OLD LIVES, NEW LIVES: SOVIET JEWISH WOMEN IN MINNESOTA

Interview with Nadia Smirnov

Interviewed by Linda Schloff

Interviewed on December 10, 1991
at the Saint Paul home of Mrs. Smirnov

LS: Today is December 10, and I am about to interview Nadia Smirnov for the project Old Lives, New Lives: Soviet Jewish Women in Minnesota. My name is Linda Schloff. We usually start out with some very simple minor questions about your parents, etc. That's where I think we'll start out. Why don't you tell me your first name and your last name and your maiden name.

NS: My name is Nadine, first name.

LS: So you have anglicized it now, it's an American name?

NS: Actually, it was Nadezhda. If you translate, it's "hope," in English, but then I got here nobody can pronounce it, it's impossible, so we changed this name, but actually it sounds the same. The short name is Nadia. Smirnov is my husband's last name. My last name was Ackerman.

LS: And you live at 869 St. Paul Avenue. And when were you born?


LS: Where?

NS: In Odessa.

LS: Did you grow up in Odessa?

NS: Yes.
LS: That's a very special city.

NS: Very special city.

LS: Tell me a little bit about your parents. What was your mother's name?

NS: Sofia Ackerman and Shimon Ackerman.

LS: Were they both born in Odessa?

NS: My mother was born in Odessa, and my father nearby--it's a small city maybe near Odessa, Berezovka.

LS: You told me before the tape started that your grandfather had tried farming?

NS: Yes. He was living in this country [small town] Berezovka, and after a while he finished to work in the country and moved to the city.

LS: Do you know when he moved?

NS: I think, after the time of collectivization in the Soviet Union; so it's in the thirties.

LS: Did he try farming after the revolution?

NS: Yes, after the revolution.

LS: And then, when did your father move to Odessa?

NS: He was a boy, about twelve years old. He lived in a sister's house, and actually all his life he spent in Odessa, except the time when he was studying--he was studying in Leningrad.

LS: What did your father study in Leningrad?

NS: He was a mechanical engineer or something like that.
LS: Do you know when he was born?

NS: Yes, January 12, 1920.

LS: Is he still alive?

NS: Yes.

LS: And your mom, when was she born?

NS: 1924.

LS: And she is still alive?

NS: Yes.

LS: Great. Are they both here?

NS: Yes, they are both here. We came together.

LS: How big a family did your mother have? How many brothers and sisters?

NS: She was the only child.

LS: And your father?

NS: He has a big family. I am not sure because two of his sisters already passed away and a brother. He [they] had three or four children in the family--I am not quite sure.

LS: Did your mother have education beyond high school?

NS: Something like high school.

LS: You were born in 1954, so you didn't have to go through the war years at all. My goodness, you are young. Was your mother evacuated east during the war?
NS: Yes. She moved to Tashkent.

LS: Do you have brothers and sisters?

NS: Yes. I have a brother, Yevseyy Ackerman, and he is also here.

LS: Is he younger or older?

NS: He is older. He was born in 1947. He has a wife and a son, Igor Ackerman, and they live in West St. Paul.

LS: How long have they been here?

NS: It's about two years.

LS: It seems a distance.

NS: Yes, actually he tried to come to America twelve years ago, but he didn't get permission and he had a lot of trouble after this. So we came first, and he came after, about six months later probably.

LS: Did your father serve in World War II?

NS: Yes. He spent about seven years, because he was in the army before 1941. He started to be in the Navy [...] like a regular soldier in 1939, and then he spent five years in the war, until 1945 I think.

LS: I interviewed a lot of people whose parents really believed in the premise of communism and I interviewed some people whose parents were really hurt, who suffered. And not only the parents, but the children too suffered all their lives because they were identified as members of the bourgeoisie. Where do your parents fit into the spectrum?

NS: If I talk about my mother, she never trusted the system, never, but my father in the beginning of his life, when he was young, of course, he trusted. He is a very clear person, and he trusts everything. When he got the newspaper and read it, he trusted everything. But after a while he became to understand more and more.
LS: When you say, after a while, what did he begin to understand?

NS: I think after Stalin died, after that time. Because my mother told me, when Stalin died, everybody cried, and she cried also. If they got together at that time, the first [unclear] that people usually tried to say something, they said about Stalin, then about family. It was a terrible time for the whole country, but in our family it was not repressive.

LS: You mean nobody was sent to the Gulag?

NS: Nobody in our family, it was a lucky chance probably. After Stalin died, my father came to understand life a little better.

LS: When you were growing up, were you living in an apartment?

NS: Of course.

LS: Was it one of those communal apartments?

NS: Yes, when I was young--until fourteen--we lived in a one-room apartment: my parents, my grandma, my brother and I.

LS: Which grandma was this?

NS: It's my mom's. Her husband died in World War II. Actually we didn't get any information about him. It was common in those times. So she lived alone and she never tried to get married the second time. So she lived in our family and she died in our house.

LS: What language did she speak to you?

NS: Usually, my parents use Russian, but if they tried to say something that we shouldn't understand, they used Yiddish. They know Yiddish--I don't know Yiddish.

LS: And what about your grandmother? What did she speak?
NS: She spoke Russian quite well. She usually spoke Russian, but she knew Yiddish, of course.

LS: Who were your parents' best friends? Was it confined to the family, was it confined to Jewish people, was it general?

NS: No. It was Jewish people. First of all, we have a lot of relatives in Odessa, we had, because now nobody is in the city--a lot of people in Israel and a lot here. But the rest of the friends were Jewish. They did not have any Russian friends. It doesn't mean we didn't want to communicate, but it was difficult, it's so difficult to find a good relationship between Russians, Ukrainian, and Jews.

LS: Was it difficult?

NS: Yes, it was difficult, except my husband.

LS: Why was it difficult?

NS: Actually, Jewish community in Russia, in Odessa, like here.

LS: Was your neighborhood Jewish, mainly Jewish, for instance?

NS: No, our neighbors were Jewish and Ukrainian and we didn't have any trouble with them, but we never communicated so closely. You see, because Jewish in the Soviet Union every time was kind of a position, and if we discussed, we usually discussed everything negatively, so nobody could understand us quite well.

LS: Except other Jews you mean? You mean, when you did your complaining, nobody could understand what you were complaining about?

NS: And the people were afraid sometimes to tell.

LS: So you didn't want to complain to Ukrainians that things were not [unclear] because they wouldn't understand?

NS: Yes.
LS: What was not fair, for instance? What would you complain to your Jewish friends about?

NS: You see, we have our Jewish problems. I think you know all our problems.

LS: You have to say it for the tape?

NS: Oh, I see. The problem actually is anti-Semitism. It's a major problem, and it's a problem, I am afraid, forever. So, the Ukrainians never understood us, because we lived in the Ukraine, so they have no [idea] what we're talking about. Actually, I never tried to find friends, except Jewish, because the intellectual level was quite different, and I grew up with these people and I didn't meet anybody else.

LS: When you were going to school, were most of your friends Jewish?

NS: About half of the class was Jewish, so I had a choice to find Jewish friends. It doesn't mean again that I hate Russians, just no interest.

LS: You think it's just a matter of a comfort level? You were more comfortable?

NS: More comfortable, yes.

LS: How about your teachers? Were they fair or do you think there were some problems?

NS: In school, I myself didn't have any problem. My classroom teacher was Jewish and a lot of teachers were Jewish in our school. But different kids had different problems. Maybe this teacher liked me but she doesn't like my friends. I didn't have any problems in school--I had a lot of problems later.

LS: How about in Komsomol? Was that something you enjoyed?
NS: No, this is like a custom. Everybody who wants to continue their education should be in Komsomol. Everybody understands that the whole idea of Komsomol is just a nothing--everybody, not only Jewish, everybody understands. But we need this paper, like a permission to leave. My husband, for example, never took this paper, but he is special, but I wasn't so special and I was Jewish. He had an opportunity to be more bright than me, than Jewish, for example. Do you understand?

LS: No.

NS: What I am trying to say is, he is Russian, so he was not afraid...

