

Jeremy Morrison Transcript

Jeremy Morrison: Whatever you want. I found some pictures for you guys.

Tamar Shachaf Schneider: Thank you.

Aaron Hersh: Thank you.

JM: I got a lot of stuff there. But you don't want to record me talking about my thesis.

Gabriel Weinstein: No, no.

TSS: I'm recording everything, and we'll just ignore whatever we need to ignore.

JM: I'll talk about my thesis later. Don't worry about it.

GW: After this, we can stop the mic. All right, so this is Gabriel Weinstein. I'm here with
—

TSS: Tamar Shachaf Schneider.

AH: And Aaron Hersh.

GW: We are here with Rabbi Jeremy Morrison to record his story and his oral history as part of the Soviet Jewry Oral History Project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today's November 8, 2016, and we are at 77 Addington Road in Brookline, Massachusetts. Rabbi Morrison, do we have your permission to record this interview?

JM: You do. Were you guys trained in how to do this?

GW: We were.

JM: That's useful. [laughter]

GW: Yes, we were. All right. So I guess our first question –

JM: You can lift that up if you – if you want to bring this chair closer, you can –

AH: Yes, that's all. Thank you.

GW: Rabbi Mehlman told us that you were very involved at Temple Israel as a youth growing up. So when did you first start becoming involved with Temple Israel during your childhood?

JM: I started getting involved [at] five years old, roughly. I was born in Brookline [Massachusetts], lived in [Washington] DC for a couple of years. But basically, from the age of four forward – my kids are fifth or sixth-generation Temple Israel kids – my kids. So my mother was there, and so when they wanted to enroll their kids in a school – oh, here, I got plenty of pens.

GW: Thanks.

JM: – that was the place. Then [Rabbi] Bernard Mehlman, who you met; [Rabbi] Ronne Friedman, who you'll meet; they arrived – well, and [Cantor] Roy Einhorn. They arrived in 1978 at Temple Israel. Those two guys have been major players in my life. Then Roy Einhorn, who you're going to meet on Thursday, came when – I was one of his first bar mitzvah boys. So I've been there most of my life, save for when I went away for school and came back, and I came back here as a rabbi in 2001. That's that. But I don't know – I want to be efficient for you because also, I don't want you to have to listen to lots of stuff [laughter] to get to what you want. [laughter] So anyway, so I grew up there.

GW: Yeah, that was basically – just getting the background.

JM: Yeah, I guess, nutshell.

TSS: A background, nutshell.

GW: What was your role with NFTY [North American Federation for Temple Youth, now the Reform Jewish Youth Movement]? We know that you went to the USSR as a member of NFTY, so what was your role in NFTY?

JM: Yeah, so Temple Israel, one of I think its great strengths is it has a very – it's a very powerful, healthy, local youth group called RYFTI, Reform Youth [Federation] of Temple Israel. And in fact, because of its strength and what could happen there, I had nothing to do with NFTY, basically. Anything someone might get from NFTY, I could get at Temple Israel; we had retreats all the time and all that leadership stuff. And so, my brother – I have an older brother – he was the president of RYFTI; I became the president of RYFTI ultimately. But that was a major part of high school and was one of the central experiences of high school. Certainly somewhat responsible for what I'm doing now. But what happened was – I don't know what Bernard told you about this, vis-à-vis this trip. So I went in – it was '87, which puts me in the winter of my junior year of high school. And in my sophomore year, somehow, they came up with the idea of sending one high school student with them to the next – it was the second Temple Israel trip if I'm not mistaken.

AH: I believe it was, [inaudible] he told us.

JM: Is that right? Okay, yeah. So they went, Bernard and Ron, I think, went one year. Yeah. Then the next year, they planned to go back. And I don't know – you should ask Ronne this question if Bernard did not answer it if it matters to you, who came up with the idea of sending a high school kid on the trip. Because what then happened was they had an essay contest. Let's just say the trip cost – I'm making it up, but it might have been true – maybe the trip cost two thousand dollars, so they had two thousand dollars on hand to bring a kid. Two of us – I don't know exactly how many people applied to go on this trip. I was one of them. You know, it's not like twenty kids, maybe five, ten kids

applied for this. They read these essays, and two of us – they ended up wanting to take two of us, someone else – I mean, I don't want to add to your work – the other teenager works at City Year and lives in Boston and is a member of Temple Israel as well: Jessica Greenfield.

TSS: We've heard of her.

GW: I tried reaching out to her and was not able to get her.

JM: You didn't get her? All right. If you want it, let me know if – I understand where you are in your lives, so if you don't want one more interview, fine.

TSS: No, it's just that we don't have time.

JM: Yeah, well, that's it. So all right, anyway. So I remember clearly, though, in the spring of my sophomore year, Bernard and Ronne called my family in to meet with them and called Jessica's family in to meet with them. And what they resolved is they'd take both of us, and each family would pay half the cost. And so that's how the two of us ended up going. So. I mean – You tell me, ask questions that you care about.

GW: Was the Soviet Jewry movement something you guys talked about in RYFTI?

JM: Yeah, yeah.

GW: [inaudible] On a local level, what did RYFTI do for the Soviet Jewry movement?

