

Interviewed by Lucille Brown Schenectady, New York

1976

Visiting Union College in 1976, Roman Vishniac sat down with Lucille Brown to talk about his life as a Jewish child and young man in pre-World War I Russia. Vishniac is well known for his stunning photographs which captured Jewish life in Europe before and during World War II.

Lucille Brown: Would you be good enough to give me your name?

Roman Vishniac: Yes. It is the day, Monday, October 18, 1976. And I am Roman Vishniac, a Jew. Born in 1897.

LB: Where were you born?

RV: I was born in Pavlov, which is a little town close to St. Petersburg.

LB: So you were born in Russia, itself.

RV: In Russian, yes. And I stayed in Russia until I was twenty-three when I did escape from the Soviets.

LB: At that time, if I'm not mistaken, [Jews were not generally permitted](#) to live in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

RV: My grandfather lived in St. Petersburg and the father of my father lived in Moscow. Why did my grandfather have the permission to live in Moscow? That is a story by itself.

LB: I would like to hear that.

RV: Yes. It starts just one hundred years ago; a little more. In 1971.

LB: In 1871.

RV: In 1871. A terrible mistake that we often do. And once my check was returned from the bank and I was very upset and I called and I said, "I am told that my check is not paid. What is wrong about it?" And the man answered me: "It is impossible. If it were last year, it would be O.K. But if it is one hundred years, then it is not ethical." So finally I wrote another check. So. 1871. It was the following situation: The Russian population didn't buy manufactures because they, the peasants, produced it themselves. The only customers for this manufacturer were the Jews. And the Jews never bought from Russian manufacturers because they lived - we call it [Pale of Settlement](#)- or "Cherta Osledosti". There it was established, as the Americans don't remember, [by Caterina the Second](#). The great Caterina, who corresponded with [Diderot](#) and Diderot even asked her why she doesn't permit the Jews to come to St. Petersburg. It was a good time when the scientists came as men of other countries, took care of the terrible situation of the Jews in Russia. At this time the Jews bought all manufactures smuggled, without paying any taxes, customs, from Germany. And the reason was simple. The Germans spoke a language close to Yiddish. So the Jews could really speak with them. And the Germans spoke with the Jews and the Russians always regarded the Jews as something that are lower class, so the Jews never bought manufactures from the Russians. And it was a terrible situation for the manufacturer. And they asked the government to permit one hundred Jews, who would be middle men or salesmen, to come to Moscow. And after some deliberations, the government

permitted. And they decided that a better kind of Jew should be permitted to come to Moscow. The better kind of Jews, in the opinion of the government, was the Jews who were not dressed - we call it Hasidic dress - not dressed so it will be a reflection on the city of Moscow.

LB: This was 1871. It would be the reign of Alexander II, correct?

RV: It was [Alexander II](#), yes. The so-called Liberator who was executed in 1881. And this started all the [pogroms](#).

LB: Yes. Now we'll get back to this group of Jews coming into Moscow.

RV: Yes, so it was asked all the Jewish *kahals* - all kahals are the communities- to make a choice of better Jews. My grandfather was one of the best Jews, in the opinion of the Jews, because he was a great Talmudist. He was the author of books and my father saved his book and the book of my great grandfather, all very famous Talmudists, in Lithuanian part of Poland. It was [Slonim](#). And I don't know if he was a good salesman, a good middleman. But one hundred Jews were finally brought to Moscow and settled in the *Glebovskoye Podvorye*. This [Glebovskoye Podvorye](#) was a ghetto for the hundred Jews. My grandfather had a room together with [Visotsky](#), who later started the tea company. And it was very famous, very big tea company. The Jews lived their normal life by praying in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening. I am speaking always about Jews. And what is with Jewesses? What is with the family? Oh, this was something that they forgot. Their family was unimportant for the businessman and therefore the families stayed where they were.

LB: In Slonim?

