

Interview with Leonid and Nina Yufa, November 7, 2010

Attending: Mara J. Fulmer, Mott; Irina Yufa, JCS; Sara Yufa, High School student/ translator; Ann Pintar Curtis, Mott GD student; Veronica Creed, high school student; Alexandra Caldwell, high school student; Eric Hines, Mott MAET student; Samuel Lazar, high school student; Malcolm Bean, high school student.

Introductions:

IY: Today we have first interview for Holocaust project. This is my parents, my mom Nina Yufa and my dad, Leonid Yufa who are holocaust survivors. Today we have three generations of the family here. My parents, me, and my daughter Sara who will be translating for us.

I am Irina Yufa. I am adult and youth coordinator from Jewish Community Services (Flint) who created this project.

SY: I'm Sara Yufa. I'm a student at Carmen-Ainsworth High School. I am 16 yrs old and I am a member of the Holocaust project.

VC: I am Veronica Creed. I am 17 yrs old. I go to Grand Blanc High School and I'm also part of the Holocaust project.

AC: Hi. I am Alex(zandra) Caldwell. I'm a student at Flint Southwestern Academy. I am 17 and I am also part of the Holocaust project.

EH: I'm Eric Hines. I'm a film student at Mott and I'm also part of the Recounting Memories project.

MB: I'm Malcolm Bean. I'm a 17-yr-old senior at Classical Academy. I'm also an active member of the Remembrance project.

MJF: I think we had a few questions that folks had been asked to prepare and which started out fairly basic. I think I'll have Sam, since you were the first one, I'll have you start with the first question.

SL: Where did you live before the war?

NY: I lived in Karkov. I was born 2 months before the war.

LY: I also lived in Karkov in Ukraine. I was 3 years old. I was born in 1938.

IY: In the Soviet Union, the war started on June 21, 1941.

MJF: that's good to know. We know that in Germany and Poland the war started earlier. So this is good for context.

AC: Who did you live with?

Nina: With my parents.

Leonid: I also lived with my parents. My mom, my dad and my grandma.

[04:00]

VC: Did you and your family own a business before the war? And if so, were you forced to give that up?

Nina: My mom was a student and my dad was a builder.

Leonid: My parents worked in the cargo bus factory. Just workers in the factory?

MJF: (To Nina) What was your mother studying as a student?

Nina: Architecture. She finished her degree after the war.

AC: What kinds of persecution did you or your family experience?

Nina: The KGB took my grandfather. After 2 months he died. He had gone to school in England. And because of this, they thought that he was a British spy.

Leonid: No one in my family suffered much. But my dad's cousin in Odessa, was also took by the KGB and he also died in their hands.

Sam: Were your family members practicing Jews, or secular?

Nina: After the revolution, it was forbidden to practice jewish traditions. My mom told me stories about before the (Bolshevik) war when she was really little. But after that, there wasn't much.

Leonid: My family, they only spoke Russian. In my family no one practiced a lot of Jewish traditions. Not my mom or my dad. But my grandmother and her brother, they spoke Yiddush between themselves.

Irina: When I spoke with my grandma, my dad's mom, she never told me that she knows Yiddush. But when we came to the United States, she was the one who spoke Yiddush, the only one. She spoke Yiddush.

MJF: I think that's part of the misconception that in Europe everyone was a practicing Jew, everybody was Orthodox. And that's not the case.

Irina: Right. But in Soviet Union, it was prohibited. People were scared because you could be taken by the KGB. They were scared to do it [practice their religion].

[10:07]

In some places, small places, they did it. But most places they did not.

Alex: What was it like living under the Soviet Government?

Nina: Before I was born, they moved my entire family into a room about this size to live, even though before that they had a four or five bedroom house. They moved them because they decided it was too much space for each person to have their own room.

MJF: Was that a law that was decreed at the start of the war?

Nina: No. It was because of the start of the revolution. We studied, we worked. We didn't realize it was possible to live any better.

MJF: So when the war started (WWII), Jews had already been persecuted for decades in Soviet, post-revolution Russia.

