

# EXODUS Project

## Interview of Alexander Ilyn

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Alexanderilyn.doc

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**Lynnie Mirvis:** Hello I'm Lynnie Mirvis and I'm here at Temple Israel on August 2nd, 2016 interviewing Alexander Ilyn and...

**Speaker2:** Alla.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Alla Ilyn. Hello. So, let's start with you, Alexander. Tell me your name, your full name, and your date of birth.

**Alexander Ilyn:** My full name is Alexander **Yuy** Ilyn. I was born on the 18th of April 47, 1947, in Kiev. And that's all.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Okay. So, you were born in Kiev, and the Republic is?

**Alexander Ilyn:** In those time is was Soviet Union, but Kiev already was the capitol of the Ukrainian Republic. Ukrainian Socialist Republic, actually. Like it was before. But, on the passport it was Soviet Union. \_\_\_\_

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Okay. So, can you tell me a little bit about what was it like to grow up in Kiev?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Well, in Kiev it was not too bad. It was the capitol, suppliers were very good over there so we had no troubles with anything. But, it was not like the West, of course. But, childhood was not too bad because after the second war, people was more united as you can see. It was almost no crime because everybody was tired. It was after war years, and actually it was a lot of ruins around. I have lived on \_\_\_\_ Street, it was a main street. It was destroyed completely, almost. The wars destroyed many streets in the city, so I remember how I played among the ruins and we found bullets and shells.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Hmm...wow.

**Alexander Ilyn:** Sounds not very usual for today's time. When I went to school, it was very nice school, it was old fashioned school, it was all teachers I remember our principal was from \_\_\_\_, principal and it was very good school with very good teachers. I can tell that 100% from our class entered in higher institutions and universities.

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Everybody. Not everybody finished, but everybody passed exam. I was good in school. I finished on the second place with silver medal

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mmm.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So it was not very hard to get university, Kiev University, it was great university, maybe in the first fifth in the Soviet Union. We had also a special education, military education, in our area university because there was a lack of men. We were like generation of so-called sons of killed fathers, so it was a gap in our generation and it was created a special education for our age guys, and we get both civil diploma and military diploma. So I get a military diploma and lieutenant rank, **engineer** lieutenant. And I get a civil diploma like electric engineering, and my major was information and measurement devices and equipment.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mm-hmm.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So \_\_\_\_ computers and everything around different system. So I was quite good educated. It took 5 years and 8 months to finish.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Oh wow!

**Alexander Ilyn:** Education. And after that summer was enlisted to active army, because there was a lack of officers and I had to serve about 2 years.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mm-hmm.

**Alexander Ilyn:** It was the last term possible. So, our \_\_\_\_ was served in aircraft missile defense.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mmm.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And there was as possible for navigation system for missiles, so it was not very easy and very fun, and I reference this to the sad military joke that: "Who has served in Soviet army, never smiles in circus."

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Can you explain that a little bit?

**Alexander Ilyn:** A little bit? It was a lot of stress. A lot of hard physical and mental job. I can tell you that I lost 11.5 kilograms, two sizes of my uniform, in a half a year.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Wow! Woah! Did you have to go to any wars, or?

**Alexander Ilyn:** It was \_\_\_ of war, but it was a lot of military exercises. A lot of driving around and there as officer I have to watch everything around and be responsible for equipment, for behavior of my soldiers.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Wow.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And so it was quite stressful job and, but it was a good life experience and I understood what it means Soviet Union in general, and his army in particular, and it was some cons and it was some pros, because first of all I get more physical strength

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because I was sitting on the chair 5 years and 8 months, and now I have to run with soldiers back and forth, so, this was one plus. And another plus, nobody with my background, not a lot of good get to communist party of the Soviet Union.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Yeah.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And the army was as a trampoline for that, and I get an option to, they actually invited me, because I was a good officer.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Uh-huh.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So they said you should be, all our officers should be in the party. So they

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mm-hmm.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So they involved me, and when I go to civil life, it was very easy to find a job, and I found a job in a military plant which was produced navigation systems for nuclear submarines.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mmm!

