



Donald and Fran Putnoi Transcript

Gabriel Weinstein: All right, so it's Friday, November 4. It's 4:23 PM. This introduction is just part of the Jewish Women's Archive standard script. It's Friday, November 4, 4:23 PM. I am Gabriel Weinstein. I'm here with my colleague, Tamar Shachaf Schneider. We are with Fran and Don Putnoi, and we are here to discuss their involvement with the Soviet Jewry movement as part of the Jewish Women's Archive and Brandeis University's Soviet Jewry Oral History Project. All right. Our first question is: how did you guys learn about the Soviet Jewry movement?

Fran Putnoi: My first involvement – and Don's might be different – was a woman in our congregation named Ronya Schwaab, who was a Soviet citizen and emigrated. In [1978], whatever year Ida Nudel was imprisoned in the Soviet Union, which was prior, probably '79. [Editor's Note: Ida Nudel was exiled to Siberia in 1978] Ida Nudel was one of the first really important voices in terms of her imprisonment. She brought the whole consciousness-raising to American Jewry, and Ronya Schwaab was a woman in our congregation who was dogged in trying to get the American Jewish Congregation to pay attention to it. She literally hounded Rabbi [Bernard] Mehlman for as long as I can remember – I was very involved in Temple Israel because I was the first woman to be president of Temple Israel. So this was the heart of the Soviet Jewry work in our community.

Donald Putnoi: Well, I've had a little more circuitous – I have very little living family, and the story goes that my mother and her three brothers left the Soviet Union left –

FP: Kaunas.



DP: – Kaunas for the United States in 1919, 1920, something like that, maybe a little earlier. And they came to the United States with the idea that they were going to bring the rest of the family over, which never happened because of World War II. So, the story for me picks up that my aunt, who was my mother's sister-in-law, the last of the surviving people who were in this part of the world, made my first cousin and myself the executors of her and her husband's will – my uncle, my mother's brother. So we knew that there was a family in the Soviet Union. So, when my cousin, a physics professor here at Northeastern, was delivering a paper in Prague, Czechoslovakia, he decided that he was going to travel with his wife to go to meet our only existing relative left in the world. They made an arrangement to meet in Kaunas, I believe. That was the first time I realized that there was a connection of family from my biologic mother's side. [On] my dad's side, my grandfather came from Russia, during the Russian-Japanese War, he was in the Russian army. He was marching east to fight the war with hordes of illiterate soldiers who didn't know their left from their right, and they were marching with a potato and a carrot tied to the – chanting, “Potato, carrot, potato, carrot.” He realized that he was marching to his death because no one was going to escape. He was basically fodder for the war. He was dressed in a uniform and soon he realized that instead of [marching] east, he better go AWOL [Absent Without Leave] and march West. So as soon as he hit a train station that he could get to, he took off the potato, carrot, and his uniform, hopped a train going as far west as he could, and ultimately came to the United States.

GW: Where is Kaunas?

DP: Kaunas is in Lithuania.

FP: Vilnius. It's a suburb.

GW: So it is in Lithuania?

DP: The Kovno Ghetto.



FP: The Kovno Ghetto. Have you ever heard the –?

GW: Yeah.

DP: I'll tell you all the stories as we go along. Go ahead.

GW: All right. How did you guys get involved with Action for Soviet Jewry?

FP: Well, because I was exceedingly involved at Temple Israel. Rabbi Mehlman and Emily Mehlman were not only our rabbis but our closest friends. We had mega-involvement because our community, and with Bernard's leadership, heard the clarion call of Ronya Schwaab. Ronne Friedman and Bernard Mehlman went with the Mass Board of Rabbis – he made a trip with Rabbi [Ronne] Friedman in 1988. Don and I took them to the airport with all of their first round of contraband, including two huge duffels including a heart valve and medicines, cameras, anything requested.

DP: Well, we get we gathered –

FP: Well, we were part of a committee. Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman started a synagogue-wide committee, which we were very involved in not only because of the congregational life but because they were our best friends. So, we spent a lot of time and energy gathering our resources. My husband's a physician. So we got a lot of other physicians to contribute medicines. We sent in hundreds of pounds of contraband into the Soviet Union, basically.

FP: The first time we took Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman to the airport, on their first journey, Emily, his wife, and Irene were away, and Don and I took them out to dinner. We took them to the airport with duffels. I mean, literally duffels worth of stuff.

Tamar Shachaf Schneider: When they immigrate, and they travel, they go with duffel bags.



FP: Right. Exactly. They were our emissaries. The congregation raised hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of stuff.

FP: This was the first trip. This was the very first trip that Bernard and Ronne made.

DP: The first thing is that Bernard is an activist. You have to understand that.

FP: He's an unusual leader.

DP: He walks the walk. So, before the Soviet Jews, we had the boat people.

FP: We had done resettlement of Vietnamese boat people.

FP: – a big action around the resettlement –

DP: The South Vietnamese, basically, were overrun. We lost the war in Vietnam and all these Vietnamese –

FP: But that's not this thesis.

DP: Whoa, whoa, wait a minute because we got organized that way. What was our organization? All of a sudden, there was a call out for synagogues and churches to take the poor Vietnamese who were basically floating in the ocean, just like the refugees from Syria.

FP: Which we're doing now.

DP: Arlo Guthrie, for example. I don't even know if you know that name, Arlo Guthrie.

GW: Oh, yeah. Sure.

DP: Okay. Arlo Guthrie had a few families where he lived in the Berkshires. Well, we settled some Vietnamese, and so we got the understanding of when you bring people



over, we have access to old furniture, access to how to get people into homes. So we had the wherewithal from that experience that we could do that. Then came the Soviet Jews.

FP: We had an organized mechanism.

DP: In our synagogue.

FP: When the call went out to our congregation to get on board. I think the first night – I don't know – eighty people showed up. (Edie Mueller?) just became a grandmother to triplets about three months ago. She's always one of those women – she had resettled the boat people in her attic.

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FP: We had lots of wonderful congregants who trusted Rabbi Mehlman's leadership, and when he said there was a need, they responded. The first trip, they went as our ambassadors. We sent them with all the money and all the stuff that we [had] – cameras and heart valves. It was just astounding how much stuff –

DP: We didn't know what to bring. So Action for Soviet Jewry provided lists of needs.

FP: So, Action became the partner. Sheila Galland and Judy Patkin, who – I don't know if either of them are still alive, but to do a study of Soviet Jewry in Boston without speaking to either of them –

GW: What was their name?

FP: Sheila Galland. G-A-L-L-A-N-D. Or Judy Patkin. I don't know if either of those two women survived.



TSS: I think maybe the other group –

GW: The other group might have them.

FP: Okay. Because literally the partnership between synagogues like Temple Israel – because we weren't the only ones –

DP: And the synagogue in Florida, Sandberg's synagogue in Florida.

FP: I mean, it was a national – I think Chicago was the first American Jewish community that really worked hard on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Florida. Sheryl Sandberg, the new CEO of Facebook.

DP: You know, Sheryl Sandberg, the Lean In –

FP: Her parents were instrumental.

DP: Joel and Sandberg were at the forefront of Soviet Jewry.

TSS: Can I ask a question?

FP: Sure.

