

EXODUS Project

Interview of Iris Harkavy

July 11, 2016

Page 1

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Iris Harkavy.mp4

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Lynnie Mirvis: This is Lynnie Mirvis. It is July 11th, 2016 in Memphis, Tennessee and I am at the home of Iris Harkavy, and Iris, I would like to ask you when and where were you born?

Iris Harkavy: Well, I'm Iris and I welcome you to my home. I was born in Louisville, Kentucky.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And I came to Memphis as a bride, the wife of Ronald Harkavy who was a lifelong Memphian and as was his mother, and his father was an immigrant as a matter of fact from **Volkovysk** which was in Russia at that time, the Soviet Union. So I felt like I had a connection with immigrants from my grandparents and from Ronnie's father and so it was really a blessing when I ended up very involved with immigration...you know, the whole thing...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Iris Harkavy: ...that we went through.

Lynnie Mirvis: Would you tell me a little bit about your parents?

Iris Harkavy: Sure. My parents were born in Louisville, Kentucky. They were both first generation children of Russian immigrants. My maternal grandfather came when he was only 8 by himself. His family sent him because there were brothers and sisters ahead of him, the typical Jewish story of the Russian immigration where they usually sent one by one out to an older sibling and it was during the time of the pogroms and my grandma... they met in Louisville but his wife, my grandmother, also came out of what was called White Russia, Lithuania, and she came older. She came at 23, also sent out to join other sisters because of the pogroms which she never really wanted to talk about, but they were so terrible that when we got older and I got married and talking about going to Europe and whatever she could not understand why anybody would return to that part of the world.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mmm.

Page 2

Iris Harkavy: So it was typical story of that tremendous influx during the 1900s, 1890s. And my paternal side was the same story but it was even more remarkable to me because that grandfather was the oldest in his family and he worked as a tailor. He was really a clothing designer and he one by one brought each one of his siblings but then it was time for his parents to be able to get out and she, as a child, had had a farm accident and lost a leg but she walked on a wooden leg and you would never have known. They sent her back before he could get anything done at Ellis Island, so his parents never got to live in the United States. So great stories...

Lynnie Mirvis: Great stories.

Iris Harkavy: ...of bravery and courage.

Lynnie Mirvis: Well tell me something about your education and background when you came here.

Iris Harkavy: Okay. ____ is not where I finished. I was in pre-med. I was going to be a doctor and went to Vanderbilt University in their pre-med and before I could finish I married Ronald and he gave me a choice, either I marry him then or what and I was very young and very in love, so I married him and came to Memphis where I was going to go to medical school and got pregnant with my first child very soon and at that time I talked to the Dean of Medicine and he said, "Oh, darling, you'll find something else you love. We don't have married women, much less pregnant women." That was 1958. So I went ahead and finished and got my graduation, I was a Bachelor of Science in chemistry and started raising children and learning about Memphis. And well, I had four children and it was a wonderful time in my life getting to know Memphis, getting to know the Jewish community particularly, became very active in the center. And love Memphis, I still think it's a fabulous Jewish community and decided to...I had not gotten my actual degree when I...because I had a child that interfered, the birth of a child, so I went back. They had changed the catalog, I owed them 20 hours and so I had actually 3 children, I went back and got my degree by taking a semester of 20 hours and I just had a babysitter.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Iris Harkavy: I stacked them all on Tuesdays and Thursdays which you could do in those days and graduated and my babies were there, that was happening. And when the fourth child, when **Lee** was, I guess he was going to junior high, I decided that I would get a master's in social work. They wouldn't allow you to take part-time at the University of Tennessee but they had an incredible program at the University of Memphis. It was community social work and activism and I loved it. It was a fabulous experience, and during that time I was also working as a volunteer for the Jewish Family Service and so it was natural. I was very close to **Jack Lieberman** and I also had done the program with **Margie Marlow** who was in our community at the time. And we developed a program of adolescent and vocational counseling for young people in high school who were considering colleges and what they want to do maybe with their lives, and then also women that were reentering a different kind of life whether through divorce or loss, they were going to be the breadwinners and also men at that time, it was the beginning of the 1980 decline of jobs and men that had never thought about being out of work were out of work so that was...we developed a four-pronged program and that was in 1975 and we had gotten started and I was working. I loved it, working with young people and women and we had all kinds of community programs.

