

EXODUS Project

Interview of Janna Piacenti

July 19, 2016

Interviewee: Janna Piacenti

Interviewer: Lynnne Mirvis

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Transcription

[Recording begins]

Lynnne Mirvis: Hello, I'm Lynnne Mirvis, and I am here with Janna Piacenti at her salon, The Neuvo. Did I say it right?

Janna Piacenti: Neuvo.

LM: Neuvo.

JP: Neuvo, yeah.

LM: Thank you, Janna, for agreeing to the interview. It is July 19, 2016. Janna, first, just tell me your full name.

JP: Janna Piacenti.

LM: Ok. And what is your date of birth?

JP: 5/13/66.

LM: And what is your place of birth?

JP: Russia.

LM: Russia. Can you tell us which republic, city, or town you came from?

JP: I came from a little city called Bila Tserkva. It's about 80 miles under Kiev.

LM: Under Kiev.

JP: Near Kiev. 80 miles away from Kiev.

LM: So can you describe... What are some of your memories of growing up there?

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JP: Oh, not as good as here [*laughs*]. Memories... I really tried to, I don't want to say forget because that is my hometown... Not a good memory. We didn't hardly have anything compared to here. We couldn't even get a piece of gum. Didn't have jeans. Just simple things. Didn't have candy. Didn't have popcorn. Didn't have potato chips. The simplest things that people here take for granted. We didn't have anything, basically.

LM: Can you describe your house?

JP: We had a nice house. Obviously, my parents did very well in Russia, and so we had a nice house. We say nice house—it was an apartment high-rise. But there's five people living in two bedrooms. So you know, me, my brother, and my grandmother shared one room. So it was very tight, but it was very nice. We didn't need for much. We had a nice place to live. As far as food and things that everybody in America had, we didn't have.

LM: What did your parents do?

JP: My father was a machinist, and he worked for a big corporation. He did very well. He was very good at what he did. My mom worked in a book store, which was a big deal in Russia. Books were a big deal. They were hard to get. So she would bargain with different people. If we needed meat or we needed fish, she would bargain with people. She'd give them books so we could get meat and fish and set the table. So she was very savvy. I guess that's where I get it from [*laughs*]. Yeah, she was very savvy. She knew how to get around things, and we had food on the table because of her, basically. And people in Russia like to read. There was a lot of smart people, so books were very, very hard to get. And if she could get it, she would turn around and sell it to the right people, and she would bargain, I would say...

LM: Were some of the books hard to get?

JP: Encyclopedia and things like that. Yeah, they were very hard to get in Russia for some reason.

LM: And what about your grandparents?

JP: Ah, my grandparents. Most of them died in a war. I only knew one, my mom's mother. She lived with us, and she basically took care of me and my brother while my parents worked.

LM: Were they in the Holocaust?

JP: No. No. No. But they won the war. My mom went through two starvations, so... Yeah, two, not one. Two.

LM: Starvations? Could you describe?...

JP: Well, basically, she was telling me she would... There was no food. She would go to restaurants and dig in the garbage and take potato peels and go home and make soups out of them. Things like that. When they were little, they would go to the tables at the restaurants where rich people were eating, and they would give them their leftovers. It's just hard for me to believe,

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you know, that she lived like that. So now she's very cautious with her money. Now I'm like, "You can spend it, you can do whatever you want." But when you're used to all of that, it's hard to... It's very difficult to understand.

LM: Yeah. So what was it like to be Jewish growing up?

JP: Um, well, not for me so much because I was younger. But we mainly left Russia for that reason. Because my brother, who was going to be 18 and he was going to have to go to the army. My parents didn't want him to because some of their friends' kids got killed in the army because they were Jewish. [Killed] by their own people. So my mom was just, didn't want to go through that and was scared. She wanted to leave the country because of that. That's why we left. They didn't want my brother to go to the army. He was 17, and another year, he was going to be drafted. My parents didn't want to go through that. So it was difficult. [Inaudible] would go... I was little, obviously, when my brother would tell people he wasn't Jewish when he was. Those people look down on Jewish people. Now, when you came here, so much easier and free. You can tell anybody you want to that you're Jewish. It's nice.

