Ary Rotman Transcript

Interviewer: For the record, can you state your name, who you are, and where you were born?

Ary Rotman: Ary Rotman and the name has changed. In Russia, it was (Arkadiy Rutman?). I was born in Moscow and immigrated to Israel in 1974, lived there for [a] short nine month[s], and then moved to the States via Munich, Germany, where we had to wait for an American visa for five months. I landed in Boston on October 19, 1975. I'm sorry, August, August 19, 1975, and been here ever since.

Interviewer: I first want to focus on time in Moscow. Can you tell me a little bit about your life growing up in Moscow?

AR: I lived in Moscow [for] twenty-five years minus one day because I left the day before my twenty-fifth birthday. First twenty years, we lived in a communal apartment with sixteen other neighbors – quite typical for Muscovites because apartments were large. Before the revolution, they were occupied by one family. And after the revolution, people were – due to the housing shortages, people were stuck in those large apartments, and every family would occupy one room. So there were six families living in that apartment. And that's where I spent twenty years, first twenty years. Then my father was able to move to – "cooperative," it's called, a private apartment, which would be by American standards called a studio, one room with a bedroom. No, it's a one-bedroom apartment – it would be called here. With an eat-in kitchen. One bath. There are three people [living] there – my father, my grandmother, and I because my mother passed away from a car accident when she was thirty-six years old, and I was ten, which was 1959. You asked me to write that in the form. So I wrote it down. The date is there. I met my first wife in college when I was eighteen, and she was sixteen. She had American relatives, cousins

who lived in Boston. They were born here because her uncle immigrated to the states in the ’20s. He was much older than her father, and these people were born here. They came to visit [in] 1968. That's the first time we really saw Americans very close. I was then nineteen; she was seventeen. And from that moment on, we both decided that we wanted to cross the border somehow and live in the States. I memorized their address. As a naïve – [laughter] – being a teenager, I naïvely thought that I could somehow escape from Russia, and once I'm on the other side, I’d need to remember that address in Milton, Massachusetts. Obviously, we had no idea how we're going [to] get out of Soviet Union. We thought that we're going to get married, and we'll purchase tourist trips somehow to the Western world, and we'll be able to ask for political asylum. The little that we knew that – we'd never even get the visa because, at the time, the young couple wouldn't be allowed just to travel abroad, period. At the best, we could get to Bulgaria, one of the other Soviet Bloc countries, but then you can't ask for political asylum there. They'll send you back. But we didn't know any of that. So we got married when I was twenty; she was eighteen. Part of my education was musicology, so that's why I started playing. I learned how to play bass guitar and played in the band in restaurants in Moscow. She was learning to be an esthetician to do facials because her mother was a hairdresser and her aunt was in the same beauty business. I remember she got pregnant; I was in the Army – getting out of the Army. I was pretty upset because with a child, how you can immigrate from the Soviet Union with a child? That was 1971 when he was born. My son was born [in] 1971. I was then twenty-two years old. I heard from my father that in our building, there is a family that’s leaving for Israel. I asked him how, and my father said, “I heard they have relatives there.” So I went to see that guy – to this date, he remembers how I appeared in a Soviet uniform, our military uniform. I wanted to ask him questions. So he told me that he has an aunt, and they are leaving pretty soon. They got visa, but then I could tell that he was lying. So we spent a few more minutes talking. And then he told me, “I'll tell you the secret, but don't tell anybody. I don't have any relatives in Israel. It's just that [the] Israeli government found a way to send

