

EXODUS Project

Interview of Barbara Ostrow

January 18, 2017

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EXODUS

Barbara Ostrow.mp4

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Lynnie Mirvis: I'm going to start with here, and I'm Lynnie Mirvis and I'm here with Barbara Ostrow with the Exodus Project, and it is Wednesday, January 18, 2017. Hello, Barbara.

Barbara Ostrow: Hi. It's nice to...

Lynnie Mirvis: Tell me your name first and where and when you were born...

Barbara Ostrow: Well, I'm Barbara Ostrow and I'm originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Barbara Ostrow: I was born in Pittsburgh, raised out in Pittsburgh. My parents lived in a very small coal-mining town. We were the only Jewish family. We were the only Jewish family that lived there the whole time I was growing up, but all of our relatives were in Pittsburgh, which was maybe in those days a 30 to 45-minute drive. Now it's a lot less, but... and we used to go and visit our relatives every Sunday. You know how that is, and...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: Go out to lunch, go out to dinner, and was sort of like a split personality because Monday through Friday you were in this all-Christian community, and then Friday to Sunday you went to Pittsburgh, you took the bus, you went to Pittsburgh, you stayed with grandma or your aunt or somebody, and then you had what we would call, quote-unquote, "a Jewish life," so we always said we were split in half, and... and we met lots of... well, I knew lots of older people. My parents were very involved in the Christian community. My mother was on the schoolboard for 46 years. She got an award from the state. She was... we used to kid her, she was a women's libber before that time, and we had a bar, and so we all worked in the bar, and I mean it was a very peculiar, in some ways, way to grow up. I mean at 7, I could draw a draft and I could play euchre, and so I had a very peculiar upbringing, so to do something like this, to work with people who didn't speak the language... I mean, in our little town, people spoke Polish and Russian and Italian or whatever, and while I didn't understand it

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all, you got used to it, and so you just were able to deal with it, and so when this project came available, Marshall and I felt like it was something we really wanted to do, and we became... maybe not as involved as some other people, because I was working and he was working, and... but we did... we did work with them on different levels. We worked with helping them to find jobs and do that kind of thing. I spent a lot of time learning about education in Russia because they had... they had very peculiar names for things that they considered college educations that we would consider were maybe high school or community college kind of thing, and they were very proud that they had gone to college and they had... they had become a draftsman, for instance. They called themselves engineers, so we had this whole... this whole kind of different lifestyle, I guess, that we had to learn, we had to get together. We did find that most of them were well educated, but differently than we were, and helping them to find jobs, get their Social Security cards, do all that stuff that you have to do when they first came, and they were the first big group here, so it was a big learning experience for all of us who were involved with this, and there were lots of people. Okay.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, then. Well, tell me about your education and how...

Barbara Ostrow: I went to school at the univer-... I went to school at Penn State University, got an undergraduate degree in education, did a master's in Pittsburgh at a small college in Pittsburgh, and actually my specialty was reading.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: I was a reading specialist, and throughout my teaching career, I've had a very different kind of teaching career. I spent time in the classroom the first maybe eight years, nine years...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And then I got involved with the University of Pittsburgh, and we became a model training school for them, and so I became what was known as a team leader for a middle school group of teachers, and it was a very interesting program because we took kids, which they do now... I mean, we were really ahead of our time. We took people who had... did not have education degrees, and we worked with them for a year. They came in the summer. We got them sort of situated and settled.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: We worked through a program and they got half salary and benefits, which was very unusual in that day, and they taught like a doctor would or an intern would have for a whole year and they went to school at night and got their masters, and they were well sought after, and then I worked at the university. I did tons of workshops in the area about especially teacher training. I was big into that field, and then we moved to New Jersey, **[laughs]** and in New Jersey I got a job in a middle school, and I ran a reading lab, which was... there were four of us in the lab and all of the kids who had really serious issues... we had a lot of migrants. We found ourselves giving kids showers down in the boys' locker room and the girls' locker room. We bought toothbrushes, all that kind of stuff, to help maintain some health, got dentists to do things, that kind of stuff.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And there I got really involved with special ed kids, and I was on a state committee for special ed kids. I don't know. I've done a whole variety of things, and when I came here...

Lynnie Mirvis: To Memphis...?

Barbara Ostrow: I said...

