

EXODUS Project

Interview of Marina Levitanus - 1

December 15, 2015

Page 1

EXODUS

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Lynnie Mirvis: This is Lynnie Mirvis. I am interviewing Marina Levitanus on December 15, 2015 for the EXODUS project, **Affedivation** Project and the Jewish Historical Society and the Temple Israel Archives.

Marina Levitanus: Hello.

Lynnie Mirvis: Hello. Marina, tell me, what's your full name?

Marina Levitanus: Marina Levitanus. I used to be...my maiden name is **Redinninskiou**

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, so when and where were you born?

Marina Levitanus: July 19, 1952 in Russia. Leningrad, now it's Saint Petersburg.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay. Were you named after someone in your family?

Marina Levitanus: No, not really. My sister suggested that I was called Marina because it's most common name. My mom wanted to call me Sarah, but my sister said, "mama, she's going to be a subject of laughter" because Sarah represents very Jewish name in Russia. All the jokes about Jews start with Sarah, so you know, therefore mom changed her mind and called me Marina.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mmm.

Marina Levitanus: Yeah, it started from my birthday.

Lynnie Mirvis: It started from your birthday.

Marina Levitanus: And to _____

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you tell me about what it was like to grow up with your family? And the place where you grew up?

Page 2

Marina Levitanus: Yeah, well, I have two, uh three siblings. I have twin brother and much older sister who is twenty-one years older than me and brother who is fourteen years older than me and so basically when I grew up to be knowing what's going on, they were gone already, so it was just me and my twin brother. We lived in community apartment and shared one room between my father, my mom, and my twin brother and it was tough, but it's so hard to say like in such short time—I don't want to say too much but—there was a lot of problems in our living condition because the neighbor didn't like us because we were Jewish and I heard a lot of that slurred of "Go to Israel", and things like this and I never could understand what did we do wrong, why people don't like us. Even my best friend in school would never invite me to her house because she would say, "well, my mama doesn't like Jewish people, so you better don't come to my home". That was really sad. I was so aware of it, even when I was...my mom got really, really sick when we were nine-year-old, me and my twin brother and they sent us to boarding school in the suburb of Leningrad, so we would go there, me and my brother, by bus and train, and we were there one year, and I will never forget that. Everybody in Russia would ask what's your nationality, meaning, Jew. In Russia, nationality is Jewish. It's not religion and therefore, well, even if you _____, if you go anywhere in the park to run some items, they always ask you for passport and the fifth autograph in the passport, it says Jewish or Russian or Belarus and once it says Jewish, they treat you different. They know you're Jewish. You're not as good as them. So when I was in the third grade, everybody introduced themselves and the teacher asked everyone your name, your nationality, and I was so scared to tell who I was. I remember standing up and whispering in her ear that I was Jewish because I was so scared that people don't like me anymore.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, very, oh.

Marina Levitanus: And then unfortunately, my brother, my twin brother, got really sick there in the home, boarding school, and so one day when we came from school, he was really sick and he was diagnosed with chronic kidney disease, and he was sick ever since. He died at the age of 40 of kidney failure.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, so hard.

Marina Levitanus: Well, and back to my life in Russia, I mean, I didn't know any difference. I believed my parents loved me. They gave me everything they possibly could with our circumstances we lived in and I was a happy kid because I had nothing to compare it with. It was just, you know, simple life. Not much, we never went on a vacation, like traveling. My mom never went to my school because she was too sick. We always did things ourselves. In Russia, they would say, mom would say, "just go play" and we would be in the courtyard running like crazy between among all of us homeless people and alcoholics and whatever. It just really, we did the best we could.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. You did the best you could.

Marina Levitanus: Yes. So life here is so different...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Marina Levitanus: And I tried to tell my kids how lucky they are to be here in this country...

Page 3

Lynnie Mirvis: Absolutely.

Marina Levitanus: Because...it's just very...

Lynnie Mirvis: Different.

Marina Levitanus: Unbelievable. Yes. So I try not to dwell on things...

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: And just appreciate what I have.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. Tell me Marina, in growing up in Russia, can you tell me something about what life was like for your parents do you think? What life was like when they were there?

Marina Levitanus: My parents. Well, my mom, who was an amazing woman, I just really admired her. She was strong, physically, even though she was very sick. She doesn't never complain. She did everything she needed to do, you know, I always feel like I have a grandma for my mom. She was not capable of doing a lot of physical things, so therefore, I was always her right hand. I helped her and living in community apartment, which was so huge and even just walk to from your room to the kitchen, it would take a couple minutes, five minutes.