TSS: I want to go back to how you became so involved with the congregation. I know that you were –

FP: How I became involved with the congregation?

TSS: You were president. I do not know if you are still president, but you were president.

DP: No, no. [laughter]

TSS: So, how does a person get to be president of this major congregation?



FP: So, how I got involved was that when my husband came here to Harvard Medical School, which is literally walking distance of Temple Israel, and I had grown up – because my father was a Holocaust survivor – in a very identified Jewish home, Reform Jewish home. The rabbi at the congregation where I grew up as a little girl was named Roland Gittelsohn.

DP: Very well-known rabbi.

TSS: Did you grow up here, in the area?

FP: No, I grew up in New York.

DP: No, New York City.

FP: New York.

DP: Both of us are from New York.

FP: I grew up in a town called Rockville Center. And Rockville Center's Rabbi was a man named Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn. He was the rabbi that was here in 1964 – Rabbi Mehlman succeeded him. In 1972 I came to Boston with my husband. We had a little girl. We were looking for a community. And Temple Israel –

FP: Anyway, we lived in Boston. We were within walking distance of Temple Israel. I sought out Rabbi Gittelsohn because my husband needed a way to earn extra money. He was a medical student on scholarship, and we had nothing.

DP: I had children.

FP: We had generous parents, but we really didn't have any kind of outside income.

DP: Means.



FP: – cash flow. So my husband started tutoring. The way he got his students was to go to Rabbi Gittelsohn and introduce ourselves. He had consecrated me when I was five years old, and he remembered very distinctly my parents.

DP: And my uncle.

FP: Because my father's story, as a Holocaust survivor, was one of the stories he used in his early years in his rabbinate to get his already assimilated congregation to donate generously to the Jewish community. And because my father had a story to tell, he used my father as a shill. He would say, "This refugee can give me five hundred dollars. You guys who have lived here your whole life can match his gifts." My father was an ardent Zionist and an ardent philanthropist, even when we had nothing. So, it was a natural progression for me to Temple Israel. He gave my husband his help so then I started getting very involved in the congregation.

DP: And Roland Gittelsohn also worked at my uncle's camp.

FP: And we had lots of – you know the Jewish world. There's one degree of separation. We had a child very early on, and I was a stay-at-home mom. I liked the Jewish holidays, and I took my daughter to decorate the Sukkah at Temple Israel. It was a very formal old-line German Jewish congregation, with a high degree of formality and very little energy around integration of family and family life, the way I had known it in New York. That's because I was a New Yorker, and I came to Boston, which I found to be a very closed-down city, emotionally.

DP: You have no idea what it was like fifty years ago.

FP: It was just really hard for me.

DP: Oh my god.



FP: My husband was a full-time medical student. I was always a social engineer. I like change. I like growth. I like making things happen.

DP: She was a kochleffel. [Editor's Note: Yiddish. Literally, a cooking spoon used to refer to a busybody or someone who stirs up trouble.] Do either of you speak Yiddish?

TSS: No.

FP: I decided that the only way I could help my child was to get myself involved. So, I did it through action. I became involved in the PTA [Parent Teacher Association], and I became involved in social change for the congregation. I used my daughter's life as the life that I wanted to frame around a coherent Jewish community. So I just kept on driving them crazy. I asked for children [and] family activities. I asked for an outdoor Sukkah that we could decorate as families. I started stirring the pot, and then Rabbi Gittelsohn left our congregation, Rabbi Mehlman came to our congregation, and it was like I found a kindred spirit. He had come from Washington. He was a Brooklyn Jew. He was a social activist. He had come from Washington, where he was involved in the peace movement which my husband and I had been involved in. It was kind of a natural fit. I just believed – I went to Brandeis to study Chaburah movement then a very revered professor named Bernie Reisman.

TSS: Of course. He's the first chair of the Hornstein program.

FP: The whole Chaburah – right. Okay. So the whole Chaburah movement was started. [Editor's Note: The Chaburah movement was an anti-establishment movement among Jews in America, based around the concept of greater individual and community involvement in Judaism]. I was just in a town that I didn't get. I didn't understand how people could just stay in their homes and go to temple once a week and call it community.



DP: Fifty-five years ago, just to [inaudible] piece of what Boston – there were very few restaurants in Boston. This is the way Bostonians would live their social life. I'm not sure what Cleveland was like.

FP: You would never see a tray like this in any Boston Jewish home.

FP: This is way too much food for any Boston family to have on the table.

TSS: [inaudible]

DP: If you went to symphony, for example, which we did a bunch of times through the good graces of Harvard Medical School, or if you went to theater, you would eat at home and then go to theater. There was no real eating out.

FP: There were like five restaurants when we moved here.

DP: Boston is a very different society than New York or Philadelphia.

FP: For us, it was. It was really culture shock to be here. We kept on getting in a car and driving to New York so I could feel alive. That's how the synagogue became a really important part of my life. Then Rabbi Mehlman and Rabbi Friedman came. They were invested in exactly the same issues that I had begun to think about. They only wanted to open up the doors of this community. So they made outreach to interfaith families, gay families.

TSS: When was that?

FP: Rabbi Mehlman came to Boston in 1976. Starting around 1978, we started really making big moves. There was so much to change because Rabbi Mehlman just had a whole different way of initiating his rabbinate.



DP: Children were not allowed to really be in synagogue, as it were. Simchat Torah, Purim – but they didn't want any children to dirty the synagogue.

FP: It was a very formal–

DP: It's true. [laughter]

FP: My life at Temple Israel, my revolution at Temple Israel, started when we built a brand-new building, which was in 1972. Rabbi Mehlman came in 1976. We had a brand-new building, and they had planned the whole weekend of festivities, and they saw themselves as a cathedral congregation, and not one of the activities involved anything that had to do with kids. I was invited to a meeting at the Board of Trustees with all these very austere men. I stood up to this group, and I said, “You're going to dedicate a new building, but there's not one activity for kids. What are the kids going to do?” They said, “Oh.”

DP: Stay home. Stay home.

FP: One man raised his hand, and he said, “You can't have children in the building, they're going to dirty it, and it's brand new.” And I said, “Well, if you don't have children in the building, you don't need a new synagogue because there won't be a next generation to support the congregation.” The chairman of the committee was a man named Bill Silverman.

DP: Silverman.

FP: He had a very good spirit, and he was very different than the dominant culture in Boston, and he said, “She's right. Give them a thousand dollars.” With that thousand dollars, I planned a family day called Yom Hamishpacha [“day for the family”] for the Sunday after their big Friday and Saturday fancy events and formal dinner.



TSS: It is still a holiday in Israel. Yom Hamishpacha.

FP: It is? Which holiday?

TSS: I think after Tu B'Shvat.

FP: Oh, interesting.

GW: How did your identity as the children of Holocaust survivors impact your decision to get involved with the Soviet Jewry movement?

FP: I think very directly. I think both of us having had families that came from abroad. I'm a first-generation American. So as a first-generation American, I know what the Jewish community did for my family – for my father. My mother came from Turkey. So that's a whole other story.

TSS: That's why the food.

DP: Pistachio nuts.

