

Olga Shmuylovich Transcript

Alexandra Kiosse: This is Alexandra Kiosse, and I am with Olga Shmuylovich in her studio in Boston. It is 1:58. Can we start?

Olga Shmuylovich: Sure.

AK: Do you or your family have stories about life in the former Soviet Union? Also, how did you arrive in the US? How were the early years in the United States?

OS: We came here in 1992 as émigrés, which means that by the [inaudible] being refugees, pardon me. Being a refugee, you have to be invited by someone from immediate family living here already, and also, you have to prove that you were experiencing hardship in the Soviet Union. That's why we came. The story is, of course, every Jewish family has a story, especially when this is the family who lived in the former Soviet Union; now it is Russia. So my parents Beylya Berezina and Yakov Shmuylovich, came from a small Jewish town, smaller Jewish town Nevel, that once, as [inaudible] its history says, was the place of Hasidic movement, but now after World War Two, there's only a few Jews left alive in that town. My parents, though, left the place for their study in universities and medical schools to Leningrad, so I was born over there. The first story that I remember was when I was a young child – not a young child; I was a teenager, and my parents decided that they allow me to experience that. They took me for their annual pilgrimage to the place of persecution of Jews of that little town – Nevel is the name. So I came there, and my first [inaudible] impression – it took all my elements when I saw this: three huge graves in the woods. In the opening of this forest was one grave where was my grandfather, whom I didn't know because he was murdered in '44, and I was born in 48. So, it was the first thing – and then I came back. Then, of course, here and there, a little bit [of] unacceptance being a Jew at the school, at the working place, [inaudible],

other encounters. It's from my side, but I was blessed, and I'm still blessed, with a family who kept the tradition. So when I was back home – for example, in my young years, and it was Passover, we would come together all the family, and celebrate, and pray. I was even brought at some point to the Leningrad synagogue. I remember how I would climb on the second floor because it was the Orthodox synagogue, and women had to be separated from men. Beautiful singing. Absolutely astounding. So that was it. We had those celebrations of major Jewish holidays at my home. When perestroika happened, I was allowed to invite my friends to join the family because it was dangerous to do it in the open before perestroika, and people suffered with the consequences of that. So, that was one side of the story. The other side of the story was when I joined the cultural movement in '70s. It started in '70s. I was part of it until I left the country. There were stories and stories and stories. I was part of another group of Jewish artists “Aleph” and joined them in 1975, following a show of the reproductions and some originals of our work here in Berkeley. It was supported by the Council of Soviet Jewry from the United States. Further participation in those activities eventually brought me to the point that, though I was not jailed, and I was not otherwise physically threatened, but the work where I had my regular job – after graduating from my art academy, we all had our regular jobs. Eventually, I had one as well. I got the situation that I wasn't given anything to do. So it was like everyday prison that you would come on your own will. You'd come in; you'd be paid something as all the workers are paid, but you would have to spend eight and a half hours doing nothing. I mean, nothing. So I would see people around me receiving some projects. They are collaborating; they're working. I would have nothing. Of course, I would not be allowed to read. I would not be allowed to do something. So eventually, after about a year of that interesting experience, I quit, and I started my work as – I don't know if you know that way of doing – artists and other people who belong to those cultural movements, and those who would decide to leave the country and became refuseniks, if you know the term – they wouldn't be able to have normal jobs. So, they were working at the enterprises, serving some elevator services, as people who would

clean, people who would do other things. So, I was serving as a person who would be invited, for example, to the grocery store to write labels [on] the products because there was no time. It was not a time when computers were up, and all these things had to be done by hand. So, I did have that skill. So [graduating] from art academy can give you a lot of useful skills, not only [do] you know how to draw, paint, or do designs; you can do these things, too. So that was how it was going. Then, I got in touch and started collaborating, cooperating with Jewish University. It was then opened [inaudible] university. Then, especially when it gets out from the underground, it obtained the title Petersburg Jewish University after the city changed the name back to the original name. So, we did a lot of things there. Eventually, my beloved big project "Beit" (or "Bet") – "Home" in Hebrew - happened because once they asked me to conceptualize a little bit on that topic on Jewish culture. So, I don't know if you want to take a look, then you can take a look at it. If you want to talk, then we can continue talking. Behind you, you have also – there was a display that was more convenient for you, where you can find here translation and original text. So, this is what I made, text that I've written. Waiting for you, I reread the text in Russian. Somehow, I was kind of satisfied [with] what I did in 1990. It is me sitting there, and I still consider that this is my best portrait ever because the photographer who worked with me then – he was invited to photograph the project after suffering, trying to make me make a normal face. He said, "Olga, just sit there and empty your mind. Don't think about anything." So, it came out fine. People were responding really, very nicely to that project. We started working on it after I proposed the concept, and it was accepted, and the financial support [inaudible] the Council for Soviet Jewry gave the money for that. The place where to do that huge thing was found because it was supposed to be not just the show, not just the performance, not just the installation, but altogether everything. Everything had to be compiled together and create a special image. So we did. We started working on it in 1989 and worked, I believe, about nine months, something like that because the opening happened in August, I think, of 1990 or even later, and it was open for public for a month. So, it was absolutely

fantastic. Worked together with Jewish University, with another – I don't even remember what is the official title of that organization, and I really want to pronounce it correctly in translation because we eventually have to [inaudible] the professional translation because we knew that all the materials would go here or would go to Jerusalem, and it was printed there, and it had to be in the language that was understood by others. So, it is the other enterprise, Center for Studies and Presentation of [inaudible] Jewish Diaspora, another organization, and sponsored by the Union of Council for Soviet Jews – it is the official title. The list of names that I would be delighted to name all of them if you want, or I can go – wherever you want.

