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Alla (Hannah) Aberson Transcript

Alla Aberson: Do you want me to start from the beginning?

Interviewer: Sure, whatever will be easiest for you.

AA: All right. I was born in 1960 to both Jewish parents and in pretty much an assimilated family, quite educated, but first-generation going to universities. My father holds a PhD in electrical engineering, and my mom has two master's degrees. So we had similar friends in the circle, and my father became, when he was young, growing up during [Joseph] Stalin time, started having doubts and thoughts about the regime, but nothing could support him. So, when I was seven years old, there was the Six-Day War. Then, in 1968, Russian tanks moved into Czechoslovakia. So my father's generation then was, so to speak, a political spring in Russia, and people hoped that there will be some ease in their regimes. Stalin was dead; there was a lot of revelation. Even people knew that a lot of people were murdered and imprisoned. His own father was in prison, and my mother's father was in prison; a lot of Jews were in prison for different – not necessarily for Jewish stuff, but it was a terror regime. My father became, as he called himself, anti-fascist. He and his friends in those years believed that there could be some political spring, and there would be some sort of democracy in [the] Soviet Union. But in 1968, Jewish tanks invaded Czechoslovakia, if you know, and a lot of dissident-thinking people understood that there could not be any political easement in [the] Soviet Union. About six months prior to that, there was the Six-Day War, when Israel came out

victorious, and a lot of dissidents, like my father and his friends, told themselves, “There’s no future for us as Jews in [the] Soviet Union. We really need to leave. Israel is a place where we can go.” So those two historic events actually made [the] Aliyah movement in [the] Soviet Union – those people who had no education, Jewish education. So I grew up in that atmosphere, where there was a lot of anti-communist thoughts and anti-regime thoughts, but at the same time, a lot of thoughts about Israel and Jewish pride – not substantiated absolutely anything. So my father wanted to leave [the] Soviet Union with the first Aliyah, but we couldn’t do that. At first, my family was afraid. The rest of the family – that was something new and very scary, just to pick up and go when you used to live in your country, and you don’t know anything else. It’s scary to go to a place where there are wars all the time after Russia experienced wars in my father’s generation and grandparents’ generation survived the Second World War. So thinking about going to a new place where there are wars all the time was pretty scary, but also, there was no reason for that as well. You had to be really determined to be free from the ideology, which people never knew anything else. So my father’s friend, school friend, actually picked up his bags and leaves in 1971 with whom they’d made a transition from being a dissident to being Zionist. He’s a very close friend. And other people started moving out of Russia in 1971 and 1972. Then, we had some family situations where we couldn’t leave Russia. I was already [a] teenager. The second big wave of Jewish immigration started in 1975 when we started raising the question of leaving. I was fifteen. But then, people started going to [the] United States. So anyway, we could not apply at that time. So my family decided that I should go to university. I graduated [from] school. In 1978, I went to university, but my heart really [inaudible] to leave the country. I totally couldn’t take the regime anymore. It’s very hard to understand because it was not Stalin and the regime. Basically, they didn’t bother you anymore unless you would be a dissident or (protest?). But something was calling me, and I wanted – and all my friends – at that time, I would say there was a quota to enter universities, and Jews could not get into many schools in Moscow and everywhere in [the] Soviet Union. You either had to have a