TSS: [inaudible]

FP: HIAS [The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] helped my father come to America. So I knew that if you have an organized world to help the next generation, they have a chance of making it. It's never been a question for me. The minute Rabbi Mehlman put out the call, Don and I signed up because what else should we do? There were people that needed a home. They needed their freedom, the way my father did. In 1940, my father comes to America. If there wasn't a welcoming community, there wouldn't have been that seven bucks that HIAS met him with in Switzerland at the boat to pay his first meals in America. So I really know firsthand because my father shared his story constantly that we had no other choice. My mother and father were active philanthropists my whole growing up. From the time we had very little to the time my father was on the Board of



Governors of Hebrew University. He was always giving back. He was always about giving back. That was the role model. And Don came into – we were engaged to be married when I was nineteen, and he was twenty. My parents, especially my father, was a very charismatic character. Don and I were raised at his foot.

DP: Feet.

FP: His modeling definitely impacted how we [inaudible].

DP: But also, my family – when my cousin went over and discovered my family, we had to push. We had to get the people from Kaunas, who are now living in Kyiv. –

FP: That's in 1990.

DP: We had to get them to move because this was – now the doors for settling the Jews from the Soviet Union in the United States were closing because there was some sort of quiet agreement between the Israelis and the United States that the Israel government should be taking these Soviet Jews. It'd be better for Israel if it went that way as opposed to the United States. So, it was very hard then to get Jews from the Soviet Union after a large push that we had to get them settled in the United States. They made it difficult.

So, we had an ongoing negotiation with our family for, I would say, a good four years to try to convince them –

FP: And there were nine of them.

DP: There were nine. My whole family. I mean, my grandparents, my mother's side.

First of all, the older people didn't want to come. That's what happens all the time. They didn't want to come. And they didn't trust the information. When my cousin went there, they said, "How many synagogues are there in Boston?" My cousin said, "I don't know. Maybe a hundred, maybe more." They thought they were telling propaganda stories.

We would send them packages even before Action for Soviet – we would send them



packages that they would be able to trade in the dollar store to get money to save – like cameras, people who are going to go to the Soviet Union, we would give them cameras so that my family would then be able to transfer that into money. They sell it. Then the doors of the United States closed, and things were getting a little more difficult for them.

Then they wanted to make the move. By that time, the only movement was aliyah to Israel. So they ultimately decided to make aliyah to Israel. We met them at the airport in Ben Gurion. They made aliyah, and it is, as I say, a Horatio Ginsburg story.

GW: A what Ginsburg?

DP: You know Horatio Alger? You know the thing?

GW: Of course.

DP: Well, they came. Both of them were very knowledgeable in the computer sciences, very gifted in computer sciences. They came, and we supported them with housing and money, whatever there was lacking for about a year and a half. And then the male cousin, who's married to my second cousin, [inaudible], worked at the then largest companies in Israel called Comverse [Technology, INC]. C-O-M-V-E-R-S-E.

TSS: But now there was that stupid –

FP: Taken over.

TSS: – CEO.

DP: Yes, yes.

FP: What happened?

TSS: Kobi Alexander, who stole money from the company. He's in prison now, I think.

FP: Not our cousin.



DP: Not our cousin, no.

FP: Anyway, they did very well.

DP: They did well. Their children. It's what you want.

FP: Now they have grandchildren.

DP: It's a wonderful story, and we feel really good about –

FP: They have a son who's probably twenty-six, twenty-seven.

DP: So we did it for our family. We felt compelled to do it. Before we did it for the –

FP: For the Charnys and the Gilbos.

DP: And all the people.

FP: Let them ask their questions.

GW: I have some questions about your family's story. How many family members were in Kaunas that you guys helped settle in Israel?

DP: Well, let's see. The older people – then there were (Dova's?) –

FP: Everybody in Kaunas that was left – of four siblings that were left. Three of them were wiped out by the Einsatzgruppen. [Editor's note: The Einsatzgruppen were Nazi SS units that were used to kill those in the Nazi death camps].

DP: More than that. About five.

FP: The family was eight siblings, Don.

DP: Right.



FP: And four came to America.

DP: Right.

FP: (Dova?) and (Dova's?) parents survived, your uncle survived, and the other siblings were wiped out.

FP: Three siblings were wiped out.

DP: The Einsatzgruppen came, and they took all of my family; they took them to the thing and machine-gunned them.

FP: Okay. The extended family, but the family that we supported in the Soviet Union were two grandmothers –

DP: Right.

FP: – One grandfather, (Dova?), and (Yon?). And then they had two children. So the senior generation is all gone now. The three-grandparent generation are all dead. (Dova?) and (Yon?) are ten years younger than we are. So they're alive. Their two boys – one is married to a Soviet Jewish woman from Tashkent, and they have–

FP: They have five children. The other boy is single, and he hasn't married yet.

DP: He is in the intelligence service of the Israel government.

FP: I'm going to fix him up with Tamar.

TSS: I'm married.

FP: You're married. Can't fix you up. Okay. [laughter]



DP: And it's a great story. I tell a great story about my cousin. We went with Rabbi Mehlman to Israel for his last time to celebrate his retirement.

FP: His retirement celebration.

DP: He was taking us on a tour – members of our synagogue that he really felt – a core group of people, maybe twenty. I'm sitting in the restaurant on the waterfront and – I'm sitting in the restaurant, and I get a call from my cousin in Israel, who's in the intelligence service. Okay? And he says, “Donald, why didn't you tell me you're coming to Israel?” I started explaining, “It's a short stay. I'm going with the rabbi, and I don't know the itinerary.” I said, “Wait a minute. How do you know that I'm in Israel?” Since I told you, I only have one living relative in America.

FP: No.

DP: (Carl?).

FP: In Israel.

DP: But there's one in Israel. He's the one who's calling [inaudible]. I said, “They called?” He said, “No.” I said, “How do you know?” He says, “Donald, what do I do?” I said, “Yeah. You're in the intelligence service.” He says, “Yes. And I'm in charge of all of the people who fly into Israel and then decide to fly to other places, any Arab country, or anything else. It goes through my desk, and your name popped up. And how many Putnois are there that live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that's not related to me? So, bingo.” I said, “How do you know where I'm staying?” He says, “We have it all. We have it. We know where you are.” So yeah, that's our family.

GW: What year roughly did you guys first discover their existence?



DP: When did we discover the –? Well, Aunt Hilda told me about them, but when Aunt Hilda died, that's when we made the real concept.

FP: So, it was about twenty-five years ago.

DP: Yes, twenty-five years ago.

GW: So, 1991, you learned about them?

DP: Yes.

FP: Yes.

TSS: Right when the wall fell.

FP: Right.

TSS: [inaudible]

FP: And when things started to get complicated, to get them out. Because if they came here, getting them to the United States without health care for three senior adults would have been very costly. There was no way to really do it easily. It was just in that window when things kind of shut down. That's how they went to Israel because they could make aliyah with a lot less complication, although they had much more fear about going to Israel.

DP: A lot of fear.

FP: But they finally decided for the good of their children.

DP: But we helped them and talked to them. We made many visits to them.

FP: They weren't identified Jewishly at all.



DP: No. And that's typical of many of the –

FP: Their Jewish identity was nil.