Page 3

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: Well, then we got word about...we had told HIAS that were going to resettle...HIAS would...the Russians...the doors had opened. I don't know, I'm sure every Memphian remembers the wonderful marches from the Peabody.

Lynnie Mirvis: Tell us about that.

Iris Harkavy: Right. Well...

Lynnie Mirvis: Tell us.

Iris Harkavy: What happened with, you know, the Soviet Jews, the doors were closed and they were never Russians. They were Jews, just like Hitler, Stalin made sure every passport was marked Jew and if you had...unless you were very well connected which there were Jews that became politically connected or maybe you lived in...your family had lived in Leningrad which was in Stalingrad or in Moscow, those were more sophisticated people and they had learned how to work the system, and a lot of their children were allowed into certain schools. The rest of the Jews could not go to school. You know, they learned a trade, most of them learned trades. It was a very...of course, no practice of religion. So with Israel, became a renewed interest on the part of the Jews that they wanted to be able to be Jewish and hold their heads up as Jews and learn how to be Jews because they hadn't. They had been separated by years from actual...I mean, their grandmothers do or their grandfathers but young Russians didn't know much about being Jewish except they had to live as Jews which was kind of paradoxical.

Lynnie Mirvis: So what made you become involved?

Iris Harkavy: Well, it fell into my lap because I was already at the Jewish Family Service.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And what happened was when...because of the pressure of the United States and American Jews, they had a great idea. They would put a strain on Israel by letting out suddenly a huge amount of Jewish immigrants.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And they thought economically this would undo Israel which was ironic because Israel really wanted the Jews. They wanted them because they wanted to have...it saved Jewish lives but also it was an economic thing for Israel in a different way. The Russian immigrant was a totally different immigrant than they had. They were highly skilled technically. The ones that had gone to school were all high level engineers.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And they were dying to get these people. But the law...in other words they got...they were let go with the understanding they would only go to Israel.

Page 4

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: But the American Jews particularly felt this was unfair and once they got to Italy, because of the protests of American Jews they felt that just like their grandparents had a right to come to America, because these Jewish immigrants were very afraid of their sons going to Israel because they would immediately have to fight and this was very, very frightening to them and so I think in the end, I don't remember, it's been so many years, but over 50% chose to come to the United States or Australia. They had to pick a country that would receive them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: At that time, the United States again because of all the pressure, said they could come in as refugees. In other words, they were in harm if they...they had no country to go to and therefore they would take anybody who selected them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And they did until...that was 1979 I think and they did until the mid-80s and then pressure from Israel caused them to rescind that and said only first-degree relatives could come. That means, like, people from that early group, their relatives could come.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: Of course, there were ways to get around it but not easily and so that...I was working at the agency when that happened.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. So what was your role then at the Jewish Family Service?

Iris Harkavy: Well, it was decided because they could not be dependent on any funds like, you know, social security grants except the very, very elderly so our community, based on our population, just like all over the United States, HIAS decided a fair amount of refugees that we would have to be responsible for totally. There was a \$1,000 per head grant just to take care of the very early preliminary but the Memphis Jewish Federation stepped up to the plate and said fairly, based on population, that we would try to resettle at least 140 people during this...this time period.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And so suddenly there was this whole program with a need of people administrating it and they formed a team of three of people already at the agency and it was **Margie Marlow**, myself, and Cindy Soloway who was just working as a social worker at the agency.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: So we didn't know what we were getting ourselves in and we did not understand, you know, except my memory of what I had always heard about the World War II immigration that a lot of immigrants had a very hard time because there wasn't a continuity of services, there wasn't a time period where they could get their feet on the ground. So we wanted a very comprehensive way of acculturating these people to a