AK: Sure.

OS: Would you like?

AK: Yeah.

OS: All right. So I would read as it is written here. It is organized by Olga Shmuylovich, Art director, then the names of directors – [inaudible] B. Kellman, A. Yaskevich, T. Pogorelskaya, G. Reifer, [inaudible] in cooperation with Leningrad Open Jewish University Rector I. Dvorkin and [inaudible], the Center for Studies and Presentation of East-Jewish [inaudible] Jewish Diaspora [inaudible] of the university was [inaudible]. Nikolay Chernyayev, V. Lukin, B. Khaimovich, D. Vilensky, I. Krupnik cooperated with us. And artists were: L. Berlin, G. Bleikh, L. Bolmat, V. Veksler, D. Goberman, A. Zinstein, I. Zlachevsky, V. Levitin, A. Leitman, S. Lipkovich, A. Manusov, T. Pogorelskaya, Afanasi Pood, O. Shmuylovich, G. Yakhvets, A. Yaskevich. [inaudible] who lives in Jerusalem now, [inaudible] unfortunately, deceased now [inaudible]. A. Manusov, my friend who passed away while we were making the project, while I was installing – we were installing on-premises of that show. He passed away. He wasn't well. So, I installed his paintings, and every day, I would make sure that there were fresh flowers near his paintings. So it was that. [inaudible] because I was there not only as the author

of a concept and then director but also as an artist as well. [inaudible] That is the whole crew. There were a lot of people who would come and bring something. I especially was touched by the fact that the son of one of the participants, V. Lukin, who [inaudible] participated in it as a scientist and researcher, but his son played flute – [inaudible] studied. So, he came to that structure that was built on the premises, and it was a really big one, as you could see by the photographs, found the place that felt comfortable for him, and just played. Just played his flute. I know that people loved to come there to talk, to consult, to give their meetings. So, we managed to create a really culturally convincing, comfortable, and inviting place as we wanted. A lot of things came out of it. First thing, I understood that it was possible to make these things because I have to tell you then, in the beginning of the thing, I was brought into the huge two-story space concert hall performance hall that was found for that and put in the middle of it. I look up and down and left and right. I said to myself, “All right. You have to do it. You have to do it.” It was scary. But all came out just nicely. So it was [inaudible]. After that, with all the relationships, etcetera – you just ask questions because, with a person of my age, I can talk a week without a break. So many things have happened. Ask. Ask. I can continue, or I will answer your questions.

AK: How did you originally get into art? How did you become interested in art, if you remember from the very beginning?

OS: I do not remember when I didn't do it. So, it was always. Though I have mentioned that – and I will explain why. I was a very, very fortunate child that when my parents decided to bring me to an art studio for children, I was eight-year-old – to this special place where these kinds of activities were happening. To my utmost fortune, I came to the studio of Solomon Levin, an outstanding pedagogue and prolific in many ways. He was an artist. In terms of his teaching, he was a genius. And all of us, his students – unfortunately, he is not with us anymore. All of us, his students, understood it, I believe, right away when we were young children and our parents as well. Even when he

became sick at a rather early age and had to retire, we would come to his house to spend time with them, him and his wife, who supported his activity. He was teaching us many things, not only painting and drawing but also how to be in it. He would say, "If you could live without being an artist, without being in this field, don't go there. It is a very hard life. Very difficult life. You can always spend some spare time painting, drawing, and doing whatever you want. You can get some other profession safer and more convenient for everyday life." Some of his students followed his advice. But those who didn't, we just became artists, and we kept in touch. My best friends for life came from that studio. I keep in touch with them since then until now. Solomon Levin, my first teacher, and I believe that he put the foundation of everything that I have done [inaudible] talk about achieving something. Whatever I have achieved, I feel that I just follow his example. I believe, and I feel that I'm a follower of Solomon Levin, first as a teacher because coming to this country, I started working with children and worked with children teaching art, of course, under the umbrella of Jewish organizations, different kinds of them, for a long time. I had my private lessons and art projects with people of different ages. Sometimes, it was a mixed crowd, completely. At my present time, I started working and doing artist therapy with elderly people who live in a hospital, long-term care, sufferers after stroke, or dementia, Alzheimer's, or other unpleasant diseases and conditions. I always feel that I am following his way. He is showing me how to do that. So that's Solomon Levin. Then, somehow it happened that I got to one of the best art academies in the country, now its name is the St. Petersburg State Steiglitz Academy of Art and Design, though, almost was rejected from there, but one of the directors and founder of that was another perfect person – J. A. Vaks – his name. He didn't allow me just to drop out. He found me, through my parents, somewhere when I was outside there, thinking that I would go and kill myself out of despair. I'm just kidding, as you understand. But he convinced me to get back and helped me to get back to the academy that I graduated from. So this is another person to whom I should be very thankful. A lot of people were students of that academy, which J. A. Vaks just pulled out of ashes and

