OLD LIVES, NEW LIVES: SOVIET JEWISH WOMEN IN MINNESOTA

Interview with Paulina Tylevich

Interviewed by Linda Schloff with Olga Lifson as translator

Interviewed on August 29, 1991
at the Mt. Zion Synagogue in St. Paul, Minnesota

[Mrs. Tylevich speaks Russian through most of the interview. The text appearing after her initials, in the third person, is the translator's version of her words. Sometimes she attempts to answer in English and those responses are identified as "PT in English." The bracketed material has been added by the transcriber, who is fluent in Russian, and represents either a more accurate translation or additional details left out by the translator.]

LS: We generally start out by you giving us your name. Your first name?

PT: Paulina Tylevich.

LS: Where do you live in St. Paul?

PT: South Cleveland Avenue, Apartment 8.

LS: Where did you live in the Soviet Union before you came to America?

PT: In Minsk.

LS: When were you born, what year?

PT: In 1946.

LS: Have you always lived in Minsk?
PT: Yes, she was born and raised in Minsk and lived there all her life until emigration.

LS: Why don't you tell me a little bit about what your mother and your father did, what their professions were?

PT: Her mother was a dentist and her father was a meteorologist, working in the weather forecasting.

LS: Where did your mother work?

PT: In a children's clinic.

LS: When would she leave the house and when would she come back?

PT: She used to work from about 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

LS: Was there anybody else in the house who did household chores, besides your mother?

PT: Lately, nobody was able to help. Initially, they lived together with the grandparents and the grandmother did help out a little bit, but she died when Paulina was only seven years old.

LS: What did she do? What did the grandmother do? Did she do the cooking, did she do the washing, did she go shopping?

PT: She was practically running the household.

LS: When she died, who took over all of those duties?

PT: By then her mother had another baby, her sister who is about five years younger, and her mother could not cope with all that and she had to hire someone [someone] like a maid to help at home.

LS: Is it easy to find that sort of help?

PT: Right now, it is very difficult. It used to be easier to find such kind of help in the fifties, when this happened, there were girls from
the villages who were eager to come to a big city and work there as maids, just for the sake of staying in the big city, but they were not experienced and not very reliable. She even remembers that her younger sister wasn't a very good eater, so the maid took advantage of it and would eat everything that the girl did not eat and then forbade Paulina to ever mention it to her mother, and finally she stole some stuff and ran away. So these girls were not very reliable.

LS: Did she live in the house with you?

PT: Yes.

LS: Tell me a little bit about your apartment, how large was it?

PT: Her father was in the military, and he was sent to work in Minsk. When they came there, it was during the war [right after?] and practically all through the war Minsk was occupied by the Germans, and when they were retreating, they damaged the city and destroyed a lot of the buildings. So, there was not a lot of apartments left. This was kind of a gate on the border with Poland, where the Germans came in and then went out of the country. Considering this situation, they had a relatively good apartment, but it was not their own--they were sharing it with other neighbors--and this is a kind of a typical situation in the Soviet Union, with communal apartments.

LS: How long did you live in the communal apartment?

PT: She was born in 1946 and it was not until 1953 when her father finally was given an apartment.

LS: Tell me, when did your grandmother die?

PT: In 1953.

LS: When you moved to the new apartment, did your grandfather move with you?

PT: No, grandfather stayed in the old apartment. [PT in English]
LS: Tell me about the new apartment, how large was that?

PT: This was a two-room apartment with a kitchen and a bathroom.

LS: Were there any bedrooms?

OL: Just two rooms, that's it, there is no qualification of a bedroom.

PT: Two rooms--separate two rooms--and a kitchen separate. [PT in English]

LS: OK, so you and your sister could sleep in one, and your parents could sleep in the other. Did you still have maids when you moved?

PT: No. By then Paulina was already taking care of the younger sister.

LS: How old were you? You were born in 1946, did you say?

PT: She was in the second grade.

LS: You were taking care of your sister and you didn't have any help?

PT: Well, the younger sister was already going to a nursery by then, so she was not taking care of her all day long. She had to take her there in the morning and then bring her back home.

LS: Did your father help out as far as household chores were concerned?

PT: Yes, naturally, whenever he had time.

LS: What did he do?

PT: Whatever was physically more demanding, like shopping and bringing heavy stuff and bringing wood to work the heater for hot water in the bathroom.
LS: What were your chores besides watching your sister? Did you have to wipe dishes?

PT: She can't say that she had a lot of things to do. Sometimes she helped dusting and sometimes washing the dishes, but not much.

LS: You didn't have any fixed chores to do?

PT: No, and never cooking.

LS: You mean your mother did all that? She did all the happy work, she did the cooking, she did the washing?

PT: Yes, mostly. [PT in English]

LS: Did she do the laundry at home or did she send the laundry out?

PT: At home. [PT in English]

LS: And the ironing?

PT: Yes. It was customary to have all these runners and bed ruffles with lace, starched. That took a lot of work, and she used to do all that.

LS: Did she ask you for help?

PT: Sometimes, but this was too demanding a work and she was not trusted to do it.

LS: How big was your apartment building, the one that you really grew up in? How many other families?

PT: Four stories.

LS: And how many apartments on each story?

PT: About fifty apartments in the whole building.

LS: Did you have many friends who lived in the building.
PT: Not many, some. [PT in English]

LS: I want to know something about your school. Was your grade school a happy experience for you? Were you a nice, well-adjusted child whom everyone loved?

PT: She hated school.

LS: Why?

