

MY STORY

This is the story of my life, story of a Jew who was born in the former Soviet Union and lived there for thirty eight years, until he was fed up with this life and left everything behind, his mother and brother, his wife's parents and her sister and came to US.

The idea to write this story came to me after my granddaughter wrote in one of her presentations about us, her grandparents, coming to US. She heard this from her father and from us. The story was quite short and she wanted to know more details about our journey as well the reason why we moved from the established life in the Soviet Union to a new country, new language, new life, and left everything and everyone behind.

And I decided that I needed to tell my children and particularly my grandchildren about us, about our journey to freedom and to a better life for our children and grandchildren.

I am seventy six years old and I have lived in this country for thirty seven years and my memory of what happened here and there is fading but I'll try hard to describe the major events of our life.

So let's start our journey.

I was born in Berdichev, a small town in Ukraine. In this town the majority of inhabitants were Jewish. Before the revolution of 1917 this town was a shtetl where the Tsar's government allowed Jews to live. My grandfather was a bookbinder. He bound religious books. He was married and had six children. I don't remember him, he died in 1944, I was just 4 years old. I also remember my grandmother very little. She died when I was just 5 years old. After the revolution of 1917 Jews received freedom to move from the shtetls to big cities, be accepted to colleges to receive education and get good jobs.

A little history about Ukraine and particularly about Jews in Ukraine. Ukrainian-speaking people lived in Poland on the border between Russia and Poland. They belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church while Poland was a catholic country which created some tension between Ukrainians and Poles. Jews arrived in Poland in the 16-17th centuries by the invitation of the Polish king who wanted to bring commerce and trade to Poland. Many Jews opened bars where they sold vodka to peasants; others became traders of agricultural products. Large landlords hired Jews as managers of their estates. All of this created tensions between Ukrainian peasants and Jews. In 1650 when Ukrainian Cossacks (peasants who ran away from their landlords) rose up against Poland but first they started killing Jews in the thousands. This tradition (killing Jews in any uprising or revolution) was carried in 1917-1920 during the Bolshevik Revolution and in 1941-1945 during World War Two. In 1917-1920 Ukrainian nationalists under their leader Petlura and in 1941-1945 under Bendera continued the tradition

of killing Jews. By the way, now the Ukrainian government presents them as heroes of the Ukrainian nation.

Now back to my story.

My mom graduated from Odessa's Pharmaceutical Institute and became a pharmacist. After graduation from Institute she was sent to work to Korosten, a small town in the eastern Ukraine where she met my father who was an accountant. It was 1939, the year when Russia started the war with Finland. My father was called up to join the army and they offered him two choices: to fight Finland or go to a military school and become an officer. He chose the second. After graduation from the military school he was sent to Ufa, a town in eastern Russia beyond the Ural Mountains. Mom joined him there with me and my twin brother Ilia. In the spring of 1941 my mom with us went to Berdichev to spend the summer with her mom. She said goodbye to her husband. He was supposed to meet her on vacation later on, but this never happened. The war started in June 1941 and my father was sent to the front right away and was killed in July 1941. I was just 11 month old when he was killed and I obviously have no memory of my father.

In the beginning of war Germans advanced very fast and my mom with her parents, sisters and brother evacuated to Alma-Ata, capital of Kazakhstan, in the south-eastern part of Russia. It took them several months to reach their destination. They rode in cattle cars. On the way to Alma-Ata they were bombed by German planes. And don't forget they traveled with two eleven-month-old babies. Obviously I don't remember anything about this trip, but after the war when we got older, mom or her sister Lisa told us the stories about this trip and they cried just remembering this nightmare. While in Alma-Ata, my mom and her brother worked in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, she as a pharmacist and he as chief bookkeeper. Just before the war ended, the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs moved back to Kiev and my mom with her brother and all the family moved with them to Kiev. After arriving in Kiev they received three rooms in a five-room apartment for 6 adults and two children. By Russian standards it was a very good deal.