Irina: Before the war, it was not only Jews. In the '30s, it was people who lived in the villages, in the country.

MJF: During the programs.

Irina: Yes. All food was taken off, and they practically died. And, at some point of period, it was political leaders, not necessarily Jewish people. It was a policy to kill all intellectual parts of society.

MJF: So, when we are talking about the Holocaust, how did things change? How was it different for Jews in Soviet Russia?

Nina: Everyone tried to leave. My mother took me in her arms, my brother by the hand. And with one suitcase, got on a train without a ticket and tried to run away, because she knew that the Nazis were killing people.

Irina: Not (just) people. They were killing Jews.

Leonid: My family lived like many other families in the Soviet Union at the time. They were relatively poor. When the war started, my family evacuated. My dad went straight to fight on the front. And my mom moved to Siberia with the family.

Irina asks question in Russian. If all our family could flee from Germans, or was someone under the Germans in staying in the city.

Leonid: Not my entire family was allowed to leave. My mom's brother had a mental disability and they wouldn't let him into the train wagon. The government told my family

that they would send him later. But they never did. All the people who were held back were later killed by the Nazis.

[17:10]

Irina: He was in special house for disabled people. And he just stayed the whole time. Family just visited him. ..just killed.

[transcribed from Audio tape, part 2]

Irina: In my city, Haika, what happened was that Germans took all Jews. Our city went back and forth from Germans to Russian army three times. What Germans did was they took all Jews, they told them to take all stuff they have, all jewelry, all goodies, and come to specific place. We have huge plant in the city. And they told them to take off clothes, stay naked and they killed all Jews in one place.

In another place what they did, they took people to the forest. They gave people shovels and told them to dig. And later, they kill all people, pushed them inside (the hole they'd dug), and took another group and told them to take a shovel and cover it. This ground was crying for a few days because so many people were (still buried) alive inside.

On this place later was built a monument in memory. But because Soviet Union was anti-semitic, always, before war and after war, no one said it was a monument to Jews. Everyone knew it was Jewish grave. But no one said it. It was monument to victims of the war.

Another interesting thing, my Dad didn't tell it. My grandfather, he didn't just work in the factory. He was the leader of the communist organization in this factory. My grandmother, she was a leader of communist youth organization. They very truly believed in good life, in better life.

MJF: So they were fairly high up in hierarchy.

Irina: My grandmother's family, before revolution, they had a small restaurant on the first floor, and their apartment on second floor. But they lost everything. I don't know why they believed in a better life. But they also had social security. And my mom's family had a tailor shop. And her family was highly educated.

VC: I wanted to know if you were ever forced to go into hiding. And if you were? Where at and what was it like?

Nina: When the Nazis came to Karkov, my family was in Uzbekistan.

Irina: They moved to Uzbekistan, then to German, than back to Soviet Union.

Nina: My mom and the children. My father was fighting on the front.

Leonid: We also left. We went to Siberia. Which in a way was hiding.

Sam: What was it like in Siberia?

Leonid: In Siberia, it was very cold. I don't remember a lot because I was 3 yrs old until I was about 5 yrs old. I was told that it was very hard in terms of getting food, and that the living conditions were very hard.

Irina: Where did you live in Siberia?

Leonid: The company that my mom worked with, the factory, they gave their workers places to live, like a room, or dormitories.

Ann: Are these the people who helped you flee to safer places?

Leonid: It was the people in the factory. My mother's boss.

Irina: They evacuated the whole factory. They had people who could help.

MJF: How did you feel about the people who evacuate the factory?

Leonid: I can't really say a lot because I was young. But my mom said that people helped a lot. The local people helped if they could.

Alex: You said that getting food was hard. Do you happen to know what kind of food you ate?

Leonid: Potatoes mostly. I can't really say a lot of what the food was. I just know that it was very hard to get food. People would trade their clothes, or their jewelry, or whatever they had for food.

Ann: Of these people who helped you to escape to better places, would you say they were risking their lives to help out?