Lynnie Mirvis: Came to Memphis...

Barbara Ostrow: And I couldn't find a job.

Lynnie Mirvis: When did you come to Memphis? Yeah.

Barbara Ostrow: In '87 or '88?

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, with your husband.

Barbara Ostrow: Yes, and he came for a job, and we... I couldn't find a job here. It was the most interesting thing. I had never taught little children, and honestly, I really don't enjoy first and second grade teaching.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And the first job offer I had was first grade, which I thought was interesting because all of my experience was 4 to 9, so I thought that was interesting. I taught at a school here for about a month and a half. I was the third teacher in the room, and my sister got very sick, very bad cancer, and so I had to give it up because I had to travel back and forth, and my mom lived with us at the time, so I also had to take care of that, but... and then I took this job at Bornblum, and I guess we all know the story from there. You know, I taught there for many years and became a supervisor, and I was never going to be the assistant head of school, but I did that, and I don't know. I've had a... I've had a very, very rich career. I mean, very different than many who are in education. I learned tons. I mean, tons and tons of stuff.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And I was happy as a clam. To do it again, it would depend, you know, because life is a little different now in education.

Lynnie Mirvis: You're right.

Barbara Ostrow: But that was my chosen career. I mean, I knew that the day I stepped into a classroom, and my first classroom, by the way, I had 47 children, so a little different than today...

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Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: Where you could never do that.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yes.

Barbara Ostrow: So I had... and I had a sister. I had two sisters, and my mother raised a boy that was her sister's, who she... her sister died at... when she was young, and my mother took him in, and there were four of us. Okay?

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: There were four of us, and so, you know, I had what one would call, I guess, a normal childhood. I don't know.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: I don't... I guess, for me, I would have to say it was a little abnormal because, you know...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: Most kids aren't born above... don't live above a bar and...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: Work in a bar...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: And do all that kind of stuff, but...

Lynnie Mirvis: So you...

Barbara Ostrow: But it's helped me in my lifetime. I have to tell you. When we came here, I got very involved in Temple. I was very involved here, president of the sisterhood, then a president of the district. I was on the national board, and I can remember people saying to me, "now, Barbara, when we go into these small towns, you know, life is different," and I would laugh and say "can't be any smaller than where lived." We had 900 people in our town, or 990, and when the town drunk died, we'd have a 1000. Town drunk would die, we'd have 999, so...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: So it has helped me in my lifetime. I have to tell you. I can manage pretty well with most kinds of people.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: Whether they're Jewish or Christian... not so much African-American because there weren't any where I was. We had one family and they didn't stay long. So that has helped me a lot in my lifetime, and I had a mother who really believed that you had to be... you had to do in the community. She would visit everybody in the hospitals. They were the only people that had a car. You know, they would drive people. They had a company store at the beginning before the... before the bar, and... and so I think we were all expected to do volunteer work, to be careful about other people, to help other people, and it was a lesson that all of us... all of my sisters and I lived, and so I've been very blessed in a lot of ways.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: You know?

Lynnie Mirvis: So tell me about what it was like when you became principal of Bornblum, where you... and you... and these young children were coming from the former Soviet Union...

Barbara Ostrow: Well, actually...

Lynnie Mirvis: What was that like?