LM: Did you have any Jewish celebrations? Were there any kind of Jewish celebrations memories that you remember?

JP: Not really, no. Not in Russia. Not until we came here.

LM: Yeah.

JP: Yeah. Not really. But I mean, both my parents are Jewish. Mom and dad.

LM: Did you celebrate any Jewish holidays?

JP: Here. Not there.

LM: Not there. Nothing there.

JP: Never there.

LM: Did they talk to you about being Jewish, what that meant?

JP: Not really. Not there. Until we came here.

LM: And so when you came to America, what do you remember about the actual coming to?...

JP: Yeah, that was really hard at first. You come to America. You're 13. You don't speak English. You don't know anything. But nice Jewish families started to take us in and show us the way and how to... So really a lot of wonderful people. Like Horace.

LM: What did you have to leave behind when you came? Were there friends? Do you have any memories of that?

JP: Yeah, now that I look back, yeah. A lot of friends. But really not that good of memories. Really, to be honest, it was a very hard life.

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LM: Did you experience anti-Semitism?

JP: Not me myself personally because I was younger, but my parents and my brother have. Yes. Not me, personally. But my family has.

LM: What was your schooling like there?

JP: School was very hard. Here, everybody jumps in a car and their parents take them to school. In Russia, it's nothing like that. You had to walk to school. You had to walk, sometimes, 10 miles to school.

LM: You walked 10 miles?

JP: Uh huh. Or longer. And if it snows, you go to school. You walk to school. Yeah. So it was pretty incredible. With books and feet wet, hands wet. You get to school, you put your mittens to dry, and you're in school. Nobody drove you there, nobody took you there. People here have it very easy.

LM: Can you describe any school memories?

JP: Our school was just kind of like school here. You go to school, you sit at the desk. Very, very disciplined. A lot more disciplined than it is here. You have to raise your hands about everything. You can't just get up and go to the bathroom. You can't get up just to do anything. You had to raise your hand for everything. They could swipe you if, you know...

LM: With a ruler.

JP: Yeah. Yeah. Very much disciplined. Very, very disciplined at school. I think people here get away with a little more stuff.

LM: Did being Jewish affect you in school?

JP: No, no, no. Not at all. I didn't experience anything like that personally.

LM: When you left, do you remember what you could take with you?

JP: Not much. We really didn't... We could only come with \$500 for all five of us, which was nothing. Hardly nothing. Pretty much the clothes on my back.

LM: Do you remember what year that was that you left?

JP: 1979.

LM: So you were 13 years old, you were a teenager...

JP: 13 years old.

LM: Just the clothes on your back, you couldn't take much...

JP: Not much.

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LM: Is there any?...

JP: But there was really not much to take [*laughs*].

LM: Did you have a special toy or something special?

JP: No, not really.

LM: Not much. It was very little.

JP: Very little. But I do remember we always wanted gum. It's a story I will never forget. My father used to go to the black market, my father had a car, and he used to take people to sell their stuff. He traveled a lot because he had a car, which a lot of people don't have cars in Russia. And I'll never forget waiting... He was supposed to bring Juicy Fruit gum, and I couldn't wait. I waited all night for him. I saw the lights coming and said, "That's my dad! That's my dad!" He brought me some Juicy Fruit, a pack. So I chewed one piece. I put it on top of the window. I went to school the next day. It was hard as a rock. I put it back in my mouth and chewed one piece for a whole week.

LM: Oh, wow...

JP: For a week. So that whole five pieces lasted me a year. Here, people have no clue. Every kind of gum, every kind of thing you can imagine. You can get. So I took that piece and I put it on top of the window. When I got up and it looked at it the next day, I was hoping it was still there. It was still there, put it back in my mouth. I put it back in my mouth. It was hard as a rock. And I chewed it. It's a story... I will always, always remember that.

