

EXODUS Project

Interview of Judy Royal

January 18, 2017

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Judy Royal.mp4

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Lynn Mirvis: Hello. I'm Lynn Mirvis and I'm here with Judy Royal, and it is Wednesday, January 18, 2017, and we're interviewing for the Exodus project. Will you tell me your full name and when and where you were born?

Judy Royal: Judyth Rose Epstein Royal, and I was born in Memphis on September 13, 1942.

Lynn Mirvis: And tell me a little bit about your background, your education.

Judy Royal: Well, I grew up in Memphis. I went to Snowden Elementary and Junior High, and then I went to Central, graduated in 1960 and attended the University of Illinois. I graduated in 1964 with a degree in Elementary Education, came back to Memphis, and taught in the public schools for six years. I taught second grade for two years at Hollywood Elementary, got a Master's in special education at the University of Memphis, and taught special ed for four years, and then started having a family. Got married and started a family.

Lynn Mirvis: Alright. A family.

Judy Royal: Got married first.

Lynn Mirvis: Yeah, and so you raised your family here in Memphis.

Judy Royal: Yes, yes.

Lynn Mirvis: And tell me a little bit about how you got involved with helping the Jewish families from the former Soviet Union.

Judy Royal: Well, you know, it was interesting. I've been thinking about that, and I remember that there was an announcement that there were going to be a meeting at Temple, I guess an information meeting, and I think all the synagogues were invited to participate in helping resettle these families. And honestly, I came to the meeting, I had no idea really what to expect, and I remember **Henry Marcus**, I believe, and someone else from Jewish Family Service, and there was a large group of people that came to Temple. I remember sitting in the meeting room, and the idea was to encourage people to group together basically to help resettle these families.

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And one of the things in looking back that I think was really nice was we were sort of put together. You didn't necessarily sign up with your three close friends, so in our particular case, it was very nice because we had a large... we were assigned a three-generation family, and there were eight family members that were coming which we found out when we were asked to help resettle this family, and I think there were five or six of us that were assigned. And then once the family came and we saw and they saw what the needs were, two or three other people came along. And I think a lot of people felt that "their" family was the best family, but I think that our group really, really bonded with this family, and everyone sort of took on a different responsibility.

We sort of divided it up because people came with different, you know... some people had time constraints, some people didn't, and so we all kind of took a little piece of the family as we helped get them resettled and acclimated to this country. And, you know, the friendship and the relationship really continued for many, many years. Unfortunately the grandparents, **Mark and Anna Rogavoy** have passed away, and the two daughters have moved out of town, but I think those of us that are still here and still part of this are interested in always knowing where they are and what their family is doing.

Lynn Mirvis: Could you tell me about who were the people who worked with you?

Judy Royal: Yes. I was trying to remember. I think the original group was **Abby Weiner**, who has passed away, **Tom and Harriett Sturg** who also have passed away, **Shelly and Frank Pierce**. Shelly is still here, and unfortunately Frank is also passed away, and **Felice**, and I think her husband's name was **John Hedge** who have moved out of town. Gloria, the **Felsenthals**, joined us later, and you know, I think that might have been our whole group. But like I said, we had a big family. We had two grandparents, two daughters, and three small children, and there were eight family members.

Lynn Mirvis: So how did you divide that up? Did you want to talk about that?

Judy Royal: Well, I think we divided it up basically on who needed what. We did transportation, you know, we did grocery store things that the kids needed. I think it was basically also who was available, and with eight people... And at the beginning, they did not have a car. They fairly quickly into their moving to Memphis, the grandfather, Mark, got a car because he became the driver. Claudia, the older daughter, got a job very quickly. She had two boys. She came as a widow. She was a very young widow, and her older son went to White Station. Her younger son was at the Schechter School. **Ina**, the younger sister, had one little boy, and she and her husband, I believe he started out maybe at the Temple preschool and then went to the academy. I'm not sure.

