

MIKHAIL LANDMAN. Born 1952.

TRANSCRIPT of OH 1711V A-B

This interview was recorded on February 24, 2011, for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Brandon Springer. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Chandler Routman. The interview was transcribed by Tara Kelly.

ABSTRACT: Mikhail Landman grew up in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and emigrated to the United States in 1991. He describes his family's experiences during World War II, his childhood and education in the Soviet Union, the development of his Jewish identity, and his sense of needing to leave Tajikistan in order to provide his daughter with a secure future. He tells about the process of obtaining refugee status and permission to leave the Soviet Union, his arrival in Boulder, and the assistance given his family by Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry (BASJ) that aided them in adjusting to life in America. He became a citizen in 1996, and he relates his appreciation of the political freedom of expression that is part of U.S. culture and how he and his friends always include a toast to the United States as part of all of their celebrations.

NOTE: The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets.

[A].

00:00 (My name is Brandon Springer. I'm interviewing Mikhail Landman, who is a former Soviet citizen, who was resettled in Boulder, Colorado, by Boulder Action for Soviet Jewry. This interview is being recorded for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program by Chandler Routman.

So, Michael, my first question is when and where were you born?)

I was born September 18, 1952, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan—one of the Central Asian Republics in the former Soviet Union.

(Can you tell me a little about your childhood. What's your memory of growing up in Dushanbe?)

I was the first child out of two sons of my family. My dad used to teach physics at the local university, and my mom was a bookkeeper. I went to, first, elementary school, and then my parents moved to a different part of the city, and my dad sent me to one of the two, I believe, or maybe three special English schools in the city. Although, we have another school, basically around the corner where we used to live, but he thought it would be a good idea for me to advance—study—English.

(Why do you think he felt that?)

He always thought that education would basically guarantee a good life for his kids. Being a teacher himself, he always forced us to spend a lot of time studying.

(What did your father teach?)

Physics.

(So, you grew up learning English?)

Yeah, like I said, when my parents moved to a different part of the city, I was in the fifth grade, and the kids in my class started learning English, I believe, from the second grade. So, I had to play some catching up. I think I did pretty good.

(What language were you starting from?)

We spoke Russian at home. When I was in elementary school, because we lived in Tajikistan, it was a law that everyone would have to study Tajik language. So, I believe, I spend two years studying Tajik, and then when I went to that special English school, we didn't have any Tajik language lessons at all. So, basically it was Russian and English.

(Did your parents speak any other languages?)

My dad spoke Yiddish very well, because he grew up in a family where they all spoke Yiddish. He was born and grew up in Ukraine—so was my mom. He knew also Hebrew, but—he could read and write in Hebrew, but I believe he never spoke it until they moved to Israel in 1990.

(Did he ever teach you Yiddish?)

A few words. I remember his cousin would come and visit us. First he lived in Dushanbe, and then, I believe he moved to Tashkent, which is the capital of another Central Asian Republic—Uzbekistan. Once in a while he would come and visit my dad. The only language they would speak was Yiddish. My dad also had two sisters that lived in Alma-Ata, which is the capital of Kazakhstan. When they would get together, they would also speak Yiddish. Plus, in most of Jewish families, if parents didn't want their kids to know something, that's the perfect way to hide from the kids [laughs].

5:16 (Does that happen often in your family?)

No.

(Do you recall where your father and his siblings learned Yiddish? Did he ever mention that?)

Ah, well, at home. Like I said, my dad was the last child of a pretty big family. I think, if

I remember that correctly, he was either the eighth or ninth child in the family. It was a very religious family, his dad, my grandfather, which I never met because he passed away when my dad was 10 years old. Like I said, that's the language they spoke in the family.

(Now you were born in 1952. So were your parents or any of your other relatives affected by World War II or the Holocaust?)

My dad, basically, I believe from October, maybe even September of 1941—and as you know, the Second World War—I'm sorry, the Great Patriotic War [the term Great Patriotic War is used in Russia and some other states of the former Soviet Union to describe the portion of World War II from June 22, 1941, to May 9, 1945, against Nazi Germany and its allies in the many fronts of Soviet-German war]—started on June 22nd of 1941. So basically from the very beginning to the very end, which was 1945. I think my dad finished the war somewhere in Finland. He was in the Marine Corps. So, all those years he was in the army, he was in combat.

And from what he told me, his mom and his oldest sister were killed by Germans. They were taking them to a concentration camp. I'm sorry, I don't remember all the details, but what my dad told me, they were crossing a river and they were on the bridge. His mom and her oldest daughter they just simply jumped. Nobody ever saw them again.

Another—my dad's oldest brother—I carry his name, I was named after him; he was killed in combat during the Second World War. My mom's father, my grandfather, who I did meet, he lived in Kiev, Ukraine. He came to Dushanbe to visit his daughter, my mom, and to see me a year or two after I was born. I have a few pictures of him when he visited us in Dushanbe. He was also in the army during the Second World War. I think he finished the war somewhere in Germany. I don't remember exactly where it was, either Berlin or—

(So your father served in the Red Army? Did he talk about that much after the war?)

About?

(About his service? About his experience?)

Yes, he did. His older sister, who first lived in Moscow and then she was evacuated and moved to Dushanbe—that's another story. That's how my mom and my dad met. My mom and my dad's sister happened to be next door neighbors in Dushanbe. They were both evacuated when the war started. My dad's sister was evacuated from Moscow, and my mom with her sister, my aunt, were evacuated from Poltava, Ukraine—this is where they lived. During the war, my mom was waiting for the letters from her dad, and my dad's sister was waiting for letters from my dad, and they had a lot of things in common. After the war, when my dad, because him and his older sister were very close, he went to Dushanbe to see her after the war. This is how they met, and they decided to settle there. Although like I said, they both were born in Ukraine and spent their childhood there.

