Q: That's important here.

Sinitsky: Sure. I understand.

Q: You felt that there were no impediments to you, invisible impediments.

Sinitsky: No. Sometimes I had an interview. For example, at the Hamline University with a very interesting person, he was head of the German department over there, he was so nice to me. He would hire me, but he didn't have this opportunity. They took a person already and he showed me this person. [Laughter] It was so much fun. Then after I got this job at Carlton, I called him and told him, you know, that probably this interview was not for nothing. It was my experience.

Q: It's good to have experience in an interview.

Sinitsky: So nice.

Q: You really sat on both sides of the fence, Jane. You've been served by agencies and you've served at agencies. We are interested in knowing whether you think, in your own personal experience, did the agencies do enough? Could they have done other things that would have been useful?

Sinitsky: I think that we didn't expect that the people would do for us so much. You know, we didn't expect we would be supported so much. It was such a big help. So for me it was just, you know, I was surprised what Bonnie Golden did for us. She worked at that time as a social worker.

Q: That's right.

Sinitsky: Everybody took care of us, so it was a really big help. I think that even now our agency is working well, very well, and all the services we have in the St. Paul (Jewish) community are much better than in other cities. I know this for sure.

Q: I know that St. Paul works hard.
Sinitsky: St. Paul is really good, really good. Sometimes the people are spoiled, even. They are Soviet people using the situation. That's the part of their life. That's not their fault.

Q: When you say that, can you just tell some listener who doesn't have the background that we have, what you mean by the fact that they are Soviets and they're using?

Sinitsky: You know, the people over there, everything around them belongs to the state. The purpose of the people was to lie to the state, and the state lied to the people. So this was the life. That was the life. When they are coming here, they try to do these tricks also, you know, to do tricks with the welfare department, with the Jewish community, with Joan Bream (social worker at Jewish Family Service), tricking her. Not everyone. Some. But this summer, enough to make opinion about Russians sometimes, which is sad, actually. Sometimes the people are just part of the life over there. They were pushy. They knew that if they can take or have it, they have to take it. They have to have it. And that's it. Because that's for free, or, "If he got this, I have to get it, also." You know? It's nothing to do.

Q: You think it's just a process of educating people?

Sinitsky: No. It will be gone with a generation.

Q: You feel it's just part of what comes with the culture.

Sinitsky: Culture. That's the culture. That's part of the culture. From small places, much more. And from big places, also. The people are really different. Some from Moscow, you know, you never know.

Q: When you say from small places, more, you think they're more used to--

Sinitsky: To be pushy.

Q: That's interesting.

Sinitsky: It depends on the education and the views of the person, probably. I don't know. Hard to say. It's not easy to work with Soviet emigrants.
Q: What about the help that you received from the United States government, getting on welfare, all this other business? What do you think about that system?

Sinitsky: Very good, but not right.

Q: In what way?

Sinitsky: I think it is absolutely impossible to have the people on welfare more than a year. I think that's not right. That's not fair to the taxpayers. That's not fair to the people who came from Russia, because if you cut their welfare, they will work tomorrow. But they are dependent, becoming dependent, on this assistance, and they are counting each penny they're getting from the assistance. Or if they will go for five dollar an hour, it's much better to get assistance than to get five dollar an hour. They are not begin to work. They are not begin their life, because their life will begin here only with the work.

Q: You know it's not as easy for everyone to find work as it was for you, because you both found work in your fields.

Sinitsky: Who wants to work is working.

Q: Okay.

Sinitsky: I am from another society! [Laughter]

Q: Okay. Of course, the welfare system here is the welfare system here. It's not just for the Russian emigrants.

Sinitsky: I know. I cannot agree with that. I cannot agree with that. I got, two days ago, thirty-five-year-old, big guy who can work, he was a very good worker in the Soviet Union. He told me, "I worked my whole life. I began, I was fifteen." And here he is not working. He came from Utah. He separated with his wife, and the wife has a child of twelve. He is a single man, will be on welfare like in two weeks. He told me he will get a child in a week from Utah, from his wife. And Gail [Saeks] told him, "Okay, we will report to the welfare department of Utah that your wife doesn't have child anymore." They try to do tricks. And he can work. Even for five dollar an hour, that's not a big--I mean, how
the kids are working at school? After school, on weekends.