LS: ...he was not afraid of not going down the path that was open to you, that was laid out for you. This is the way you had to do it. He felt, because he is Russian, he didn't have to worry about not obeying the rules. Is that what you mean?

NS: Yes. It wasn't easy for him also, but he is not the kind of person [unclear]

LS: Did you celebrate any Jewish holidays?

NS: In my family, when my grandmother was alive and after she passed away, maybe Passover, only Passover, I think, and I think that's it.

LS: How did you celebrate Passover when she was alive?

NS: We usually made a nice dinner, fish, and special kind of Jewish food. Sometimes she went to the synagogue. We had a synagogue in Odessa.

LS: I was told that it was very far away. It was up in water, it was a difficult place to get to, and it flooded.

NS: Yes, it was in a place, actually, where no Jews ever lived. I don't know who built this synagogue, but it was the only one in the whole city, and on great Jewish holidays, there were a lot of people,
but most of them were old people, of course, because the young ones were afraid.

LS: Do you think it was also true that they simply were not interested?

NS: You know, I was not growing up like a Jewish [child], so I wasn't interested. But we feel like we lost something every time...

LS: Did you feel that you lost something when you were in Russia? Did you feel the sense of loss [unclear] your culture? Is that what you mean?

NS: Yes. You know why? Because if anybody says, "Don't do it," you want to do it, right? I think a lot of people--maybe they never thought about it before--but the system told us every time, "You shouldn't do it," and we wanted to do it because the system said "You shouldn't..."

LS: You know I guess what surprises me is that, even though there is this attitude, I haven't interviewed anybody who actually learned a single prayer from the grandmother, so it sounds as though even though the system said, "Don't do it," people actually didn't do it.

NS: Yes, a lot of, but not me, I'll tell you the truth.

LS: Did you have matza at Passover?

NS: Yes, we had an opportunity to buy it and we did it.

LS: Did your grandmother try to go to services on the High Holidays, do you know?

NS: Yes, I think so.

LS: Did anyone else in the family go with her?

NS: My mom sometimes.

LS: What did your mom do? Did she work?
NS: She worked as a technician, but the last few years before we went to America she was retired, like my father was.

LS: Did your father have any problems because he was Jewish, and was he able to do what he wanted to do as far as the job was concerned?

NS: I think so, but he was a perfect specialist. He had good qualifications, and he had a good job actually, but it depends on the people who worked with him. Sometimes he had, sometimes not, because he spent about thirty years in the same place, and everything was changing—it was a worse time, and it wasn’t.

LS: I imagine so. Did your parents have any interest in Israel?

NS: In [their] heart. They didn’t have any relatives, but they usually read everything, and I remember how my mother cried when it was the first war, in sixty...

LS: There was a war in 1967. It was called the Six Day War.

NS: Yes, I mean this war, 1967 war. They were very concerned, and if you could get a book about this country, we enjoyed Exodus, for example, when we got it. It wasn’t a normal book, it was like...

LS: ...like a Samyzdat?

NS: Yes, Samyzdat.

LS: Did they ever listen to the Voice of Israel?

NS: Yes, usually Voice of Israel and all Voices.

LS: Voice of America?

NS: Yes.

LS: Tell me about your schooling. Did you go the university? Did you go to a gymnasium, first of all?
NS: I finished high school, nine classes [years]. I didn't finish the whole semester because I was studying in a music school also, and after the music school I was trying to get my music education.

LS: Did you want to teach music?

NS: Yes. I did teach music. In Odessa we had a very good musical college, and I was a good student, but my teacher said to me after I finished my school, "Don't try, don't waste your time." You can find another city in the country because you will never get in Odessa Music... it's like college.

LS: Why don't you tell us the name is in Russian because my transcriber knows Russian.

NS: This is [college of music]. So I went to Ufa, which is in Bashkiria.

LS: That sounds very far away.

NS: It's a new city, I think, it's in the Urals, and I passed all exams. My parents had friends [there]; they had no connection with music, but they just lived there, and first year I lived with this family. So I was studying in Ufa in the college of music and then in the Arts Institute.

LS: And what instrument did you play?

NS: Piano and history of music, and I found my husband in this city, of course.

LS: Really?

NS: Yes, because there were no Jews in this city--maybe a few--then I finished the college of music and I got a project, kind of your project, and I was asking the chief of the Institute of Arts--it was a Bashkirian composer, I forgot his name--I was asking him about his music and other questions, he knows me pretty well because of them, and my last name was Ackerman at that time, and then he
asked me, "Are you going to take the exam at the Institute of Arts?" because it was my last level in the college of music, and I said, "Of course, I'll try." And he said, [unclear] "Why don't you change your name before you try?" he said to me. Ackerman is a Jewish name, it didn't sound so good, like Smirnov. I was only one Jewish for the whole level.

LS: You were the only Jew on that level?

NS: Yes. There was another Jewish girl from the third grade, and I was the only one in the fourth.

LS: So you think you would not have passed?

NS: It was helpful, not because I am not good professionally. .He explained to me the situation: he could accept only one percent of this nationality. Only one.

LS: So there was a quota?

NS: Yes, one percent.

LS: There used to be quotas in America, you know, for Jews.

NS: So you know what it means.

LS: Yes, it means you have to go somewhere else.

NS: But in this country it's quite easy to move.

LS: If you can afford to. It's money that...

NS: ...in this country--only one problem--I know that.

LS: Tell me about, when you were growing up, did you date boys in Odessa? Did you go around in crowds? What was it like to be a teenager?

NS: I just got a call from my boyfriend from Odessa. It's not like a boyfriend like it means here because the [unclear] quite different in
Russia, but it was my first love--it was a boy in seventh grade at my school; he also was studying in the same music school, but he wasn't a musician, he became an engineer, and now he lives in Cleveland.

LS: How did he find you?

NS: I have no idea--he didn't say anything. It was in August--my birthday was in August, so I got a call unexpectedly, it was quite surprising.

LS: I must say it's quite surprising. When you were growing up, did you go around in large crowds or did you break off two by two?

NS: You mean when you have big company?

LS: No, it used to be in America, like in seventh or eighth grade groups of boys and groups of girls would do things together and then by tenth and eleventh it's couples.

NS: No, it was never, before my husband it wasn't couples. It's usually a big company, and if you have a date, it's just a date, it's nothing else. It depends on the people, of course. I left my house when I was sixteen, and I moved to another city, and everything's changing, and my old friends disappeared and I got new friends. These friends were much older, it was other people, it was very interesting people.

LS: It sounds really interesting for you to leave home at such an early age, and here you had, most of your friends had been Jewish up until now, and all of a sudden, that was gone.

NS: You see, the friends of my parents were Jewish, and they had a daughter, so she was my first close friend, but she was older by four years. That's why probably I got a lot of friends older than me, and she knew a lot of people in this city, which were not Jewish because there were not so many Jewish [people] in this city. That's why I got relationships with Russian and Bashkirian, but it was very educated, it was really intelligent people, it was very interesting people.
LS: So these were intelligent people who were sensitive to your concerns?

NS: Yes, and they understood everything. There were a few Jewish, but it was a mixed company, not like in Odessa.

LS: How old were you when you met your husband to be?

NS: I met him at nineteen, and I married at twenty.

LS: And where were you married?

NS: In Odessa.

LS: Were your parents upset that you decided to marry someone not Jewish?

NS: Yes, very, it was terrible.

LS: What did they tell you?

NS: They told me, "You will have a lot of additional problems," which is probably true, because it's not quite easy to make a new family with... [End Tape 1 Side 1]

[Tape 1 Side 2]

LS: ...a joke that this one woman said to her daughter, "Well, it's OK if you marry somebody who is not Jewish as long as he is an orphan."

NS: An orphan?

LS: Yes, because then you won't have to deal with the rest of the family. The husband-to-be might be of a higher intellectual level...

