Ronne Friedman Transcript

Gabriel Weinstein: All right. I'm going to turn on the recorder. With all of the other people we've interviewed, we have this little script that the Jewish Women's Archive gave us. So I'm going to start with that. It's basically just stating who we are. What's the address? 26 Royal Road?

Ronne Friedman: Yes, Brookline.

GW: The reason we say this is the Jewish Women's Archive basically told us to start all of our things with that. So, that way, when people listen to this thirty years from now, they'll know who we were and where we were talking.

RF: Very good.

GW: All right. So without further ado, this is Gabriel Weinstein, and I'm here with –

Tamar Shachaf Schneider: Tamar Shachaf Schneider.

Aaron Hirsch: And Aaron Hirsch.

GW: We are here with Rabbi Ronne Friedman to record his history as part of the Soviet Jewry Oral History Project of the Jewish Women's archive. Today is November 15, 2016, and we are at 26 Royal Road in Brookline, Massachusetts. Rabbi Friedman, do we have your permission to record this interview?

Ronne Friedman: Yes.

TSS: Thank you.

GW: Thank you very much. So our first question is, when do you recall hearing for the first time about the Soviet Jewry movement?

RF: I would say in the relatively early ’70s. My career as a rabbi began in 1975. So certainly, by the time I was in my first position in suburban Chicago, I was aware. I want to characterize it within the Jewish community as something of a fringe movement. I mean, [Elie] Wiesel was the prophet who was raising the alarm. But the degree to which it had really spread throughout the larger Jewish community was much more limited than it became in the ’80s.

TSS: Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

RF: If you qualify the question a little bit, I’d be happy to.

TSS: Your rabbinical career?

RF: Sure, sure. So I went to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. After a couple of years, I took a year out and interned for a year with Bernard Mehlman, who is my closest friend and mentor. He was then in Washington, DC. So I returned to Hebrew Union College [and] spent another couple of years. I was in a five-year rabbinic program. But because I took a year out, I had fallen back a class, and that class was the first Hebrew Union College class to spend a required first year in Israel. So most of my new classmates – not every single one, but most, had spent a year in Israel, and I had not. Consequently, I persuaded the HUC administration to let me spend most of what was then my sixth year in Israel, in Jerusalem. My wife and I were there for about nine months. Then I came back to be ordained, and my first position was in Glencoe, Illinois, which is the north shore of Chicago. I was there for three years. During that period of time, in the last year that I was there, Bernard Mehlman wound up taking the pulpit at Temple Israel. The interim rabbi, who had been the Associate Rabbi when Roland Gittelsohn, the previous senior rabbi, had retired, had spent five years at T.I. – there was

a new rabbi coming in, and so he went off on his own to an another pulpit, thus freeing a position at Temple Israel. I came to Temple Israel in 1978. I was there with Bernard Mehlman for sixteen years and left in 1994, went to Buffalo, New York, for five years, [and] returned from Buffalo in 1999. When Bernard Mehlman announced that he would retire in 1999, I entered Temple Israel's search process and wound up as the senior rabbi of the congregation, where I continued for the next seventeen years. I just retired at the end of June. So thirty-three years of my life were spent in that building. [laughter]

TSS: Like my father's career in the army, also thirty-three years. [laughter]

GW: So when you arrived at Temple Israel in 1978, was the Soviet Jewry movement still a fringe movement within the Jewish community?

RF: I hate calling it fringe because I don't really mean it in terms of importance but in terms of attention. So, it was, I would say, somewhat on the fringe, at least quantitatively. I think that what started to emerge during the late '70s and early '80s, that the steam started to pick up a little bit; the degree of awareness became greater, geopolitics to some degree really affected and molded that. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, which is the Reform organization of rabbis, has a Central Conference.

AH: The CCAR, right.

RF: Yes. It is divided into regions. At that point in time, many of the regions were very active on a regional basis. That was true of NER, the New England Region, which encompasses pretty much all of New England plus a little bit. NER rabbis developed a commitment--I don't know exactly when it started; my guess is the late '70s, maybe 1980, something like that, around that time. The rabbis of the region funded two rabbis to go to interface in a variety of different ways with refuseniks in the Soviet Union. So, despite the fact that – what would always happen is that a couple of people would come back (and they were really *farbrente* when they came back), engaged to a much higher

degree--they returned with a mission. But it still took a while for that to really coalesce and to begin to expand and grow. I think the expansion was really very much in the mid-‘80s into the ’90s. I would say that you have the March on Washington in that latter period of time so that the energy continued to grow. In 1986, Bernard Mehlman and I let our colleagues know that we would like to go together to interface with the refuseniks, and that was the beginning of our really heavy-duty engagement. That’s what sparked that our deeper commitment – I mean, we were not uninvolved prior to that point, but we were totally immersed after that.