invitations from these fictitious relatives. It's up to you to make up the story. Since the archives in Ukraine didn't exist after the World War Two, you can always say, "It's my aunt from Kiev [now Kyiv] or wherever immigrated to Israel, and she wants to join families by inviting me over.'" Of course, KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, the Committee for State Security of the Soviet Union] knew that was a scam. But officially, an invitation would come from Israel with a person – [an] actual person was doing it, so there was a person behind, and it was sealed with a seal of the Israeli government, so it's all official. But again, it's up to a person who was to come up with a story [about] the relationship between [the] two. I was so happy because I found there is an official way to immigrate – don't have to cross the border, don't have to run out with a child in hand. So he gave me the logistics, and he told me how this is all going to work. When he lands in Israel, he will then submit my name and Sochnut [HaSochnut HaYehudit L'Eretz Yisrael, the Jewish Agency for Israel, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Jews immigrate to Israel] or whoever else at the time will come up with a person and send me an invitation too. He also gave me a contact, a friend of his. He said, "You should come to Moscow synagogue. Every Saturday outside is a lot of young people getting together; a lot of people who want to immigrate to Israel are getting together there. So you should meet those people and learn how things are done." So I was sitting there waiting for an invitation which never arrived. Soon it was apparent that my grandmother used to get them, and she would throw them away. Because she was afraid that – she saw the invitation, and she would just simply trash it. I didn't know. So one person was leaving – I went to the synagogue; I met bunch of people who were about to leave. I submitted my name over and over again to others so they would produce that invitation. Then, as we suspected that my invitation's getting lost somewhere – could be stopped by the KGB, but again, it's just my grandmother would just trash them. We had an invitation sent to an Austrian embassy at the time representing Jewish immigrants because the path was, from Moscow or other – from Moscow to Vienna; from Vienna, those who wanted to go to Israel go to Israel, others would go to Rome. They spent time there waiting for their

visas, and they'd go to either Canada, US, or Australia, or else South Africa was on the list at the time too. Anyway, somebody who was getting visa to leave – they [were] bringing mail out of the Austrian embassy, and that's how I received my invitation, finally. Of course, getting documents together was [an] additional task because, in addition to an invitation, one has to have approval from parents that the parents wouldn't be left without support. So, in other words, there had to be a written [consent?] from the parents and a characteristic from employer. It doesn't have to be good; it just has to say something. That's where things started being difficult. My father didn't want me to leave, so he wouldn't want to write anything. But I dealt with it quickly. I forget how, but I guess I was strong enough to persuade him. My employer tried to give me a hard time, but I was taught by my friends at the time how to deal with that. So finally, I got all the documents together. In 1972, we applied in November; we applied for visa. Two months later, I was turned down because I served in Soviet Army. I happened to be in the border patrol units. Therefore, at that time, they reported to KGB – the border patrol units reported directly to the head of KGB, not to the Army. So for all practical purposes, my records indicated that I was associated with KGB somehow. [laughter] And as a result of that, my inquiry was turned down with a no, and I ended up being a refusenik. From that moment on, again, I started going to locations where refuseniks would meet and started brainstorming ways to persuade Soviet authorities to let us out because I didn't know I would be presenting any threat to the system. Because while in the Army, I was basically playing the piano, and playing the accordion, and teaching soldiers to sing, and we had this orchestra and all that. Didn't really have a machine gun assigned to me, never mind the rest. But again, the records indicated that I was with KGB, and therefore I couldn't get over this hurdle. So in the summer of 1973, I bumped into a couple of guys who just had a demonstration in front of the Soviet newspaper – four of them. They became pretty famous in the community because the picture of them appeared in [the] New York Times. Somebody photographed it on purpose. And Voice of America broadcasted that there are four Soviet Jewish refuseniks [had] just staged a demonstration near the

publishing company of that newspaper in Moscow. So they were instant celebrities, and they didn't get arrested for whatever reason. So I spoke to one of them; I said, “Listen, once you have the next demonstration, I'd like to join it too.” Later he told me how suspicious they were of me, a person who just came up and asked for that. Little that we knew at the time that a person who really was squealing was one of those four. But that wasn't found out until years later. He was actually working for KGB. That's why every time we planned [a] demonstration, they’d know. And we didn't know how they would find out. And the occasion was that in June of 1973, [Leonid Ilych] Brezhnev [Leader of the USSR from 1964-1982] went to meet [Richard] Nixon [37th president of the United States from 1969-1974]. And we thought it'd be [a] great idea to go to Kremlin wall and come up with this poster, so with slogans to lift the signs, “I want to go to Israel.” That's basically what we planned to do. There [were] eight of us. We decided to get together on a given day in June at the Kremlin wall, certain location. At the same time, I had a rehearsal with my band where I worked as a bass guitarist at ten AM. So I figured I'm going to skip it. But my friends told me that you got to make sure you don't have a tail; when you go to a location, make sure nobody is following you. The way to find out you get into a metro car. Then, when they announced that they're going to be – because in Moscow, they announce through radio that doors will be closed. So just a second, when the door is about to be closed, you just step out, and if anybody follows you, you'll see. That's exactly what happened. I was standing next to the door when they said the doors would be closed. I ran out, and two big guys from another car also got themselves out, and now three of us are standing on a platform, and obviously – they came closer without saying a word and were standing next to me. At this point, it was obvious that they are following me. So I decided not to go to [the] demonstration. I decided to go to my rehearsal. And they followed. And I went to a restaurant – musicians still together. We stood up. We said hello, we sat down, started rehearsing, [and] we had a break. I thought, now I'm going to escape. I'll leave my instrument there, they’ll take it away, and I'll run. So I went downstairs, and the people – I noticed they're standing, those two that I

