Anna Charny Transcript

Gabriel Weinstein: So, our goal today is to – we've done some background research on you and your family. We've been learning a little bit about the Soviet Jewry movement in our class and independently. We're here today. We're doing this project, as you know, with the Jewish Women's Archive, and Tamar and I and our classmate Aaron, and our other classmates in the class – we're speaking with a variety of people throughout the Boston area who were involved in the Soviet Jewry movement. We met with Rabbi [Bernard H.] Mehlman on Tuesday, and we had a really great time with him. We really learned so much from him. He was a great insight. We're really looking forward to learning more with you today.

Anna Charny: I will try to do my best.

GW: I'm just going to read this statement here for procedural purposes. This is Gabriel Weinstein and Tamar Shachaf Schneider. We are here with Anna Charny to record her life history as part of the Soviet Jewry Oral History Project of the Jewish women's archive. Today is November 4th. It's 1:33 PM. And we are at five Auburn Street in Framingham, Massachusetts.

Tamar Shachaf Schneider: He's a journalist.

GW: Anna, do I have your permission to record this interview with you?

AC: Yes, please.

GW: All right. Thank you very much. So, my first question is, and we're going to start at the beginning is where and when were you born?

AC: Moscow? 1960.

GW: Oh, wow.

TSS: Both of my great grandfathers were from Moscow, but they moved to Germany.

GW: You are an only child, correct?

AC: Yes.

GW: What was Moscow like growing up in the ‘60s and ’70s?

AC: It was a happy city for me until I was old enough to realize various things that were less happy. I had a pretty secure childhood. It was a sheltered life with my parents. So, until I grew up enough to start realizing the limitations and the constraints that being Jewish put on us, life seemed pretty happy. You may know that when people are young, even when you do realize various constraints, life still seems pretty happy. For Jews, the limitations were in the areas which are not recognized yet by many young students, although some did encounter antisemitism when they were very young in their schools. I was lucky enough not to think about it until probably high school, maybe the end of middle school.

GW: What type of schools did you go to?

AC: When I was little, I went to a specialized English school. This was a school with some additional emphasis on English. Then, by seventh grade, I went to a math school, which was – still is – believed one of the best schools in Moscow. So, I was pretty lucky in that sense.

GW: Your father was a mathematician. Mother was an engineer. Right?

AC: Right.

GW: So, was education something that was a major priority?

AC: Absolutely. Absolutely. It always was.

GW: Were you the only Jewish student at these schools you went to?

AC: Oh, by far not. There were not so many in the English schools. The math school was heavily populated by Jewish kids. This was actually pretty comfortable. This seemed a pretty comfortable environment for Jewish kids because it seemed that math teachers were intelligent and protective, and understanding, with some exceptions. Actually, I think my first act of protest was in ninth grade, where [it] was the first realization that things were not as bright as they seemed. There was a parent meeting to which my parents were invited, where the discussion was about one of my classmates, who was the son of refuseniks, the (Berlatsky?), and the school just learned about that. We actually did not know anything about that because this was not really widely discussed at the time. But the school learned about this, and they assembled the Jewish parents with the message that they should influence the family so that the child is withdrawn because it was jeopardizing the special status and the comfortable environment of the school. So my first act of protest was that I actually left the school the next day. My parents came home furious. I asked them what was the problem, and they told me about that. They never suggested that, but I did not return to that school. Even though I left a lot of friends there, it seemed so unfair and so sudden and unexpected. It was not that I grew up without the understanding that Jews were persecuted. This was absolutely not the case. My parents gave me a good education, so I understood what was going on, but it seemed remote up until then.

GW: Where did you go to school after that?

AC: In Russia at the time, there were just ten years of schooling. This happened probably about the middle of ninth grade. So for the remaining year and a half, I went to the local school right next to my house, where I saw all sorts of children, who were quite antisemitic, quite openly so. So, I had to stand my ground quite a bit at the time. That

step took me out of the sheltered life I had lived before into what the everyday life was, which was that there was – I remember a day when they took us to see a movie about the war, [Adolf] Hitler and the Holocaust. They took our class there, and as we were watching it, I heard behind me – there was a scene, where the Jews were actually being fired at, at the wall somewhere, and someone behind me said, “Oh, I wonder where [inaudible] Anna is there.” I remember this because, again, it wasn’t so unexpected anymore. Still, it was a little bit more than I expected at the moment. You could feel this in everyday interactions with other students at the school. It was never official. So obviously, if it ever became [inaudible] discussed it. But at the school by the school officials, that would not have been something officially approved, but it was in the air.

GW: What were some [examples]? How did you feel it every day?

AC: Miscellaneous antisemitic remarks at different – just almost at random. I remember once that – since my house was right next to the school, I remember once there was a group of students going past our windows singing loudly antisemitic songs. I don’t know whether this was for me specifically, but I knew the kids. So, it was there, at that point, in the air almost all of the time. In fact, as I became older, I realized that it was always there. It's just that my parents created an environment where, when I was little, I was sheltered and protected from it.

GS: Yes. How did you wake up and go to school every day knowing that these comments were coming?

AC: I don’t think I ever took it personally, in a sense that it never diminished my sense of who I am, and the values that I valued, and the friends who were my friends. It seemed something that one has to withstand and fight and object to, but not something that personally was a danger and an environment. It was not force. I don’t think I ever felt intimidated, not because people didn’t want to intimidate me, but because I think the sheltered life that my parents created for me had the benefit of making sure that I knew

my own – I had a lot of self-respect. I had a lot of respect [for] the values my parents brought me [up] with. This was just not one of the things that I was allowed to interfere with. It's living with something that is antagonistic and [as] old as antisemitism – it was, at first, surprising. Then, because it somehow felt like something of the past, but it was very clear and very quickly clear that it wasn't anything in the past; it just was the first time I truly encountered it face-to-face.