AH: So what did you do to prepare for this trip in 1986? On top of that, what did Temple Israel do to prepare for it since, as far as I'm aware, there was much contribution?

RF: Yeah. Why don't we pause for a second. I'll get you a cup of coffee, and then I'll answer your question.

TSS: Okay.

AH: Great. Thank you. [Recording paused]

RF: So we left off – you asked about what we did to organize, essentially.

AH: Yes, how'd you prepare for the trip?

RF: First of all, we were connected instantly, as had been all of our colleagues who had previously gone, to Action for Soviet Jewry. I would say that they did exceptional, pretty extraordinary work in that period of time. The dedication was way, way, way beyond any reasonable expectation. I also want to say that, since you're doing this for the Jewish Women's Archive, although certainly there were men involved, this was really a female-driven organization in every sense. I mean, and the dedication was pretty much absolutely tireless. Judy Patkin and Sheila Galland.

GW: Decter?

RF: No, no. Sheila Decter is a different organization. I mean, not that she was uninvolved.

GW: I'm just throwing names out there.

RF: Shoot. Either Roy or Bernard, if you speak with them.

AH: We've spoken with both of them.

RF: Bernard's internal computer is the best. I may not come up with her last name again. Anyway, they were exceptional. So it was a sort of a cloak and dagger atmosphere, too, that was part of this because what Action for Soviet Jewry was imparting to us is that the people that we were visiting were really at risk as a result of our visit, and therefore, [there was] the need to create codes. We went and bought things that you would take for granted now, but you couldn't take for granted in that era, [such as] watches in which we could code addresses and stuff like that. I think that some of it was probably reasonable caution. Much of it, I think, was really the understandable paranoia that the Jewish community felt around the Soviet government. It's not that they were wrong, but the idea that bumbling rabbis were going to deceive the Soviet government was not a very realistic idea. But we were sort of prepped with that kind of stuff in mind. If we were visiting someone and somehow, the government happened to walk in, we didn't want to expose other people that we had come to see, and that kind of stuff. Anyway, we had been given a list by Action of things that we could take, and we took that on very seriously and started raising money, getting contributions, buying and receiving all kinds of things that we could take, which included Judaica, Hebraica, but also just things that would produce income on the black market, so that refuseniks, most of whom – you know the catch 22; that's already been explained – the catch 22 of losing a job and then being at risk of being identified by the Soviet government as "parasites"

(living off the State) and then becoming imprisoned. So if they could sell something on the black market, they could protect themselves and their families to a certain degree. So we went in with cash and jewelry, and just all kinds of stuff. We could probably have supplied a religious school for the year with the Judaica. I would say that each of us probably carried a hundred pounds of stuff. We were really packing pack mules in that era.

TSS: So we heard that you were caught in –

RF: Customs.

TSS: We'd like to hear about your experience [and] how you felt.

RF: So first, one other element, which is a story that has a continuing line afterward. Action had asked us to procure and carry in two heart valves. You've heard the story already.

GW: Yes, Rabbi Mehlman.

RF: So I don't need to repeat the story if you have heard it already.

AH: Feel free.

RF: Well, they needed two heart valves for a Jewish woman. A Jewish doctor had said he would perform the operation, but he needed two sizes of heart valves. I don't know whether that was really the case or that was part of the deal that he would have one afterward. It was never ours to try to discern any of that. The heart valves were very expensive at that time; they were about twenty-five hundred dollars apiece. We put a call out, and the call was answered by a Palestinian American doctor who heard the story of this woman and was moved by it. So, an incredible aside in that larger picture is that the salvific agent, the person who was, in one sense, really responsible for what was going to