built out of nothing, again, because it was completely destroyed during the war. So, we were also very thankful for him. So, that was about art, and that was about design, and that was about working together with Jewish organizations over there. When I came here, of course, I continued because Jewish organizations, as you know, Jewish Family Service, [Combined Jewish] Philanthropies, etcetera. They are helping newcomers, refugees in our case. Of course, I offered whatever I could offer, and that is how it happened. A lot of art projects came out of that collaboration with the Jewish organizations, and they followed from – I think that they stand out from that experience because it gave me confidence, and it gave me the understanding that people needed and people like to be put under the condition of art-making. So I call these projects “Interactive, Collaborative Art Projects for Multiple Participants”. They are usually multiple, from tens to several hundreds. For example, when we did the project for First Night 2000 in Boston, it was like five-hundred-plus. When I followed that project with *Message and Menorah* Project – I pulled out all the materials [inaudible] if you need it. When I did that project, that is called *Message and Menorah*, in 2004 or three for the Women’s Studies Research Center at Brandeis University – Hadassah Institute [is the] other name – it was about a hundred people.

AK: I think I actually saw those from someone else I interviewed – Andrea Waldstein.

OS: Yes, this is the person who gave my name, I believe to (George?). Yes.

AK: So, she showed us.

OS: You would find her name there. As an artist, I experienced a very interesting feeling that the project was very – it was a pure concept. When you turn a two-dimensional piece into a three-dimensional piece, nothing left on the side unused – everything is utilized, and it is still working. Last time, I put it together and brought it to our reunion this spring, I guess. I didn’t pull it apart here because it just happened that we have visitors in our house on Pesach and [inaudible], and they just love to show them how it works and

how it's all held together. As Shulamit Reinharz told [me] when we finished that project, and I was given – I was honored by offering to light the candles. Before that and after that, she would touch it and [say], "It is how it goes. It is very flexible, but it is not separable. This cannot exist without being together." So that was it. A little bit before that was another very exciting project with children, again, about Passover. At one of the synagogues – I think Sudbury. With Beth El at Sudbury, I had a very interesting experience of working with them periodically. Once in seven years, I would be invited there to do something, though I do not belong to that community. I belong to the Shir Tikva. I did one very interesting thing with Shir Tikva later. So, on Passover, I just proposed that – let's imagine that we all are coming together around a big, big – I have to show you that. I just love that so much that you will have to enjoy seeing it – the collided photograph. See? We just put a huge, huge white cloth on the floor. I made [a] huge circle like it was a round table. I invited kids just to make pictures of themselves and their families and their friends like they were all sitting or standing or being gathered around that table. So, it is how they were. One girl asked if she could bring to the table her doggy, and I said, "Yes, you can." That happened before *Message and Menorah*. Another very interesting project with that very congregation, Beth El, was *Tree of Names*. This *Tree of Names* project also has a continuation because the idea of life, a communal life, as a tree is very understood. It's an obvious idea. Everything is intertwined, right? What is the bloom of that tree? What fruit can this tree bring to us? Of course, us. What is the thing that we introduce ourselves to the world first thing? When you called me, what did you say? "This is Alexandria?" Right? So, it is our name. What is [inaudible]. Your name is important. So, we created another installation on their premises. We worked through the [inaudible] school. To make sure that everyone understands everything, I would usually create some kind of a flier comics strip, exactly as the one that you possibly noticed over there when we were passing by the installation. See that one? I did that one for everyone. You can see how it looks. See? Then, you can see how it works. Then, the fun started. We build. We started building

the installation on the premises of the – I do the sketches that I love to make because you never know what eventually you come up with. But you have to pleasure – you can enjoy making sketches [and] making paintings. So we started building that installation on premises. It was looking like that. First, it was empty voids. Then it [inaudible] with something. And people would pass by asking, “What are you doing? What are you doing?” Now, this is part of my idea. When you do it on-premises of your future final installation, you have a chance to communicate with people because, of course, they don’t understand what’s happening. If they are willing to ask, I’m very willing to talk, and we talk and discuss. Then, children came, carrying their homework, the images of their names, and we installed them all on that tree. At that point – I have to show you my back. This is me. See? That is me. Because, at that point, you have nothing to do. But what? What happens? Are you failing? Are you successful? What happens? How excitement is in the room, etc.? What is the final result? So, it was all good. It was standing there for some time. Then we took it apart. We installed it somewhere else. Then, I repeated it here at Midway Artist Studios using some part of that structure, the tree, inviting my fellow artist friends – new friends because we just moved here – to create the images of their names. And they did, believe it or not. That was standing there for a good couple of months, I guess. Sometimes, they would add something to the tree, to the image that they would love to have there. So, that was how it goes. I never forgot my experience at the mass grave that I described [to] you because I promised myself, and I really tried my very best to do, that I would do whatever it could take to pay my contribution not only to the memory but to make sure that this memory is not going away. But there is the thing – even the in Russia, working with the university and school of that Jewish University and working on my own on my projects, I understood even then – and it was proved to be right here – when you want to help human conscious to accept and to imprint in itself an idea, it should be delivered on the vehicle of creative force. If a person whom you offer an idea is accepting it through – is working it in through the creative work on his or her own, it is forever. It forever stays with that person. That’s