GW: Going back, you said your elementary school and your middle school, there were a lot of other Jewish students. With your other Jewish classmates, would you ever talk about being Jewish? Around the holidays, would you talk to each other about what are you guys doing for the holiday or anything like that?

AC: One of the things that happened in Russia was that many, many Jewish families were assimilated in the generation before us. I was actually lucky that I knew that there were Jewish holidays, but they were never – up until I grew up and my family started to almost revive the traditions – these traditions were not there when I was little. I knew there were Jewish holidays, but we were not actively celebrating them. We did not keep Shabbat. I still do not. I think the first time I went to the synagogue was with my friends when I was, I think, already out of school. I can't remember actually at the moment, but I'm pretty sure that I was already out of high school because I don't think my parents would have allowed me to go there while I still was effectively under their jurisdiction. As I learned later, my grandparents and my great aunts – my grandparents when they were alive and then my great aunt and uncles who were alive at this time were actually going to the synagogue. They were much more aware of Jewish life than I was at the time. But when I became older, we actively started learning about Jewish life. There were celebrations of Jewish youth at the Moscow synagogue, dancing at Simchat Torah, always surrounded by a ring of militia. A lot of people were aware when you were a student at the university going to these events [that it] wasn't safe, in the sense that if you were actually caught there, then there were a lot of students who were expelled from the

universities for attending the Jewish holidays at the Moscow synagogue. But by the time I was eighteen, which is two years after school, we had already applied to leave for Israel. This was still a pretty private decision. This was not yet a movement in a sense. It was not an act of actively protesting against something that was in this country; it was the act of trying to leave whatever we didn't like. Little did we know that it would take ten years for us to get out. Those ten years, of course, changed both the perspective of how things looked and what we did and the connections with the Jewish culture in Israel and the United States. The perception turned from a private act of wanting to leave the country and go to a different place to go to Israel or the United States. In fact, initially, our plans were to go to Israel, not to the United States. This was also the only way one could actually apply to leave. Jewish immigration at the time, to the extent it was allowed, was only allowed for immigration to Israel. So the ten years that followed made a huge difference in so many things in our lives and in our realization of the [inaudible]. So, it turned from a private decision to a communal protest.

GW: We will definitely talk about that. But I want to hear more about life in the USSR. So you finished your high school education at sixteen.

AC: Right.

GW: Did you go immediately to university?

AC: Yes, I went immediately to the university.

GW: Which university?

AC: It was called the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. It's almost the exact analog of MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There, I, in fact, was the only Jewish student in my year in the department, which had a strange effect of – this was the first time when I thought that I was not in the right place. I worked very hard to get there. Objectively, I deserved every bit of being part of that university, but there were so many

friends I had, the Jewish friends, who went through the same process and did not get into this university or other high-end universities, that it almost felt that I took someone else's place. This was probably one of the – I always wondered how strange it was that the ability – it went when I was in fact accepted, to something which was highly selective and did not accept any Jewish students – did not feel like a victory. It felt, in fact, like something wrong, given how many others did not get into it.

GW: Did any classmates, faculty members, or administrative people do anything to make you feel unwelcome?

AC: No, no. But what made me unwelcome – what made me feel bad and unwelcome was the fact that so many of my friends, who I knew were certainly no less deserving, and some of them were, in fact, brighter and better students, could not get in. That seemed just simply wrong.

GW: What did you study there?

AC: Math.

GW: Math?

AC: Applied math.

GW: It runs in the family. Your father was a theoretical mathematician, right? Or was it practical?

AC: Well, he was actually an applied mathematician. He spent a lot of his time in space research. So, space research is applied math, although it requires a lot of pure theoretical math to deal with.

GW: What captured your attention with math?

AC: It seemed an interesting thing to do. All my life, I went to math school entirely on my own. In fact, my parents didn't know that I had taken the examinations to that math school that I spent most of my middle and high school in because it seemed like it was the right thing to do. They were very happy when they learned that I had passed the exam and was accepted. But this wasn't in any way their initiative to do so. It seemed the right thing to do. It still seems the right thing to do.

GW: Hence the Russian School of Math. Do you have any questions?

TSS: No.

GW: Just backing up, what was the name of that specialized math middle and high school that you went to?

AC: It's called school Math School 57. I think it's called Lyceum Number 57 these days.

TSS: I do have a question. When you got into the university, was it before or after you applied to leave?

AC: Before. A year before.

TSS: When you applied, they didn't –?

AC: I was kicked out.

TSS: You were kicked out.

AC: Yes. We didn't get to that part.

GW: So, you applied to leave in 1978.

AC: I'm trying to remember whether this was, in fact, the case. So, it was, yes. So that would have been '78 or '79. '78 probably.

GW: You got kicked out of the senior – expelled?

AC: In order to provide the application to the authorities, you needed to get the paperwork signed by your place of employment or study. So that's how everybody lost their jobs and how everybody lost their – how everybody got kicked out of universities because when you come in, and you for these papers, they effectively just kick you out. So I was in the middle of my second year when we applied, and that's when they did expel me. So, eventually, I went – I think it was about a year later that I applied and got into the – there was a school that was famous for its leniency towards admissions of Jewish students, especially students who were kicked out of other places because they had applied to leave. At the time, it was called Kalinin State University. It's now Tver State University. A lot of children of dissidents and refuseniks went there because they were effectively – they never asked for any paperwork – I don't think they would have been allowed to be so lenient if they explicitly knew. But they made sure that they do not ask questions that will make them know. So I finished my master's degree there at this university already while I was in those years waiting to be allowed to leave.

GW: Was this also in Moscow, this university?