save this Jewish woman's life in Moscow, was a Palestinian American. I had one size; Bernard Mehlman had the other size. You've met him, so you know that he's not a prototypical – he looks more Irish than Jewish. He did then – red hair and the complexion of a redhead. He moved through customs at the Moscow airport without any problem at all, but they stopped me. They started unloading Hebrew texts and all different kinds of stuff. They took me into a room to pat me down. I was wearing a turquoise necklace to give to somebody for black market sale that was probably worth – I don't know – maybe about fifteen hundred at the time, which really would have supported this family of four or five for about half a year. They patted me down, but they patted me down only on the sides and not like this (on my back and chest). So, I went back to the original customs line. They pulled out the heart valve and said, “What is this?” I said, “It's a heart valve.” They said, “Well, why do you have it?” I said, “Well, I have a heart condition, and my doctor said that I should travel with it.” [They] said, “You've come to Moscow for an operation?” I thought, “Heaven forfend!” They said, “Well, if you'd like this back, you have to go to the Health Ministry.” I said to myself, “That's something that's not going to happen.” Finally, after interrogation, and I wouldn't say hard interrogation, but enough to make me more than a little anxious and with Bernard Mehlman waiting for me, not knowing what was going to happen. Finally, we passed through. They confiscated about half of the Judaica and Hebraica – they didn't really confiscate much of the other goods. – This is a later conclusion of mine. I now think that part of this deal was that the Russian government was very happy to have all of these goods come into the black market because it put stuff that they couldn't otherwise get out in circulation. It didn't cost them anything. There was no trade cost to them. It was all contributions, right? It wasn't going to wind up ultimately with the people they didn't like. It was going to wind up in the coiffeurs of not ordinary Russians but the elite. I hadn't come to that conclusion at that particular moment in time. Ultimately, we were permitted to pass, and we proceeded. I think probably not worth [going into] some of the observations and details of the first period in Moscow other than that the visits to the refusenik families

were really compelling. We had gotten one of the heart valves in. We met Felix Friedlander, whose wife was the person for whom the heart valve was intended. We had reason to feel that having gotten one in, we'd get the other one in through some other route. So, I think there was a sense of half-triumph. It was a start, but it wasn't sufficient. We had contact with a slew of people, but particularly with Ben Charny and his family, and with Misha and Marina Fuchs-Rabinovich and their family, and then a host of others. I would say that [in] 1986, the degree of tension and suspicion was still at [its] height. It hadn't really dissipated at all. We went nonstop from early in the morning to late at night for whatever number of days we were in Moscow, and then we went to Leningrad. I mean, the only thing that we did for ourselves– other than seeing Red Square, the only thing that we saw in Moscow was the art museum. I mean, that was all. It was not a tourist trip in any way.

GW: What did you guys talk about during your visit with the refusenik families?

RF: I mean, I think – oh, the other thing that I didn't mention in all of this –we were loaded with medication – Zantac, Xanax. I mean, anything imaginable – diabetic supplies because people couldn't get stuff. So part of it – there was definitely a rabbinic role. I mean, with some, it was really just the encouragement that there were plenty of people behind us who were coming in, to tell them what was starting to burgeon in the United States, that the Jewish community was becoming aroused, that that was true in Israel as well – to keep that flow of information, which wouldn't be available anywhere else within the society, just to keep hope alive. So that was one of the functions. I would say that in a number of instances, we did a lot of rabbinic counseling. I mean, people were devastated, anguished, hopeless, and fearful. One woman who eventually came here and settled, came in and just cried through the entirety of the time that – we were in the company of maybe six, eight, nine people, and she cried through the entirety of the evening, just overwhelmed by the pain. Everything depended upon the individual needs. I mean, people like Ben Charny and Fuchs-Rabinovich were like battlers and fighters.

They just needed to hear that there was support and that there would be support because they were going to do it no matter what.

AH: So it appears that your group visited these refuseniks in clusters. You just mentioned six, seven to around nine people. Was that the general size of these clusters?

RF: Frequently. It was seldom larger. I mean, especially in ’86. Seldom larger. There was really the sense that a large group would attract attention, and there was real concern for that on our part and on theirs. We had the contact numbers, and we would have the person who was organizing this visit call for the next day or the next afternoon or whatever was going to be so that they were, in effect, passing us from one to another. We used their assistance so that we didn’t have to try to make our way through. We both learned the Cyrillic alphabet to be able to nominally read but didn’t have any Russian at all.

TSS: I want to go back. I know that on one of your journeys, Rabbi Morrison and [Jessica] Greenfield –

RF: Later.

TSS: – so they joined. So we wanted to know: why did you want young people to join the trip?

RF: Sure. So what happened was after Bernard and I were there, I went the next year with Roy Einhorn, our cantor. You interviewed him as well?

TSS: Yes.

GW: Yes, we met him.

RF: Okay. We took two members of the congregation with us. Because I had been before, we hooked up with the two rabbis who were traveling for the Northeast region of the CCAR (NER) that next year. So there were really six of us traveling together at that point –1987. In ’88, Bernard and Roy – if I have it right, Bernard and Roy went in ’88. I don't remember whether it was ‘88 or ‘89 that they brought Jeremy and Jessica.

GW: ’88.

RF: ’88.