PT: She never liked the atmosphere. It doesn't mean that everybody hated school. There were a lot of kids her age who liked school and who were quite happy there. It just so happened that she never liked it.

LS: But why?

PT: Well, she never liked the teachers, never liked the atmosphere, and at that time its was allowed [?], and as soon as it was possible, after seventh grade she quit school and went to the art vocational school. [fine arts school for gifted children - EI]

LS: What do you mean by the atmosphere?

PT: Maybe it is something that started at that age and that she sees even now in herself because she finds it difficult to make friends [I am very selective about people with whom I associate - EI] and it was difficult for me to make friends at school too. [I found it difficult to find people among my schoolmates whom I would both like and have things in common - EI] She is not very outgoing, not very adaptable to all these mass things that they require you to do in school. She is watching her daughter in school now here and she sees that each kid here can really find his or her own niche and things that they like to do and express themselves, while back there everybody was expected to do the same things.

LS: Were there any after school activities that you enjoyed?
PT: As long as she remembers herself, she always did some drawing and painting and she attend some art classes, arts clubs and she was always into that. And maybe that's why she didn't have to look for other entertainment--she was always busy with that.

LS: Did you find other friends who were interested in art the way you were?

PT: Not at that time, later, when it was already a profession.

LS: Did you go to camps when you were a child?

PT: Just one time and she never liked it.

LS: Did you go on holidays with your parents?

PT: In Belorussia, there are a lot of beautiful places, a lot of huge woods and lakes, and they used to go to a place on Lake Narych, where her father's office had like a cluster of cottages that they could rent.

LS: Now tell me about your art school. You said that you could transfer to that after seventh grade?

PT: She was attending this art [school for gifted children - EI] vocational school during the day and then taking the regular high school classes in the evening so that she got her high school diploma. Later on they joined these two things, and the art school was also providing all the regular classes, and that was a difficult time. And then the majority of people who were admitted to this school already had [a high school diploma - EI] covered all the ten grades of high school. So most of the people around her were much older.

LS: Did you have any quarrels with your parents when you told them you didn't want to go further than seventh grade in the regular school system?

PT: No, they really supported this idea.
LS: Doesn't it mean that you had to work twice as hard because you were going to two schools at once, right?

PT: In the Soviet Union parents usually don't mind if their children are working hard and are very busy.

LS: Did you have time to go and have some fun?

PT: Sometimes. [PT in English]

LS: What did you use to do for fun?

PT: In this art school, every now and then they had a party, a dance or something like that. And then, of course there were movies and concerts.

LS: Who were your circle of friends there? Were there other nationalities in this art school besides Belorussians?

PT: Mostly the people around her there were Belorussians, and in the art field especially, and later on, there were very few Jews.

LS: Were there any Jewish classmates at all?

PT: No. There was one other student whom she remembers, but he was in a different class. There were Russians and Ukrainians, of course, too.

LS: Did you all get along pretty well?

PT: Yes, basically.

LS: Was this a time when the nationalities were getting along pretty well or was it because you were in the arts?

PT: She thinks that the second reason is probably more important because these were educated people and even if at heart they may have been anti-Semitically inclined, they did not show it openly like, you know, in the fish market.
LS: When you are talking about the fish market, was it showing openly sometimes when you went shopping?

PT: Well, she never really felt any open expressions of anti-Semitism, maybe because she didn't look very typically Jewish--she thinks that maybe now, at her present age she is more looking like you would stereotype a Jewish person--but when she was a kid, she probably did not look very much Jewish, and very often people around her would even tell ethnic jokes and wouldn't even suspect that her might take it differently.

LS: When was the first time you realized that it was not so good to be Jewish and that you were Jewish?

PT: Practically every time you filled out any type of an application or registration form, even if you just had to go to the library, every questionnaire always had a question about your nationality, and being Jewish was considered a nationality. Like everybody else, she had to join the Komsomol--at age fourteen--and again, this was coming up now and then, and she started realizing that maybe it's not so good or advantageous to be Jewish. Of course, she didn't understand it as well then as she does now, and the situation was a little bit different [I was looking at it from a child's point of view - EI], but it was coming up every now and then.

LS: What did your mother and father tell you to do when a situation came up, how to handle it?

PT: It was a kind of a confusing point because her mother used to tell her, "You shouldn't be ashamed of being Jewish," and at the same time if it is put to you that way and you feel that people take it as something wrong, then it is a confusing situation. You shouldn't be ashamed of it, but at the same time there must be something wrong if people expect you to be ashamed of it.

LS: And your father, did he have any advice?

PT: She doesn't remember any specific conversations with him about it, but her father was a very outgoing and gregarious person and they used to have a lot of parties and her parents were entertaining,
and she once heard a comment by one of his colleagues, who was in charge of the airport and he was somehow connected with weather forecasting for the aviation, and this guy said, "Oh Mark--meaning her father--Mark is a very good guy even though he is Jewish." And this is such a typical remark.

LS: So there was always this undercurrent?

PT: Yes, it was always somewhere under the surface, and she was a little bit confused about why she should be ashamed of it [but I felt ashamed of it nevertheless - EI].

LS: When did you start dating?

PT: Not very early because she was pretty busy; it must have been at about age sixteen-seventeen at the art school.

LS: Were you going out with guys who were a lot older than you?

PT: [Not much older - EI], about two years.

LS: Basically, what do you do when you go out on a date in the Soviet Union?

PT: If the weather was fine, they would just go for a walk in the park or they would go to the movies or a concert. It used to be quite accessible. [It was quite affordable there - EI]

LS: Are a lot of people hugging and kissing in the parks because there is no automobiles?