Barbara Ostrow: Actually, it was before I was... before I was the principal.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: I was actually still in the classroom when the kids came...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: From Russia, and the numbers were divided between the Academy School and our school.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And actually I think the Academy even had a few more than we did. We had... we had, at the most, I would think... as I can remember, about four or five children, because they came in sort of waves, and then they came and they stayed, and then some of them went to public, and you know, all this kind of stuff. It was an interesting experience. It really was. You could tell from the children those who were... I don't know if I should even say this... average, above average or below average, and the key marker was math. If they couldn't do any math, and we had one, we knew we had trouble, because all of the children were math ready. I mean, it was the language that we could all speak. We all knew what math was.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: We could do this, and many times, they were even brighter, I think, than most of our kids. They were more... they were a little more advanced in math, and they were... because in those days, we didn't have teachers that taught the second language...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: You know, the ESL teachers, and so we were all, in ourselves, struggling to figure out how to reach these children, and we would try one-on-one. We tried with upper grade kids and lower grade kids, we had... and the problem really became is they never spoke at home. You know, it was always Russian at home and trying to teach them English, and for us to understand that they had to transpose in their head to make this work. They had to think in Russian, transpose to English, and then try to do the English, so it was not easy for them. The really brightest ones, because language is easier when you're younger to catch on, they did fairly well. There was a lot for them to overcome, you know, and the kids, because they were in a small environment like ours, the kids accepted them, except for one little boy. We had a lot of trouble with one little boy, and he eventually went to the Hebrew Academy. They decided that the Academy would be a better place for him. We did have... I did have one of the most interesting experiences I've ever had in the classroom with these children. We had a mother come in and talk to the class. We thought this would really be good for the children, and she could speak English very well. I mean, not... you know, better than most, and so she came in and she talked about what life was like in Russia. She talked about how, you know, you didn't have all the things you needed, that it wasn't like here. You don't... you know, the grocery stores weren't full, when they came here and saw what was going on in the grocery stores, they were astounded, and you know, this kind of stuff, and so she finished and we thanked her for coming, and I think we had some flowers or something for her, I don't know, and her son said "I need to go talk to my mother," and I heard them yelling at each other in the hall, and I'm thinking to myself, "what is going on," and I said to the kids, "calm, I'll be back in a minute, I'm just going to go out and see what's going on." Well, the little... the young boy was so angry that his mother had said to these children that they didn't have everything they needed. He said "I had everything. I could have ice cream. I could have whatever," but he didn't go shopping. He didn't see where the money was. He didn't see anything. He only could see this little mirror under which he worked. He didn't know about the secrecy and... and all of the things that went on in the background, and he was livid. He came back into classroom, slammed the door, and said, in as much English as he could say, "don't believe," and I'm thinking "okay," and so I said to him, "well, I don't think your mother would tell fibs," and he was... I mean, he was done for the day. He was not going to believe that this could be true, and so we talked about that and worked with it for a while, but I'm not sure he ever... probably it was one of... I didn't think it was a mistake at the time. I thought it was good for our children, but when you look back and you say to yourself, "well, maybe this wasn't so good because it made him so angry" and it made the children see him in a very different light than they might have, so that was... that was kind of interesting, and trying to get parents to... and they wanted to be involved, but the problem was that they couldn't quite do it. You know, they... when he had homework to do or he had to read something, this... the family we had was easy because they were pretty good at English, but for some of these children, I mean,

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they were living this split-level life, you know? Trying to be an American, or trying to become an American, and then also wanting to hold onto their Russian, and at the school, we talked about this a lot, that we couldn't take away their culture. That was the important thing. We had to understand that they had to speak in Russian, they had to think in Russian, until they had the opportunity to learn enough English, and we did the old thing with language where you say "if you know two words, just use those two words in the sentence and then go back to Russian," and then that always helps you to gain some strength, because I know in Hebrew they tend to do that a lot, so it was interesting for us. The children were... the children turned out to be bright, and then I was involved in transporting children from the Academy, which everybody thought that was the funniest thing.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: I would go after school and pick up this young boy who lived up on Summer, and he was one of our transfers from Schechter into the Academy, and it was hard for him. He probably had the most difficult time of all, and I would pick him up and people thought that was so crazy, "that you would go over to the Academy after... why wasn't he where you..." and it was just something... they needed somebody to transport him, and sometimes I would think about my mother saying "it's hard for you, but sometimes you have to do for others," and we'd take him home and he lived in this... it looked like a motel on Summer. I don't even remember. I just remember it had like the catwalk on the outside which made me think it was... and a lot of them lived in motels in the beginning, so... but it was a wonderful experience. We learned a lot. We made... the family that we were involved with, the Savchenkos, their kids went to Schechter in the beginning, so we felt like we were, you know, closing in with the whole family and trying to help them out. I don't know. I guess I had one in the... he was in the fourth grade when he came, and the other one was younger. He was like in the first or second grade.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And in some ways, it was easier for him, but he was... he was a little bit of a thing. He was very tiny, I remember, and very thin, and his mother was divorced before she came... or no, mine was divorced before he came, and the other one... I can't remember exactly the details, but she... they all lived together. They all... you know, the father, the mother and the daughters and the children all lived together and very quickly they made their way. They, you know, she got a job, and that was very helpful in the beginning, and then the other one became a nurse later on. She always wanted to do something in medicine, and the boys, then they moved to Anshei. They became very religious and they moved to Anshei, and one of the boys is really religious now. He lives in Baltimore, I think, or Ohio. I can't remember. I... I don't have all the details in my head, but the Savchenkos lived at Plough too, so I used to see them at Plough when I started volunteering over there and I've done some work with the Russian community presently over there. I tried to teach English. This was... this is almost... they've been here for so long that if they're not going to know it by now, I could tell you... had they not been clustered, I think...