why, when I met Holocaust survivor Maurice Hollander and his wife Edith Hollander – I don't know if you're from Boston. No. You're not from Boston. In Boston, their names are known. Maurice passed away a year ago, but Edith is still alive. They came here in the late '60s. They both survived Auschwitz. When I came to know him, I invited him to one of my shows through a mutual friend to participate in the very first show created as an homage to the idea of the Shoah. As I was told, he looked at the poster I created with the presentation of several columns, with the human images on them. He counted all of them. When it came out that it was six, he said, "Okay. I'll go." I didn't count. It just happened. Things of this kind happen. So, Maurice came. I came to know him. We came to become friends. I made one first project that I called *Another Butterfly*. Have you read the poem by Pavel Friedmann created in Theresienstadt about the butterfly, that he would never see another butterfly again because butterflies would not come to concentration camps? Though Theresienstadt was an exemplary place, as we all know, people were sent to camps of death from this place, and Pavel died. He perished in one of those camps, though the poem was created in Theresienstadt. So I read that [*The Butterfly*] poem, and I learned that this poem was used in many media. The oratorium was created by a composer and cantor or rabbi Davidson, which I listened to, and other things. So, I made a project that I called *Another Butterfly* with Maurice Hollander and his wife. I invited children to meet him and asked them to create pictures listening to his story. So they did. Then, next year, after learning about this project, my temple Shir Tikva invited me to do something of a similar matter for their school. So I did. Here you will see what happened. What happened is that I found – [inaudible] little thing for you, so you can see. I found one little girl here in Boston – she was five years old then; now, she's a little bit bigger, of course – who was the great-granddaughter of the person who was killed then, who was lost in the Shoah, as I wrote in my papers. I asked her for the image of a butterfly because she was doing some pictures, paintings, and they found that image. I asked another person to create that card with the images of butterflies and with excerpts from my writing. We came to Shir Tikva and invited another Holocaust survivor,

Peter Gossels, to talk to children. I have to tell you that this first meeting with Peter was not very promising because Peter said – and I knew by then that did happen, that children didn't want to listen to that. What's the point? What's the point to listen to the stories of children [of] Holocaust-Survivors? Children are children. They like to live. They like to play. They like to be happy. We talked a little bit and talked a little bit, and then we managed to convince him to try, and he agreed. The director of the school at this point was – her name should be written here, I guess – Rachel Kest [inaudible] was the director of the studies on that. So, two girls are sitting on his side and pressing him a little bit. So, we convinced him. So, he came, and he started talking. The set-up was this way – I created the installation in the room with the pictures created for Maurice and Edith Hollander's presentation last year. So, children were invited to be the artists who would give to the future generations their image of what was happening, what was going away without trace if they didn't create their own observation on what happened. And they had to build a bridge. So, the designer of this card used the image of the bridge for that. Apparently, she did a good job because it was a convincing thing. To convince people to do something, you have to please their feelings sometimes. If you present them with [a] nice image, it is very pleasing. So, the designer and the girl and all other people who I managed to invite in this project, we did a good job. So, kids came with their parents. They sat there, and they were listening. You see, I showed you that first image. Look at that girl. Could you read what is written on her shirt?

AK: Pure love.

OS: Pure love. Now, let's see what this pure love created. This is what she created. They created a whole bunch of – the whole album. These are copies because all the originals I turned into the installation that was sitting in that huge room given to that installation for a few days. Then, I was requested to move it to the common area so congregants – their children and themselves and their guests – could experience what was there. What I'm looking at – I want to show you one specific photograph. There are

great pictures here. If you have time or want to take a look at them, you would be more than welcome to do that. Peter Gossels is one of the children of Chabannes if you know this name. This is a French village. Villagers are not Jews; they're just French, but they decided to give shelter to Jewish children from all Europe – actually, from all around the world, whoever could bring them to them. They kept them in secret in their village in the castle that they gave to them. Being asked why did they decide to do that, the answer [was] that they didn't find it good when other people kill other people because of their difference. So they kept the children. One of the images that children created is two boys because Peter has a brother, so two brothers. They're knocking at the door of this castle. Someone opens the door and says, "Welcome." This is [inaudible] and this is – people listen. It is how they listened. It is how they listened, and they started making pictures because I was trying to move them smoothly into the creative process because I wanted – the thing that Peter was delivering would be processed by them through their creativity. So, the idea that they managed to get from that encounter would be not just one of many, but [a] single, unique – single one. That they would not only experience for themselves, but also through their pictures that were displayed over there – would give that image, would build that bridge to other people because artistic image – a piece of art can touch you very deeply when you just look at [it]. I don't know if you like fine art or not, but I'm sure that you like any other kind of art – music, dance, anything. So, if you encounter something that touches your heart, the deliverance is very deep. So, you have it. You carry it. You carry it within your system, being ready to give it to the next person who is ready to accept. Talking about giving to the next, I want to get back to my first teacher, Solomon Levin. I have to tell you that almost all of his students whom I know we are teaching. We cannot just keep for ourselves what our teacher gave to us. We just have to give it to someone else, so someone else can go and give it to someone else. It is like a baton. You're just passing it, passing it, passing it. The same thing with art. The same thing with art. Through art, you can pass very important things and ideas. *Another Butterfly* proves it. Peter was so thrilled that – he's a lawyer, by the way, so it's not very