Page 5

new life and give them the same level of status that they saw themselves as coming in from Russia and we also were very careful. We could pick the people that we felt we could do the best in resettling and so we chose people that we thought were a good match for our community because we had a little information on them, not much. And it was a blind leading the blind. [Laughing] No doubt about it. But we did reach out to the larger communities like Baltimore. I went several times and met with people, you know, who had more experience than I did and **Margie** did and Cindy and we worked together as a team and we just learned to love each other and had great respect for each role each of us played so it was a remarkable, remarkable time period from about 1979, this was the first wave, 1979 to 1985 or '86.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And they, you know, just kept on coming and it was just...it was the best because it gave me insight into probably what my grandparents were like when they came and I felt such a kinship with these people.

Lynnie Mirvis: Could you describe one of the first meetings, encounters that you had?

Iris Harkavy: The first...we decided...the structure was Cindy would take care of family problems, psychological, medical. We would all...as a team, we decided that the best way to integrate is to give these people a family in Memphis.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: So we went out into the community, we spoke at all the organizations and institutions, synagogues, and we asked for volunteers who would agree to be a surrogate family and we decided for each family that came in, we had two families, two Memphis families that would be attached to them and be like family. That's all we were asking them. Call once in a while, you know, if they needed something that wasn't just what we were doing then that's where they...and it worked. It was the most incredible system and so we had a volunteer coordinator who did all the clerical work with that group and kept all their schedules and so when we heard the first...we had decided we would meet every family personally and have their volunteers with us. And before they came, we had wonderful real estate people that gave us apartments and, you know, the Makowsky's, the people that own French Village, we established, like, Russian communities at French Village and there was one on Summer and White Station and then one on Cherry Road. And that's where we placed all the people so that they would have...because many of them only spoke Russian. They needed a community within a community. And so we met every single person that came in personally at the airport and we would take them immediately to the center for _____ and show them the center because that's where they would be coming every day for three months. And we had hired an English as a second language teacher from the University of Memphis who was marvelous, **Nancy Sherman**. And we had a lot...we had...this was **Margie** and our thing. We got all these people who would give their specialty in kind. Like volunteer doctors and lawyers and anything that they might need in this journey and they were all ready. We had them all ready and as soon as we saw there was a problem whether it was medical we had people that were very willing to give their time and we had three months where they would receive support from the Federation dollars and then in three months we were expected to have them independent and working.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Page 6

Iris Harkavy: So that was a challenge but it was...oh, I learned so much. I learned so much about Memphis.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: I went in places of Memphis that I had never been in my life. I learned about occupations that I never knew about in my life.

Lynn Mirvis: Right. Do you have a highlight that you want to share?

Iris Harkavy: Yes. I'll tell you about...one of the first families...

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: ...were the **Pogorny's** and the **Pogorny's** consisted of the mother and the father who were in their 40s, and the mother is Maria, the father was **Leonid** and then two children and this was pretty typical. The oldest was Alex who was just turning 17 and then a daughter who was 12. Well, almost all of our families that we received in Memphis came with a 17-year-old son...

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: ...because these were the people...and to ask to immigrate was a terrible risk because they lost their jobs immediately, they lost their homes which were usually apartments, they had to survive many times for a year and a half or two just on almost nothing but they're survivors and they worked the system and they were able to do this, but they came because when a Jewish boy turned 18 he was taken into the Russian Army, Soviet Army, and would disappear because they were so anti-Semitic and the parents were scared to death, and that's why the transference to the thought of their children who they were rescuing from an army would be going into the Israeli Army as soon as they got there. So anyway...so this family arrived. They were...they had less English than some of the families we would receive later because they were really workmen. **Leonid** told me riding home from the airport because we had...**Celia Sedesky** was our interpreter.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: She was a Russian immigrant who came in by herself. I don't know how they got out when they did but they got out maybe three years before all this happened and they had come...it was very difficult for them because there wasn't a system like we developed and so she worked for us. She was our interpreter which was a lifesaver, and riding home from taking him from the airport, and when they came in this family looked like immigrants.