Q: But it's difficult. You don't get benefits from those jobs.

Sinitsky: We have the opportunity, I told him, through Lutheran Social Services, to get benefits for him and for the whole family for twenty dollars a month.

Q: Oh, really?

Sinitsky: For a family with low income. Group health. What is the problem? No problem! He wants to work in his specialty. Okay, go to work three days a week, twelve hours a day. And four days, look for job. You know, big, strong man. I looked at him and he told me, like how is Gail so angry at me. I told him, "What do you think, Gail? Gail is paying taxes to feed you." He cannot understand that. He thinks that's the state, you know.

Q: It's the system. It's the system they come from and the system they come to.

Sinitsky: But it's not fair to let these people stay on welfare until the kids are eighteen. That's not right. One year. Then maybe half a year more, but not the whole thing. Partially, but not let these young people doing nothing and working for cash on the side.

Q: It is a problem.

Sinitsky: I don't think it's just a problem of our community.

Q: No, it isn't. That's what I said to you.

Sinitsky: We have few people like that, very few in general.

Q: It's a problem of . . .

[Begin Tape 3, Side 1]

Q: I'm interested also in the difficulty. Here you find yourself in Minnesota. What did you think of Jews? What did you think of non-Jews? The last thing we wanted to talk about was the process of rebuilding your family here. So when you came, you said you
weren't thinking too much about what people would be like, but you had seen movies of America. So what did you expect America would be like?

Sinitsky: I found here very different people than I expected to find, and first of all I was surprised how friendly Americans are. Maybe I was lucky; I don't know. But I can tell you everyone I met here was so helpful and friendly to me, I don't know why, but everyone helped a lot or tried to do something about it. The people are really very, very friendly here.

Q: Have you discussed this with people who live in places like New York City or Chicago? Have you learned of instances of unfriendliness?

Sinitsky: I went to Chicago. I have relatives over there, too. We went for three days last year. They have pretty much the same life like we here, but they do not live inside of the community. I don't know. They're working.

Q: It's a big community.

Sinitsky: It's a very big community, but they live in another place. In New York, we have very good friends. We were during emigration time together, a wonderful family, and they moved to New Jersey already, but I visited them in February. I was at the conference in New York. So I talked to them. They are pretty much in contact with Russians. So I mean after work. So they're working, they feel very comfortable, they knew the language pretty good, they're good, educated people. But after work, so in their personal life, they [are] pretty much just with Russians.

Q: And you?

Sinitsky: And we are not. We are strangers, maybe. I don't know. So I told you that our friends, we have many people who came to us, but you know, I don't know why we have different people in our case.

Q: Are you saying that you've had no trouble making friends with Americans?
Sinitsky: Yes. You know, the first time it was hard because of language, communication. We were just very tired, and it was hard of thinking. It's not anymore. We are comfortable in both.

Q: My background is in history, too, and like your father I am pursuing a Ph.D. at an advanced age. We have read so much about the difficulties about changing cultures, and here you're telling me it wasn't so hard.

Sinitsky: Oh, no. It was hard.

Q: Tell me about the hard parts. What is hard?

Sinitsky: How you open the can. We never did it before. How you open the door.

Q: But that's something you learn once and that's it.

Sinitsky: No.

Q: You don't think so?

Sinitsky: You cannot learn it at once.

Q: It's a whole part of society.

Sinitsky: That's the society. That's the way you look at the people, the way you do the ring like that. We never do that. We do it differently.

Q: You don't pull your ring back and forth?

Sinitsky: We drink differently. When I went for the first time in the restaurant with my friends, I just was surprised awful how you take the napkin, put it here, cut, put your fork into the right hand, and have your hand under the table. I told to my husband, "What's happening? What are they doing?" [Laughter]

Q: I suppose that every part of life--

Sinitsky: Everything. Everything was different. For me it was interesting. This was my position. Everything new must be interesting. For many people it is very hard. "Are they crazy to do like that?" And they are very often in depression, depressed,
because, "The Americans do everything not right," which is not true. They just do differently.