Life during the war and after the war was very hard. They received a card which allowed them to receive small amounts of food, just little above starvation level (bread, cereals, sugar, etc). You also could buy some food in stores where selection was very limited and you had to stay in line for hours or you could buy on the market where the prices were sky-high and ordinary people could not afford them. This card system continued for a few years after the war ended. After arriving in Kiev my grandfather died. Then mom's younger brother died, he died from tuberculosis which he caught while they traveled to get evacuated when he was just 16 years old. During the evacuation, the son of my mom's sister Manya also died. All of this greatly affected my grandmother and she got a heart attack soon after they died. She was in her fifties.

My mom, her sister and brother continued working in the Ministry of internal Affairs system until 1949. That year Stalin began a campaign against Jews and all the Jews who worked for the government were fired. My mom and her brother started looking for jobs, but not too many companies were willing to hire Jews. It took them a while to get jobs, meanwhile they received no money, since no unemployment benefits existed in Russia during communist rule.

Our childhood was hard; we didn't know that, we've been too small to understand. We were left alone by ourselves from the age of 7 when we went to school. With us lived mom's sister Lisa who help mom care for us. Usually they went to work and left us alone. We got up, ate breakfast that mom prepared, collected our stuff and went to school. School finished at two or three o'clock (I don't remember exactly) and we went home, had something to eat, did our homework and went outside to play with our friends. We did not have good clothes since mom didn't have money to buy them, so our clothes were short and shoes very often had holes. We couldn't afford to have toys, bike, skates, skis, or anything that kids have at that age. But we thought it was normal; at that time many families lived like us, Jews and not Jews.

After graduation from seventh grade my brother was accepted to a three-year technical college and I continued regular school by myself. After graduation from high school I tried go to college but this wasn't easy. In Russia, education was free and they didn't have so many colleges like in the U.S., so to be accepted to college you had to pass quite rigorous exams. Besides that, colleges had a quota how many Jews can be accepted to college. And on top of it, among the teachers who took your exam were quite a large contingent of just anti-Semites who didn't want Jews to be in college. Therefore for a Jew to be accepted to college you had to be very good and also have somebody in college who could help you, usually for money. The alternative was to go to work and take evening or correspondence classes. You still needed somebody's help but the price was less. Since I wasn't accepted to college I went to work as an apprentice of turner in a big shipbuilding company. I worked there only a few months since at that time there was an opening in a two-year school of pharmacy. I passed the exam and was accepted there. Right after graduation I applied to the correspondence medical college in Lvov with major in pharmacy and after passing the exam I was accepted. But my happiness was short-lived; in September I was drafted into the army and started my 3 years of military service. I don't know about armies in other countries but the Russian army was not the best place to be, particularly in 1959. In the first year they sent me to artillery sergeant's school where they trained you all year to become a sergeant. Training was very hard, but I survived.

Just before graduation I met an officer who was in charge of the medical unit and told him that I was a pharmacist and would like to serve in his unit. Likely they had an opening and they transferred me there. I was very happy and my life in army significantly improved. Even more, they allowed me to do a correspondence study in college and gave me 10 days of vacation so

that I was able to take exams and pass them for the first year. They also allowed me to complete the second year. In the middle of the third year my position of pharmacy manager became civilian and I was transferred to a construction battalion closer to the city of Korosten where my father was born and where my mom and dad met. I was there as a company medic. The construction battalion and particularly the company where I served built silos for ballistic missiles. My life there was good, my responsibility was to give some pills if somebody got sick, and if somebody got seriously sick or had a trauma to transfer them to a hospital in Korosten. Being often in the city where my mom and dad lived and where my father's family lived before war, I tried to find somebody who knew them. Unfortunately the Jews who remained in Korosten during German occupation were all killed and not too many who evacuated from the city returned back. Thus not only don't I know my father but I also know almost nothing about his family. Finally in the fall of 1962 I was discharged. I never forgot the feeling of freedom when I rode home.

