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Alexander M. Vinokurov oral history interview by Tori Chambers Lockler, January 19, 2010

Alexander M. Vinokurov (Interviewee)

Tori Chambers Lockler (Interviewer)

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Tori Chambers Lockler: Today is January 19, 2010. We are here with Alexander M. Vinokurov. His name at birth was Arnold Markovich Gleyzerman. My name, as the interviewer, is Tori Chambers Lockler, and we are holding the interview in Tampa, Florida, in the United States. The language of the interview is English, and our videographer is Jane Duncan.

Okay. So, if you would start by telling us your name now.

Alexander M. Vinokurov: My name is Alexander Vinokurov.

TL: Okay. And could you spell that for us?

AV: It's A-l-e-x-a-n-d-e-r, and Vinokurov is V-i-n-o-k-u-r-o-v.

TL: Okay. And that was not your name at birth?

AV: No. My name at birth was Gleyzerman Arnold Markovich, and I changed this when I was probably forty in order to make for my daughter is leaving, because of discrimination in Russia. And this is last name of my mother.

TL: Okay. And can you spell Gleyzerman for us?

AV: It's G-l-e-y-z-e-r-m-a-n.

TL: Okay. Thank you. Can you tell us when you were born?

AV: I was born in December 14, 1934, in city of Odessa. It was Soviet Union; now it's Ukraine.

TL: Okay. And can you spell Odessa for us?

AV: It's O-d-e-s-s-a.

TL: Thank you. And can you tell us your mother's name?

AV: My mother's name is Maria Markovna Vinokurova.

TL: Okay. And your father's name?

AV: He was Mark Sapsaievich Gleyzerman.

TL: Okay. Thank you. And do you have any siblings?

AV: No.

TL: Okay. Can you tell us your earliest memory before the war began?

AV: You know, my father died when I was like almost three years old and my mother had to go start working, make a living. So, first she put me in the daycare, but I was very unhappy. I was crying, was ill sometimes. So, after all the decision, my mother, before coming to work, she would take me by city transportation, called tram or streetcar, to my grandparents from my mother's side—from my father's side. And I spent all day, until I got probably five, or five and a half; they then put me to kindergarten, when I got older.

TL: Okay.

AV: This was year of (inaudible) death.

TL: Okay. Can you tell us what your mother did at that time for a living?

AV: My mother worked as a clerk for a power company. She received a very small salary, so my relatives from Moscow were sending money to help us to survive.

TL: And what—were you still living in Odessa at this time?

AV: Yeah.

TL: Yes.

AV: We lived in Odessa until the war started.

TL: Okay. So, you said that until you were around five, you stayed with your grandparents during the day.

AV: Yeah.

TL: Do you remember their names?

AV: My grandfather, his name was Shabson, and my grandmother was named Chaya, I think. I called her Grandma. And also, it was aunt living there; her name was Hannah. And they lived quite a small room, so I didn't have too much space to play with. I remember that my grandfather used to sleep under the table, because it was no place there. My grandma slept on the bed with her daughter, Grandfather slept under table, and I sometimes, if I stayed, slept between Grandma and my aunt.

TL: And what happened in the evenings, once your mother picked you up? Do you have any memories of that?

AV: She used to take me home to feed me. Sometimes my grandparents complained about my bad behavior, usually because at first, I was a little bit bored staying in there in this room, so I occasionally moved not very careful and I used to break something. Or they could—you know, the clock on the wall, which you need to pull in order to make its workings, so I pulled, pulled, finally ended up broken. So, my mom used to say to me, “Behave better,” or something like that. She read books for me, and sometimes she played with me. This was on weekends, she used to take me to see movies or walk in the park. This was life there.

TL: And what do you remember about school, about starting kindergarten?

AV: I played there with the kids. And I remember that they sometimes, to prepare—you know, like performance, like for holidays. And I remember that they need to say the poetry and I had repetition, repetition; then I got sick and I stayed home, and I didn’t have to chant. But this poetry, for now, it’s funny to recall. It was “‘Two by two is four.’ ‘Oh, it’s true! How you know this? You are so smart!’ ‘No, I am not so smart. It’s our Comrade Lenin told me this.’” And usually in a lot of places, like kindergarten, we have portraits of Lenin and Stalin hanging on the wall, so the poetry was at this portrait of Lenin. “Help me to figure out how much it will be, two by two.” This was such a poem. We played, and this kindergarten was located in—it was in the yard of a German church, Lutheran church, but it was closed, and part of the building attaching to the church was used for kindergarten. So, I remember climbing on the fence looking inside of the—what is inside of this temple. This was memory.

TL: Okay. Thank you. And you said that right before you started kindergarten, you were staying with the grandparents from your father’s side.

AV: Yeah.

TL: What about your mother’s parents? Do you remember them?

AV: My grandfather from my mother’s side, he died when my mother was born. He fell from the horse and killed him. My grandmother died approximately—maybe half a year after my father died. She had cancer. So, I didn’t have any more grandparents from her side.