So Mark, once the two daughters got jobs, Mark became the driver and so here was this grandfather who, new to this country, did not have a lot of English, was the carpooler, you know, and he was picking up the boys and bringing them back and doing all these things. His wife Anna never drove, and then eventually Claudia got a car, and Ina and her husband got a car, but in the beginning it was really Mark, and I really believe that it was Mark who was the person that encouraged this family to leave Russia because he knew that this was the best for the grandchildren.

And you know, when I think about it, it was so unselfish on his part, but it was so brave because here was a man who was, you know, in his late 60s, encouraging his entire

family to leave. They first went to Italy. They stayed there for a while, and then, you know, I can't even begin to imagine... We used to ask them, "How did you feel when you

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heard you were going to Memphis, Tennessee?" I mean, they knew nothing about Memphis. The only thing I think they really knew was that it was hot, and I remember all of us going to the airport to pick them up. They arrived late one evening. It was in May of 1990, and we're at the airport with balloons, and I think we had teddy bears for the kids, and you know, when I look back on it, I'm thinking, "What could they have possibly thought?"

I mean, I'm not sure what we thought except that we were so excited and they have made this long journey and here are all these people coming to greet them. We knew where they were going to be living. We had stocked their apartment somewhat with food, and I do remember **Abby Weiner** who had the biggest heart of anyone I think in our group, and she just wanted more than anything for them to have everything they needed, and I remember her going to the grocery store, and she was so proud of herself. She had bought caviar and all this imported food for them because she said, "Well, I know they're going to eat caviar because they're from Russia." And so that was kind of a joke. But like I said, I think as much as anything, along with getting to know our family, it was also great getting to know some other people, some volunteers, that we didn't really know. We all didn't know each other, and I think we worked great together. We had Shabbat dinner a few times. I know that **Harriett** had people over for holidays. I remember being in her house for Hanukkah one year, so there was a lot of bonding, I think, that took place. But I do want to share one story that was very interesting.

So one night, I think that actually everyone was at my house for dinner. It was a Shabbat dinner and we were sitting around the table, and we were talking as well as we could talk to each other, probably shouting because I know **Rai** said this in her interview, we all felt that the louder we talked, the more they could understand us, which certainly was not true, but Mark, the grandfather, said that he had a cousin who had moved to Portland, Oregon, he thought. Well he had lost contact with them some time in the 1920s, but they had moved to Portland in the 1900s, and he would love to find them. Well I always like a challenge, so I thought, "How difficult could this be? I mean, how many Jews are there in Portland, Oregon?" And of course this was before Google. This was before... Can you imagine how easy it would be now?

Anyway, the beginning of the next week, I actually called Portland, and I called... I'm trying to think. I think I called the Federation maybe first. No, I think I called Information. Of course. We used to all call Information. I called Information to see if there was a **Rogavoy** family in Portland, and I remember getting someone's phone number. I called this particular family, and they said no, that they did not have any Russian relatives, this did not sound familiar, but they suggested that I start with calling some of the rabbis of the couple synagogues that were in Portland. And I called a Rabbi Gellar who was at the Reform Temple, and he couldn't have been nicer, more helpful. He immediately said to me, "You know, I think that the people that you might be talking about, their name is **Rogelway**, and the wife works at the Federation. She's the Assistant Director of the Federation." I got her phone number. I called her, told her the story, and without missing a beat, she said to me, "This is my husband's family." Her husband's name is Burt. His grandfather had come to Portland. They had communicated for a time with the family, but then the family in Russia stopped communicating with them because they were very fearful, you know, that someone would find out, and so they had actually not been in contact I think since about the 1920s.

They immediately called each other. They did confirm that yes, this was their family, and in February, I actually have the clipping, in February of 1991, Burt and his wife **Lori**

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came to Memphis, and so it was this unbelievable reunion. I remember we were all together. We went to dinner and we had... all the volunteers and all the family were together a couple of times, and if I remember correctly, I remember Burt and **Lori** came back for one of Mark's and Anna's grandchildren's bar mitzvahs. I think it was Elias. It was at **Enché**, and then Mark and Anna and maybe Claudia and Ina actually went to Portland to visit them. So I really think of everything that happened, that might have been the high point, and it was very easy.