easy to move his heart. So, after I gave him the same album with the same materials that I have that are in my lap, he and his wife sent me a very sweet letter that, of course, I have in this album, thanking me and saying, by the way, that I was right. I was right. It was very, very deep and moving. He asked me when we would make another project of that kind, which didn't happen, unfortunately, though I was ready. But things happen or not happen, not necessarily following your will. So, that was *Another Butterfly*. Then, there was something else, but after *Another Butterfly* was the *Tree of Names* here. Then, I started working with sick and suffering people. Another very big thing that I made – though I did a lot of shows within this organization, within this system of Hebrew Senior Life, it is called, and the place I work is called Hebrew Rehabilitation Center – two campuses now. So, I came to the idea – [inaudible] presented that art is art no matter who makes it. So my idea was to bring the art that we created and keep creating within the system as a therapy because it is a very successful, deep, and important therapy. I don't know if you know anything about these implications of art-making to the brain of dementia sufferers, for example. Stroke sufferers, other diseases – also good clients for those therapies. Benefits of therapies of this kind are very bright, from my experience, for example, because I work in this system for eight years. I believe eight years now. Before that, I worked a little bit, but [on a] smaller scale with the same population. I remember, for example, that I was assigned to a person after a stroke who was lying in bed. She was lying in bed, and she lost capability of moving. She wasn't allowed to sit, and she couldn't eat on her own. She had to be fed. When I came to her, she couldn't fully sit in her special bed. She was lifted a little bit. She couldn't hold the pencil in her hands. I helped her to do it. By the end of the first year, she not only could sit and eat on her own, which is huge, as you may understand. She created her own art. She was [inaudible] artist before because she belonged to the [inaudible] family of very famous artist. Her son, who lives in Texas, I believe, and was a radiologist, neurologist – something very complex. He came once and said that what medication couldn't do, art therapy could. So, his mom was up and art-making. That was one of the brightest

examples. Another bright example I just showed you – this one. That was a very young person, relatively young for that situation. She was in despair starting her life there. Very professional, highly professional. Doesn't do anything with art-making – with music, creating music scores and sound scores for movies. I spent a year and a half convincing her to help me through her [inaudible] through her profession, through compiling music for some collaborative big mural that all my clients whom I work with were working on. Eventually, she, being already open for me, as relationships develop, agreed to pick up whatever it was [inaudible], and she did her first touch somewhere. She started painting. As you can see, she is painting beautifully, and this beautiful case is here. So it's [inaudible]. I showed her art [inaudible]. It's a kind of a circus project that we all are working on. I asked her – because I was already interested in synesthesia, I asked her if she ever saw colors while creating her musical scores. Guess what she answered? She answered, "Always. Always." She just didn't know that she would paint. So, she's painting now. Rather recently, she said to me, after the end of this session, "now I'm free". She felt free. So, it was the full circle of the experience of Soviet Union when we were persecuted by being free artists, to that point. *Creativity Under Duress* – this is the title of the show that was created with the use of the works Aleph group artists created in 1975. We were all gathered from around the world [inaudible] by the Louisville Art initiative; one person of the initiative group was Lauren Garron, whom we are friends with now, and our [inaudible] works done by then – current by then time – was also put in the show. The title was perfect, *Creativity Under Duress*. So, under duress, the only thing that can put you free is creativity. I used that concept in my work now. My hero for many years is Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, whose name you possibly know. I know the story. I told the story to my students whatever age they are – little ones, big ones. My supervisor said they don't know because they don't. They use the concept all the time. So, eventually, in [inaudible], I received the permission of all the levels that I had to receive to create the show of the art, of my resident artists, to create the show outside of the facility because I'm sure that a broader community – old people – should understand that those

who are not well, those who suffer from whatever conditions or diseases or states, as well as children – because I did a lot of children's art shows – they can create great art. Nobody cares when and how, under what conditions it's done, if it is good. So, it was a good show named “Open Art”. As you can see, I had already the installation of dancers. See? This is the poster that I made. All these dances are done by my residents, who were put into a huge installation that I did – would then close the box, the basket – a huge one – within which one of my colleagues, who is a movement therapist/dancer – she danced within the project. The music therapist, who was a piano player, played. Another person who was volunteering with us did a bunch of [inaudible]. So, this is the latest. This is the image that I took from that person. Actually, by the rule of the institution, we are not allowed to name the name of the resident outside of the institution, but in this case, I got permission from the family because I wanted to put that poster outside [the] gallery because I was curating this gallery at that time. So, all our gallery guests could see what they expect. So, her name is Emilia Volk. I am allowed to name her name because I follow the rules, and I'm happy that the people would know her name now. So, I used that image. I used the collection of music that she put together as the music accompaniment for the dancer to dance because she did it. She just went through the whole collection of music and picked up and put together the whole stream of numbers that can be listened to and [inaudible] danced to. A lot of other things were used for that show. I mentioned here, and I write it here, that the idea that I proposed in this work is called the “trampoline concept” and that the “trampoline concept” describes how we use art to harness the creativity of our participants. This concept is signed by my name and by the name of Diane [inaudible] Shufro, who helped me to edit the text. So, I asked her permission to put her name under that. She was the one who created her collection of essays, also presented at the shows. So, what is a trampoline? The google definition says, “Trampoline is a strong fabric sheet connected by strings to a frame used as a springboard.” In “Open Art” studios and within artist therapy groups, the leader awakens artists who know the power of the creative force from the inside [and] sets the