Q: So how long did it take you?

Sinitsky: It will continue until I am going to die. Forever.

Q: There will be bumping up against invisible walls.

Sinitsky: Always.

Q: I bet there are things that the Russian community could teach the rest of us.

Sinitsky: Better things?

Q: Well, other things.

Sinitsky: Other things. Yes. For example, you remember the woman who came from New York and shown us the video about [unclear], she did with Russian and American kids, school kids? You remember?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: And she couldn't talk to Russian kids. They were absolutely closed. They didn't want to communicate. She just asked them, "Tell me what you hate in Americans." And they told her. "Why are they smiling all the time with their stupid smiles? Wearing a smile, and after a second they're wearing them away. You're taking them from the faces away. Why they live their whole life on the floor?"

Q: What do you mean?

Sinitsky: Floor life at school. Kids are sitting just on the floor, all over. That's all right for you, but never was normal for us. You know, you never notice these things because you're comfortable. It's a part of your life. And the Russian kids began to talk. They could do a big list of these nuances, of these differences they had to study, not only to study, but to do the same.

Q: Would it be useful to start making lists for Russian emigrants?
Sinitsky: Oh, no.

Q: It's just something everybody has to experience by themselves?

Sinitsky: I think so.

Q: Actually, we wrote a book.

Sinitsky: Really?

Q: Didn't you see the book, the book that Shelley put out?

Sinitsky: Shelly--

Q: Rottenberg.

Sinitsky: And this man.

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: They went to my office. I talked to them, too.

Q: A whole lot of things on living in America, living, actually, probably in St. Paul. A lot of this kind of thing, you know, everyday kinds of stuff.

Q: But even now you're talking about these invisible cultural barriers, it sounds to me as though you're still fairly comfortable living here.

Sinitsky: I am comfortable. I don't mind. I'm accepting everything. I understand that it's just different. I'm accepting everything and I don't want to change me. I think it would be interesting to have me also different here. Why not?

Q: Absolutely.

Q: But is your husband more depressed about leaving the culture he knew?

Sinitsky: No. It was just very hard to have this so much information in the head, to evaluate such a big mountain of information in a short period of time, in order to be able to
live. It was tension. You had just to think about so many things to understand them. I still don't know the brand names you use, and I don't know what you are talking about, cookies or whatever you're talking about, or commercials, some songs. Who knows? Where do you know that? But everybody knows, except me.

[Laughter] My kids, my students, are a very good source of these kinds of things.

Q: Yes,

Sinitsky: At school they are very helpful.

Q: They have to be extremely helpful.

Q: Kids know everything. Shall we go on to the family? When did your parents decide to join you?

Sinitsky: My parents? After a year.

Q: Did they have any problem?

Sinitsky: Yes, they did.

Q: In leaving? They did?

Sinitsky: So I came here '88, in October, and they applied for leaving in June '89. They got the permission in September, but my aunt, who lived in Odessa, my mother's sisters, all the sisters she was together with her during the evacuation-remember I told you?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: Her husband died exactly in October '88, the time we came here, and she also became lonely and she applied also in Odessa. She couldn't do all the documents. My father went to Odessa and applied for her and did everything, and she just was late, because the first of October 1989 the emigration policy was changed. The United States government changed the rules how to apply for immigration to the United States. My parents didn't leave; they preferred to stay with my aunt and to try to do something about her. She got permission in the middle of November, so one and a half months later.

We applied again through the new organization, Washington Processing Center, and they got an interview in April 1990, and
they came to this country November 13, 1990.

Q: I remember when they were coming.

Sinitsky: Yes. It was exactly two years after we came here. They lost a year because of my aunt, because of change in the emigration law, and all this stuff.

Q: Was it hard to work through all this government and process?

Sinitsky: It was very hard because you didn't know the new process. I didn't know how it will work. Now I know how it works, but in the past they were also the first in this process. It was very hard to know that they are in this kind of situation with no documents. They have their Israeli visas already, giving up apartments, no getting any pension anymore, and all this stuff, it was really hard. My father is a very energetic person. He is a fighter. He had a life which taught him to fight. He just, you know, pulled through. Different kind of careers over there.