NS: Actually, I should say he is an unusual person and his family is very intelligent. Also unusual people, it's like people who are in 19th century, not from 20th century. His mother, she is still alive, she is a teacher of Russian language and literature. He has a brother
and a sister. They are both in the Soviet Union. They are not going to come here. I never felt like Jewish in a Russian family, I never felt that way, but we have more problem here now. Now I feel more Jewish than before, and especially we have a lot of problems with my daughter because she is Jewish now. She became Jewish so quickly. When we came two years ago, she went to Talmud Torah...

LS: To the day school you mean?

NS: To the day school, yes, in the fifth grade, and in two years she became Jewish.

LS: I am going to come back to that later because it seems like a great paradox. You got married at the age nineteen in Odessa over your parents' concerns, but I assume that they reconciled themselves to that.

NS: They said, "OK, if you're in love, we can't do anything."

LS: So what year did you get married?

NS: I was twenty... in '74 probably.

LS: And this was a civil ceremony, etc.?

NS: Yes. It was a nice ceremony.

LS: Was your brother married by now?

NS: Yes.

LS: Did he marry someone Jewish?

NS: Jewish, yes.

LS: Did he have trouble with his schooling because he was Jewish?

NS: He had a lot of trouble when he finished school and he tried to pass exams in the institute--like most of the Jewish [people], like most--I don't think it's an unusual situation. This is really true. He
was a very good student and he got like a "D." He got a "D" from one of the special subjects, like physics, and then he tried to pass this exam again for the evening classes, and he got an "A" for the same exam. So it doesn't mean he wasn't smart--it's just...

LS: ...fiddling with the grade. Was your husband a musician also?

NS: No. He is an electronics engineer.

LS: Why was he in the Urals? Why did he go to Ufa?

NS: He lived in Ufa. His parents lived there. And I went to study, and so we met each other, and we got married, and we lived in Ufa until 1977, I think. My father got cancer, and my mother was very worried about him, so I decided to move to Odessa.

LS: Could you move that easily?

NS: Yes. You see, when I went from Odessa, I still had in my passport a stamp that I actually lived in Odessa. That's why I could move. Maybe it's not proper by the law, but it was the only opportunity to come back after a while. Otherwise, if my parents lived there, maybe I could before I married, but after...

LS: Tell me what you were doing after you got your degree.

NS: I started to work in a country musical school when I was in the fourth grade [year] of the musical college, because I needed experience to take exams in the Institute of Art, and I continued to work at this part-time work--it was part-time work only one time a week on Saturday, since I was studying in the day time. Then we moved to Odessa, I still continued to study--I finished my two years like extension classes, and it was another problem to find a job in Odessa like a musician, especially for the Jewish [people]. So we used all our connections, we paid money, and I got a job.

LS: Who did you pay money to?

NS: To my supervisor.
LS: What sort of job did you get?

NS: Teacher of music in a music school.

LS: Was it easy for your husband to find a job?

NS: Not really, but he got some, not really easy, but he had some special problems.

LS: What was that?

NS: He is a person who never liked this system. He had some problems in his young age.

LS: He was very independent?

NS: Yes, yes, and he had trouble with K.G.B. And then we went to Odessa, and he got a place to work in the security system, but what was happening in Odessa, with this work, he moved very often from city to city, and one time he met an American diplomat in the train. They talked about literature, about history, they exchanged books—he gave him a book, and when he came [back], he told me about it. I said, "Yury, you didn't [unclear] anything? You have a special job, you shouldn't do it this way." He said, "Ah, it's OK." One Sunday they went to the beach...

LS: Who went to the beach?

NS: My husband and this guy.

LS: The diplomat?

NS: Yes, he had been in Odessa. After this they invited him to K.G.B. I didn't know about it. And he lost his job. Then he found another one. So he had a lot of trouble. Actually, when we went here, in America, I think we got a permission probably first of all because of this because it's not the kind of [unclear]. But this is true.

LS: You mean you got permission because he wasn't exactly trustworthy in Russia? Is that what you are saying? I don't quite
understand what you meant. Are you saying that you might have
gotten permission to leave because...

NS: Not to leave--to come here--to come to the United States. Do
you know they should get this permission in Italy. When we left the
Soviet Union, we went to Austria, and then Italy, then HIAS met us...

LS: Then HIAS meets you and they ask, "Do you want to go to Israel?
Do you want to go to America?" Right?

NS: Yes. And everybody should explain the situation at that time:
why we left the Soviet Union, what we expected, what was the
reason for leaving. Maybe now it's something different, I don't know,
but in that time it was this kind of situation. Everybody tried to
have special problems. For our family, it was major problems, for
my family.

LS: You are talking about the problem with the K.G.B.?

NS: Yes.

LS: They were going to hang over you for the rest of your life?

NS: Yes. Nobody can expect this situation. You see, we had the
system, of course, but anyway I myself would leave this country
anyway, but I am not quite sure about my husband today. Maybe
today it is not good to leave the Soviet Union. If this situation in
the Soviet Union would be two years ago, I am not sure he would
leave the country.

LS: That sort of answers my next question because some of my next
questions have to do with why you left, but I wanted to know more
about your work. Were you happy working, were you satisfied with
your work?

NS: I feel sad--you see, Odessa was a special city. If you compare
to Kiev, for example, I didn't feel so much pressure like anti-
Semitism. Of course, it was, now it's forever, but I myself didn't
feel it--maybe because there were a lot of Jewish people around me,
and in our school half of the teachers were Jewish. That's why the
school was perfect, and our students got good scores in competitions--it was a very good environment. Of course, we felt a lot of trouble, especially when the supervisor changed. Every year--actually the chiefs of the music school were sometimes not educated people--but we felt enough power, there were enough of us and sometimes we could dictate, and we did. I was very proud of my school that way, because if somebody tried to say, "You're Jewish," we could fight and we fought. It was a good school, but now everybody is in America. I just got a call from one of my best friends in Chicago, another one is in New Jersey, a lot in New Jersey, New York, California.

LS: A new diaspora, but it's too bad for Odessa because it was such a wonderful city. Did you have any aspirations to be anything more than a music teacher? I mean did you have any aspirations to be an administrator, to rise up and have a more powerful position?

NS: No, not really.

LS: Did you have any friends who did, who really took their jobs extremely seriously? Let me tell you what I am getting at. In this country there has been a lot of talk about a glass ceiling. Have you heard that expression? A glass ceiling? That women can rise just so high and then they never get to a level where there is real power. And I am just wondering what you observed in the Soviet Union as far as women--Jewish women--rising to the rank.

NS: I don't think that Jewish women can take a high position, even in our school. There were no Jewish chiefs of departments in school--only one--and you know why--she was only half-Jewish and she was in the papers Russian. And of course, there were no Jewish chiefs of music schools. There may be one for the whole city because they also needed to put check marks in the documents. They tried...

LS: ...to meet the quota?

NS: The quota, yes, but no women. I don't think it would be possible if I really wanted to find another position.
LS: So you were happy with what you were doing and you had your career?

NS: Yes.

LS: Did you figure you'd do that till you retired?

NS: You know everybody sometimes wants to change something, but I would never have this possibility in Odessa, and probably, yes, I would stay.

LS: You would stay until you retired? Do you have one child?

NS: Yes.

LS: When was she born?

NS: She was born on November 19, 1978.

LS: And what's her name?

NS: Maria--Masha.

LS: That's a good Russian name. And what does she call herself here?

NS: Masha.

LS: Marsha?

NS: Yes, they spell it Marsha. In the school she has actually two names. I don't know why it happened, but when we came here, they wrote it down like Maria, but she had this name, and she said, "It looks like I am Spanish. I am not Spanish." But we call her Masha.


NS: In American it's spelled with "R", in Russian without "R".
LS: And she was born in 1978. Did you think about having other children?

NS: You see, in Russia it was impossible because I understood I couldn't afford it, and now I am afraid I couldn't afford it in America either. But no, not really, it was enough.

LS: Where did you live? Did you find an apartment in Odessa?

NS: We lived with my parents, with my grandmother. They had a two-bedroom apartment and we lived six people. So it was impossible to get another child in this situation. It was a good apartment, compared especially to Odessa buildings, Odessa apartments. It was a good neighborhood, a good apartment, very nice, big room, then another big room, and we made up a kitchen, we divided the kitchen and made a third room. The kitchen was small, with no window--just a window in the ceiling. But compared to another apartment, its was beautiful.