saw, I recognized, and some others who surrounded the building. And they were watching. So finally, the rehearsal was over, and I was about to go home. As I left the building, I asked my peers to keep an eye on me and see what happens. So they were standing there smoking, watching me. Then as I crossed the street, I went back, and as I was about to go back, a car stopped right there. The door opened [and] two guys took my head down and made me get inside. So I sat inside the car, and they sat next to me without a word said. All I heard [was] the shortwave radio, or rather walkie talkie talking. So they shut that off. Without saying a word, the car went, and we arrived to a police station in Moscow.

Interviewer: Did you have a feeling of dread during this whole rehearsal that you knew something was going to happen?

AR: Yeah, I had a feeling that they could arrest me because they wouldn't just – because they were following me all along, and they were watching. Every so often, somebody would come up and see – as we rehearsed, somebody would come up and look inside so I could see that they're watching. That's why I thought something's going to happen. That's why I asked musicians to watch me as I was crossing the street. So they saw it. They didn't understand what actually happened. And [that night], we were supposed to work. We started [at] six o'clock in the evening until – I don't know – eleven, maybe we work – twelve. Maybe seven, we started working. But anyway, I was arrested. I was sitting inside the police station in the room with books – somebody's office, it seemed like – and nobody talked to me. So then the guy walked in. He started asking me questions or something. I asked him who he was. He gave me his first name. I asked him why I'm here. He said, "You know why you're here." I said, "I don't know why I'm here." I said, "I had a rehearsal." He said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We know what you're planning to do." So that went on like this for half a day, then they had lunch. I said, "I want something to eat." So they brought me a sandwich. I mean, they were very nice. They didn't talk much. I just realized that they're just keeping me there for a

day. When it came to six, seven o'clock, I said, “I got to go to work.” They said, “You're not going anywhere.” I said, “I need to tell at least my peers that I'm not coming to work tonight. Could you call the restaurant?” He said, “What do you want to tell him?” I said, “I don't know. You tell him whatever you want to tell him. Tell him I was sick.” So he called, and the bandleader came to the phone. He said, “Ary can't make it.” He's about to probably ask him on the other side, “Who are you?” But he hung up the phone. I said, “Okay, listen, you’ve got to give me a note that I was [here].” Yeah, by nine o'clock, they let me go. By nine o'clock, they said, “All right, go and behave.” I say, “Aren’t you going to give me some sort of a document so I can present to my employer saying that I was arrested?” They say, “You can get it tomorrow, here.” Well, the thing is that when I got out, I start calling from the payphone to find out that all of us were arrested the same way. As I realized later, some of them were in the same police station, just in different room. So the following day, I came to the station, and I asked to see chief of police. They brought me up to him. He sat in his office. He said, “What can I do for you?” I said, “I was here. I was arrested yesterday and spent all day in your facility. I just need a document of some sort to show to my employer the reasoning for my arrest and the reasoning for me missing the day of work.” He says, “Could you wait outside for a moment?” So I did. So I came back, [and] he said to me, “Listen, which room were you in?” I said, “Downstairs when you walk in the left.” He says, “Ha, what do you know? I was here all day; I didn't see you.” I said, “So? Well, I was there.” He said, “Who arrested you?” I say, “I don't know.” “What do you mean you don't know?” I said, “I don't know because they never showed me their ID; they put me in the car and brought [me] to you your station over here.” He says, “Come on. It's not Stalin’s time. Couldn't be happening.” [Editor’s Note: leader of the Soviet Union from 1922-1953, a totalitarian whose time was known for oppression, ethnic cleansing, and repression.] I said, “What am I supposed to do?” He says, “I don't know.” So I walk a mile in shock because I had no – now I had no proof I was arrested. [laughter] My employer said, the bandleader said, “[If] it’s going to happen one more time, you’re going to have a problem. This time I

can cover for you." I said, " You see, they arrested me." He said, "Yeah, we did see you, but why did they arrest you?" I said I had no idea.