Lynn Mirvis: Mm-hmm. Can you describe...

Iris Harkavy: Most of them...most of them looked like this family but we had some that were much more sophisticated.

Lynn Mirvis: Would you describe that? I mean, just...

Page 7

Iris Harkavy: Uh, first of all their dental care had been horrible so most of them were missing teeth or had gold teeth, you know? They looked just like you would picture people that were not worldly and were not...you know, they hadn't been exposed to a lot. They...even the way they dressed, it was very old world and, I mean, if you were in the airport and you saw these people you would think they had come from somewhere else.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: It wasn't...they didn't fit in. So riding home from the airport with this family, I'm trying to make conversation and I said, "Well, **Leonid**, you know, what did you do in Russia?" And he said, "Well, I had golden hands." But my grandmother used that expression. The expression meant you could do anything in the world with your hands.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: I said...so, I couldn't seem to get through **Celia** what it was he did...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: ...except that he had golden hands and Maria said, she just...she was like a...in Russia they had and like in America if you sat in a chair and watch an elevator door that might have been your lifelong career.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And therefore she worked that way and so she didn't really didn't have a skill but she had worked always. You had to work in order to survive so I thought, "Oh, okay, this is going to be interesting." And Alex, you could tell, the boy, was very angry. He didn't want to be in America. I think he was a little wild in Russia and he, for lack of a better word, ran in somewhat of a gang and he was not happy to leave and then Janna was 12 years old and had no language and school was obviously going to be difficult. But the Hebrew Academy stepped up to the plate with all the Russian kids but the very... one of the most important things when we resettled these and took community dollars to do it because what had been the experience before with immigrants was they wanted to them to be Jewish and they were coming from a background that did not include that. And so it was very important that these kids be exposed to the Jewish world, the Jewish religion and the Hebrew Academy and then the Yeshiva really stepped up to the plate and opened their doors and let us bring in people that would help the kids. They were really very special and so anyway that was the beginning. The story I want to tell you about **Leonid**, because **Leonid** was the most remarkable...he was about 5 feet 3, powerhouse of a guy. It ended up **Leonid** did have golden hands. First of all, he could fix any old car that existed. All of our Russians were driving cars with...had cars because **Leonid** would find these wrecks and fix them...

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, my gosh.

Iris Harkavy: ...for all the Russians and he became the father actually, the father figure of many of the Russian families because he was this...he had a heart as big as he was and he just wanted to take care of them. But when it came...**Leonid** says to me, I brought him to this center and we explained the program which was very comprehensive. We needed to even teach them about deodorant or the hygiene in the

Page 8

United States. You were expected to do certain things that you didn't do in Russia because you didn't even have the money to do it, to buy those products. So we had what was called acculturation which was Americanizing as much as we could before they hit the real streets of America and we also talked about the world of work and how it worked in the United States because they were coming...they weren't coming from a free world. They didn't understand freedom, and that was what we had to acculturate them in that direction because they had gotten what they got by conniving and just being survivors and not doing it the way...Americans are much more, I don't know. They do the same things under the table but it's not...it's not obvious. And so...and the English.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: That was the most important thing. They had to have some working English even to be independent enough and go to the grocery store without an interpreter and that was another lesson, just going to the grocery store...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Iris Harkavy: ...and how you...because you didn't have grocery stores like that. I mean, the first time they walked into a Kroger they...it was like, "Oh, my God." You know? How do you make a decision here, you know? But they learned how to work that, too. They bought fruit that wasn't exactly beautiful but they could get more for their money. They taught me. But the English, **Leonid** had said to me when I was going through this whole thing with him, he said, "Forget the English." I said, "**Leonid**, you're living in America now, you have to learn...not in New York where you're just going to speak Russian. You have to learn English if you're going to be..." He said, "No." He said, "I was illiterate in Russia. I'm going to be illiterate in America."