LS: When you say compared to another apartment?

NS: For example, to my brother's apartment, like a garage.

LS: Was your mother retired when Masha was born?

NS: Yes, after nine months, I had to go to work, and she was retired and she stayed with Masha.

LS: Then you didn't need to worry about child care, is that right?

NS: No, but at the age of four, I think, she went to the daycare, and she enjoyed this daycare. It was a good place--it wasn't government child care.

LS: It wasn't?

NS: It wasn't. It was child care from a big factory, which is much better usually. Of course, they had additional money.

LS: Why were you able to get in there?
NS: Because.

LS: Because of your father?

NS: No, because we found a connection.

LS: What was your connection to the factory?

NS: I don't remember how we found it, but we did find it.

LS: So you can't live without these various connections? Is there some name in Russian that's used for all of these?

NS: Yes, blat.

LS: Blat?

NS: Yes, it is the same like "connection."

LS: That seems to be the most important thing about making things work.

NS: Yes. This is slang, of course, but everybody knows it.

LS: Everybody uses it.

NS: Maybe somebody doesn't want to think about it [unclear]

LS: Did your parents have trouble accepting your husband when they were living together? Was there added friction? I mean there's always friction. Was there added friction because he was not Jewish?

NS: I don't think it would be less trouble if he could be Jewish. Just like a new person in an old house. We didn't have any problems because he is not Jewish.

LS: Who shopped for the food, who cooked the food?
NS: It's a difficult question. Everybody cooked. You see, my mother was staying at home, so of course, she spent a lot of time, and I didn't work every day. In the music school it's about three-four days per week—it depends on the hours. Actually, it's about four days a week, but not morning till evening. It's probably starting from eight to two or two to eight. I had a lot of time to help my mom. You see, in Odessa, again it was a special city, we use market. I think eighty percent of the food we go to the market.

LS: And there was a bigger variety too, wasn't it?

NS: Yes, which was more expensive, of course. So all our salaries were spent on food, almost, I think about eighty-five-ninety percent.

LS: How do teachers like you get paid? I am talking about in Russia. Do they get paid a decent amount?

NS: It depends on the hours. I earned about 160 roubles per month. I am not talking about today's money, but it was kind of stability two and a half years ago. Compared to the clothes, for example, a pair of boots in the black market again, costs about the same money. So you can compare.

LS: So it wasn't a large amount of money?

NS: No, of course.

LS: How did you make do? Some people had other little jobs.

NS: No, I didn't. I had a few students at home, but it wasn't a big addition. First of all, we lived together, the whole family, which was helpful, and usually we got help from our parents, as a lot of young families, and not very young families.

LS: You couldn't make it? With the baby?

NS: No. It's normal life.

LS: I am beginning to think it's normal life in America, at least what's coming.
NS: I don't know. I don't know any normal life here.

LS: So you shopped in the market, and you found clothes for yourself and the baby where? Would you say in the black market? Is there a bigger black market in Odessa?

NS: It's a beautiful market.

LS: Odessa is a wonderful city in that respect. They used to have a lot of Jewish gangsters. Do the Jews still control the black market there?

NS: I don't think so, only Jewish, but a lot of Jewish around this market also. There are a lot of young people who are not Jewish, who have connections with people who came from another country. We have a big port in Odessa, so that's why Odessa is quite different. It's a more open city.

LS: It's always been more open to the outside world. When the baby was born, you were in Odessa, right? Was your care good before the baby was born and your hospital stay?

NS: First of all, the condition of hospitals was so terrible, you can't imagine. It was a very hard time, it was very hard, I think, for all women who deliver in the Soviet Union. I am not sure if any of these women can remember this time and say, "Oh, it was nice, beautiful." It was terrible because you feel like not a human, and people around are not polite. And again, we should pay money for everything, for everything. And we did. When you are in a hospital, you pay money to the doctor who delivers the baby, you pay money to the whole personnel, otherwise you'll never see the face of a sister [nurse]--never. So we pay.

LS: What about your care before the baby was born? Did you go every month?

NS: Yes.

LS: And was that fairly decent?
NS: It was normal. I didn't have any special problems, so it was normal.

LS: How about care for the baby?

NS: If your price OK. Maybe Odessa is a special city, but I am not sure about it. Maybe the situation is a little bit better in Leningrad, maybe, but in Odessa it was true.

LS: Who were your friends once you got back? You had your friends from work, right?

NS: Yes, from work.

LS: And what about your husband? Who did he make friends with? Who did you go out with?

NS: With my friends, with Jewish friends. He had only one friend who wasn't Jewish, and again it was a guy who was working with him. So the friends from work usually.

LS: Did your husband sort of complain about it or did he just note it in passing?

NS: I don't think so. He is quiet, he is a person who likes to stay home. He wasn't so concerned, and we had enough friends, of my friends.

LS: When your husband was questioned by the K.G.B. about his friendship with this American diplomat, did you say he lost his job?

NS: Yes.

LS: And did the K.G.B. just warn him?

NS: First of all, they changed the book [exchanged books?]. Somebody made a picture of him, and they said, "You give him special information." And they asked him to work with K.G.B. He said, "No," and sometimes, about once per month, until maybe six years, they
asked him to come and talked with him, and he was very mad. And we didn't know about it because he was afraid to tell me. But I understood something wrong.

LS: He never told you?

NS: He never told me at that time. I didn't know about it. When he changed his job, he told me about it.

LS: What sort of job did he find then?

NS: It was like a working job because he couldn't find a job like an engineer.

LS: Pretty severe punishment?

NS: Yes. But otherwise, like an engineer, you see, he got less money than like a worker. It's normal in Russia, by the way.

LS: I guess, American people would say a laborer, but when you say a worker, it may not be the same thing. What was he doing?

NS: Actually, he did the same thing. When he worked like an engineer, he worked with this special systems in the military objects. He worked on military systems.

LS: He worked on some sort of military systems. Did he work on military bases, like army bases? Did he have to go to places where just the army was allowed in?

NS: He made communication systems. When he lost his job, he also made communication systems, but it was just like civil people, and another level, like a laborer.

LS: So he made the same amount of money?

NS: More.
LS: That's quite a paradox. At this period of your life you had Jewish friends, although you were not overtly Jewish? I mean you were not celebrating any holidays?

NS: No.

LS: You weren't going to the synagogue?

NS: No.

[End Tape 1 Side 2]

[Tape 2 Side 1]

LS: What was the last thing I asked you?

NS: Why we didn't celebrate. First of all, it wasn't a tradition, and if I wanted to, I couldn't anyway because I was a teacher.

LS: Did any of your friends celebrate any Jewish holidays?

NS: Not really, I don't think so.

LS: When did you first think about leaving?

NS: I think it's about three and a half years before.

LS: Tell me, first of all, when did you leave?


LS: And you started thinking about it in about 1986?

NS: [unclear] I mean starting from this day. We decided to leave very quickly.

LS: Did you say you left Russia in May of 1989?
NS: Yes.

LS: And when did you think about it?

NS: About one year before.

LS: Did something trigger this or was it an accumulation of things going wrong?

NS: Yes, I think so because we started to understand there's no future in this country. No future not only for us--no future for my daughter. It was the major thing, the major reason for me.

LS: What was going wrong in her life, for instance?

NS: She had real problem in the first grade in school because she went to a normal school and the teacher was terrible. She hated Jewish like...

LS: But Masha, didn't her nationality say "Russian"?

NS: Yes, but she had seen me, it's enough.

LS: Really? I thought it was just the nationality.

NS: No, she knew about it, but after the first grade we changed the school. There was one school in Odessa, the best school, there were a lot of Jewish kids who studied--it was English school. So we changed the school.

LS: Did you have to pay to get her into that?

NS: Of course.

LS: So she went there from second grade to when?

NS: Second to fourth.