So I came home and right away new problems arrived. First I needed to find a job. To find a job in Russia at that time was quite complicated. There wasn't any advertisement in papers as well as any private or government organizations that helped people to find jobs. The only way to find a job was if you knew somebody who knew somebody who knew some company in your field that was looking for people with education and some experience in their field. But if you were a Jew your task to find a job became much harder, particularly don't even look for a good job in good companies. It was practically almost impossible to get there if you didn't have friends or someone whom you could bribe to get a job there. Since I didn't have this kind of friends, my mom found someone who knew that in a small chemical company they needed someone with knowledge of chemistry and they could even hire a Jew. Thus I got the job as a technician.

I need to describe this company because conditions and safety in this company were so bad like in the third world countries or in U.S. where illegal immigrants work. We manufactured in this company chemical reagents for science labs in colleges and for a variety of institutions where chemical reagents were used. The value of these reagents was small and work usually was carried in the lab. As an example of what compound we used were phosgene, chlorine, flour and other very nasty stuff. Each room had hoods with negative pressure but, with exception of phosgene, all the fumes from the hood went straight into the air and I felt sorry for people who lived in the vicinity of this company. Only the phosgene hood was connected to the scraper but the air from the scraper had never been tested for residual phosgene. The good of working in this company was great experience in producing a variety of chemicals; the bad part was that this was a very dangerous job not good for your health. I worked in this company for fourteen years and the experience I received there helped me tremendously in the United States.

One of the benefits of my job was that I met my future wife there. We were married in 1966 and at the time I am writing this story it is 50 years of our marriage. We've been lucky, six months after the wedding we were able to buy a two-room condo on the fifth floor of a five-floor building. Our life was typical of the life of an average Russian professional. This life continued to 1978 when we immigrated to the United States.

Now I 'll try to answer the question I've been asked by my granddaughters, my American friends, coworkers and even my neighbors, why did I immigrated to United States.

There were three major reasons why we did it.

First. I became disappointed with the communist system. I did not want to live in a country where the government (which included party leaders and KGB) robbed, cheated, killed and imprisoned innocent people. The life for regular people was miserable with permanent shortage of goods, terrible services, endless queues, and so on. At the same time the party leaders not only in Moscow but on a local level lived in nice apartments, and while regular people stayed in long lines to buy anything from foods to clothes they had special closed stores just for them for half the price and no lines. These discoveries didn't happens overnight, the communist propaganda was very strong and started in kindergarten and it took me awhile to realize that everything they presented in newspapers, books, TV, radio were lies. They never said or showed any disasters happening in the Soviet Union, anything bad happened only in foreign capitalist countries, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, fires and so on.

So how did I come to the conclusion about the reality of the Soviet Union? Soviet Union was a very closed society; all information sources belonged and were controlled by the government and particularly by the KGB. Stalin died in 1953 and the Party leader became Nikita Khrushchev. In 1956 there was the famous Party congress where Khrushchev disclosed the truth about Gulags, about arrests, imprisonments and killing of innocent peoples. At that time they allowed to publish the book Archipelago Gulag by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and more importantly they stopped blocking the radio stations like Voice of America, Radio Freedom, Israel's station from broadcasting in Russian about life in Russia, about the atrocities of the communist regime. It didn't last very long, but it was enough to open my eyes to see the horror and injustices in the country that presented itself as the most just country in the world. Even when the sources of information from the West were blocked I had tried to listen at night through terrible noise the news from the West and some chapters from Solzhenitsyn's books as well as some story about life of unknown to us famous people, such as Beatles, Priestly, Sinatra and so on. And after all of this I desperately wanted to leave the communist "paradise" and move to the capitalist "hell".

