

TR-3818 Transcription

Friedman, Hebert A. Interview with Russian immigrants of Kiryat

Tivon Absorption Center, Mary Zilber and Martin Cherkess.

[Haifa, Israel]. 23 May 1972.

Herbert A. Friedman: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. We're sitting here in a very beautiful place called Kiryat Tiv'on, a small village near the big city of Haifa. In this village there's an absorption center, a *merkaz klita*, in which there are about 150 newcomers to Israel from the Soviet Union. It's quite interesting that there's also here a family from South America, one from Iraq, one from North America. But, mainly the people are here from the Soviet Union. Upstairs in the third floor of this lovely building where we look out and see grass and trees, there is the apartment of Dr. and Mrs. Mary Zilber. There are two rooms to this apartment -- one room for the doctor and his wife, the second room for their two daughters -- they have their own private bathroom here. Downstairs [01:00] in the main dining hall is where all of the people eat together. The Zilbers and all of the other immigrants stay in this absorption center in these very lovely surroundings, for about five or six months. They learn Hebrew here, they learn to react with each other, they learn to meet the townspeople, they go to the concerts,

they listen to Hebrew being spoken on the streets, and this is their first adjustment to life in Israel. It's true that it's a protected society in a certain sense, and yet in another sense it's a good introduction to the country because it helps them to learn the new environment and the new customs. We're sitting in Mrs. Zilber's apartment and she has a guest -- a young man by the name of Martin Cherkess. He was born in Novosibirsk -- [02:00] far out in Siberia in Russia, almost 3,000 miles from Moscow; he studied mathematics. He was in Israel about five months. He's at a different absorption center called [Aud lite?] -- he came over here today to visit. Mrs. Zilber comes from Riga up on the Baltic Sea. She and her husband and their daughters have been here about three and a half months. So, we have two people -- very fresh newcomers to Israel -- and we will get from them their story of what they went through in Russia -- why they wanted to come out, how they came out, what they're doing here, what their reactions are here to their life in the new country, and whatever message they want to give us, the American listening audience. Mary Zilber, let me ask you first why it was that you wanted to come out of Russia? You studied [03:00] at the Academy of Science in Riga, you took a degree in chemistry, you're a wood chemist -- which is a highly specialized thing -- your husband is a physician -- it would seem to me that your

life in the Soviet Union should have been very good at your level of intellectual achievement. Why was it that you wanted to leave Russia and come here?

Mary Zilber: Although our family wasn't religious, we tried to observe some Jewish tradition, like the festival of *Pesach*, of *Hanukkah*. We got the Jewish education in our childhood -- my mother was a teacher in a Hebrew school in the time of Latvia -- and we wanted to give our children the Jewish education, and it was impossible to do in Russia.

Herbert A. Friedman: Why was it impossible?

Mary Zilber: Because, there are not -- a Jewish school let us newspapers, books, [04:00] and it isn't forbidden, but it isn't allowed.

Herbert A. Friedman: So, you came here to try to bring your children to a Jewish environment.

Mary Zilber: Yes, yes, yes. And, we felt -- we had a very good standard of life in Russia -- we had a beautiful apartment and our standard of life was very high, but we felt that we are

Jewish, and we wanted to come here and we wanted to educate our daughters in the traditions of the old and very beautiful Jewish culture.

Herbert A. Friedman: So, you didn't come here for any materialistic reason -

Mary Zilber: No, no.

Herbert A. Friedman: -- you came here merely for a spiritual reason.

Mary Zilber: Only for a spiritual. And, we knew that it will not be easy, and it was very hard to get the permission because -- or so it is said, it is purposeless for you to go to Israel; you are educated, [05:00] your husband is reserve captain of the Soviet Army -

Herbert A. Friedman: A captain in the Soviet Army?

Mary Zilber: -- yes, in the reserve.

Herbert A. Friedman: In the reserve, yes.

Mary Zilber: And he has to stay in Russia.

Herbert A. Friedman: Well, I think it's fantastic that you got permission to come out all together with so much education and with your husband being a reserve captain, I think you are very lucky to be out.

Mary Zilber: Do you know when I -- we are in the office of the permission, the bus had to say, "Zilber, you are once more here and I said that I don't want to see you here. Go out from here." The last drop was a cable sending to [Ma?] Shazar."

Herbert A. Friedman: To Mr. Shazar the President of Israel?

[06:00]

Mary Zilber: Yes, yes -- for the festival of *Hanukkah* we sent a cable that we are -- that we hope the next festival to be in the country of our fathers and mothers. And, the cable was broadcasted in Marconi style, and we heard in Riga in the [ka-ge-be?] had also the cable.

Herbert A. Friedman: *Ka-ge-be* is K-G-B -- this is the Russian secret police.

Mary Zilber: Yes, and they heard the cable and we -- I mean, they didn't want to have such people like we in Riga.