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Iris Harkavy: "I am not a student but I have golden hands." I said, "**Leonid**, we have to talk about these golden hands." This is all with an interpreter and of course he's so loving. He's just...I said, "We have to translate your golden hands into something real. If you're not going to learn English, we have to figure out another way to go." I said, "What do these golden hands do every day?" He said...the most I got out of him was it was some kind of machinery, so that was a clue and what I did was throughout the whole time period and that's...I met so many wonderful Memphians. Using the Yellow Pages, I would find a title of whatever I was looking for. In this case, it was machinery. I just looked up machinery in the Yellow Pages because not many Jewish people could help me about machinery. So I just...I was so lucky. I called one and I said, "Who is the biggest machine shop in Memphis?" And they gave me the name which was on 2nd Street and Williams. And I called the man and I asked to speak to the owner and he came and I explained who I was, what I was doing. I said, "I'm not asking you to employ anybody. I'm just asking you to help me understand what I should do with this gentleman. He has to have work within three months. What...I have no idea. He cannot tell me what he did, but I have an interpreter and maybe you would have the questions to ask him that I don't." He said, "Sure, that sounds like fun."

So we go down on 2nd Street with **Celia**. This place is a block. I've never seen such a... I mean, I had gone past it many times. I didn't know what it was. And so we opened the door of this huge...I'm telling you. It had to be in height at least two and a half stories high and a block every way you looked. But they were machines as big as this dining

Page 9

room which is about 17 by 15. Huge things that one little person sat up, climbed up and got in a seat just like a pianist, all computerized. It looked like something out of space to me. I said, "What is that?" We open the door and **Leonid** comes in and he goes, "My machines! My machines! My machines! Cincinnati, Cincinnati..." He's talking...that's the brand. [Laughing] I said, "These are the machines you worked on?" "My machines!" And the man is watching him. And I said, "Mr. Williams, this is...how much does one of those machines cost?" He said, "Don't even ask." I said, "Well, he says they're his machines. This man I have been with for four weeks. He is so excited. He can't believe he is seeing his machines." I said, "Is there any way at all that you can try him on one of these machines?" And he says, "Can he read plans?" I said, "Well, show it to him." Well, of course he can read plans. "Metric, metric," he keeps saying. I said, "He says he can read the plans." This brave gentleman let **Leonid** climb up two stories and sit in the seat and he gave him something to make from a plan because this company makes things that like a factory in Buffalo breaks down, the only way to replace the part is for somebody to make it and this...that's what this company did for all over the United States. He gets up in that machine, he looks at the plans, he turns it on, and he starts working. I've never seen anything like it, never seen anything like it. I'm, like, in awe. He's in awe. He gets through. The man looks at the part that he's just made off of this machine. He says, "Don't even take him home. I don't have anybody like this." He said, "He's a master." He said, "Where is he from?" [Laughing] I said, "He's from Russia." And I told him the story about the Jews and blah, blah, blah. He said, "I am honored." He says, "What would you consider a fair..." You know? I said, "Well, what does your best machinist make?" And he told me. He says, "Fine." **Leonid** worked there, he bought a house immediately. He made his way in America.

Lynnie Mirvis: Unbelievable.

Iris Harkavy: And he learned a few words of English but never a lot and this man, he was like a doctor. This man would call him at 2:00 in the morning when a factory in California broke down and he had to...the only person to make that part was **Leonid**. That was **Leonid Pogorny**.

Lynnie Mirvis: What a story. What a story.