Second. I am a JEW and I am proud of it. But when I was growing up in the Soviet Union I didn't know almost anything about Judaism, Jews religion, history of famous Jews, etc. Sometimes my mom told us about our grandparents who had been religious people and how on Friday night all the family gathered together and grandma lit the candles, grandpa read the prayer from the Bible and they had dinner. My mom and her sisters weren't religious; they grew up after the revolution when religion was suppressed. One has to realize that for young boys and especially for girls the revolution changed their lives. Before the revolution their life was set. They had to live in the small town (shtetl), get married, have children and so on, particularly for the poor children and my family was poor. So after revolution the world was open for them. They could move to a big city, go to school, colleges, etc. This was exactly what happened to many Jewish youngsters, many of them graduated from colleges and became famous scientists, doctors, engineers, writers, musicians, teachers, and so on. So they very easily broke up with religion and jumped into the new life. In the thirties many of them ended up in GULAG, were tortured and killed or died from hard work and starvation. But in the beginning they were very happy and they very much supported the new system, they believed in everything the new government told them.

My mom was able to go to college and become a pharmacist, she became the first member of the family who got a college diploma. Antisemitism in the Soviet Union had shown itself in full blast only after World War Two around 1947 when my mom and her brother lost their jobs and nobody wanted to hire them. At that time quota was introduced for how many Jews can be accepted to colleges, it became very hard for a Jew to be promoted at work, and the worst of it was that it allowed anti-Semites to get out and harass Jews. As an example, in school in the sixth or seventh grade two boys sat behind my desk and they quite loudly cursed Jews and that was ok. To be fair, not all of the people were like them. Me and my brother had Russian friends and we are still friends. Unfortunately they live in Ukraine but my brother is close to them calling them regularly.

So, being a Jew in Russia didn't make me very happy and I started to try to find out who were the Jews, what was their history, where did they come from and what differentiates them from other people. It wasn't easy but I was persistent, reading books like Spanish stories, Jew Süß, Jewish War by Lion Feuchtwanger. His books were allowed in the Soviet Union because of his naivety in supporting Stalin's regime. In these books he described the history of Jews in the Roman times, their uprising against the Romans, the siege of Masada, the heroism and sacrifice of Jews. In the other books he described life and struggle of Jews in the Middle Ages. I also found one book by a Polish author where he presented the Bible as a narrative story, and the history of Jews became open for me. I found out about Moses, David, King Solomon, and so on. These books opened my eyes about who were the Jews. I found out how many famous people even geniuses were Jewish and became proud of who I was. I didn't want to hide that I was a

Jew, I wanted to feel equal to other people and maybe be a little superior (sorry). This I only could reach abroad.

Third. We have two children, they are very bright but they had no future in that country. I didn't want for my son to go to the Russian army and, how it happened in the 80th, to be killed in Afganistan or Chechnia, and for what? I wanted them to achieve whatever they were capable of.

Of course there were other reasons to emigrate.

I wanted to leave my terrible place of work and work in a nice secure place and to do what I liked to do, like process and products discovery and development where I was good. I was lucky, by coming to America I was able to have the work I liked. I enjoyed my work and I achieved some success in my field which I never would have in Russia.

And not the least reason to leave Russia was a dream to have a better life, to have nice clothes, to have a car, a house, to travel around the world, all the goodies which you can have if you work hard and have a little luck. This was an unachievable dream in Russia but a hope that we could have it if we left Russia.

Now I'll describe the emigration and the first steps in America.

I thought of emigrating to the U.S. in the beginning of seventies, but Rimma (my wife) couldn't dare to move. One has to realize in that time by leaving the Soviet Union we would never be able to see our mothers, her father, my brother, her sister and our friends, never. It was a one way ticket with no return. Another obstacle to make a decision was fear that if for any reason they didn't allow you to leave you could lose a job, you could be harassed by authority and for you and your family there was no future.

The procedure to leave the country was quite complicated. You were supposed to receive an invitation from your relatives in Israel which Israel was happy to send you, never mind you never knew the name of the people who sent you this invitation, but neither did the KGB. After you received the invitation you applied for permission to leave the country. KGB checked if you did any work involving classified information and only if you didn't you'd be allowed to emigrate from Russia to Israel.