Interviewer: Did they know you were Jewish? Your bandleaders?

AR: Yeah, sure they knew [I was] a Jew, but he didn't know I applied to go to Israel. Nobody knew. Let's say that my peers didn't know. I didn't want – because in those years, it was a rarity to leave the Soviet Union. Early '70s, it was not that popular for Jews to leave, and those of you who try to immigrate would be labeled as traitors. "We educated you for free, we gave you everything, and now you're just going; you want to leave." That's the attitude. So everyone in our band [was] Russian. I didn't want to. We were friends. We didn't socialize after work, but I mean, we were a group of musicians there; we had fun. I didn't want to create animosity, so they knew I was Jewish, but it didn't matter. This one guy was Tatar. I was Jewish. Maybe somebody was Ukrainian. But what's the difference? That's how the Soviet Union is; everybody's from somewhere. But the fact of immigrating would create animosity because they would either – some may envy, some may feel that I'm a traitor or be just simply afraid of dealing with me. Who knows? Once you're looking to the West, you may be a spy. Who the hell knows? So that would be [a] situation where I wouldn't want to be until I had to be.

Interviewer: Did you also just face any antisemitism, overt antisemitism?

AR: This is a different subject altogether because you have to live there to understand. Antisemitism is not – if you ask my wife, she says she never had any antisemitism. She grew up in (Kharkov [now Kharkiv]?), in Ukraine. There are forty kids in the school; they have thirty-three Jews. We had two in Moscow. And I know what antisemitism is; she doesn't. [inaudible] antisemitism could remind me of a friend of mine who was telling me how he was treated in the early '60s, '50s when he was – he's Black – how people look through you, and how in Filene's [department store], they wouldn't wait on you. I mean,

nobody says to you, “You’re a nigger,” but he feels it. So Soviet antisemitism is not when somebody tells you, “You're [a] Jew.” It’s where you feel it. So it's a separate subject. To say that I felt antisemitism, the answer is yes. But not among close friends, who are my friends. I remember in ’67, I wanted to get change for a ruble. This woman who sold ice cream says, “Go to your Israel.” So that was obvious antisemitism, right? But that rarely happened. Some drunk could look at my nose and say, you know, "You ..." That's obvious instance. But there’s subliminal antisemitism, which you don't – the country like Soviet Union used to be – Russia, Poland – those are East European countries. They know very well who Jew is and what the Ashkenazi Jew looks like, with that nose, like, “You look like them. You may not. But you do.” In this country, it could be Italian; it could be – it's kind of different. It could be Irish, anything. But in Soviet Union, the Russians look this way, the Jews look this way, and it’s very obvious. So you could see it in their – you can sense it. My wife doesn’t look Jewish. That's another reason why she never felt – on the streets, she would pass as the locals. It was my nose – I never could be disguised as anybody but Jew. Yeah, I guess if I were living in Armenia or Georgia, they could think maybe I'm from one of those Caucasus countries, but in Moscow, it was not a second question. To answer your question, did I feel antisemitism in the Soviet Union? Yes, I did. But it's still a long subject how I felt it. It wasn't like skinheads, where they write on the poster that they hate Jews, and they want to go back to [inaudible]. No, it wasn't that way. But it was –

Interviewer: More implicit.

AR: Yeah, it was suggested. Animosity was there. But anyway, we're getting away from the subject because it's antisemitism, and the Soviet Union is a totally different subject. [laughter] So what else do you want to know? I forget.

Interviewer: You were talking about the process when you were arrested and brought to the station. I think more leaning toward the process of leaving.

AR: Okay. Well, first, that continued until Brezhnev was in the US. Those arrests continued. Finally, my employer had it. And I was told [inaudible] one more time I miss work [that] I'll be gone.

Interviewer: How many times were you arrested?