So finally they came, and he was very depressed for the first time, very much, for the first two or three months. "I am nothing here. Nobody is interested in me. How will I live here? That's because of you. You never have a minute to come. You come in just once in a while, twice a week."

So I used to come every day for one month, during the first month, to them, after work. You know I am working with Berlitz. After Berlitz, nine o'clock in the night, and in the morning, six o'clock, up and go to school. It was very hard.

So then we were just lucky that he drove, so we bought a car for him and he began to drive. That helped, because he has a wonderful sense of direction. He knows everything now.

So then I came today and I give him something to work at. He is very proud of that.

Q: What does he do?

Q: That's terrific. He is running a group in Russian twice a month, where they discuss--

Sinitsky: Different things. I think more American culture, American history. He is learning about American presidents and Jews in America, because during this two years he sent to me here his books. He got very many books here. I saved them, and he has
pretty good library.

Q: That's wonderful.

Sinitsky: He goes to university, making friends, making friends with students from Russian department. The students are coming to him. He is very busy.

Q: Oh, really? Now, why did he decide to go to the university?

Sinitsky: He wants to work. He is dying, he wants to work. I told him, "Have a language first. Then you wish to work." But he is still trying. He is trying everything. He was a very good lecturer, and he is a good teacher. He is speaking, everyone is listening. He cannot listen. [Laughter]

Q: In the Russian department, he speaks Russian.

Sinitsky: He speaks Russian, everybody understands. They send him students, Russian history students who speak very little Russian, but he does bibliography, so he looks through the books which he can, for example, suggest for this person to read in order to work at this topic, for example, or something like that. He is working at the university library with a boy, and the boy asked him to give him Russian lessons, and the boy gives him lessons how to work the computer in the book search. So he is okay, but he wants to work.

Q: How is his English?
Sinitsky: You know, he speaks--who knows how? [Laughter] My mother is doing much better than him. She can communicate. She can slowly, but she communicates. She is okay.

Q: Do they miss their old life?

Sinitsky: My mother, no. She told me she even doesn't miss her apartment. She loved her apartment in the center of the city with big ceilings. You know, Petersburg's apartment, full of books, with a soul. You know? "I even do not miss this apartment."

Q: How about your father?

Sinitsky: My father misses the people very much, and he wants to work. I don't know what to do about that. But he is really busy.
They go to the English classes every day, and I found them English classes here in the community in some kind of church, and next they will go to another church because they will move to another level. So they do not have their place for the community college. They organized these ESL (English as a Second Language) classes in the different churches. They go to these churches, and what is good, there is no Russian people there, so they cannot speak Russian during the

Q: Who is there in the ESL classes? What sort of people are learning ESL?

Sinitsky: Oh, Vietnamese, Mexicans, from the whole world.

Q: All sorts of people.

Sinitsky: All sorts of people from Dakota County. You know, wives from different countries.

Q: I suppose.

Sinitsky: These kind of people.

Q: Do you have other family that have come, also? More family?

Sinitsky: My relatives?

Q: Tell us about the other relatives who have come, when they've come, and in which order.

Sinitsky: First after us came my husband's parents.

Q: Before your parents?

Sinitsky: Yes. Right after us, three or four months after. My husband's parents, his grandmother, who is now eighty-seven. She was eighty-five. This is the most interesting person in the family.

Q: Who is his grandmother?

Sinitsky: Mrs. Olga Feinman [phonetic]. They moved to Minneapolis, actually.
Q: Did she speak Yiddish?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: Has she found that useful here?

Sinitsky: She?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: She feels very comfortable. She is just a wonderful person.

Q: She is from Odessa, right?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: Where in Minneapolis? They're part of the group that moved to downtown?

Sinitsky: To downtown. They moved to this Nicollet Tower.

Q: Downtown Minneapolis.

Sinitsky: Main Avenue.

Q: She is finding it comfortable living there?

Sinitsky: Very comfortable. She feels very good about it. You know, this is the woman who just gave her life to her daughter. She lost her husband. Her husband died. She was forty-two, and she never married again. She just did everything for her daughter, for her family. She cooked and cleaned and raised kids and was with the kids during their vacation and just, you know, gave her life to this family. And now she gets her money, a little bit. She has her room. She feels so good and comfortable. Leonid?