LM: Oh, my gosh.

JP: Here, people have no clue. So when I came here, I had to make the best of it. And the most of it. So here, it is amazing. If you work hard, you're going to achieve everything you want.

LM: So who came with you again?

JP: My mom, my dad, my brother, my grandmother.

LM: Can you tell me their names?

JP: My mom is Maria [last name is inaudible]. [Inaudible sentence]. My dad is Liam(?) [Inaudible]. He's actually deceased now. And my grandmother, Hannah [inaudible]. My brother's name is Alex {inaudible}. And he's here. He has his own business.

LM: What are they doing?

JP: My brother has his own business. He does landscaping. My grandmother is deceased. And my mom is retired. She used to work for Wurzburg Brothers for years. She's retired.

LM: What did she do?

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JP: She worked at the factory. Did labels.

LM: Do you remember the actual trip of coming? How did you get here? How long did it take?

JP: Well, it took a long time. We didn't come just straight to America. We went from here to Italy, from Italy... We were in Italy for three months. And then from Italy to Memphis. So it's about a five-month deal to get to the United States.

LM: Do you remember once you decided to leave, how did your life change in Russia? Did people look at you differently?

JP: Well, we tried not to tell anybody until the last month because we didn't want any trouble. My father didn't want any trouble at work, all that. So it was pretty hush hush until the last month.

LM: Mhm. And how did you travel?

JP: By plane. To Italy, yeah, we lived there for three months.

LM: Do you remember where you stayed in Italy? Or anything about that?

JP: No. No. No.

LM: That was hard.

JP: I was 13 years old [*laughing*].

LM: That's hard to remember, yeah [*laughing*].

JP: But I know they had a lot more delicious food and yogurts and gum than we did. So that was fun [*laughing*].

LM: So you came from...

JP: Yeah, nothing to, yeah. I was like, "Can we just stay here?" Yeah.

LM: So what would you say, thinking about America, coming here, what do you think was your greatest challenge when you were 13, when you were arriving here?

JP: Oh, God. It was so hard when I first came not knowing the language and people talking to you. The first thing I wanted to do was obviously learn English so I could communicate. So that was the... That's what I wanted to do the most. Not a far second thing, I wanted to work. I was too young. I was too young to work, but I really wanted to work because I wanted... You know, \$500 for a whole family is not much money. So I knew very quickly in America, money don't grow on trees like people think in Russia. They did. I knew quickly I had to learn a language, I had to grow up a little bit, get everything on my own.

LM: Where there any surprises for you here that you didn't expect?

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JP: No, not really. No. Just it was a very nice surprise that a lot of people cared and took care of us. That was... Strangers that didn't know us. That was very nice.

LM: Can you describe that? What it was like to come here and about the people.

JP: People were very nice, which I was... You know, you come and you don't know anybody, so you're very shy. You're scared of everything. People were very nice. Everybody took us in. There was a lot of food, a lot of everything. We didn't even know what was what. It was like... It was like monkeys being let out of a cage. Everything was given to them, and you don't know where to... We didn't know what deodorant was, we didn't know what razors were. Everything was sort of like we were dummies. Basically, that's what we were. And the sad thing, people in Russia are very, very educated and very smart. But everybody acted like we didn't know where anything went, was. We didn't know what shaving cream was. We didn't know what a razor was. It was a whole new world. We had classes. We had classes for everything. And then other Russian people started coming, and we got smarter. We started helping other Russian people. My parents did a lot of helping with other Russian people that came over the years. Yeah. So they were very involved in that.

LM: What kind of help did people need? What kind of help?

JP: Yeah. My parents were taking them to get jobs. Obviously, after we get on our feet, we got a car. So new people that come in, they don't have cars. They don't have anything. You've got to chauffeur them around. So my dad did a lot of that. We did a lot of buying a lot of food for them, stocking their refrigerators out of our own money. So my parents did a lot of...

