

EXODUS Project

Interview of Gloria Felsenthal

March 7, 2016

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EXODUS

Gloria Felsenthal.mp4

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Lynnie Mirvis: Hi. I'm Lynnie Mirvis. I'm here at Temple Israel on March the 7th, 2016, and I'm talking to Gloria Felsenthal. Gloria, can you tell me where you were born?

Gloria Felsenthal: Oh, I was born in Memphis in 1944.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, wonderful, and I know you have been very much connected to the Russian resettlement program of the last part of this... 20th century and beyond. Can you tell me how you came to be involved with that?

Gloria Felsenthal: Okay, well, first of all, I am a first generation American, and very grateful to America, and... but I got involved with this project by accident. Someone who had, out of kindness to me, called and asked me if... who... she was a... it was Roz Hirsch, and she was chairman of the project at Temple, the resettlement project, and she called me and asked me if I would come on Tuesdays and Thursdays and talk for four hours to the adults to help them learn English, and I said "I cannot imagine talking to anybody for four hours, but yes, I'll come," so when I got to Temple, it turned out that there was a teenager, and she just kind of randomly said "would you help this teenager?" And the teenager happened to be... his name at the time was Alex Savchenko. He was 15, and the idea was that he was to go to... hopefully to White Station Optional School in the tenth grade. The problem was he didn't speak very much English, so I met with him and I had some... actually some ACT materials, and I just asked him to start reading, and he said... he read fine, but he said "I don't understand a word I read," so I managed to get together some materials with the help of Barbara Ostrow, and we set off to get him ready for White Station, which he did enter in the tenth grade. More about that later. In the meantime, I got friendly with the entire family, and I do want to start off by saying that the families were all assigned volunteers throughout the project with Temple and the other synagogues, and the... there were two families. Alex's family was his mother, Claudia Savchenko, and his brother, Ilya Savchenko. The other... okay, and then the grandparents, Mark and Anna Rogovoy, and the other household was Ina Finkelstein and her then-husband Eugene and their son, Igor, who was 4 in 1990, when this... when we all met.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: The volunteers, the fabulous volunteers, Harriet and Tom Stern, of blessed memory, fabulous; the Royals, Judy and Bob; the Cans, Ruth and Jay; the Pierces, Shelly and Frank; Abby Weiner; and Felice, and we think John Hedge, who are no longer in Memphis, so shout out to all of them. Claudia was a computer... a

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computer systems analyst, and actually got here from Ukraine, Kharkov, Ukraine, and she very soon got a job with the help of one of the volunteers. I left town and came back and she had... before she ever started the first job, had a second job at twice the salary, so she was off and running. Ina, her sister, 10 years younger, also I think had computer skills but had always wanted to be a nurse, and apparently that wasn't possible in the former Soviet Union, so she started nursing school and she very soon after a number of years became a cardiac nurse with great... and got great accolades, won awards, so great success story. The grandfather, Mark Robovoy, had been a math professor in Kharkov, distinguished, I believe, and he was the... kind of the glue... he and Anna were the glue that were holding all this... all these beginnings together. He drove everybody where they needed to go. Claudia and Ina fairly quickly got driver's licenses. He carpooled the kids, Anna cooked for everybody, and in the end, just huge success story.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. So tell me about your professional background that related to what you did in this project.

Gloria Felsenthal: Well, I have a master's in English, and...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: A teaching certificate, which I basically never used in terms of classroom teaching, but I tutored for many, many years, still am doing it, for the SAT and the ACT, so I was used to working with teenagers, and it just... first of all, it was a natural, and second of all, this young man just caught my heart. He just soaked up every word I said. I found my expressions and idiosyncrasies coming right back at me.