Iris Harkavy: And his daughter who now owns her own shop in Memphis is just like him. She can do anything and she can...and she is a tremendous financial success and she's built an amazing life and she, too, said to me, it was like déjà vu, she graduated from the Yeshiva, all the kids are going to college.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Iris Harkavy: Most of my Russian kids all went to college. I said, "Okay, Janna, well, let's talk about college." "I'm not going." I says, "What do you mean, you're not going to...?" Me, who believes in education first before you eat, "I'm not going to college." I said, "Oh, you have to go. In America, you have to. You have to do this." It reminded me of **Leonid**. "I was illiterate in Russia." She said, "I barely got through. I stayed there because you wanted me to. I cannot do this. This is not who I am and I promise you I will be a success." I says, "Well, what do you want to do?" "I'm going to be a cosmetologist." We had a grant for the people we resettled who chose not to go into their old professions. And she went to cosmetology school and she became the best cosmetologist in Memphis. She opened up her own business and she runs this tremendous salon on Wheelis and she is a success.

Page 10

Lynnie Mirvis: What a story. That sounds like your challenging...I mean, your most rewarding...

Iris Harkavy: Not really, but the most interesting journey.

Lynnie Mirvis: Most interesting.

Iris Harkavy: And of course they stayed in Memphis and she adopted a child from the Jewish Family Service and I've gotten to see the whole progression whereas we have a number of Memphis families, but as the people have aged and their children got educated and I have some remarkable stories about these people and their education, and these kids went all over the United States because they all had specialties, eventually we lost...we're losing our families as they're retiring and they're going to be with grandchildren and their families.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: But I'm telling you, each story, you said that was the most...they were all so remarkable.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Iris Harkavy: Because they were a remarkable group of people who had learned to endure and they taught me a lot. Believe me, I learned more from them than I ever did for them but it was just a fabulous time.

Lynnie Mirvis: My God, that story. What was the most...yeah, what were you going to say?

Iris Harkavy: I want to tell you another story.

Lynnie Mirvis: Sure.

Iris Harkavy: And I'm serious when I say each one as better than the next as far as what happened. Alright, so we go back to the airport, another family comes in. And they did, they came, like, one family and then we'd have a rest for a week and then another family and...but it was hectic and they would come in in almost states of crisis where you had to be available 24/7 because they were very insecure. They didn't know what...if they had made a mistake and just a lot of...a lot of responsibility and just being there for them. But this one family was a family of three. It was **Simon** and Maria, also another Maria...no **Deena**, excuse me. **Deena and Dmitry**. **Dmitry** was actually going to be 21 and they were also very little people and they get off the plane and they are coming from I think...where did they come from? You know, it's been...look how many years it's been. Um, they came from a large city but it wasn't as sophisticated as Moscow. And **Deena**, and again, she spoke lovely English when she came. In fact, they spoke... **Simon** spoke pretty good English, **Deena** spoke lovely English, and she had been the principal of a vocational school and she had her what would be comparable to her master's in education and **Simon** was an engineer with patents all over the place and they were able to bring proof of their patents out and he was an assembly...what do you call it? Conveyor belt expert.

Page 11

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: So he was a dream to place. He had no problem. And he was this marvelous engineer. But **Dmitry** comes and he's about, also very short, very slight, and he introduces himself in perfect English. Flawless English. So we're driving back to the center and of course I don't need **Celia** with this family and I said, "**Dmitry**, your English is remarkable." He said, "Well, you're the first person I've ever spoken to in English."

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, my God.

Iris Harkavy: That's what I did. I said, "Throw that by me one more time?" [Laughing] I said, "You're kidding." I said, "**Dmitry**, what do you do?" He said, "Well, I was about to graduate in electrical engineering but if I took my degree I would not have been allowed to leave the country, so I didn't finish." So with **Simon**, like I told you, it was no problem. We had Cleo Wrap and _____ and I said, "I've got this person that has a patent in conveyor belt." Well, Cleo Wrap is all conveyor belt which I knew because I had been on a tour there once and I said, "Just talk to him and see if he's anybody you can use." Well, of course he never left...he was there because he...anything that broke, **Simon** could fix.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Iris Harkavy: I mean, not this way but in design and how to arrange it more efficiently. Everything. Anyway, and **Deena** said, she was such a smart woman and she's still here. She said, "Iris, I can't be an educator in America. It's a different population, different students, different philosophy." She said, "Just get me a job. It's not important what I do." As it turns out, she's such a smart woman, whoever came in contact with her used her. I mean, in a managerial...she had wonderful people skills and she was a doll and she is a doll. **Dmitry**, I thought, "Gee whiz. I don't know, maybe he should go to University of Memphis and complete the degree." I call the head of electrical engineering and introduce myself and I said, "I have this young man that I have a feeling is probably over the top smart. He has everything but the degree in electrical engineering." But I had found from others that it was best to take some time and transfer the skills to American engineering or American dentistry or whatever. So we would take time with them and get them grants to... He said, "Well, bring the young man. I'd love to talk to him." I said, "Well, you'll be able to talk to him because he speaks perfect English." So we go and this lovely professor said, "Why don't you leave him here? I'd like to introduce him to our department. I'd like other people to give me the feedback, and I'll call you and we'll put our heads together and decide what's best." Very...I mean, these people were so receptive to helping.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's wonderful.