10:30 So, to answer your question about what was happening during the war, he did write a few things to his sister knowing in advance that those letters would be read by people who were supposed to read them. You know, for example, he complained that they didn't give people a chance to read the fresh newspapers, so he wrote this in this letter, and like, sure enough, a week later he started getting the newspapers and whatnot. He realized that he should be very, very careful about what he writes and how he writes, because the times were very dangerous.

I remember he was telling me a story: it was a break between the battles, and the soldiers were sitting around the fire, and everybody was telling his own story. When it was my dad's turn to tell—just like you are asking me about where I was born, what is my motherland—my dad said that Ukraine is my motherland. One of the guys who was sitting right next to him, he said, “No, Landman. This is not your motherland. Ukraine—I mean, you're Jewish. You can't say that Ukraine is any—”

That was the first time that told me what he really thought, what he was basically dealing with. Although, during the war he became a member of the Communist Party. He was a Communist. He became a Communist, and I asked him many times when I grew up and was started to understand a lot of things happening around us. I said, “Dad, how come you became a Communist?”

And he said, “You know, that was the time when I really thought that the idea was good.” Many times after that he regretted it, but that's the truth.

(So when did you first realize that you were Jewish?)

That's a good question. I learned about this on the street. You know, my guys on the street, they're the ones who told me, “You are Jewish.” So, I came home and I asked my parents—my dad—: “What does it mean to be Jewish, and why are they accusing me of something? Is it a bad thing? Is it a good thing?”

I can't answer why Dad never told me himself, so basically it happened that I was introduced to that idea by someone else. But when I came up to him, and I said, “Could you explain to me please, what's going on?” obviously, he told me the whole story. And you know, not that he was trying to hide anything from me, but he simply wanted to be honest and fair. I mean, here's a seven-, eight-year-old kid; what can you explain to them? But _____ that was the beginning.

Through the whole life we did have a lot of discussions about this, because I remember those same guys who told me that I was Jewish, they were telling me that probably your dad and your mom were hiding somewhere in Dushanbe during the war. When I told them that that wasn't true—and I even showed them the medals that my dad got—

15:10 I went home and I asked Dad, because I saw a few pictures of him during the war when he had those medals on the chest. So, I asked him if I could take them on the street

to show the guys. So I could prove they're wrong, they're lying.

But that was the perception, and I heard that many, many times that—Jews? No, they were somewhere in retreat during the war. There are a lot of officially published documents that I'm sure you're fully aware of that [show] how many Jewish people participated, and where honored during the years of the Great Patriotic War.

(So once you learned you were Jewish, how did you define your Jewishness?)

In terms of what?

(What did you feel made you Jewish? How did you think about yourself as being Jewish?)

At first I had to learn how to live with that idea that I am Jewish. Because like I said, although Tajikistan wasn't the worst place in the former Soviet Union in terms of anti-Semitism—unlike Ukraine, for example, or Russia, or Belarussia—but still, the perception of Jewish people was—you know, thanks to my dad—he told me that the only way you can establish yourself and earn the respect, is to be well-educated, honest—and I basically find the truth to his words through my whole life.

When Dad was employed, until he retired, he tried not to—because you have to realize, we lived in a country with a very strange attitude towards different religions—unless you are Christian. Although, any religion was basically prohibited. So, anyway, until Dad retired, we didn't celebrate Jewish holidays at home, but like the first year after he retired—obviously he knew everything about how to celebrate, what to celebrate. He knew all the prayers by heart. But when he retired, he said, “The heck with that; we're celebrating all the Jewish holidays.” For example, for Passover, he was telling us all the story, how it was all done in olden times. I remember, he transformed himself after his retirement, because at that point, he didn't have anything to lose.

(When was that?)

He was born in 1910, so he retired, I believe, in 1970 or '71, something like that.

(So, you were in your late teens or early twenties?)

I was 19 years old. I was in college; I graduated from high school in 1969. I went to a local university, so I was in college when he retired.

(So, before that you and your family didn't practice or express your Jewishness in any way?)

No, we knew a little bit, but like I said, Dad was very careful, he simply was worried that either me or my younger brother would have problems.

20:00 (And then once you did start practicing and celebrating the holidays, what was it like for you? You said your dad transformed himself, how did that change your Jewish identity?)

[pause, sound of microphone being adjusted]

At first, like I said, when Dad was telling a story about Jewish religion, Jewish holidays, at first it was somewhat strange because those holidays were completely different from what we used to celebrate in the Soviet Union. The biggest holiday of the year was obviously New Year's Eve, for example, like Christmas here. But that was the biggest family holiday. Or May 1st, May 9th—Victory Day. The Great October Social Revolution was another big national holiday.

I did struggle a little bit with myself, trying to make a comparison—they're so different. I remember one day, Dad told me, listen, those holidays—like for example, November 7th, the day of October Revolution, it was 50 or 60 years old—although Jewish holidays were thousands of years old. So, you can see the difference and the history and what that would mean to the human being.

So, when he could, he would give me something to read. For example, I forgot how he obtained several pieces of Jewish encyclopedia, and that was very interesting. He was basically showing me some articles about the famous Jewish people, philosophers, writers. That's how I learned, piece by piece.

(You mentioned having Passover Seders, tell me what it was like celebrating Passover in the Soviet Union?)