lot of [inaudible], or you had to bribe people with money to get into school, or there were some schools where Jews or dissidents were in some sort of control, and they were able to let Jews in. So that's a school I went to. There were three major schools in Moscow, where there was a [disproportionate] amount of Jews. In my school, some faculties had sixty percent of Jews, which is unbelievable; a lot of them were brilliant and talented people, a majority of whom could not enter a Moscow University. They not only couldn't enter the exams that they were given –I'll give you an example. We have a friend; he lives actually not far from here. He is a very brilliant mathematician. So he went with his Russian friend to take entrance exams; they sat together. My friend's facial expression –very Jewish. He's very dark with a big nose, huge brown eyes. Another guy was Russian. So they looked at him and said, "Can you show us your passport?" He shows the passport. The passport states that he is Jewish. So they said, "You're not sitting in the right place." He said, "What do you mean I'm not sitting in the right place?" He says, "Well, you should move," and sent him to a different corner. So that corner, which they put the Jews in, were given a completely different entrance exam from the rest of the room. He could only resolve – there were five problems given. So my friend could only do two and a half problems, so he did not pass. Then he gave the problem to a friend, who was doing PhD in math, and he couldn't do these other two problems also. So they were set up in a way that basically, there was a very strict limit to Jewish entrance to school, and that was the atmosphere. So my school was full of kids who experienced government antisemitism on them, and my father decided that I should not experience it because I also wanted to try. He said, "There is no point to that. You're not going to get into that school, and this is ridiculous. You're not going." So that was [the] atmosphere. So, when I got into the first year, I started going to secret Hebrew language studies. That's how I got involved in the Refusenik movement. I was then seventeen. We went from there. That was 1978. Finally, I begged my parents to apply. What I did was, in my year, there was a girl, Lisa (Ballina?), whose mother was actually a witness at [the Natan] Sharansky trial, and they were given abruptly permission to leave. So when they were

leaving, the family was leaving, I gave her our information, and I said to her, “You send me for me and for my family an invitation to Israel to immigrate, and then we’ll go from there.” We got the invitation. We got the invitation for the whole family. So I came to my parents; I was eighteen, and I said, “Well, I decided that I’m going to leave. It’s up to you now to decide either you join me…” We had five friends, and we decided to create a [inaudible], so to speak, like friends to go together to Israel, and we would live together and support each other. “If you don’t want to go to Israel, then I’ll just go with my friends and do it by myself.” So my parents understood that that’s serious, and they asked me to wait for six months because they were working. There were many legal things to take care of. So they would prepare, and I should wait for them. That’s how we applied. In 1979, we applied. We thought we would leave very fast, but that year, [the] Russian Army invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, and the Jewish immigration stopped. That’s how we became Refuseniks. So do you have any questions?

Interviewer: Yes. I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about what it was like to be living as a Refusenik and what that experience entailed for you and your family.

AA: Well, many aspects, I would say, from exciting to non-exciting. My parents could not work, and I had to leave university because every young person had to be a member of a youth communist organization. You had to leave that organization when you applied to leave because it was considered treason. So as you’re leaving Komsomol, the youth communist organization, right away you become persona non grata in university, and basically, they would create a very unbearable situation for that student and expel. My friends who did it before me – it was a huge meeting, and people were yelling at them.

They would be sitting on a stage, and everybody would be yelling and telling them, “How could you do something like that? How could you commit treason for the Mother Russia that raised you, gives you free education, and so forth?” So there was no point, and I had to leave the school. My mom had tenure, but she was fired anyway, and my father was forced to leave his job because the boss said to him that he would give him – I don’t know how you call it. Because he was an engineer, he was doing some sort of secret work, like clandestine something. In Russia, there were different gradations for that, and he would never leave the country. So my father became a guard in the hospital at night with people who were alcoholics and people who committed petty crimes. So he worked with them. My mother was in the entrance. It’s not a guard, but a person in the building – opened the door for people, tell them if somebody is coming and leaving. So she did that. That was typical Refusenik jobs. So I and my friend decided to go to nursing school because nursing school in Russia was a professional school, and it wasn’t a university so they didn’t check our documents well. So we were able to slip in and start a new profession. When they asked us, we told them, “We want to be doctors.” So that’s only a step for us to go into the medical field. They bought that, and they took us because we were great students. So they took us. I became involved in not only learning Hebrew but also [the] social life that we had there. We were trying to introduce Jewish history. There were a lot of brilliant people who were in the same position like we are, and people didn’t work. They weren’t intellectually occupied. So they started learning Jewish history. They started learning a lot of interesting other subjects. People created – we called it (Devarim?), which was usually [inaudible] Shabbat, which we would show in somebody’s apartment. The law was that we would speak only Hebrew. So this is out – to create the atmosphere when we would speak Hebrew because there was no natural, obviously, way of learning. One friend of mine hired a Palestinian Arab [laughter] to teach him, actually, Arabic that is spoken in Israel. [Telephone rings.] People were very, very resourceful. Every week, there were different lectures on different topics because people were very brainy. So they created a magazine called Tarbut that was