Herbert A. Friedman: [laughs] Well, I'm glad they didn't, I'm glad you're here. Mr. Cherkess, did you ever have any experience with the KGB far out in Siberia?

Martin Cherkess: No, I hadn't experience with KGB, but I had enough experience with other instances with other governors [07:00] in Russia. I was eight months without work -- unemployment -- because I asked for permission to leave Russia.

Herbert A. Friedman: When did you ask for permission?

Martin Cherkess: My parents asked first in 1956.

Herbert A. Friedman: 1956? How come? I mean, why so long ago? Explain to me something of the background.

Martin Cherkess: See, my father is old Zionist, and the first possibility to ask because a year earlier, for asking permission

to leave Russia, you could become prison, but in 1956 you could ask for permission. You didn't become, but ask you could.

Herbert A. Friedman: You didn't receive permission.

Martin Cherkess: No.

Herbert A. Friedman: You could ask, but not receive.

Martin Cherkess: And, from 1956 [08:00] till 1964 they each year asked for permission. In 1964 I entered in the Novosibirsk State University and my father was afraid it would be not good for me if he would follow in asking the permission. Till 1971 he didn't ask. In 1971 we began to ask and I left my job.

Herbert A. Friedman: Now, you were eight months, you said, without work.

Martin Cherkess: Yes, without...

Herbert A. Friedman: What did you do in these eight months?

Martin Cherkess: Nothing.

Herbert A. Friedman: Nothing?

Martin Cherkess: I was waiting; I was asking.

Herbert A. Friedman: And then, one day you got the notice...

Martin Cherkess: We became an answer "no." In May 1971 we asked for permission, we became an answer "no" in July, and in November we came and answered "[kam?]" -- yes. [09:00]

Herbert A. Friedman: So, November of '71 you got your answer "kam," which means yes, and you are here now about five months.

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: All right. Are you glad to be here?

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: Yes, that's a very interesting answer. Is there something more behind the answer you want to tell?

Martin Cherkess: See, for me to be in Israel is the solving of my national problem.

Herbert A. Friedman: The solving of your...

Martin Cherkess: National problem.

Herbert A. Friedman: National problem, I see. Yes?

Martin Cherkess: And, therefore I think it isn't even good to ask this question, "Am I -- do I enjoy the life in Israel?" It is my love -- can't you ask from an American, "Do you enjoy life in America?" It is America -- it is his country.

Herbert A. Friedman: Yeah, it's true, but there are lots of Americans who would say to you they don't enjoy life in America today.

Martin Cherkess: OK, see, I enjoy.

Herbert A. Friedman: You enjoy. Listen, I think there are many Russian people -- Soviet Union immigrants who don't like life in Israel. [10:00] What do you think Mrs. Zilber? Are there some people who don't like it here yet? Didn't become adjusted yet?

Mary Zilber: No, I think that a lot of people are liking Israel. But, the first time is a very difficult time because it is difficult with the language, with the job, with the flat, but in the end, I mean, it will be good for every man who's coming to Israel. He has to try to do his best for this country -- it is his own country, and then he will good from the country.

Herbert A. Friedman: You sound like a very nice, good patriot. And, of course I agree with you.

Mary Zilber: It is my opinion!

Herbert A. Friedman: Yes -- listen, of course it correct. Every beginning is difficult. You were a chemist in wood -- [11:00] we don't have much wood in Israel.

Mary Zilber: No, and I have to change my job.

Herbert A. Friedman: So, what job are you going to do?

Mary Zilber: I am going to work in a milk factory.

Herbert A. Friedman: A milk factory -- that's very different...

Mary Zilber: And cheese factory!

Herbert A. Friedman: Milk and cheese -- that's very different from a wood chemist.

Mary Zilber: Yes, but it has nothing to do -- I didn't brought wood from Russia and it is impossible. I tried to do my best!

Herbert A. Friedman: You have a very healthy attitude. You are willing to change your job completely.

Mary Zilber: I have to work, and if it isn't a job like mine in Russia, I have to change my job.

Herbert A. Friedman: Tell me, do most of the people -- the Jewish people who come from Soviet Union -- do they feel the same way? Are they willing to go through some job retraining if

necessary?

Mary Zilber: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: Because you see, if so, then I think they will make [12:00] a very successful adjustment here because the country here wants them very much. If they can adjust to the conditions of life here, then it can be a very good situation.

Mary Zilber: There isn't another way -- it is the only way -- the only right way is to find a job -- far or no -- so far from the job in Russia.

Herbert A. Friedman: Martin, do you feel the same way? Are you going to have to go through some retraining or not?

Martin Cherkess: See, in my case it is the same for me, but I'm sure -- and I saw many people that are not the first time so...

Herbert A. Friedman: Happy?

Martin Cherkess: Happy. Because they came here -- it is an idea, see? And, if you see the idea in the life, it isn't the same as

an idea. And, many people can't translate the idea.