AC: That actually was about two hours – it's on the hundred-kilometer boundary. A hundred kilometers is a meaningful number in Russia because the hundred-kilometer boundary was the boundary within which they would not allow anyone with any criminal, including political criminals, to live. So, a lot of people returning from the Gulag and a lot of dissidents returning from prisons would not be allowed to live in Moscow, but they would be allowed to live in this hundred-kilometer zone. Kalinin was at that hundred-kilometer zone. So I had to go there by train. It was quite a drive, but at least it was a university that I was able to complete.

GW: So you commuted from Moscow every day?

AC: I didn’t commute every day. They were also lenient enough that effectively, it was a lot of self-study. I commuted mostly for required labs, tests, and exams. Everything that was possible to do by study, and since it was math, a lot of it was possible to do by study; then, I was able to do it at home.

GW: Were you involved in the student social life at this school?

AC: Oh, no. Not at that university. Because I almost really didn’t know anyone. I knew the professors from whom I needed to take exams, and I knew my advisor, who I worked with.

GW: How did being denied permission to leave affect your social life? Did any of your friends end their relationship with you and your family?

AC: I don’t think so. I was actually pretty – well, for my parents, this was the case. A lot of their friends were afraid to associate with them, although many were not. In my case, I was pretty lucky that I never had a very large circle of friends, but the friends I had were handpicked. I think that also resulted in the fact that none of them were actually afraid to continue associating with us. So my friends stayed. I didn’t get many new ones outside of the refusenik circle, though, because simply, at the time, most of the new friends were also refuseniks.

GW: I don’t think we asked this. Maybe we did. I’m sorry if I’m being repetitive. What led you and your parents to decide to ask to leave in 1978?

AC: I think it was [inaudible] in the family for a while. My father had felt a lot of limitations at his work. I think, for me, the fact that I ended up being alone, the only student in the university I was accepted to, emphasized the antisemitism that I lived in even more than the more direct but I would say more trivial and antisemitism that I encountered at high school. But the trigger was that my uncle, at some point, also decided that he was fed up with it. He basically was the first one who made the first step.

He said, “Well, I would like to live with you.” We said, “Yes, we would.” That is Uncle Leon. So, Leon was just seven years older than me. So, he was always almost – he was my father’s brother, but he was more like a son to him and a brother to me. There was a big difference between them. So, I think that’s what triggered our – there was no particular – on my end, there was no major event politically that triggered the decision; it was simply the realization that we lived in a society, which was strongly antisemitic, openly antisemitic, at the level of simpler population, less-educated population, and secretly antisemitic, never actually obviously stated in the academia and more sophisticated workplace, but where it was implied, understood, and accepted by everybody. No one was surprised that Jews were not promoted. Discrimination was at multiple levels at the time, and it was known to everybody, and it was almost accepted [by] everybody. I think that was the trigger. It took everybody some time to – the decision to leave the country where you’ve spent all your life is never easy. We knew that it could potentially not be an easy escape for us because we knew that my father’s clearance, which was no longer active at the time, could still be a hindrance. So, we knew that we were getting into potentially a long process, but we never knew it would be so long. As life went by, other complications occurred. My father got very ill, and that added an additional level of complexity to the situation. As time went on, the more or less passive resistance to the situation turned into more active resistance, into being more active politically, more openly resistant to the regime. Thinking back, there were people in the refusenik movement who started effectively as Jewish dissidents who started their protest within the country to protest the situation and to try to do something about it within the country. Those people, I have great respect for them because their resistance did not come out of circumstantial changes to their life, but of conviction.

Many of the refuseniks in the refusenik movement started as private, quiet citizens who had no resistance in mind. What they had in mind is leaving that place and going to a place where their limitations would not exist, seeking freedom, but then being put in a position when they couldn’t – their simple desire to just leave and be in a situation where

their Jewishness was not a problem, where they could live in Jewish life. For some of them, living a Jewish life wasn't even an issue. It was an issue of living a life without discrimination for being Jewish.

GW: Would you say your family fell into the second camp you just described? People that wanted to just live there?

AC: I think so. I think so.

GW: Private people that just wanted to live their life without limitations?

AC: I think so. I think so.

TSS: I don't know if it's a politically correct question, and feel free not to answer. But do you know why your parents were refused for the first time?

AC: Yes. It's a totally politically correct question. Officially, they were refused because of my father's former association with the Soviet space program. They claimed that he knew state secrets. That was not, in fact, the case. His clearance expired a long time ago. The work that was classified was at the time actually already in open published press, including being translated in the West.

GW: In the US, too?

AC: Yes, in the US as well. In fact, when he later arrived, he met people at MIT who knew him by his work that was, in fact, translated. So that was the official reason. But that was also at the time when a lot of people who did not have any similar circumstances were refused. The so-called possession of state secrets was a very common ground for refusal to [grant] the visa. For some people, they had more reason to, at least circumstantially, claim this. There were families who had no access to any classified work at all, who still got the same refusal reason. But at least in our case, they

had this initial – they were able to say that's why they're not letting him go. Eventually, I got married, and we applied as a separate family, not with my parents, and we still got quite similar refusal reasons. So, one of the things we tried to argue with the authorities for those many years is that there's no grounds for this refusal. There are no grounds because the work has been published. There's no grounds because the clearance was lifted many years ago before that, but that's neither here nor there.

GW: You mentioned earlier that your father felt some limitations at work. What were those limitations?

AC: So, as an example, my father – in Russia, in the Russian academia, there is an analog to the PhD dissertation and defense. And then there is the second level of this, which is called the doctoral dissertation, which is actually the next level up from the PhD dissertation. My father was a brilliant scientist. He, in fact, in his life, tried to pass the second level of the doctoral dissertation three times. Each one of them is actually now a classic work in the field, and yet, every one of them, he was not allowed to defend. There was the process that you submit the dissertation, and then there is the so-called scientific council that listens to the presentation, and then they decide whether or not you're worthy of the title. All three of those times, he was not as per the council's decision. When one speaks about these things, even when I speak, I ask myself, "So how does one argue that this was truly an act of discrimination?" Was it perhaps that it wasn't, in fact, worthy of the defense? But now, given that in this particular case, knowing that these are, in fact, the classic works in the industry, it's probably pretty clear. It was also wide knowledge – in fact, after the first time my father tried when he was trying it the second time, his colleagues would ask him whether he was really wise – they called him Don Quixote because they all felt that he was trying to get through that glass ceiling that was not for Jews at the time because that was, in fact, the ceiling. It was practically impossible for Jews to get through this barrier at the time. So, this was one of the examples.