TL: Okay, okay. Thank you. Okay, so, moving from kindergarten, what was, in this time frame, being at home? What was the city like that you lived in? Do you remember experiences of anti-Semitism there or—?

AV: You know, in that time, I was too small to know anything about anti-Semitism. I know only I saw my grandfather was praying at home, covering himself with tallis and kippah and having, you know, like tefillin. And I assume that he couldn't go. I don't know anything about synagogue in that time. I don't—I never heard that he went somewhere. In that time, I was too small to know anything about anti-Semitism, and I don't remember if somebody in that time was saying, like, the word *zhyd*; it means "kike." At that time, I don't remember. Usually I didn't hear anything, because my appearance was not like traditional imagination of Jewish guy. I looked like boys around me. So, at this time, I don't know about this thing.

But one of my friends, he stayed during this, when Odessa was occupied. He was a little bit older than me, and somebody was hiding him. I think they were hiding in a village. And when one day he went, visited Odessa, and he was passing where he lived, a girl from his house where he lived—the building—saw him and began to yell, "Here's a *zhyd* coming! Catch him!" So, it existed; but at that time, if I heard, I didn't pay attention.

TL: Okay. And you talked some about your grandfather. You remember your grandfather praying at home. Would you have considered your family, looking back, religious?

AV: Grandparents for sure. With my mom, because I was too small, I don't remember she saying that she's—we never talk about this, about religion, with my mom. But I remember that sometimes we were invited to our relatives, and they celebrated Passover or another Jewish holiday that we participated. But no, I was living in Russia. It was so removed, because all synagogues were closed. Later, after war, I know that there was one synagogue. It was located somewhere in the suburbs, near the industrial district. But I brought up being not religious.

TL: Okay. All right.

AV: Now, because I survived, and that I was brought to United States, I never think about this because we lived comparatively—life, I mean, on the Russian standard, a good life: apartment for ourself, Nelly and I worked, we had a daughter. So, we didn't know how Americans lived, so we thought that we're okay. And really, it's just chance. God brought us here.

TL: Okay. Thank you. And what's your earliest memory of the war beginning?

AV: You know what, it's interesting like this. The date was Sunday, June 22, and my mother took me to the park; it called Sobornaya Ploshad. And all of a sudden, I saw a crowd of people listening to a radio that was located on a post, and people were around and they heard that people were saying, "War started. Now it will be a lot of bloodshed." And I saw some airplanes flying in the sky, but I don't remember it was Soviet airplane or the Germans. But was no bombing on that day. And then, couple days or maybe next day, the bombing came.

So, this was now we were some days, then I think—I don't remember kindergarten was closed, but I stayed with my grandparents. And I remember playing in the yard, and all of a sudden the siren sound and we run to the basement, and I saw—began to see—destroyed buildings. When it's bombing inside, you can see above the roof. Something was burning; it was flames. That's how I remember it started. And I heard, you know, some like gunners were located on the roof of the buildings. And then my aunt's house they found in the frame of the window. I don't know it was bullet or it was a piece of bomb or something like this, but the frame got broken.

And then when Germans came, Romanians came, closed our city. The city was surrounded. They occupied the village or small town where was water resources for Odessa, and the water problems began. I remember that I don't know where my family got water, from well or something, and my grandma, in order to make this water safe, I think she add some vinegar or something like this, so the water tasted terrible.

TL: Okay. And so, once the war had started, you have got, you said, your grandmother and your grandfather from your father's side, your aunt, and your mother and yourself are all living in Odessa. Okay, can you tell us what happened next?

AV: Next what happened is this: Because my mother was working, what happened, the authorities first evacuated companies and people who worked. And my mother got like—it was called not ticket, but some kind of document—for her and me to leave. And my mother didn't want to leave, leaving grandparents and aunt. So, we decided—she decided that she will stay. And by the way, since these people were not believing very well in Russian newspaper, what is published there, so we didn't know—I think we didn't know about German atrocities, or were very skeptical about what was written. And my grandfather, he stayed in the place where occupied by Germans during World War I. So, my mother decided to stay.

My grandparents, they had a neighbor; he was a driver for one top official. And this neighbor brought the permission, which was for my grandparents, my aunt, my mother, for me. So, we left Odessa in—it was, I think, August of 1941. So, we boarded a ship called *Pioneer*. I think this ship was not a passenger ship, because on the deck it carried some damaged planes, and passengers were located on the deck under the wings of the airplanes. Some were on this—just an opening there.

And what happened before my mother told me that I can take a couple toys with me, and I put every toy. I wrapped them in my handkerchief. And when we were boarding, it was bombing began, so we began moving back and forth until they allowed us to board. And during this commotion, my grandma, my aunt has a problem with her hearing. And when we boarded, we didn't see our aunt, and we began to look. My grandmother said, "I won't go without her. She may be left outside." But finally, they found her, and we located on the deck. Then, I began—and what happened, this handkerchief became—what it's called, open?—and I lost during this boarding. I lost all my toys. This was last toys in my life. Then I began—I don't know what I was looking for, toys? I ran in this ship, on the deck somewhere, and my mother lost me and she began to run, looking for me. And one officer helped her, and the officer offered to my mom to settle in his—what it's called, the room? Cabin?