Several months after we were able to connect Mark's family, his wife, Anna, said to me, "I have a cousin that I think moved to Philadelphia. Do you think you can find her?" Well, I said to Anna, "There are a few more Jews in Philadelphia than there are in Portland," and we did actually try. I mean, she had very little information, and unfortunately we were never able to find her cousin, but we tried. So I think of everything, that probably was a high point.

But I think the other piece was to see how this family became a part of not only this community, but this country and what these grandchildren have accomplished. It's unbelievable. And I will say that Ina, the younger sister, very soon after she was here, expressed her desire to be a nurse, and she said she always wanted to be a nurse but in Russia they told her she had to be a computer programmer, and through her relationship with the Sterns, I think that it was really Tom Stern who really encouraged her and helped her do what she needed to do to get courses. I remember she went to then Shelby State to take the science courses that she needed while she was working, while she was raising her little boy, and she then went to UT School of Nursing. I remember we all went to her graduation from nursing school, and she became a cardiac nurse. She worked at the hospital, and on more than one occasion, I knew people who happened to have had her as a nurse, and she was really cut out to be a nurse because she is outstanding. She is, I believe, living in California now with her son, and Claudia is living out of Memphis with her children. So it's a wonderful story. It really is.

And when you think about, again, the courage that it takes, because I think about... and I don't know that I thought about it much then, but in retrospect, to think what it takes to leave everything. Maybe as bad as you think you have it, to go to the unknown and to take little children, because they really had no idea what to expect I don't think, so I think it took an enormous amount of courage and bravery and perseverance and all of these qualities, and for Mark, the grandfather, to be the force... because I don't think Anna, his wife... I think she was a lot more fearful. He was a mathematician. He was never really able... I think he tried to work a little bit here. I think he did some tutoring and things like that, but he left his career. He left his life in Kharkov to come here.

But I do remember that when they moved to Plough Towers, he became a singer, and they had a choir. They had a Russian choir, and he was actually the leader of the choir. And I remember going to the Mid-South Fair because his group was singing in the talent show, and he took his group of senior Russians to sing in the Mid-South Fair Talent Show, so I'm sure that... Who could have ever imagined that from Kharkov to Italy to the Mid-South Fair.

So I think that's their story, that's our story, and I feel very fortunate that our family played a small part in helping them become part of our community.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Judy, what do you think in your background, where you came from, prepared you for this? I guess what I'm asking is what made you, what do you think helped you to become involved?

Judy Royal: Well, I think that we knew these people were coming. I will say that my great-grandparents came from Russia, but I don't think that... I mean, yes, it was wonderful that we had that connection, but I think as much as anything, it was community effort. It was a wonderful coming-together of the entire Jewish community. I felt like for our family, for our children to see this, to be part of it, is really important, and I think it was sort of a natural. I mean, why wouldn't you? I mean, what a great experience, and if it turned out that you were assigned to a family that maybe didn't need a lot, because I know there were some people that were assigned families, and some families didn't say. They were here for a short period of time, and maybe they left to go somewhere else, they weren't happy in Memphis or whatever, but I don't know. I think it just seemed like something that if you had the time, it's something you should do, and I certainly feel, and I hope my kids, that we certainly got a lot more than we gave.

Because and then I think also, what if we traveled to a foreign land? You would hope that someone would reach out to us or to anyone. And like I said, I think it was a wonderful, wonderful time for the Jewish community because I think it was a great coming-together of all the synagogues, all the agencies, because I think everybody pitched in. I think that it was such... When you think about people that gave people jobs and all the schools that opened up for these families, and everyone. If you needed doctors. Whatever it was, I think that the community was just so behind it. It was such a great effort, and it was a wonderful time.

