

EXODUS Project

Interview of Roslyn Hirsch Clark

January 18, 2017

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Roslyn Hirsch Clark.mp4

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Lynnie Mirvis: Hi I'm Lynnie Mirvis and this is the Exodus project, Wednesday January 18, 2017 and I'd like to welcome you Roz and would you tell us what your full name is and when you were born.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Roslyn Diamond Hirsch Clark and May 14, 1944.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay. And where were you born?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I was born in Greenwood, Mississippi.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Then I lived in Memphis for 25 years and then I went back to Greenwood for 20 years and now I'm back.

Lynnie Mirvis: Great. Well you were going to tell me a little bit about your education and your background growing up.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I grew up actually in Moorhead, Mississippi which is 20 miles from Greenwood. But my grandparents lived in Greenwood and we had the only orthodox congregation in the state of Mississippi for a while until Meridian had one, _____, and then it still operating. We're still having services.

Lynnie Mirvis: And I know that you were involved with the resettlement of the Jewish people from the former Soviet Union?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Correct.

Lynnie Mirvis: Would you like tell me about that?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: We did some kind of program here at temple where we had classes. Had a bank. How to use the bus service. How to go to the grocery store. Just classes like that. We had people that would pick them up if they needed to go to the doctor. Just helping them to settle. Learn about this country really. Because they were educated people, they just didn't know our ways.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: And one of the funny things I have to say is when we would talk to them, people would talk loud and I remember my friend saying, "You know I'm not hard of hearing!" But that just seems to be a way of trying and using your hands a lot. A way of trying to make them understand.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. So I hear you came from Greenwood?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um hmmm.

Lynnie Mirvis: And the synagogue. You were part of that synagogue?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um hmmm. That's where I grew up.

Lynnie Mirvis: Sounds like you were connected there?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: That's where I grew up. And I did go to Russia in 1978 with my mother-in-law and it was pretty eye opening and so when they came here I really wanted to be a part of it.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah. So what made you go to Russia?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: She invited me!

Lynnie Mirvis: Is that where she's from?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. Her parents were from Odessa. Um hmmm. But we didn't go to Odessa but she had a trip and...

Lynnie Mirvis: What was that like to be in Russia? To be there?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Fascinating. Fascinating. Because I remember we would be on the bus somewhere and see lines of people and then we would be coming back that evening and it seemed like the same people were in line still waiting to get into wherever it was.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah. Oh. What else might have stood out to you about that trip?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: We were speaking to one of the people and we thought it was the grandmother. It was actually the mother. We felt bad about that. Then my mother-in-law was trying to brush up on her Russian because she wanted to know like where the bathroom was. And so when we stopped somebody and she asked them in Russian and then they spoke in English and said, "The toilets over there."

Lynnie Mirvis: So that trip really influenced you to become involved?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yeah. It did. It helped. I would have become involved anyway, but it helped.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm. So you got to tell me a little bit about who the first families or people were that you met or some of the ones that stood out for you that you...

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Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Well, I definitely have one family that stood out and that's Lazar and Nina Gala and they were so nice. And I guess it was Cindy _____ that called and said would I go meet them? Because they had a son my son's age and I met them. We went over there, Scott and I did, and from that day on we became friends. But Nina and I knew that we were sisters or whatever. We just connected. But I did find something interesting when they went to their refrigerator and there was maybe six grains of rice and they saved that and nothing was wrapped you know. I thought that was interesting. And then we had them... It was right at the beginning of April we had them over for Passover.

Lynnie Mirvis: What was that like?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: It was interesting. Lazar told me later on that he said, "The chicken tasted so weird to me. I didn't know the spices" or you know anything like that so... It was interesting. Nina spoke English. Somewhat English. She understood. Lazar didn't speak much. It was wonderful. And I miss Nina.