TL: Cabin. Mm-hmm.

AV: So, my mother took all our family, and this officer went to share a cabin with another officer. The officer was so nice; he gave my mother address of his parents—they lived somewhere near Moscow—and he asked her, "Write to them and we'll keep in touch." My mother a little bit later lost this paper that it was on. So, we traveled on this ship. I think it's like night and day. We got bombed couple times, but we were lucky. Ship went through, and the ship came to city of Sevastopol, in Crimea.

TL: And could you spell that for me?

AV: Sevastopol is S-e-v-a-s-t-o-p-o-l.

TL: Okay. Thank you.

AV: They placed us in—I think it was a school, and we slept on the floor. Then, I don't remember how we get, but we get to the city of Kerch. From city of Kerch, river transfer on the barge to—it was Krasnodar Region. And I remember at the time, when we boarded the barge, my mom and some people left to get some bread. And at that time,

bombing started, and the barge, for some reason, moved from the beach. I began crying that I don't have father, now I lost mother, and I was crying terribly. Then bombing stopped, the barge moved back, and my mother boarded the barge.

So, we came to the Krasnodar Region, and we were sent to a collective farm. We stayed with one family of the farmers, and my mother worked in the field collecting harvest, or I don't know what she did. And we stayed there for a while, then bombing began and we heard guns firing, so we decided we needed to leave. One day, horse carriages, cart, we moved to Krasnodar in order to go farther, and when we were travelling all this way to Krasnodar, the bombing began. And I don't know what—a piece of shrapnel or pieces of something hit me, here and in my legs. So, my mother put something to hold my bleeding, and then some kind of—when we reached Krasnodar, in some hospital they put stitches here and then here and that was—

So, in Krasnodar we boarded a train, and we were travelling. I don't remember exactly what it was, city—I think Kuybyshev, but maybe Saratov. It was located on Volga River. So, there—and I don't remember what; sometimes we changed passenger train for—what it's called, cattle?

TL: Cattle cars?

AV: Cattle cars. And I remember that sometimes we didn't have bread, and I was crying, was very hungry. My grandmother had some pieces of sugar, so they gave me. I was sucking and I was crying. I was sleeping on the floor. It was terrible thing. And again, every time I was afraid when train was stopping; my mother used to go and find some food—and I forgot to say this. My grandfather decided to stay in Odessa and keep looking for my mother's room, my grandparents' room, and he was killed by Germans. What I heard, last information that some neighbors, Russian neighbors who survived, told us that they saw him in a group of Jews, and this was last trace of him.

So, we were changing the train in Kuybyshev, and I remember that at a terminal, they have connection between the rails in these tunnels. And I remember a crowd of people walking, and I remember falling and some couple people stepped on me, but I survived. So, we boarded next train, and we came to Uzbekistan, city of Tashkent in this way. When we were in Kuybyshev, it was October, and I heard the information that Odessa got occupied by Romanians. So, we came to Tashkent, and we were unloaded from the train. We stayed in the park near terminal, sleeping on the grass under the trees. I got sick with measles, and we were boarded on—we were loaded on this—emergen—what it's called?

TL: Ambulance?

AV: Ambulance, with six kids. And only me and one girl survived. The rest died, and they had measles.

TL: And what did they die from, illness?

AV: Illness, probably illness. My mother stayed, and I don't know where she was living. She used to sell something of our belongings in order to bring me something to eat. I don't remember how many days I spent in the hospital. So when I was discharged, my mother and me boarded train. My grandma and my aunt, they left for city of Namangan.

So, we travelled to Namangan, and I remember it was very terrible conditions. I had diarrhea, the restroom was locked, and I was dirty. I am sorry for such details. So, when I came to the city of Namangan, I was in my mother's underpants. And what happened, this train where we were was so crowded people were sleeping under these beds and I remember my mother was very tired. She took off her shoes and they disappeared: somebody had stolen them. So, my mother was lucky that she had some—what it's called?—very old shoes she put on.

My grandma and my aunt met us in terminal, and we walked quite a long way to this house where they occupied now. This house was shared by—three more pairs lived. They slept on this—what it's called?—doors, what it's called, pieces of doors, and they had pieces of bricks underneath in order to be above the ground. But my grandma and my aunt, they slept on the bags just on the floor, on the store was from clay—white coal. So, we got additional bags, and my mom and me, we slept there.