AR: I can't remember. Almost every day. Because what turned [out] to be that they wanted to keep us off the street while Brezhnev was in the States. Every day goes by, [and] every one of us had a car with four people inside following us – everyone. Everyone had a car. It was funny. Once, we got together at somebody's house, and we were drinking beer, and we went to the balcony, looked down, and there were eight. So there were eight cars with four people in each. They were waiting there. They followed us openly. They didn't even hide. I remember once we went out with our guys. We knew that there's a bunch of tables taken by followers following us. So we played a joke on them. We ate very quickly, paid, and stood up. And half the restaurant stood up and went with us. [laughter] So those are fun times. But we were followed closely, all of us, every single day until Brezhnev was visiting Nixon. But then he came back. We were not able to demonstrate while he was in the States. Yet, we decided to stage the demonstration at the Metro Station after he returned. A demonstration lasted [a] few minutes. Normally, a Western journalist would be invited. That's how demonstration could be noticed; otherwise, nobody ever hears about it. We got arrested, got fifteen days in jail for disobedience, police disobedience. We were arrested. Judge was brought in. Not that we went to court; the judge was brought in, and everyone one by one went in front of the judge. The trial took [a] few minutes, like five. The questions were asked, and the witness was presented from the police, how they witnessed our disobedience. We were given fifteen days. That's the first time. What happened inside that jail – it's another story. It's a long story. It wasn't pleasant, let's put it this way. But after that, we had a press conference; we told how we're treated and this and that. It was published somewhere in Western publications. I don't know where at the time. And then,

soon after, we had another demonstration staged. At that time, [Natan] Sharansky joined. I didn't know him, and then we were introduced. So we went to the same demonstration. He was let go because, for him, it was the first one; for me, it was the second one. [laughter] So I was arrested again. Fifteen days in jail for disobedience. It was exactly during the Yom Kippur War [between Israel and Egypt and Syria, from October 6-25], 1973, because I remember that while we're inside, the officer came in and said, “There's a war just broke out in Israel. You still want to go?” That was exactly Yom Kippur War of 1973. Yes, to fast forward somehow, if it was ’73-year Yom Kippur, somewhere in ’74, towards the end of winter, we started hearing that some of our refuseniks were getting visa from nowhere. So I got a phone call. Someone asked me if I still want to leave. I said that I do. Well, they said, [You will have to reapply quickly.” So I gathered my documents – didn't have to do much because I wasn't working at the time. They threw me out of that work for [the] fact that I was jailed – and granted visa very quickly. They really wanted to get rid of some. I guess somebody finally got a hold of my file and really decided there's no danger of letting me out because I don't know any secrets. I wasn't a scientist. I wasn't anybody worthwhile keeping the Soviet Union who would create all this noise and just frustrate the authorities. So it would be easy for—they [inaudible] picked a few files and just let us out. A friend of mine, one of those eight – he and I were on the same plane. He still lives in Jerusalem. I just visited him in September while I was there. Then, that's that. So 1974, in June, just a day before my birthday, we left Soviet Union with my former wife and a son. Our son was then three years old, about. The rest you know. We went to Israel, [and] lived there a few months. At the time, Israelis weren’t granting visas to immigrants; therefore, we still continued to be Soviet refugees. As much as we didn't want to leave Israel, my wife's American relatives who were inviting us to the States saying that it's much easier to live in America, [so] why don't you come? Why do you want to struggle there? Because we were struggling. I had no specialties because my specialty was part of the Soviet agitation, propaganda, and part musicology; but again, I wasn't the kind of musician where I can go