Leonid: No. In Siberia, it was either the neighbors or the factory where my mother worked would help its employees. They had coupons that workers of the factory could get things like bread for.

Irina: During the war, it was the norm for each person for the bread. For workers, it was like 250 grams. For family members, 125 gms... per day. It mostly worked women, since most men were in the army. If woman one piece, 250 gms, she would choose one and the had other piece for her children. And most women gave her part to her kids to keep them alive.

Irina asks question to Nina in Russia: Tell us about your family and how your mother worked.

Nina: We lived in Uzbekistan. They placed us among the locals. Because my father wasn't just a soldier, but a commander in the army. They placed us with this woman. And my mother would leave us with her while my mother would run off to work.

At night my mom would sew Uzbekistanian hats to make some extra money to help feed her two children.

Irina: Where did she work?

Nina: I don't even know.

VC: Was your family always together? If they weren't, where did everyone end up?

Nina: My mother was almost always with her children. But my grandmother left for the Bulgar River. She died there from hunger because the Nazis came to the Bulgar River and it was very hard to get produce there.

Leonid: We were always together when we moved to Siberia. Then, in 1943, we moved back to Karkov and lived where we had before.

Irina: What about your father?

Leonid: My father was injured because he was fighting on the front. A couple times he came to Siberia to visit us. After we move back to Karkov, the factory started working again and my mother worked there. Because of his injury, my father had only 20% of his vision and he worked as a security for a factory. In 1945 it was robbed by a Russian local people and he was killed. He was 32 years old.

MJF: When did the war end for your family?

Irina: May 9, 1945 was the victory for the war and it ended for my family.

MJF: How did things change for your family after that?

Leonid: In the room where we lived, we had four neighbors. And they all survived the war and they lived there. The room where we lived before the war, everything remained there because, while we were gone a Nazi officer lived there. When the Nazis fled, they really didn't have time. They really didn't care about grabbing things. Even when we moved back, we found our chandelier across the street in an army headquarters.

Before the war you lived a mother, a father. Then after the war you had a different family situation. How hard was it? My mother worked. My grandmother didn't. After the war, I started school. It was hard to get... it was a hard life.

Nina: When we returned to Karkov, the apartment was completely empty, destroyed. The windows were broken. And my mother was forced to live with her family in a small

room. She worked in and took classes at the Institute to complete her degree. It was very hard for her. And she was forced to take me to an overnight daycare where the children would stay five days a week and then come home on weekends.

Ann: How did this impact you?

Nina: I was sick very often and started school a year later than was normal.

Irina: During the evacuation, how was your health?

Nina: During the evacuation, even though I was only 1, I was sick with tropical malaria. My entire life, I never had any vaccines because my reaction to them was very bad.

Irina: When she was 1 yr old, in Uzbekistan. There was no medicine. No doctors for they were all on the front.

Sam: Looking back on this, is there anything else that really sticks out in your mind?

Nina: All my parents told me this. When I was 8 yrs old, I had a relapse of malaria. And now, though I'm past 70 yrs old, I still remember this.

Ann: I did have a question about maintaining faith. How were you able to maintain faith in G-d after surviving the Holocaust and witnessing all the devastation that it brought?

MJF: Faith means different things in an area where you weren't allowed to practice. Maybe in that context you could answer.

Irina: In the Soviet Union, there was no G-d for people. Religion was prohibited, to practice religion, ANY kind of religion. In our city, I don't know how many synagogues there were before the revolution, I don't know. But I know that all my entire life, I went to sport complex, like the YMCA over here, they had there. And I didn't know this, but people later told me that it was a synagogue. And I started looking around and I saw Star of Davids all around, in the windows, beautiful since they couldn't destroy it. It was of stone or glass.

In 1986, when Gorbachev (glasnost) took place, they opened windows to the world and people started practice religion again. In this place, all Jews from the city of Karkov they needed so much money to build this place as a synagogue again. And I can tell you that in a few months, they didn't expect it so fast, in just a few months the synagogue was open. It was the first synagogue. We had three synagogues, big. One was destroyed completely. One was just closed, an old place that no one knew about. And the last one was huge, beautiful, in the middle of downtown. And it was turned into a sports complex.