JM: Sure. Well, in some ways, what really brought it to the forefront was the trip the year before at Temple Israel, and so that all of a sudden became some sort – this is going, trying to remember things, but RYFTI – we brought all this stuff with us, right? We brought tons of stuff. So all of a sudden, that became an activity for families to contribute to the stuff. More powerfully, I remember very clearly that we got involved with the resettlement of families here in Boston. I remember one day in particular where RYFTI

went out with Cantor Einhorn. This was actually – I think – oh, yeah, this was to set up – you spoke about the Gilbos. Have you met a Gilbo yet? You've heard about –?

TSS: No, we've heard of –

AH: No, we've spoken about the Gilbos.

JM: Yeah. So Joseph Gilbo is the brother of Eugene, and – I'm blanking on her name – Tanya, I think, Gilbo. Does that sound right? You guys –

GW: Yeah, it does sound right.

AH: Yeah, Tanya.

JM: So I remember very clearly, as an activity with RYFTI, Roy Einhorn rented a U-Haul truck. We went to pick up furniture from somebody's house [inaudible] place, who was donating furniture, and we brought that furniture to what would become Joseph Gilbo's apartment right on Chestnut Hill Avenue in Cleveland Circle.

TSS: I think Fran Putnoi told us about it.

JM: Yeah, that could be, for sure. So we were doing stuff like that. I don't know what the parallel is, but it became – at that juncture in Temple Israel, social justice, social action stuff became the prime issue. Soviet Jewry became the focal point, whereas healthcare was that seven years ago, or whatever. So if you were present – so, on one hand, Temple Israel was doing – RYFTI was engaged in some of these pieces that I've described, but if you went to the temple at all, if you were present at services, I mean, it was a talking point. It was part of the dialogue.

GW: And so you helped move Joseph Gilbo into his apartment? This was before you went on the trip?

JM: That's what I can't remember. That's what I can't remember. What I can remember is – because I think I met Joseph in the USSR. I know I met the other Gilbos in the USSR, so it might have even been after it. But I'm almost certain that RYFTI had a role collecting stuff.

GW: And this is when they went on their – when Rabbis –?

JM: First trip and second trip.

GW: First trip and second trip, okay.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

TSS: What was it like for you to go to the USSR with a group of adults and really going on this very meaningful mission?

JM: Oh, I thought it was pretty cool.

TSS: [laughter]

JM: First, it was nice that we were the only two kids doing it. I mean, that was kind of cool, right? I had no friends – I knew no one my age who was doing it. There was a degree of preparation that was pretty exciting. Like, what's his name? David [K.] Shipler. Is that the writer? There were a couple of books we read to prepare. We had meetings. I had never done anything like that before. What also was very – what made quite an impression was all the espionage element of it. I mean, very seriously, how are we going to get this stuff through customs? What is that experience going to be like? We flew to – I know we flew out through Switzerland. I think we flew in through Switzerland. But we decided from the time we got on our flight from Switzerland to Moscow [that] we would not do a lot of socializing together. So all of a sudden, we were sort of – I mean, there was this kind of level of “this is serious,” in a way that was different

from other trips. I was also the only person of our group that got stopped and searched at customs.

TSS: It was very risky.

JM: Yeah, that was scary. I was the only of us – so there was Jessica and me; a doctor, John Loewenstein, who's a member of the temple; and two rabbis, right? And so we get to – I remember this clearly. Getting to the airport, we decided we wouldn't go through customs in a group. From the moment we got off the airplane, we weren't going to talk to each other. And that's a whole level of – that makes an impression. And then being the one – and the kid. I mean, I'd expect an adult to get searched, but they're pulling out all this Judaica from my bag. They're pulling out all this medication for my bag. All of a sudden, there's no one in front of me or behind me in customs, and they've taken me into another place to talk about what is all this stuff, and they ask you about drugs. So for a junior in high school, that was impressionistic, right?

TSS: Did you prepare for a scenario like this? [inaudible]

JM: Yeah, we talked about it, but it wasn't – the line was like, "Why are you bringing drugs in? What is all this stuff for?" I'm just going to open a window. And in some ways – even to talk to you about it brings back that it was serious and scary. So all those pieces – well, actually, let me show a picture that – and so that stuff would continue throughout the trip, those kinds of things. I want to just – I'm looking for one thing, in particular. Unfortunately, I can't tell you every single name of the – here, wait. There's Bernard Mehlman asleep in the Leningrad [now St. Petersburg, Russia] airport. [laughter] Seth Bernstein; he's a rabbi. He's asleep. But when we went to see the Charnys – I don't know what – you know what, guys? You tell me what you want to know because I don't want to just do this for you.

TSS: I actually have a question.

JM: Yeah, go ahead.

TSS: So coming from Israel, being in the Army, and in general, nothing in Israel is very formal until you go to the Army, but after that, even in university, it's not very formal. But I don't know what it's like in [the] synagogue. I don't know what it's like in a synagogue in America. Was it formal? Was it like breaking the distance like we have in the Army with our commanders? What was it like to go with your rabbis?

JM: Oh, I see where you're asking. No, I enjoyed with Bernard and Ronne – I mean, one reason I really had developed close relationships is, I guess, they treated me to a degree like an equal. So we had a level of intimacy going. What was nice, too, is over time, they entrusted Jessica and me with more and more of the [responsibility]. I remember very clearly being the one later in the trip – I said, “Let me check us into this hotel.” Those kinds of things as adults we do, I started doing those things. But no, if anything, it was a treat. For me, it was fun. There wasn't a worry about formality. There wasn't any of that. Go on. Yeah, sorry, yeah.