GW: Isn't it ironic that, on the one hand, they expelled Jews from many positions; there were quotas and everything. And on the other hand, they reached really important places. Your dad was denied because he worked with the Russian space plan, but he was a Jew, and he was a Jew who worked in that very, very important field.

AC: I think that there are multiple things to be said about that. So, first of all, just as any glass ceiling, it only starts acting at a certain point in one's career. Also, the height of that glass ceiling was very, very different, depending on the – it changed every few years, I would say. For example, when I was born, this was the time after [Nikita] Khrushchev. This was the time of the so-called "thaw" period in Russia. In fact, at that time, Jewish discrimination, even if it still existed, was probably at the lowest point. So, my father, for example – my mother grew up – when they were young, they enjoyed this period of relative freedom for a short period of time. They reached whatever [position]. For example, at the time, my father was able to study at Moscow University, which, just a decade later, was almost impossible for any Jewish child to be accepted. So that was part of the explanation. The other part of it was that the country needed a lot of –the country was sophisticated enough to allow a lot of bright people to work very productively on the enthusiasm of wanting to work in science, in the industry, even though they were not paid very much, even though they knew that they cannot get through– cannot get promoted at the same speed as the people who didn't have the problem. But you also have to realize it wasn't just the Jewish – I should tell you a joke. I have a friend who tried to get into Moscow University about the same time as I was, also one of the refuseniks who did not get through the exams, but his mom already was extremely politically active. So, what she did is she took the recording device, and she went to talk to the rector of Moscow University, demanding that her son is given a fair trial. He uttered the phrase, which I think became famous at the time. He said, "You Jews always think that you are the only ones persecuted. This is not the case. We also don't accept Tatars and a lot of other people." Actually, she threatened him then with the release of this tape to the foreign correspondents, and, in fact, he was allowed to get in. My friend

was allowed to get in. I think this shows how that all worked. That was a long answer to a short question.

TSS: Thank you very much.

GW: When did you apply for the second time to leave? Was that when you applied with your husband?

AC: So, once you apply, the process just keeps going. The first time, I think, they – I think we waited about two years for the first time. Then they told us that it was so-called "first refusal." So, they told us that our application was refused about two years after that. Then, I think you had to wait for – I think about half a year, and then you could apply again. For all of those times, that's what we'd do. We'd apply again. We would wait until we get the next refusal. We'd apply again, and so on. Later on, when I had to work, we tried to time it so that I would find a new position right after we applied. You know that when you apply, you get kicked out of the previous one. So, if you go into the next one, and you managed to find a place of employment that wouldn't ask you why it is that you've left your previous one, then we knew that it would take at least some time for the next refusal to come in and the next round of paperwork that you need to bring in, so you get to work for a little bit of time in between.

TSS: So, when you apply to leave, do you also apply to get into the United States or to Israel?

AC: The application was only to Israel; there was nothing else available. So everybody applied to leave to Israel. Then, the way it worked is that you would arrive – they would fly to Vienna, and then you would interview with [inaudible] HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] and make a decision of where you actually go, whether you would go to zero to the United States. In our case, we actually always thought that – despite the fact that my uncle went here, we always thought – not always, but initially thought that we would go to

Israel. At the time I left, the political situation was already such that it was clear to me that I could make a change in my – they allowed me to go about two years –?

GW: 1987.

AC: I came in here in ’87. I think my parents came a year later or two years later – a year later.

GW: I can’t remember.

AC: Right, right.

GW: ’88 or ’89. Let’s say ’88.

AC: So, they came a year later, and it was very clear to me that I could make a huge difference if I came here politically to help him and less so in Israel. Actually, it was not an easy decision. I mean, it was made easier by the fact that (Leon?) was here at the time. But that’s what it was.

GW: I want to go back to a question. Going back a little bit, you said there’s a difference in – your father’s generation grew up during this political thaw and that your generation didn’t. Did that thaw account for a difference in Jewish identity between your father’s generation and your generation?

AC: I think it was the generation of my grandparents who were forced to abandon any obvious signs of Jewishness. It was the time of [Joseph] Stalin and shortly after. So, my parents, I think, already grew up in a situation where there was no obvious Jewish observance. The Jewish holidays were not actively present in anyone’s life. In fact, Jewish history had to be learned from books that were not safe to keep at home. I think that the first books of Jewish history that I had were the so-called Samizdat; they were brooks that were illegally printed and illegally distributed because they were not allowed

to be around. Many books that I read were brought to us by people like Rabbi Mehlman, who then came later. That was how we got access to many more books and much more information about Jewish history and Jewish tradition.

GW: What did you know about the outside world growing up in Russia? What did you know about American Judaism or life in Israel?

AC: I don't think I knew many specifics about Jewish life in the United States. We obviously knew that there were many Jews who immigrated early into the United States, and we read books by American writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, which obviously provided information about general life in the United States. Obviously, it had information about Jewish life, but it wasn't really much – it wasn't emphasized in my mind as something specific about Jewish life in the United States. It was just life in the United States, the melting pot where everybody worked to the best of their ability being free. As far as Israel goes, there wasn't much literature about – certainly, my parents and my parent's friends, they were acutely aware of the history of the creation of Israel. I think Exodus was one of the Samizdat books that I read. So, we were pretty aware of the situation. I was pretty aware of the situation in Israel, not necessarily in great detail, but certainly as a big picture. We listened to the Voice of America. We tried to listen to all of the available radio programs until they were jammed. We tried to get – but that was already when I was older, not when I was little.