When we started to celebrate Passover, Dad simply did it very close to the way he had it in their family. He would read Haggadah to tell us the story of Passover, how Jews escaped from Egypt, the story behind matzo and all that stuff.

(Was their any worry that anybody would find out that you were celebrating?)

Like I said, after his retirement he didn't really care about this stuff. Before that we didn't celebrate, period, after that it's like day and night.

(But were you worried for yourself?)

Um—[pause]—yes and no. I can't say that I was the bravest man on the earth, but I simply relied on my dad that he would be able to protect the family. Although you know— No, we never had any problems with authorities doing that. If I remember correctly, when I left Dushanbe, the Jewish population was quite large. It was April of '91 when we left. The total population of Dushanbe was about 800,000 people. The Jewish population, I'm not sure, but something sticks in my mind around 70,000 Jews, maybe even more, I'm not sure. But that's the number I have, I can't say for sure. So, there were some very conservative Jewish families in Dushanbe that would have

problems with the authorities, so the authorities had much more on their hands than to look after our family. So no, we didn't have any problems with them.

25:20 (Did you ever attend synagogue in Dushanbe ?)

Once or twice, and the reason for that, I'm sure you know that in Tajikistan, because it was an Asian republic, there were two groups of Jews, Ashkenazi Jews and Bukharian Jews. And the synagogue that was in Dushanbe was a Bukharian Jewish synagogue. Ashkenazi Jews, beside Russian, if they would speak any other language that would be Yiddish. Bukharin Jews, they spoke Tajik. The majority of Ashkenazi people simply didn't know Tajik language, so there was nothing for them to do there.

[break in recording; section removed at narrator's request]

(So, let's get back to your childhood. You said that your father was a member of the Communist Party. Were you involved in the Communist Youth Organizations?)

Well, as everybody else, yes, I was a member of the—I was a Pioneer. Well, first it was an October Movement in the elementary school, and then I became a Pioneer when I was in either 8th or 9th grade, I believe. I became a member of the Youth Party called Komsomol. Basically, I was there—I was a member, I paid my dues, but that was about it.

(So, how did you feel about having to be part of the Youth Organizations?)

It was a very common thing, I mean I know a few people who refused to become a member of the Youth Party when they were in high school or in college. Like I said, I can't call myself a 'bravest man in the world,' but as long as it didn't make me feel bad about myself. I mean everybody was doing this.

(Tell us a little bit about high school, and some of your teenage years in Dushanbe.)

Well, I was an average student. I worked hard, maybe not always hard enough, especially for my parents, they always expected more, but that was quite normal. Basically through the whole high school, I played tennis. I was a pretty good player.

When the time came for me to make a decision about what I wanted to be after I graduated from high school, obviously there was no alternative, because if you don't go to college, you would go to the army. There was nothing else. The question was, what should I be thinking about; what do I want to be? My dad used to tell me a lot of stories how good it would be for me and my future family if I would become a medical doctor. And I realized that he made a good point, but when I graduated from high school, it was about two or three weeks before I had to make my final decision and send my paperwork to the college or university of my choice.

30:37 All of a sudden, it like happened literally overnight, my dad asked me one more

time, “So, did you make up your mind? Is it a microscope?”

And I said, “No.” [chuckles]

He was shocked. He was shocked, but he respected my choice. He very carefully asked me, “So, what is your decision? What do you want to be?”

First I decided to become a computer engineer. He did meet with one of his former students who happened to be a head of the computer science department of one of our colleges is Dushanbe. He said to my dad that it’s a very good field, it has a very bright future, but not in Dushanbe. Remember, it was late ’60s, we simply didn’t have any equipment, computers, whatnot. So he said he didn’t think it would be a good idea. So to make a long story short, I told my dad that I would go to our local university, and I want to study physics [laughs].

He said, “No way.”

But, you know, I did it my way, and I never regretted about this. Yeah, I did follow the steps of my dad.

(So, you went to college for physics.)

Mm-hmm.

(Tell us about your college years.)

Once again, at least the first three years, I would spend almost all the time studying, either at home or at the library. I was lucky that Dad had a very good library of books on physics and math—at home—so I didn’t need any—you know, some of the books we had at home you couldn’t even get at the local library. So, I was lucky to have it; plus it would save me a lot of time. But anyway, a lot of studying.

I remember when I was in college, my English teacher, it didn’t take her long to realize that I had very good background. And she also, just like my dad told me, “Hey, are you willing to work extra time just for me? I don’t want your to lose the background that you obtained while you were in high school. I want you to keep your English. One day you will realize might need it.”

And she was quite right. After I graduated from college, I started working—my specialty is laser physics. Ninety-nine percent of articles that I had to read were all in English. So, it really helped—it really helped. Although, I still think that when I graduated from high school, my English was quite better than it is now.

Nothing special I could tell about my college years except when I started working on my diploma. I went to Moscow and I spent a year-and-a-half at Moscow State University.

35:13 It was an eye opening for me in many cases. First of all, that was for me the first time opportunity to live outside my parent's house—by myself. So, I had to learn a lot of things—basically, how to take care of myself. Plus Moscow State University is not the same as State University in Dushanbe. Although we did have a few very good professors as well. But in general the whole atmosphere—I remember when I came to Boulder the first thing I did when we came to see CU, that was the very similar feeling when I walked through the campus of Moscow State University. It's a special atmosphere, you can't compare it with anything else. I mean, you are being a college graduate here, you should understand what I mean. It was good. It was good.