AH: We heard that from Bernard.

RF: I'm sure it's correct. I wasn't on that trip. I was involved in organizing for it, but not on it because I had been twice now. Bernard and Roy were going to go for a second time. Our commitment to youth was very, very strong. I mean, all of us were really hands-on in terms of teaching and working with the kids. We had, in Jeremy and Jessica, two really exceptional youth leaders, one of whom was a regional officer, and Jeremy, the next year, became the president of Temple Israel's youth group. (Jessica is one year older than Jeremy.) We really felt that to include them was sort of critically important in terms of this spirit that was growing in the United States, to connect – that it wasn't going to have the same meaning to our kids coming only from us. If peers had traveled and could communicate peer to peer, the impact would be much greater. I think we felt that that was really true. I mean, they took that on as a mission when they came back.

GW: Going back, what prompted – you said that by the mid-‘80s, the Soviet Jewry movement was gaining momentum within the broader Jewish community. What led to you and Rabbi Mehlman going in 1986? What motivated you guys to take the journey that year?

RF: I think a variety of different factors. We had been at Temple Israel for eight years, which meant that we came, in essence, as a new regime. I mean, whatever we were going to have done in the first stage had been done. I think there was a sense of readiness for expansion. It was connected to our commitment to the justice work that we were doing here, but then to – that sense of responsibility for Klal Yisrael, that we couldn't just respond here if we had the opportunity, and we had the opportunity. So we wanted to see it firsthand. We wanted to be able to communicate it. We felt that in so doing, we would be able to engage a much larger cohort of the congregation with firsthand description than if we were just bringing in speakers, things like that.

GW: So what did the congregation ask you when you guys came back in 1986?

RF: First, the congregation responded incredibly to all of our efforts to generate support. I mean, it was unbelievable--just an outpouring, and that continued. When we came back after the first trip (1986), in that moment, it was really heightened. I want to distinguish the tenor of the times between 1986 and even 1987.. We came back (in ’86), and the sanctuary was completely full. So, I mean, we had people standing, which is, apart from high holy days, not necessarily a usual experience. I think that people were just eager to hear the stories we chose to tell people about it. By selecting a number of different families and telling their stories, I think we made the right decision in terms of communicating. It became much more real to people when we were talking about not a movement but rather the incredible risk and courage of refuseniks and what was needed from the American Jewish community. When I went back in 1987, it was much more relaxed going into the airport in Moscow. Scrutiny was not nearly the same. I mean, not just my personal experience. When six of us went through – it was like, “okay.” I went expecting the same attitude and scrutiny that we encountered, but it was very much different. When we came back in 1986, it was the first time that the *New York Times* printed the words “glasnost” and “perestroika.” So just in terms of the sea change that was going on in the Soviet Union at that time, it's not that the continuing plight of

refuseniks wasn't real, but all of a sudden, after we came back in ‘87, so many of the people that we had encountered started getting permission. I mean, it was really not just slipping through the crack. All of a sudden, it seemed like the window had opened. It was at that point in time that we really started to see people that we had met coming over. We were organizing to greet them here and then to provide support here and in Israel. Anyway, you could feel it starting to change even though it hadn't fully taken place at that point.

GW: Excuse me. During your first trip – I kind of already asked this, but I want to ask you again. In your trip in ‘86 and ’87, what would the refusenik families ask you about the American Jewish community?

RF: So maybe the best way to go at that is Ben Charny’s brother Leon, who sadly died as a very young man but had gotten permission ten years prior and was living here and had done his Ph.D. work at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. We were really engaged with him after we met the Charny family in Moscow, to organize to try to bring Ben and [his] family here. I remember riding with Leon one day on Beacon Street. He said, “When I was in the Soviet Union, I knew that Pravda (the premier Russian newspaper. “Truth”) lied, but I assumed that half of it was true. It wasn't until I came here that I really understood that none of it was true. None of what was printed and disseminated.” I think that probably more than anything else – I mean, families wanted to know details, maybe starting in ‘87, of the how. But in ‘86, it was still – wanted to know that the negative propaganda that they had been subjected to was really utterly untrue and that they would be in safety if they were enabled to leave for either the United States or Israel. They certainly wanted to believe that, and I think most of them believed it, but probably not to the ultimate degree – they wanted reassurance of that in particular and that this was not going to be a passing fad in either the American Jewish community or in Israel. By that time, it was not difficult to wholeheartedly reassure them that it wasn't going to disappear. I mean, there were people like Scoop Jackson, the senator from

Washington. It was just a hardline non-Jew who advocated – if you don't know about him, you have to do that research for this. Henry Scoop Jackson was a very forceful figure in all of this, and of course [Ronald] Reagan is – regardless of any thought of how we felt about Reagan in other respects, Reagan was very strong on all of this. I mean, a strong opponent of the Soviet Union advocating that we put their feet to the fire.