[audio tape 002, 28:39]

MJF: Being Jewish in Soviet Russia, you were not practicing. And the young people may have not even have much memory of what Jewish means.

Irina: Oh, but we have memory of what Jewish means. Because, in America you don't know that. But in Russia, in Soviet Union, people recognized you as a Jew from your look. And in school, kids have grades in some book. You have name and you have grades. But in my school, it was name, address, and your identity, you are Jewish, you are Russian, you are Ukrainian, or whoever you are. And THEN grades. And everyone can see if you are Jewish or not.

MJF: So what did it mean, then, to be a Jew.

Irina: It means that... ahhh... it was really tough. Because, everytime someone you that you are not as everybody else. For some reason, they thought we are bad, and they abuse us with words. Kids fight. I remember I had...

MJF: As you mentioned, it's different in some ways here. And I imagine even in Germany, as people assimilated it was hard to tell who was Jewish, who wasn't. So, not all the time, but in some cases, we could say it's the color of your hair, or the way it curls, or the shape of your face, and last name, yes. And, in the United States, that changed a lot.

Irina: I don't see it in the United States. You can find Sara's and Aaron's everywhere, from different religions.

MJF: Exactly. Or, you can find last names that have been Anglicized when they came to the United States.

Irina: In the passport, we have Nationality line. It was always a joke. Line #5. Everyone knew Line #5. No one said it was Nationality. Everyone said Line #5. And we knew it.

When I came to apply for college. I came, it was 1981. It wasn't really bad there in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was closed but it was kind of quiet, let's say. First thing they did was open my passport. By my face, they knew who am I. They wanted to be sure. We had to be 3,4,5 times better than everybody else to prove that we are allowed to have same life.

MJF: You had to be a better student, a better musician...

Irina: Right. In everything. And it was kind of funny, if you go look. We had so many... Our city was big, 2 million people, we had very industrial city. And everywhere, in every plant, in every organization, the director was Russian or Ukrainian, and then the lead engineer or lead person in the plant was Jewish... because they were working! actually doing something!

MJF: So what it meant to be a Jew was a cultural designation, not a religious one.

Irina: At least in my life.

MJF: So in 1986, when Gorbachev dropped the wall and the curtain came down, where did they come from, and how did the people know how to practice their faith?

Irina: I was so surprised to see so many people in Talas (Jewish shawl worn by religious men) practicing Judaism! It means that they DID it! Somewhere, hiding! You know. My family wasn't connected to that, and we didn't know. But people did it. People continued to practice. Like my husband, he had a Bar Mitzvah (Jewish ceremony at age 13). It was really early in the morning, no one should know that. He was waking up at 3 in the morning. They did it in some house really quietly. Secretly. People tried to practice, but they'd hide it, and no one knew it. I didn't know it. And when they opened synagogues, so many young people came. They want to be attached to their roots, their religion. They wanted to know something. And people started even arranged marriages and so on. It was very interesting how people lived their lives how they lived before when their grandparents lived. It became like a public place for Jewish people. Very interesting, actually.

MJF: When did your family finally choose to migrate to the United States. And how?

Irina: I migrated in 1991, and then I asked my family. In 1993 they came to the United States.

MJF: Was it hard to leave family behind? or did everyone come to the United States?

Irina: It was very dramatic because, with Soviet Union, you never know when they were going to close the door. Today they're open, tomorrow? In 70s the same thing happened. They opened the doors for 3 years. And then they closed. And people, some people, our friends, they sold everything. They had all their documents ready to leave. It was 1976, 1977. And then, the door was closed. And they end up in an empty apartment with nothing, without documents, with anything, money. And they lived another 10 years like this. They couldn't find job because everybody knew that they wanted to leave the country. And they were kind of kicked out of society.