Lynnie Mirvis: What do you think was maybe one of the challenges for them, for you?

Judy Royal: Well I think that, again, when you think about what these people... the chance they took, because I think it was a chance. And, you know, I think for some of them, it was just the expression "bashert" that they came, you know, they got sent, especially people who didn't have a sponsor or didn't have any family. You know, it just was a chance, so I think it was... When it worked, it worked.

And also, I think, again, the community, and I think Jewish Family Service being the coordinator... I mean, I remember that we had meetings and we had things so that if you did have questions, if you had a challenge, if you had something you weren't sure about, there was help. You were able to get help, and I think sometimes you learn things from other volunteers.

And you know, I wonder sometimes if sort of behind our backs or after we said goodbye if they didn't sort of laugh about some of the things that we did, you know, because I think in a lot of cases, we were pretty ignorant about them and about what they were coming from, because we would ask questions, and I think sometimes we were sort of amazed. I'm not sure what we expected. Did we expect peasants? I'm not really sure, but like I said, I'm sure they laughed about us some, too.

Lynnie Mirvis: Has anything come up for you, anything funny that might've happened? Misunderstanding or cultural...?

Judy Royal: No. I mean nothing... I think there were probably language things. I can't think of anything specific, but I think there were language things. I think certainly the food

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because Anna was a really good cook. The girls, her daughters, did not cook. She cooked, and so I think sometimes when you would go over there for dinner, she was always very gracious and wanted us to come over, and so I think sometimes we were as a little bit unsure about some of the things she was cooking as they probably were when they came to our house, some of the things they were eating.

Lynnie Mirvis: The food differences were there.

Judy Royal: Yes, it was. It was. But she was a really good cook, and like I said, she cooked for the family.

Lynnie Mirvis: Do you remember any dishes that stand out?

Judy Royal: Well, I remember having some dumplings that were very good. They used a lot of fat. I remember they just kind of slid down.

Lynnie Mirvis: (Laughs)

Judy Royal: And I remember she made a soup. I'm not really sure. She made a soup with some little meatballs in it, but I can only imagine what they must've thought about some of the things we cooked.

Lynnie Mirvis: What did you try to cook for them?

Judy Royal: You know, I remember thinking that we probably should have, like, a traditional brisket and kugel and, you know, all of those things. I do remember taking them once for Chinese food, because that was something they had some curiosity about, and I remember all of us going to a Chinese restaurant and trying to figure out what to order. And, you know, here we are trying to explain to them about Chinese food, so that was probably interesting. An observer probably could've stood by the sidelines and be saying, "What is going on here?" But I don't know, that was... I'm trying to think. No, I can't really think of anything else.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. So what would you tell your grandchildren then about this? How would you describe it to them, the emotions around it and everything that you did?

Judy Royal: Well, what I would say is if you ever have an opportunity like this, go for it, because it is a great experience. But I think anytime that you can give of yourself and help somebody... You don't have to know them. I mean, whether you know them, you may not have a lasting relationship, but I think that, you know, it's worth a try, so go for it.

And I think this. I think our grandchildren are much more exposed to meeting people, certainly classmates, from other countries, because two of my grandchildren attended Riverdale Elementary, and Riverdale has a very diverse student body. There were a lot of Asian children there. There were Indian children. They met children, Hispanics, who

came to Riverdale with no English. Well that was nothing. We never did that, and I'm not even sure... I'm positive. I would think that my three children maybe experienced that maybe once or twice, but I think for our grandchildren, that is much more common and probably not anything that they think a great deal about because, you know, people are moving. They're not coming necessarily with English, and certainly we know little children pick up English very quickly.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Was there anything else that we didn't cover?

Judy Royal: I think we covered it.

Lynnie Mirvis: We covered it. Thank you so much.

Judy Royal: If I think of anything, I'll let you know.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay. Thanks so much, Judy.

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