GW: Going back, what prompted – when they announced that there would be an opportunity for a teenager from Temple Israel to go on the trip and you heard about this essay contest, what prompted you to put pen to paper and submit?

JM: It's pretty cool. I mean, it was cool. It was exciting. I was looking forward to – I'd be happy to travel with Bernard Mehlman places. That was our first trip together. So we've traveled since, but this is a guy I found was fun. This would be interesting. It would be valuable work. It lined up with the values I was being taught in a Reform congregation in America. That might have been what I wrote about, but I don't remember. It was a way to make an impact. But I think most high school students – growing up in Brookline, in a place filled with Jews, not a lick of antisemitism, none of that, right? This was, for me, a way – this was exposure to a wider Jewish world, a Jewish experience opposite from my own. And that would be neat. And I think as much as I might have thought – at a certain

level, it's like, "This would be cool." As much as this might be to help them, I knew that this is neat for me. I'm not completely – I wasn't this – what would you say? – off-the-charts high school student who only thinks of other people. [laughter] This was going to be cool. I don't know.

GW: What did you know about Jewish life in the USSR before your trip?

JM: Basically, what you've been told about life.

TSS: Oh no.

JM: Oh, batteries?

TSS: Yeah, but we have –

JM: Oh, you've got [inaudible]. I think it was when I first heard of it, a revelation that there were Jews in this time period; in the 1980s, there was a Jewish community somewhere that couldn't practice, was being persecuted. So I was hearing – what I first took in was, here are Jews who don't have religious freedom. Ultimately, it was an encounter with Jews who might not have been that religiously identified anyway. But my first response was, these folks can't do what I do. So I was hearing that. There was a story – here was the latest round of Jewish persecution in the world. It probably took me a little longer to understand that I was talking about Jews who looked look like us, as opposed to Hasidic Jews or something like that. But maybe that was part of the education too. It was like, these are Jews just like us, who are like – at Temple Israel, they're lawyers, they're doctors, they're academics, who can't practice Judaism. So I think that's what I knew.

AH: Have you been involved with or interested in the Soviet Jewry movement outside of work with RYFTI and with Temple Israel?

JM: No. In some ways, this was sort of the opening of my mind to the kind of broader engagement beyond my life, Brookline, Bos[ton]. This is all of a sudden getting engaged on a larger level with something.

GW: Which leads me to my next question. Was this your first time abroad?

JM: No.

GW: Where had you been abroad before this, just out of curiosity?

JM: I had spent a good amount of time actually in Italy with my parents because of my dad's work. This is only my sophomore year of college. So I had been to Europe a bunch in elementary school.

TSS: What did your dad do?

JM: My dad was an epidemiologist, but he was doing research. For three summers, we spent time in Florence. But I'm just trying to think. That was actually when I was in second, third, and fourth grade. So there was a gap in terms of international stuff.

GW: So this was your first experience as a young adult.

JM: Yes, a teenager.

GW: I guess we can consider teenagers "young adults."

TSS: Was it the first time without your parents?

JM: You mean on a trip like –? Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, for sure. Again, I think that you're asking a question –

TSS: That's the cool part.

JM: Yeah, I guess that's the cool part. But also, these pieces weren't at all a place of hesitation for me because of Bernard Mehlman. Bernard Mehlman, I was very close to.

GW: So Rabbi Friedman and Rabbi Mehlman had been to the USSR before this trip?

JM: Yes.

GW: What did they tell you and Jessica and the other people on the trip about what to expect in the country and of the Jewish community before you guys went?

JM: I don't remember. [laughter] What's hard is we're dredging – I'm forty-five now, right? So we're going back. All of this is sort of now a mixture of stuff. So some of the things I was talking about, about getting through customs, or the stories, to speak about the items – and I can't even remember them. But maybe they gave very practical advice for us, but I don't remember that clearly.

GW: Do you remember the visits to the Jewish families in Moscow and the other places you –?

JM: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

GW: What were those like?

JM: Well, I'm just trying to think. So the epicenter of the Moscow trip was the Charnys' apartment. That loomed the largest for us because he was the most prominent. You've heard all this before, right? So you could tell me to be quiet. You should tell me to be quiet.

TSS: We want to hear your perspective.

JM: A bunch of these pictures are in Charny's apartment, and what I'm looking for – and it was definitely in Charny's apartment where you had the greatest sense of our being

– what do you call it? – under surveillance. That was the – of all the places we went – and what I'm looking for is two canisters of film to tell you about. But apparently, they were listening to – so they had developed technology to listen to the vibrations – they could, apparently, focus on the windows of an apartment building and hear what's going on inside the apartment building. So when you were at the Charnys', you had that sense of classic KGB [*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, the Committee for State Security of the Soviet Union] kind of stuff. And when we spoke about certain things there, we spoke in –

TSS: In code?

JM: – in code, so to speak, or he knew there was a mic here, so let's move over there to a different part of the room where we can't be heard. So that kind of aura was present there in a way that didn't occur in every apartment.

AH: So that was one of the only places where this kind of communication happened, meaning it didn't happen everywhere?