published, and people would write articles for that, I think monthly. [We] would collect information in different cities, would go to different cities to teach other – it's to create seeds, groups of people who would be excited to learn Hebrew or Jewish history and become a seed for others. So the material – this all was illegal, obviously. There was games always played, like who was followed by who, and also there was political things that we would do. We would go and demonstrate [inaudible] OVIR [Office of Visas and Registration], which is the organization within the internal – what is it? – a police internal affairs that would give permission [for] Jews to leave. So we would demonstrate there and get people together. We also did hunger strikes. Actually, we did. We would also be point people for foreigners who would come from a foreign office in Israel or B'nai B'rith or [inaudible] or other organization. It was a very active time. They would bring books. Also, we had very little means of support because a lot of people didn't work. So they would help financially and with things that we would sell on the black market and live off, or books that we would print. Usually, there was no xeroxing copies like today we know in printing. It was actually every copy would be countered by the people because they knew that anti-Soviet propaganda can't be, as they considered it, or Zionist propaganda could be printed. So they watched over the printing machine very, very carefully, so that they exactly knew how much ink they had, how much pages they printed, how much pages they have – it was very difficult. So what people did was they use the photocopy negatives. So years ago, you could print pictures, black and white pictures. So that's what we used, people used. Jews, non-Jews, different people created labs in their houses, which was also very illegal, a dark room, where they would be printing copies of illegal books and the information would be – so there was a network of people doing different things. It was – how would I say? – from one side, it was depressing; from another side, it was a very exciting life because we met a lot of interesting people from all over the world and people in Moscow who would never meet other than creating that life.

Interview: You spoke a little bit about protests and hunger strikes. I was wondering if you had any stories about any involvement with those sorts of things in your time.

AA: Yeah, we did it habitually. We did it quite a lot. I would say, from ’79 to probably ’82, there were a lot of political – the movement was, at first, political, asking to leave when still there was some hope because between 1980 and ’85, basically, hardly a lot of people left. So at the beginning, we would write letters, open letters, and collect signatures. We would do one-day or sometimes three-day hunger strikes. It didn’t move much, but we would go to – I remember, we would go to OVIR and submit letters with like two hundred signatures or more and try to tell them that by Soviet code of law – it was funny – by Soviet code of law, they, let’s say, could not do or shouldn’t do something or should do something. So the guy, the high-rank officer, got out and said to us, “Soviet code of law exists that any citizen at any time can be prosecuted by any law.” [laughter] So basically, there was the attitude towards law. So the law was for people to keep in certain – restrict people, but not as society rules. Any other questions?

Interviewer: Yes. I’m wondering if you ever had any interaction with the KGB and what that was like.

AA: It depends. Yes, I did. Sometimes you also have an interaction, and you don’t