Lynnie Mirvis: You had a big room? One big room?

Marina Levitanus: Just, no it wasn't big, it was just long like a tram, where we lived. So my mom would just sit in the kitchen and then would ask me to bring her stuff. So I remember running back and forth because our refrigerator was in our room, so she would go "bring me this, bring me this". I was just running, running, helping her. In our community apartment, each family had one burner, that's all. So she would be cooking in the morning because people who come from work, needed to use the kitchen.

Lynnie Mirvis: So the kitchen was a community kitchen for everyone? You had to go outside of your one room?

Marina Levitanus: Yes, as well as bathroom.

Lynnie Mirvis: And the bathroom.

Marina Levitanus: There was one bathroom, one toilet for like fifteen people. That's how many people lived in, and one bathtub for fifteen people. So like people would take a turn who is going to take a bath.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: And sometimes it would be a line to go to the bathroom.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oooo.

Marina Levitanus: And then we didn't have hot water for many years, so we would go to a public bathroom and it was so hard on the wintertime because mama would wrap

Page 4

me up so and we would walk like thirty minutes and she scrubbed me so hard and I would just cry sometimes because I was like hurting. She said the next time we go to take a bath to the public bathroom is going to be a week, so you better be clean.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, that's hard.

Marina Levitanus: My mom was a big woman. When she put me in red cabbie, you know, I could not breathe.

Lynnie Mirvis: Woah.

Marina Levitanus: She would let me out. My mom was quick thinker and she was very great cook and she told me this one story, can I tell that, during World War 2? Can I tell that? Okay, so they were evacuated to Siberia—mom and my older brother and my older sister and she worked in a farm. She was working night shift and one night she was coming home very late, course it was hunger, it was a lot of crying. My daddy was in the war at that time and so she was walking back to the house where she rented a room from this lady and she saw the pick-up truck stopped by this house and these two men were stealing the cow from the woman across the street and she saw it. That cow was only one cow in the whole street, so they would buy the milk from the cow, that was the source of the food. So when she saw that, she was terrified, she would not allow it to happen, but of course being a woman, she wouldn't be fighting against two men with a pick-up truck. So you know what she did? She started crying "fire".

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh my gosh.

Marina Levitanus: Yes, she started crying "fire, fire" and mom was strong and big woman, and everybody started turning the lights on and scared because people would not probably come and help, but in a fire, they did. And that happened, they got scared and so they ran away. The next day, it was article in the paper, the local paper, about my mom because she like saved the cow, which was so priceless at that time.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's amazing.

Marina Levitanus: She was so neat how she could think. One time there was a fire, my son was a baby and we were in the summertime in like a little like **dietche**, little apartment where I was staying, stayed there for summertime and somehow there was leaking of gasoline and as she put the match to take the thing, it started flaming, everything, and it was all wooden, you know, a lot of rags and whatever, so the whole building would be just like this and the fire was coming out from, the gas was coming out from the oven—it was a gas oven—and so people didn't know what to do, and this young man, people started to running and you know she was thinking so quickly, she said shut the gas entering...

Lynnie Mirvis: Yes, yes.

Marina Levitanus: You know there's a gallon of gas, so it would stop coming out, and the guy went and shut it off and we were all be able to, you know. You know, it's amazed me because she was so sick afterwards. I had to give her nitroglycerin and she couldn't talk and she was really like out of breath because she was already older and not well. So that's my mom, a pretty awesome woman.

Page 5

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Marina Levitanus: Very well read, even not highly educated woman. We had an incredible library at home. We have all of this European writers and our library was huge and she was so familiar with all the writers and sometimes she kept some of the books on the locker from us. Like we had this book, "As sass Nazi in Action" with the pictures of what they did to Jews, the Germans, and she didn't want us to see it, so me and my brother would sneak when my mama was in the kitchen cooking, would sneak, steal the key, and look through this book and then we would have a nightmare. It was so horrifying. My daddy worked all his life. He was very quiet man, very generous, very kind, not mean, didn't talk a whole lot, just very nice looking guy, very very beautiful, very kind, and just loved by everyone. I didn't get to know him so well till he came to United States. He lived with me for three years. I took care of him because when he came here, he was already blind in one eye and he didn't have a lad. He had a severe arthritis as well as diabetes and he lived with me and I took care of him, so we talked a lot.