Leonid Sinitsky: Yes.

Sinitsky: Are you dead? Say hello, at least? Don't hide. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: So the grandmother feels comfortable. And how about your
husband's parents?

Sinitsky: They also are okay. It was hard. It was very hard.

Q: It must be very difficult at their age and a time when you really were not settled yet, and you were having your own problems.

Sinitsky: Yes, and they went through all the problems with us. They supported us a lot. You know, probably my mother-in-law, Bena Feinman [phonetic], she is full of ideas. She is very energetic, too. She is an enthusiastic person. Yes, she is okay. They were homesick a little bit. Not his mother; his father a little bit. But his father told us, "Just one opportunity to live with you in one city is to live, because you will never go to Odessa to live. You will forever live in Leningrad. And if you leave the Soviet Union, what for will I stay?"

Q: Oh, really? Is your husband an only child, too?

Sinitsky: No, he has a brother. They work together. We have really interesting history. So his parents, mother, father, and grandmother, they stayed--

Q: Three months after you, right?

Sinitsky: After us, and they came here from Vienna because of the older woman. They couldn't transfer her to Italy. But his brother was transferred to Italy and was denied to come to the United States.

Q: Is that right?

Sinitsky: Yes. At that time he was like twenty-nine.

Q: I remember this story.

Sinitsky: It was a fight for his brother. So we began to write letters, to meet with different people, even with Mark Supelsa, through the TV, and all this stuff, to get his brother out of Italy, to let him go to Israel, to let him come here, because the whole family is already here.

Q: And it's supposed to be family reunification.
Sinitsky: Sure.

Q: Was he married?

Sinitsky: He was not.

Q: Why did they do this?


Q: So what happened? Did you win?


Q: When did he come?
Sinitsky: He came in July, 21st of July.

Q: So was he the next to come?

Q: July of--

Sinitsky: Of 1990. Also in July came here my mom's cousin with her husband.

Q: They came because of you?

Sinitsky: Yes.

Q: Where had she lived?

Sinitsky: From Odessa. My mom's relatives and their daughter with a husband, who was Russian, and the child. Then later in November came their son with a wife and a son. The son is working, this Ackerman [phonetic]. So that's the family. Then came our good friends related to them.

Q: Your good friends are related to--

Sinitsky: Our friends who are related to Ackermans. So they came through Ackermans here. That's the Tashlitskys, also from Odessa. But we knew them very good. Then came Leonid's cousin, my
husband’s cousin, Feingersch, with a wife and a daughter, and we are very close
to them still. Just one family, we are very close.

Q: How many are there in that family?

Sinitsky: Three people.

Q: Husband, wife, and daughter.

Sinitsky: Many, many people. Very different. Many of them I didn’t know so well before. I met with them. I never knew how it will be in the future. We do not have so close contacts now. At the beginning, sure, we helped a lot. At the beginning, we came every day, so we did everything, what other people did for us. Now the people are working and they do not need us anymore so much.

Q: When you talk about work, do you think you’re working a lot harder here than you worked in the Soviet Union?

Sinitsky: Sure.

Q: Do Americans have to work a lot harder?

Sinitsky: Yes, we’re working harder than the Soviet Union, but I just wished to work. I wanted to find job which could be interesting for me. I like what I am doing. I wished I work at the university level, because it is really very interesting. It is very good to work with kids. I love my kids and I have good time at school, really. But you know, they’re just young. They do not know when to stop, you know.

Q: Wouldn't you have to have a Ph.D. to work at the university level?

Sinitsky: I probably will come back to this idea. I don’t know when. [Laughter] You know, here you are never old to do something like that.

Q: Absolutely! Look at me. That's right. You could do that.

Q: What about your mother? Her role as a grandmother was so important in the Soviet Union. Does she bemoan the fact that you
live out here or that she's not as important to your children? Or is she just as important?

Sinitsky: She feels good. My mother?

Q: Yes.

Sinitsky: They live very close to us.

Q: Where do they live?