[laughter]

Gloria Felsenthal: And he was just so appreciative and wanted to know everything. He wanted to... he wanted... he has a wonderful... has... had and has a wonderful sense of humor, and he wanted to be able to tell jokes in English, and he wanted to know all the idioms, "a piece of cake, a chip on your shoulder," so that... that kept things moving, and I took him to play put-put and we did fun things as well as serious work. He is now a physician. He and Ilya are both physicians, which was an occupation that would have been denied to them in the Soviet Union, and was one of the motivating factors for coming to America, which was a courageous thing to do, come halfway around the world. He is... actually he has a specialty in pediatric allergies, and Ilya is also a physician. I believe he's a hospitalist, and possibly an emergency room doctor, but anyway, they have settled in Cleveland, Ohio. Alex works for Rainbow Children's, which is one of the... maybe the premier children's hospital in America. They became... this is another story. They became... they were very diligent in at first coming to Temple for services, so appreciative of having been brought here by HIAS, Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, and the grandfather, Mark, remembered bits of Judaism from his grandfather, so they came to Temple every Friday night. Alex, as soon as he learned English, wanted to learn Hebrew, so I called Temple. They didn't have a beginners' class. I called Beth Shalom... sorry about the order here... **[laughter]** it didn't work out. I called Baron Hirsch, I called Anshei, and I think the class at Anshei had already met once but the rabbi was so gracious and willing to catch him up, catch Alex up, so he was up and away with the class in Anshei. Anshei, the people at Anshei took them all into their hearts, and very soon, they were members of Anshei. Along the way, they decided to keep kosher. They became... what's the word? Very Orthodox? Ultra-Orthodox?

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Lynnie Mirvis: Conservative?

Gloria Felsenthal: Black hat? Very... very serious about their Judaism. He, Alex, was... it was interesting to watch the entire progression. At one point, here's a little anecdote, that I... when I went through my file, I refreshed my memory. At one point, he was very enamored of the annual Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition. I mailed him our edition when he was a freshman at Vanderbilt, and he emailed me back very quickly, saying "thank you, but the body is sacred," and he was no longer interested in that sort of thing, so... oh, and he called me one time from Vanderbilt. I shouldn't be saying this. He said that he wanted to wear his kippah across campus on the way to his Hillel Shabbat. Did I think he should do that? And I told him that I thought that he should, and he did, so it was an interesting progression. Eventually, he changed... Savchenko is a Ukrainian name. His father was Ukrainian.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: And died in a car accident when he was a young boy. He was 6. So eventually he... he and his brother changed their name... their last name to Silver, and took on new first names as well. Alex became Eliyahu and Ilya became Raphael. Claudia, to her credit, stayed in touch with her mother-in-law in Ukraine through the years and sent money when she could, and they talked on the phone. What's next?

Lynnie Mirvis: Right, I was thinking about... yeah, so... I'm thinking... so you worked with this family and watched their progression. What was that like for you? How did it... how did... do you think it affected your own life? You know, why... to do with them...

Gloria Felsenthal: Just one of the most enriching things I have ever done.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: And, you know, a way to pay back to people who were people who... to people who were kind to my parents when they came.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you talk more about that?

Gloria Felsenthal: Well, okay. My parents met thanks to a woman named, actually, Jeannette Bluthenthal.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: And my father actually stayed in her mother-in-law's home, Mrs. Bluthenthal, on Peabody. It became a senior citizen home after her death, but she needed... she was elderly and she needed someone... her daughter-in-law wanted somebody to stay... to be there at night with her, and the previous person was a woman, a physician, who was moving out, and she asked my father if he would consider. Well, he was thrilled because he was staying in some really poor places, for a very small amount of money... very, very... you know, very small kind of apartments or attic rooms, so he moved into this lovely house on Peabody. She said... the daughter-in-law said the only problem was that the bathrooms between... the bathroom between his room and the... and Mrs. Bluthenthal's room, it was adjoining, and as long as they could work that out, he thought... she thought everything would be fine, which they did, and they... my parents and... stayed friendly with her all through the years, and my sister and I

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remember going for Sunday visits all dressed up in our best dresses, speaking only when spoken to, behaving like we don't think our grandchildren would behave today if they had to make that kind of a visit, and interestingly enough, Mrs. Bluthenthal's great-granddaughter came to Memphis this year to... last year, 2015, to the archives, looking for information, and my mother happened to be here working at archives.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh-huh.

Gloria Felsenthal: So they randomly met because...