DP: We made Passover for them. My son spent a year in Israel, working for an organization called Sherut La'am. [Editor's Note: Sherut La'am was a program sponsored by the American Zionist Youth Foundation for Americans and Canadians to go to Israel to learn about its social problems.] He resettled –

FP: He was in a place called [inaudible].

DP: He resettled Ethiopians.

TSS: Where?

FP: He was near Nahariya. And he was in a caravan of Ethiopian Jews for a year.

TSS: Through the Boston Haifa connection?

FP: It was something called Sherut La'am. He's now going to be forty-eight. So it was when he was –

TSS: Is he the one who works as an ophthalmologist.

FP: It was twenty-seven years ago. It was in the height of the Ethiopian resettlement. He didn't want to live in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv because he knew he'd never learn Hebrew, and he and his girlfriend – he had a girlfriend at the time. He just finished University of Wisconsin. So he spent a year in Israel in a resettlement – and it was a quite remarkable year, and we went when his cousins came, and we all made Passover for our newly discovered family.

DP: But we brought for him an Amharic-Hebrew Dictionary from Schoenhof's.



FP: Schoenhof's in Harvard Square.

DP: They're a bookstore that has this Amharic-Hebrew Dictionary, so he can teach at this school. He learned how to speak. He was fluent in it?

FP: Actually, it was the next year that your cousins came. It's probably twenty-six years ago because (Shelly?) was there, but (Eric?) wasn't.

DP: So we made Passover.

GW: So they made aliyah in 1990?

FP: They probably made 1992, I would say.

DP: When was Comverse started?

FP: I think it's probably 1991.

TSS: My brother-in-law worked at Comverse.

GW: [inaudible] 1991 and 1992, they made aliyah.

FP: No, that's not right. We probably heard about them in probably 1989.

DP: Yes, something like that.

FP: Because it took about two years to convince them to go to Israel.

DP: I would say that we were in the Soviet Union in 1989.

FP: We were in the Soviet Union when I was president of Temple Israel; it was 1989. Definitely.

DP: Whenever that was.



GW: How many times did you go to the Soviet Union?

DP: Once.

FP: We only went to the Soviet Union once, but our synagogue – I'm sure Rabbi Mehlman told you–

DP: We spent –

FP: We spent two and a half weeks.

DP: Very tough two and a half weeks, although I loved it.

FP: We were there in the winter. Okay? We arrive in Moscow. It's probably twelve degrees below zero. I mean, it was so cold.

DP: I ordered a special coat that they only outfit Eddie Bauer for Everest climbers. [laughter] Okay? It was unreal.

FP: My husband hates to be cold.

TSS: You live in the wrong place.

DP: I do live in the wrong place.

FP: So he bought the warmest coat he could buy. One of the people on the trip was a man named Robert Shapiro, who's now deceased, but he ran a company which half of Brandeis had been endowed by.

DP: Sporto.

TSS: Did he donate the Shapiro building [The Abraham Shapiro Academic Complex]?



FP: Yes. So, he gave us all our boots. Shapiro had a company called Sporto Boots. We were all outfitted up the [wazoo] with winter garb. Rabbi Mehlman had us fill our watches with names of our contacts. We all had watches.

DP: We were all secret agents with telephone numbers of all our contacts. Action for Soviet Jewry provided us all with contacts because I was going to see patients in three cities. I had already a list of – I had a list of people to see in all three cities. We had the numbers because the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti] was following us because we had no formal tour arrangement, and they knew who we were. Although, it was sort of a love-hate relationship. They liked what we brought in, which is three thousand pounds of stuff that the KGB would buy, and ultimately the cameras and other things would go to them. They followed us. We would call them. We would call our contacts in the various cities. We would meet in an arranged place, and of course, we never talked on the phone. We talked in parks and stuff because everything was miked.

FP: Have you been to the Soviet Union, either one of you?

GW: I've been to Ukraine. So former Soviet Union.

DP: Everything was miked. I have a funny story. We were in Tashkent. We arrived at this hotel, and we had been briefed by the State Department about how not to say anything in the hotel rooms. But I wanted to see if they're actually paying someone, a Russian woman that they educated in English, to listen to my bubbe-meises? [Editor's Note: bubbe-meise (pl. bubbe-meises) is Yiddish, literally 'grandmother's story,' often used to describe conversations of little note.] What is that? So I leaned into where they said the phone was. And I say, "You know, there are not enough towels that are big enough. And I also need something else." And we started unpacking. And all of a sudden, there's a knock on the door, and towels arrived and whatever.

FP: Towels? They were not exactly towels.



DP: Well, whatever, but they were listening. They were listening. So, it's true.

GW: What were you guys expecting to see before you made the trip to the Soviet Union?

DP: Oh, we were prepared.

GW: For what?

DP: We were prepared. Well, we were told that we had to bring in our own food. Okay? Everything. For us to eat. Okay?

FP: You have to understand. There are two things that are [inaudible] important in this. One is that Action for Soviet Jewry had been very, very organized in knowing exactly how they were sending – this was not at all random. It was all highly organized. Action sent out a very detailed agenda of what we had to be informed about, what to expect, how to expect it. And then, we had Rabbi Mehlman, who's a German Jew.

DP: He's Yakke, [Editor's Note: A Yakke (also spelled Yekke or Yekki) is a German Jew.]

FP: Highly compulsive.

TSS: I know. Yeah.

FP: And a wife –

DP: You're a Yakke?

TSS: No.

DP: He's a Yakke.

FP: And a wife who was more compulsive.



DP: I'm compulsive, but not like that.

FP: The kinds of detail we had – we brought a hundred hundred-dollar bills. We brought little cans of tuna.

DP: A hundred one-dollar bills.

FP: Right. Down to the detail of what kind of food we could eat in the rooms that would be easy – we brought little cans of peaches. We brought little cans of tuna because there was no food.

DP: And we stayed at the best hotel in every city. Our travel agent – we said we want to at least eat or whatever.

FP: Let me explain to you why it was different for our group as opposed to – there were tour groups going into the Soviet Union in '89, '90, '91 that were sponsored trips. You went into a special dining room [with] long tables. When you would peer into the dining rooms, you would see an egg and a piece of toast, and everything was laid out for the big groups. We went as independent travelers. We weren't under anybody's auspices. We would travel in pairs.

DP: We had an agenda.

FP: – supposedly under the radar.

DP: But not really.

FP: Now, we weren't really under the radar, but we were as under the radar as you could get as a private citizen going into the Soviet Union. There was nobody providing us with anything. We had to go where the Russians went to eat. Okay. There was nothing to eat. Literally, when I tell you, there were families that we were very close to, who we had been corresponding with, whom we brought special things for. We went with a woman



named Mrs. Stonov. I will never forget it. Her husband was one of the most important scientists in the world, right?

DP: I was going to tell that story.

FP: We'd go to –

DP: I had specific requests from three Nobel Laureates who were world-respected names at the time. Still are. This Stonov was supposedly to be nominated for the Nobel Prize. So, there was this request that he had just had surgery for colon cancer.

FP: He needed colostomy bags.

DP: He needed colostomy bags. "Can we measure him? Can I measure him so we can send him in the next group of people Colostomy bags?"

FP: Because they weren't being cared for.