LS: And things were easier for her there?
NS: Yes. It was a Jewish teacher again and a lot of kids who were Jewish, and she had normal environment. You see, I was concerned about her environment, and I was trying to find a friend for her, a Jewish friend.

LS: Somebody told me--more than one person--it was so much easier if the nationality in your passport was not Jewish, but you were still trying to hook her up with Jews?

NS: Yes. She had the nationality like Russian, but I was afraid about her environment. It does not mean she should find Russian friends--it just means it's going to be easier to pass exams, to find a good job, to find a good life, but I wanted to see her husband Jewish.

LS: Oh, I see, you did. You didn't think that she would have the great fortune to marry someone as wonderful as your husband?

NS: You see, in this country it may be quite different, but in Russia, I don't think she could find the same person like my husband.

LS: So you wanted to keep her in some sort of Jewish milieu?

NS: I was very concerned about her environment, and then I came in this class in the first grade, and it was terrible.

LS: So you say that you decided to leave because of Masha, but before we began you were telling me about your brother and you said something about...

NS: He tried to leave twelve years ago. He also had a son who at that time was the same age like Masha now.

LS: His children were the same age?

NS: Yes, yes. Now his son is twenty.

LS: Did he want to leave because of his children?

NS: He wanted to leave because of a lot of things. First of all, he hated the system, like all of us, and of course, he had a lot of trouble
as a Jew, and he wanted to live in a more open country, in a free country. And he thought he could realize himself much better in this country than in the Soviet Union, but he didn't get permission at that time, and he lost the job again, so he had terrible time. He had to work as a painter a few years, and another concern--it was a normal concern--he had a son, and at the age of eighteen all boys are going to be in the army, and the Soviet Army is not quite the same like in America. It's terrible, especially for Jews.

LS: Yes, I've heard of Jews actually getting killed.

NS: Yes, it's terrible, it's really terrible, and my brother by himself had been in the army and he understands what it means. He feels the same way. He spent one year after he finished the university, but if you don't have this education, you spend two or sometimes three years.

LS: So he was very afraid that his son would suffer?

NS: Yes.

LS: Did they get out before his son had to serve in the army?

NS: His son went to the medical college after school, a nursing college. So he had permission to finish his education, and then, when he finished, he went.

LS: We'll come back to you now. You thought that you should leave because there was going to be no future for your daughter, but you had her in a good school, you had her in an environment with a fair amount of Jews, but you were still not satisfied?

NS: No, because I understood that tomorrow there would be no Jews in this country.

LS: You mean people were beginning to leave?

NS: Yes, and this is true now. There is no this class now.
LS: So you were afraid that this Jewish environment would disappear. Did you have friends who had left before you left? Did any of your good friends leave?

NS: Not close, but it just started, it's like a sickness.

LS: Like a wild fire...

NS: But it was right, now we understand it was right, more than two years ago. Two years ago it was a right feeling, now we can see what's happened to this country. And you know, every time if anybody knocks on your door and you are afraid, maybe your neighbors are coming now because you have a very good apartment, I don't want to live in this environment. I was scared.

LS: You just thought it was like a breakdown of order?

NS: Yes, and who is guilty? Jews all the time were guilty.

LS: So there was more anti-Semitism on the street?

NS: Yes, of course, in the newspaper, in the street, and two and a half years ago it just started, but it's very dangerous, and I think it's still dangerous right now, and I understand people who try to get out from this country now.

LS: You know, there is something I guess I've never understood: Odessa is a port city and it had a lot of Greeks, a lot of Armenians, a lot of Jews. How could they tell who was Jewish and who wasn't?

NS: If I see you, I am sure you're Jewish. I don't need to see your passport.

LS: You mean you wouldn't think that I was an Armenian?

NS: No.

LS: Because when I was in Greece, people thought I was Greek.
NS: Maybe, but you see, there are not so many Armenians, and everybody can recognize Jews.

LS: They can recognize Jews? So you could actually be pushed around on the street?

NS: Of course, yes. My mom told me, when she was pregnant with my brother--it was a terrible time, he was born in 1947, dark times in Russia--she would stand in a tram and a man was standing near her and he said, "Oh, you are Jewish"--he didn't say "Jewish," he said "Zhid" like everybody said, "get off the tram." And she had to get off. It was winter, and she said, "I'll remember this for the rest of my life." She was pregnant. So I think there's going to be a lot of violence, a lot of crime, and not only for Jews, but for everybody now--especially for Jews.

LS: So you felt it was imperative for you to leave for your own safety?

NS: Yes, yes

LS: Was it difficult to persuade your husband? Did he understand this, being a non-Jew?

NS: Yes, he understood. First of all, he understood everything, secondly, he hated the system maybe more than me, and the third one, he lost a job, he lost everything. We were afraid because when he worked in the military systems, he had a special permission--you know what that means?

LS: It means you cannot get out that easily.

NS: Yes, and when we sent an application, we were very afraid about it, because if we didn't get the permission, I probably would have lost my job.

LS: Would he have lost his job too?

NS: But we got permission...
LS: You got permission fairly quickly, right?
NS: Not really. It's about six months.
LS: When you applied, did your parents also apply?
NS: Yes.
LS: And how did his mother feel about this? Did she have to...
NS: My mother was the first one in our family who wanted to go.
LS: What about his mother?
NS: His mother, it was terrible, but she never said "no." She said, "It's your way." And now we get letters, and she understands now much better. We got a letter from his sister just a few weeks ago and she said, "You were right." They never said "no."

LS: So your mother was first who...

NS: My mother was the first who decided and who actually did all stuff. She is a very energetic person. We went quickly to get an application, to stand in line...

LS: How did your father feel about this?

NS: My father felt terrible. My father was lying on the couch all the time.

LS: He was just depressed about the whole thing?

NS: He was very depressed. He never could imagine... I think he thought it was the end of his life, but now he feels perfect.

LS: In a sense, it was the end of his life. He had retired by now, right?

NS: Yes, he had retired before. When we decided to move...
LS: Did he work after his retirement?

NS: Yes, he worked in the same plant.

LS: But he had his position? He was afraid of losing everything that he worked for all of his life and his status?

NS: Yes, but you know, on the one hand he understood there was no future, and on the other hand, he spent all his life there. He understood there is no language. It's very hard.

LS: Did you know any English?

NS: No, I just studied at school, like everybody. We studied ten years and knew nothing.

LS: Like Americans?

NS: When we decided to leave, I was studying for three-four months--twice a week--my husband did not know a word. He studied German in the Soviet Union, and he knows German quite well, but it's not English.

LS: But it helps. Don't you think it helps?

NS: I don't know. Now his is much better, but we had a lot of trouble.

LS: OK, so you went to Austria, the five of you, is that correct?

NS: The five of us, yes, a big family.

LS: Why did you decide to come to Minnesota?

NS: We had relatives here.

LS: Who are they?

NS: Zhenya [?] Sinitsky. She is my cousin.
LS: Did she grow in Odessa too?

NS: No, she grew up in Leningrad, but her mother grew up in Odessa, and when she married, she moved to Leningrad, and they lived in Leningrad.

LS: Because I interviewed her also, and I guess I didn’t remember. I thought that the only other people from Odessa that I interviewed were Sima Shumilovsky and her sister.

NS: You did interview Jane Sinitsky?

LS: Yes, that was last summer. Is that the reason you came here?

NS: Just here, to Minnesota.

LS: You left in May of 1989. When did you come to Minnesota?

NS: In July.

LS: And I suppose Jane met you at the airport? And were you settled in this apartment?

NS: No, we lived on Cleveland, near Cecil’s, there were two small buildings.

LS: Is that a smaller apartment?

NS: Yes, it was a one-bedroom apartment, but my parents had one and we had one. She found two apartments nearby and it was perfect.

LS: Was it furnished?

NS: She got money from the Jewish Community and she bought a lot of furniture.

LS: She bought what you needed.

NS: Yes, she did everything perfect. We appreciated it.
LS: Yes, it was very useful, because she was working at the Jewish Family Service, wasn't she? So she was able to introduce you to the ins and outs of working with agencies here? Is that right?