Even now, almost 35 years after I graduated, I remember all those days, and months, and years that I spent in Moscow, and after I graduated and I started working in Dushanbe, the building of our institute was being built, it wasn't ready, so we spent another year, maybe and a half working in Moscow, so that basically added to all those impressions about the university and the city of Moscow.

I used to love it—there is a lot of history. Dushanbe didn't have a lot of history, it used to be a very small settlement in the valley. Dushanbe in English means Monday. That's what Dushanbe is, and the reason for that name is they used to have every Monday, they used to have a farmer's market. This is how it obtained its name. But anyway, there was not a lot of history behind the city, unlike, for example, _____, Uzbekistan. Although if the history, _____. There is a continuing argument between those countries—who do those cities belong to? Tajikistan or Uzbekistan? But that's a whole other story. But anyway, that's why I liked Moscow a lot—there was a lot of history, a lot of history. Plus, those years, compared to Dushanbe, you could buy almost anything in Moscow. It was a center of science and culture. In everything, it was city number one in the whole country.

(So, you graduated from college, and then you started working as a physicist?)

I was hired, basically, I got the job while I was still in college with Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. There was, and I believe there still is a Physical Technical Institute of the Academy of Sciences. And I got a job with that institute. Basically, there was only one place in the former Soviet Union that I ever worked for before I left. I graduated from college in '74. I left the country in '91, and I resigned a few months before we left. I don't remember exactly, but I think it was like January or February of '91. I worked until the very last day.

40:14 (Now when did you decide to leave? When did you start thinking about that?)

There were several moments in our lives—that the desire would come and go until one day it came and never left. And that's something that I will live with for the whole life, since it happened. It was late '80s when the Soviet Union was still intact, but this is when most of the republics began their fight for independence. First they wanted to make their native language a state language.

I think it was 1988-89, I believe. That movement, it started in the Baltic Republics, and you know it moved east. There was an unrest in Dushanbe. When I watch TV nowadays and see what happened in the Middle East [the Arab Spring of 2011], it reminds me—I tell myself, “Hey, I saw that.” Maybe it was not as bad as it is in Libya nowadays, but I saw that.

I remember one morning I was walking my daughter to a music school. We used to live in the apartment building in downtown Dushanbe, like literally a few minutes from the local parliament. So, I was walking with my daughter, and I was thinking about work and something else. All of a sudden—and she was seven years old, eight-year-old kid, and she goes, “Dad, is there going to be fireworks tonight?”

And I said, “Sweetie, what are you talking about?”

And she says, “Look!”

And then I looked around; on every corner, like I said—because it was very close to main buildings in Dushanbe: the parliament, the central committee. On every corner there was either a tank or other military vehicles.

I looked around, and I looked at my daughter, and I go, “This is it.” All of a sudden, it just struck me that, yeah, I realized I had a job—good or bad, but it was a job. My wife had a job. But I’m looking at my kid, and like I say, it just struck me: what kind of future will this girl have? And I go, “This is it; it’s time to go.” That was basically it.

Much later I have learned, talking to my friends who eventually moved out of Dushanbe—and they either ended up in the States, or Israel, or moved to Moscow, or different parts of Russia—that some of them came to that conclusion much earlier than I did: “It’s time to leave.”

45:00 I used to have a pretty close friend. He worked at the local university. We were quite close. He simply did not have enough money to move his family out of Dushanbe. Because he wasn’t Jewish, he couldn’t go to Israel, for example, or to the States. So, the only way for him to get out is to move somewhere in Russia, but still you have to have money. So, anyway, for financial reasons he couldn’t do that, so they decided, him and his wife and two or three kids and his parents—so, he continued working at the university, and one morning he was basically walking to work, and there was a street battle, and he was killed accidentally.

I mean, when I heard about this, it was like, what can you do? That’s life. That what happened, happened, I believe, during the years of civil war in Tajikistan. I was lucky I left when it was still Soviet Union. It was a completely different situation shortly after that. What happened to my friend, I think it was either ’92 or ’93, something like that. But these were very uncivil times.

(Now, had being Jewish played into your thinking about leaving?)

Yes. Although, like I said, I cannot claim that I personally had any problems with my life, being Jewish. Unlike, for example, my younger brother. He had a lot of troubles, but that's a different story.

I realize that if I would decide to stay, not only, like I mentioned before, that my daughter would not have any future. And I'm being quite honest with myself saying that most of my decision came out of worries for the future of my daughter. I could go to Israel; it would be much faster—not as hard. It took me several years of hard work. When I came to Boulder, and I told my story, one of my American friends, he said, “Mike, you should start writing a book, it's quite a story.” But that's a whole other story.

It wasn't easy for many different reasons. One of the major ones was that I didn't have any close relatives in the States. But, I was lucky enough that I went to Moscow, and I managed to get into the American Embassy, and I applied for refugee status. They accepted my paperwork, I got the magic number. I don't know if you know about the famous office in Washington D.C. called Washington Processing Center. That was the office that was dealing with a lot of Russian immigrants. Once you've got that magic number--basically a K[?] number—shortly after that, the American government has changed the rules for the immigrants. This is when it became essential to have close relatives before they accept you.

50:03 For example, I have a few of my friends in Boulder who came from St. Petersburg. The fact that they came almost two years before I did—they came, I believe in 1989—1989, yes—it was a different rule. They came through Italy. First they flew from Moscow to Vienna, and then they flew to Italy. They had to spend a few months there. So, when we came, it was a different story; we had a direct flight from Moscow to New York and from New York to Denver. It was a very long day. It was almost 20 years ago, but I remember like it happened yesterday.

51:03 [End of Part A]

[B].