Lynnie Mirvis: What was it that made you feel maybe that you were really like sisters?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I don't know. I was just... It was interesting. We just have always said... You know had... It was just something about her that we connected. We thought alike I guess. And she said she didn't think like the typical Russian which I don't know what the typical Russian thinks like. She said, "I always thought more American."

Lynnie Mirvis: So you had them over in the beginning for Passover?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: And then we were together.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: A lot. A lot.

Lynnie Mirvis: Did they know about Passover?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. Yes. Lazar was brought up by his grandparent's mostly and they spoke Yiddish.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: And so you know, yes they knew. They did all of the holidays.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah. Is there anything that stands out with you about becoming friends with them?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: It just was and you know it was that connection from the beginning and still is. Nina passed away a little over a year ago and Lazar and I... He's my brother so...

Lynnie Mirvis: Aww.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: We're still very close.

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Lynnie Mirvis: You've been through a lot. Happy times and sad times.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yeah. Yes. Yes when they became citizens and her mother was here with them to and she really spoke no English.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: But she became a citizen. She memorized everything there was and I found that amazing. And she always knew my voice.

Lynnie Mirvis: Aww. She memorized it.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: We spoke... She understood my English whatever that was. So that was pretty neat.

Lynnie Mirvis: That is neat. You had a connection with the mother?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. Yes. Well it was just you know when you're family, everybody in the family is family.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. It was like family to you?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. It is. It really is.

Lynnie Mirvis: So what do you think about you know your background growing up in Greenwood and how do you think that might have affected what you did by helping these families?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: You know I don't know. That's interesting. I always was... I don't know. I didn't... I guess we always did mitzvah's and at the beginning you know this was a mitzvah and then it turned into a relationship. But you always have to give. For sure. And so it's just the way I guess I was raised.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yes. The bar mitzvah.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: And we were in a small town. With only four Jewish families in our town.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: But Greenwood had a few more. But it was that we always had a very strong Jewish identity.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm. And what do you remember about growing up Jewish living in Greenwood?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: That I loved it. That it always made me feel good.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm.

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Roslyn Hirsch Clark: It was very comforting. It was me. I think it was who I was supposed to be.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm. So I know I've learned that some of the families from the former Soviet Union didn't know about their Judaism at all. It sounds like it was a little bit different for this family?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: It was.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you describe that?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: It was. Well, I guess because Lazar was raised by his Jewish grandparents. He felt that connection. And I really don't know with Nina, but she felt she was American-Jewish.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Right. It was just part of her too.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. What do you remember doing together? I know you had the sater?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Well, right and then there are a couple of funny stories. I taught her how to return. That she could buy something and if she didn't like it she could return it so she kept a receipt. Taught her how to use a credit card! Just and then she taught me a lot. She was one of really the smartest woman I know. And several people have said that. If I needed some information she would give it to me. You know?

Lynnie Mirvis: So she was really smart and she knew?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. She was a chemical engineer. Lazar was a mechanical engineer.

Lynnie Mirvis: Were they working here?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um hmmm. Yes. Always. They always would work. But they you know... They've owned two houses, cars. And after a while I asked her information about things that were going on in my country. She knew more than I did!

Lynnie Mirvis: And are you a teacher? Is that what I heard? A teacher background?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I was. I was. Second grade. But I taught in Portsmouth, New Hampshire which they didn't quite understand my "Y'all." But that was another interesting adventure!

Lynnie Mirvis: That's another story?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: So you brought all that background with you?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes.

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Lynnie Mirvis: When you came here, right?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: What do you think might be the most rewarding experience for you about this connection?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: That I got another family and a sister and a brother. I mean it was just different. Now I helped a lot of other families.

Lynnie Mirvis: Sure. You were the chairperson at that time? Tell me what your title was?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I did. I had all this information somewhere at. Can't find it now.

Lynnie Mirvis: So what was your official title?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I'm not sure I had a title. Uh, but when temple had I guess it was an education type thing at temple, we set up classes and we set up drivers. People would get them here. I know Gloria _____ taught a class. Sheldon Cohen taught. And I hate to say this but most of that information is somewhere back in?