PT: When she was young, this was not typical or accepted or so overt. People would have to hide in hallways [building lobbies] to do that, but later on, when she was already older, she was noticing that the young people were becoming much more open about it in public.

LS: I see. How old were you when your father died?

PT: Her father was forty-six when he died and she was twenty-one.
LS: Were you married by then?

PT: No.

LS: When did you marry?

PT: Soon after that.

LS: Have you been married once or more than once?

PT: Twice.

LS: How old were you when you met your first husband?

PT: They were fellow students at the institute.

LS: How old were you when you met him?

PT: Twenty, in the first year in college, and then they got married next year, when she was twenty-one.

LS: Maybe I'd better go back because I didn't ask you how long this course was. You said that you had gone to the vocational school after seventh grade. And how long was the vocational school?

PT: Four and a half years. And then I started at the Institute of Art and Theatre. [PT in English]

LS: Was it difficult for you as a Jew for be admitted?

PT: It must have been pretty difficult, but since she graduated from this vocational school with [highest honors - EI] straight A grades, she had some advantages.

LS: So you were admitted. And how long was this institute?

PT: Five years.

LS: My goodness, your background is really superb. Later on I'll have to ask you how it compares with MCAD, (the Minneapolis
College of Art and Design) where your son attends. So, you met someone part way through this institute. Was this person Jewish or non-Jewish?

PT: No.

LS: And what nationality was he?

PT: Belorussian. [End Tape 1 Side 1]

[Tape 1 Side 2]

PT: They were classmates, they were in the same profession.

LS: Had he been in the vocational school too? Had you known him earlier?

PT: No. [PT in English]

LS: Was he also from Minsk?

PT: No. [PT in English]

LS: Was he from a very small town?

PT: It's not very small. It's Orsha--it's between Minsk and Moscow. [PT in English]

LS: You said you got married at age twenty-two?

PT: Twenty-one. [PT in English]

LS: Were you done with the school by then?

PT: No, this was just the second year of the five.

LS: Is it pretty common to get married during school?
PT: Yes, it's pretty common. [PT in English]

LS: Where did you live?

PT: In our apartment, with my parents. [PT in English]

LS: Your father was dead by then. With your mother?

PT: With my mother. [PT in English]

LS: With your mother and your sister Faina? How did that work out?

PT: Pretty good. [PT in English]

LS: Did it work out pretty well? I mean it doesn't have to. Here your mother was a recent widow...

PT: It's so typical. It's practically impossible to find a place to live on your own after you get married. So it's kind of accepted as an inevitable thing to be living with either one or the other set of parents.

LS: It was just the circumstances, the time when you got married, your mother was still mourning your father's death...

PT: To some extent, maybe it helped her. She was only forty-three and she was not left all alone.

LS: Did your mother like this husband that you had chosen?

PT: They were getting along pretty well, she didn't object to him.

LS: Did you become pregnant quickly?

PT: No. Since we were still students, we didn't want to start the family right away. For five years we stayed away from having children.
LS: You both finished your training? And you were still living with your mother and sister, right? And what sort of job did you find? What was your husband's name?

PT: Yevgeny.

LS: Why don't you tell me about the two jobs, the job you found and the job he found.

PT: You were not really expected to go looking for a job—you were assigned a job. Her husband was given a job in the same institute teaching and she was given a job in the research center of industrial esthetics.

LS: Did you like this job? What did you do?

PT: No, I didn't like this job but I was supposed to go on the job. [PT in English] She had to take it. When you are assigned a position, you have to take it and you have to work there for at least two years before you can look for another job.

LS: What year did you get this job?

PT: In 1970.

LS: Do you think that this job was a result of your nationality or just simply the luck of the draw, as we say?

PT: This was considered a rather lucky and prestigious assignment and she got it, she thinks, because she was a good student.

LS: What were you supposed to do?

PT: She was designing the interiors of office buildings and industrial buildings.

LS: And why did you not like it?
PT: It's not like an artistic schedule. It's more like an office schedule. You have to be there nine to five, you know, it's more like an office job, not like an artist's job.

LS: You know, I did not ask you about your marriage. Can you describe your wedding?

PT: We didn't really have any big wedding. We just went and registered, and that was it.

LS: Did you have a dinner afterwards?

PT: Just a little dinner with my mom and a few friends. [PT in English]

LS: What about his folks? Did you meet his folks?

PT: Not before the wedding. [PT in English] He only had his mother, and she was older, and she wasn't even living in the same city, so they only met after the wedding.

LS: Could you tell whether or not she cared that you were a different nationality?

PT: She doesn't think that she was very happy, first of all that her son had married so early, and she thinks she behaved like a typical mother-in-law, and it took some time to smooth it out, and later on it was more or less OK.

LS: You were living with your mother and you both had jobs. Was there a possibility then for you to get an apartment of your own?

PT: No, it was impossible, not because of money and not because of different family, just because... [PT in English]

LS: ...it's a lack of housing. So, how long did the four of you live together?
PT: Her sister got married pretty soon and she moved in with her husband. So, there were three of them left and they lived there until she got divorced.

LS: When did you get divorced?

PT: In 1979, or 1980.

LS: And when was your son born?

PT: In 1972.

LS: When he was born, were you still working nine to five? Did you have any other jobs between this job that you didn't like and the time that he was born?

PT: She left this job when she got pregnant. Well, this is like two months before the child is due, you get maternity leave, and at that time she quit her job.