00:00 (This is Part B, a continuation of the interview with Mikhail Landman, which is being recorded for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The date is Thursday, February 24, and my name is Brandon Springer.)

(Michael, tell me a little bit about the process of applying to leave and then how it is you came to be in the States.)

The whole story started with my parents' plan to go to United States to visit my dad's cousin who at that time—it was 1988, '89, I think it was '88—at that time he was living in New York. He left the Soviet Union when President Nixon, first time, came to Moscow to meet with Soviet leaders. And I remember Dad was telling me how it all

happened before President Nixon came to the Soviet Union. KGB used to call all the people who [they] suspected might be troublemakers. So he suggested for my dad's cousin, "Why don't you leave?" And _____ so to make the long story short, he left Tashkent where he lived, and went to Israel. He lived there for, I think, six or seven months, and then he moved to New York.

So, anyway, he lived in New York, and one day he sent an invitation to my parents—my dad and my mom—to come and visit him. I did everything I could, and I asked for help from some of my friends who could help with plane tickets and whatnot. Went to Moscow with my parents. We went to American Embassy to get them tourist visa so they were ready to fly. We were sitting in the dining room—they were staying with my mom's sister who lived in Moscow—and all of a sudden we realized that Dad was fallen sick, so we called an ambulance, and they immediately took him to the hospital. He eventually spent there a whole month. He got out okay, but obviously they couldn't go. Before they left Moscow, I had to go back to work to Dushanbe. I asked my dad, I said, "When you will be talking to your cousin, ask him to send an invitation—maybe I'll be more lucky than you—for me and my family—my wife and my daughter—so we can go and visit him. And I left.

And a few days later when I was talking to my dad on the phone, I asked him, "Dad, did you have a chance to?"

He said, "Yes, I did everything you asked."

So, that was it. I mean, a few months went by. Nothing happened. But I realized it wasn't an easy process. But anyway, one day I came back from work and I was checking my mailbox and sure enough there was a large yellow envelope with a lot of stamps with American flag. I immediately realized that was it. So sure enough, I opened it up and there was an invitation. But not to visit, but to move for good. I go, well, that's good but what was I supposed to do with that paperwork? I had no idea. So after talking to a few of my friends in Dushanbe, we decided that it would probably be a good idea.

05:05 And much later we realized that none of us had any idea what the proper way to move forward would be. But that happened much later. So anyway I decided that I would take a week off without pay and I would go to Moscow, to American Embassy, and see what happens.

So I went to Moscow. I went to American Embassy, and what I saw—I believe it was some time in August—yes, it was summertime in Moscow—the amount of people on the street around the American Embassy. It could be twenty thousand, it could be more, it could be less, but it was a sea of people. I looked around and I immediately realized that there was no way I can get in. Sure enough, like in ten, fifteen minutes after I got there, a guy approached me with a question. I mean he was very polite. "Do you want to get in?"

I said yes.

“I can help you.”

I said that would be great.

“You realize it won’t be free.”

I said sure. How much? What he told me—after I heard his answer—I immediately realized that I had to come up with something completely different because basically what he asked me was like five times what I was making a year. [laughter] Obviously I didn’t have that much money. So it wasn’t realistic.

I met a guy, I think he was also a Jewish guy, from, I believe, St. Petersburg. He was a mathematician. And we started talking. I showed him my papers, and he is basically the first one who educated me that basically what I have in my hands—those papers—mean nothing. That’s not the way, how you should proceed. Somehow you need to get inside the embassy with a whole bunch of paperwork filled out in advance. So basically all the standard stuff: who are you, when you were born, whatnot, your family. [sighs] So it took me a day to basically walk through and get an idea of what has to happen for me to be able to apply.

So the next question is, how do you do that? There are people who are willing to help you, but you don’t have money, so it won’t work. Like I said, I took a week off, and because there was nobody there who could help me, I told myself: it’s entirely up to you how you make it happen. I spent there basically a whole week. I would never leave—maybe for a couple hours to get something to eat. I didn’t go to—I was staying with my aunt. The American Embassy was guarded by Soviet police and all of those guys— young kids—they all knew me by my name.

10:05 They all of them knew my story that I came from Dushanbe, that I have a week to make it happen. So one night it was like when everybody left, and I was basically the only person outside the embassy, one guy came up to me and he said, “Michael, listen to me. Tomorrow morning we got an order. We’re going to change the rules how people will be allowed inside the embassy. You must be at that place”—and he showed me that corner, and he said “at that time—not before, not after, but this—you have a chance.” [sighs]

So the next morning that guy from St. Petersburg showed up, and I told him what I heard last night. We got in. Not just me and this guy. We brought with us almost eighty people. Nobody paid a penny. I mean, you can only imagine how much money those guys lost that day.

We got in, and I waited until a young girl called me to the window where I had to basically give her all my paperwork. And the first question she asked me: “Sir, how much did you pay to get in?” They knew that. They couldn’t do anything about this because once you’re outside of the embassy, that’s Russian territory.

I go, “I paid nothing.”

She says, “I’m sorry, but I have hard time to believe you.”

And I said, “Look at me.” I mean, obviously, [laughter] I didn’t shave, I didn’t take a shower for almost a week. I said, “How could you imagine me to get in looking like that?” So anyway, somehow either tone of my voice—and obviously she spoke perfect Russian, but I was talking to her in English. Sometimes I would switch between Russian and English, but mostly it was English.

And somehow she believed me, and she said, “Okay. I’m taking your package and this is the number.”