NS: Yes, we got all information from her and orientation for the first time. It was great help.

LS: Where did you go for your English language instruction, for instance?

NS: First of all, International Institute.

LS: How did that work out?

NS: It's a good place. I like it. It's very helpful. And in St. Paul Technical College.

LS: How was that?

NS: Pretty well also.

LS: How did you find a job?

NS: When I came here, everybody told me it's impossible to find this kind of job, you should find something else.

LS: You mean a job as a teacher of music?

NS: Yes. It was difficult, big competition. You see, I am not a pianist--I am a music teacher, it's quite a different thing. So I started to think "What can I do?" I can do just nothing, because it's my only profession, I am not a scientist, I am not... So I decided to be clerical, and I finished St. Paul Technical College, and the first work was temporary in the same company that my husband started to work--Floyd Security. I worked four months and then as far as it was a temporary position and actually it was very difficult for me.

LS: Why was it difficult?
NS: First of all, because of my level of language, and the second one, I think I am not born for the clerical work. Then I went to the Norwest Bank and starting from this year I found a job as a musician. So I am working now as a part-time music teacher.

LS: What happened to the Norwest Bank?

NS: Just part-time.

LS: And what do you do for the Norwest Bank?

NS: Clerical. I am working in the Norwest Operations Center.

LS: And you have found work as a music teacher?

NS: Starting this September and I hope if it continues I will finish my employment at Norwest.

LS: How many students do you have?

NS: Fourteen.

LS: Fourteen students? You are busy. What about your husband? You said that he came here with no English?

NS: No, not a word.

LS: Did he think that he would get a job as an engineer? Was he hoping to get a job as an engineer?

NS: You see, first of all, it was a great mistake--he didn't want to study English. He decided he comes and he picks it up quickly. It was a big mistake, and I told him, "You are not right, it's impossible." But life goes on, and he went to the International Institute also and he finished fourth level, and then he got his first job at Floyd Security...

LS: What did he do?
NS: As a technician, and he continued to take English classes for two years. We paid money.

LS: Where did he take his English classes?

NS: In International. He took it twice per week. Now two months ago he found another job.

LS: What is he doing now?

NS: He is working as a senior technician in the Little Six Bingo doing all this... It's a casino. He is working for the security systems as electronics [technician].

LS: Does it have any connection with what he was doing in the Soviet Union?

NS: Yes, it's sort of, but it's quite different, it's another level, it's a higher level, and it's another [different sort of] money.

LS: He is earning more money now?

NS: Yes, and the work is quite different. It's not engineer's work, but it's near it.

LS: Is he content or does he really want to get back into engineering?

NS: I think, after a while he can do it. I am sure he can because he has very good knowledge. His problem is with his English, only English.

LS: Technology changes so that in engineering you wonder...

NS: But he knows a lot of things. I think he is a good professional, and I hope.

LS: When did you move here, to this apartment, which is about half a mile from your other apartment?
NS: Yes. First of all, it's larger. We have two bedrooms. Jane Sinitsky lived here before she bought a house.

LS: Did you have to use public welfare for a while?

NS: Yes, until Yury got a job. It's long enough. We came at the end of July and he got a job in April, I think. It's about seven-eight months.

LS: So you felt that was enough.

NS: It's too much.

LS: But now you are paying taxes, right?

NS: Yes, I think, after a while we'll return everything.

LS: I think so too. You are contributing members of society. Where are your folks living?

NS: They live in Minneapolis because they got a high-rise quickly.

LS: Are they living in the downtown, this area that has a lot of other Russians?

NS: Yes.

LS: Are they pretty happy there?

NS: I think so. They are quite independent.

LS: Isn't it strange for you to be living so far away from them?

NS: It was terrible. It was crying when they got this paper from this house.

LS: Did they want to move so far away from you?

NS: No, but at that time... now I think it's a mistake because they should wait and find the same house in the Highland area.
LS: You mean they could have waited?

NS: But they couldn't wait because the financial situation wasn't so good for the beginning.

LS: Couldn't they stay in that apartment near Cecil's?

NS: It cost him $360 per month. Now it's much cheaper in the high-rise.

LS: I see. So that's why they moved. But you were crying because they were moving so far away?

NS: Yes.

LS: And you really needed their help, didn't you?

NS: For the beginning, yes. Now, as I said, they are quite independent. They know everything around, they can do shopping. Of course, we try to help. We went every week and we tried to help as much as possible, but they are pretty energetic people and very optimistic, and I don't think they have a lot of problem. Now they study English and it's much easier than in the beginning.

LS: How is your father spending his time?

NS: He is studying all the time. He is studying, I think, more than me. He enjoys it. They got the Russian newspaper, they got Olive [?],[?]--you know, this is a Jewish magazine. So they got a newspaper and a magazine in Russian.

LS: What about their relationship to Masha? They see her once a week?

NS: Once a week, yes.

LS: When you came here, you had Jane to help you and tell you what was going on. What about, you were saying that it was awkward at that time and probably the most awkward because your husband was not Jewish. Why was it awkward and how was it awkward?
NS: You mean, is it difficult? Yes, it is. I think actually not because of my husband but because of myself. I want now to be a little bit closer to the Jewish community, and this is me and I should go to the temple, I should take part of the community life, and I feel a little bit...

LS: Are you saying you feel sort of torn?

NS: Maybe, I am not sure, but now I feel pressure, religious pressure.

LS: From whom?

NS: Maybe from myself. I didn't care before, but now it's starting to get interesting for me.

LS: It's starting to get interesting?

NS: Yes.

LS: Because of Masha?

NS: Probably because of Masha. First of all, when we came we didn't have time to participate, to be members of community as we understand and as community expects of us. We couldn't do it, first of all because of language and then we had problems to find a job. It takes time, but now I feel maybe I can do, today maybe I am ready to do it, but...

LS: When you say "can do it," are you talking about going to services and finding out more about what traditional Judaism is?

NS: Yes, but I don't think my husband likes it. Not because it's Jewish, he does not like religion at all, any kind of religion.

LS: He is just an atheist.

NS: Yes. Actually, I was an atheist also, probably I wasn't really Jewish before. Now I think first of all, I want to be part of the community. If I became part of community, I should be more Jewish.
LS: ...have said, "It's in my blood."

NS: Yes, that's true, and it's in my heart.

LS: But how do you live like a Jew in America?

NS: Yes. Actually, I don't know. You see, when I go to the temple, I don't understand any words. I like this music, I enjoy the atmosphere, and I feel Jewish at that time--I really feel it. But I take this book and I don't understand anything, and I can't be an artist [actor] and just hold this book and repeat like everybody. I've seen other people who understand and my Masha now understands. And it is very important for her. I am glad that she has now this feeling and she can express more than me.

LS: Do you think that synagogues could be more helpful in setting up either smaller sessions that are in Russian and Hebrew rather than in English and Hebrew and gear a service so that Russians could feel that they can participate in a greater way?

NS: Maybe, but I think they have already this kind of service.

LS: I am not certain. It's something I have to find out.

NS: I think so. They have Russian text for the special part of the ceremony.

LS: Yes, they have that, but would it be easier if there was a separate service or do you feel like the feeling of being a part of a bigger Jewish community?

NS: You see, I don't think that a special service will help. I think time will help. Every day we start to be closer. We don't realize it
sometimes, but through our children, our kids, we are closer, and it's not an easy process for us, because we didn't have an opportunity to study, we didn't have an opportunity to think about it, and when people come here, they don't have an opportunity to start thinking about it just right now. They have other problems.

LS: Your problems are earning a living.

NS: Earning a living, it's true. I think everybody feels like Jewish, even if they don't participate in the service. After a while we will become more Jewish, it just takes time.

LS: You said something about what the community expects of us. What does the community expect of you? Do they expect you to live in a certain Jewish way?

NS: I think so.

LS: What do they expect of you? That was my question.

NS: I think they expect appreciation, which is normal. Then, they expect to be an active part of the community, which is quite difficult for us and I'll try to explain why. I am sure you are doing a lot of work as a volunteer, right?