DP: I go to his place. Here's a man who is world-respected, one of the highest scientists in the Soviet Union, and he lived in a two-room apartment lined with bookshelves – very intelligent, music playing – but really, he looked like a prisoner. It was sad how they had really treated – everybody were prisoners. I arrive, and they had anticipated our coming. Fran wasn't there because I was asked to be by myself to examine him, etcetera. There was not enough room. But they could not have been more generous, and they had nothing. Mrs. Stonov had gone to the ends of the earth to make sure that I had an orange, just to buy an orange and an egg.

FP: I don't think there were any oranges.

DP: There was one orange.

FP: I thought there were those crummy apples.



DP: Well, whatever. Anyway, it was remarkable. It was truly remarkable.

FP: The only time we saw food in the two and a half weeks we were in the Soviet Union was when we got to Tashkent. In Leningrad and in Moscow, we basically ate in our rooms out of tin cans. In Leningrad, on two or three occasions, we were able to get cabbage soup at one of the hotel restaurants.

DP: We lived on bread and vodka. It's true. We did.

FP: And we're at the fanciest hotel in Moscow, right? The menu is this big. It looks just like when you go to the fanciest restaurant and –

DP: Oh, and caviar.

TSS: But it's all cabbage.

FP: But it's basically cabbage. And only when they opened up their jackets and –

DP: They have caviar. You can buy off the waiter.

FP: You can pay off the black market.

DP: Caviar. So, my friend, Mr. Shapiro, who's a multimillionaire, we bonded very closely together because we were looking for food, and he says, "This is ridiculous."

FP: "I have all the money in the world."

DP: He says, "I have all the money I can buy this whole country."

FP: He was very honest.

DP: He was a very sweet guy. So, he goes over to the maître d', and he says to the maître d', "You've offered me this, you offered me that, and you have nothing here. I



ordered Chicken Kiev.”

FP: And this was after about an hour and a half of waiting.

DP: He takes out a wad of hundred dollars – we had put hundred-dollar bills and our single dollars, and a wad of hundred-dollar bills.

FP: But we weren’t supposed to take in a wad of hundreds.

DP: But he did. And he says, “Look, I want something to eat.” And the man comes back with caviar. That's it. Bread and caviar. [laughter] So, I said, “Robert, what they told us, you got to eat the tuna fish cans. Once we leave the Soviet Union ...”

FP: We bought a can of caviar. We went upstairs and drank vodka [inaudible].

DP: That’s what we did. We drank vodka until we went to sleep. That's how we survived.

TSS: So, no keeping kosher there?

DP: Pardon?

FP: Nobody’s keeping Kosher.

DP: No.

GW: What did you expect to find in the Jewish community in the USSR before you went on your trip?

FP: In the Jewish community?

GW: Yes.



FP: We expected no Jewish community. Basically, there was no organized Jewish community as we knew it. The only time we worshiped as a Jewish community was in Tashkent. In Uzbekistan, there was a shtiebel [Yiddish, meaning a small synagogue, often located in a private residence], where there were a lot of very old Russian, Uzbeki men and women with babushkas who were separated. It was a really old-fashioned shtiebel.

DP: And they had [unintelligible]. I remember that because they were Sephardic. [Editor's Note: Sephardic Jews are those whose traditions originate with the Jewish communities of Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East.]

FP: In Tashkent, there was food. There was a lot of pilaf – which they don't call pilaf; they call 'pilaw.' And there was the most delicious melon I ever ate in my entire life.

DP: And they had a bread that you could roll, a [inaudible] bread.

FP: Like a pita.

DP: Pita bread.

FP: Like a pita.

DP: It was better than it, but it–

FP: It tasted to us like the best food in the entire world because really we had–

DP: It was meshuggah [Yiddish, meaning 'crazy'].

FP: In Leningrad and Moscow –

DP: But we didn't go for food. What I expected, and what I had in all three places, was a lot of people who needed medical attention. I wrote down all the things that we needed and then treated some people with whatever we had.



FP: There was an underground. The only level of Jewish spiritual life that we encountered was when we gathered people who had a remnant memory of something that had been handed down, that they had no tachlis [Yiddish, meaning purposeful or practical] education around. It was a remnant. So when Roy [Einhorn] would sing – he bought his guitar, and he would sing, and if he sang an old Yiddish song, you saw some [unintelligible] recognition.

DP: There were tears.

FP: But as a Jewish experience –

DP: It was totally expunged.

FP: It was a redemption experience, but it's not like going to Israel and sitting in Levi Kelman's shul [Yiddish for 'synagogue'] in Jerusalem and davening in our tradition. [Editor's Note: Levi Kelman was Rabbi of Kehilat Kol HaNeshama in Jerusalem.]

DP: No, it was totally bred out in the Communism and Soviet Union style.

FP: It was really the sense of tikkun olam [Hebrew, describing the Jewish value of repairing the world and taking care of one another socioeconomically], but not a sense of a Jewish world. It had no resemblance to the Jewish world.

DP: Well, they were hospitable like Jews.

FP: Yes. Certainly, we knew they were Jews. But they had no education about Judaism.

DP: They had no education. And they were fearful.

GW: Did you guys meet the Charnys on this trip or no?

FP: We didn't meet the Charnys in the Soviet Union.



DP: I thought we met one of them.

GW: You went in 1989?

FP: '89. No, we didn't meet the Charnys.

DP: We met the Gilbos and the Stonovs.

FP: We met the Gilbos' sister. I was very involved with a family named Lurie. I had been corresponding with his family.

DP: Kelman. We met Kelman.

FP: We met Kelman. Not Levi Kelman. We met none of the people – Anna Charny, we were involved with when she came to the United States. We met Ben Charney's plane when he touched down in Armand Hammer's plane. We were at the airport on that wonderful hot July day when that plane – we marched with Anna in the Soviet Jewry march in Washington. When we were trying to free Soviet Jews – a Free Soviet Jewry March. We marched in that parade. We were with Anna by her side. Anna had pneumonia; she was so sick. I'll never forget how she must have had a 103 fever. We had to get her home and get her antibiotics. She was really, really sick. But we were involved with Leon Charny and with (Yelena?) Charny and with all the Charny family, but only when they came here.

DP: The (Weinbergs?).

FP: Did Rabbi Mehlman describe to you how every Friday night for the years that we were settling Soviet Jewry, we had postcards of every one of the families?

TSS: We saw [inaudible].

FP: Did you see some of the postcards?



GW: Yes.

DP: We also had prayer books, both in Hebrew and Russian. At the beginning –

FP: Well, when they first arrived.

DP: Yes.

FP: We worked very hard.

DP: We xeroxed it, mimeographed, whatever.

FP: We worked very hard on the resettlement when they got here, as well as going to the Soviet Union. When we went to the Soviet Union, we went with Rabbi Mehlman, Cantor Einhorn, Rabbi Mehlman's son David, who's a filmmaker – now he's a filmmaker.

FP: A couple that ended up getting married, two kids in our congregation Andrew (Snyder?) and Dana Kor, and we went with Bob Shapiro. There was another senior adult with us.

DP: I can't remember.