Iris Harkavy: That's why it was so beautiful. So I guess he's there about three hours and I...he calls and I think, "Oh, God, what's going on?" And he said, "There's nothing we can teach this young man, not even in our master's degree."

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Page 12

Iris Harkavy: I said, "But he doesn't have a degree." He says, "That will be no problem." He says, "I've already called Light, Gas, and Water. They can't wait to meet him and talk to him. Can you get him there tomorrow?" I said, "Of course." So we take him to Light, Gas, and Water and the same thing. The guy said...the head of Light, Gas, and Water says, "I'm going to take him over to this department. I'm going to let my guys see what's going on." They call me, they said, "Oh, my God." They said, "You just don't understand because you don't know what to ask him. What a mind." I mean, can you imagine somebody speaking English to nobody and then he's speaking perfect... They said, you know, again, "What do you want us to do money wise? We would love to have him." Do you know where **Dmitry** is today?

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-mmm.

Iris Harkavy: He's a mountain climber so he wanted to be somewhere where there were mountains eventually. So he is on top of a mountain in Colorado solving all the electrical problems of the United States. [Laughing] That's **Dmitry Shusterman**. Our very own little **Dmitry**. So, I mean, things like that happened all the time with these people because they were so incredible.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, my God. Unbelievable.

Iris Harkavy: Unbelievable.

Lynnie Mirvis: What stories.

Iris Harkavy: What stories.

Lynnie Mirvis: You have got so many.

Iris Harkavy: Oh, it's just...

Lynnie Mirvis: Was there something that was really challenging that stands out? Can you speak to that?

Iris Harkavy: Yes, there was...you know, not all things were beautiful. But their kids...we resettled a family, I'm not going to mention their names, and the father in order to survive I'm sure had become a crook.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: There's Ronald. And...you can bleep that. And he was a problem because he got into trouble and we're behind him so we have to...so the...but this was, like, a rarity.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: But you said a challenge, it was a challenge, because he had a wife that wouldn't stand up to him but he had two children who both turned out to be successful.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Page 13

Iris Harkavy: And learned the right way and to this day I don't know what happened to him as far as...his children stayed in Memphis. One went and came back and his son became a very successful accountant and the daughter also I believe was an accountant and married one of the youngsters of another family that we had, you know? And he was an engineer so they have a good life.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's good.

Iris Harkavy: So that's good. But that was...that was the most challenging and of course the most challenging was the elderly because with a lot of these nuclear families who came with usually the 17-year-old son, they brought with them either parents, elderly parents, or a mother and their health even though they might have been in their 60s they were comparable to people in their 70s because they had not received the medical care that we have in America. I told you about the teeth, the same with people who developed heart problems.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: They didn't have open heart surgery, they didn't...weren't doing the... even though I'm sure the people with money and connections were getting all this in Russia. I'm not to say that Russia is backward or the Soviet was backward but in this... with medical care for this group, it was difficult but again, we were very, very fortunate because I told you about the bank of doctors who were marvelous and many of our elderly came in and had been given death sentences and it was repairable. And another agency stepped up to the plate, Plough, and whereas it would have been very difficult for the nuclear family to go forward with the pressure of a parent who had a lot of problems, they had their own space at Plough Towers with other Russian elderly and it was beautiful and to this day there's a whole Russian population still at Plough Towers from the different waves of the elderly that would come in with other families, so even the elderly...and they would come to the center, to the daily lunch,...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: ...and they...a lot of them spoke Yiddish because they were from the time when Jews were Jews, you know? And they were not forbidden to speak Yiddish or to go to Synagogue because all those years of communism, there was no religion.