Lynnie Mirvis: So you got to know him better?

Marina Levitanus: He talked to me about World War 2 and my son, Pavil, adore him as well as my daddy adore him...

Lynnie Mirvis: Ahh.

Marina Levitanus: And every night after school, they would sit together and my daddy would tell him about World War 2.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you share some of those stories if you remember?

Marina Levitanus: I did not participate in the conversation. I wish I would record it because it was so precious.

Lynnie Mirvis: Was he a soldier? Was he in the Army?

Marina Levitanus: I do remember this story. Yes, he was officer in the Army. I remember one story when there was German very close to Saint Petersburg. It was just before the seizure that he was protecting. I think it was Petro Gulf, which a lot of, you know, fighting were there just before the blockade, the Saint Petersburg, you know the before seizure occur and so my father told me that they were in the trenches. It was cold. There was not much food and they were very struggling. He was in charge of these people and some soldier. They were so miserable and the Germans would drop fliers from the plane—"Come to us, we will give you warm food. We will give you, you know, clothes to wear. We will let you go" and some people were bought by that. Papa told me that one of his friends did this. When he in the morning, started to line people us, he said, "where is my friend?" He's gone. He said it hurt him so badly when after the war, he got, you know, speaking to his wife. He never told her that he betrayed.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: He said that he was killed or something, you know, disappeared or maybe he was taken. My daddy never said that.

Lynnie Mirvis: Never said a word.

Page 6

Marina Levitanus: No.

Lynnie Mirvis: He kept quiet.

Marina Levitanus: I know. I have my father's army passport.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Marina Levitanus: I have a lot of things he speaked to from his war and that's pretty precious.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's precious.

Marina Levitanus: Uh huh.

Lynnie Mirvis: How did he meet your mom? Do you know the story? How they met?

Marina Levitanus: Oh, I know mama said to me that daddy was so gorgeous and then just women really would just falling for him and she always secretly loved him.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: I think they are even in the same small town, Jewish kind of, the town where they knew each other.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh. Do you remember the name of it?

Marina Levitanus: My father was born at a city called Fosturf, and my mom, I never learned. I should call my sister. My sister still lives in Russia. I need to because I keep thinking I need to do this and I keep forgetting to do that. She has a birthday coming up. She's going to be 83 years old, my sister.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh good.

Marina Levitanus: She's going to be 83 years old, my sister.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Marina Levitanus: Yes, crazy.

Lynnie Mirvis: Now do they have Jewish practices?

Marina Levitanus: No.

Lynnie Mirvis: Did they do...

Marina Levitanus: Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Lynnie Mirvis: What did it mean for them?

Page 7

Marina Levitanus: Oh no, no, no. My father came from very religious family. There's six children. He was the youngest one.

Lynnie Mirvis: Do you know about those grandparents at all?

Marina Levitanus: Well, they died way before we were born, so I know so little about my grandparents. So little.

Lynnie Mirvis: They were religious.

Marina Levitanus: So I know this fact that my daddy came from a very religious family. Daddy said that he was always such a good voice. Oh when he wanted to tell us how bad we are, me and my twin brother, he said that he wanted to go to school so bad that he would walk without shoes because they were so poor, but he would walk without shoes to school because he really wanted to be educated. While we being so horrible, we don't want to study, while all the opportunities have. You know how parents do.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right, right.

Marina Levitanus: And then he had a good voice and he should be a cantor. And even when he lived with me, he would sing where he feels good and my children always said, "dedushka", meaning grandfather, he's screaming.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: I said, "no, no, no, he's singing guys".

Lynnie Mirvis: He's singing. What languages did he use?

Marina Levitanus: Russian.

Lynnie Mirvis: Russian.

Marina Levitanus: Russian. Sometimes he would sing in English.

Lynnie Mirvis: He did know English?

Marina Levitanus: Uh huh. Few, oh yeah, my parents spoke English, only when they didn't want us to know something, which I picked up a couple words and later I would say, "daddy, what does it mean?" And he would say this and this so I could put the sentence together.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Marina Levitanus: So I know some secrets, family secrets. Mama would never.

Lynnie Mirvis: The Jewish practices. What about Jewish Practices?

Marina Levitanus: No, not really. You grow up in the such a country of **ethes** and so you have really no clue. No clue and you know, and the school we studied about Darwin, you know, evolution and all that—people come from monkey. So not even question about it, and me growing up in Leningrad, big city, that's even farther away.