FP: I think there were nine of us, and we spread out. We had different people that we visited, and Don did all the medical piece. I did pretty much the social welfare stuff. But I had been corresponding with people through the Action for Soviet Jewry. There was a family named the Lorie. I so often wonder – for many, many months, Rabbi Mehlman would call me into his office because I was president of the temple at the time. He'd say, "Fran, we need papers." I said, "What does that mean, Bernard?" "Well, we need to get people out, and we need money." We had all these documents made all the time.

FP: How these people got here, whether those documents were counterfeit or whatever, I never asked. But on one trip, we brought documents to Ladispoli in Italy.



DP: Oh, yes, we did do that.

FP: For families that were waylaid in Italy –

FP: We not only did the Soviet piece of this on one of our other trips to Italy.

DP: We were touring Florence. We were told they need us to detour to Ladispoli, which is the southern part of the urban nexus.

FP: Near Rome, right?

DP: South of Rome. And because all of the Soviet Jews are now stuck –

FP: Are being held up there.

DP: Because Congress had passed this rule, and so there was this blockage of movement of the Soviet Jews to the United States or to Israel. There was sort of a real backup. So we went and visited people –

FP: We had to get people documents.

GW: Going back to your trip to the Soviet Union, what was it like to meet with these Soviet Jewish families in the USSR?

FP: It was probably one of the most – you asked me if it was a Jewish experience, and I answered very rapidly without really saying it probably goes with some of the most spiritually charged moments of our lives. To meet people that were struggling for their humanity and survived.

DP: They really wanted to be, if not Jews, they wanted an experience –

FP: They wanted to know about being Jewish. We did Shabbat in a home that had never really observed Shabbat. It wasn't their weekly ritual. It's our weekly ritual. So we



adapted it for them.

DP: They liked to hear about what it was like to be a Jew in the United States.

FP: But to hear their stories. It was some of the most moving and most memorable days of my life.

DP: There was one family [that] told us about how their family was sent to a Gulag because they had a [inaudible]. They were found with –

FP: Their underground books.

DP: – underground newspaper, and they were discovered by the KGB. I mean, that's why they're so worried about us coming. Being followed, the KGB comes in, looks around the apartment, [and] they make to see it within [inaudible].

FP: Rabbi Mehlman and I went – while Don was visiting a patient one day with Roy, and I went with Rabbi Mehlman and his son David. We came across a character in the outskirts of Leningrad. Literally, I thought we had walked into a Dostoevsky novel. He was fully bearded – young man. He was surrounded – it was a hovel, but there were books. You could not see him for the books. He was very perturbed and very much struggling emotionally. I walked out of there. You encounter people like this all over the world. But there's something about seeing people in a place where you're naturally frightened to be. I mean, it was very frightening to be in the Soviet Union.

DP: And be followed.

FP: I mean, we didn't know whether we were being followed or not.

DP: We knew. Oh, my god.

FP: It was January, it was cold, it was distant. There's no phones.



DP: And we stood out in the Soviet subway system. We look [like] Americans, and at that period of my life, I was dealing with kids for some reason –

FP: And there were no cell phones.

DP: – so I worked with a bunch of noses, remember? And I would sit on the sub – people were looking, and I would put on –

FP: No humor.

DP: – funny noses and stuff. But I remember two instances, which [I'll] tell you about. We bought three thousand pounds of medicine, which we gave out. We had basically, in two and a half weeks, we gave a lot of stuff away appropriately. The last day, we're going to the airport. The only thing that we have is my Eddie Bauer Everest thing, only the pants and the shirt that I came with, and my Sporto boots and sneakers. A man comes, and he's my size. Rabbi Mehlman says, "Give him your boots." I said, "Bernard, my boots? I'll have just sneakers. It's freezing out there."

FP: "Give him your boots."

DP: He says, "You're going to be in a cab. Give him your boots." And I did.

FP: And your jacket.

DP: No, I did not give him my warm jacket. I remember that. I wasn't going to freeze. But I gave him my boots. We left the Soviet, and we left that group a day earlier because I was doing something else, and we were going on to Helsinki because the only thing I had was sneakers and –

FP: And a coat.



DP: – and my coat. We had our bag. When the customs person from Helsinki was checking, it was a big bag, and there was –

FP: Nothing in it.

DP: Nothing. It was a bag from the department store. It had nothing.

GW: What did it mean to you to be able to practice, give exams, and help people as a physician during the trip?

DP: Well, I did primitive – I had no backup of X-rays, blood tests, etc. Some of them had very complicated medical problems. I really was above my head in some of these things because they were given medicines that had Russian names, and I didn't know what the content [was]. I was able to take care of certain things, and others, I had to sort of defer. We would take their names. Then we would basically check with Action for Soviet Jewry [who] had doctors who were going through who might be able to help them. There were certain issues with cancer and whatever. Even in the West, you need to have backup. But a lot of the people needed just hands-on touching.

GW: Why do you guys think that the American Jewish community eventually got so fired up and passionate about the whole Soviet Jewry movement?

FP: Well, I'm not sure I ever saw the American Jewish community so fired up about the Soviet Jewry [movement].

GW: Really?

FP: Again, I look to these two women who really were voices in the dark for a long time. Action was really doing heavy lifting. Two women in a little room in Waltham, Massachusetts, basically were the soul of this movement. It took a long time. Once the congregation started buying in, and they realized there were two million people that had



to get out of the Soviet Union, then the Federation got on board. They liked to think that they were in there at the beginning.

DP: They were not.

FP: But they really weren't. Then they took it up as a cause. Then it became something that had another level of validity. Then you started to see that you were bringing people that you could help, that there were not the barriers that people had anticipated. They were exceedingly well-educated. I mean, it's an emigration that benefited Israel and benefited America in untold ways. I mean, you meet an Anna Charny, and you meet her nephews, and you meet her brother-in-law's – Leon's – children, who are all applied mathematicians now. They're basically doing incredible things, the next generation. I have no idea who the families are – all those papers and all those five-hundred-dollar checks that I wrote to Rabbi Mehlman every time he said we need five hundred dollars. I was very involved in the temple at that time. He said to me, "We need five hundred dollars." I wrote a check for five hundred dollars. I called a girlfriend. I said, "We need five hundred dollars to get this [family] ..." I think that it was visible. You could actually do something where you saw there was – and the people came.

DP: And you saw these people.

TSS: You saw the influence.

FP: My husband started this wonderful thing at our temple. One of the things that was really great is that there was a lot of energy by people to say, "Okay, I'll do this." My husband's great thing was that he had Cars for Borscht [inaudible] –

DP: [inaudible]

FP: A lot of people were trading up their cars.



DP: I said, "We will give you a tax write-off through the synagogue." I arranged it with the Executive Director of the synagogue that if you donate it–

FP: Donate your car.

DP: – to the synagogue, we will give you a statement that you can use for your taxes. So that you will benefit by giving a car, a useful car, not a junk car, but a useful car.

FP: Something that the [inaudible].

DP: So when the person from the Soviet Union comes, in Boston, you need a car for the most part in the suburb. It was called Cars for Borscht. The only thing that you had to do is that in return for getting the car, the emigre from the Soviet Union – family – would then have to take the person who gives the car to them, bring them to the house, and feed them borscht or food. That had two purposes. One, it connected our synagogue to these people. It established relationships between people who are really not involved, except getting rid of their car, as well as – and there were a lot of connections. My ophthalmology partner was not involved. I mean, there are a lot of people who don't want to – I mean, what's happening in the election? There are a lot of people who are really not that involved, even though it's really important to be involved. There's a certain group of people who get involved, and then people, sort of whatever. Followers.