JM: Well, in every place we went, we took notes in invisible ink, which [laughter] as we were coming – as we flew back on, we took an Aeroflot flight back to Zurich, and then flew home on Swiss Air from Zurich. I remember flying home from Zurich; we all started doing whatever you do to make the ink come clearer, so you can read it. Mine was just such a mess. You know what I mean? [laughter] But in every apartment, Jessica and I were often being tasked with writing stuff down. We'd get stories. We'd hear about a particular – I'd have to sort of – so basically, in each city we went to, it would be rare that we'd meet with one family on its own; it would be sort of a grouping of folks who come together into one locale. We have a lot of stuff for babies, for instance, right? Baby bottle nipples, and we might have had condensed milk – what do you call that?

TSS: Formula?

JM: Formula. So we'd bring that, and then we'd hear a story, and someone would need that, and so we'd give that. The eye doctor is very important. So John Loewenstein, who was the eye doctor, [would] do some examinations in these homes as we went around. We brought a whole curriculum, Hebrew curriculums, Hebrew school curriculums, and stuff. We'd distribute that in certain places.

GW: What did you guys talk about with these families during these visits?

JM: We'd hear their stories. I don't know if you asked him for this – Bernard's an excellent record keeper. We came back and gave these reports to the congregation. I don't know if you want them; he probably has them. I don't know if you want to hear that, but that would focus on stories. Also, there was this – this isn't a generalization, but in some instances, you'd be wondering, is this person telling you the truth? I'm almost forced to talk in generalizations because we're going back so far in time. But there would be some sketchy element to something. “Is this person interested in just getting our materials?” We had a lot of stuff, which also could be sold on the black market there. So there was a question, once or twice in these gatherings, is this person telling us the truth or not?

GW: I'm getting the sense that this was a rare thing because you probably met with a lot of people, and so if it came up once or twice – it didn't happen that much. [inaudible] sketchy.

JM: Yes. No, no. But basically, it would be like, come together – families would put out spreads of food. There'd be this kind of storytelling. There would also be the kind of – of course, we'd be working in English, and there'd be all the limitations to that.

AH: So you were hearing their stories. And then, if I remember correctly –

JM: Here, you can help me. [laughter]

GW: – your flight time was changed toward the end.

JM: That's what I wanted to show – yeah?

GW: Your flight time was changed towards the end, and so you had to –

TSS: Oh, Chanukah!

JM: Oh yes, that too.

GW: – go around and deliver many items very quickly.

JM: Oh, really? [laughter]

AH: In Riga [capital of Latvia].

JM: Oh, in Riga, yeah, yeah. Riga, yes, we got there very late. We had very little time in Riga. Yeah, yeah.

TSS: Twenty-four hours.

JM: Yeah, no, it became a very quick thing. That's why he was sleeping in the Leningrad airport. We got to Riga very late, comparatively. So wait, yeah, I think we gave the stuff to someone else to distribute. But what I wanted to show you in this picture – this is bringing back memories, of course. It was Chanukah, our last night or something in the Soviet Union, back in Moscow. We celebrated it with the Charnys. I mean, that makes an impression, right? To celebrate Chanukah there. You see these film canisters? That's film.

TSS: From cameras?

JM: Movie film.

GW: It's Kodak. It looks like it's –

JM: Kodak. The Charnys had, I think – this was film that the Charnys had that they wanted our help getting out of the country. We knew we couldn't take it out through the airport because they might search our stuff on the way out of the country just as they did on the way in. So, one day – I remember this clearly, that Charny came up with the idea, “Why don't you try and get it out through the embassy, the US Embassy, in their diplomatic pouch?” So we decided one day that John Loewenstein and Seth Bernstein would – did Bernard tell you about this at all?

GW: No.

JM: Would take the film to the embassy one morning, and if they took the film and agreed to send it out, terrific. If not, just get rid of the film canisters; get rid of this film because we don't want to be caught with it. They didn't succeed. So we had to destroy this film that we had.

TSS: What was on it?

JM: I think it was stories of other people – film of refuseniks telling their stories.

TSS: That's too bad.

JM: But I think that's sort of hard to – it's somewhat hard to recover or to relate these things about surveillance and being bugged. That was real. Do you know what I mean? [laughter] There was this palpable sense – we would get off trains, and we'd switch trains. We'd meet people at the back. There was all this kind of stuff that now I associate with Tom Hanks movies, for instance, that that was a major part of the trip. Now, it feels funny, but it was that.

GW: Yeah, it's like you're no longer reading about George Orwell. [inaudible] 84; you're living it.

JM: Yeah. Right, right. It was winter. It was freezing.

GW: What was the general mood of these families? Were they optimistic they would be able to leave?

JM: Some. Some. I mean, Charny was a big issue because he was having heart problems, but he got out.

TSS: And cancer.

JM: And cancer subsequently. Oh, that was a two week – he had asked us to bring tongue. You know tongue, the deli meat tongue. I find it disgusting.

TSS: I'm vegan, that's why. [laughter]

JM: So we brought tongue. The doctor with us is like, "I'm really against this. I mean, it's terrible for this guy with heart problems that he eats this meat." So, the Gilbos, who we saw in Leningrad, they were more – I think I had gotten word that they were getting out. So there was more optimism. There was something more playful and joyful about seeing them. What weighed more heavily than any of the Jewish identity stuff was the economic issues. I mean, people were taken for – as refuseniks, they couldn't –

TSS: Work.