LS: I have in the past, yes. That's the way American society is set up.

NS: In the Soviet Union it is quite different. They have another social feeling, and we don't trust this idea, the volunteer idea. It takes time to become real American. I understand volunteering is society of this country, but for us for the beginning it's impossible. But the community expects [it] of us. I know it, I understand it, but we don't have power to do it. Trust me, not because we are lazy, not because we do not appreciate. We appreciate, we understand. I am sure a lot--maybe not all--but people are quite different, in this country too. Again, it takes time. I know a lot of Jewish [people] who came twelve years ago, and they participate now more than from the beginning. It's difficult for us at least because of
language, but not only. So it takes time. And the community expects of us help, I think, but it's going to be in the future, not now.

LS: Now we can move into another area. When you said the community expects help from you, it seems as though you are giving help, because you have other relatives coming. Is that right?

NS: Yes.

LS: What other relatives have come to join you? Your brother came. When did he come?

NS: He came two years ago. We came two and a half.

LS: Were you able to help him when he came?

NS: Not financially, but physically, of course. We did all the stuff like Jane did for us. We go to the furniture, we gave him the car—because he drove in the Soviet Union—our car, we didn't have any extra car, but for the beginning, of course, all stuff that usually people do. It's a lot of problems, all appointments, a lot of translation, first orientation, first steps.

LS: Who else has come in your family since your brother came?

NS: My mother's cousins. It's a big family. It's two cousins. One cousin is alone, another cousin with the husband, with her daughter and husband again and their daughter. So it's six people.

LS: And when did they arrive?

NS: Just two months ago.

LS: I thought that you couldn't invite cousins any longer, that they had to be closer relatives.

NS: Actually, they are not inviting. It's Jane Sinitsky's mother's sister, but they live nearby. We can help more than maybe they can because they live in Eagan now. It's quite different. We live nearby, so we try to help.
LS: Did you expect what the Jewish community did? Did you know there would be the Jewish Family Service to help you out? What did you know about the level of service that would be available to you when you came here? Did Jane tell you what to expect?

NS: Yes, we had quite enough information. She wrote a letter and she described the situation. We knew a lot from different people who came in this country earlier. We knew about help from the Jewish community in different states. In different states, the situation is different, but most of the people got help, and we did know about it.

LS: Were you disappointed in the help you got?

NS: No, I've never been disappointed. How can normal people be disappointed? What can we expect? We can just appreciate.

LS: I think it's natural for people to want a lot.

NS: You mean about help or about life?

LS: About both. Some people are upset, you know, they could have found us a better job, because it's always hard to go down.

NS: You mean about life? I was thinking you asked about help.

LS: I am talking about the help. For example, getting a job, finding a job.

NS: You see, of course, getting a job, everybody is disappointed, but it's not a fault of the community and it's not our fault--maybe wrong expectations. First of all, as I understand now, we had the same way as American people. It's quite difficult to find a job for American people, as I know. They have a lot of trouble also, but of course, it's easier because they have the language, and of course, it's easier because they have connections. Nothing wrong with this--if I know you very well, I will recommend you. It's normal in this country because if I recommend the wrong person, I myself am wrong. We understand it now, but we did not understand it two years ago, when
we came. Especially, in the Soviet Union, job security hundred percent. It's very difficult to compare two systems and it takes time to get used to, to understand this. It's very difficult for the people who came from the Soviet Union. I think that people who came twelve years [ago] still feel this pressure. They are afraid to lose jobs every day, because if an American loses a job, it's much easier to find another one than for an immigrant. Yes, I am sure because the people who came twelve years [ago], they still don't have perfect English, a lot of them, and they are getting older, and they didn't have any help from maybe relatives, maybe friends--I don't know--I don't think that Americans actually help relatives.

LS: No, it's more difficult if not impossible.

NS: It's more difficult, it's a problem. You see, we were born two and a half years ago--we were born in this country again.

LS: You were born again. [both laugh] So how do you feel? Do you feel like you are beginning to fit in? Do you feel like you are going to be an eternal outsider?

NS: You see, I do not think I'll fit in for the rest of my life hundred percent, but a lot is changing and probably I myself will change more. Of course, I had other expectations, but I didn't think about money at all, to become rich. It wasn't my goal when I came here. Of course, we expected a higher level of life, of normal human life. I can't say in the Soviet Union we had normal human life. Of course, we have it now. It's impossible to compare our life and apartment in the Soviet Union. We don't have any of the same problems like in the Soviet Union, but we have a lot of different problems which we did not expect when we came here.

LS: Like what?

NS: I am sure ninety-nine percent of people never think about the language, about differences of the culture. It's one thing to understand it and another thing to live in another country. It's quite different and it shocked [us] very hard. The difference between cultures, we had an American friend, and he gave us the book of Andrey Voznesensky--you probably know this poet. So it is an
English translation and Russian text. I know pretty well this text in Russian, of course, but it was interesting for me to compare the translation. I am sure it is a good translator, I don't know his name, but I am sure it is, but it is incomparable. It's funny, and this is our life.

LS: Are you in a crack between the Russian and the English? You are trying to climb out of the crack?

NS: It's impossible to translate. So I don't think we'll ever fit in, like you said, but we can get used to, we can adapt, and my daughter is already American.

LS: Just a few more questions. Were you assigned a host family when you came here, an American family to help you out?

NS: Yes, first of all, we had a marvellous tutor, Stan Donsker. He is like a gift of God. I like him very much and he got perfect help for us. Actually, he was our best friend and he is a friend now, and we appreciate it very much.

LS: Did you also get a host family?

NS: Yes, but...

LS: It's a very artificial sort of relationship?

NS: Yes. It didn't work.

LS: Have you made American friends or do you still feel that there is this big culture gap or language gap?

NS: I think we are very lucky. We found an American family which thinks the same way and we have this family. It's not a Jewish family, but it's good people.

LS: How did you find them? Through work?

NS: No. Our host family [unclear] they are friends of our host family, but now we are closer to this family now.
LS: That's really nice. So who are most of your friends? Are they Soviet immigrants?

NS: Yes, of course.

LS: And your family?

NS: And my family and my brother--we have a big family, it's enough.

LS: It is. Especially when they need so much help. Are you happy with the school that Masha is going to?

NS: Yes. Of course, Talmud Torah was a perfect school because she had the time, first of all, to be in a normal environment, in a beautiful environment. And now she is in Ramsey, she is in the seventh grade.

LS: How many years did she go to Talmud Torah?

NS: Two years.

LS: How is Ramsey working out?

NS: It's OK, it's a nice school.

LS: Would you keep her rather in Highland Junior High school?

NS: Yes, Susan Kobrin recommended this school, and we decided to pick it. I checked the program, it was a good program. I like small schools better than big ones. So far so good.

LS: So many of the Russians that I've interviewed have been extremely unhappy with the American school system.

NS: If we talk about the system, I agree with them. I just talk about her feeling, and she feels pretty well in school, but of course it's impossible to compare. You see, she was sick now, she had pneumonia, she just went to school on Monday. I think she missed
about three weeks, because you see, she had bronchitis, she went to school and then she started being sick again. So she missed three weeks. Yesterday she took the homework. Nothing happened.

LS: Yes, it's not moving along very quickly. Are you members of Temple of Aaron?

NS: Yes.

LS: And does she go to Sunday school there?

NS: Yes, Sunday school and evening school, and she is going to have a Bat Mitzva.

LS: When you say evening school, do you mean she goes to Talmud Torah?

NS: Yes, Monday and Wednesday. She missed a lot, she skipped about a month because she was sick, but she enjoys it because she has friends here, which is very important.

LS: And she is going to have a Bat Mitzva?

NS: Yes, in February.

LS: So you are really in the midst of preparations for this?

NS: Yes.

LS: That's a real American Jewish rite of passage, isn't it?

NS: Yes, which is surprising. If somebody told me three years ago in the Soviet Union my Masha is going to have Bat Mitzva...

LS: It would not have meant a thing to you?

NS: No, never.