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Gloria Felsenthal: Jennifer Campbell introduced all the workers at archives and Nancy Toff recognized my mother's name, so they went to the cemetery together, and I ended up having dinner with Nancy that night, so... and I'm now in touch with her mother, who is 92.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, that's...

Gloria Felsenthal: Who would be Mrs. Bluthenthal's granddaughter.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Gloria Felsenthal: So she lives in New York, Westchester, and we've been emailing, so...

Lynnie Mirvis: That's just...

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah, anyway, this project became very dear to my heart, and I always felt that Alex, as I continue to call him, that Alex's children someday just might want to have some history of their father, so I've got it if they want it.

Lynnie Mirvis: You're holding their history. Tell me, where did your parents immigrate from?

Gloria Felsenthal: My father came from Berlin in late 1937. He had a very difficult time getting a visa. He had to go to Holland eventually. When he went to the U.S. Embassy in Berlin to try to get a visa, there were some questions that he had to answer, some trumped up questions. The main question was could... and he had studied a lot of English. He had studied Latin, Greek and English, so he was not a beginner. The question was "do you know what hollowware is?" Do you know what hollowware is?

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-mm.

Gloria Felsenthal: It's flatware, like forks and knives that... obviously, he didn't know what hollowware was, so he got turned down, could not get a visa from Germany, so he moved to Holland and followed the ambassador around and finally got a visa, and he had his sister and brother-in-law in New York who were American citizens. They had come earlier. The brother-in-law actually had dual citizenship, so that was one of the... a little bit of a requirement that... well, it helped people who were trying to get here if they already had family because the family could guarantee that the immigrant would not be dependent upon the government for money, whereas when the former Soviet Union

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immigrants came in 1990, they got... the elderly... the elderly immigrants got... actually got welfare immediately, I believe, so... and some of the... some of the people... okay, eventually the grandparents moved into Plough Towers.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: And there were people at Plough Towers who resented these immigrants from the former Soviet Union because “nobody ever helped my family when we came.”

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: So that was an interesting little bit of friction.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: But anyway, so my father went to New York.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Where he had a sister and brother-in-law, decided very soon he wanted to get out of New York to be a real American because in Kew Gardens, where they lived, everybody spoke German, and he felt like he would not... he wanted a new country, so he went to the office of the National Council of Jewish Women, as a letter was coming in from a man from Memphis, Leo Levy, saying that he wanted to sponsor an immigrant, so my father said, as the man was reading the letter, he was kind of translating the first sentence as the man was reading the next sentence, but the answer was “yes,” he wanted to come to Memphis. He took two trains, including an overnight train, to get here, had no idea where Memphis was, had no idea it was so far away.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: His family thought he was crazy, going to place called Memphis in Tennessee, and he started off at the very bottom of the totem pole with Mr. Levy and worked his way up, and...

Lynn Mirvis: Levy’s department store, or...?

Gloria Felsenthal: Levy’s, yes. It was a very, very fine ladies’ department store that people from Mississippi, Arkansas and Missouri came to Memphis to shop at. Anyway... and he had been in retail work in Germany. He was 30... wait a minute... 1937. I think he was 34 when he came, so got kind of a late start, always had an accent, never got rid of his accent. Charming, I thought. Spoke good English, very good English, and caught other people making English mistakes, but actually never caught on to the infinitive, so... anyway, my mother came from Leipzig, sponsored by the Sam Shainberg family, to whom I’m very grateful. Sam Shainberg’s wife, Lizzie, was sister to my mother’s grandfather, who died at a very young age, so she never knew him, and they had already brought over Fannie and Sid Pearl and their daughter, who is now Nora Rothschild, and so they brought my mother and my uncle, Axel Robbins, my dear beloved uncle of blessed memory. Am I leaving anybody out? Anyway, they brought them over here, gave them jobs at Shainberg’s, which was then called Black & White stores, and then my mother met my father at this party that Jeannette Bluthenthal gave,