And when I left, my mom had a heart attack. And for 2 years a period because she thought she'd never see me again. It was so scary. I came in June and in August was a putsch (government overthrow) when Yeltsin took over. And I thought that's it. I thought that they'll close the door. I was crying for weeks, and for weeks I couldn't talk about it. It's so hard. And when I left, it was very interesting. People came with families, mostly. And they were so happy to come. I was crying for 9 hours in a plane because I was alone, I didn't know where I was going. And my family stayed. It was so hard.

MJF: And your family joined you 2 years later?

Irina: Yes, in 1993.

MJF: You came to Flint?

Irina: Yes. Flint Jewish Federation resettled me. And then they helped resettle my family. It was a happy ending.

And what else I want to say is that in Soviet Union, I knew that I was a Jewess, but I had no idea about our religion, about our traditions, about our rules. Here, my kids go to Jewish school. My daughter had Bat Mitzvah. My son on his way next year. And they can pray, and they can be proud to be a Jew.

MJF: So in a way you've had a chance to, by coming to the United States, to rediscover this part of your heritage.

Irina: It was a missing part, a big part, that I always wanted to know. I always felt it was something I need to know, that I didn't know about us.

[Audio tape 0002, 38:07]

MJF: Ann, did that start to address the question?

Ann: Absolutely.

MJF: We've come full circle.

Ann: It's a big circle, all right! It's a lot more in depth than I thought.

Irina: It's not just about discrimination in Soviet Union. I just want to tell you about my father. In Soviet Union, when you go to college, you have to do four tests. English, no Russian, two Math tests, and some other subjects. My father did it 5 years in a row. Until his mother found someone who could help him go into the college. He didn't have a choice about college. He couldn't choose college because no one would take him.

It was really hard. People paid big money just to help kids get in. It wasn't about your knowledge. It was about who you are.

MJF: Or who you could bribe.

Irina: In my college, it was a limit. Two Jews in a group.

MJF: That kind addresses a question that goes back 30 or 40 years. Why did more Jews not try to migrate after WWII from Soviet Russia?

Irina: Because they closed the door. Again, my husband would tell you this. But his mother, she was married and they had a kid. And they wanted to escape from Soviet Union. People who were working on the border, for big money, they would help some

families. But because they had a little kid, a baby, they didn't let him do that, because baby could cry at any time. But people paid huge money. People, some people who wanted to escape, they tried to move close to the border. But it was hard.

No one took them to jail. No, they just shot the people.

It was impossible. You couldn't go anywhere. You couldn't go for a trip outside of the country. When Gorbechev came, so many people just booked ANY trip. It don't matter what. Just moved out of the country and never came back. Not only Jewish people. All people tried to go out of this country.

MJF: The brain drain.

Ann: I would like to know what feelings do you have when you hear the name Adolf Hitler?

Leonid: Scary feelings. It makes me remember that Hitler and his system killed millions of people just for political reasons. And the horrors that it caused for Europe and the Soviet Union.

VC: When you were growing up, and you would talk to other kids? What were their opinions about what happened then? How much did they know?

Leonid: During that time children didn't think about why Jews were being killed in the Holocaust, or things like that, because the government hid all of that. On the contrary, they tried to make it seem like the Nazis were going to take everyone, all the Russian people into custody.

Irina speaks in Russian to parents.

Sara translates Irina: After the war, Stalin basically did the same thing that Nazi German did. He planned to make Bierabijahn a Jewish state inside the Soviet Union, in Siberia.

Irina: It was the worst place whole country. The country was huge. But Bierabijahn is the worst place in all. And he planned to move all Jews to this place. And what happened was that on Purim, he died.

It is significant. Stalin didn't finish this project and he died on Purim. And all Soviet Jews were saved. He moved some people. Actually, in Bierabijahn, so many Jewish people lived. And actually in Bierabijahn later became a huge industrial and educational place.

He died in 1953.

MJF: Purim, simply speaking, celebrates the victory of a Queen over a tyrant.

VC: What are some images that stick out? What can't you forget?

Nina: When the Nazis took over Karkov, hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed. They told everyone that they were going to be given jobs. And they just gathered all the Jews in a chopper factory and shot them all. In Karkov, they finally built a monument.

[48:38, Audio Tape 00002]