So like I said it was August. Come October 1st, when the fiscal year in America starts, this is when American government changes the rules, this is where they required someone who wants to come here to have _____ relatives. But I had that magic number.

And so I told myself—first I was thinking, how do I get out of the embassy, get home alive? Because I knew there were a lot of people who wanted to talk to me. [laughs] But I decided to walk. It was a long, long walk. I didn’t want to take—I basically wanted to stay among the people, so I assume that’s the only way they would leave me alone. And basically that’s what happened. So anyway I got out alive with a magic number. The next day or the day after I flew back to Dushanbe, came home and started thinking, what’s next?

Okay, well, I applied and I was told—that girl told me that you have to wait. We’re going to send you a package. You’re going to have an interview with the American Embassy, and this is where we will decide if you get or don’t get refugee status.

15:00 So I came home, and I decided to take some use of that invitation that I got from my dad’s cousin. So I went to the Soviet authorities who dealt with immigration issues back in Dushanbe, and based on that invitation I filled out the paperwork applying for the commission from the Soviet government to leave Soviet Union to go to the United States. And they looked at my invitation—they couldn’t find anything wrong with it, so they accepted my paperwork. But after spending a year—a week—in Moscow, I was very well educated—that’s at least what I thought of myself. I said, “You guys don’t know what you’re doing. It’s not going to work.”

But what I thought will happen actually did happen. In few months they said, “No. You can’t go to America.” And the reason for that—they basically refused me.

And I said, “What’s the reason?”

“This is the cousin of your dad, so he’s not your close relative.” The man says, “No.”

I said, "Fine." I knew what's going to happen, but I also knew that I need to move forward and basically force them to give me that refusal in writing, so I would become refusenik. Well, that wasn't easy. It took several months although the head of this department—we lived in the same apartment building—we were neighbors. Every night we would walk together—I with my daughter, and she had a young son and, you know, we basically were just next-door neighbors. We were friends, but as long as she was at work and I didn't complain: I would make an appointment to meet with her religiously every Saturday for several months.

And she would say, "No, I'm not going to give you the refusal in writing." Until one day she said, "Okay. I'm sick and tired of you. Here it is."

But like I said, it took me several months before I got that paper in writing—you know, with the seal and all the official papers.

So what I did after that—I made a copy of it and I send it to my sister-in-law who lived and lives in England. She married a British guy in 1980 and she left Dushanbe—1981. So anyway once she's got the copy of that refusal, I don't know exactly who she handed it to. But anyway, people who dealt with Soviets who wanted to move out—that's how they became aware of my family. At that point, I thought, "Okay, I've done my part. Let's see what happens next."

Another few months went by. One evening I got a call from a lady who I used to go to high school together—we were in the same class. And she says, "Hey, I have a guy here—a young kid, American kid. He came with a list of people that they think want to move out and I saw your name there. Would you like to meet with him?"

I said, "Sure."

[She] said, "Well, take a cab. Come. Here's my address."

20:05 So I came to her place, and I see a guy—a young kid, 18, 19 years old. I introduced myself. He introduced himself. I told him about myself, my family, this and that, why I think it is very important for me to move out. Anyway, it wasn't a very lengthy meeting, but still. After all, he says, "I'm sure you understand that I'm a powerless person, but my mom is an immigration attorney in the States, and one thing I promise I do for sure—first thing I come home—I will tell my mom your story." He made few notes, you know, I left him my address, home phone number. And he left.

Another several months went by. Same scenario: come home after work, check my mail box. There's an envelope with foreign stamps. I opened it up, starting reading, and it took me awhile before I realized who was writing to me because it was completely unexpected. I mean I realized I don't know this person—a lady. And all of a sudden, it just clicked. That's her. Her name is Helene Schwartz. She basically wrote me about herself, about family, her husband, her two sons and asked me to provide her with some more information, to write her about myself, my work, my wife, my daughter, and

whatnot.

This is how we started—you know, writing to each other. In those letters I told her in more details what happened to me—how I managed to apply for the refugee status at the American embassy. And finally she says, “I’m going to help you.”

So she was working, basically—we forwarded my paperwork at Washington Processing Center. One day we got a package from the embassy. We got an interview. We got refugee status. And at that point, we needed someone in the States who would basically—take us. We were in contact with Helene, and one day I got a postcard from her, and she says, “I will be in Moscow.” I believe it was February of ’91—there was the first time, there was an International Jewish Congress in Moscow. And she said, “I will be there. I really, really want you to come. I want to meet with you. I want to help. Please come.”

So I went to Moscow. We spent, I think a week—maybe even ten days—in Moscow. And I remember—I mean, obviously she knew everything about what was going on with my paperwork. She knew that I got refugee status and everything else.

And we were—it was a cold day in Moscow. We were freezing. She says—she didn’t call me “Michael.” She called me “Misha”—that’s Russian. She goes, “Misha, I realize you’re expecting to hear something from me that, you know, I would be the one who would basically sponsor you. But please understand one thing. I live in a very small town upstate New York. You, with your experience in laser physics—you wouldn’t be able to do anything in that village because, I mean, there is no laser industry. But I have a friend—very close friend—who is also an immigration attorney. His name is Bill Cohen. He lives in Boulder, Colorado. He knows everything about you and your family as well as I do, because every time I would talk to you or I’d get a letter from you, he would know about this within the next few minutes. So please take my words—and he’s ready to take you.” She goes, “Go there. One day I will come and visit you in Boulder. You will never regret about this. Just trust me. Go there.”

26:17 I said—look—that was the first time I heard that name. Well, I guess the rest of it is history.

(You went to Boulder.)

Yeah.