LS: And then you stayed in the apartment?

PT: Yes.

LS: How long did you stay home after Alex was born?

PT: Just one year. [PT in English]

LS: Is that all paid?

PT: It's not your full salary. You get full pay for three months and then it's a percentage.

LS: But you could manage?

PT: You still get your continuity of work record. It doesn't interrupt your work record for pension purposes, but you are not paid full salary.
LS: So then was your mother still working most of the time? She wasn't retired yet, right?

PT: There was a brief period when her mother retired and even left Minsk and went to live with relatives in Kiev, but this didn't last very long, and she came back.

LS: You were responsible for the washing at this point. And did you learn to cook then or was your mother still cooking?

PT: Yes, very quickly. [PT in English]

LS: And you were shopping and doing everything? And then when did you go back to work? Was Alex actually a year old?

PT: When she resumed working, she went to work where I really wanted to be, and that's the Belorussian Art Fund.

LS: And what did you do there?

PT: There you had a work record, you were like you had a permanent job, but you were working on contracts, you had a contract to do a certain piece of art, like a free lancer.

LS: Did you design pieces of art rather than interiors?

PT: I designed interiors and different kinds of work I did. [PT in English] I could also work with different materials in the interiors and design the thing and also do certain elements, make them. For instance, she made a design of wall hanging or stain glass pieces or ceramics.

LS: What happened to Alex? Who took care of him from the age of one on?

PT: Since she was working at home most of the time, she could do these things at home. And her husband was also working in the same fund, so they were very often working together.

LS: That sounds excellent.
PT: Not excellent because it's not enough place for working there. [PT in English]

LS: There was not enough space for you to spread out with two projects?

PT: They didn't have a workshop or a studio.

LS: It sounds pretty frustrating. Was there a nursery school available when you needed it?

PT: In the Soviet Union, you send your child to the nursery only if you absolutely have to because kids are often sick there, so since she was working at home, she simply couldn't bring myself to do it.

LS: Did he never go to the nursery school?

PT: No.

LS: Is there kindergarten in the Soviet Union?

PT: Yes. [No, there isn't. She probably misunderstood the question. They generally refer to daycare centers as "kindergartens." - EI]

LS: So kindergarten was when he started getting childhood illnesses, right? [This was translated in Russian as "Kindergarten is where kids start getting all sorts of childhood illnesses?" Therefore, Paulina's response that follows generally states the fact rather than refers specifically to Alex - EI]

PT: Yes.

LS: Did you and your mother ever have differences about how to raise Alex?

PT: Of course, sometimes they did. That's normal.

LS: But it was nothing you couldn't live with, I imagine?
PT: No. She basically didn't interfere too much.

LS: You are the first person I've interviewed--no, the second person, I guess--the other person taught piano, so she had more spare time too, she could shape her work time, and you were able to shape your work time too. What sort of responsibilities did your husband have at home?

PT: We didn't really have a very clear-cut separation of functions. Maybe the kitchen was my domain only, but everything else was more or less common.

LS: I have been told that in the Soviet Union husbands don't often take the vacuum cleaner or go out to beat the rugs or whatever, but I am sure there are exceptions to that too. Were there any sorts of bad feelings about--here, I am doing this, I am holding a job, I've got a baby, I've got all the kitchen, why don't you pitch in?

PT: She thinks she was pretty lucky in this respect.

LS: When you had the baby, you were happy with the level of care you got at the hospital?

PT: No, of course, not. With her second child, with Katya, she was already in a more kind of up-to-date hospital and clinic, and it was a little bit better. [The last sentence seems to be coming directly from the translator.]

LS: When did your marriage end? In 1979?

PT: Yes.

LS: What happens when a marriage ends in the Soviet Union? Do you just go out and get some papers signed? You don't need a divorce lawyer, I take it?

PT: When there is nothing to split, when there is nothing to quarrel about, it's easier.

LS: But then where does he go to live?
PT: Legally, since he had lived for thirteen years in the city [in that apartment], he had the right to part of this apartment where they lived. So he could legally claim a right to get a one-room apartment. [to have the two-room apartment where they lived exchanged for two one-room apartments, so that he would get one of them] But by then we already had a reasonably good studio for our artwork from the Art Fund, so he basically moved in there and he lived in the studio.

LS: Could you continue to use the studio?

PT: No.

LS: Was this an amicable parting or were there hard feelings?

PT: Divorce is always rather painful, and she can't say that theirs was the worst. There was no bloodshed, but still it was not a very easy time.

LS: Here you were--fortunately you didn't have to live in the same apartment, but you lost your studio, right?

PT: Well, it was a kind of an amicable agreement. He did not legally relinquish his claim to the apartment and she didn't legally relinquish her claim to the studio, but they didn't visit.

LS: But didn't you keep running into each other at work?

PT: No, he went to work for the movies and he still works in a movie studio, so they were no longer in the same field.

LS: What about seeing Alex?

PT: He did see him until she remarried, and after that he still kept insisting on seeing the child.

LS: You know, in this country, when people get divorced, you go to a lawyer and write that into--you're going to see them every weekend, etc.--what do people do in the Soviet Union?
PT: It may also happen like that in the Soviet Union, if there are disagreements and they quarrel about it, they may need a lawyer to straighten it out, but if you agree to a certain modicum, then you don't need that.

LS: Did he want to see Alex every weekend or every few days? What did you work out?

PT: She doesn't remember exactly, but it was mostly on weekends that he would call and take him out.

