

EXODUS Project

Interview of Vladimir Voin

July 19, 2016

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VladimirVoin.mp4

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Vladimir Voin: Camera.

Lynnie Mirvis: Well, it's the same thing. I'll be over here. Hello. I'm Lynnie Mirvis and I am here on July 19, 2016 at the Cobblestone and I'm interviewing Mr.

Vladimir Voin: Vladimir Voin.

Lynnie Mirvis: Vladimir.

Vladimir Voin: Yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: Voin.

Vladimir Voin: Yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay. Mr. Voin, I'm so happy to see you.

Vladimir Voin: Me too.

Lynnie Mirvis: Tell me your full name.

Vladimir Voin: My full name is Vladimir Voin.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh. And what is the date of your birth?

Vladimir Voin: I was born in November 8th of 1951 in Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Lynnie Mirvis: Kharkiv, Ukraine, the place, is it near a big city? Is it a small town?

Vladimir Voin: Yeah, it is pretty big city. Right now, it's something between one and half and two million population. It's former capital of Ukraine.

Lynnie Mirvis: Tell me the name again.

Vladimir Voin: Kharkiv. K-h-a-r-k-i-v.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

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Vladimir Voin: Yeah, it's big city in 1920s, 1930s, it was first capital of Ukraine.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, so tell me something about your parents. What did they do and your family?

Vladimir Voin: Okay. My mom passed away several years ago. My father is still alive. He lives, and his wife, they live in **Plowtowers** , and few months ago, they moved to my brother to Australia.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Vladimir Voin: Okay, so my father was a dentist.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: My mother also was a dentist. So it's a dentist family. My aunt, who lives in Israel right now, her husband, everybody in the family, was a dentist, but not me.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, so wait, I'd like to hear about life in the former Soviet Union. What was it like for you?

Vladimir Voin: Ohh, it's...

Lynnie Mirvis: There?

Vladimir Voin: I don't know. It's difficult to explain. It's very different, especially to us really different in time the Soviet Union and it's, I don't know, it's difficult, I think, even impossible to explain to people who were born in United States, what means life in the Soviet Union. That, it is big difference and I don't know.

Lynnie Mirvis: Did I asked you the date of your birth?

Vladimir Voin: Yes, you did.

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah, okay, so you were little during, in the Soviet Union? You were there during the time?

Vladimir Voin: I left my country and this time it wasn't Soviet Union. It was independent country of Ukraine. I left it in August 25th of 1992 and...

Lynnie Mirvis: 19...

Vladimir Voin: Oh I'm sorry, 1992

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah, okay.

Vladimir Voin: 1992 and it was the same day, the same day, August 25, 1992. Late night, I came in Memphis International.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, well we are going to hear about that. First I'd like you to go back a little bit. Can you describe the street you lived on or where you lived when you were growing up in the Soviet Union?

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Vladimir Voin: Okay. It was, it was all part of the city, pretty close to center, but very old part and it's from this street was built in 17th century or something like that, very old and I was living with my wife, I mean, with my mother and my aunt in pretty small apartment. Then at age thirty, I move with my first wife and my child, first child, my son. We moved to another apartment that was better.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Vladimir Voin: In a new building.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay. So what was it like to be Jewish growing up in the Soviet Union?

Vladimir Voin: Oh, it's difficult to explain, but I'll try.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Vladimir Voin: It was, okay, Ukraine, like other parts of the Soviet Union, is pretty, pretty anti-Semitic, but not right now, very interested, not right now, but it used to be years. I can say every second, I heard about my nationality, no, but you feel it. You always feel it. You are different. They more or less let you know, you are different.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: You are, even if you are few generations were born in this country and live in this country, defend this country, you still all in, you still not belong to this country like other people. They more or less, like I said, they let you know that you are not, you are not us.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Vladimir Voin: But anyway, I think good thing of this is that Jewish people supposed to be, supposed to be, because there is resistance, make more job than other people and be more successful because they did more job. Usually, Jewish family always try to give children good education.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: It was like tradition.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Not me, but most of Jewish people. Colleges and Ph.D. and Master's, Ph.D.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Pretty famous scientists, even in Soviet Union where it was anti-Semitism.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh. They were able to do that. So what was it like to, uh, were you able to celebrate Jewish holidays or were you able to practice?