GW: What was the Jewish knowledge like of the families that you visited?

RF: Very variable. You know, Anna Charny's husband – they're no longer married – referred to it as "Moscow kosher," and what that meant was, we do the best we can to try to comply, but there are severe limits. We can't do it all. We don't have the opportunity or the freedom. So that was with regard to Kashrut. But I think more generally, it was people in search – I mean, there was a real eagerness. We did a lot of teaching when we were there. There was a real eagerness for that on a variety of different levels. The Russians, even if they had very little Jewish knowledge, were so steeped in literature and in philosophy. They were eager to engage in this from a Jewish perspective, eager to hear it, and eager to incorporate it. There was a real hunger.

TSS: What was it like meeting them back here when they came?

RF: Unbelievable. A couple of different incidents. I'm sure others have described the day the Charny family landed. It was just this exceptional network. We were connected to this network. I mean, somebody who worked as a youth director was married to the daughter of a guy who had been a *Times* correspondent in Moscow for four years, and she had grown up there, and the father became involved, had contact with Armand Hammer, who got involved and ultimately arranged for the Charnys to come over on Armand Hammer's plane. But Ben Charney was so much at the forefront of the congregation's vision that we probably had a hundred people there to greet them when they got off the plane. I mean, it was just overwhelming particularly in that Ben's health was imperfect, and we got him out alive. American medical treatment helped to keep him

alive for several years. The second story along these lines is we were having a Kabbalat Shabbat service in the summertime, and we'd use the atrium of Temple Israel. So you walk in from the parking lot into Temple Israel, and you're into the atrium, and that's where the service [was]. Bernard and I were there with Roy to lead the service, and all of a sudden, Felix Friedlander walked in with his wife, who was the recipient of the heart valve. You could have scraped us all off of the floor at that point. I can't tell you whether he is still alive. He was the tallest Soviet Jew that we met. This is someone with real height. He walked in that door and was unmistakable, and we'd never met his wife, Mira. But we knew instantly who he was. He walked in; it was just miraculous. I think we experienced – each of those events as minor miracles. I had another story also. I went to Israel with the Combined Jewish Philanthropies during the first War with Iraq. When Bernard and I went in '86 [to] Leningrad, we met a filmmaker by the name of Leonid Kelbert. I don't know whether Bernard spoke about him or not. He's really an exceptional guy, a very courageous guy. He was traveling throughout Russia, documenting the history of all of these shtetls that had been decimated, whether by the Nazis or by the Russians and documenting this history. He made a film of Pamyat, the antisemitic Russian secret organization. I went to see him in '87; he got out shortly thereafter. I was in Jerusalem during the first Iraq war. If you remember the threat of Scuds and all that kind of stuff, or you remember hearing about it anyway. I don't know if you remember it personally.

TSS: I remember experiencing it. [laughter]

RF: So we were given gas masks – which, by the way, didn't work – when we got off the plane. One of the things they wanted to do was – this CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies] mission – to put us in contact with some of the Soviet emigres. So they arranged a dinner at a Jerusalem hotel, and we walked in. The emigres were going to come in. There was an alert, and everybody put on a gas mask. So I put on this gas mask that didn't work. I looked up, and Leonid Kelbert was directly opposite me. I took

off the gas mask. He took off the gas mask. He said, “Fuck it.” Let that slide. [laughter] There was no way that the Scuds were going to interfere with our unanticipated reunion at that point.

GW: Rabbi Mehlman showed us some of the postcards that you guys had printed of the families that you distributed in the synagogue. Why did you guys do that? Where did that idea come from?

RF: Oh, I don't know. I don't know where the ideas came/come from. What did we dream up? What did we borrow from? I mean, it's all fair game; it didn't matter the how. His idea, my idea, somebody else's idea – it was in an era before there was very much marketing sophistication in the larger Jewish community. I mean, certainly not what exists today in that regard. I think it was just a stab in the dark. What could spread this word so that more and more people would become engaged? It was at that point in time that almost every Jewish organization then started getting behind it. That was just not always true. It’s not that they didn't care, but they weren't doing that much. So the larger Jewish community wasn't committed in the same kind of way. But it was just that growing feeling – why for us? I think that it became, to some degree, the raison d'etre. There was nothing that we were doing that we felt compared to this redemption of the captives at that moment in time.