And then, after a while, short while, my aunt got sick with typhus, and she was taken to the hospital. Then my grandmother got sick, and she died laying on the floor, and I was sleeping and I was hearing that she was saying, "Mola"—my father's nickname—"I am coming to you." And it was night, and still this day, I can hear her voice. She died. And later, my mother got sick, and she was taken to the hospital by ambulance. Ambulance in this town looked—it was cart driven by donkey. So, I stayed with neighbors, who stayed, and they took care of me, and then my aunt got discharged. They took care of me until this emergency carriage came to pick me up. And you know, it was slow process, because we didn't have telephone there. So, my aunt had to walk long way to the hospital to say, "My nephew got sick." So, this carriage came, put me on the carriage, and took me to the hospital. But already, I think [I was] past this worst in this sickness.

So, when I was in the hospital, maybe one or two days later, I felt good and I began to walk. And, if I remember correctly, in this hospital they had a couple like roommates, and one of them died, quite a young man. So, I began to walk, and I saw the nurse who took my mother to the hospital. And I asked, “Where is my mom?” and she said, “She’s supposed to be in—she is in this hospital.” So, I began to walk around this building, yelling, “Mom, Mom!” Finally, one nurse looked and said, “What are you yelling?” and I said, “I’m looking for my mom.” So, she asked my mom’s last name, and she checked with office there, and they told her where my mom is, and they came. And my mom, she had some—it affected her brain, and I was shaven completely. I ran to her, and she said, “Who is this Uzbek boy?” Uzbeks is nationality. And I began to cry, “Mom, Mom,” and she finally recognized me. So, we got united, then we got discharged.

My mom began to work as a worker for a plant where they made cotton. She would—what was my day’s schedule: I went to the morning—when I woke up, I went to the morning to this plant where my mom worked—it was quite a long way—and she will give me my portion of bread. It was 400 grams, but what was—bread was quite soggy, so it was heavy. And also, in this store where bread was given by the card—you know, we had cards, so we can get only like 400 grams. When they were weighing, their scales were set up that usually it was less than 400. So, I was walking back and I was biting for little by little. I think, “I will keep this bread, stretch throughout the day.” But it didn’t give a sufficient meal, so then I ate my bread, and coming home empty and waiting until my mom come and prepare something. And I remember sometimes—and what we were trying to eat, what else can—I know that some boys that I was friends one time killed there, bird from this—what it’s called? You know, we had (inaudible) attached; it was torn (inaudible) and we cooked it.

TL: Coryza?

AV: Yeah. And also, we ate—it was food for cows. I don’t know; it’s called oil-cake, something like this. It made, I don’t know what from, but we tried to eat. And I remember one time we were so hungry. My mom had starch. She prepared some, she cooked, and then she tried; we couldn’t eat it, but we were attempting to eat. This was—in summer, it was a little bit easier, because we had some—we can get some more food from the trees. I remember sometimes climbing on this fence. Our neighbor, Uzbek neighbor, he was drying apricots, and I had stolen some. So, I was thief, and came eating this thing. I also, during this time sleeping on the floor, I got pneumonia, and when I recovered from the pneumonia I had—what it’s called? I kept coughing and coughing.

TL: Malaria? No, bronchitis?

AV: No, not bronchitis. But it was coughing.

TL: Tuberculosis?

AV: No, coughing like—it was some kind of a children disease.

Jane Duncan: Whooping cough.

AV: Whooping cough, yeah, whooping cough. And after that, I was so weak that I remember before I got sick, I was wrestling with guy and usually I was winner. After all this, my adventure, he won. This is how we lived. And I remember one thing. It was my mother prepared something for in the morning, to eat it at night, and I was so hungry I ate everything. And then our roommates began to say, “How you didn’t leave anything for your mother? You’re supposed to share.” So, it was a good lesson for me. After that, despite how hungry I was, if something I ate, I left for my mother.

TL: Can I—for just a moment—

AV: Sorry.

TL: Sure.

AV: And there, in this style of living in Namangan, this is first we began to hear. People were yelling, “*Zhyd!* Kike!” This I began to hear. This was the start.

TL: Okay. Um, I just want to make sure now that I have the timeline, and then I’d like to take you back and go from Namangan, if that’s okay. When you left Odessa, you said that you went by train to Sevastopol.

AV: No, no, by ship.

TL: By ship, excuse me. By ship. And then you went from Sevastopol to Kerch?

AV: Yeah.

TL: Can you spell Kerch for us?

AV: It's K-e-r-c-h.

TL: And can you tell me—you said you then moved to the Krasnodar Region?

AV: Yeah.

TL: And can you spell that?

AV: It's K-r-a-s-n-o-d-a-r.

TL: Okay. And how long—do you remember how long you were in each of those places, up to there?

AV: I don't remember. The only thing I can say is this: that we left in August. And Odessa, I think, was occupied in October.

TL: Okay.

AV: And at that time, we were in Kuybyshev.

TL: Okay. Okay. Okay. So, then you went, you said, from Krasnodar—that's when you started settling in the villages, in the Krasnodor [*sic*] Region?

AV: Krasnodar.

TL: Krasnodar. Okay, thank you. And what was the name of the village that you had settled in?