conditions for a therapeutic result with art-making participants. The leader encourages an environment where not only therapy is provided, but really good art is produced. It is methodical attention to [inaudible] beginning slowly just as one steps onto the trampoline with care and then begins to balance perhaps with trepidation and then with glee. The new participant artist can retry [inaudible]. It is their accompanying joy that is the benefit. The activity is interactive and collaborative, enabling students and teachers to [inaudible]. They did, and they still do. So it was a huge success, this show. I was hanging on the walls, literally, because I have to cover all the walls – big gallery – for a month [inaudible] before the show was open to [the] public for another month and a half. I'm very happy that the newspaper, second big newspaper in our state – MetroWest Daily News – put a nice article – nice material for public to read, and a local TV station recorded an interview with me later in [inaudible] TV. They did that recording. If needed, I have [a] CD, and I have permission to use it for whatever needs can come up. Both in the text of the article and in the interview, I try in simple terms to present the importance of art application into the life of all of us, including our young, old, well-being, not very well-being people – everyone. Right now, I am working on the other project. Andrea Waldstein, when she was here last time and when she saw the installation that I did for one of our shows – because we have periodical shows. Of course, we both, Nikolay and myself – we participated at least in two of them as residents of a [inaudible] Midway Artist Studios because it's so convenient. You don't need to go anywhere. Just a few steps downstairs, and you're at the gallery. No need for transportation, just the elevator. So, Andrea asked me if I would consider [applying] for the show at the Kniznick Gallery at Brandeis University. I started working on that whole project, which I probably propose – and that will involve everyone. It will involve my friend, artist Nina Libin, a lady who works in New York. Just recently, we did a very interesting show for her, which is called *Beanile Forest*. I'll give you a chance to have a little look into what she does. And Emilia – I'm going to invite Emilia with her beautiful painting into that show. Another person who probably will be an action artist, who would do some action, who would perform and

connect the whole thing – my fellow artist from Midway Studies. With my strange fate, it is another lawyer. Lawyer there, lawyer here. The girl who helped me edit and to put together and to work on the first *Another Butterfly* was also a lawyer. So, I'm lucky with lawyers in my life. I guess that it will continue in a good way. Another thing that I'm working – and a piece that you can see, and that piece that you can see here – this is my sketch. It is about circus. One of my residence artists created a name for that project, that circus. She put it "unbelievable circus." So, we are working on a project called "Unbelievable Circus." It will have to be the involvement of many media, not only fine art but also music and poetry. I have the agreement of my fellow artists of Midway to participate. But I [inaudible] their need of videographer. Did you know some videographer who would be willing to work with me?

AK: No, I don't think so.

OS: That's too bad. That's too bad because I would need another medium to be part of the group to move it forward.

AK: I actually do know somebody, but she lives in New York. I don't know if it would work out. She was my roommate in college. She makes films.

OS: Maybe she has friends here?

AK: Probably.

OS: Ask her.

AK: I can. [laughter]

OS: Please do that because the thing that you can see here – I will show you one little toy that I made for presentation. For example, you're coming to our gallery, and you see the images of clowns on the wall, right?

AK: Yes.

OS: They're different. This is one of them. Suddenly, something changes. First, probably, the light goes down, so the changes can be done. When the light is up, you turn it, you look at the walls, and the walls are changed because of not only the image here but also something else. What is this something else we want to see? We want to see what is the something else. Somebody is making music to that image. Somebody is dancing to that image. Somebody is reciting poetry to that image. So, to make their promotional video to put it out, I need a videographer. I need a videographer for the development of that project because I have a feeling that in our time, it is inevitably to be going into cyberspace at some point. Of course, it can be done here at our place in physical space, in real reality, but to get more people involved into it – and it is kind of an endless possibility to have more and more people to respond to each other's art. It had to be moved online. It had to be moved online. For that, it'd have to be [video recorded] properly, with someone who wants to become part of that whole thing. Of course, the money can be involved in this. But the force of working together is much more than just the money. So it all can be together. Right now, I'm negotiating with the girl who does videos. I probably will meet her at some point. But I am not yet in agreement with her. So, I'm still looking around. So, this is how I see it. See? More or less. Eventually, everything is different when you come to work under the real conditions, into the real space with real people because when I invite someone to work in my Interactive, Collaborative Art projects for Multiple Participants, I always create the space for that person. So that person also can explore his or her own creative juices. Otherwise, it doesn't make any point. Why should I enjoy it and other people shouldn't? Everyone should. It makes it stronger and more interesting. The more people are getting involved in those things, the better, the healthier. I don't know if I can create that word in that kind of tense – kinder. Kinder because when people are making art, that's why it is used as therapy so successfully. We pull the best out of themselves, not only for themselves but also for others. When we work with my artist residents over there where I work now, in