JM: – work. That was what was most debilitating – meeting with folks who are highly educated – or most concerning – folks who were cream of the crop just being reduced to really bad economic circumstances. And thus, you also were aware of what a drop in the bucket this was. It was like, "Yeah, we brought all this stuff. We're here to see you. But can I really alter the outcome of your [situation]?" I guess that was one of the lessons as

a teenager. “Okay, you can get involved, and this is nice, but” –

TSS: To what extent?

JM: Yeah. Really, what impact are you going to make? I think I was aware of that as a kid.

GW: It seems like there was some impact, though, at the end. Charny ended up getting out.

JM: Yeah, but that’s not because we took a visit.

GW: No. But I think probably had some – I think, in the aggregate –

JM: Oh. Yeah, yeah. No, I agree with that.

TSS: Maybe gave them hope.

JM: Yeah. Well, I think those were all nice – no, definitely. Those are all nice things. Those were good things.

TSS: Actually, I have a question. You said that you were suspicious of some families about their –

JM: Yeah, or one or two guys, basically.

TSS: So I was wondering, why would people risk their lives because it was really risky to even get together like that if they weren’t genuine about their feelings towards Judaism [inaudible]?

JM: No, I think it was more about – as we’re talking, I remember one guy in particular, who told the exact same story to – I remember this very clearly now. Jessica and I each talked to this guy individually. Whatever the story was, it was based on a certain need.

We said, “Oh, we actually can help you.” We rummaged around in our stuff and brought him X. It might have been cigarettes because cigarettes on the black market were worth a lot of money. Well, then he told the same story to Jessica or to me, and I said, “Oh, I can help you. Let me get X.” And it's not as if he said, “Oh, your friend just gave me X. Save it for someone else.” It was “Great.” But also, this is hindsight. It's not like you could – back to the economic circumstances of certain folks. Another issue that made an impression, too, was how Army service is mandatory, compulsory. For Jews, it was horrendous. One of the sons of these families was about to go into the Army. And the notion [of] can this family get out? I wish I could remember the name. This is where Bernard's just brilliant with this stuff. But to meet another teenager who's just having such an opposite experience to what Jessica and I are having and is about to get screwed in this whole thing –

GW: What were the big themes of the Jewish experience in the Soviet Army?

JM: Oh, no. First, conscripts generally are treated horribly by older officers. There's a lot of hazing. And then it's magnified for Jews – antisemitism. To be a Jew in the Army was horrendous. I know families went to incredible extremes to try and keep their sons from going into the Army.

TSS: My great-great-grandfather was in the Russian Army. He was the Tsar's dentist or something.

JM: Wow. [laughter] Really? That's a neat story.

TSS: Yeah. But probably the only Jew. [laughter]

AH: So I know you're talking about comparing your lives to the teenagers' there, and that must have been really interesting. If you remember at all, what types of questions did the Soviet Jews ask you guys?

JM: First, there was an assumption that I was Bernard Mehlman's son because we look a lot alike. [laughter] So, "Are you his son?" Jessica and I were like the kids in the room, right? So, on one hand, there was generally an outpouring of hospitality and sweetness. They were sweet. Then there's a block in language. All I'm trying to say is the give and take was different. It was more like, "We're here to learn about you. We're here to learn about you. Tell us your story. What do you need? How can we be helpful?" There would be chit-chat. At Ben Charny's house, where we must have gone two or three times in the course of the whole trip, was something more expansive, more relaxed. They had visited him the year before. There was more interaction. The other houses [were] a little more formal than that. So, "Where are you from?" "Brookline." I mean, there wasn't a depth – I don't remember a depth of being interviewed. I don't remember a lot of questions.

GW: It wasn't as much of a two-way street.

JM: Yeah, but I wouldn't expect it to be.

GW: We've kind of touched on this already, but to prepare for this, we read the article that you co-wrote in the *Jewish Advocate* [in] 1987.

JM: Oh, my Lord. So you've got more information than I. [laughter]

GW: The title of it was like, "Life is Gray in the Soviet Union" or something like –

JM: Who co-wrote it?

TSS: Oh, you wrote –

GW: It was you –

JM: My name was on it?

AH: Jessica, Rabbi –

JM: Really? [laughter]

AH: John Loewenstein –

GW: John Loewenstein and Rabbi Mehlman.

JM: Oh, great. I'd like to read that. That might jog my memory. [laughter]

TSS: I will send you a link.

JM: Okay, please.

GW: But anyway, one of the scenes in this is celebrating Hanukkah with the Charnys, and some of them talked about how you guys sang *Maoz Tzur* [a liturgical poem sung on Chanukah after lighting the candles; the English version is titled “Rock of Ages,” though this isn’t a direct translation] with them.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

GW: Do you remember that at all?

JM: I do. I also remember they did the candles backward, which was evidence to me of –

TSS: *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel*? [Editor’s Note: Literally “house of Shammai” and “house of Hillel.” There is a debate in the Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 21B) over whether the number of candles should start at eight and decrease by one each night or start at one and increase by one each night. These positions are held by the houses of study of scholars Shammai and Hillel, respectively. The law follows the latter.]

JM: Yeah.

TSS: We do it *Beit Hillel*, I think, right?

JM: Yes, we do.

TSS: We add one –

JM: Yeah, yeah.

TSS: And they do it *Beit Shammai*?