AH: We hear about the scene where Ben Charny is getting off the plane and all the figures you're speaking about – Felix Friedlander? Was anyone in the congregation, including clergy, very involved in getting them to be allowed to come to America, to leave the Soviet Union?

RF: Yes. Look, there were people – as people became engaged through Action for Soviet Jewry, other organizations dedicated to Soviet Jewry, increasing numbers of people became involved. There wasn't anyone who, in the most direct way, could get this person out of there. Everything was through – “which contacts do you have? Who

do you know? Could that person –?" I mean, there was no guarantee that a well-placed person could do anything, but seeking any angle, really currying favor with politicians, making sure that the politicians that we were connected to us – I mean, the national politicians that we were connected to through Massachusetts would become increasingly engaged. That became something important as an identification with the Jewish community to be outspoken on this and to make that kind of commitment. So, it was just that growing energy.

GW: What role did non-Jewish clergy in the Boston area play in this?

RF: It's funny. I would say that interfaith stuff became incredibly important to me. In the latter part of my career, I was really very much engaged. I don't recall necessarily – with some exceptions, individual exceptions, I don't recall, for the most part, non-Jewish clergy getting too involved. I'm sure that institutionally that federations in this case – CJP probably sought Lenny Zakim from ADL who had an incredible relationship with Cardinal Bernard Law and the Catholic Church. I'm sure that there was some energy given to that, but for the most part, it really felt like it was predominantly a Jewish cause. I hope I am not slighting anybody in that. I know that there were those exceptional members of the interfaith community who undoubtedly stepped out, but it was the exception rather than the rule, I think.

GW: Was the Soviet Jewry movement well known? Was it a cause that was well known outside of the faith community and just in the broader Boston community?

RF: Yes, I think it became so. But again, you have to put it into the larger geopolitical context. It became so as the Soviet Union was – we didn't know initially, but the Soviet Union was on its last legs. The American energy at that point was – the United States was smelling victory at that point, and so a lot of this fueled the level of awareness. But it was later rather than in the early stage. When Wiesel wrote *The Jews of Silence*, nobody knew. Even when he wrote it, just a small percentage resonated [with] that initially.

AH: When Soviet Jews arrived in the Boston area in the country, what kind of outreach did you guys at Temple Israel do? What kind of research into that did you do?

RF: We did a tremendous amount of outreach. Research, it depends what you mean by that. It wasn't academic research. It was research on how we can go about ensuring housing, how can we more effectively raise support dollars to enable – how could we encourage volunteers who would, in essence, adopt a family – furniture and clothing drives. We were pretty much all in at that point. I would say that the vast majority of the congregation responded to that. I mean, there are always some people who – we too are not completely immune to the anti-immigrant sentiment, and there's always a little piece of that, but it's a minor note. We devoted so much time – we had translated the Shabbat service into Russian. One night at Temple Israel – we also, at that point in time, had a signed service once a month for the deaf and hearing-impaired community. One time, we had, in essence, four languages at once: English, Hebrew, Russian, and sign. I think that we independently raised money to set up classes because what would happen is that people would go through the first set of classes that the community provided, but for most of them, it wasn't really sufficient to enable their full integration. Those who were more entrepreneurial, more energetic, [and] maybe had a little bit of English to start with, might graduate from that first tier and go out into the world. But there were a lot who didn't, and a lot of pensioners came over. So that was a very different kind of issue and problem for the larger Jewish community because it was a support need that was never going to disappear. These people were not going to be, at some point, in the workforce. They were just going to be here, be dependent and age, and require the same services that others in the Jewish community required as they age.

GW: What was the biggest challenge that Soviet emigres faced in the United States?

RF: I would say it was multiple. Employment was probably the most significant because you had people who were trained in the Soviet Union – let's say someone was trained as

a doctor in the Soviet Union; [they] couldn't walk into a hospital here. [They] had to retrain. So a lot of people were forced to accept employment that wasn't – whether it was in medicine or engineering or – dentistry which was a hundred years behind in the Soviet Union from what we knew. People came with expectations that, more often than not, were not going to be realized. Look, at the very top level, somebody like Ben Charny was a rocket scientist. There's no question – one of the others probably mentioned is the Gilbo Family, Evgeny (Gene) Gilbo had no problem acquiring a really solid job. These guys were at the top before they became refuseniks. So they were desirable in their fields once they arrived. But for just the ordinary person who might have been professional, might not have been at the top, [it was] not easy to come. The level of employment expectation exceeded the practical reality. So there was a lot of need for people to adjust themselves and also to receive counseling about what they really could expect and what would be unrealistic. I would say that that there were all of the issues associated with immigration, except that this was an educated population. So, it's not like people coming over and immediately being adjusted to our culture and our systems. I remember, in a number of instances, going with people when they went to the grocery store for the first time. They would go in, and their carts would be just filled to overflowing. There's no way they could have consumed all of it, but they were operating with the fear that existed in the Soviet Union, that all of this stuff on the shelves wouldn't be here tomorrow. So part of it was really sort of the acculturation that needed to take place. After a while, all of that happens, but initially, there's a lot that's required to get to that point.