AC: What American books did you read?

AC: All of the classic American literature at the time. We read [J.D.] Salinger. We read [William] Faulkner. I remember that I read the Great Gatsby and was very happy about it. The fact that I also could read English made it possible to get access. I went to the library – there was a library of foreign literature in Moscow. I spent quite a bit of time there. I actually worked there one summer. My English teacher provided me with all sorts of books which I read in English, so I was reasonably well-read at the time. How

did your family come in contact with Rabbi Friedman and Rabbi Mehlman?

AC: They came to us when we were in Moscow on one of the trips. They had met Leon here, and they had been – Temple Israel was very much involved in the Soviet Jewry Movement in general. I believe that they learned about us from Leon. I'm pretty sure about that. But we learned about them, not from Leon, but when they came to visit us. That was a very memorable visit, not necessarily in the detail of it, but in the effect that it had on us.

GW: What effect did it have?

AC: It gave us the feeling that there were people who cared, that there were lots of people who cared, that these were the people who were extremely knowledgeable, pleasant, people who were extremely, very pleasant to associate with, but the people who led the Jewish community here and who cared about the fate of us, all of us at the time in Russia. There were many people who we met at the time, who came to us similarly, but for some reason, Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman and Cantor [Roy] Einhorn – I think the three of them came – and the people who were with them came across as the most sincere, the closest people to what we would expect to be our family and our friends in terms of who they were personally and intellectually and whatnot. So, in that sense, it was a visit different from others, I would think,

GW: What do you remember? I know that it's been thirty-plus years, so I'm sure the details are fuzzy, but what details do you remember about that first visit?

AC: I don't remember many specific details. I remember we talked a lot about books. I actually remember that Rabbi Mehlman sent me a lot of books afterward through other people. Obviously, we talked a lot about – we were asked a lot about the situation in Russia, but we also asked many, many questions about the situation here in the community at Temple Israel in Boston. I think we spent quite a bit of time together,

talking about so many different things. It wasn't the details that I remember. It was, in fact, the feeling of the importance and the impact of that meeting that I still remember. It stands out as an important meeting with people who made a difference, who were liked very much. I think that's what I remember the most.

GW: What year was that meeting?

AC: I don't actually remember.

GW: Rabbi Mehlman was fuzzy on it, too.

TSS: Yes. He doesn't remember.

AC: It was a few years before we actually left, not very many. I think I would say, probably about three to four years before we left.

GW: '85 or '86, something like that?

AC: That sounds right.

GW: What was the context? What was going on in your and your family's life when Rabbi Friedman and Rabbi Mehlman visited you guys for the first time?

AC: Here, I'm fuzzy on the timing. I'm pretty sure that by that time, my father was already ill. That means that there was another aspect of – as time went, even without the situation, we gradually became more and more political. We participated in demonstrations and protests. We wrote letters. We all started to learn Hebrew quite sometime before that. At the time, actually, was the time when I was – I never reached the fluency in Hebrew, but it was at the time I was actually able to understand and talk a bit. Since then, I forgot everything I knew. But we also got involved in the process of distributing the materials – we distributed the tapes with Hebrew and Hebrew songs. My father was copying them, and I was carrying them around. As he would make more

copies, I would bring them to new families. I think that life became more politically active and more dangerous at the time. But then, when my father got ill, an additional aspect to it was added. There was the urgency of getting him out because of the lack of adequate medical attention. That was, I think, the time when several people in a similar situation of dire medical circumstances created effectively a group which had a separate agenda item, of not only trying to get out of Russia but also getting their – in some cases – parents or wives or children out quickly because of of the urgency of the medical situation. So, I think there was an additional aspect of it. I think it was around that time that my mother went on a hunger strike. Unfortunately, the timing of this event is no longer so clear. So, it may or may not have been – I think it was before Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman came, but here, the dates no longer work.

TSS: Was your father denied the treatment because he was a refusenik?

AC: He was not denied treatment because he was a refusenik. That was not the situation. The situation was more prosaic in the sense that he had a peculiar combination of medical troubles that each one of them would have been treatable in the Soviet Union. The issue was that, because of the limitations of available medicine, he was told that some of the treatments would not be available to him because he simply would not be – even though the surgery itself they knew how to do, and there were very skillful surgeons who could do the surgery, they would not go for it because they believed that the post-surgical medicine, in combination with the combination of all of his conditions would simply not leave him alive after the exercise. It appeared that it was a pretty routine process here. In fact, it was. When he, later on, came here, he spent quite some time at Boston hospitals. Until his disease claimed him eight years later, he actually was put back on his feet. He was able to work, which was a miracle. We didn't think it would be this long to tell you the truth, given how dire the situation appeared there. We think that miracles were done here in the hospital, and he was able to live for eight more years of life in freedom, a life where he was able to work, and he was happy.

TSS: Thank you for sharing that.

GW: How often did your family –? During those years of refusal, how often would you guys get together with other refusenik families?

AC: Daily.

GW: What would you guys do during those meetings?