the middle of the session, for example, different kinds of sessions – right now, I'm talking about the one that we called "Open Art," which means that everyone can come in at any time within the limitation of that time span that we spent there. So, people can come in and sit there and experience the utmost joy of that. I've collected a good collection of comments that the aura, the air of the space where the people are making their art – the music, of course, is playing, and everything is going this way – is very special, is pleasant. They love it, and they don't want to leave. I never was able to finish that session in time. No. Whatever campus I'm working in – HRC, Roslindale or NewBridge on the Charles, Dedham – the story is the same. People just don't want to quit. They don't want to stop. They love it. They love the flow. They are in the zone. I know that you know what it means. They are in the zone. It's good for me too. I'm sure that I didn't cover a lot of stuff, so ask if you want to ask something else.

AK: How would you describe yourself in terms of your Jewish identity? Have your feelings about being Jewish changed over time?

OS: As I was painting, I lived in a Jewish home, though it was really difficult to perform it. But even before the time came when I was allowed to invite my friends for the Seder, traditions were kept. My father would say that he was honoring the memory of his perished father. But I know that not only for that, though, for this, of course, as well. I just needed – in the family, it was needed. Though I can't speak Yiddish because my parents couldn't speak Yiddish. They were afraid they would put me under the danger if I pick up some Jewish words and bring it out there, where I had to spend my life at school and at other places. So, we all can not speak Yiddish – all my generation from Russia. But the first knowledge that I got as a Jewish person I got from my father. I always asked questions. He would answer [to] the best of his knowledge. The first Bible that I had in my hands, he brought for me. It was the book printed some time – the end of 19th century or the beginning of 20th century – double text, one side is Hebrew and another side in Russian. So, I started reading it, and read and read and read. Eventually, I

learned something by heart and loved that book. Of course, I couldn't take it with me when I left for the USA. Because under the law, books printed earlier than a certain time were not allowed to be brought out. The risk of trying to drag it through customs was that they would take it from you and put it in the trash. So, I couldn't do that. I left it behind. I know that eventually, it was given to [a] synagogue. I think the people who helped me to take care of what I left eventually brought it there. So, here, once upon a time, when I lived at my first home, we lived near a Jewish community center. At some point, they had a yard sale, though I hate yard sales. But this time, I just decided to go there because it was just across the street. I went there, and I see a small, very thick book on the table. I picked it up. It was King James' translation full-text, thirty-seven cents. I don't know why I remember this thirty-seven cents, but I do remember the cost. I just, being stunned, said to the [inaudible] sitter the whole story. She said, "Apparently, it was waiting for you." So, I have that thing now, and I use it when I need to quote. For example, when I did the last work that Andrea Waldstein saw, it was one of many works that I did on the topic of the Book of Esther. It's called *Royal Apparel*. I recall that because I usually put one of the quotations – and one was, of course, "And who knows it whether thou come to the Kingdom for such time as this." Another time, Esther put on her apparel and stood. So, my thought is that, at any given moment, any point of time and space, there is a situation when Hadassah has to become Esther, has to put on her royal apparel and stand for whatever she has to stand, taking all the risks that, by the book, she was taking. She could be beheaded – no kidding – if the king would not come to favoring her uninvited presence if you know the story. In these horrible times, nobody could come to [the] king without being invited. If it could happen, that person would be beheaded. So, at some point, when Jews got under the threat of [inaudible], she just did that. I created a lot of images of these different kinds of times and presentations. I imagined different kinds of appearances of Hadassah becoming Esther and putting on her apparel and stand, etc. So, the Bible is being used. It is being used – in use. So, of course, in those times, in Russia, as I already mentioned, you couldn't forget that you

were Jewish, especially having such a face as I have. Nobody could even have a thought of doubt what ethnicity I belong to. So, all this beautiful stuff [inaudible] school, not being accepted at the first job after the graduation. They didn't want me because of my Jewishness, so eventually, I got another job. Other things – the thing is that antisemitism is so dangerous. It is not a disease, not infection – probably [a] virus that if it starts living within the organism, sometimes it is so difficult to get rid of it. So, the culture – otherwise beautiful culture – of Russian people got that infection/virus in it. Even the best of those people who were my good friends or colleagues just couldn't bring themselves even to the possibility to say out loud, "Jewish." I still remember, as one of my co-workers came to work and talked about some experiences that she had in public transportation and described the person whom she [sat] across the train. She said, "With Oriental appearances." She just couldn't bring herself to say, "Jewish" – just couldn't. Here in the United States, I was [inaudible] by a very nice woman, who helped me to start setting up my work with children, teaching children with art. She was an art director of the art school at Danforth Museum. She said that when she was a girl, she experienced antisemitism in America. Now, it is much, much better, but still existing. The test that probably could be given to the difference between self-feeling over there and over here is that here, when I just go along the street, I don't feel myself Jewish; I feel myself Olga. It couldn't be that over there. Because me being Jewish is part of me being Olga. Right? So, I think that is the answer to your question, partly – the difference that I paid attention [to] because I was asked that question, of course, not once, especially by people who helped us, who were being bold in helping refugees or Jewish people coming from different countries to the United States. The fact that somehow it happened that I got in touch with the group that Andrea Waldstein belonged to – this is another interesting story, by the way. One of my friends who tried to help put me in touch with another person from this group – Josie Schneider, who is an artist. She is an artist. When I later became curator of the gallery, I [inaudible] exhibited her art many times. I like her paintings. So, she took my portfolio, and in some time, when she looked at my portfolio,