AV: Timoshovka. Timoshovka.

TL: Okay. Can you spell that for us?

AV: T-i-m-o-s-h-o-v-k-a.

TL: Okay. Thank you. And then, we have you travelling then to—is it Saratov?

AV: I don't remember exactly. It was Saratov or Kuybyshev.

TL: Or—okay. Okay. Can you spell that for us?

AV: Okay. Saratov is S-a-r-a-t-o-v.

TL: Okay. Thank you.

AV: It's probably Kuybyshev more, but I'm not sure.

TL: Okay. And then you moved to Uzbekistan, and there you were—you were living in Tashkent?

AV: City of Namangan. Ah, yeah, we first went in Tashkent. We stayed for—I cannot tell you how long we stayed there, probably two or three weeks.

TL: Okay, but not long enough to be in school or to—

AV: No. No, no.

TL: Okay. Okay. Okay. And then—so, really, your illnesses started shortly before you got to Namangan. When you were in Tashkent is when you—

AV: Yeah, I had measles.

TL: —got the measles.

AV: The measles. The rest was in Namangan.

TL: Okay. And was the illness, would you say, part of living conditions, of where you were?

AV: Yeah, living conditions.

TL: Okay. Because you said that you've had the measles, and typhus, and pneumonia, whooping cough.

AV: Yeah.

TL: So, much of that portion of your childhood you spent in illness.

AV: Yeah. You know, it was during—I think during the one year I had these diseases, because—no, after I got sick—I don't remember which order after I got sick with first, with pneumonia. And I began for short time attending this kindergarten. They gave me a bed that we can take—we took to this house where we lived—and I slept on the bed. And later on, my mom got the same bed from this—from the door, panel of the door, and bricks. But for a while, we slept on the floor. And you see it like water we drank: it was in the pan where people were washing their legs or whatever, and it was the same pan where we got water to drink.

TL: Okay. Okay, thank you. Okay. Okay, so during this time, then, you said you were living in Namangan. And you started to tell us that that was when you first really remember experiencing anti-Semitism. Can you tell us what you remember about that?

AV: I remember even when we were, let's say, in this—in the market, and I could hear. You see, I didn't have a traditional appearance of a Jew, anti-Semites will imagine like. So, it was not related to me, but I heard that some people were yelling or something. They will say, "Oh, you are dirty Jew!" or something like this. But being there, being a boy, I didn't hear that it was related to me. By the way, when I was—I very rarely was arguing with somebody, but usually I didn't hear straight addressed to me. But as I'll tell you later, I felt, being Jewish, there was attitude to me by some bosses, authorities.

TL: Okay. And during this time, what was your mother doing? She was working in the cotton?

AV: Yeah. They were making bags from cotton.

TL: Okay. All right. And you still have with you—your grandmother passed away?

AV: Yeah.

TL: And your aunt was still with you.

AV: My aunt lived with us for a short time; then we found that my other aunt, with her daughter, lived in a village—in Uzbek, it's called *kishlak*—not far from Namangan. So, our aunt left us and went with them, so I lived only with my grandmother.

TL: With your mother.

AV: I mean, my mother.

TL: Okay. And what was—what do you remember of the location you lived in?

AV: You know what, this was—we lived—it's called, like, Old City. It was buildings made from clay. No running water. Restroom was outside. And in this yard was couple families lived in different houses, but we shared with couple—was one pair, husband and wife, then it was one woman with her daughter and one woman with son. Then, because they had husbands serving in the army, they moved to better houses, and we stayed for a while there. Then this couple, the husband, he got in jail; he tried for an evening to speculate; he was caught and put in jail, and this woman lived with us. Then she found a little bit better house, and we moved.

But this house where we lived, it was—I remember once was very rainy weather, and this water was coming on us. So, we were lucky that one Uzbek family, they offered us to stay with them, and we stayed with—and I was, you know, completely wet. I don't remember what my mother put on me. And we stayed with Uzbek family for couple days, and it's interesting that they were—interesting way of sleeping. They had place

called *sandali*; it's like a table. It was not wood, but another type. So, it was like fire under the table, and it was covered with blanket, so we had legs there, and covered, and sleeping around this table. It was a circle shape. And we all were sleeping, keeping our legs near this heater, and sleeping around. No electricity, nothing like this. And this family, they supported us these couple days we had with them there, traditional food, *plov*, by using hand.

TL: Okay. Well, what I think we'll do now is we'll take a short break and then come back and start talking about the end of the war.

AV: Okay, thank you.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

TL: This is tape two, and we are here with Mr. Alexander M. Vinokurnov—Vinokurov.

AV: There you go.

TL: Very good. (laughs) Okay, thank you. At the end of our last tape, we were talking about when you were living Namangan with your mother; that your aunt had moved; and you were talking to us about the living conditions there, what you were eating, where you slept, the living quarters also. Can you tell us what you remember about the end of the war, how old you were at that time, and then, some of those memories?