Lynnie Mirvis: A lot of volunteers.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: In the eye-cloud.

Lynnie Mirvis: Lots of volunteers that you coordinated then?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. Exactly.

Lynnie Mirvis: Hmmm.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: And so that was pretty rewarding and interesting to hear some of their questions. You know it makes you think because you take so much for granted. You don't even think about it when you go to the grocery store. What you're going to get and I remember some of them saying, "Well, which loaf of bread should I get?" You know!

Lynnie Mirvis: There were so many choices.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Choices. Certainly. We don't think about it.

Lynnie Mirvis: What does that feel like for you? You say you don't think about it and...?

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Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I thought. Wow! I don't know. Which one if I had to you know reverse. I don't know. That's the difference I guess in the culture.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: They didn't have a choice.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: That was probably I would think maybe one of the harder things for them to learn over here.

Lynnie Mirvis: It was hard for them to have the choices?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: To have a choice. Yeah!

Lynnie Mirvis: So you put yourself in their place what it would be like for you?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Yes. It would be tough. You'd have to think about it because you're brought up one way and then probably have never thought about it. Except Nina did. She always said to me, "I know there's got to be something better out there in this world."

Lynnie Mirvis: When she was in the former Soviet Union that's what she would say?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: That's what she would say. Um hmmm.

Lynnie Mirvis: Did she share with you about what life was like back there?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um. Yeah. Somewhat. Um hmmm. I mean they had a life and they had fun.

Lynnie Mirvis: Sure. Sure.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: And you know cause you don't know any different and they had a summer home. It's not what we call a summer home, but they did and you know they had a good time. They had friends. Did things. It was just different. It's just a different life.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah, different life.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um hmmm. Which is interesting you know. We learn about... I think that's how we really become educated and learn about different ways.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah. You were learning about different ways, but then when you had her as a friend that's what opened up for you?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Right. Right. Right. We did. We'd see the world through different eyes.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

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Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Same world, different eyes.

Lynnie Mirvis: So if you have to say the most rewarding thing in this connection, would it be that?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Oh, absolutely.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah. Yeah.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: By far. I mean to have a best friend is pretty awesome. Somebody you know you can depend on.

Lynnie Mirvis: And how long we're you best friends?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: The entire time.

Lynnie Mirvis: The entire... Oh, okay.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: As I said we met a week or two after they got here.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm. That's what you said? Right?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um hmmm.

Lynnie Mirvis: And right away you connected?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Right away. There wasn't any doubt about it.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Um hmmm.

Lynnie Mirvis: That is a story!

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: It was for me a blessing.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm. And then you moved away so that's what you said happened?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: But we stayed... Oh yeah. Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: You weren't that far away?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: No. A couple hours.

Lynnie Mirvis: You still stayed in touch?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Oh, for sure. And they came to see us and you know we came back here. We had grandchildren here so. My joke is if we needed a loaf of bread we could come to Memphis to get it!

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Lynnie Mirvis: Right. Is there something else that you'd like to share that we didn't talk about yet about this experience?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Well at the moment, no. But probably once we end the interview I'll think of a lot of things and if I do I'll write them down.

Lynnie Mirvis: Write them down. Yeah. So well maybe... Well what about your feelings about it? How would you describe your feelings about this whole experience?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Well, I think it was an education.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm. Absolutely.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: That mostly. An education.

Lynnie Mirvis: Sure.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: I had never dealt with people from another country in this capacity.

Lynnie Mirvis: Um hmmm.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: So I was certainly educated.

Lynnie Mirvis: What would you tell your grandchildren about it? About this experience?

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Well, they know my friends and so there... That they should get involved. Even if it's different or may feel a little uncomfortable at first because you don't know what you're doing. Get involved. The reward is important. It'll help them grow as people and as Jewish people.

Lynnie Mirvis: Thank you so much.

Roslyn Hirsch Clark: Your welcome and thank you!

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