LS: I've not had too many friends who were divorced, but I remember one close friend who got divorced, and she really needed the support of her friends, her female friends. Did you have to fall back on that too?

PT: I didn't really feel the need to involve my friends into my family problems, and I didn't ask for their help.

LS: Did you have other friends who had gone through separations or divorces or family problems that you were able to be sort of be a sounding board?

PT: She believes that every situation is very unique, and she doesn't think that their example would have meant anything.

LS: Did you and your husband, when you were getting along, did you have a circle of friends that were mainly artists?

PT: Yes, of course.

LS: I really feel as though I should be asking you some questions about artistic freedom in the Soviet Union during the seventies, when you were working. Did you feel as though there was the dead hand of bureaucracy thwarting your artistic expression?

PT: Of course, there was this kind of official art that paid, and if you did something else, you simply did it for your own pleasure and nobody would pay for it. She thinks she was probably lucky because
in my field at least it was giving me more opportunities to express myself. She wasn't painting portraits of the big bosses or something like that, so she didn't have to do it.

LS: Was your boss fairly understanding?

PT: The good thing about this job for the Art Fund was that she didn't really have a boss. There was this committee that would give her a project to work on, and then there was another art committee that would evaluate the results. [the same committee - EI]

LS: Did you ever have any problems with your evaluations?

PT: There may have been some difficulties occasionally, but not really big troubles. She usually did get assignments and they were usually accepted. It depended on the assessment of this committee as to what category they assigned to the final product and that determined the pay. And of course, maybe she was not always in agreement with them as to what category they assigned it.

LS: When people get divorced here, it's always a big problem for their friends to decide who they are going to be friends with. Did that happen with your circle of friends too that some became your husband's friends and some stayed with you or some did not want to have anything to do with either of you? When you look back at it now, can you note that friendships did change for you?

PT: She didn't really run into big problems. She didn't have very many friends, but those that they had, she thinks that she managed to stay in the same kind of relationship with them, and her ex-husband was not a very outgoing person and it didn't really matter very much to him to stop these relationships.

LS: How many really close friends did you have?

PT: Maybe a couple, it's hard to tell.

LS: Did you go out with them? To concerts or something?

PT: Of course.
LS: And then your mother would babysit?

[loud noise, tape stops]

LS: How long were you divorced before you met Sasha?

PT: Maybe half a year.

LS: And when did you marry him?

PT: In 1980.

LS: What was his job?

PT: He was working for an architectural firm. There was a big architectural institute that was designing buildings for Minsk.

LS: So this is 1980 and Alex is in school. How old was he when you remarried?

PT: Seven or eight.

LS: Where did you live after you remarried?

PT: Her second husband had an apartment, so they moved in with him.

LS: Was he living there by himself?

PT: Yes.

LS: And how was he so lucky?

PT: It was kind of dubious luck. It's just that he was the only son and he was living with his parents, and the parents had died by then, and he stayed in the same apartment.

LS: Had he been married before? [End Tape 1 Side 2]
LS: I was asking where you had met him?

PT: Just at a party, as usual. She knew him before but not very closely.

LS: And who gave the party? Do you recall?

PT: She was working on some kind of a project for the movie studio and someone from the studio threw this party and they met there.

LS: You said that you met him after you had been divorced for about half year, is that right?

PT: They had not even been legally divorced, they were just separated, and then when she decided to remarry, then she got official divorce papers.

LS: How long did you know Sasha before you married him?

PT: She just knew him because he was in the same profession for maybe a couple of years, but they never really were closely acquainted.

LS: Once you started going out with him, then how long?

PT: They started dating in June, when the infamous Moscow Olympics took place---when nobody came---and then they got married in January.

LS: Did he have relatives in Minsk?

PT: An old aunt.

LS: And your mother, was she rather sad to be left alone in her apartment?
PT: She initially even moved with them, but then she decided that it was not such a bad idea to have finally an apartment for herself.

LS: And when was your daughter born?

PT: In 1983.

LS: OK. I didn't get the date, the year you remarried?

PT: In 1980.

LS: When your son was going to school, he had no problems because his nationality was Belorussian, right?

PT: No, he didn't have any problems.

LS: So was his schooling rather happy?

PT: He is a very disciplined person; he always does his homework and he always was a very good student: even if he didn't like the subject, if it was required, he did it. And even though he was definitely artistically inclined and also wanted to be an artist, he was going to a school with special emphasis on mathematics and had straight A's.

LS: Was his grade school happy, no problems?

PT: She can't say that he was a very happy child because in her opinion when one speaks of a happy child, that means carefree, but he was always very pensive and thinking about big problems and asking questions, and he didn't like school just like she didn't.

LS: When you say asking questions, what sort of questions?

PT: He always had all kinds of questions, and as a good student, he was expected to take part in all kinds of social, extra-curricula, and political activities in the Pioneer organization. He never liked that and was always questioning "Why do I have to do it if I don't like it," and he was asking all kinds of political questions and about nationality, and so on.
LS: Was he happy when you remarried or was it difficult for him to adjust to?

PT: Well, she thinks he was always rather independent and he had his own interests and she doesn't think he took this as something painful or distracting. Anyhow, when he decided at some point to cut all the relationship with his father, it was his idea, not hers, and he didn't like what he was telling him, he didn't like what he (his father) was saying about his mother, and he didn't even tell her much of what his father was saying about her, but he decided that he didn't want to have anything in common with him. And actually he was the pusher in the whole idea of emigration. He started talking about it much earlier than they even thought about it, and he can't even understand what his main motivation could have been because he didn't really suffer any anti-Semitism, but still he was talking about it and he must have been thinking about it and he was pushing for emigration ever since he was maybe twelve years old.