(And when did you end up officially leaving?)

I came to Boulder April 27, 1991.

(And can you tell us, what was your last night in the Soviet Union like?)

We were staying with a friend of mine in Moscow. We used to work together. We were

very close and we traveled—we spent vacation together. We went out, had a nice dinner, you know, everybody was very excited. A friend of mine—he's also a physicist—he went to the States—it was either end of 1990 or the beginning of '91—literally like few months before we left so he had the freshest information, and plus it was an impression of the person who came from the Soviet Union—not the American guy. It was simply interesting to hear from him.

But, you know, I was a little bit nervous for different reasons. First of all I realized, I mean, I wasn't in my twenties or thirties. I had a family to support. I realized I would need to go out of my way to find the way to support the family, and I was ready basically for everything. Remember as I told you before, once I made that decision to move, it was basically almost all about my daughter—her future. And even until now, every time I see her—unfortunately, we don't see each other very often, after she graduated from college, she—well, after she graduated from high school, she went to college in Arizona, and after she graduated from college she went to work in California. She lives in the Bay Area. So anyway, every time I see her, I ask her exact same question. “Do you ever regret that I brought you here?” She was ten year—I mean she just turned ten when we came here. Her tenth birthday was on April 19. We came here, basically, a week later. And that's very important. That's very important for me to realize, to understand that I made the right decision.

30:15 We had to be at the airport—back then it was the only international airport in Moscow—Sheremetyevo—around two o'clock in the morning although the departure was scheduled at around six, I believe, or even seven—something like that. So anyway we had to spend most of the—but that's the way how all the immigrants had to go through the customs and whatnot. It wasn't very pleasant, but because we didn't have basically anything that was prohibited with us or on us, we didn't have any troubles.

We did have few of our friends and relatives that saw us off at the airport. I saw the jumbo landed that came from New York. A few hours later we were on it—on board on the way to New York. And, you know, we came to New York. We had to change the planes. I think we had to go through some proceeding with paperwork through local Jewish organization—what's name of it? Ayana—I think something like this.

And so finally we landed in Denver, and Bill and Sara-Jane and a few other people—some of them were members, some of them were Russians, and one of them was that lady that I told you about—basically, the whole story started—her oldest sister still lives in Boulder. They moved out, I think they moved to Cleveland. I don't know if they're still there or not. But anyway, that's how we ended up in Boulder.

(And so you step off the plane in Colorado, Bill and Sara-Jane were there. And what happened then?)

Well, we got our luggage—not all of it. A few bags were missing. But anyway, it was a pretty large group of people. There were two families that came to Boulder that night—our family and another—they were from Kishenev, Moldavia.

So anyway, they brought us to Boulder. Our apartment that BASJ rented for us wasn't ready because someone got late out—and they simply didn't have enough time to clean it out. So anyway, we had to spend three or four days with a friend of mine—my classmate. Our apartment was in the same building.

So we settled down. I mean, obviously there was a lot of talking. People were asking different questions. And a few days after that—I remember I think it was May 1, I woke up and I looked through a window, and there was almost like a foot of snow on the ground! [Laughs]. I go, “Well, we didn't have snow in Dushanbe on the first of May.” Although the climate is very similar—you know Dushanbe and Boulder are sister cities. And, you know, people sometimes ask me if I have anything to do with the project, and I always say, “No.” As a matter of fact, when I was still in Dushanbe, I went to a government building of Dushanbe after that project became alive. And I was trying to get some information about Boulder, and they [laughs] refused. I said, “Okay. Fine.”

35:28 But anyway. So shortly after that, the way how BASJ would work with newcomers, they would give each family what they'd call it— an anchor family. I happened to have two very nice, super nice people. I mean it's unbelievable the way how they were treating us and helping us around because—I was lucky that I came knowing English. I can speak. I can do stuff. A lot of people couldn't do as much and that help was very important and simply essential.

We also got—not just our family but everybody else's as far as I know—would get tutors, people who help you to learn English. On top of that, there were several classes of English that became available to us. One of them was here at C.U. Another one was I believe somewhere in South Boulder—what was the name of that place? Paddock School, I think.

So, anyway, we were treated—words fail me to express how I felt about that. I realized we were strangers, but on the other hand there were those people that were surrounding us—Bill and Sara-Jane and Barbara Gould and so many others—like I say, including my anchor family, the tutors—James _____ and Caroline. James was helping me, and his wife was working with my wife. You know, my daughter went to school.

[pause]

To tell you the truth, I never—it's been almost twenty years to the day. I can't say that I have personally regretted that one day I made that decision and decided to change the life for myself and my family.

(So then, how quickly did you find employment when you came?)

Barbara Gould is the one who sent me an information out of the *Daily Camera*—the classified section that a local company that was doing a business in the laser industry was looking for persons—so basically that was it—like two sentences.

40:02 And I called them up, and I scheduled an interview with them. A lady spoke with me. At that point I didn't know who she was, but anyway I spent a few hours there. She showed me around in the day, and she says, "You know, our boss is on business trip. He's in New York. He will be back in a week or so." You know, I brought and left my resume there. She said, "I will make sure he gets all the paperwork and see what happens."

So he came back, the boss, and his office called me up. I have another interview. And then another interview. [sighs] And I remember one evening I came back home after English classes that I was taking here at CU, thanks to Bill. And my daughter was so excited. I said, "What happened, Sweetie?"

And she says, "Hey, Dad. Barbara just called, and she thinks that you will get the job. How does she know about this?"