AV: Okay. We moved and we lived now in a little bit better house. It was one woman; she lived with us in the previous house. I went to school, and I had—at that time, I had begun to get sick with malaria. What else I want to say is this: that I am—first of all, I learn to read by myself. I was a very good student, so I was tutoring one from my classes. And this family was in a little bit better shape; they got something, they had food, so they gave me sometimes something to eat. I remember that, that I don't have—in that time, we didn't have any freezers or something. So, I remember once they gave me soup, and the soup was a little bit—you know, it wasn't—

TL: Sour?

AV: Yeah. And I ate it, and later on I got all this, what follow with this, diarrhea. But another thing I remember that it was—in Uzbekistan, it's quite warm. And I was—had attack of malaria when I was on the way from school. I got such an attack of this that

they gave me warm, very warm, jacket. And so, in this hot weather, I was in the jacket and I still was cold. Okay, now coming—this was war coming to the end, and I remember one night I was sleeping. All of a sudden, I heard a voice and voices, and we went outside. We were scared, because sometimes—a couple times we heard the (inaudible). So, we went outside, and our neighbors, they have a radio. They told me, “War is over.” And so, this was the end of the war. We continued living. Nothing changed with food or something; everything was the same. And I remember that soldiers began to come. One day, I had a fantasy: maybe my father was at war, maybe one of the soldiers. I went to terminal to see over the gate.

Then, in 1946, my mother decided to go back, and we went by train. We stopped in Moscow, where most of my mother’s relatives lived. And they tried to do something that my mother will stay in Moscow; in this case, her life will be easier. But in Russia at that time, you need to do—it’s called *propiska*. They couldn’t achieve this, so my mother had to leave. And my relatives said, “Leave your son here, and when you got settled, then you can come and take him with you.” So, I stayed with my relatives, and I went to school, and I spent year and a half living with my relatives until my mom came. And you know what, I’m very grateful to my relatives, but I wasn’t happy living there. I feel sometimes jealous or something. I used to write my mom, “Mom, take me.”

TL: And where was she? She had gone to?

AV: Odessa.

TL: So, she went back to Odessa?

AV: Yeah.

TL: Okay.

AV: In Odessa, her room was already occupied by somebody else. So, my mother applied to the court, said that she has her own room, and the judge said, “Nobody called you. You don’t have an official invitation, so you don’t have right in this room.” So, this is so much for right of return.

TL: And remind us: you said that your grandfather had stayed in Odessa to watch your mother’s room and their room. Can you remind us what happened to him while he was in Odessa?

AV: He was killed by—the Germans called all Jews to get together, and these Jews were killed. And you know what is interesting? We lived—years, years later, we bought apartment in New District in Odessa, and one of the buildings not far from us had the table. “In this area”—it was placed on the wall. “In this area (inaudible) were killed”—I don’t remember how many; 10,000 or 20,000, I don’t remember—“Soviet citizens.” They all were Jewish, but the Russian—I mean, the government didn’t want to mention anything about. And I remember that some of the Jews were put in one big house, and this house was—it was storage of something. This house was burned. So, in one of these places, my grandfather was killed.

TL: Okay. Thank you.

AV: So, my mother didn’t—so the judge said that you don’t have right, because nobody called you. So this was, like I said, right of return, and this is only—mostly was Jews affected, because Jews were coming and they were not letting them to live there. And I don’t know any Russian or Ukrainian boys that I was with then. They were not living—they lived in the same condition. My mother had to rent part of the room, because she didn’t have money for to rent it. So, we began to live—my mom. I began to live with my mom. One woman with her daughter, they rented us part of this, and it’s good that our relatives were sending us some money to support us.

TL: The relatives from Moscow?

AV: Yeah, relative from Moscow: my mother’s sister.

TL: So—I’m sorry. You were with them about a year and a half?

AV: Yeah.

TL: And then your mother called for you?

AV: Yeah, my mother came and took me to Odessa.

TL: Okay.

AV: So, this is what I began to go to school. My mother worked, and we lived, and we rented this one apartment, another apartment. It's for four years. Then my mother got a room; it was ten feet by ten feet, and we shared a kitchen and bathroom with another family. In order not to, you know—to relieve our relatives, I went to technical school after seventh grade. I went to technical school, then I got some—what's called stipend—and we wrote our relatives to not send us any more money, because I am now getting. And I was a straight A student. So, when I graduated from this technical school, called Technical, I had paperwork saying that I have right now to enter university, or polytechnical institute, without any tests.

TL: Because of your grades?

AV: Yeah. In Russia, was law: if you graduate from high school and have medal, golden or silver medal—silver medal if you have one B, like my wife graduated with silver medal; again, it was some kind of anti-Semitism. So, I came to this polytechnic institute, brought my paperwork, and they are saying, “We have already closed for good student field.” They mentioned that they are not accepting good students anymore; now, only average. So, I was lost, you know, and I couldn't go to pass the test because for two years, I only studied technical subject. So, I didn't have time to be prepared for test. But even if I was taking the test, we were told that, first of all, they are trying to having the test. They can put—let's say that you're a Russian test. Somebody will put some extra commas or do something in order to put the bad mark, or ask unanswerable questions.