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so very grateful to all. My mother's parents never made it out. They tried and tried and tried. They went from Leipzig to Riga, Latvia, where the father had relatives, tried through Russia, tried all kinds of ways to get visas and could never get one. There was some question as to whether they went voluntarily to Riga, which we think they did. Later, there was actually a deportation of the Jews from Leipzig to Riga. We all went to Germany in 1996 and met some people who helped us sort that out, who went to Riga... to Leipzig. My sister, Bunny Burson; her daughter, Claire Burson; my husband, Eddie Felsenthal; my son, Edward Felsenthal; my mother, Helga Cornell, who got to practice her German, not that she ever wanted to, and I. We went, and it was a wonderful trip. One of the two women who took us around Leipzig on our day there, as it happened, had gone to the same high school as my mother, and they talked about their favorite teachers, and that was something special. We went to my mother's apartment. We went to the apartment of the... of my mother's grandmother, who raised three daughters alone because the aforementioned grandfather had died at a young age, and I knew that grandmother. She was my great-grandmother. She came to Memphis with the Pearls, whose name in Germany was Perlmutter.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm... mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: This is a lot. We're off the subject. Where else do you want me to go?

Lynnie Mirvis: All right. No, but thank you for sharing that kind of...

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: It's a relationship, so you were grateful.

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: And you wanted to pay back, yeah. Yeah. I think...

Gloria Felsenthal: There's a lot that I love to say.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah. Thank you. I... yeah, so how... how do you think being first generation has affected your life now that...?

Gloria Felsenthal: Okay. There...

Lynnie Mirvis: Anything else that you want to say about that?

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah. There... Yeah. There are two stories that are just very, very typical. One story is that the parents who have been through this traumatic experience are very forthcoming, talk about it a lot, and the children grow up with that kind of experience. The other experience is the parents don't talk about it at all. They close that chapter, and that's...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: That was our household, and my father, I think, would have been glad to talk about the past and Germany, but in respect for my mother never did... later, and years later he did, so we grew up just a perfectly happy, idyllic childhood. If we ever

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asked about grandparents, we... or my mother's parents, we very quickly learned not to ask. My father's other... my grandmother on my father's side was alive and did come to Memphis on several occasions and stayed for several months at a time, and we adored her. She didn't speak a lot of English, but she had taken lessons as soon as she came, and she spoke some English, and I had very warm, fuzzy feelings about her, although I was frequently in trouble for not talking to her enough, you know, not sitting in her knee.

Lynnie Mirvis: Where did she live?

Gloria Felsenthal: She lived in Kew Gardens with her daughter and the daughter's husband.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Gloria Felsenthal: And their two children, who were... when they came, the children were teenagers, even maybe a little older. Generations are a little skewed because my father's sister was six years older, got married in her 20s, and my father got married in his late 30s, so the generations got off, but... so my father said one of his first impressions when he came was that his nephew, Ralph Collier... his name originally was Kisch, but he changed it to Collier, was working as a soda jerk in a... at a drugstore, which he thought was fascinating because in Germany children didn't work, so that was his kind of first taste of America, first... one of his first impressions. I might mention that my father's name was Cohen.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: He changed it to Cornell, just a random choice, because he was told in New York that he'd better change his name if he wanted to get a job because we were at the end of the Depression, in the late '30s, and there was still antisemitism in America, so as he later said, he traded his very good last name, which was... is an understatement, for a different one, so that's it.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Gloria Felsenthal: But we grew up just happy-go-lucky, not a care in the world, just a very, very happy childhood, and I'm really grateful for that. In later years... well, actually, my sister and I decided to interview our father...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: For the beginnings of this project, which was Center for Southern Folklore, I think, started it.

Lynnie Mirvis: History Project...

Gloria Felsenthal: The History Project, yes. The history... Oral History Project, so we interviewed my father under the pretense that we were doing it for the project, but we were really doing it for ourselves.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. Right.

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Gloria Felsenthal: And we got him to talk a lot about his background, and then we asked him to write his story, which he did, in a book that he called "The Lord is My Shepherd," and there is a copy somewhere at Temple.

Lynnie Mirvis: How wonderful.

Gloria Felsenthal: Not sure where, but we all have a copy.