What was really behind the scenes, I can't tell you; I simply don't know. But after three interviews, I got the job. And I hold this job until the very last day that company was in Colorado. So basically, for the last thirty-five years, there are three places in my life that I ever worked for: one in Russia and two here.

(So when did you leave that job?)

I didn't leave it. The company had to move to California. As a matter of fact, I was offered a job there to move with the company. Our headquarters were in California, and it was a nice part—southern California, but my wife and I looked around, and we decided that there is nothing else better than Colorado, so we decided to stay here.

(So where do you work now?)

It's the company here in Boulder—actually Gunbarrel, but that's Boulder.

(Now did you experience any sort of culture shock when you arrived?)

I hear that question. You're not the first one who asks me that question. I guess it depends on what you consider a culture shock. I mean I realize it's a different system, it's a different language. It's a different—no, no. I used to say that to some of the people I know. And I'm being completely honest when I say those words. I realize that I will probably remain an immigrant here for the rest of my life.

But that's not why I am here. I want my daughter—and I was trying to do everything I possibly could to help her to adjust, to basically come out of that situation and become a real—and when she speaks English, she doesn't have any accent.

45:05 She is an American girl. What can I say? I cannot call her a kid anymore, although I do. She gets upset sometimes. She will remain a kid for me. That's quite

normal. But, yeah, I think that part I succeeded, you know. Every time we get together with our friends to celebrate either a birthday or a holiday or just simply a get-together party, it was always, always a toast that we never forget—we always toast to this country. Always. And that's not a game. And that's how we really, that's how we really think. That's how we really feel. And we are being very generous about that.

(Now you said that you think that you will remain an immigrant for long time. Do you feel like an immigrant still?)

No, no. Like I say, maybe I didn't use the right words for that, but mostly by my nature I always been a perfectionist. Good enough is never good for me. And I get very upset every time, for example, I don't know what the right word to use. I get upset with myself mostly. That means I didn't work hard enough to improve my English. And that 's basically the bottom line.

No, no. It happened to me only once at work, but I still appreciate that guy who expressed himself—I mean I find that is one of the beauties of this system, of this country. He was very honest. He was very upset with me but he basically said exactly what he felt that—“You came here”—talking to me—“and you are taking a job that an American could have.” When I shared that with my friends and they said, “Mike, just don't take it to heart so much. He forgot what generation of American he is.” But anyway, like I say, it happened to me only once. I don't think it's that bad.

(But how did it make you feel?)

Like I say, the fact that the guy was honest and he said exactly what he meant, to me that was always very important because, you know, living in the Soviet Union, you have to think twice before you say something. I remember when I was in college, I was almost expelled from college because I said that I was listening to the Voice of America. It was a hockey championship and that game, that particular game that everybody was interested in, I don't remember exactly what that game was, but it wasn't broadcast on the Soviet T.V. So I said to myself—I came home and turned on the radio. Anyway, the next morning I came to the classroom, and I told my friends. I say, okay, this is the result.

And they say, “How did you know?”

I was honest, like always. I said, “I listened to the Voice of America.” [laughs] It almost put me in trouble.

(And so now you have your citizenship, right?)

Yes.

(How did that experience feel?)

50:00 It's been awhile since I got it. I got it in '96. Yes, it was May of '96. Speaking

about that day, it was actually, it was actually the very next day at work, because what happened at INS office in Denver—it was nothing special unlike what they show on TV when that event takes place in the cities like New York or Washington, D.C. There was nothing exciting about this.

But the next day, when I came to work and what the whole company did for me—I will never forget that. I got a baseball bat with my name engraved on it saying “Michael Landman, American Citizen. May 12, 1996.” I got a baseball with everybody signed on it. I got several American flags—I still have them. I still have them. I mean, that’s something that I would never forget.

(So, the last little questions. How did you encounter the Jewish community in Boulder?)

[pause]

You know, at first we were quite close with the Jewish community. We would go to the service almost every week. And people are very kind and very friendly. But especially after we moved out of Boulder—I mean we used to live a few blocks from here at 7th and Arapahoe, so it was—. So living in Boulder was one thing. But we moved out—although it’s not that far. It’s only, what, twenty, twenty-five minutes. And when we bought the house, we missed Boulder a lot. But then, you know, the routine around the house—the work, this and that, and I blame it solely on myself. I’m not trying find anyone else to blame. But somehow—and I don’t think—there is nothing to be proud of that we basically distanced ourselves from that at some point. And we were talking with my wife about this thinking that at some point we need to get back to where it was once. But during those days when we were somewhat active in the local Jewish community, I remember taking my daughter to Sunday School. She didn’t [did?] like it a lot, but like I say, somehow we were somewhat distant from it, and we need to get back. But that’s all I have to say.

(Do you feel that your interactions with the Jewish community in Boulder changed how you looked at being Jewish and your own Jewishness?)

Not so much. Not so much, because remember—well, let me take it back. Like I told you before, when we lived in Dushanbe, there was no place for Ashkenazi Jews to worship—synagogue. And I told you about this. The fact itself that we started going to the synagogue—to me that was a very important element. I was very interested when I went to Israel the first time to visit my parents and I went to synagogues there—I mean I tried to notice the difference, especially. It’s somewhat a different manner [?] than it is in Israel but still, Judaism is Judaism. It doesn’t matter to me as long as you know who you are or what your roots are. That makes you a person.

(That’s all I have. Is there anything we didn’t talk about, that I didn’t bring up, that you’d like to talk about—any other stories that you’d like to relate?)

I think we _____.

(Then, thank you very much.)

Thank you. Thank you.

56:38 [End of Part B. End of interview.]