Vladimir Voin: Ah, okay. Yes, it was possible, but okay, for example, when I came to United States, I saw celebration of many different Jewish holidays. I know about these holidays when I live in Soviet Union, but we celebrated just a Pesa. It was tradition. It was always matza, felt a fish and it was tradition. About other holidays, I knew it. I read it. My mom told me, but we were not celebrate because religion in Soviet Union wasn't something that government appreciate.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: So my city before revolution and my city was about somebody told me, I'm not sure, about six or seven synagogues. When I grew up, it wasn't any. For example, in center part of my city, big synagogues, it was like gym and now it's against synagogue. It's very big. One of the biggest synagogues in Europe. It's pretty big.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Vladimir Voin: Yeah, so it was somehow that old people, Jewish people pray. They came to holidays and Shabbat, and they pray, but it was only our Jewish people.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Vladimir Voin: Even on Jewish cemetery, only one person who can pray on Hebrew and people always ask him...

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Visit him to pray. People, Jewish people ask him to pray, to say Kaddish on the grave, yeah.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow, what about your grandparents? Do you remember them?

Vladimir Voin: I remember my grandfather. My mom's father. Okay, my family came from, my mom's side, my family came from Berdichev. Berdichev is very famous, small town. It's very famous between Jewish people because about maybe in this time, maybe 70, maybe 80 percent, when my mom was born in 1926 and maybe 70-80 percent population was Jewish people.

Lynnie Mirvis: You talk about Rhodesia in Africa?

Vladimir Voin: Huh?

Lynnie Mirvis: Did you say Rhodesia?

Vladimir Voin: Berdichev.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, Berdichev.

Vladimir Voin: Berdichev yeah.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Ah, Berdichev.

Vladimir Voin: Yes, it's very, very famous, small town, famous Jewish, small town and Shalom Aleichem wrote about Berdichev, yeah. So when my mom came to Kharkiv, she was five years old. She didn't speak any Russian or Ukrainian. English only.

Lynnie Mirvis: Ah.

Vladimir Voin: And my family always speak English when they try, when they try to hide something from me. They didn't want to talk about something when I wasn't in the room, so they spoke, they spoke English.

Lynnie Mirvis: Woah, they spoke English. Woah. So what about your education and training? What was that like?

Vladimir Voin: Okay, I wasn't well educated. I mean, I finished high school. I try to start academic, but I didn't pass test. Many years, I was manager of sport good warehouse. Many years.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Then I was a worker. I was photographer. So, yeah, before I moved to United States, few years, I was a worker on some small plant and then when I came to United States, I asked my friend, Boris **Brosky** to teach me how to fix shoes. I wasn't sure I wanted to fix shoes.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: I just wanted to try. He teach me and then I bought his shop.

Lynnie Mirvis: Mr. Brosky? Here in Memphis? Where was that?

Vladimir Voin: No. Mr. Brosky here in Memphis.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Vladimir Voin: My first place here in United States was in Memphis and it still is. So all twenty-four years in this country, I live in Memphis.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay, so before we leave to talk about America, I'm wondering, did you experience anti-Semitism directly in the Soviet Union? Or in education?

Vladimir Voin: Yes, yes, yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: Would you like to talk about it?

Vladimir Voin: As I said, not always...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

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Vladimir Voin: But it was, it was pretty often.

Lynnie Mirvis: Any special stories?

Vladimir Voin: Nobody beat me on the street.

Lynnie Mirvis: Okay.

Vladimir Voin: But at the same time, as I said, somebody can tell you like ____.

Lynnie Mirvis: That matters.

Vladimir Voin: Yes. Somebody just let you know that we can't, they cannot make it, officials cannot make tell the stray that "no, you are not good for this position because you're Jewish". No. They just try to say something, but you understood why you can't.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Or sometimes they said, you know, you understand why.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: I am good to Jewish people, but I can't do anything, something like that.

Lynnie Mirvis: I hear you, oh. So what made you decide to come to America and leave?

Vladimir Voin: Short story, looking for better life for me and for my family at first. Second, yes, it's true, I do want to leave because life in Ukraine became worse and worse because it was after collapse of the Soviet Union and usually who is guilty is something around very bad. Jewish people. So we decide we have opportunity this time, and we decide to move to United States, especially it was few advance that push us to do so. For example, maybe year or two prior to moving to United States, my father was wounded in his own apartment.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh.

Vladimir Voin: Yeah, through door. Somebody break in the door and my father asked who and then it was shot from shotgun and it was just miracles that he is alive.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Vladimir Voin: Yeah, so I don't know. My father wasn't a rich man, average man, and I can't explain why it was. Nobody try to open the door or break the door. Just they shoot him and I think it was because he was maybe one Jewish man in all the building.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wow.