Sinitsky: One block from here. If you will go that way, you will see the apartment buildings there. So they are renting one apartment, a two-bedroom apartment for three of them, with aunt, and they are waiting for maybe Section Eight (welfare) to separate. It's hard to live together, very hard. They never did. For my father, it's not so nice.

Q: It should be easy to get Section Eight in Dakota County.

Sinitsky: They applied, but I have to check it again. I do not have time enough. But they will probably, maybe six months, a year, or longer.

Q: But she doesn't feel as though she's less useful to you?

Sinitsky: My mom? No. Slava is very often there, and my father is taking him. They have a pool in the apartments. He is taking him to the pool and then to supper, whatever. My mom is feeding him all the time, you know, Russian tradition. So I am fighting with her about that, but nothing to do. She has to put something into the mouth. But we are still close. I call them every day. Sure. If they need something, my father just comes and picks up. It's okay. But they have their life. They go every day to the English classes. She has to cook, she has to do something at home, to clean, to wash, you know. The week is going so fast and evenings they go to the lectures, they go to all--my father is involved in everything, so they visit all the events at the JCC and whatever, meetings with [Eduard] Shevardnadze, he was the first. He is pretty much involved. He goes to the library. My mom, you know, she had a heart attack in Leningrad. She cannot do as much as he can, for example. She is getting tired very fast. But we
are coming anyway.

Q: Are you satisfied with the health care here?

Sinitsky: I am satisfied. Yes, I am.

Q: Is she satisfied?

Sinitsky: We are. Sure. It's absolutely different. We cannot understand why the doctors do not visit patients. In Russia, the doctors were visiting patients at home. If you are sick, for example, have a fever--

Q: The doctor comes to see you?

Sinitsky: Comes to see you, to the home.

Q: When I was a little girl, they did that.

Sinitsky: Now you have to take the child and bring it. If it's night, you have to go to the hospital. There is not your doctor there. It's different. But still, it's okay. We are not so sick. [Sinitsky knocks on wood.]

Q: Is knocking on wood an American custom or a Russian one, also? It's the same? I see. So you knew what people were doing.

Sinitsky: [Laughter] If it's wood.

Q: Do your parents ever go to synagogue?

Sinitsky: Yes, very often.

Q: Do they feel comfortable?

Sinitsky: Sure. They feel comfortable. You know, it's so interesting. It's so different. It's not so deep religious.

Q: The synagogue is not so deeply? They go to Temple of Aaron, I suppose.

Sinitsky: They go to Temple of Aaron. Looks so nice. The people are not Orthodox. They're very normal. They even can see the
Q: Absolutely! They go Friday night.

Sinitsky: Friday night.

Q: And everybody goes. You find out what the baked goods of the week are.

Sinitsky: It is so nice. They feel very comfortable to listen to the chazan (cantor), and then after, to talk to the people. I think they're going for this purpose.

Q: Going to the synagogue for social reasons is important for Americans, it's important for Russians.

Q: Absolutely. It doesn't have to be just religious.

Q: That's why I think most people go. It's a way to get together.

Sinitsky: Yes. It is very nice, and they love to go. They don't go every Friday. If they have something on, they don't. But if they don't, they go.

Q: We had a question about what you liked the most and what you liked the least about this country.

Sinitsky: So you would like to ask me what I like the least and most?

Q: And what you really can't understand.

Sinitsky: [Laughter]

Q: What you truly dislike.

Sinitsky: What I truly dislike? This is the welfare system. I told you that.

Q: Right.

Sinitsky: I just dislike that, because I know that. Maybe if I
would know other things pretty good, I would tell you my opinion. This I don't like.

What I do like, this is the feeling of opportunities. That's just something magical.

Q: We keep hearing about that, but when it's told to us over the television, it begins to sort of sound hackneyed. So when we hear it from somebody who's come here, then we, I think, pay a little more attention.

Sinitsky: Because you never knew that nothing in the life cannot depend on you. Nothing. You couldn't do nothing about ... [Begin Tape 3, Side 2]

Q: ... what you want to do with that.