AC: Some of the meetings were political, where we would discuss the next actions and the protests and the letters and whatnot. A lot of them were around learning Hebrew. A lot of them were around Jewish holidays that, at that time, we were very well aware of, and we were actively bringing back into our lives. Then, finally, they were just friendships and social interactions with people – dinners. A lot of my refusenik friends – we went on hikes together and things like that. We were still young, and it seemed – the gravity of the situation was clear to all of us. But it was always – when one is young, life goes on. You live it with all of these political activities and the dangers. We still were able to enjoy each other's company. We'd occasionally go hiking. I'll give you an example that even such simple things were colored by the situation politically and so on. So we were, at some point, probably – when was it? I'd say the very early '80s. I went with a group of friends to the mountains, to the Pamir Mountains. In the East, they have – the next higher ranges, the Himalayas. That's the previous one, slightly lower. About half of us were refuseniks, and half of us were not. This is not an easy hike. We went pretty high. Actually, the highest point I got was six and a half kilometers, which is a lot. There was an easy path down, which was across the ridge down to the valley. It happened to be the valley, which was the boundary with Afghanistan. Those of us who were refuseniks said, "We can't go there because the moment we show up, they will arrest us, thinking that we are there to try to cross the boundary illegally," because they would immediately be able to trace back the fact that we're trying to immigrate and whatnot. Our non-refuseniks group went down the easy path, and we went down a very hard path down on the other

side, where we came from because that seemed much safer than going and having to be in the area where we would have to be examined by the authorities. So, our friends who were not refuseniks would just go down. They showed their passports. They were allowed to go.

GW: So, Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman come on that first visit. What was it like to have visitors from the United States come and visit you guys in those years of refusal?

AC: They were not the first ones. I remember when the first ones came, it was very, very unusual. It felt really strange. It felt like people coming from a different world. By the time Rabbi Mehlman [and] Rabbi Friedman came, I think this was no longer such a new event because a lot of people came to us. It felt like a lifeline. It felt that this was the only thing that really provided us protection and safety because I think that if not for these visits, if not for the fact that the authorities know that a lot of people knew about our existence and our struggles in the West and would, in fact, interfere if we just disappeared, I think probably many of us would have just disappeared. So, the fact that people like Rabbi Mehlman came meant so much at so many different levels. Certainly, understanding that people cared for us. Certainly, the understanding that there was a Jewish community across the ocean that knew about us, cared about us, and was ready to welcome us should we come there, but also simply the feeling that while we were even not there, while we were still in Russia, we were protected by this attention and this knowledge. That meant a lot.

TSS: So, they were the reason that you immigrated to the United States and not Israel?

AC: To a large extent. To a large extent.

GW: When that first group of Americans came, what made them seem unusual?

AC: They didn't seem unusual. It was an unusual – see, Russia was a pretty closed society. We were not able to leave the country, and we hardly ever saw anyone from the

outside. So, this was unusual in the sense that it's people coming from the other side of that wall.

GW: How did being a refusenik affect your employment?

AC: Well, employment was quite sporadic, I would say. I was able to get pretty random jobs occasionally. Anytime the time came to submit another application for the exit visa, I would lose that job. It was really a process well-defined. It was difficult to find a job, but once you found it, you knew you would keep it until the next time you go to get your paperwork. For my parents, it was even worse because it was not so easy for them to find a job. There was also the law, the perverse law of the so-called – I forget actually what the English word for it is. What is the word for refusing to work and therefore leaving an idle life? There's one word in Russian.

TSS: Leach? Parasite?

GW: Ward of the state?

AC: Something like that. [inaudible]

GW: [inaudible]

AC: Yes. So, there was a law against – yes, you could say a law against so-called parasitism, which meant that if you didn't work, you could be prosecuted for not working. So, my parents, who were both kicked out of their jobs and who couldn't find themselves a job, found themselves in a situation where they tried to work, and they couldn't. My father, at some point, went to work for the teacher at the school, who was a math teacher. I don't remember whether he was doing that at the time when Reverend Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman came. It wasn't a very long-lived position because, as for many other places, he had to get his paperwork for the next round of applications. That's where he was asked to leave as well. I believe he was hired there because they were in

such desperate need of a good math teacher. So, the authorities of the school chose to overlook all of the possible reasons that a person like my father was looking for a job until they were forced to see the paperwork when he asked for it. So, he worked like that for a little while. I spent some time working as a lab technician. Actually, I was at the same time doing the – I was at the Kalinin State University. I managed to do my master's thesis on a connection between math and the virological work that was done in the lab. My work was washing the dishes, the lab dishes there, but I was curious. So, I learned a lot about what was going on and was able to translate that into a math model that eventually actually was my master's thesis at that university. But I was kicked out of there pretty quickly also the next time I had to apply. I worked as a programmer somewhere for some time, again, until I had to apply. I think these were all. For most of the other time, I couldn't find a job, so I was not employed. I taught English. I taught a little math. I tutored the kids of friends and relatives. But it was not easy to get by with jobs those days.

TSS: What was it like to find a job here after you came? I mean, I know that today, they're doing a background check. So obviously, if you were a refusenik, and they saw that you lost your job many times, did it affect when you looked for a job here or was it a clean slate for you?

AC: I don't know because I got hired at the first job I applied [for]. I know that I got some recommendations. So, there were a lot of friends, American friends who provided personal recommendations. None of them could provide professional recommendations since there weren't any. But I got a reasonably unsophisticated job. I went to work for, at the time, Digital Equipment Corporation doing the quality support for one of their software products, not necessarily my first choice of job, but I was pretty sure that whatever job was the first job will be a start, and so it was. When we first applied, I knew I would be kicked out of that Moscow [Institute of] Physics and Technology, and I remember at the time thinking quite clearly, "So what? I'll go to MIT." I didn't realize that it will take ten

years to get out and another three years to get to MIT, but I would.

AC: What did you hear from Leon during these years?

AC: Leon, we were in close touch. He wrote us letters, although they were not very open letters. We knew everything about his life. We knew that he was actively involved here with the Jewish community, trying to help get us out. We knew that Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman met Leon and that he was part of their – actually, I don't remember whether he was part of their congregation at the time, certainly was later on for a period of time. But we knew Leon had married. He had a young son. So, we knew everything about him. We knew everything that could be communicated in letters and a little more. He called us frequently, so we knew a lot.

GW: Did the Soviets open letters before they got to you?

AC: Yes.

TSS: Like military censorship in Israel.