TSS: How many families came eventually?

RF: Through Temple Israel?

TSS: Yes.

RF: I couldn't begin to count. Lots.

TSS: Because we only hear about the Charnys and the Gilbos.

RF: There were hundreds. When I say that, I don't mean that we resettled every single family, but the families that we touched in this way, that way, or another way – hundreds. For a period of time, I think we felt that half of the time and energy of the congregation should be sacrificed to this, period. After a while, people started making their way. As that began to happen, it's also – as the flood starts to draw down a little bit, there's also a – what should I say – a communal enervation that will take place after a while. It lasted for a very long time. But at some point, the degree of energy that was required and the degree that was provided – the need was not the same, and we spent a lot of time trying to encourage colleagues to really move their congregations to do some – which many did. Part of it was really active persuasion that the organized Jewish community really, really engaged [in]. CJP did a yeoman's service. The organizations did yeoman's service. But it was not all at the outset; it was building to that point.

GW: In terms of Jewish life, what was the biggest adjustment religiously for the Soviet emigres once they got to the United States?

RF: The vast majority had grown up with little or nothing. There was an awakening in the Soviet Union after the Six-Day War. So Jewish consciousness rose, but you have a society that – in addition to the prejudice against Jews, period, there was also a society that was organized against – that promoted atheism and disdained any idea of religion. I think that tremendous numbers of people came. They wanted certain things. They wanted their kids to become bar or bat mitzvah. They wanted circumcision for their kids. They wanted a chuppah, but there's a tremendous percentage of those who came [who] had never been engaged in terms of the organized Jewish community. [They] might have been attracted to some of the communal aspects, but not necessarily the religion and the study. They wanted their kids to be exposed. But we had any number of folks who – after the kids went through religious school, became bar or bat mitzvah, they were

pretty much done. I think that part of that was the reality of growing up in the Soviet Union, and part of it was just the existential reality of making your way. The most important thing was not how you were going to demonstrate your Judaism. It was how you were going to make a living and make your way in this society. So, [it was] complicated.

GW: Are you still in touch with any of the Soviet emigre families that you were close with through this?

RF: Yes. Gilbo. They belong to the congregation. At the end, I'll tell you a story about her because you're doing this for the Jewish Women's Archive, and it's a great woman's story, at least I think it is. I was for a period of time, but much less so now. There are still some families who I knew in the Soviet Union but came to us, where the kids went through. My first tour of duty at Temple Israel, I was running the youth programs and everything. So, I had all of those kids and was engaged with their families on that kind of basis. Some of that continued, especially if they remained in the congregation. But now, not so much. Tanya Gilbo – when we went in '87, we were in their home in Leningrad. We spent a fair amount of time with them because they were really prepared to be an organizing center. They were pretty fearless. I walked into the kitchen, and all of the burners were on, on the stove, but there's nothing cooking. I turned to her and I said, "Tanya, why are all the burners on? I don't understand. Is it for heat?" She said, "*Tsk-tsk*," [to indicate no." I said, "So why do you have all the burners on?" She said, "The government pays for the gas." [laughter] These little acts of subversion. For me, that was like the story of the midwives and the Exodus story. "The Hebrew women are too vigorous, Pharaoh. We can't really get there."

GW: I'm just asking very general questions; I apologize. How did the Boston Jewish community change as a result of its participation in this movement?

TSS: That's an interesting question.

RF: That's a great question. I don't know that I'm necessarily the person to answer it. It's hard in this respect for me to answer because the Boston Jewish community definitely changed when Barry Shrage –

TSS: CJP.