So, now I began to look for a job, and I couldn't find job because—there was a lot of advertisement everywhere saying that they needed technician, but when I come, they will say, “You know what? You don't have experience.” With such a low money, they still saying that you need experience. So, with help of some of my mother's co-workers, I got low-level job as a worker. And I entered this—what's called night university. There, it was easier to get.

So, I began to work and studied at night, and finally gradually became a foreman, worked as a foreman. When I graduated, they had opened a new design bureau, very far from the center. And you know, in Odessa, like in many cities of Soviet Union, the transportation was not very good. The streetcars were usually very crowded and everything. So, Russian—so, in this design bureau, they didn't have choices, like accept managers. So I began to work as a designer there, and I got couple promotions. I became a leading engineer. And what is interesting, we had once commission—I mean, inspection—came, and they checked the work of design bureau. And they wrote that our bureau, design bureau, is soiled: too many dirt there, too many Jews.

TL: Oh!

AV: So, they are trying not to hold. Like, it happens that I have—my team had four or five Russian and Ukrainians, and I was in charge of them, and I was only Jewish guy. So, one year, all of them got promotion, more money, except me. Even my team was like team of communist labor. In good—you know, I had—my designs was good, but everybody had some kind of mistakes. I never had complaint from customers that something was made wrong.

And another interesting thing of anti-Semitism was demonstrated: Our president called one of the vice-presidents, said, “Why we have some kind of complicated project made by more experienced and good designer?” And he said, “And because we had many Jews in this design bureau, many Jewish designers were designing this complicated new technique.” And the boss said, the president said, “Why only Jews doing this? Why you didn’t give Russian this project?” So, from our department, they had one Russian leading engineer. He was a nice guy, but he was quite mediocre designer. They gave him job. So, what they did, they sent me and couple other leading engineers to be part of his team. So, we designed for him without supervision, and then, when he was sent to have approval in Moscow from company where we were designing, they didn’t approve it because he couldn’t prove. So next time, when he went, he had another guy helping him to explain how things are working. This is what kind of thing—what happened that we had.

And the same—let’s say that some of these people in Russia were, like, working, were needing room to live, and you can get from government this apartment and you are paying some kind of rent. With Nelly, had only to buy by ourselves: government didn’t give us. And you know what—and this the reason that my daughter began to go to school, and I want to say when I applied to university after I finished my technical school, as soon as the commission were accepting students, they saw last name Gleyzerman, Jewish name. She sent me to their boss, and boss said me—and that’s why I changed my name, so that my daughter maybe will have better, easier life, because when I was looking for a job, as soon as I said my last name is Gleyzerman or they saw it, again, they will say, “No, we need experience,” or something else.

TL: And you said you were around fourteen or so when you changed your name?

AV: When I was forty.

TL: Oh, forty, when you changed your name.

AV: Yeah.

TL: Okay.

AV: It didn't give me anything. The people were even joking why I changed, and it's interesting that when I applied for to leave—I mean, when people began to get permission to leave, many Jews used this opportunity. You know what, we had friends, we had our house, our apartment, and we had—you know, decent living according to us; we're quite modest people. And I have interesting work, and Nelly worked as a designer. But we were afraid for our daughter, you know, because when I started work—and I was, like, mama's boy, and I came to such a rough environment and people were using bad words and everything. And I was, you know, very stressed. And I met one Jewish girl; she was telling that she wasn't accepted to the university. She worked for building business, doing some minor work. And what she went through, that was the reason for us that I thought, "Well, we'll leave." I was told by my president of our company—had meeting, and they told that, you know, this Vinokurov applied to leave. He said, "What, he now will change his name again?" Here is his joke. I was told this.

You know what I forgot to say, talking about Holocaust and all those stories that I gave? When I returned back to Odessa, in my childhood, I had a friend, a girl named Sofiya, or Sophie. She was a little girl. So, I decided that I will go to visit her, and I came to this building where she lived, and the neighbors told that she was killed. Little girl, with her parents and—with her mom; her father was fighting the war—with her mom and her grandparents. It's terrible.

So, going back, so when I applied for—when you want to leave Soviet Union, we need to bring this visa office some paperwork from companies that I worked for. And when I came to the company, they had a rule, because I wasn't first who left, that I need to get this paperwork only in exchange for my letter of resignation. So, as soon as I applied, they gave me this paper, and it's interesting that I didn't finish my project what I designed. So, next day, I climbed over the fence in our company, and I showed the people I worked with what to do here, what to do there, and everything.