she decided that she would give me [inaudible] help. She got me my first project at Newton JCC, which is called – first installation for Purim, by the way. Since then, my masks started. See? I can't stop making masks because I made several masks for that first Purim project. Then, I am just in love with them. I am making them and making installations with them everywhere. She brought me – Josie brought me to the [inaudible] Keshet Seder that was taking place then at Women's Studies Research Center with Shulamit Reinharz as the founding director. I did several commissions over there, a couple of commissions. Eventually, I did that *Message and Menorah*. I was enjoying all the time that I spent with them, worked with them and for them. They were willing to participate in my things because participation was a necessary thing to get running that *Message and Menorah* project. We had to start and finish the whole thing in thirty-five minutes. When I was invited to do something for the [inaudible], I was [told] that I had only thirty-five minutes left of empty time during the registration. So I had to fill it into that time slot. Eventually, we did the registration of people who came to that [inaudible] Event. The way that they participated in art-making – to have it all successfully started and complete, I had to have a whole crew of people who would do such thing or such thing, being explained what exactly in what time they have to do to bring a person from this station to that station, the help person to the such-and-such, and all was monitored and trained. So like angels, they did all that stuff. We make that happen. Really great women. I just wish to be able to do something else with them at some point. They still come to see my shows in my other projects, my other installations. So, this is the story of how I came to know Andrea and a whole bunch of other people – as Nikolay sometimes jokingly puts it: feminist nest. They have some feministic ideas in the concept of the programs [inaudible]. Who says that is bad? No? Everything which works for good for people is good. A mask is a very interesting thing, by the way. Being already very deep in making them after several – fifty, eight masks – [inaudible]. You see that thing under the ceiling?

AK: Yes.

OS: Several times, I would put the whole column from ceiling to floor, covered with masks, for example, or with something else. I understood, making these masks, that these are faces that I had in my memory. They're just coming out through me making the masks. Because you see, they have different kinds of expressions and features and everything. I just probably kept them somewhere in the inner storage of our conscious until it was time for them to come out. Every single mask that I would create, I would try on myself to have the feeling how it works out within the mask. Those cut-outs, they're salamanders – all salamanders, which are born in flame and live in flame. Behind you, the work that I did – artists are very funny animals. It was a time of big loss for me in the family. I did that thing with many figures sitting shiva, all carved of white boards. They're sitting shiva. They're all sitting shiva in the one behind you, as well. Because not everyone is Jewish here in the building, though some Jewish people live here, officially, I call that installation *Observer* or *Observation*, which is appropriate because when you pronounce shiva, for some perception, it can be shiva of the Indian culture, right?

AK: I don't think I have any more questions for you, but if there's something you want to add. I don't know. Anything else you want to talk about?

OS: I don't know. I thought that I talked so much.

AK: [laughter]

OS: Take a fruit.

AK: I'm good. Thank you.

OS: You listened to me so nicely. You deserve some.

AK: I'm okay. Thank you.

OS: All right.

AK: So, is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

OS: Nothing comes to my mind right now. The only thing that I feel that – when I try to look at, to observe the way that I made – from '70s through the current time, with hardships and punishments undeserved – or deserved because to be free in those conditions, it is kind of a crime, I guess. Oh, did I tell you what Emilia told me, that she felt free?

AK: Yes.

OS: Yes. So, somehow, it comes together. It comes together in an appropriate way. I feel that I'm blessed with people whom I met, and the biggest blessing in my life [is] that I have met extraordinary people, starting from my parents, who were surgeons in their young years. Twenty-one was my mother when she was sent to the [inaudible] World War II to be a surgeon, and she was there. So, starting from my parents and my teacher, Solomon Levin, and my friends through the whole life I lived – and I would name all of them if it were appropriate. Of course, Nikolay is an extraordinary person and excellent artist. His works are the proof of that, of the drawings that you could see here. These are his. And my students – little ones when I worked with children and old ones, whom I work here with. I never, though, officially would call them clients, but when I work with them, I call them students. So it's easier for them to feel themselves in a more appropriate setting. Some of them are [inaudible] a hundred years old. My oldest student was a hundred-and-four, and my youngest was three-and-a-half. See? So interesting. I just want to go on and go on and go on. I want to finish – not to finish – to continue to work on both projects that I'm running right now about clowns and about Hadassah/Esther. I just need a videographer. I just need [a] financial foundation. I just need such and such and this and this. So, I need forty-eight hours per day, definitely. So, it is what I add to our conversation. If there is someone who could stretch the time, that would be good. That's it.

AK: Thank you so much.

OS: Thank you.

AK: That was really great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]