Lynnie Mirvis: Maybe it's in archives. Yeah.

Gloria Felsenthal: Maybe. I'm not... you know, when the library closed, not exactly sure what happened to all those books. It might be upstairs somewhere. All right.

Lynnie Mirvis: So yeah, so the... where your parents came from and what they went through really impacted you.

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: And you gave back with this Russian resettlement family.

Gloria Felsenthal: Right.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you think of what maybe is a highlight of a moment in working with the Jews from the former Soviet Union with these families? Is there anything that comes to mind that was a high point for you?

Gloria Felsenthal: Well, the high point... well... um... well, we became wonderful friends.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: I loved the grandparents.

[laughter]

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: The high point really was, I just have to say, seeing Alex get educated.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Seeing him dig in, go to Vanderbilt... he and his brother both took a gap year at a yeshiva in Monsey, New York.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Yes. Witnessing his embrace of Judaism, beautiful.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

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Gloria Felsenthal: Seeing his... seeing him live his dream to become a physician, and...

Lynnie Mirvis: Were there...? Yeah, go on.

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah, it's just... it's really just getting the education that they wanted and getting to live the lives they wanted. I just... can you see this?

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah. I could see it. Ah, yeah. Would you say that it had an effect on your own Judaism? Your own Jewish... values or...?

Gloria Felsenthal: Uh... yes. The fact that Jews embrace other Jews and... just the universality of... passing gifts down to the next... the tree that the man plants...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: And is asked why, is this a midrash? Yes. Is that why he planted? Because his... he's not going to be there to see the fruit?

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: But his children will, and yeah, and I know, it's funny, I never... I don't... I don't really know... I don't have any way of knowing whether I would have volunteered for this project...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: It just fell into my lap, and it became the most meaningful thing besides raising my own children that I have ever done.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, that's beautiful. Yeah. Can you look back and think what were the challenges? Was there something that maybe the community could have done differently or is there something that you would have done differently?

Gloria Felsenthal: Well... yeah. Well, first of all, I think... you see the tears, right? I think this family was so blessed to have the volunteer families assigned to them that they had, that everybody contributed in his, her, their own way...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: From getting them jobs to setting up the apartment to acculturating them. Felice one time was going to show Anna how to make latkes for Hanukkah, and went into great drama about the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, et cetera, et cetera. They went to the grocery together. They got to Anna's apartment, Felice brings out her recipe, and Anna says "potato pancakes? I made these... I always made potato pancakes."

[laughter]

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Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, that's so funny.

Gloria Felsenthal: So...

Lynnie Mirvis: For Hanukkah, or no?

Gloria Felsenthal: Oh, no, no, no. It was not for... she didn't know. I mean, they just...

Lynnie Mirvis: So they didn't know about ours...

Gloria Felsenthal: Made potato pancakes because...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Gloria Felsenthal: I don't think they knew now. They may have known a little bit about Passover.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: There were stories about... they were very thin when they came. They were... and pale, and there were stories about the family sharing one can of pineapples.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Alex said that he and his friends used to go around and finish the Coca-Cola can of the tourists...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: That were left around, and then such courage. They... it's... as I understand it, when they said they wanted to immigrate, they lost their jobs.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Not positive of that. I think that's true.

Lynnie Mirvis: They were refused...

Gloria Felsenthal: I know it's true in some cases. Claudia, because her last name was Savchenko, and because she was... is blonde... said that her coworkers were surprised that she was Jewish.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Although I feel sure... I know that her passport was underlined or whatever it was. I had my father's underlined passport, so...

Lynnie Mirvis: That he's Jewish, you mean?

Gloria Felsenthal: Yeah, underlined means Jewish. Yep.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Mm. Mm.

Gloria Felsenthal: Trying to think if the archives has a copy of that.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah... Is there anything else that you want to add before we conclude?
Is there anything else?

Gloria Felsenthal: I think I've pretty well said what I want to say, and yes. Thank you.

Lynnie Mirvis: Thank you so much, for the Exodus Project, and Gloria Felsenthal.
Thank you.

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