It was like I was laid off, because we had first letter refused. They didn't allow us to leave. So, if I didn't lose my job, I may think, "Okay, I applied, nothing happened. I'll continue to live or do something." But I was lucky. I was fired, so I applied second time, and second time they allow us to leave. We were lucky to get here. And here, we are happy. My daughter graduated here, my grandson now looking to become a doctor. He graduated from—he has master degree. And my second granddaughter is now in Miami University.

TL: Can you tell me what year you were married?

AV: I was married in ninety-six [1996].

TL: Okay. And what year—when was your daughter born?

AV: Nineteen sixty-three.

TL: Okay. And how old was she before you left to come to the United States?

AV: She was sixteen.

TL: Sixteen, before you moved to the United States.

AV: Yeah.

TL: Okay. Okay. And then, tell us—tell us towards this last part of your story, coming to the United States. You feel that you've experienced anti-Semitism here?

AV: You know, nobody was saying to me—when I applied to work, I had interview, nobody asked me—they asked me only what I did, my design background and everything. And I remember that I worked at General Dynamics shipyard in Bath, Maine. Usually when I came, they asked me—and it also happened in New York State. They asked me, “What is your accent?” I said, “I came from Russia. That’s my accent.” And they say, “Oh, you are Russian?” I am saying, “No, I am Jewish.” And they will say, “Hey, Jewish is not nationality.” In Russia, Jewish is considered to be nationality. In passport, you had—it’s called fifth paragraph defect. Fifth line, it was nationality, and it was written Jewish.

You know what, I heard my grandparents talking Yiddish, so I knew a little bit of it. But I grew up in Russian culture, and I read a lot of Russian literature and everything. And if it’s not for discrimination, I even wouldn’t think who I am. But you know what I heard, like I was a friend for a long time with one Russian boy, for a very long time. And, all of

a sudden, he told me, “You know what? I would never marry a Jewish girl.” And from now on, our friendship began to go down.

TL: Thank you. What year, remind me, did you move to the United States? Your daughter was sixteen, but what year was it?

AV: Nineteen eighty.

TL: Nineteen eighty?

AV: April of 1980.

TL: Okay. And you started telling us earlier, when you were talking about your family and how religious your family was, you said you would tell us a little later how you approach religion now; that you felt that God brought you to the United States.

AV: Yeah, but for me, it’s difficult to be religious like people are here, because for many years, I grew up without religion. But, two things happened like miracles. One thing is that we were—my grandmother’s neighbor, I remember—Kessel; his last name was Kessel—brought this paperwork allowing us to leave. This was a miracle. And the second thing, taking into consideration me and my wife, we are not materialistic. Most of what we brought here from Russia is books. We didn’t want to have to come to America to earn big money; we came to America only to be—I mean, it’s miracle. God created miracles, and we came here. And if it’s another thing, we are probably digging somewhere in a garbage can looking for food, because companies were closed. I only worked as designer.

(voice in background asks a question)

TL: Um, okay.

AV: You know, in Russia, many views of anti-Semites is the Jews are—what they are trying to achieve is to make money. And our grandson, he graduate and, what is a tendency in our family, our grandson, he graduated from a master’s degree and now he wants to be a doctor researcher. And something mentioned to him about money, that he can earn something, and he said, “No, I graduated not in order to make money. I graduated in order to help people.” And what now can I say?

That here in America, I read a book by—you probably heard about him—Solzhenitsyn. He wrote about Stalin, how many people were in concentration camp and killed. And he wrote very anti-Semitic book about the Jews are sucking blood from the people, that Jews vulgarize culture of Russia and everything. And this book is widespread in Russia, and I read some critiques about this. They are not saying this. You know, it's not logical thing. This is worse attitude, where we are trying to escape. And here, as I am saying, I worked for four companies, and everywhere I didn't conceal the fact that I am Jewish. If somebody is saying Russian, Ukrainian, I am saying, "No, I am Jewish," even I don't speak Hebrew or something like this. And I am happy to be in America.

TL: And now, are there any final thoughts, or any final advice you would like to leave, based on your story, to your children, to your grandchildren?

AV: You know, I am trying—you see what is in our family. We used to help each other. My relatives help me, and then when we came here we tried and still were helping some relative who stayed in Russia. And I remember once I told—I talked to my youngest granddaughter, and I am—we're trying discussion on some ethical thing. And I read a story about how a homeless man found a purse and it had a hundred dollar bill and a card from one of the video stores, where it have name of the owner; it was a girl. And he brought—first he had some kind of "Maybe I'll use this"; then he decided, "No, I will return." He returned this money to the girl.

So, I told this story to my granddaughter and said, "Tell me, what happen to you if you lose your purse with hundred bucks and this homeless man will bring to you? Will you share with him or give him ten dollars or something?" She said, "I will give him whole money what he brought." And I ask why. "Because he need this money more than I am." This make me proud of what she said, and this is what was our style: to try to help people, and try to love them, help them, encourage them. This is what is our philosophy.

TL: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time and sharing your story with us.

AV: And thank you very much for your patience to hear everything.

TL: It was a wonderful story. Thanks.

End of interview