Sinitsky: Mostly. But if you have a purpose and if you are fighting for this purpose, you can achieve. In Russia, nothing can depend on you. Even change the apartment, even change the place you live, even go to another school, even buy a nail, you have to be dependent on somebody or on some circumstances. You know, it is a terrible feeling. You couldn't move. For example, I wanted to move to Moscow. I couldn't. I never could do whatever I wanted. I even never could have the ideas. What for to have ideas if they will never come true?

So I was thirty-six, I told you, I came to this country. In Russia, I just felt like an old woman, waiting for the grandkids or to put my child into the university, that he marry and I take care of the grandkids. That's the way it is. And here I have the whole life in front of me!

Q: You have your Ph.D. to look forward to.

Sinitsky: Maybe. Who knows? [Laughter] Maybe some day. I just want to work at the college. I don't want to have Ph.D. I want to teach at the college level, and language, nothing more, just language, because I can do this. I know how to do that. But they require it.

Q: I don't know if they actually require them before.

Sinitsky: They don't require, but they write "preferred." Maybe
I will change my resume in a year, and I'll have two years' experience in the school. I will try again. We'll see.

Q: Perhaps smaller schools.

Sinitsky: Private colleges maybe.

Q: Yes, rather than the university. It would be a place to start.

Sinitsky: Sure. It's hard to work at the university. I worked for Carlton, it was really nice. It was so nice.

Q: That's a premier college in this country.

Sinitsky: The students were--I got a letter from one of my students. I will save it forever. They're really smart kids.

Q: Very. You have to be very smart to go there. What are you doing to make your kids remember the Soviet Union? As you say, you left a great culture behind. The fact that it's in disarray now doesn't detract from that fact. Do you speak Russian at home?

Sinitsky: Only.

Q: Is it important that your children remember Russia?

Sinitsky: Absolutely. Dennis will never have problems with it, so Russia is a part of his life. He is still writing letters with his friends. His best friends are still there. So they are from school. They have really wonderful school and good kids. Slava will be much more difficult, so we keep Russian at home, we taught him read, we taught him write. My mother is teaching him writing in Russian. We are trying to keep his Russian. We want him to have both. But I don't know if we will be successful. He is much more comfortable in English already, I mean everyday talking. Maybe not literally language.

Q: When you speak Russian to him, does he answer in English?

Sinitsky: No. He knows it's forbidden. Even he tells to the older brother, "Don't speak English with me. It's forbidden in the house." Because sometimes it's easier to explain some things from TV, from shows, you know. They are really comfortable in English,
so no problem for them.

Q: And you are so aware of this, being a language teacher yourself.

Sinitsky: Yes. Like all teachers, you never have time for your own kids. [Laughter]

Q: Do you celebrate any Russian holidays?

Sinitsky: Here?

Q: Yes.


Q: What is Women's Day? Tell us about that.

Sinitsky: Officially it's called International Women's Day.

Q: How is it celebrated in the Soviet Union?

Sinitsky: Just nice day in spring when the people buy flowers. Flowers are very popular in Russia, much more than here. Everyone is buying from them. My kids I took to Russia, they noticed this, that everyone is buying flowers and holding flowers.

Q: Did you get off of work then?

Sinitsky: Yes. We don't work.

Q: That celebrates women?

Sinitsky: Yeah, they do something like that. They do a meeting, party, people have a meeting, so in the evening there are many concerts and on TV, good shows. It's a nice holiday. We celebrate every year New Year here.

Q: How is New Year's celebrated?

Sinitsky: It is celebrated strange for you, because it's always with a New Year tree, and it's impossible not to have a tree fora new year. Here we do not have a tree, but we buy sometimes just
branches. I actually didn't buy, but the last time we celebrated in my house, so friends brought it with them, because it's impossible.

Q: Do you have special songs?

Sinitsky: No, nothing special. Just good meal and doing fun with masquerade, with lots of jokes. It's very nice. It is just the proverb that if you will be very funny this night, the year will be good. So it must be nice holiday. Everyone had to have a good mood, many songs, and talking and jokes. We even did plays sometimes in the past. Funny thing.

Q: That's great.

Sinitsky: New Year is nice.

Q: Any other questions?

Q: I haven't any. Should we stop there?

Q: I think we ought to stop and give you a little bit of an evening yourself.

[End of interview]