to Symphony Orchestra and get a job. I mean, I was, like, below average. I played the bass in a band in a restaurant, but it's not enough to play professionally in Israel. I went to [a] couple of gigs, but I realized quickly that I don't qualify. So I do something else, and I was learning how to polish diamonds. That's the dirtiest work I ever [have] done on that rotating circle. You touch diamonds, and this dust flies around. I was doing it for twelve hours a day just to make [a] few bucks because they paid by the piece – diamond, polished. It was easy to convince me to change my life at the time. I had a son who was constantly sick, maybe getting used to a different climate because we came to Israel in June, a few more months after Ulpan [intensive Hebrew classes for adult immigrants] the fall [inaudible]. In Tel Aviv, it was like in Boston winter; it was kind of raining and rainy and cold – maybe it wasn't cold as in Boston, obviously, but it's drizzling rain, and he was sick all the time. I couldn't make enough money. We were selling something at the end of the month to make our ends meet. Because we brought some stuff because everybody says you have to take everything. We had sheets, pillows. We brought the piano and who knows what. We brought everything that people have; we brought everything with us to Israel. Every month, we were selling something. There'd be somebody [who'd] come in; they'd buy things cheap, and they'd sell them in a what-you-might-call-it – a flea market kind of thing. So we would sell something in order to generate enough money to pay our bills, which were still small, yet, I wasn't making enough money. My wife at the time wasn't working; she's still learning to become a beautician, get the diploma, and all that. Another thing is that we were still called Soviet refugees, so that was a way to get to the States on the status of a refugee as opposed to immigrant. Because once you became [an] Israeli citizen, there's no way you just can go to America and live there. It doesn't work; nobody would take you. So it was a rush to leave Israel before the year is up with the status of refugees. That's how we end up in Germany, in Munich. International Rescue Committee took us as refugees. And we got visas [and] came to America with a status of a refugee. They screw up my last name because it was (Rutman?) – became Rotman. And the first name, I changed because

(Arkadiy?) is a long name; I didn't want to go by that name. Plus, I like that character from Exodus, and I want [to] take his name. So I took it. I should have been Aaron because they called me (Arkadiy?) to Uncle (Aharon?). They gave me a Russian name as opposed to (Aharon?). When I was in Israel, I told him that my name is (Aharon?). Why I didn't keep that name, I have no clue. That's it. So we came here. At the time, in 1975, Jewish Family Children's Services was very generous. They would keep us on the [laughter] "payroll." They paid for our apartment for a whole year, gave [us] medical insurance and all. Gave us money for a whole year. Soon after that was over, they didn't have enough money to do that. But we got lucky. So we had time to learn English. We used to go to Hebrew College. We used to live in Jamaica Plain and walked over to Hebrew College for English classes. Then I started working in Filene's part-time. Just take a train over to Filene's in Boston. They gave me a job. Before Christmas, I remember I started sweeping floors – $2.25 an hour. Then I became a union member; I got $2.50. Then I was hired to – the second floor. It used to be one company – second floor – selling women's shoes. They gave me three bucks an hour plus five percent commission. Then I sold men's suits. So five years gone by, I spent in Filene's. And then, I got recruited by New York Life Insurance Company. That was my next employer for the next 30 years until I retired from them a couple [of] years ago.

Interviewer: I saw that you were involved in the Russian Jewish community here. Did you have an involvement in trying to help other refuseniks when you were on this side, once you were in the US?

AR: No, first of all, I didn't know how one can help refuseniks. You're talking about –?

Interviewer: Or help apply pressure to the government?

AR: No, no. No, I never was involved in that. I remember when Sharansky's wife was traveling when he was still in jail, and she was traveling, and she was in Brandeis speaking in probably 1976; we went to visit her. But no, the voice from here is not – no, I

didn't do any of that. Actually, I didn't do anything until I heard that some Russians [were] having a charity ball. And the money goes to Jewish Family and Children's Services. So I figured I want to help because after all that organization's helped us. It was maybe twelve years ago. And then, after doing it for them, a few of us said, "Why do we have to raise money from Russian community [and] give it all to Jewish Family and Children's Services so they can put in their budget? They have bigger donors. Let them have their own. Let us create our own organization." From that conversation, Russian Jewish Community Foundation was born, of which I was president for seven years. The organization – you can get on their website and see what they're doing. I'm proud to say they're still around. It's the only really grassroots organization of Russian Jews that still exists. Because everybody in New York and Los Angeles, they'd get together, do something, [in a] couple years, they all fight with each other, and the organization ends at that point. This organization was officially formed in 2005. They just celebrated their tenth charity ball. I was there in April. So they help children of Sderot [a city in Western Israel less than a mile from Gaza under frequent attack from rockets]. They help raise money for other causes around Boston area. So I was doing it faithfully for seven years, then we started spending more time in Florida; I couldn't be involved anymore. Because again, we only live here [for] five months. And that's the story. That's the only real work I've done for charity. Everything else was a bit more self-serving. When I was a member of that or the other organization, it's just to meet people because, in [the] insurance business, you have to have connections. You have to be involved in many things to meet people. That's why I was involved with the Republican Jewish Coalition and Brookline Republican Town Committee, but it's more for meeting wealthy individuals.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to add about your story, or maybe about Jewish life growing up as well?