JM: No, no. I'm saying they put the candles in just a different – if we started our candles over here, they started them in the middle. It was, for me, a kind of evidence of the lack of Jewish education or Jewish connection or knowledge.

TSS: I never thought about – I guess in Israel, we also, I think – well, I don't know. It's random. Either we put it from the right to left or left to right.

JM: No, but they started like –

TSS: In the middle?

JM: Yeah, like, here's the *shamash* [literally 'attendant,' an extra candle used to light the others]. They put one here, as opposed to over here. You know what I'm saying? I remember –

TSS: They have their own school. It's not *Beit Shammai*. It's not *Beit Hillel*. It's *Beit Charny*.

JM: It could be. No, it could be, but it was also just evidence of the state of Jewish education. It's jogging my memory, but it was sort of like – when we were doing the candle blessings and singing *Maoz Tzur*, it was kind of like, "Fuck you, KGB." I remember feeling that way. I was a high schooler. I was like, "Let's stick it to them" kind of thing. [laughter] You can put that out there on the web. No, but I remember that. I

remember feeling like this is a moment of standing up for Jewish identity. [laughter] Look, one of the profound moments of the whole experience was when I saw the Gilbos at Temple Israel afterward or when I saw the Charny[s]. That, for me, seal – all these questions about identity or what was it like over there, what were we doing and why – that experience brought it home for me as a teen perhaps more than this. And I'm also aware – look, I mean, here I am talking to you now, as a father, as someone in my forties. I've had more years of experience. Had I'd been John Loewenstein on this trip, or Bernard Mehlman, or one of the adults, my whole understanding of it would have been radically different. Relationally, it would have been different.

GW: Are you still in touch with anyone from the trip?

JM: Sure. Jessica Greenfield, for sure, and John Loewenstein, from the Temple. Yeah.

GW: What about the people you met, like the Russian [inaudible]?

JM: Yeah. When I see the Gilbos at the Temple, we remember each other. It's nice. It's beautiful. They're warm. They're very warm people. Are you interviewing – who are you interviewing who's Russian? Diana Shklyarov.

GW: And Anna.

TSS: And we interviewed Anna Charny.

JM: And Anna Charny. That's it?

GW: Yeah.

TSS: We couldn't get in touch with Yelena [Bonner].

JM: But you couldn't get to a Gilbo?

AH: I don't think so.

GW: We weren't given the names of Gilbos [inaudible].

JM: Oh, that's interesting because they're great. They're right over, or they were right over in South Brookline. But anyway, I don't want to – I get it. [laughter]

TSS: You're a student. You know.

JM: Yeah, I get it. I totally get it. Totally get it.

GW: You mentioned that your perspective would have been different had you been older when you went on the trip.

JM: Yeah, if I understood Judaism more. [laughter]

GW: Did this trip impact you as a Jewish professional at all, you think?

JM: No.

GW: No?

JM: I wouldn't draw a straight line from that to this, to now, professionally.

TSS: Correlation and causation.

JM: Okay. [laughter] What do you want –?

GW: Go on, and then I'll [inaudible]

JM: I'm not a rabbi or a Jew who really grooves on the persecution/Holocaust narrative. Do you understand? That, for me, is not a touchstone of Jewish identity. In fact, I'll be more articulate. I was about to say, "I shit on it," but that's wrong. It's more that too often, that's the touchstone for why people are Jewish. Do you understand?

GW: Yeah, I know what you're saying.

JM: It's that they're rooting themselves in such a negative narrative. The place I experience this very clearly is in Israel sometimes, this dynamic. It's very important for our [generation]. Our generation is different; identity isn't based – if we continue to speak about an identity that's based on persecution and the Holocaust, it's not really going to work for folks my age, your age, etc. And this is sort of – you guys are familiar with David Hartman's stuff at all and the [Shalom] Hartman Institute [an education and research center focusing on pluralistic Jewish thought and Israel's Jewish and democratic foundations] stuff? Yeah, I mean Zionism being predicated on a narrative of covenant and values and ethics, rather than “They tried to kill us. That's why we should support Israel.” If I make these two major distinctions, okay? This became for me the closest touchstone I had personally with the persecution story experience. That made it real to me.

TSS: You said your kids are ninth generation in the synagogue, so it means that your family's been here for a while?

JM: Yeah. But I mean that also as a teacher and professional. Why we're Jewish isn't because someone tried to kill us. We're Jewish because of all these other reasons, right? What is this all getting at? This is the most personal experience I had with that element of our history, and that's important.

GW: No, I see what [inaudible].

JM: And then, of course, the other experience I've had in a less intensive way, but living in Israel for two years, post-1990s Israel. Living in Israel after this huge influx of Russian Jews. Who are these folks who came into the –? These guys came and helped build Israel. So what am I getting at exactly? I can't say [that] the fact I did this somehow kicked off a professional –

GW: I wasn't trying to suggest that it did. I guess I was wondering more, has it given you some context in your work in the rabbinate [inaudible]?

JM: Yeah. No, it does –

GW: And changed maybe how you've approached things as a rabbi because you had this experience?