Page 8

Now if you go to smaller town, where some of the Russian friends of mine come, there's much more religious practice of religion. So my mom came from a religious family, but from wealthy family, so once in a while, that they in a little argument she said "well you were not, you would act so poor and I was so rich" and it was so cute to watch them because ended up after evolution with nothing.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: Because my mom and everything was taken from her family. All the, you know, labor party took everything and my daddy never had anything to show, so they balanced out finally.

Lynnie Mirvis: Were they part of a Jewish community? Did they stick near people who were Jewish or how did that work?

Marina Levitanus: No, here's what Jews do in Russia—they stick together. It's like some would really just kind of cult. Not to practice religion, but be together and the Jews help each other all the time, like if I know someone who would need a favor, because in Russia, everything is built on favors.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: If you're Jewish, you cannot get anywhere in the way of gates/doors closed for you, but if you know someone who is Jewish and happened to be there, he will help you, so that's how it works. So we all know about being Jewish but not from religious point of view, of point of view of helping one another and it's a really strong community.

Lynnie Mirvis: It's a strong community of help.

Marina Levitanus: Yeah because really thinking about my parents, they didn't even have like a Gentile friends, seems to me. Everybody, even though they were related to people from war, it's seems like all Jewish.

Lynnie Mirvis: All Jewish.

Marina Levitanus: So I had a very strong feeling about who I was, but when it comes to religion, that was totally nonexistent for us. Matza, we had a Matza, for Passover a couple of times, but you know, you can't go into Synagogue. There was one Synagogue in Leningrad and like when I was married, my husband worked at university. He was a coach, track and field, and they would not allow to especially people who work in the university, who have a position in the higher, to go to Shul Synagogue.

Lynnie Mirvis: You weren't allowed.

Marina Levitanus: No. Well, what do you mean it's not allowed, it's not that they just don't let you, but if somebody sees you, you can lose your job.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: So that's how and sometimes young people just go to Synagogue to meet Jewish people so when the big holiday, we would go to **Cefelatera**, go to

Page 9

Synagogue and especially my twin brother, he was so handsome, and so single, and he would just go to meet the Jewish girl.

Lynnie Mirvis: Always. So you went to Synagogue in **Cefelatera**.

Marina Levitanus: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you describe that? What that was like? Do you have memories of that?

Marina Levitanus: A lot of people just dance and drink wine, but there was a separation of women and men. In fact, I went to Russia three years ago for my sister's 80th birthday and we went to Synagogue.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Marina Levitanus: It's beautiful.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah, it's beautiful.

Marina Levitanus: They remodeled.

Lynnie Mirvis: They remodeled.

Marina Levitanus: They made it so pretty and it was amazing. The building is still the same, but inside everything was well done.

Lynnie Mirvis: This is Saint Petersburg?

Marina Levitanus: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: It's called Saint Petersburg now. It used to be Leningrad.

Marina Levitanus: Right.

Lynnie Mirvis: So what was it like then when you were growing up in the Synagogue? You said you went to **Cefelatera**.

Marina Levitanus: I have a very, very vague memory.

Lynnie Mirvis: Just, right, you didn't go that often.

Marina Levitanus: Right, no, my mom, with all that she was more probably at these well, my sister, my older sister, was married to a man whose father was a Rabbi, which was so unusual for us, like a Rabbi. What did the Rabbi look like? They had, one time we were invited for dinner and **Abid**, his name was. He was a short little man with a beard and head and at that time, me and my twin brother were teenagers, so everything was funny to us and I remember at the table, of course, there was no kosher food, so he ate at the table with us, but he looked so funny to us and he was praying before the meal and we were just giggling and look he was like so crazy.

Lynnie Mirvis: Different.

Page 10

Marina Levitanus: Like where did this man come from? What is he thinking? That's our thinking.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Marina Levitanus: My mom, because we were so disrespectful, she hit me on my head and said, "stop doing this". But I said, mom, you don't believe in this too. She said, "doesn't matter, you have to respect person."

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Marina Levitanus: And so I remember him so clearly thinking he is kind of odd. Then he went to Israel and of course he passed away, though his son, **Zama**, that's my sister's husband, he never practiced religion, so in that respect, there's not really much.

Lynnie Mirvis: Is there anything else about growing up in Leningrad that you want to share? A memory of school or ?

Marina Levitanus: No, well...

Lynnie Mirvis: No.