FP: We were activists. Most people aren't activists.

DP: My partner gets involved basically through giving his car to the Gilbos, was it? He donated his car, and he and his wife are invited for a meal, borscht, but more than borscht. They established a long-standing relationship with them.

GW: We did a lot of reading in the Jewish Advocate about Temple Israel's involvement with the Soviet Jewry Movement and about you guys and your role in the Soviet Jewry Movement. Was it hard to get political heavyweights like John Kerry, Ted Kennedy, and



Joe Kennedy involved?

TSS: And Armand –

GW: Armand Hammer?

FP: Was it hard? I'll tell you one of the great things about the Temple Israel community. When you have authentic leadership in any organization, when there's leaders you can trust, and people of power understand that these are people that are trustworthy, you have a better chance of talking to anybody. Temple Israel was also blessed with a very fine membership Rolodex. John Kerry's brother is a member of Temple Israel; he converted with Rabbi Mehlman.

DP: You know that the Kerrys are Jewish.

TSS: Yes.

DP: We went with them to Prague. We went with his brother to Prague last year.

FP: And he shared his whole story.

DP: We're walking through one of the synagogues, which lists – I don't know if you've been to Prague, but it lists all the names of the Jews that perished from Prague, at Terezin and Auschwitz. We stopped there, and Cam [Cameron] Kerry stands up, and he says, "Our family doesn't like to talk about this, but I've done a lot of research." He says, "You see those names over there? Those are the names of my grandparents." He said, "The reason that our names were 'Kerry' is that my father didn't want us to have the same fate. So what he did was change his name and his religion. My father spun the globe, and wherever his finger landed, it landed on Kerry, Ireland, and that's how they get the name Kerry."



GW: I never knew that. I thought John Kerry was a New England WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant].

TSS: No, I knew that he has Jewish roots. It was all over the news.

DP: He has more than [roots].

TSS: He has contacts with Israel, so why isn't he more supportive of Israel if he's Jewish?

FP: Anyway, because we have members that are very well connected, we also have a woman in our congregation named Margot Stern Strom. She started an organization which, if you don't know about it, you should know about it. It's called Facing History and [Facing] Ourselves. Okay. Margot's brother was a man named Gerald Stern. Rabbi Mehlman married him in Washington when he was the rabbi.

TSS: He told us this story.

FP: He must have told you the story. Part of the accomplishments of our synagogue really have to be laid to the fact that we had a senior rabbi at the time who was an incredible connector. He was incredibly well-respected. He had built authentic relationships in the community. There's another woman, another heroine, that you should really have a conversation with if you want to do the thorough story of Soviet Jewry, and that's Sheila Decter, who was a heroine.

GW: I believe our classmates spoke with her.

FP: What's that?

GW: Our classmates spoke with her.

DP: Sheila Decter.



FP: Okay. Sheila Decter also is exceedingly well-connected. She has incredible ties to the Kennedys. Again, she's an authentic voice in the community. She and Rabbi Mehlman, between those two people, we could probably talk to anybody we needed in the world.

DP: Stern – that's Margot's brother – was Armand Hammer's private lawyer.

FP: That's how we got to Armand Hammer.

DP: That's how we got to Armand Hammer.

GW: What was it like the day Ben Charny arrived in the United States?

FP: Magic. Total magic. A bright blue sky, maybe ninety-five degrees. July.

DP: A Persian rug coming into the Hanscom Field. It was like –

FP: Like a magic carpet.

DP: – a magic carpet.

FP: It was one of the highest high days of our –

DP: There are a lot of people that we impacted with Action for Soviet Jewry, as well as the Vietnamese.

FP: No, that day was just – it was magic.

DP: It was great.

FP: We marched in Washington with Anna. We were there the first night that Anna Charny walked into Rabbi Mehlman's house, carrying this little girl in her arms and her red dress. She had an eye problem –



DP: She had an eye problem that they asked me to take a look at.

FP: Don had to look at her eyes that first night because Rabbi Mehlman was worried about if she had an eye turning. Now she's probably a college graduate and probably an applied mathematician.

DP: I remember watching – I had just returned from the Soviet Union from our trip. I was watching a PBS special with [Mikhail] Gorbachev. Gorbachev had said that – actually, it was on CBS, and it was the – what comes on Sunday after –

FP: Sunday morning?

DP: No, no Sunday night.

FP: 60 Minutes.

DP: 60 Minutes. And Gorbachev said, “If we let the Soviet Jews out of the United States, it's going to be a brain drain.”

TSS: Out of the United States or out of Russia?

DP: Out of Russia. He said, “If you let the [inaudible], it's going to be a brain drain.” And people sort of – “A-ha.” It was a brain drain. It was a benefit to Israel and the United States. It was a significant loss to the Soviet Union. They deserved it because they didn't treat their own Jews, their own people well, and certainly the Soviets. As I see the people prosper in this country, the Soviet Jews and in Israel –

TSS: I can't say that Israel benefited. Israel didn't treat them very well.

DP: Did not treat the Soviet Jews well?

TSS: No, I think that they made it very difficult for them to practice their professions. For example, doctors had to do all these tests in Hebrew, but they were already grown-up



people. It was really difficult for them to learn the language, and they don't practice the amazing professions they have. They are cleaners –

DP: I understand.

TSS: – just to earn money.

FP: It was harder. There were plenty of people, who it was very hard for.

DP: It was a mixed experience.

FP: The Charnys were a very unique family.

TSS: They learned English [inaudible].

DP: But for medicine, the way medicine was practiced in the Soviet Union during the period that I had seen was very primitive. I think in some ways – I know that the United States this was – but I assume this was in Israel –

FP: They all had to retrain.

DP: They had to retrain. I remember this one doc[tor], (Birdenko?) – they have mixed in their training, both science and a little voodoo. Medicine that has not been proven to work. But if you take a pinch of – and you say, “Well, where's the evidence to this?” Because that's the way we've been educated. “Where's the evidence? How do you know that?”

TSS: A leap of faith.

DP: Leaps of faith. It's complicated.

GW: Going back to the day that Ben arrived, what was going on? What was it like to watch Leon and Anna and (Yelena) that day?



DP: I don't know.

FP: All I could think of that day was that, personally, to be involved in something that had a happy ending was great. It's very rare that you get to have a happy ending. Life doesn't give so many happy endings. And that it was a huge new beginning. What were they going to face? Ben wasn't so well.

DP: Oh, that's another experience, I remember, in the Soviet Union.

FP: Ben wasn't so well. But I remember just the sheer – it was, as Don said, when that magic carpet set down, all of us who had been involved – I don't remember how many of us were at the airport, maybe twenty. It was just an overwhelming – I think we all sang Shehechyanu. [Editor's Note: Shehechyanu is a Jewish blessing recited, among other times, when one lives through a wondrous occurrence.] I think John Kerry was there that day. It was just a hallmark of – we've had a lot of incredible experiences in our lifetime. But this one was a communal effort. There was an element of magic about it. There was an element of how hard we had worked. It came to a good fruition. We had achieved a goal. It was human. It was this incredible reunification of a family.