AC: We knew that our apartments were bugged. We knew that our letters were read. One learns to live with these things. We knew that these things were happening, and so we understood that we couldn't write much. We had to try to put meaning in between lines. Since we knew each other so well, we could frequently infer associations that were clear from what we were writing. But not everything could be said, not everything could be written, but we knew a lot.

GW: Why were you and your husband finally allowed to –? Why did the authorities finally let you guys leave?

AC: No one really knows for sure what the answer to this question is, but I have a theory of what possibly happened. I think, at some point, the level of pressure on the

government of Russia from the American government and the level of pressure of the Jewish community on the American government resulted in the fact that the Jewish immigration was, at the time, really viewed as a pawn in a larger game. The permissions for families to leave were granted one after another for an exchange of some larger negotiations in other fields. I think at some point it became – we were allowed to go as one of those – at some point, there were many families, who were on the lists that were circulated within the American government, and they were [inaudible] own negotiations [inaudible] allowing a certain number of families to leave. At some point, it came so that I think we were allowed to leave, although my parents were not. Only, I think, two or three years after we came, the situation really changed. It was as if the switch was turned, and a lot of people were allowed to go. Until then, it was one family at a time.

GW: What was it like to leave your mother and father and come here?

AC: That was a terrible day. None of us really knew whether we would see each other again. I remember that day in great detail. Actually, I wish we met at home because I had some pictures of that day that I think is telling. The faces of everybody look as if this was the day of a funeral. Luckily, that didn't happen, and we did see each other soon enough, but no one knew at the time.

GW: What was it like to finally come here?

AC: It was quite overwhelming. I think our arrival here was pretty unusual, at least for me. I don't think it, as far as immigrant arrivals go, was anything expected. We were met by a lot of people. It seemed that we already had a lot of friends here. When we left, my older daughter was just three months old, and she was ill when we came. She was very ill. In fact, she would not eat. One of the things that happened at customs when we were leaving is that I had to give her a special formula that in Russia was only prepared in a special "baby kitchen." When we were leaving, I knew I had to take food for her because she couldn't eat anything else. I couldn't breastfeed her. But customs would not allow us

to take anything past the first few hours. When we got [to] Vienna when my uncle met me, the first thing we did – we had to run to try to buy various kinds of formula so that we can try to feed her, and she wouldn't eat anything at all. We arrived quickly, which was unusual. I think on the third day of that, we were already in the United States. By that time, she was pretty blue. For a little baby to not eat for several days is a big deal. The next day, after arrival, Rabbi Mehlman took me to – I'm pretty sure it was Rabbi Mehlman. He took me to the children's hospital, where one of his friends, Dr. (Mendel?), was waiting for us at the steps. I still remember seeing him. He was just standing there waiting for us. He looked at [inaudible], "That's not a big deal." He immediately gave her some prescription formula, and she was fine.

GW: It seems like that first year, just from reading press accounts – for most immigrants, their first year is focused on setting the foundation, getting a job, learning the language, dress, culture, all that stuff. From the press accounts – and I could be wrong. Please correct me if I am – it seems like that was not the case for you and your family.

AC: Not the case for me.

GW: What was that first year like?

AC: I think it's probably worthwhile – so this first day, which was the hospital visit with my little daughter. Then, two days later, I left her with my in-laws and my husband, and I went to Washington because I had apparently been expected at the hearing for human rights. At the time, I didn't even understand how unusual it was. It seems strange, but that is effectively – there was no time to think how strange it was. From that time on, there was a year – until my parents came, it was a year of nonstop – I spent most of my time in Washington. I lived there for many, many weeks. I was quite well-known at the offices of a lot of senators and congressmen because I spent my time walking from one to another. I think it was – I flew many places, talking and on invitations. It was both strange and inevitable in a sense because, at the time, I was totally consumed by the

need of getting my parents out. It was amazing how many people were willing to help and how the community came together to make this happen from everywhere, in fact. I traveled all over the United States at the time. Anywhere I was, there was overwhelming support. So, it was both strange and gratifying that this was happening.

GW: Did you feel like you were becoming American or an American Jew at all?

AC: I don't think I had any awareness of what I was at the time. It was really a process of being consumed by a goal and not thinking about much else. I think that it was years later where the [inaudible] resettlement came through when my parents were already. In fact, some time had passed so that – actually, I'm a very private person, and the necessity to speak in public and to address people in high positions was not something that was either natural or easy for me, and so I think that for probably about two years after my parents survived, actually probably was the most secluded years of my life. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I had trouble. I had difficulty answering the phone. In fact, I tried to not answer the phone to the extent I possibly could. My family answered for me. So, it wasn't immediately that I came back to the normal feeling of myself.

GW: What was it like when, I think sometime in 1988, you see your father and mother walk off Armand Hammer's plane, and you're there with Michael Dukakis and Senator [Edward] Kennedy and Senator [John] Kerry? I'm sure I'm missing some other dignitaries. What was that day like for you and your family?

AC: The strange thing is that I don't remember much of that day other than seeing my parents. I don't remember much of the – I remember just from the fact – I certainly know that I spoke, that there were all of the dignitaries who spoke, that all the people were there. I do technically remember the day, but the only thing I actually remember is seeing my parents and being with them.

GW: What were you thinking about when you were hugging them?

AC: I don't think I was thinking much. I was feeling a lot, not thinking.

GW: What were you feeling?

AC: I was really very happy. I felt that they were here; they were safe. I don't even think I thought about what it took to bring them there at the moment. I just thought about them being there. It was obvious when, a little later, we thought, and we talked about a lot. There were a lot of dignitaries and a lot of conversations, and there was a lot of press. These things never were natural for me, and at the time, I was more used to them, but again, I think I remember the overwhelming feeling of relief that my parents were there and that they were safe, that my father would get the treatment that he needed and that the deal with over, and we could actually return to a normal life.

GW: What did it mean to have these political heavyweights there with you and your family and so involved and dedicated to your father and mother?