Marina Levitanus: When I finished college...

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Marina Levitanus: I was, wanted to work in this very prestigious institute, chemistry, you know, they develop all kind of like new products and whatever, and I got my diploma and I did very well, but they didn't, so then they ask you where would you like to work. So of course, I said _____. Gistrassan Institute. It's an institute of _____, oh I forgot the word, but anyway. They didn't take me there and when I said, um, I didn't, I could not speak to this committee, so I left the room and I remember sitting and crying and the principal of college walked to me—he was a Jewish man **Svindikis** his last name was—he said, "Marina, what's wrong?" I said, "they didn't take me. I asked for work in this place and they didn't." I said, "I don't understand why" because for my friend, they said for health problems which I mean, I didn't really have problems, but my friend, we worked together in this diploma, she did really have a serious health problem. They took her. So I was comparing. I said, "why didn't they take me over her" and he said, "don't you understand?" I know, "no, what, what don't I understand?" And they said it's because you're Jewish. I said, "but why, what is it the matter?" He said, "well, there's a lot to learn about how this work, Marina. I am so sorry, but you don't have a chance to work there. There's no way."

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Marina Levitanus: And I remember coming home and just cry my eyes out. I felt so good about my future profession and this and that and all of a sudden, just like lock the door in front of my face. So I, my aunt, she was very influential, so she helped me to get the job with another company, very prestigious, but after like working a year there, I went to my boss and said, asked him if I could have a promotion because I was doing a good

Page 11

job. You know what he said to me? There was so much noise with you coming to work in this company, so you better sit quiet. So there was no promotion for me.

Lynnie Mirvis: Hmm.

Marina Levitanus: So that's how it works.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's how it works.

Marina Levitanus: Now later on when I applied for immigration to United States. It turned to be a blessing that I was not accepted through this institute originally because it's a secret place. If I would, I have to wait five years and not be able to immigrate to United States and not work for the company to kind of forget all my secrets.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow. A blessing in disguise.

Marina Levitanus: All whatever I know.

Lynnie Mirvis: A blessing in disguise.

Marina Levitanus: So it was a blessing. Yeah. So you never know if things turn to be good way for me.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yes. Marina before we end, do you want to share how you met Valery? What that was like?

Marina Levitanus: Oh. Valery.

Lynnie Mirvis: Your husband.

Marina Levitanus: Okay. So my sister-in-law, that's my older brother's wife, who I adore and love. She's my life best friend and everything. They live in Australia, Melbourne now. She work at university, Leningrad University, and she was a piano player, accompany for the gymnastic. My husband, Valery, at that time, he work as a coach in track and field. He was a champion of hammer thrower in Russia. He was a big athlete. That's why he was allowed to work at university because of his name. He has a lot of medals and his pictures were in the, otherwise, there's not many Jews in university. University, it's like a closed place for Jews. So she said to me one day, I met this nice looking Jewish man, guy. He's very handsome, very cute, and I would like to introduce you to him and I said, "okay." So one day, she invited him over, you know, they become friends and she came, invited him over to her house and we were introduced. At that time, Valery just went for a divorce. He had a child from first marriage and he was single man. So when we introduce, I remember him being very big guy and handsome and kind of shy, but very, very attractive and so we started dating and we didn't date long at all. It was crazy. She introduced us in the late fall. In April, we got married. Well in Russia, nobody dates forever because, I mean, where do you live? I live with my parents till the day I was married.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow, that's fast.

Marina Levitanus: Well in Russia, nobody dates forever because, I mean, where do you live? I live with my parents till the day I was married.

Page 12

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh. Right.

Marina Levitanus: Then we have to find that little bitty room. It was so tiny. We couldn't even move there. It was just, everything we possessed was in that little room. So we leave there. It was so tiny. It was like probably the size of this room. Just, that's all.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow. That's it.

Marina Levitanus: Uh huh. So, so we lived, then I was pregnant with Pavel and then we decided to immigrate because my brother, my older brother, left and he went to Israel and so he invited me. He sent me an invitation to immigrate and so that's what would work on all, you know, Valery had to quit his job because they're not allowed to potential immigrate to work at university. He had to quit his job.

Lynnie Mirvis: Do you remember what year that was?

Marina Levitanus: That was '78, between '77, Pavel was born '77.

Lynnie Mirvis: What made you want to immigrate?