Vladimir Voin: Maybe couple of them, so I think it was an act of anti-Semitism I think. I don't know because this person never was found.

Lynnie Mirvis: Hmm.

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Vladimir Voin: So we fill out application and have an interview in U.S. Embassy in Moscow and United States gave us opportunity.

Lynnie Mirvis: How wonderful. What could you take with you when you left Russia?

Vladimir Voin: Okay, we came with, it was five people. You ask me how many...

Lynnie Mirvis: People or what things. Who did you take with you and what did you take with you?

Vladimir Voin: Oh it was...

Lynnie Mirvis: Could you take...is what you wanted?

Vladimir Voin: Okay, we had limit because we flew by company named Air Tower. It was charter. It was U.S. company, but Israeli crew. So it was limit for each person, two bags, two big bags, so we took only necessary—our clothes, some stuff for bath, for kitchen stuff, something like that. We can't bring our furniture or something like that.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Yeah, it was five people. My family—me, my mom, my ex-wife, her brother, and her mother. So five people. Then few years later, I invite my father and his wife. Then few years later, I invite my son from my first marriage.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh. Wow. How did your life change after you decided to come to America? Did it change?

Vladimir Voin: Oh. Dramatically. Everything was absolutely different.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right, were you...was there a long period between when you made the decision to leave and when you could actually leave? What was that like?

Vladimir Voin: Okay, no, it was, I believe, about a year, year and a half before we, okay. We fill out application for immigration.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: And drop it to the U.S. Embassy or send it by mail. I don't remember and it was in the beginning of 1991 or end of 1990

Lynnie Mirvis: 1990.

Vladimir Voin: And in February of 1992, we got interview in U.S. Embassy and in August 25th, we flew to United States.

Lynnie Mirvis: Did people around you look at you differently? Or what was that like?

Vladimir Voin: Oh no, no, no.

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Lynnie Mirvis: You didn't have any of that?

Vladimir Voin: No.

Lynnie Mirvis: They knew you were leaving? Yeah.

Vladimir Voin: What do you mean different?

Lynnie Mirvis: I mean, was it, they knew you were leaving. What did people think when they knew that you were leaving? The people who were still living there?

Vladimir Voin: Ah, you mean in my country?

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah, your country.

Vladimir Voin: Ah, it's very interesting. Usually I went in 1976, '75, Jewish people immigrate. Other people immigrate to Israel and United States and anti-Semitic people say "ok, they go to Israel", "ok, go here to...we don't need you here" or something like that. When I left in 1992 and I need to sign off some documentation about my apartment or something like that, few people who were talking to me, they ask me "are you going away to United States? We are so happy and we wish you all our best". It was very interesting, but it was so kind of them.

Lynnie Mirvis: What was one of your greatest challenges to actually come here once you were here?

Vladimir Voin: I don't know. Life changed absolutely.

Lynnie Mirvis: Can you describe that? How, what the changes were like?

Vladimir Voin: Oh no. I'm not writer.

Lynnie Mirvis: No, you're not writer. What do you want to say?

Vladimir Voin: I'm not a writer to describe.

Lynnie Mirvis: Oh, I see. So what about language? What was the language?

Vladimir Voin: Oh yes, it was the most difficult part because when young people change country, they pick up new language much, much, much faster. I came in this country when I was almost forty-one. I learned English in the school, but it was very, very, primitive English. When we decided to go to United States, I had few private lessons, but it wasn't enough and I don't have enough time to study it whole because it was so many things I needed to do before we leave. So when I came, it was very, it still isn't perfect, but when I came to United States, it was very, very, very primitive and we came, maybe months before I start my first job in the United States. We came to ____ school. It's land from Jewish Community Center. Pick up is from our apartment and went to ____ school ____

Lynnie Mirvis: Yeah.

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Vladimir Voin: And we learned English. I started my first job in the United States. It was Oak Court Mall Goldsmith's, right now it's Macy's.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: And I just learned my English during the life.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. Were there any surprises for you here?

Vladimir Voin: BS. It always surprises but I don't remember exactly, but it was good surprises and bad surprises. Something you like, something you don't understand. I can't give you example...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right.

Vladimir Voin: But I know this country is very, very, very good. It's great country, but some thing strange for us.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: So it's.