**Alexander Ilyn:** So I was inside of submarines. I was familiar with a lot of military, navy officers. I had a lot of friends over there. I have been on the North Fleet and on another fleet in the East. And I have been inside of the submarines, and nobody liked!

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Woah!

**Alexander Ilyn:** And after that, I gave just one example that the biggest Russian Soviet \_\_\_ Soviet submarines with 24 missiles, and each missile had 10 heads with nuclear, and if it shot one time, and shot France, it would be a flat place, all of France. Just one.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Just one?

**Alexander Ilyn:** And if they shoot all missiles with actually might be 2,240 heads, nuclear heads, which drops. And so it is a thousand Hiroshimas.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** So, what was that like for you?

**Alexander Ilyn:** So, it was sad and, you know, I just have to waste money. The cost of just one fleet was, Russian nuclear fleet, was more than if it was created from pure gold, and everything inside of the submarine was all full of gold. And it would be cheaper than the cost of this real fleet. Not to mention how much money you have to spend just to keep it in shape. So, people calculated the price of this fleet for one year, cost to build about 10 million population cities.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Wow.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So that's why Russians are so poor.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Tell me about your family life, about your parents.

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**Alexander Ilyn:** My parents were a very unusual couple because they come together from absolutely different sides of the world. I mean, different classes of people. My father was born in a noble family, very famous family, and is straight descendent from the creator of Kiev Russia.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Who?

**Alexander Ilyn:** His name was Ludwig. Creator of Kiev, Russia.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Really?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Our family has history from 19th century, from 9th century.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Uh-huh.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And I calculated I was 43rd.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** 43rd generation?

**Alexander Ilyn:** I know 43 of my ancestors, my predecessors.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Were they Jewish? Were you Jewish?

**Alexander Ilyn:** No, no. No Jewish. It is absolutely Russian.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Right.

**Alexander Ilyn:** It is pure Russians.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** So you were partly with pure Russian?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Actually, it was some Germans in our family on our father's side. \_\_\_\_\_. There is a city \_\_\_\_ Swedish right now.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** And your mother's?

**Alexander Ilyn:** He was born the 9th of May, in '17, before the revolution. My father was born and then the revolution started. It was a nightmare for their family. All of my grandfathers, on both sides, brothers, and cousins were shot by Bolsheviks.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** But they weren't Jewish, you said?

**Alexander Ilyn:** No, no.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** They were, like, Russian.

**Alexander Ilyn:** No, no. Nothing Jewish.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** But they were shot?

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**Alexander Ilyn:** They were shot. And my grandfather survived just because he was in Kiev. All of this happened in Russia, in Petrograd, in Moscow, where he was from, actually. He met my grandmother and she was from Kiev, so that's how, how he survived. The Bolsheviks found him after that, and he get prisoned, and he disappeared in Stalin's camps. I could not find his grave. I could not find his fate.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Your grandfather?

**Alexander Ilyn:** I had today, in my archive, three different responses from three different Soviet Republic that they could not find such a man. But, my father says that he saw him in prison last time, and my grandfather told him: "Give me war that you never tell nobody who are you from, because you are the last from our full family, and you got to survive." So, found wife from absolute \_\_\_ class.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** What was her ancestry? Where was she, your mother?