Marina Levitanus: Okay. Well, immigration for Russian Jews, it's something like dream. We would, whole family get together and talk about how we would immigrate and how we would leave and what we would do when we come to United States and you know, nobody really thought it was for real, but it was so wonderful to just dream about it. So I don't remember how my brother, you have to have an invitation. You can't just pick up and go, so my brother somehow got an invitation. He immigrated and when they left, I was pregnant with Pavel, and I was so devastated because I love my brother so much and my sister-in-law, who lives in Australia, where I feel like somebody cut my arm.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: I remember coming to the window when they left and just stood there at the building and cried because she was everything to me. Even my husband was kind of jealous and so...

Lynnie Mirvis: This is your sister-in-law?

Marina Levitanus: It's my sister-in-law.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Marina Levitanus: She always said, we were sister in the past life or something like that. So yes and when, then we left and I just feel so lonely, because we have such a great family, so together all the time, so loving, and all of a sudden, I just have...oh my daughter was born in Italy. I left Russia when I was pregnant with her...

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

Page 13

Marina Levitanus: So she was born in Rome and it was really hard. It was tough. When I got pregnant with Mariam, I was so scared, but my husband said, "I'll do anything to make sure that we're okay. We're going to be okay." So, we're okay and when we came to Memphis, we had this incredible welcome from all these people and I didn't know anything about kosher and seeing ____, I remember she said, this is for me, then this is for Pavel, and this, and I'm like no—I didn't speak English—so I thought why so much dishes, too many dishes. Who else is going to be living in this...

Lynnie Mirvis: [Laughter].

Marina Levitanus: And, I, Valery spoke English fluently, so I said Valery, asked why we have so much dishes and oh so many, so many and then they start to explain and I said—I was so confused. First of all, I couldn't even know about God, what, when we came to Rome, we went to Vatican and all these people praying, I was in such shock, like, young people praying. What's going on? I mean, culture shock, religious shock, non-stop, and I thought, well, I'm sure in America, people are not religious and the first thing, you know we do, they gave us a book about religion and God and talk about this kosher and this meat and why so much, I mean, I was overwhelmed and I think I cried the whole entire week because I didn't expect anything at all.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Marina Levitanus: And, I even remember even smell at the thing. It was so just so kind of different and everything was amazing. Yeah. So when I call my mom the first time, it was so expensive to call Russia. We didn't have any money, so I had to write down a few words that I'm going to tell you because I thought I'm going to lose my everything I haven't talked to my mom six months or more since we left Russia. I never could afford to call her and I had to write it down—the words that I'm going to say to her—and the first thing my mom said to me, "who was born?" I said there was a little girl and mama said, "Have you gained weight?"

Lynnie Mirvis: [Laughter].

Marina Levitanus: My mom was always after me not to gain weight. I said, no mom, I actually lost weight and it was pretty awesome. When my mom died in 1980, soon after we left, and they didn't even tell me that she died. I find out like almost a year after.

Lynnie Mirvis: They didn't tell you?

Marina Levitanus: No. Nobody had the guts to write me a letter. Yeah, well, my mom wrote me a letter and she said in this letter, which is, I mean, when you immigrate from Russia, you have to have permission from your parents from your ex-wife, from everybody in the country that you don't owe anybody, so that's how long it takes every year just to run all over the city and get all this paper done and everybody look at you like you're a trader. They hate you once they see that you're immigrating. They know you're Jewish. So my mama, she okay with me going. She wanted me to have a better life, but she knew she was never going to see me again and when we gave up our apartment, you're supposed to give it back to the government and I moved my mom and we lived for like the last week together and I said mom, your birthday is December 31st. We were supposed to immigrate December 29th and I said, if you want, we can prolong our leaving, extend it till after your birthday, and she couldn't even look in my eyes. She said, the sooner you leave, the better. It was like tears. It was grief in her eyes. It's like

Page 14

she already sent away her son, you know my brother who she adored. She saved his life during World War 2. It was like amazing story, but she said I cannot bear, you know, you just go, and then she wrote me a letter and she said, "I hope your life is good and I hope your children never leave you the way I was left." So she was so grieving because she really realized that she was never going to see me again. And when Mariam left for Israel the first time, people said to me, how are you dealing with that? I said, you know it's a destiny. That's how I see it. I left Russia for better life and my daughter does the same thing. I just have to accept it and you know, that's just the way it is. You have to let your children go because you raised them, they're good people, and now they raise their own family.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah, I'm going to stop.

EXODUS/pti:fl