LS: Very interesting, even though it was not affecting his life?

PT: Maybe because her sister had emigrated in 1979, maybe it was something that his father was telling him, maybe a lot of different factors put together.

LS: I don't want to raise a lot of pain, but when you say what his father was telling him...

PT: Maybe she is assuming things, but she thinks that his father was disapproving of the fact that her sister had emigrated and maybe he was telling him that this is wrong that they have left the country. When you live together and everything is OK, certain things are not even discussed, but when you are mad at each other, when you have separated, then maybe certain things become a point of contention and if there is an additional factor of different nationalities, maybe this was also coming up.

LS: I guess I didn't want to ask you that. I know the answer because it seems to me when people are unhappy, they will use any
sort of stick to beat the other person and the nationality stick is certainly a big stick.

PT: And he used this. [PT in English] But this must have had just the reverse effect of what he was counting of, because he was speaking against emigration, but it only provoked his [son's] interest.

LS: Now we are going to get into emigration, but he did allow, he did sign the papers to allow Alex to leave, right?

PT: At that time, when it all started, he would not have signed these papers and would not have let us emigrate. This already happened later.

LS: OK, so Alex wanted to emigrate. When was Alex beginning to talk about it?

PT: He started talking about it when he was probably around twelve, and they emigrated when he was already eighteen, so this was going on for years.

LS: When he first started talking about it, did you just say, "Forget it, we've got a good life here?"

PT: She told him that they couldn't emigrate at that time, first of all, because she was sure that her ex-husband wouldn't have signed the papers and wouldn't have let them emigrate, and she didn't even want to ask him to sign these papers so that he would have a chance to talk in the professional circles about their intention to emigrate. At that time, very few people were even allowed to leave--it was during the Afghanistan war in the 80's--and she thinks it would have been a very disadvantageous situation for them at that time. And then, Sasha, of course, realized very well that even though there was nothing holding him back there--he didn't have relatives who would be any hindrance [maybe: he didn't have any immediate family members left]--but he had his profession and a good job and he realized very well what he is facing here.

LS: How did he realize that? Did somebody write him?
PT: He is a clever person and he knew that it is very difficult to start everything again from zero at our age and in the profession that is probably not that popular here, so he realized that it would be very hard.

LS: So finally, what pushed you to apply?

PT: A lot of things accumulating and coming together, and then Alex had already graduated from vocational school and was already of draft age, and he was pushing them to do it.

LS: Would he have been drafted or might he have gone on to the university the way you did? He went to the same sort of school you went to, right? Then, would he have gone on to the same sort of college that you went on to?

PT: He was planning to go to a similar institute, but his age was such that he could have been drafted, and at that time they would have drafted him even if he were in the art institute. And he absolutely hated the idea of going to the army [not because he was afraid of difficulties but because he hated the system], and he wanted to avoid it by all means.

LS: So your decision was based on his future? Is that what you would say?

PT: Yes, to a great extent, and also the future of her daughter.

LS: Was it difficult then to get his father's permission?

PT: They thought that it would be a big problem and they psyched ourselves up and they were expecting all kinds of complications and objections and so on, but by then the father and son had not seen each other for about five years and he [Alex] was a little boy when they last saw each other and now he was already a big man, and it was a completely different situation, not as they had expected and he immediately signed the papers and he said, "I knew that you would do it and you are right--there is nothing to expect here."
LS: How long was it from the time you applied till the time you left the Soviet Union?

PT: A couple of months, that's all.

LS: When did you leave, what day and year?

PT: July 31, 1989.

LS: Your mother had said that she left with you but then she got left in Vienna?

PT: Yes, she spent eight months in Vienna without them.

LS: And I know you went to Italy and then you came to Minnesota because this is where your sister was?

PT: Yes.

LS: Who met you at the airport?

PT: All the relatives.

LS: How many relatives were there?

PT: Maybe twenty. A lot of children had already been born here.

LS: Just tell me so I know. There was your sister and her husband's family...

PT: It's a big family. [PT in English] His sister with three children and brother with two children and she [Faina] had one child and her second child was born here.

LS: Was there anybody from the Jewish Family Service to meet you? Did they provide an apartment for you?

PT: Yes, her sister arranged through the Jewish Family Service.
LS: Was your sister paying for the apartment or was the Jewish Family Service paying for the apartment?

PT: At that time, she thinks, it was still the Jewish Family Service that was paying for the apartment.

LS: And who furnished the apartment, do you know?

PT: She doesn't know exactly how she managed and how she arranged all that, but her sister took care of all these preparations, and there was some money given to her from the Jewish Family Service, and she must have also pitched in.

LS: Once you got here, did you use the Jewish Family Service for much or did you rely on your relatives for information about how to get English lessons and so on?

PT: It was mostly her sister who was taking care of paperwork, with welfare applications, with English classes and all that.

LS: So it was very different now because you had relatives to rely on. Other people who came needed the help of agencies. Do you agree with that?

PT: She doesn't know exactly how it was before.

LS: Do you have to used the Jewish agencies or the state agencies very much now?

PT: Well, of course, when she didn't know where to send her son to continue his studies, she was asking at the Jewish Family Service.

LS: Did they give you the information you needed?

PT: Unfortunately, not. Unfortunately, their relatives couldn't give them much help in this field either because none of them was involved in this area. Basically he himself found out everything he needed, and to her surprise, his English was much better than she knew and he must have studied it much more than she even
suspected. They didn't have much time for that, but he must have gotten prepared.