AC: I felt very grateful. I think that was the overwhelming feeling, that I was grateful that these people cared. I was grateful to be in a country that actually allowed, in some sense, easy access to these people with the support that we get, that effectively propelled us to the attention of these people. There is no doubt that the only reason that all of those dignitaries were around us is because of the overwhelming support of very many people in the Jewish community, not only in the Jewish community but there was never any doubt in my mind that the only reason this was possible was because of that support. I was grateful that we enjoyed it.

GW: So, your family gets here. You kind of already talked about this. After your family's here, then there's the whole process of becoming an American and adjusting to living life here. What was that process like for you?

AC: Easy.

GW: Really? What made it easy?

AC: I actually probably had the easiest – I never thought that – I don't know. It felt absolutely so natural. I remember that even when my parents were still not here, when I looked around, and I saw how things were, I remember a very simple thought, that this is how it should all be. It really came so natural and so expected in a sense that there was no – it felt that there was no need for emotional or even cultural adjustment. There was certainly a lot of – I had to find a job. We had to work. I had a small child. I didn't sleep very much. All of these things were there, but it was a normal life. The rest of it was building a life, going back to school, children growing and taking care of their education and their lives and whatnot. So, from that time on, it was life as usual.

GW: What was it like becoming part of the American Jewish community?

AC: When we came here, it already felt that we were a part of the American Jewish community.

GW: Really?

AC: I don't think we – I have never been particularly active in the Jewish community in the sense that – I just have this feeling of belonging, so I don't go to the temple very often. I go [on] the holidays. I like to see friends from the old days. I occasionally see Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman, and I love talking to them. It feels part of normal life. It just feels part of being and not an invasive part, either. It's just there.

GW: One thing we spent some time speaking with Rabbi Mehlman about was how they had these courses for Soviet Jews at Temple Israel, English courses and classes about job interviews, resumes, and stuff like that, and services in Russian, Hebrew, and English. Did you go to any of those things?

AC: See, I came already speaking fluent English. I came with substantial skills in math. To me, this was not something that was necessary. I got my first job with the help of many people, I'm sure, although no one really knows. I went through a full day of interviews, and I was hired. So, I was hired effectively the next day. After that, it was life as usual. I went to work. I did my work well. I went to school. I actually worked at Digital for several years. And then, Digital had a program, where if you manage to persuade your boss that providing you better education is going to benefit the company, the company would actually allow you to go to, in addition to work, get a degree at one of the top universities, as long as the university would accept you independently. So that is how I actually ended up going to MIT.

GW: You got a master's and PhD from MIT?

AC: I went first for the master's, and I came back to Digital. Then I went back to MIT a couple of years later to get my PhD. After that, I spent some number of years in various companies, including Cisco [Systems]. At some point, I got interested in education. I first thought it would just be a short-time hobby; it ended up taking over my life. But also, for a while, I actually dealt with all of these schools in parallel with work for many years, and then only just for the last few years, I've started just dealing with the school full time.

GW: Your master's and PhD, are they in math or computer science?

AC: They're in computer science, both of them.

GW: Is there a large Soviet Jewish emigre community here in the Boston area?

AC: Yes.

GW: Do you have a lot of friends in that community? Are you involved in it?

AC: I have a lot of friends. I'm not a political animal anymore. I'm not involved in communities much, but I see a lot of people. I also keep myself extremely busy at work, so I don't have that much time to socialize. When I do socialize, I see a lot of the people from the old times, a lot of the people in the Jewish community, but also a lot of friends who are quite independent of this, who I acquired here over the years.

GW: What did it mean for your father and mother to live in the United States?

AC: Well, this is what they were going to do. They wanted a life of freedom. They wanted to be near their family, and they wanted to work meaningfully. My father got all of those things. My mother was not able to go back to work, but I think she was happy enough to be around all of us.

GW: What does it mean for them to be near you and Leon and your children?

AC: Look, how does one answer this question?

GW: Yeah. All right. I think those are all the questions I have. Tamar, do you have anything else?

TSS: No. You answered everything.

GW: Anna, is there anything you'd like to say that we didn't touch upon?

AC: There really are no facts to – it feels strange to try to remember all of this. It feels like a normal life lived, but it wasn't. The circumstances were strange. There were twenty years of political circumstances which changed the lives of so many people in so many different ways.

GW: This is going back, but at one point in Russia, did the abnormal start feeling normal?

AC: Say it again.

GW: You said it was a strange life, but it didn't feel strange if I interpreted that correctly. Was there a point where you knew you were living an abnormal life, but you're like, "this is just the reality, and this is our life, and it's normal now?"

AC: Well, I think the whole situation in Russia with the refuseniks could never be classified as normal. People were torn out of their normal lives. They were in a situation which was both dangerous and hostile, and discriminative. So life in such circumstances could never be normal, and yet, we lived this life, and it was our life. We went through it to the extent it was possible.

GW: All right. Thank you very much.

AC: You're welcome.

TSS: I did want to ask – you said that you have a photo that you thought of from the day that you left to the United States. If it's not too much to ask, would it be possible to scan them and send them to us?

AC: I could. If you remind me by email, I will do so.

TSS: Yes. I will also give you my card. Do you have a card that I can –?

AC: Yes.

GW: Thank you for the refreshments.

AC: Do you want my card, also?

GW: Sure. Yes. That would be great.

TSS: I will send you an email. Thank you.

GW: I want to say thank you in Russian.

TSS: [speaks Russian].

AC: Thank you. [inaudible]

TSS: Thank you for sharing your amazing life story with us.

GW: Do you have any friends that ended up in Cleveland by chance?

AC: I don’t think so.

GW: My grandfather, I told you, was born in Ukraine. He ended up running a Russian clinic for Soviet emigres in Cleveland at the Jewish hospital there.

AC: I see.

[END OF INTERVIEW]