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Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: Had they been in different places, they would have had to learn the English, but because they live together in a cluster over there, they have each other. It's sort of like the ghetto with the Jews in the early times, I think.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: It's that same kind of thing.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: But it's been interesting. It was a very interesting experience. Marshall and I were very happy that we had the experience, and we would do it again, given the opportunity, and if we had the health to do it.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh. That's wonderful. What was most rewarding for you, do you think?

Barbara Ostrow: I think... I don't... I don't know how you say "most rewarding." It was in different levels, different times and different levels.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: Like when Claudia got... that was her name, Claudia. When Claudia got the first job, we felt like we had... we had helped somebody find a new life, because Marshall had worked with her in getting her resume ready and doing all of that, and I had spent a lot of time interviewing, trying to get her, you know, to respond in sort of a way that was both Russian and English. You know, we had to be able to...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: And she knew enough English that she could get through it, and when she got the job, I will never forget the joy, not only in her face but in that room, when she came and announced that she had gotten... she was the first one to get the job at Dobbs, and she had... you know, she had dressed for the... she knew. She was a smart sucker, this... I'm not... oh, I'm sorry... smart lady, and she... she just... she was one who could find a job because she was job ready. Lots of them were not. They were busy worrying about their education in Russia and trying to find a job that matched their education, and you know, it's like when you come to a new town and a new...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: I mean, our parents came... my grandparents came that way. You know? You... for a lot of times, you had to just take whatever you could get, you know, and...

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Lynnie Mirvis: Right, right.

Barbara Ostrow: And they... it was demeaning to some of them, you know, who thought, well, they were mathematicians, like Mr. Savchenko. He was retired, so it wasn't so bad, and he and his wife were both mathematicians, so they... and they were bright and they had a lot of personality, but some of them not so much, and some of them weren't so... I think they thought that they were going to have everything they needed here, that life was going to be a hundred times better than it was in Russia, and in lots of ways it really was, but in some ways, I think, it was very hard to make this transition. I mean, I had a friend in... when we lived in Jersey, I had a friend who had Russian relatives who came to this country just to visit, and I remember she was saying to me "this is so funny, this is so funny," that's in my head. They would go out for a walk every night after school... oh, after dinner. They would go out, and I said to her, "Sheila, why are they doing this?" And she said she told them they didn't have to worry. Nobody was listening, they could talk freely, and they didn't believe it, so their way of having a conversation where they could talk about things that were important, I guess, to them, or that might not be so great for the country or the place they lived, they would go outside every night and they would walk for about 45 minutes. They would have whatever conversation they needed to have and they came back and they were genuinely happy. They could not be convinced that there weren't bugs in the house, you know, that people weren't listening, that this was a different kind of world, and I think for some people who came here, it was hard. I mean, I think that it wasn't as easy as they thought it was going to be.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: You know, and so... and people were very kind to them when they came here. There were lots, and Temple had a huge group that did this, and I'm sure the other synagogues had it. I'm sure everybody did, and I... and in the end, I think that they were lucky to come here, because this is a community that will close in the ranks and they will do what is ever necessary.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: Some of the communities they went to didn't have as much luck. People were excited with them for about the first five minutes, and then after that, it sort of disappeared, and so I think the community was very generous to them. I think they tried with everything they could do, for the most part. I'm sure there were times when people felt, no, you know, they were whatever. I mean, I can remember people taking them to Social Security offices and getting their phone and helping them do, and they didn't get that everywhere, so...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: They were lucky, I thought.

Lynnie Mirvis: How do you think it changed you?