And at the beginning of August 1978 we flew to Vienna. We were allowed to carry \$400 dollars (\$100 per person) and since we flew in the plane we only could take with us two pieces of luggage and a big bag. As you can see, our country wasn't very generous. In Vienna we were met by HIAS and they transferred us from the airport to a small hostel and placed us in a small room with two beds on the second floor. The hostel was filled with people like us, emigres from

Russia. The place wasn't a hotel and it wasn't designed to accommodate families. The rooms didn't have a bathroom, a shower, a kitchen, and only two bathrooms were in a big corridor where at least 10 rooms were occupied by ten families. Also in the corridor was one room as a kitchen where we could use a personal electric stove. HIAS also gave us a small amount of money so that we could buy some produce to cook meals.

There were two organizations in Vienna who took care of us. One Israeli "JOINT" and American "HIAS". First, families went to JOINT where they were offered to go to Israel and if you refused for any reason they sent you to HIAS. It took about a week for HIAS to prepare all papers to transfer us to Rome, Italy. So we had all week to explore Vienna. For us who came from communist paradise we couldn't believe our eyes when we saw stores filled with goods and no lines, nicely dressed people, no drunks on the street, no military uniforms, few policemen, music in the street. Vienna is a beautiful city, a lot of parks and trees on the streets. Everything looked so bright there compared to the grayish color of Russian cities. From our window in the room we could see the neighbor's house and a backyard with a pool. One day I saw the owner or the owner's son went outside, jumped in the pool and started to do laps. I couldn't believe that normal people who lived on a regular street, not the government or party leaders could have such luxurious life and I made a promise that someday I'd have it too.

We stayed in Vienna for ten days and then all the families who refused to go to Israel were loaded on a train and sent to Rome (Italy). The train was guarded in Austria by Police and in Italy by Mafia against terrorists. The train stopped at night about 50 kilometers from Rome and people were very fast removed from the train and placed on trucks. To speed up the unloading process the small children were passed through the window. As soon as trucks were filled they started to Rome. In Rome we were placed in small bed and breakfast hotels about up to ten families in each. Our hotel was located not far away from the center of Rome so we could walk to any famous place in Rome, such as Vatican, Coliseum, Spanish steps and so on. In the hotel they fed us since we practically didn't have any money except what was left from Vienna and what we brought from Russia. So in Rome we walked to all attractions. In Rome also were free days for visiting museums which helped us to visit all museums and attractions.

We stayed in Rome around ten days to fill paperwork for applying for permit to enter the United States. After that HIAS gave us some money to rent a room and buy some food to feed the family. The rent in Rome was quite expensive and the majority of Russian emigrants moved to Ostia, a small vacation town on a shore of the Mediterranean Sea about an hour drive in a train from Rome. The process to find and rent an apartment was quite interesting. Since no one from the Russian people could speak or read Italian the quite typical Russian system was developed. The people who would go to the U.S. stayed in Ostia for three months, people who would go to Canada or Australia stayed up to six months. The people arrived in Italy and left

Italy once a week. So the people who were leaving Ostia passed their apartments (usually one room) to newly arrived people. You had to pay them a broker's fee of about half of your monthly rent, depending on how good the room was and where it was located, but when you left you would have your money back passing your room to new arrivals. All this renting process occurred in the center of Ostia where a huge crowd of Russian emigrants gathered to exchange news, rent or sell apartments, meet friends and just be together.

Finally after three months in Italy, on the 28th of October we flew to the United States. The flight was from Rome to New York and in New York we were transferred to another plane to Chicago. It was an interesting system how HIAS would place families in the U.S. HIAS tried to place people with their relatives who could help them in the beginning. For people who didn't have relatives the selection was made based on your profession, education and skill. So the people who were engineers, technicians were sent to places with developed manufacturing. The people who had service professions like barber, masseuse, repairmen were sent to places in the south like Miami where there was a need for service people.