**Alexander Ilyn:** My mother? Let's come back to my mother. So, I did not know my father's family history at all until til 43, and I come back to this story a little bit later. I tell now about my mother. So, my father he was actually an orphan. He was raised with his mother and his mother later gets to Stalin's camp, too, with his older sister. But when he was 21, and it was '38, last century, he met my mother and they get married. And my mother was from very poor Jewish family. It's just what happens. In Kiev they met, they lived close. My mother was very beautiful and my father fell in love and she started to chase him, as she said, "He convinced me." So, in '38 they got married and in a year my older sister Larissa was born. My father has finished special school for topographer. He said "I did not know, what does it mean?" But I had seen the special advertisements. There is such courses, and they paid money for this. And he was orphan, he had nothing, so he went over there and he finished this school and he get a diploma and he was sent to the west Ukraine, because in those times West Ukraine was conquered by Stalin. It was a secret agreement between Hitler and Stalin. And then Stalin, they divided Poland, and a piece of Poland for each. The Soviet Union was to be erased with some special needs, and my father was sent to measure some \_\_\_ as a topographer. The war was suddenly started and my father was on the border and my mother was in Kiev. My father ran back in Kiev and found that were alright, and volunteering to serve in the army. And he got a military rank as an officer because it was very rare specialty. He was serving in engineering troops during the war. My grandmother, at the same time, she has feelings special school and becomes a certified bookkeeper. He was working with a center bank of Kiev. And that actually saved them. It is number one occasion why they survived, because she was able took her parents, her younger sister, and my kid sister, her daughter, with her to escape Kiev as an employee member's family of this central bank. And she told me that they just jump in the one before the last train. They were bombed, and it was nightmare when they survived. But fortunately, my father, when he gets officer's rank, he actually had a special military officer certificate which allows his family to get some food, some money, and to survive in military time. But he could not give this to my mother because he was driving to the front line. Fortunately, it was a German's road, and the mile of people who were around the back, he found his coworker, a woman, he asked her to give the certificate to my family and this is their address. And she gave this certificate the day before they left.

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**Lynnie Mirvis:** Wow.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And this certificate allows them to show this to the authorities and they had to supply them with everything they need. That's why my mother's family survived, except my grandfather, he died in immigration camp, in Uzbekistan.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** He died in the camp?

**Alexander Ilyn:** He died of an ulcer.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** What was it like to be Jewish in the Soviet Union? Your mother was Jewish?

**Alexander Ilyn:** I tell you that if you know a little bit of history of the Soviet Union, you have heard what means by BR in Kiev, so my mother's family should go straight over there, if they wouldn't have escaped.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Uh-huh.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So, this was life during the war. Afterwards was much better because Jewish people were in favor. They had a lot of stress. They were killed, everybody around knew this story. The worse casualties were among Jewish, especially in the Soviet Union. By 1936, 84% were in the United States. It was less in Poland and France, and \_\_\_ it was less than that. So, nobody touches Jewish until the 50s. Five years afterward was fine. But then Stalin decided to put all Jewish far east of Russia, and for God's sake he died before it happened, so nobody was hurt again after the war. But after that it did become worse, because people started to forget about war, and it was better time, and anti-Semites raised up in those times, but I did not feel that because I had Russian last name.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Right.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And when I get a passport, it was Russian.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** You didn't have the word "Jew" on it.

**Alexander Ilyn:** I just was lucky because by Russian law, it does not matter who is your mother if your father is Russian.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** I see. So, you didn't have to put the word "Jew" on the fifth line. No, no you didn't.

**Alexander Ilyn:** From the other side I had Jewish mother, so I was feared to both sides, so I could have made any maneuvers I could.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Right.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So...

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Did you suffer?

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**Alexander Ilyn:** I did not suffer. But in my school, it was a lot of Jewish. My friends, maybe 70%. And they had a problem, a lot of problems, because they had “Jewish” on their papers. It was a problem. I had a Russian father, Jewish mother on my birth certificate, but it was enough for Russians to shut up, and it was enough for Jewish to accept it.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Right. Did you celebrate Jewish holidays? Or did you know anything about Judaism?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Actually, my father was an orphan. I did not know any Russians around. I had just Jewish around myself. But it was not like Orthodox Jewish families, in spite that my grandfather from my mother’s side was \_\_\_\_\_ my grandmother said.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** What was his name? Do you know his name?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Solomon Idyls. No, no I am wrong. Solomon was her father. It was her father’s father. It’s a long story. But, I have some knowledge about my grandfather Solomon. He was served in the Czar’s army. It was very rare in those times, Jewish in Czar’s army. It was nonsense. But, there was a special troop, so-called “cantoniste.” It is musician. They were not allowed to wear weapons, but they may play and just during the war they can have weapons to protect themselves. So, he served 25 years as a regular soldier, and then get pension, and he get 13 kids. And my grandmother was number 11. And I have met number 12 and 13. So it was 12 sisters and just one brother.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Wow!