Lynnie Mirvis: What about...were there disappointments here? Any disappointments?

Vladimir Voin: Mmm, not really. No.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh. So how did the work that you did in the former Soviet Union compare with what you're doing now? What would you say is different?

Vladimir Voin: What do you mean? I don't understand.

Lynnie Mirvis: As far as, are you being satisfied with the work? Do you like working better here than you did there? What do you think?

Vladimir Voin: Oh yeah. Yes, you know when you go, even when I work for eighty-five an hour in Goldsmith's, I knew at the end of the week, I will get my check and it's not big check, but it's enough to pay for my apartment, for my food, for gas for my car, and it's just, it's stability because prices now jump like it was the past few years in my country and yeah, you know, when I went to work, I always was in good mood because I felt some safety. I don't know how to explain it, but it was pretty good, yes.

Lynnie Mirvis: What about the people here in Memphis?

Vladimir Voin: People here are very friendly. It's the South. When I couldn't compare, no, first of all, it's truth. You asked me in the beginning, what is the difference in life. Okay, people in my country, people in my country almost never smile. If you go down street, somebody smiles, sure, boy and girl, some company of young people, yeah, sure they smile, they laugh, but generally, if you walk down street and see faces, it's not smiling faces. In the United States, people are always smiling. It's first expression, when you see it, it's really, I really like it. I understand it's not always through smile, but it's much, much better to see this smile than face not happy.

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Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: And I really like it and when I first arrived in Memphis, I thought that everywhere in United States, but it's not. When you go to north, people are not so friendly like the south. They just...

Lynnie Mirvis: Right, right, yeah.

Vladimir Voin: Yeah, and Memphis is a good city, really good. When you go to some big city, it's nice, it's culture, it's concerts, museums, but it's difficult big distance, very expensive, and not so green. Memphis friendly. Memphis green. Maybe yeah, it's not center of the country, but at the same time, it's pretty good place to live.

Lynnie Mirvis: It's a great place to live.

Vladimir Voin: Yes, and also, when we came, I was surprised that people from Jewish Community Center, who met us, it was **San Leapsy and especially Heather Marcos**, they spent a lot of time with us and help us very much and me and my family really appreciate it. We never forget. They brought us to our appointments, to doctors, to other places where we were supposed to be and it was really, really nice and then when San Leapsy didn't work at JCC anymore, but Heather Marcos still did, Heather was very, very helpful, all these years.

Lynnie Mirvis: That's wonderful. What about Jewish Connection here in Memphis? How do you feel about that?

Vladimir Voin: Oh yeah, yeah, first of all, we start going to _____, not often, but at least on holidays and it's really nice. When you start, ok, I always knew I was a Jew. I always knew it. Nobody let me forget.

Lynnie Mirvis: [Laughter].

Vladimir Voin: At the same time, we were a little bit far from all these traditions, Jewish traditions. It's not because of us. It's because life around us. We knew we were Jewish and at the same time, as I said, no Jewish traditions, only celebration of Pesa and if somebody died...

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: Bury on Jewish cemetery.

Lynnie Mirvis: Right. I didn't get to ask you about how you Larissa. Is that another story before we end?

Vladimir Voin: Oh, it's long story. Larissa is my third wife. We knew each other a few days, a long, long time ago in 1973 on Black Sea, it's on Black Sea in Soviet Union where we met in the company of our mutual friends and I promised _____, but we met each other on the Black Sea and I promised her call when we come back to _____ and I never did this time because I met my first wife and I didn't call. Then after I divorced second time, in company of same mutual friends who live in Chicago right now, they live in Chicago. We were on the lake and in Wisconsin and we talked about people who we knew in our life and I heard her name and I asked, "Where is she?" She lived in Israel

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with mom and her son. She also was divorced and I called her because I promised. It was from twenty-eight or twenty-seven years before and I called and we started talking. Then I visit to Israel. We met and then she came here. Then we decided to marry.

Lynnie Mirvis: Did you get married here in Memphis?

Vladimir Voin: Yes, we were married in Hari-Hoopa Temple, Israel, biglan style.

Lynnie Mirvis: Uh huh.

Vladimir Voin: ____ . It was thirteen years ago in 2003.

Lynnie Mirvis: Wonderful. Mazel tov.

Vladimir Voin: Thank you.

Lynnie Mirvis: So is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like to add or talk about?

Vladimir Voin: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

Lynnie Mirvis: Well I want to thank you so much for the interview.

Vladimir Voin: You're welcome.

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