LM: Do you remember any of the families that helped you or anybody?

JP: Helped us? Yeah. [Inaudible] stands out the most because she helped us the most. Malkean, Lee... Lee Malkean, am I right? Evelyn, Evelyn... Gray hair. Simpkin. Bob Silver and his wife.

LM: Jewish families.

JP: Jewish Family Services. That's pretty much what I remember. And Cindy and Mark Soloway. They don't live here anymore, but yeah. Very, very grateful.

LM: So when you came here, what was it like going to school? Do you remember where you went?

JP: Well, I went to Yeshiva Hebrew Academy. It was very hard obviously, the English part of it. Because I got thrown into school immediately without knowing any English. But it was either swim or sink, so I did it. I did it. I graduated. Some of my friends from school, I keep up with a few people.

LM: So you didn't know the language, and you went to this school, and...

JP: Yeah, it was pretty hard. Very hard. Very hard.

LM: What about the Jewish life here? What was that like for you?

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JP: It was very nice because I'd never experienced it before. So it was nice to go to a Jewish school and to learn Hebrew. It was very nice. It was all very difficult because as I learned Hebrew I was learning English. It was all at once. It was pretty hard. Yeah. So it was very hard. But I loved it. It was fun to be in an environment that I wanted to be in. I couldn't practice that where I used to live, so it was nice.

LM: Are there any memories that stand out to you from this school? Or when you came?

JP: Here, yeah. We had a lot of [laughing]... I remember we needed... We were playing basketball, and we needed to raise money. So we set up... I was selling... I have the yearbooks, it's so funny. I was selling food. I made soup, I made hot dogs. And I was selling at the Hebrew Academy to teachers and kids and all that. And I raised enough money not just for the team. It was even more than I was supposed to. So that was fun. We needed uniforms, so I raised a lot of money. I just set it all up myself. So I always said that business... Thank God I didn't go into cooking. I went into hair [laughing].

LM: You were thinking about it.

JP: No.

LM: No?

JP: No. I loved to cook. I actually, I'm in the paper for cooking. If you Google my name, I'm in the *Commercial Appeal*, full page. So, yeah.

LM: Where does the cooking come from? Do you have family recipes or anything special?

JP: My parents. Well, it wasn't family recipes, it was crab cakes that I made, and I had some other... But I was full page. From my parents, my mom and my grandmother.

LM: Did they have any traditional dishes? Anything come to mind?

JP: Yeah, they do. My mom still does get fish, [inaudible]. A lot of Russian dishes needed potatoes, chicken cutlets. Just a lot of Russian dishes. A lot of Jewish foods, too. She does [inaudible] fish, chopped liver, all the Jewish foods. And it's delicious.

LM: Well, did she... Do you think she got that from her?...

JP: From her mom.

LM: Did you ever experience any Jewish holiday at all there with your grandparents?

JP: No, not there.

LM: I know you said that before. But I'm thinking you had the Jewish food, but not the...

JP: No, not there. Here, when we came here, we had those every year.

LM: So what was that like to not know what this is, and then to?...

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JP: To be traditional, when you're Jewish, you pick it up very quickly. What your traditions are [*laughing*].

LM: Right. So tell us, I'd like to know more about... How did you get into what you're doing now? Tell us what you're doing now?