know that the KGB – actually, as we found out, some of our so-called “friends” for some other reasons also were – they were not on the payroll, but some of them maybe even didn’t know that they were telling information. It was all a game, where it sounds like KGB was always a step ahead. But the most direct? There were many instances. For example, once my notebook was stolen. [inaudible] Shabbat, we would go to the synagogue, and it was our meeting. We would hang out there, and speak to people, and go down to different lectures, and my notebook was stolen. One guy calls me up and says, “Hey, this and that,” who was a friend, “gave me your phone number. Do you want to go out with me?” It sounded a little bit weird to me because if my friend would give him my phone, he would probably tell me. There was something not connecting to me. So I said to this guy, “You know what? Why [doesn’t] he introduce you Saturday night near the synagogue, and then we’ll go from there?” That’s what I answered him. He never called again. So that was an obvious setup. I’m just telling you that a little bit like – if you didn’t have a little feeling inside, then you could get very easily in trouble. Another thing was when Alexander [Sasha] Kholmyansky was arrested – the prisoner of Zion – I went for Shabbat to a friend. There was a guy there. They were talking, and he went to the bathroom. There were only three of us. My friend was telling me, “Oh, he’s such a wonderful guy.” He looked Jewish, and he could very well be Jewish. He said, “He’s so wonderful. We went before the trip where Alexander was arrested. We were hiking. He got us hiking equipment, and he got us this, and he got us that. He’s such a great friend. He’s such a doer.” I looked at her. I said, “Listen, he’s KGB. What’s wrong with you? She looks at me like, “How could you think of that?” I said to her, “Who could get new hiking equipment in a two-day notice? Who can do this? Who can do that?” He was everywhere and doing everything. Everywhere he went, you felt you were followed. Anyway, because they were in the situation, they couldn’t hear themselves. Even Sasha Kholmyansky couldn’t get it. So when I said it to her, this poor guy returned from the bathroom; it was a question of five minutes, both of us looking at him. [laughter] He never showed up. My friend went to Sasha’s brother and shared a thought that that guy could

be a mole, but this guy never afterward showed up. So obviously, he understood that something went wrong. Who knows what? A situation like that, yes. I don't know. I had many of them. So, just giving you examples. Sometimes, you know things later from friends that somebody was informing because they had some skeleton in the closet. Then the KGB would come to them and say, "Well, we can hurt you, put you in prison. But instead, we'll let you leave the country. Meanwhile, as you're here, you will be reporting on your friends." People would have to do it – perfectly good people, but because they were very scared to refuse – it was situations like that, too.

Interviewer: Did that happen to you with any of your friends, where you found out afterward?

AA: Yeah, it did.

Interviewer: What was that experience like?

AA: It was a little shocking. My friend was a girlfriend of – what's his name? He was a prisoner of Zion, also. Vladimir? Oh, gosh, I forgot his last name. Anyway, she was then his girlfriend. We met after he was released. So he asked me if I knew that his former girlfriend, who was my friend also at the time, was already in Israel actually, that

she was an informant. I said, “Wow. How do you know this?” So he said that he figured it out by the questioning because they lived together. So by the questioning of KGB, he figured it out. He told the father of this girl that he figured out that she was informing on him and other friends. So her father said to him – basically, what the KGB did, they took her. There was something there that she was trading on the black market, basically. They took her, and they put her in prison for ten days, just locked her in for ten days, and they told her what she’s supposed to do. If she’s not going to do it, then she’s going to get time. So she agreed. The father said, “If you would be in prison for ten days, you would agree, too.” This family happily lives in Canada now. But my friend was in jail afterward. So that’s the situation. Here you are. I’m sure that many other people that I don’t know who were too. So the safest thing to do is by yourself. You never knew. Very often, you didn’t even know.

Interviewer: How eventually did you wind up leaving? What was your journey in that time?

AA: After every refusal, I think in six months, we were allowed to reapply. I told my parents that there is no point of reapplying. It was very, very difficult to get all the documents together. It was money, time. I said to my parents, “You know what? The KGB knows we want to leave. If they decide one day that they want to let us go, they’ll call us.” I mean, looking in retrospect, it’s crazy to say that, but that’s exactly what happened. So it was pretty depressive because there was no hope. In my generation, actually, I remember for years, nobody dated; nobody wanted to get married. My father said to me, “There’s no point for you to get married to raise slaves in this country.” So we

were just platonic friends. Nobody wanted to date and to have a future in that sense. So one day, I remember getting an invitation from Israel – second day of Rosh Hashanah, and it was from someone, and his last name was (Naseem?). Miracles. I said to myself, "That's it. We're going to leave by Purim. I made [to] myself a statement like that. Why? I didn't know. By that time, I was already religious. So exactly at the time of Purim, I come from Shabbat, and my mother looks at me and says, "We got a phone call from OVIR, and they told us to come on Monday. If we decide we still want to leave the country, we have permission. I told them, 'I don't trust them.' The woman said to me, 'No, no, please trust us.'" My mom said to her, "How can we trust you when for so many years you lied to us? How can you prove?" So she says, "Okay. Monday, come to OVIR, and we're going to give you four cards – refusal from Soviet citizenship." That's what it was because Soviet citizenship was an honor. We had to pay to denounce it. It was a lot of money. The average salary, monthly salary, was one hundred twenty rubles a month. That was seven hundred per person. So that was a lot of money to pay. So we come to OVIR, and they give us four cards. So that means we have to get all the paperwork together. So that's exactly what it was. That's how they let us go. I don't know how, and I don't know why. I think it was a message from Hashem, a hint.