LS: It's an American custom, totally American custom. When your grandmother died, were there any Jewish prayers said over her?
NS: Yes. First of all, in Odessa we had a Jewish cemetery. So we had an opportunity to do all these things like Jewish, like Jewish tradition.

LS: I guess I hadn't realized that that was still possible.

NS: It's possible, now I am sure it's possible. It was possible two years ago, at least in Odessa because we had a synagogue, we had a special cemetery, which is unusual.

LS: Is it unusual?

NS: I think so. You see, there were a lot of Jews living in this area traditionally. That's why maybe we feel a little bit freer than in another city.

LS: Is there any problem with this Bat Mitzva because your husband is not Jewish?

NS: Yes, it's family problems.

LS: Is there any problem with the synagogue?

NS: Not with the synagogue, but I still, for example, today, I don't know how we can make it, because the husband should stand near the Torah, and he can't, so I don't know. But I have a brother, maybe he can do it. It is usually done this way, do you know?

LS: No, I am afraid, I don't. I think the rabbi might be able to help you out.

NS: Yes. I asked the cantor, and he said, "No problem," but I think I should talk with the rabbi.

LS: I mean they'll work out something so that it can be a happy affair for everybody. They don't want to embarrass anyone. I am sure there is some solution, but I honestly don't know what it is.
LS: When you said Masha was sick, do you have adequate health coverage here or is that a problem?

NS: Yes, we have insurance.

LS: You told me something about expectations, about living in the Soviet Union, and the expectations of the Jewish community. You said that the expectations of the Jewish community are unrealistic, expecting you to jump in and be a volunteer, expecting you to have some other level of Jewish background, and it was impossible to have.

NS: From the beginning.

LS: Do you feel, though, that what you are bringing to the Jewish community has been overlooked or slighted because they expect you to be a certain way and you aren't and they just sort of dismiss you? Or do you feel that Jews value what you are bringing to the Jewish community? Or do you just feel as though they think of you as another social service burden?

NS: I am afraid I don't quite understand your question.

LS: Do you feel that when you see American Jews at the synagogue, do you think that they want you here, that they are happy that you are here?

NS: I don't know. Some of them maybe yes, some of them no. It's quite different, because there's different people, there are a lot of different opinions, and maybe some of them thought we came to the synagogue because on Friday they have a lot of cookies, but it's not true. I can afford a cookie at my house.

LS: Right, right. You laid out a lot of cookies for me. Do you make it a point to speak Russian in the house so that Masha won't forget?

NS: Oh, this is a problem because she picked up English very quickly and of course, we talk among us Russian, but if she is trying to tell me something special, she uses English. So this is trouble. And I
started to read books to her in Russian because she doesn't want to read Russian books. This is terrible.

LS: You ought to tell her that if she can keep us her Russian, she'll get credit when she enters the university. Do you celebrate any Russian holidays here? Women's Day or..?

NS: No. You see, lots of Russian holidays were political holidays, except the New Year's, which is improper because we have Hanukah here, and everybody has Christmas, but actually, the New Year's is not like Christmas...

LS: It's a holiday here too.

NS: It's a holiday here, but we did put a Christmas tree. It was our normal tradition. It does not mean I think in this time about Christmas, but it was a tree and we decorated it, and maybe it's kind of a mixed tradition, but I grew up in this tradition.

LS: Do you still do it?

NS: Last year we got a letter from the Jewish Community Center, and they explained to us very politely that a Christmas tree in our house is not a Jewish tradition and try to avoid it. So we tried to forget this tradition. But I don't think it's so good. It's normal. What do you think?

LS: It's an evidence of American Jewish community putting pressure on you.

NS: Yes. It's pressure, right? I like it. I remember the smell of this tree, and I never think about God, any god--Jewish God or Christian God--it's kind of different and it's the only one non-political holiday in Russia, only one. This holiday came from the time of Peter I. He brought his tradition from Europe to Russia. Since this time everybody started to put green trees. It wasn't a Christmas tree, it was just yolka - green tree. When the revolution started, there was a special decree--nobody can do it any more, but after a while people started to do it again because it's a nice tradition.
LS: So will you do it, you think?

NS: I think so. Don't tell anybody. [both laugh]

LS: I must say that you have a right to do whatever you want to do. As I said, it's a free country, right? You are in a free country. Are there any cultural differences you find really frustrating in America?

NS: Yes. You see, when we came here and got our first jobs, of course, it's another level of jobs, it's a low level of jobs compared to Russia. Anyway, we should communicate with people with another level of education. I think we have a high level of education, so it's another shock. There are a lot of educated people in this country, I know it, but for the beginning we don't have an opportunity to communicate with these people, we can't, we are not ready for this, it's not the fault of these people, it's our problems. So we started to communicate with people whose level of education and intelligence was much lower, and it's very disappointing.

LS: Were they unkind to you or were they just sort of stupid?

NS: Just sort of stupid people. Sometimes very kind, sometimes no, but it makes no difference for me because I never communicated with this kind of people in Russia--we have a lot of this kind of people also--but now it's our life, so of course, it's a problem also.

LS: Is that still a problem with your husband working in this Bingo place?

NS: Not now because this is a different kind of job.

LS: So that was a rude immersion into American culture. You are still self-conscious about your language?

NS: Of course. I am going to take English classes maybe in spring time because it's necessary.
LS: If you want to classify yourself now, do you classify yourself as a new American, do you classify yourself as an American? You haven't been here long enough to actually take the naturalization...

NS: I classify myself like a person who came in America two years ago.

LS: I see. So you are caught in the crack of the pages, right? Are you missing things about Russia, about the Soviet Union? I can't even say the Soviet Union--it doesn't exist any more. Now I have to say about Ukraine.

NS: Of course, I miss my language, my culture, not particularly things, my city of course, because it was a beautiful city. There are no friends in Odessa now. [End Tape 2 Side 2]

[Tape 3 Side 1]

LS: How often do you go to the synagogue?

NS: Before I started to work, we went quite often, probably around twice a month. Now the problem is I am working Friday evening and Saturday morning--not like a real Jew. So since I got a job it wasn't possible, but now I try to send Masha to the synagogue with anybody, with my friends, because I am working the evening time on Friday and usually finish at 8:00, 8:30.

LS: Do you use the Jewish center very much?

NS: Not really, but we are members. Last year Masha used more, now she has three schools--evening school, Sunday school and normal school--so she doesn't have a lot of time.

LS: Has she gone to camp, any Jewish camp?

NS: Yes. First and second year she went to the (Camp) Butwin, of course, and to the Herzl Camp. The first year we got full scholarship, last year we paid about $300, which wasn't easy for us, but she likes this camp, it's very important, and now we got new...
I don't think we can afford it this year because she is already grown up and the first session is not for her, and the second one too expensive.

LS: Well, there may be scholarship money available.

NS: Yes, we will try, because it's very important for her.

LS: Yes, there are scholarships given through the synagogue and through the Talmud Torah. So you have to see what you can do.

NS: We will try it. Of course, it's very interesting and it's good rest, but expensive.

LS: Yes, everything is expensive in America, that's the problem. Do you have plans to stay here or would you rather move to Eagan if you could? What are your future plans?

NS: I don't like to live in the country, like Eagan, but if my husband will keep the job for a while, of course, we'll think about a house, because we already pay about $500 for this apartment, so it's not so expensive for a house, but we'll be able to afford it after a while if he will keep his job. And there are no new buildings in Highland and it's very expensive to buy something in this area. So just one way is Eagan, but I don't like it actually, I'd rather live in this area, I like this area more.

LS: Sometimes the areas north of Grand Avenue and north of St. Clair, they have smaller houses that are not quite as expensive. So you are making your way in America, but you've only been here what, a few years?

NS: Yes.

LS: When you think about future, the fact that it's only been two years, you've really made enormous efforts to fit in

NS: Everybody wants more, just right now, today.
LS: Right, everybody wants more. OK, I want to thank you very much. I may have to come back because there's always questions that occur to me afterwards.

NS: I see. No problem.

LS: Thank you.

NS: Thank you.