JM: Well, I haven't been asked that before. I haven't asked myself that before. So I'm thinking about it now. Certainly, I guess it did help attune me to Jewish communities being persecuted around the world unto this day. And thus, what is our responsibility to these communities? What it really, probably more strongly, powerfully affected how I think today as a leader in the Jewish communities is, like, communities can do shit. You can do something. Right now, Temple Israel's involved with Syrian refugee resettlement. Well, that's directly connected to this experience. So maybe that was the first time in my life I saw that happen. And thus, I can think about – if I go back and look at this, I could say that was the first time I experienced as a Jew how a Jewish community could band together and really make a difference for other Jews, unlike us. Temple Israel had done some resettlement of the Boat People [refugees who fled Vietnam by boat after the Vietnam War] before that. I wasn't part of that. So those folks who had been part of that experience brought that to this. Then, I guess for my generation, for me, this became sort of a way to see how we here in Boston are so fortunate, blah, blah, blah, who have resources, blah, blah, blah, can really affect something and make change. It sounds so trite, but I think for me, this becomes a touchstone for that.

GW: What did you tell people about the experience after you came back from the USSR?

JM: These kinds of stories. [laughter] These kinds of stories.

GW: You guys have anything else?

AH: Yes. I just want to clarify about the delivery of items in Riga.

JM: Okay. [laughter]

GW: You were mainly giving those to other people to deal out or –?

JM: Yeah, that's what I remember. We had a time crunch, and we had saved a lot for Riga because very few folks had gone to Riga. I can't remember a single encounter in Riga, like a family, a face. I can't remember any of that. Because we were there – I think we got in late at night and left the next night. Does that sound familiar?

GW: Yeah, it sounds about right.

JM: So I think we had one gathering, where we delivered stuff to one group that then got dispersed. I feel like this element's a bit like an investigation. You're squaring the story. What else? [laughter]

GW: The reason I was asking is because this very same article that we were just talking about described the situation in Riga. I must say, the way that it was described here was like –

JM: In the article?

GW: In the article. It was like a movie transcript.

JM: Oh yeah? [laughter]

GW: “We ended up getting here at this time. We had to leave at this time. We only had a day to deliver this stuff, so we did it very quickly.” I was just like – I was just shocked by that.

TSS: James Bond.

JM: [laughter] I wish you guys asked me about something that happened to me five years ago because I could have more depth of experience, expression. I would say it was an extraordinary experience. I would say I wasn't necessarily extraordinarily reflective about it. I understood how interesting it was. I knew I was fortunate to get involved in this way. It definitely impacted – I'm pretty sure I wrote about this for college essays. I mean, I didn't do it for a college essay. But that might have been the last time I've really reflected on it deeply. But again, I was just a high school kid. It was a very different thing.

GW: Yeah. When you're eighteen, no one is super self-aware.

JM: Well, I was sixteen.

GW: Sixteen, okay.

JM: I was sixteen. It's like, "I feel like a nincompoop," [laughter] in looking at the past.

AH: So going off of that, you're –

JM: Yeah. My being a nincompoop?

AH: – all these years later – [laughter]

JM: Yes? Go ahead.

TSS: Can I look at this [inaudible]?

JM: Yeah, whatever. Yeah, sure. [inaudible]

AH: What's one thing from your mission that still sticks with you today? That was very important that you took from it or that you learned, and that still sticks with you today?

JM: Well, in some ways, your questions have brought that back. The way I answered your question about if there is a throughline. But I also know I've learned that lesson ten, twelve, twenty times since then, this notion of causing change or banding together. I think it also brought home – growing up as a kid in Brookline, Massachusetts, is like, okay, there are ways to build relationships with people that ultimately come down to “Let's just sit in a room together and talk.” Do you understand? How many times before in my life, in the first fifteen years of my life, did I gather with people who were very different from me, from a very different experience from my own, and just talk and get to know each other? That was the first time in my life I had done something like that. So that made an impact. The impact gets blurred because of the thirty years since. [laughter] I could speak to other moments that I feel in the last thirty years have been more – that I could speak to you about more cogently, about what kind of impact it made on me. Do you understand? Just because it's newer or I'm more reflective. I've got more to bring to the table.

TSS: I can totally see the resemblance.

JM: Right? [laughter] Well, he and I were in Thailand together this past year, and the same thing happened.

GW: What were you guys doing in Thailand?

JM: I spent six months of a sabbatical in Thailand, and he came through for five weeks. But again, I mean, you know.

GW: What was just the Soviet Union like in general?

JM: Totally depressing.

AH: It's gray.

JM: Yeah, all that stuff. We went in the winter. By the way, Gorbachev was on his way here, as we flew there, for glasnost [a policy of transparency in government, used as a political slogan by Gorbachev in the 1980s]. So we were at the tail end of this period, right before – remember, the wall comes down – when does the Berlin Wall come down? '80s?

GW: '89.

AH: '89 or '90.

TSS: '89.

JM: '89. So we're right at the tail end of the USSR, so to speak. But it was really depressing.

AH: I mean, where people – just random people – were people friendly? Did they [inaudible]

JM: Yeah. It also depended where; like Leningrad, this is Leningrad, like Leningrad is a much more pretty place –

GW: Leningrad is St. Petersburg.

JM: – yeah, yeah – than Moscow. Moscow was depressing. I remember – also, don't forget my feelings about the police were really shaped by America in the '80s and how America perceived the USSR at that juncture. Right? Like, “evil empire.” I mean, this was still the Cold War.

AH: The age of Reagan.

JM: What?