RF: – came to CJP. He brought, I think, a new thinking and a new wave and a new relationship between the Federation and the congregation. So the synagogue and Federation were much more connected once he came. There was much greater division prior to that point. There's no question that during his tenure, which was throughout this period of time, the commitment to Soviet Jewry and to Israel was strong and real. He embodied that. It was something that those who became engaged embraced – he modeled that for his leadership. I think that in the same way that Israel had become at an earlier stage of the American Jewish community, the rallying cry for American Jewry – that American Jewish identity was formed in relation to Israel, the Soviet Jewry movement also had that effect, not to the same degree to be sure, but powerfully so. By that time, the American Jewish community was really coming into this period of great affluence and no small degree of power. So, I think that – I don't know if this is correct or not; my feeling is that a lot of that was crystallized in this commitment that people felt that we could really – I think there was a feeling that we could transcend the victimology. Something that had taken place in Israel, particularly as a result of '67, I think some of that started to – here, it was by extension, it wasn't really the American Jewish community; it was Israel that had done that. But the engagement was – the awakening was the same. But here, this was something that we were really moving forward. I think it was an important awakening for the American Jewish community that we really could save Jews. It was, on a microcosmic level, not a response to the Holocaust but a refusal to be ensnared in that continuing saga, to say, "Here is this body of Jews, whose fate is up in the air unless we act and do something about it." There's no question that the energy of the American Jewish community fueled a major change. A lot of other things

were involved: Israel was active in this, and the Soviet Union was falling apart. If the Soviet Union had been dominant at that point, it would not have happened.

AH: How did Temple Israel change as a result of its involvement with the Soviet émigré movement?

RF: I don't know. I think there is one component of the change that was very deliberate. Remember, Bernard was there twenty-two years. I was away for five, but total time [was] thirty-three. Roy wasn't with us the first five years we were there, but he's now entering his thirty-fourth year. Elaine is in her twenty-sixth [year]. But a lot of the Soviet Jewry engagement preceded her by a year or two. I think it was one aspect of a very deliberate change agency in which we were directly – to which we were committed. I mean, there was change agency with regard to creating space first for families whose partners were intermarried, to provide greater support for comfortable conversion to Judaism, but also to add support for families where conversion was not going to take place. We were really exceedingly deliberate early on in the amelioration of the disabilities towards – at first, gay and lesbian Jews, (then GBLTQ,) but when we started, the vocabulary hadn't been expanded. It was GL at the beginning. We sort of hatched the plot in my living room, how we were going to go about that. It was all in the same era – just a recognition of the demographic shifts and changes that were taking place in America, in the American Jewish community, and asking the question of what does a religious institution have to do to be responsive to all those changes. Now, a lot of such inclusion and integration within liberal congregations is a given, but it wasn't a given then. Outreach to non-Jews was not a given. Certainly, outreach to the gay/lesbian community was almost anathema because the fear of that community grew with AIDS. So there was a lot to overcome in that period of time. Welcoming the stranger – Soviet Jewry – your brother, the stranger, if you will, I think, was part of a much broader theme. There were people in the congregation who resonated with all of that, and there [were] people who left because they didn’t share the same commitments and attitudes. We'd like to think that it was a

hundred percent successful, and I don't think that that's necessarily true.

GW: What was the biggest lesson you learned from participating in the Soviet Jewry movement?

RF: To some degree it is the indomitability of the human spirit. It was hard to believe that people would take the pounding that those who took the risk took, not all of them, but most of them. A couple got through without being battered, but most of them were battered one way or the other. I mean, they used to fire people from their jobs, and the only thing they could do was become stokers in these apartment complexes, which is awful work and not very safe work. So it was real hardship and danger to life and limb. How could people hold on to the dream in the face of all of that? There were different periods where it opened up, and then, when it would close tight again, it was just awful – people waiting for years and years. I think that there's so many examples of individuals who defied – I think [Natan] Sharansky's defiance in that time was just – it was unbelievable.

GW: Do you feel that you changed at all as a person because of your involvement with the Soviet Jewry Movement?

TSS: As a rabbi?

RF: It's hard for me to answer that the way – the question is perfectly fine, but the way it's framed, it's hard for me to answer. I think, had I not been involved, I would have been less [of] a rabbi. I don't know. I can't articulate precisely. There are those things that you experience – this is one of them; it's not the only one – that are just absolutely humbling. A lot of people go into this stuff imagining themselves in a heroic role. What you discover, I think, early on, is that the response of doing something that you know is right isn't heroic; it just has to be, period. You don't get extra credit for it. It's fair to blame people who ignore it, but you don't get extra credit for it. It's one of the things that

we're here for, period. It’s not the only time in my life that I experienced those kinds of feelings, to be sure, but it was powerfully so with the engagement we had.

GW: I don't have any more questions. Do you guys have any?

TSS: No.

GW: Would you like to add any final thoughts, Rabbi Friedman?

RF: No.

GW: All right.

RF: Well, tell me about each of you before you go, though, so I know something about you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]