Interviewer: Did you live in Israel for a while?

AA: I lived in Israel for three years, and then I came to [the] United States to work. Then I met my husband, and I stayed.

Interviewer: You said that by the time that you were leaving and going to Israel that you were religious at that point.

AA: Right.

Interviewer: Were you religious growing up as well?

AA: No, we were completely assimilated. So, I had a lot of friends, and we all were interested, so to speak, in history. But I, at some point, when we were Refuseniks for so many years with no job and being a little miserable, I start asking myself a question, "Why are we denying ourselves a future? What's wrong? What's the difference between me and my wonderful Russian friends? What makes me different? Why I have the desire to live in Israel?" – all those questions that I had no answers [to]. So I start looking, and I went to Alexander Kholmyansky before he got in jail. I went to the second seder to his house, and on the way back – we lived in the same direction – I lived in the same direction with Eliyahu Essas, who was then part of a religious movement. So about an hour, as we're riding the metro, we were talking together. We lived in the same direction. So he invited me – he was giving weekly Parashat HaShavua lecture. So he invited me, and I remember telling him, "Okay, I'll come. I'm interested in Jewish history. But don't you make me religious." He smiled and said, "Okay, just come." So I went to the house where he was giving a lecture. Then, this person invited me for Shabbat. When I came to Shabbat, there was a very small group of his students, five boys. There

were a couple like us coming for Shabbat. When I came, it just clicked. I came, and I said," Okay, that's what I'm looking for, the spirituality I'm looking for." There was no other way for me. It's something that I was looking for all my life, and that's it. It just clicked. How? I don't know. I didn't come in one day. Obviously, there was a lot of (Yetzer Hara?) I had to overcome. That was 1981. Slowly I understood that's my direction. But you commit to this, then you commit to that, and you do this, and you do that? There are a lot of steps in that and still continue.

Interviewer: What year did you say that you left Moscow?

AA: 1985.

Interviewer: Do you have anything else that you want to share with us? Any thoughts that are coming to mind?

AA: Any thoughts? I don't know. I have to think about it. Any thoughts?

Interviewer: I just want to be mindful of your time, too.

AA: Right, right. No, I get it. I think that it's a very important part of Jewish history. We, as Jews under pressure, performed quite well, as usually it goes, unfortunately, that we have to perform under pressure to recognize who we are. And for us, who were involved, it was very, very interesting. If not for this, I don't know if I would be remaining Jewish or if I would be religious and what my life would be. I mean, definitely, I bless every day that God chose me Jewish and that I am a part of such a wonderful history. I'm not kidding. That's not words. That's in the morning blessings. I thank God every day that I can belong to that. I needed to discover that and actually appreciate that. I learn every day and think about it every day, actually. It makes my life tremendously different. So I hope that other people would discover their Jewish roots and not make it casual because it's not casual at all. I think that it's the most interesting philosophy and intellectual knowledge that people can learn. Sometimes I see people who are amazed by culture, amazed by music, amazed by literature and other stuff, not realizing that it's all little offshoots of Judaism, of creation. It's not the whole thing; it's only one little part. So that's what I would say. So I'm very blessed to discover it for myself, and I'm discovering it every day. So that's what I would say. I wish it to every Jewish person to discover and more than me. So that's what I would say. If that could be inspiring to someone when they hear it, they get interested.

Interviewer: I think that's also a great place for us to end for today. So I'm going to pause us in all the different places that we are recording. Stop it here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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