AR: There's no such thing as Jewish life in the Soviet – we didn't grow up – I hope you understand because many Americans don't [know] that Jewish is the nationality of a

person; it's the DNA. It happens to be the same word, Judaism and Jew. But Irish know that he could be – I mean, Catholics know they could be Irish, and they could be Italian. It's not the same, but they are both Catholic. But we're not Jews, at least – we were not Jews by religion; we were Jews by DNA. And that's what makes you unique. Because an Armenian born in Moscow doesn't become Russian. I mean, I have to explain it forty years later to Americans that don't get that part. The fact that the Armenian was born in Moscow doesn't make him Russian. When they say, "You're Russian," well, actually, I'm not Russian; I'm Jewish, okay? I'm settled with that. I don't bother explaining to anybody. "Well, you're Russian." "Okay, we're Russians." But we're not Russians; we're Jews. And that's the difference.

Interviewer: What did your passport say?

AR: Well, in Russia, it said Jewish. That's how it was that Armenian in my example, who was born in Moscow, his pass will say "Armenian," because his mother was Armenian, father was Armenian. Now, if it's a mixed marriage, at age sixteen, when they get the passport, they have a choice. So many Jews would become Russians because it was easier living that way. But again, with a nose – I remember I had a friend; I met him in the Army. He was Russian; he had a nose bigger than mine, and his father was Jewish. But he was actually practicing Christianity. I had no idea. When we were in the Army, we were both treated the same. We would do more work in the kitchen as a punishment because we're Jews. But the fact is that his passport said "Russian" and mine said "Jew" didn't matter because we look the same. We could pass like cousins. But the fact is that officially one – and his last name was (Zolotnitsky?), it wasn't, like, (Petrov?). So with his nose, with his last name, he still was a Jew, but his passport said "Russian." It didn't matter. But the fact is, yes, at age sixteen, one can pick up whatever parents they choose and take their nationality.

Interviewer: Also, did you have any Jewish religious practices at home?

AR: No, I didn't know. Actually, when I met my first wife – her family [is] from Ukraine, and her father spoke with a Jewish accent. He could pray. I never even met that type of Jew. I never met any because my parents were quite Russified. They spoke perfect Russian. I never heard anybody mentioning any holidays. I know that when it came to Purim [a Jewish holiday celebrating the story of Esther], my grandmother would make hamantashen [triangular cookies traditionally filled with poppy seeds, fruit, or other sweet fillings]. I didn't know what Purim was, but I knew it's something when you eat those things. We would never celebrate any holidays. But when I met my former wife and her family, the first time I went outside of the synagogue in Moscow, never mind inside; outside, it was for exactly what was last night, Simchat Torah. [Editor's Note: Jewish holiday celebrating the end and beginning of the cycle of weekly Torah readings, often including circle dancing.] That's the first time I went to that celebration when I was eighteen years old. I had never been to a temple before, didn't know anything about Jewish holidays, and never missed them because I didn't know anything about it. [laughter] How can you? It's a kind of funny question when you're deprived from Jewish [education]. I didn't know that there is Jewish education. [laughter] How can I miss it when I don't know what it is? Today is different. I don't even know what it is today. But today, Russia is like any other, or most, let's say, civilized countries have education, and more or less. We didn't have any of it. When I was trying to leave Russia, I started learning Hebrew. It was underground. So that's about as far as I went. But as far as religion, my wife is atheist to this date. She wouldn't go to temple. She said, "I don't want to go there." I was at Chabad [Lubavitch Chassidic global organization with a focus on outreach] last night. I went there. I go to Russian Chabad every [inaudible] you should see that. They have this prayer book, right? In the middle is a bottle of vodka and a bottle of whiskey. They say a prayer; they drink [inaudible]. Then they start running with a Torah like maniacs. So at that time, I left because I had too much to drink the night before. [laughter]

Interviewer: Anything else to share or that you want to add?

AR: I don't know what else to share. I mean, I think in basic terms, this is it. That's the story.

Interviewer: Okay. That was very, very interesting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]