**Alexander Ilyn:** So, and actually, we met with my wife and those part of the family this one son, my cousin, was the father of the girl who married my wife’s uncle. It’s hard to put all of this together! But this happened, and that’s what you get.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** I will ask you how you met, and then afterwards I will turn the story over to you, but maybe I will finish with you.

It’s okay, finish.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** How did you meet? And then we’ll go to you.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So, we had no any problem. My father was in favor because he was very rare specialty, and he created this special maps for full city, because all maps were done in czar’s time, and it was not measurement system for those times. So, he had to convert all czar’s measurement system for the land to metric system.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Mm-hmm.

**Alexander Ilyn:** So, he was paid well but he lost his eyes. It was his job, because it’s very small.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** You’re talking about your...?

**Alexander Ilyn:** I’m talking about my father.

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**Lynn Mirvis:** Your father.

**Alexander Ilyn:** My mother was mostly housekeeper. But he raised us and he started to work when I was maybe in 5th grade. But before, in the first time at my school I exactly remember that I was the whole time alone at home with my key on my neck. So I come to house and open it and get in, and I would take what was on the table and eat, so I was like that.

**Lynn Mirvis:** How did you meet your wife?

**Alexander Ilyn:** I met her, it was...

**Speaker2:** Family.

**Alexander Ilyn:** It was a family party, it was somebody's birthday, her cousin's birthday, and we just sit, around the table.

**Speaker2:** Actually, we did meet a little earlier.

**Alexander Ilyn:** Oh yeah, it's a secret I told my wife. We had met when I was 15, she was 16. She was very mature, and I was a sick kid and I just fell in love at first sight, but I said it's not time yet. I have to wait. And I was waiting for second vacation, and she forget about me, and I remember when I am ready to propose. And I even wrote in my diary that I have to remember this, blah blah blah blah, and I would like to marry her. And it did it in 5 years.

**Lynn Mirvis:** So, what made you decide to come to America and when did you come?

**Alexander Ilyn:** We had no problem in the Soviet Union. I get a great job, I was head of special institution which was working for Soviet government. It was part of standard committee of the U.S.S.R., so my supervisor was straight in Moscow and I went straight to them when Soviet Union collapsed. All kinds of institutions collapsed too, and actually it was closed, and they got out everybody. Not just me, but 273 persons, and in my supervision it was a nightmare. I knew that this happened, and I gathered there were some guys who had to find job because I could do nothing. It's force majeure, I cannot help you with anything. And after that, it was hard time because it was so-called perestroika with idiot named Gorbachev, and this perestroika actually destroyed everything. But fortunately, during my study in the university, I in \_\_\_ with a special 3-years courses with the English language. I did not use it in more than 30 years.

**Lynn Mirvis:** Right.

**Alexander Ilyn:** But then I remembered that I had something, and I found the Swedish company, very famous company which uses special equipment for roads, and I started to work for them as a representative. I had my own stamp, I can make contracts with



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everybody, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia. So, we had no problem. Before that, I was working with, I was part of guys who created Israel Ukrainian.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** With Israel?

**Alexander Ilyn:** I will remember eventually. Enterprise.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** A connection with Israel?