Herbert A. Friedman: Ideal -- you mean the ideal. [13:00]

Martin Cherkess: *Kam*, the ideal -- translate the ideal to the life.

Herbert A. Friedman: To reality, yes.

Martin Cherkess: To reality -- it is not so simple. And, therefore for -- and, you can find many hard problems. See, I'm a mathematician -- I have no problem with the work.

Herbert A. Friedman: You have no problem.

Martin Cherkess: No.

Herbert A. Friedman: As a mathematician, what are you going to do?

Martin Cherkess: I can do what I'm going to...

Herbert A. Friedman: Can you teach in the university?

Martin Cherkess: I can teach in university, I can teach in school, I have enough jobs in firms.

Herbert A. Friedman: Business firms.

Martin Cherkess: Yes, business firms: IBM and so on.

Herbert A. Friedman: IBM?

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: I see, I see. Well, for you then there will be no trouble. Do you have a family?

Martin Cherkess: Yes, I have. My family came with me -- it is my father, my mother, and my sister.

Herbert A. Friedman: Is this the father who was -- you told me he was a Zionist and he was arrested, he was in prison; where was he?

Martin Cherkess: In prison? He was -- I think he saw all of Siberia. [14:00]

Herbert A. Friedman: Siberia?

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: So, he came out; he's with you now, so he is safe.

Martin Cherkess: Yes, he is safe.

Herbert A. Friedman: And who else?

Martin Cherkess: My mother, and my sister. My sister is a student. She's now studying in the Jerusalem economics.

Herbert A. Friedman: Economics.

Martin Cherkess: Oh boy. This whole wave of immigration from Soviet Union is bringing to Israel now many, many talented people -- many intellectual people, and I think it's going to be wonderful for this country, and wonderful for you also. Now

look, when do you have to leave the *Ulpan* -- the *merkaz klita*, the absorption center?

Martin Cherkess: In two days. Two, three days.

Herbert A. Friedman: In two days? You are finished?

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: You had five months and you go out. Where are you going to live?

Martin Cherkess: My parents became a flat in Bnei Brak, which is a town near Tel Aviv, [15:00] and I am going to become a job in Jerusalem.

Herbert A. Friedman: Jerusalem. It's not far -- it's about one hour to travel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Martin Cherkess: On a car, yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: In a car, or even a bus or a [*shavout?*].

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: Mrs. Zilber, how long will you remain here in the absorption center?

Mary Zilber: Two or three weeks, but we are staying here in Kiryat Tiv'on -- my husband is working here like a physician and it is...

Herbert A. Friedman: You mean already? In three -- four months in the country he has a job as a physician?

Mary Zilber: Yes.

Herbert A. Friedman: Beautiful, that's very good. And, you like this little town?

Mary Zilber: Yes, very.

Herbert A. Friedman: It's very nice.

Mary Zilber: It's very nice. In my opinion it is the best place in the whole of Israel.

Herbert A. Friedman: Very good. Well, look now, here you are talking about two wonderful families with children, with professions, with education, and already in four or five months you've made your adjustment, and you are flexible, and you are [16:00] going to begin a new life -- OK. I would like to know if you have some word to say to the American audience of what help is required -- not for you, you've made your adjustment -- but what help is required from the Jews of America -- what do they have to do in order to keep this process going? Martin, supposing you give me your ideas.

Martin Cherkess: See I think, first of all, the American Jews helped us very much in the pressure of the Soviet government. Second, the American people can help us materially -- not us, but the Jews that are coming -- to help not the Jews, but to help Israel to solve the problem of *Aliyah*. *Aliyah* -- immigration to Israel -- is a very hard question for Israel, and it must be done the best [17:00] it is possible.

Herbert A. Friedman: Mary Zilber, you think that the Jews of America can help?

Mary Zilber: Yes, I think they can make the best the best of them. They can -- in the world opinion because now is the time when USSR is afraid from the world opinion. And, the second: Israel is a little and poor country. It isn't enough money for the great immigration, for the schools, for the *Ulpan*, for the houses, for the flats, and medical can help.

Herbert A. Friedman: I think that's a very good encouraging message. In other words, the word to the Jews of America, and to the non-Jewish friends as well is that the Jews of the Soviet Union want to get out. They can get out if we put enough pressure on. They need to be helped to be brought here to Israel. Israel needs help -- [18:00] money help -- in which to build houses and schools and all the facilities, and if everybody does his job, then you are telling me that the *Aliyah* -- the immigration of Jews from Soviet Union to Israel -- could be successful. Is that your last word?

Martin Cherkess: Yes.

Mary Zilber: Yes.

Martin Cherkess: I am sure you are right.

Herbert A. Friedman: OK, let me thank you both very, very much and I wish you both good luck and much success for the future. Thank you.

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