Barbara Ostrow: I think in two ways. I think first it helped me to recall my own roots.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: You know, my grandparents were first gen... my father was first generation here, came when he was 14, so I had... I had that in the back of my head, always when I worked with these people, I could only think of the Jewish immigration, my own family, and our own lives as a result of this. You know, my father could speak four languages. You know, and... and he came when he was 14. He came through the underground, and so... and he had brothers and... who were here, and he came to there, but here, for me, that was one part of it, and the second part of it was... is that in Judaism, we're expected... I mean, we are expected to help those who need the help, who... and... and in actual fact, when she got that job, I felt like we had earned it with her, and that thank God that there were people in this community that were doing this, and it made me... it made me think about the broader things. You know, and I had never lived in a community... I don't know whether to say this or not. It might get me in trouble. Maybe you want to take this out, but I've never lived in a community where, if you were Jewish, you were insular Jewish. I've always lived in communities that it wasn't so insular. You know, if you were Jewish here... I don't know. I shouldn't say this, and I thought about that... and I thought about that a little bit for the Russians. Would that be... would that be their issue too? Would they only be able to really integrate with other Russians, or would the community as a whole take them in? And as it turned out, the Jewish community was their savior... oh, their... the person... the people who made this so easy for them, so...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: So living here in the beginning was a very different experience for us. You know, we came from communities that were large, or more mixed around, you know, colors, religions, all that, and being raised in a Christian community, you might say, I also had a different point of view, so I thought about that a bit, and I learned a lot doing that. I learned about how to handle children who needed ESL. I mean, I'd never worked with ESL kids, and that was good for me, and I think for my family, I had two children, I had two boys, it was really good for them. They needed to see how the world is. You know, it isn't all like here. Streets aren't paved with gold everywhere, so to speak, and so for a family, I think we got a lot out of this. We... and that we used to have them over for dinner. We'd take them to lunch. We'd take them shopping. You know, you do whatever you could do, and my kids are... my kids are pretty much like that, and you know, they still do a lot in their communities. Little Eli, honest to God, I think he's going to be a community worker when he gets older or something.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's your grandson?

Barbara Ostrow: That's my little grandson, my youngest one here, and so I think that passes on to generations, and so for me, it is the model that I really want my children to see, and I wanted my grandchildren to see, and it's turning out that that seems to be the case. I mean, I can't say for sure, but they seem to be involved in the community when you look at our children in Philly, and when you look at our children here, I think... I think that... I do think that that message is being passed on, and I think that's my job as grandma to be able to do that for grandchildren, and you know, we had them every Friday night since the time they were little babies. We have a whole ritual.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Your grandchildren?

Barbara Ostrow: With my grandchildren, the families, and so I feel like those kind of experiences help to cement all of your relationships around not only with the community but most importantly with your own family, so...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Oh, thank you so much. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Barbara Ostrow: I don't know. I'm honored that you asked me. I think that's... that surprised me. I wasn't quite sure what this was going to be, and so I'm honored that you asked me. It helped me to recall those days a bit, which was nice.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Barbara Ostrow: They were happy times, and it makes me think about the Russians who are here now, and who are still, even though they're clustered and... they're still lucky to be here. I mean, I talked to... the other day I talked to the one that sings. I can't remember his name. I'm terrible with names, but we were talking about...

Lynnie Mirvis: Not the...

Barbara Ostrow: Not Jacob. No.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Barbara Ostrow: I... it'll come to me.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: It takes me a few minutes but it'll come to me, and we were talking about Ukraine, and he said "I'm so lucky not to be in Ukraine. It's so terrible there," he said, "so I'm so happy to be here." You know, they have a nice two-bedroom apartment. They have people that take them places. They do things here in the community, you know, this kind of thing, and so that's what you want, I guess. That's where it is.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Barbara Ostrow: And it's funny. One of them, I taught him... I taught their grandchildren, but they... they weren't actually involved in that first wave as much, and they still come to my desk when I'm there volunteering and saying "did you know that so-and-so just had a baby" or "did you know..." or if they're in town and they're in Plough, they go to visit their grandma, and they'll stop by the desk, and we'll have a nice conversation, and you know, it's so... I guess... I don't know. I just... I don't know what to say except that, for me, I was very lucky. I had a wonderful experience. I think the people we interacted with had a good experience, and I think we made a difference for some people. Not a lot of people, but for some people.

Lynnie Mirvis: Thank you so much, Barbara.

Barbara Ostrow: You're very welcome. It was my pleasure.