LS: So he found the best place to go and he went and applied himself?

PT: Yes. He has filed all the papers and filled the applications and grants and all that, and they knew that he would need it probably more than they did, and they couldn't take any of their artwork out of the Soviet Union, but they took some of his artwork, so it helped for him to apply and to arrange an exhibition. It helped a lot. He could show his work to the board of the college, they looked at his work and they gave him a scholarship for the first semester, and then he could continue.

LS: Has the Jewish Family Service been of any help to you?

PT: Sure, even the fact that they gave money to start, to help them out initially.

LS: I was thinking, I guess, more about information. They didn't have the information of the sort that Alex needed. What about information of the sort that Sasha needed to try and find a job?

PT: She doesn't think that anybody can help them in this area, even the Jewish Family Service.

LS: Can you talk about the problems of artists finding themselves in another culture?

PT: She thinks that problems have different sides: it's a different culture, different people, different traditions, and also maybe their age is a disadvantage for them—it's kind of in-between. It's very difficult at their age to switch to a different profession. They don't want really to do it, and of course, it's a pity to abandon everything that he had already achieved back there and to start something completely different from zero. And she doesn't even think that he would not be able to work as an architect here. There may be some nuances that a person study and master here.
LS: What about you, your life as an artist? You think that you will be able to find work?

PT: She doesn't know. She doesn't think she can make any prognosis.

LS: What about your English proficiency?

PT: That's a sore spot. She knew that she would probably have problems with English, and she thinks it's kind of expected in an artist who has her medium through which she expresses herself and not normally through words and through people contact. So for her now it's very difficult to express herself in an unfamiliar language.

LS: You know, it strikes me that here you came to America and maybe you even left you were confronted with the problem of not only getting used to America, but getting used to sort of living a life as a Jew because that was something, it seems to me, you hadn't really thought about too much in the Soviet Union? Am I wrong?

PT: This is a rather pleasant change and nothing drastic is happening.

LS: But I mean, it's a process of learning something that you hadn't known before?

PT: Of course, by now they are already used to the fact that there are so many different synagogues, but the first time when they saw Temple of Aaron, they were really shocked and amazed that such a huge and beautiful building is a synagogue and that people are not afraid or ashamed or reluctant to come and show that they are Jews.

[End Tape 2 Side 1]

[Tape 2 Side 2]

LS: ...part of the growing anti-Semitism in Russia had forced them to start looking at their own past and try to find what was important and they had started going to Simchat Torah(Jewish holiday
celebrating the giving of the Torah). They didn't go to the synagogue, but they went outside the synagogue just to identify as Jews. And we were wondering if you had done any of that in the Soviet Union.

PT: When she was growing up, it was more all geared towards internationalism and all that, and they didn't even know of any literature circulating undercover. It probably was never even reaching the Soviet Union, but lately from her son she learned a lot of things because he became involved with a lot of the new things and he was getting literature about Judaism that was translated into Russian, and through him she learned a lot of things.

LS: Alex is a very interesting person.

PT: It's kind of a paradox that parents are learning from their children.

LS: Yes. And you also have this paradox of learning from Katya because she goes to the Jewish day school.

PT: With Katya, it's kind of expected, it's not surprising. But Alex had a Hebrew-Russian dictionary back in Russia and some literature about Judaism in Russian. He came much better prepared. Now he is studying Hebrew and he is going to a conservative synagogue. We are going here, to Mt. Zion, and he is going to a conservative synagogue.

LS: When does he have the time to go?

PT: He finds time. [PT in English]

LS: Which synagogue does he go to?

PT: Beth Jacob.

LS: Who does he go with?

PT: He has some friends, the son of Susan Cobin.
LS: Susan runs the Jewish day school, does she not? And who does Alex go with, her son?

PT: With her son and her family.

LS: How did he find out they go there?

PT: She invited him [to join Rabbi Gordon's group]. He has every Saturday, about 4:00 p.m., meetings with boys and he talks with them about religion and so on.

LS: He is still doing that? He is a wonderful teacher.

PT: So he liked it very much and he was attending these talks and he keeps going.

LS: Are there any other Soviets?

PT: He is doing it on his own. Nobody was pushing him, and they didn't push him.

LS: Very, very interesting. I know you've been so busy here, but you have such an interesting background and your interests certainly transcend any focus on Judaism. Have you made friends with other architects and other artists here, American born people?

PT: Yes, they met quite a few because it's a matter of life and medium and environment.

LS: So you had to network?

PT: Yes. It's very complicated, you know, it's not easy to start new relationships. A lot of acquaintances but not really close friendships that they had back there. [We are trying, but it is very difficult to become as close as we were with people there and to find so much in common. - EI]

LS: Is part of that because of the language or what is it?
The language must play an important role in it, but then again, it is only now, nearly two years after they came here, that she began to realize how different people are. Initially, you just look at people--and a lot of them look the same as Russians, especially the Jews whose ancestors came out of Russia--and they all look the same, but now they are beginning to realize that the people are quite different.

LS: How are they different, I think that's really the [unclear], how are they different?

PT: They were growing up under different circumstances, they have a completely different outlook on life.

LS: So what is their outlook and what is your outlook?

PT: It's hard to formulate it, she just feels that they have a...

LS: Are Americans more selfish, more independent in their thinking? There is not the same feeling of camaraderie perhaps?