Lynnie Mirvis: No religion.

Iris Harkavy: And that was a difficulty, too.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: Because whereas some of them wanted their children to have it, they really didn't want any part of it or it was so foreign to them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: Some of them still had memories of grandmothers or whatever but it was not a priority in their list and we did...a lot of them did eventually did really...like, I know there were several that became very active at the temple. It was very, very difficult for them to become Orthodox Jews or, you know, it was a journey for them. They had

Page 14

Jewish culture, they were thrilled that their children were going to Jewish schools, but it was a difficult journey for them.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: You know? To become...but the older people, many, many of them came to shuls. You know, the different shuls.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And it was beautiful to see. I mean, they cried because they were now in a Jewish world. It was. It was very special for them, too, even though it was hard, you know? It was hard for them to leave other children.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm. How did your Jewish values inform the work that you did with the...

Iris Harkavy: I think it was the way I was raised.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: You know? You never get too far away, I don't think, from how you're raised. I was raised in...my grandparents lived with us a lot of that time so I saw my mother and father opening their home and giving them such love and support always. And of course in my family, you know, I mean, I couldn't have had more loving parents who wanted to do everything for us in a positive way. We were not...you know, my father was a self-made attorney building a...so there wasn't a lot of money when I was growing up which I think actually was another little blessing in a way because I saw my father work extremely hard...

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: ...to provide and that was definitely his priority, that we...and education.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mmm.

Iris Harkavy: Education was everything and my grandmother was Jewishly very literate. She had...she was the daughter of a Rabbi in a small community and she had been taught unlike a lot of Jewish women, she was very...she knew Tamid, she knew... she was very intellectual in that area and her philosophy was a daily thing where she would say these little jewels straight from the, you know...and her language was not great but she got her point across.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow. Beautiful.

Iris Harkavy: Yeah, she...you knew that number one, your responsibility was **of a Jew**.

Lynnie Mirvis: So beautiful.

Iris Harkavy: And number two, you...she would say, "You're beautiful, but you must use your beauty in the right way."

Page 15

Lynnie Mirvis: Mmm.

Iris Harkavy: She was. She was a very learned woman. Ronnie gets tired of me because I always used to say, "My grandmother used to say..." or, "My mother used to say..." because she took it all in and that was how I was raised.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And you gave back.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And I...you know, that's...that's just...and I just always...I think I always could put myself, I always had an ability because I was a story maker, that what's my art's about. I'm a storyteller, and I don't have to tell you who is also a storyteller. I think you're able to be a storyteller because you can put yourself inside somebody else's story.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: And that's...I think where you have empathy, that you can...it makes you see things...like, if that was you.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: You know? I'm still asking myself. Every day I read this horrible stuff and I said, "God forbid, if that was me, what that would feel like."

Lynnie Mirvis: Mm-hmm.

Iris Harkavy: So that's my story.

Lynnie Mirvis: Thank you. Is there anything else you want to add?

Iris Harkavy: No, this is so much fun. [Laughing] Because I could go on and on about my...my dear experiences with my dear Russians.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, thank you so much.

Iris Harkavy: But, by the way, they're not Russians, they're Jews.

Lynnie Mirvis: They're Jews.

Iris Harkavy: They would get very angry with...

Lynnie Mirvis: Absolutely.

Iris Harkavy: You know, inevitably you would be calling...saying they're Russians but they were Jews. They were never Russians. They would correct you every time.

Lynnie Mirvis: Absolutely. Thank you so much.