DP: There was one scene, I remember, right from the beginning. I brought a camera in, a Polaroid camera. They had never seen a Polaroid camera.

FP: When you went to the Soviet Union.

DP: When we went, yes.

FP: Not that day. He's asking about that day.

DP: No, no. I'm going to relate this back to the what-do-you-call-it because it had an element of mystery and magic. We visit the first family, and they gave us a really nice meal. It was the first time we had a warm meal in the Soviet Union.



FP: It was Gilbo's sister [inaudible].

DP: That was more than tuna fish in a can, right? And I had my camera. I took a picture of the family. I don't know if you remember Polaroids, how it was developed, and how it comes like zzz. They thought it was wizardry. How has that happened? It's magic. So, I took another picture of another thing. That's the feeling that I got when the Charnys came down from Armand Hammer's plane. It was that type of magic thing. It's impossible. There was this wall between the West and the Soviet Union. It had melted for that moment. It was incredible.

GW: A big part of our conversation and one of the really interesting parts for us with him was talking about the integration of the Soviet Jewry community in Boston and the efforts that Temple Israel took. Were you guys involved with Temple Israel's efforts to integrate the Soviet Jews once they were here in Boston?

FP: Yes.

GW: What did you guys do?

FP: Everybody committed to different projects. Don did the Cars for Borscht; that was Don's piece. I was involved in –

DP: A lot of cars. It was a lot of cars. [laughter]

FP: No, it was a lot of cars. I helped when a family got here. One of my favorite stories wasn't one of the early families; it was one of the later families. But I took him for his driving test. And I'll never forget driving him out to Framingham and passing things like a motel. He's newly here. He'd come like three weeks before. He says, "Could you explain a motel to me?"

DP: The motel has a special name, and he really –



FP: It was called the Days Inn.

DP: Days Inn. That was the thing that struck him.

FP: He said, "This would have been very helpful in the Soviet Union." I said, "Why would that have been?" He said, "Because we lived with our parents. If you wanted privacy with your wife and you were married, you were constantly – we were sharing a two-room apartment. If you wanted to make love to your wife, there was no place to do it." He said, "If I had a Days Inn, I could have gone for the day." Then taking families to orient them to a supermarket, an American supermarket.

DP: Oh, I remember seeing with Gilbo. I took him right after he arrived. You know, Gene, did you interview him, Gene Gilbo?

TSS: No, but we have heard of him.

DP: Okay, so I took them – they're very bright, well educated. He's a Professor of Mathematics at Leningrad University.

FP: She was a librarian, I think.

DP: [He] and his wife came to visit us. This is a great story. We have a home in the Berkshires, our summer home in the Berkshires, where Tanglewood is.

FP: You know what the Berkshires is?

TSS: I've never been there. Just know that it's somewhere here.

GW: It's west.

TSS: Somewhere west.

FP: Are you going to be here through the summer this year?



TSS: I don't know.

DP: It's unbelievable.

FP: Where's your husband? Here?

TSS: Yes.

FP: You live in Waltham?

TSS: Yes.

DP: There are very few places in the world like Tanglewood. It's the greatest music center in the summer especially.

TSS: I heard that.

DP: Like Salzburg.

FP: If you like music –

DP: If you like classical music.

TSS: Salzburg, Austria. My husband loves music.

FP: The Soviet Jews love it.

DP: It's unbelievable. On Sunday, people come, and there's a shed. You sit in the shed, but for less money, you can sit on the lawn and picnic. People come and picnic with beyond big – I mean, it is like a bar mitzvah or a wedding, over the top. Every type of food, champagne, desserts, but with napkins, and it's unbelievable. I'm there with Gene and his wife. What's his wife's name again? Anyway, we're there, we're walking around, and on the lawn, there may be three, four thousand people. Okay?



FP: Elaborate picnics.

DP: Oh, you cannot imagine it. You cannot imagine it.

TSS: Like a rock show?

DP: What?

TSS: A rock concert.

DP: Well, it's a very elegant rock concert. Gene says to me, "Donald, is this a national holiday? How often does this come?" I said, "Gene, this happens every Sunday."

FP: Every Sunday of the summer.

DP: He said, "Really?" I said, "Every Sunday." "For how long?" I said, "It's been going on ever since I moved here. It's one of those – this is what happens." He could not conceive so much food in one place. He said, "We don't have anything like this in the Soviet Union. Nothing." They were overwhelmed when they came by the fact they had choice and so much stuff.

FP: We'd set up apartments. I mean, literally, we'd get an apartment. I'd be on the phone, calling everybody in the realty business that I knew. We were always networking. It was community organizing that got made famous by Barack Obama.

DP: Well, he didn't [inaudible] made it famous.

FP: We were very, very lucky. Rabbi Mehlman was a very unusual rabbi, and he had enormous people skills. He had a wife who was his real partner. Their home was like an extension of the sanctuary. When she died, we did a cookbook in her honor – all her friends – because her table became an extension of our community. Because of that, because of this partnership of a husband and wife, who took their Judaism [and], in a



way, expanded it beyond the walls of the synagogue, we all were part of a community.

We were like six or seven families that were really very intimate friends and also invested in creating a better world for all these families.

DP: And we did.

FP: So we bought all their linens, and we set up their apartments, and we helped them get jobs.

DP: It's incredible. Gilbo, for example –

FP: For the Gilbos, what we did was every year for the last twenty-five years –

DP: We networked with them. We call the various CEOs. We said, “Wait a minute.”

FP: Don's cousin is a physicist at Northeastern. We had a whole setup in the basement of Temple Israel where we had job counseling and training, and it was a very good vocational service.

DP: So, Gilbo got a job with (Unisys?), and then, what he had done as a part-time job for Aeroflot before they kicked them out because he went into refusal – you lose your job and your life. He basically planned the landing patterns for Aeroflot in Moscow. Then, he comes here. He gets a job in (Unisys?). (Unisys?) then has a possibility of figuring out some landing patterns. They've never done this, and Gene said, “I did this for Aeroflot.” Now, what Gene has ultimately done is he's done the landing patterns for most of the East Coast airports and West Coast, and he has been lent out by (Unisys?), so he does the boats that go through the Panama Canal, so that you can calculate –

FP: Present. They're not in perfect shape.

TSS: No, thank you.



FP: We did it in memory of Mrs. Mehlman, so you'll get a sense of what this community –

DP: You can calculate so that boats that are coming in from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

FP: She was a big part of what we did on Soviet Jewry.

DP: Can efficiently go through the Panama Canal. He did that. He spent the whole year. He's been a real asset for the world. But not only him.

GW: What was the hardest thing about integrating into the United States for the Soviet Jews that were part of the Temple Israel community?

FP: I think that from what I could discern, for the older people who came with a skillset like medicine, they had to take lesser jobs. The kind of diminution.

FP: The diminution of their professional ability, to have to convert [inaudible]. That was very hard. And then all the things that were very hard for Soviet Jews [inaudible].

TSS: Yes. Wow.

[END OF INTERVIEW]