PT: It's hard to formulate how it is different, but she sees that attitudes are different, the manifestations of friendship maybe different, and you just have to get used to it, you have to accept it and understand it and get used to it. [I can't tell, maybe the meaning and manifestations of friendship here are different--and maybe it is even better than the Russian type of friendships--all I can tell now is that there are differences, which at times are quite shocking, but we need to get used to it, to understand it, and undoubtedly, to accept it.]

LS: When you talk about the manifestation, so many times people have told us, "You know, Americans make friends easily, and you think you're a friend of theirs, and then you don't hear from them for a long time." So, it's rather superficial friendships.

PT: She thinks that it's very individual. In Russia, there are also people who make friends very easily and then people who don't make friends very easily. She thinks there is nothing wrong about Americans being very open and smiling and easy going and making a
lot of friends. There is nothing wrong about it, it's just that some people make friends easier than others.

LS: Do you have any comments to make about artists here and artists in the Soviet Union, the life of an artist here?

PT: She doesn't think she knows very well the life of artists here, so it's hard to compare. She is acquainted with some artists but not with their life.

LS: But as far as getting jobs etc.?

PT: She knows some women artists here whose husbands are wealthy enough and they don't depend on their art for a living, so they can work independently, and it's a different situation.

LS: Do you have any women friends who don't have husbands or whose husbands can't support them?

PT: No, mostly these are married women.

LS: Do you sometimes think longingly of those days when somebody gave you an assignment and then you were on your own to do it?

PT: She is not looking back at that time in this way. Since they are here, it's a completely different situation and a different life. The only thing she is sorry about that time is passing and we could [be doing something useful here.] Of course, as a woman who has children--and it was always like that even back in Russia that her creative expectations were kind of secondary [to her concern about] the future of her children--and now looking at them and their future, she is more concerned for them.

LS: So were your creative expectations always secondary to your children?

PT: Yes, children were always a hindrance to creative work.
LS: Did you have any friends in the Soviet Union, women who wanted to achieve and either didn't have children or put their art before their children?

PT: Yes, those women who were very successful in their art, usually didn't have children. She thinks that it's probably the same here.

LS: Is there anything that the Jewish community might have done to make your life as an artist here a little easier?

PT: She just does not know their capacities or what they could do, but she knows that the synagogue has helped them out tremendously and they are very grateful that they provided the studio for them. She can't even imagine what they would be doing if they didn't have this studio. Especially Sasha who spends his entire days here.

LS: Do you spend all day long here also?

PT: Only while Katya is in school.

LS: When she gets older, do you expect that she would be able to walk home from school and go to her grandmother's, for instance?

PT: That would probably depend on what school she will be going. And her grandmother has a rather full life here now.

LS: Is her life different than it was in the Soviet Union?

PT: Yes.

LS: How so? Is it fuller?

PT: Back there, she was busy trying to forage and buy food and bring it for the whole family, and here it's the opposite—they are bringing her the groceries, and she is busy studying English and doing other things.

LS: Is she spending just as much time being a grandmother here or is she spending less time?
PT: She is less of a grandmother here than she was back there.

LS: And why is that?

PT: The living conditions are different. Over there it was a necessity.

LS: Is Catherine still at the Jewish day school?

PT: Luckily, yes.

LS: Is she happy there?

PT: Luckily, she has nothing to compare it with, but she likes it there. She didn't go to either kindergarten or school back in Russia.

LS: The only thing I wanted to ask you about was the difference between MCAD, where Alex goes now, and the sort of schooling that you and he had in the Soviet Union. What are the differences?

PT: Back there, in the institute especially, it was more academic and very structured way of teaching. When I was in the vocational school in the sixties, when Khruschev's thaw was affecting the arts and all of a sudden things became permitted that had been completely forbidden before, like cubism and abstractionism, and our teachers on the one hand were allowed to let us do things that would not have been possible before, but at the same time they didn't know themselves how to teach us these things because they had been completely banned for year and years. In the institute, it was, of course, more academic painting and things like that. She is very happy that Alex had a chance to get four years of this kind of studies back there and it helps him to really excel here, and he shows very good results and he even has a job in one of the trade magazines for one of the [insurance] companies. So it really helps.

LS: What do you and possibly he dislike most about MCAD? I am sure it has drawbacks.

PT: She likes very much his school and every time she visits, she is really envious and wishful that she would have had a chance to
study in such an atmosphere. They have wonderful workshops and studios. So she thinks he is very lucky, even though she can't really complain that I did get a good education, but the atmosphere and students there are very nice.

LS: If things settle down in the Soviet Union, would you and Sasha ever think of going back and trying to pick up the pieces of your life?

PT: She doesn't think so. The children are here, and she doesn't think you can emigrate the second time and go through all this again.

LS: Do you feel that you are caught between two worlds now—you can't quite step into American life in some respects...

PT: To some extent, yes. Of course, there is a gap. For instance, she used to read a lot, and even though all these Russian magazines are available here through a wonderful library, but she just can't let herself spend time reading Russian—she must force myself to read English—and that takes a long time. So there is a gap and there is a feeling that she is missing something. And there is no circle of colleagues or friends with whom she can argue or talk about this stuff [I can have debates on various issues] on the same level. Luckily, they can discuss things with Sasha and they can [have debates] argue with him, but that's a different story.

LS: Can you discuss them with Alex or does he have an American outlook now?

PT: He has his own outlook and we talk a lot with him. He doesn't accept everything that he sees here absolutely and he has his own outlook.

LS: I want to thank you very much for adding to this project.