AH: This was the age of Ronald Reagan [40th president of the United States, who described the USSR as an "evil empire" in a speech in 1983].

JM: Yes, exactly. I mean, this was a place opposite us. And cold, repressive, all those things. I guess Orwellian. You used that word. You made the reference.

TSS: Maybe you can talk about the pictures.

JM: Yeah, I was trying to remember some of it.

GW: Did you learn any Russian for the trip?

JM: No.

GW: So how did you – did you guys have translators?

JM: No, they knew English pretty –

GW: In the USSR, people did?

JM: Yeah.

TSS: Well, we know Anna Charny knew English.

JM: The refuseniks knew English, and often, we'd come together in a group, and there'd be like one or two people who spoke better English than others, and they'd sort of function as the go-between.

GW: So, going back to the end of the trip – you come back in December '87?

JM: Yeah.

GW: So the fight for Soviet Jewry is still very much going on.

JM: Right.

GW: Were you still involved with the Soviet Jewry movement once you got back in the US?

JM: Only from the perspective of future trips out of TI [Temple Israel]. Don't for[get], in '87 – well, I mean, two pieces of it – one, I was just a kid. The real efforts were happening around with Senator Kennedy, right, and [Senator] (Kerry?) – that's where the real effort was going on.

GW: It was high-level stuff.

JM: Yeah, it was high-level stuff. Right.

GW: It was over a seventeen-year-old's head.

JM: Yeah. Right. I mean, maybe that's also what was exciting; like, I was being treated as an adult by my travel mates in a way that most adults wouldn't have treated me beyond the temple.

GW: Did you still go to rallies or, I don't know, [marches]?

JM: Yeah, but there wasn't much of that. There wasn't much of that.

GW: What was most of the activity –? What do you remember most of these activities after the trip?

JM: Most of the activity was this – fortunately, it moves into a resettlement period. That's also where I was in this, and the timing – people were getting out, which wasn't what was happening X number of years before. The Charnys coming [laughter] was – the Charnys coming was like, “Here's a chance to help now them here.” But then there are like a hundred plus adults ready to help them here. So what role do I have in that? Very

little. It wasn't like there were a lot of kids coming into the country. However, I mean, this wasn't a family I visited on our trip, but after college, I was the youth director at Temple Israel, and there was the son of a former refusenik family in the youth group. Then I did his wedding five, seven years ago. And that's cool.

GW: That's amazing.

JM: [laughter] That's a cool – but my childhood experience as a Jew, for better or worse, was focused at Temple Israel. Temple Israel was such a powerful place in shaping my identity and giving me this kind of – this kind of opportunity came from being at Temple Israel. I only had so much connection to life beyond it. You're saying, “What was happening with Action for Soviet Jewry?” Was I involved in it? No. I was involved with what was happening at the temple and the people there.

GW: Got it. All right. Any other questions, guys? Is there anything else you'd like to add, Rabbi Morrison?

JM: You can call me Jeremy. No. I'm thankful for your asking these questions. It's causing me to reflect on the past. It's causing me, too – I look back at this thinking, on one hand, wow, impactful. And also, I could have learned so much if I took my forty-five-year-old self back. Do the same thing as a forty-five-year-old – how I would have interacted, thought about it – would be vastly different. Do you know what I mean?

TSS: We're lucky we don't have to, because (we?) can go [inaudible] –

JM: Yeah, for sure. It's funny to be thinking about myself as a sixteen-year-old in this way and to be thinking about it for the first time in a lot of years. [laughter] So thank you guys for asking that; I'm thankful for your doing that.

AH: Our pleasure.

TSS: Well, we thank you for sharing (with us?).

AH: Thank you for taking the time.

JM: Oh, yeah, so this is one of the teenagers we met in Leningrad. I don't know his name. So they said to us, "Go talk to him." But he was very shy. That's Jessica, that's me, and that's – this kid might be the one I'm referring to, about to go into the Army.

GW: Oh, man, he looks like he could be about to be in the Army.

JM: But how do we build connections like that within an hour? He's shy. We don't speak the same language. So there'd be those kinds – you asked about what would go on in the interactions? Some of it was hard to break the ice. And I think nominally we were brought for this kind of circumstance, like, "Oh, great. We'll have now multiple generations of people meeting each other." This wasn't happening that frequently – meeting teenagers and talking through stuff. You'd try and connect over – what do you connect about? That's also the question.

GW: This is kind of random, but do you remember if there was a preference from the refuseniks over whether they wanted to go to Israel or to the United States?

TSS: They were only allowed to go to Israel, from what I remember from –

GW: For a little bit, and then (all of a sudden?), they changed.

JM: Oh, really?

GW: Yeah.

JM: I don't know. It's a great question. I remember that as a question, but I don't remember the responses, and I think a lot of it had to do with opportunity in each place. But you should ask that – you're going to have a great [conversation] – you're going to

have a much more robust [laughter] conversation with Ronne Friedman, mostly because he talks a lot and slowly.

TSS: Slowly is good.

JM: Well, make sure you schedule good time.

GW: Yeah, we have a while.

JM: And he's retired now, so he's got time. [laughter] But he'll be able – I mean, if you want – he'll be a very helpful interview for you.

GW: This was great. Thank you so much.

AH: Thank you so much.

TSS: Thank you so much.

JM: Pleasure, thanks for coming.

[END OF INTERVIEW]