We had a relative in Chicago, it was my mom's brother with his family who immigrated to Chicago two years before us. They couldn't help us since him and his wife received SSI and his daughter and her husband with two children didn't earn enough money to even lend it to us. The major help they could give us was to share the experience of life in the U.S. We arrived in Chicago around midnight and were met by a HIAS representative who didn't speak any Russian and we didn't speak any English. There were three or four families whom nobody met at the airport. He put us in the bus and drove us to a hotel in the North part of Chicago. At the hotel he gave us a check for \$200 and left. The hotel people gave us the key and showed our room. In the room we found three beds and three bags with sheets and blankets. So we made beds for our children and us and went to sleep. In the morning we went shopping for groceries to feed the children and ourselves. We used our money which we received in Russia, since we didn't know what to do with a check.

The day we arrived in the U.S. was Halloween when people dressed in different costumes. This holiday was unknown to us, and you imagine our surprise to see all of this. After meeting with a HIAS representative we were told that HIAS would give us every month for a total of six months some money enough to pay rent for a small apartment and buy food for the family. So in these six months we should find and rent an apartment, find a job at least for me.

We were lucky, waiting in New York for the plane to Chicago we made a call to friends of my mother from Lvov and they gave us a phone number of their friends whom they met in Italy. They had already been in the country for a few years and the man of the house who had a Ph. D. in chemistry worked at a large chemical company as a scientist. After arriving in Chicago we called them. They came over the next day, took us to their house where we had a party,

introduced us to their friends who had been in the country even longer and had some local friends. They asked their friends if any of them knew who had an opening in some company for a chemist from Russia. In a few weeks they called me and told me that one very small company was looking for a chemist to run production of enzymes.

The pay was very low, \$5 an hour, but it was a start. There were a few problems, first my English was very bad, I could read with a dictionary, but I didn't understand anything when people talked to me, the second the company was located quite a distance away from the place where we lived which required to use three busses to get there, about one and a half hours of traveling. I dismissed the second problem since I had experience in Russia to use public transportation. The lack of English was a serious problem but the lady who found this job told me that they knew of my handicap and were willing to try. So she drove me for the interview with the company owner. Where I didn't understand anything they talked about. When we drove back she told me that the owner hired me. This was how I started my working career in the U.S. The work was manual but I had experience in Russia in this kind of work. Two more people worked with me at the plant and they talked to me and I tried to talk to them and in about a few months I started to understand them. But then came a new problem – the Chicago winter. I didn't have good winter clothes and didn't have money to buy it. The winter of 1979 was very harsh, very cold, with a lot of snow, and waiting for each of the three buses when outside it was 10-15 F and sometimes even lower was a challenge. But I survived.

In the spring my boss (the owner of the company) asked me if I could drive. I told him that I took lessons in driving in Russia but my driving experience was very small. He told me they had a company car, an old Toyota Corolla, and I could in my free time practice on it but I needed to study and pass the written exam, get my permit first. In a couple of weeks I was prepared, passed the exam and got my permit. I practiced driving for another couple weeks, took the driving exam, passed and got my driving license. And my boss gave me this car to drive. I was so happy and so thankful to my boss. But his generosity hadn't finished. By the summer, the work load in the plant was reduced and I had some free time. One day the boss called me to his office and asked me if I could produce some enzyme from some raw material they bought a long time ago but nobody had the time or desire to do it. I told him I'd try. And in about a couple of months I produced this enzyme. In a few days he called me to his office and told me that I had good experience and education and his company was very small and they could not fully utilize my experience and pay me a decent salary, therefore he said I better look for another job in a big company and he would recommend me to them. This helped me to be hired by a large pharmaceutical company as an engineer.

I described my first steps in America to show how lucky I was to meet such nice people who helped me in the hardest time of my life to stand on my feet. I was working at large

pharmaceutical and food companies for almost 30 years, produced over ten patents for the company, designed and built plants, and now I'm retired and enjoy traveling, reading books and watching my grandchildren grow.

And now I want to say a few words about the most important participant in our journey, my wife. She carried the hardest part of our journey taking care of our children and all our family with such scarce resources. It took her a little longer but she found the job she liked. She was very respected at her job and she retired after working 25 years at the same place. And now we can enjoy our retirement together.