JP: I always liked to be in the beauty business. And of course, after I graduated high school, my parents wanted me to go to college like everybody's parents want you to go to college. I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to go to cosmetology school. They didn't want me to go to cosmetology school. They didn't want to support me in the cosmetology world. They wanted me to go to college and get a degree. So they didn't want to help me. I had to say to them, "Sorry mom and dad." I was on my own basically if I went to cosmetology school. If I went to college, they would pay for college. So I disagreed. Oh, I know. So I did. I went to cosmetology school, and I graduated at 19. I went straight into... I worked for a place called Balmond. It's actually right behind me. Do you remember that place? On Wheelis. Fred Tyson. It was a school. So I worked for her. And then I worked for a place called Capelli for twelve years. And then I've been on my own for eleven. I originally rented a little place on Wheelis Drive. I'm sorry, on Aaron Drive, next to Huey's, for five years. The location. Then I decided I wanted to do something Memphis had never seen before. So I wanted to get my own beautiful building with a lot of nice things in the building. Memphis doesn't have anything like that, so I bought this little house and was on this property. I demolished it and built a million-and-a-half-dollar building. And here I am. I still love it.

LM: That's amazing. Tell me what's in this building.

JP: We do hair, we do nails, we do pedicures, manicures. We do hair extensions. We do waxings. We do facials. Pretty much anything you can imagine beauty needs, but very, very high fashion. Everything I have is the latest, the hottest. We have the best products in the city. We have products that nobody in town carries. It's called Kerastase. I'm the only one in Memphis to carry it. All the movie stars use it. So I try to bring a little London, a little Paris, a little of the latest and the hottest. I've won several awards cutting hair. So this is it.

LM: And what does your family say now?

JP: Yeah. No it's a different story [*laughing*]. Yeah. I followed my dream.

LM: What made you want to do that?

JP: Always as a little girl, I wanted to make people pretty, make people feel good. There's nothing like when they're in your chair, and you make them feel good, and they're just beside themselves. That's my high. That's... The smile on their face. You know, you go to a doctor. You don't feel good and you're sick, and it's not a good feeling. I wanted to do something that's such a good feeling when I'm done with them. Thirty years later, I'm still loving it like I just started. Yeah. It's nice to have a smile on their face, and every client likes you. It's just an amazing feeling.

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LM: That's fabulous. So you said you are married.

JP: I got married at 34. I've always put my career first and still do. And I adopted a little boy from Jewish Family Services. Yeah. Penny. She's a wonderful lady. I'm going to cry.

LM: She was the adoption lady.

JP: She passed away. She was a wonderful, beautiful lady.

LM: I met her.

JP: She did the most wonderful thing for me.

LM: Aw. We can stop?

JP: Yeah, stop.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

LM: So tell me about your son.

JP: He's 12 years old. We got him when he was three weeks old. He was [inaudible]. He went to Temple Israel for three years, and after that, he... My mom took care of my son for a little bit, too. Then he went to Temple Israel. After that, we decided to send him to St. Dominic's. So he's at St. Dominic's now, and he's twelve years old. He's an amazing little boy. He's very much an athlete and plays a lot of basketball. He's very competitive. He plays AAU basketball, and my whole life revolves around him and work. He's going to go to Lausanne in 8th grade. So that's our plan. We really like that school. That's it.

LM: Is he involved in the Jewish community at all?

JP: Not so much. He plays a lot of basketball, so he travels the whole summer. The whole summer. He just came back from nationals for a week. Every day, he's in camp. He's in camp now. Every day, it's some kind of camp or they have practice. When you play competitive, you have no summer. It's practice every single day, for three hours every day.

LM: [Inaudible]

JP: Yeah, he's actually... They just finished 11th in the nation, so that's pretty major for Tennessee. Yeah. They represent the state of Tennessee and Memphis. Yeah, he's one of the top 6th graders in the country. So that's pretty amazing. Yeah, I'm proud.

LM: I know you're proud. So I just want to know, is there anything else that you'd like to add that we didn't cover?

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JP: I think pretty much everything... I mean, really, the only thing I want to say is if you come to this country and you want to work hard, you can achieve pretty much... Like Trump's wife said yesterday, I don't know if you watched the speech [*laughing*], if you come to this country, you work hard, exactly what she said, you can achieve every dream, everything you can imagine. The only thing you... Just work hard. That's it.

LM: Thank you so much.

JP: You're welcome.

[*Recording ends*]