**Alexander Ilyn:** With Israel. We produce a special drilling machine, moving machine, which may move from one place and drill a hole with one meter and a half diameter, and 25 meters deep. So, we can make wells, we can make holes for piles under high buildings and so forth. It was a good job and I have 3-year contract, and I was maybe with them more, but I decided to go to the United States because first it was tough to be a successful person in those countries. First of all, you have to bribe authorities. So, firemen come, policemen come, some supervisor from some sanitary comes with nothing to complain, and just to find something in your corner and say "I punish you for that." And I was so tired, and I said, no that's finished with production. I work 3 years for you, and I decided to go to the Swedish company. It was much easier for me because I just get my portion from the selling, it was enough. But it's becoming worse and worse and worse, and my son had to graduate university, and I decided that he has no future in this country, so he got his diploma in 4 months, 3 months, just came to America. It was the number one reason. Maybe another, maybe it was an even bigger reason, because my mother she had leukemia 18 years, and they started to treat her worse and worse and worse. I was thinking she might die without any treatment in Soviet Union, and my father lost his eye almost. He could not see anything, and nobody can help him. In those times, my sister was over here in Memphis already for one year.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** What is your sister's name?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Larissa Ilya.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Larissa Ilya.

**Alexander Ilyn:** It's actually her husband was invited over here, so.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Vladimir? No.

**Alexander Ilyn:** Ilya. Ilya.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Ilya is the last name?

**Alexander Ilyn:** No. His first name is Ilya, last name Ilyn. So, they come in '96 then by American rules we cannot go straightaway, all of them, so first they come, then they pull out my parents, then my parents pull out my family, so.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Will you tell me your parents' name one more time?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Yuri and **Fani**. **Fani** was my mother's name.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Ilyn?

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**Alexander Ilyn:** Yes.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Right. Okay. So first your sister came with her husband and then they came?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Then my parents, and they are year by year.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Then you came. What was the year again? When did you come?

**Alexander Ilyn:** 1998. 1996, 1997, 1998.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** How did your life change after you came to America? What was it like?

**Alexander Ilyn:** We did not have a lot of trouble. First of all, my son has the diploma of a banker, as a banker, and he finished English school so he speaks English well. I spoke English as well at the time maybe better than now. Or I should say definitely, because I was working with Europeans, and they have British accents, not over here.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** They speak so well.

**Alexander Ilyn:** I was devastated because I could not understand anything in Tennessee, especially in \_\_\_\_\_. “Do you need a bag?” My nephew said “Do you need a bag?” “Tell her no.”

**Lynnie Mirvis:** You speak so well! So, you came?

**Alexander Ilyn:** And my wife, finished \_\_\_\_\_ we had no big trouble to find jobs with the help of Jewish community. I got a job...

**Lynnie Mirvis:** What kind of work did you do?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Actually my major was electronics, so I found a job in Jabil Global Service Incorporated. It was not in those times such name, it was three times sold and bought, this company. When I come to the company it was CIAI. In one year it was sold for bigger company, and in one more year it was sold for biggest company. So I retired already from Jabil company after about 15 years.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Okay. Wonderful.

**Alexander Ilyn:** And my wife was working, she tells herself.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** I am going to get you to tell her story. Are you too tired?

**Alexander Ilyn:** If you give me a glass of water!

**Lynnie Mirvis:** We'll stop right here. We'll give you a glass of water, we'll take a break, and then I'd love to hear from you. Is there anything you want to add before we stop? And then I would love to hear from you.

**Alexander Ilyn:** My coworkers used to say that “this guy is full of stories.”

**Lynnie Mirvis:** You have a lot of stories!

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**Alexander Ilyn:** And I have a lot of stories!

**Lynnie Mirvis:** And you've come to Memphis, and you were able to find work, and were you able to connect with the Jewish community here at all?

**Alexander Ilyn:** Yes, immediately. Actually Barbara, maybe you know her? I forgot her last name. He actually found job for me.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Bob Silver? No.

**Alexander Ilyn:** Barbara.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Oh, Barbara.

**Alexander Ilyn:** Yeah.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** Okay.

**Alexander Ilyn:** I appreciate her help, and after that I make sure that I didn't need any help from anybody. My wife gets job.

**Lynnie Mirvis:** I want to hear from her, so I'm going to stop right now for a minute.

EXODUS/pti:fl