RV: In Slonim. In any little townlets. I will translate, townlet. They stayed there. The children, the wives and the men were brought into this ghetto. The next morning prayer, [shacharit](#), a hundred Jews stood with their prayer shawls and in the same moment, somebody entered and shot and killed one Jew. Ninety-nine remained. When the judge asked the man who did it, "Why did you kill this Jew? Did he swindle something? You know, I know that the Jews are not to be trusted and presumably you lost some money." "Oh no", answered this man, who happened to be a Russian nobleman. "I don't deal with Jews, but Jews killed my God. Therefore it was my duty to kill one of them, and I did." So, finally he had to go for one year to the church every Sunday and to give to this church one hundred rubles. That was the punishment. By the way, in my youth, I was always fighting and a fighter for equality. And equality in our time means that the punishment for killing a Jew should be the same like the killing for a Gentile. It was always distinguished between a killer and a murderer. If you kill a Jew, you are a killer. If you killed a Gentile, you are a murderer. And that is a big difference.

LB: So this was your grandfather, you say, who came to Moscow.

RB: That was my grandfather, Wolf. It means Zev. The translation is Wolf. It was a symbol of strength. The Jews complained that they cannot live without their family. They cannot cook for themselves. So, two years later it was permitted to take families into the ghetto; into the “*Glebovskoye Podvorye*”, and my grandfather had ten children. So ten children and my grandmother Bella arrived in Moscow. I have the pictures of them in my book “Roman Vishniac”, published in Viking Press. I can show you.

LB: Is Vishniac a Lithuanian name? What is it?

RV: I don't know the meaning of this name because my grandfather didn't know when I asked him. The names were taken according to the law, the regulation of the government that [all Jews must have a family name](#). Usually, the Jews did not have a name, like in the Bible, the son of so and so. So they had to take some name.

LB: So this is your grandmother and your grandfather. And they're a handsome couple. You're lucky to have their pictures. This is you. You are a cutie. In Moscow, 1905. Tell me about the rest of your family - how things developed for them. There were ten children and a grandmother.

RV: These hundred Jews became the honorary citizens of Moscow. They could live with all their children and all generations with one rule: they had to pay one thousand rubles a year. These were the merchants of the first degree, the first guild. Most of them were unable for a time to pay the thousand rubles a year. So they lost their right and had to return. Because the ten children were interested, they all paid presumably a part, and this thousand rubles has been paid all the time until the [Czar - Nikolai the Second](#), who was one of the three worst anti-Semites who was at his power.

LB: What did your grandfather do? You say he was a merchant or a middleman. You say Visotsky started the tea business. Do you know what business?

RV: My grandfather remained a Talmudist and he did not have any kind of business. He couldn't do any business.

LB: Well, he had to live to eat, to support himself and his children.

RV: Yes. In the beginning there was my grandmother that did some work and then the children were active and took it over. So when I was born, my father was a *fabrikant*, that means an umbrella manufacturer. And he made a very big umbrella business - the biggest umbrella

business in Russia. My father had original ideas how to make an umbrella saleable. He got the metal parts from Germany. The taste he learned from Austria. For example, the umbrella had a little silk rose and this silk rose was a very good idea, because every woman had to have an umbrella with a silk rose. And he had two kinds of umbrellas. Umbrellas against the rain and umbrellas against the sun. So I was born into this umbrella business. This was in Moscow.

LB: Were they still living in the same ghetto?

RV: Oh, no. After some time, it was permitted to take other locations but my grandfather and three of his sons lived in the house that was later the most terrible house in Russia where, in the basement, the Bolsheviks made all the executions and the street then became an emblem-
[Lubyanka](#).

LB: They lived in the Lubyanka?

RV: They lived on the Lubyanka, yes, but it was in czarist time and the Lubyanka became in the Soviet time; in Lenin's time, after 1917. So the time when Vishniac lived in Moscow had some terrible happenings. It was the time of the [Kishinev pogrom](#). Or it was the time when suddenly in 1891 the mayor of Moscow, who was the uncle of Nikolai the Second, demanded that all Jews had to leave Moscow. And my family, the Vishniacs, because they paid the thousand rubles, they could stay. But it was terrible disaster for them. All (inaudible) of the Jews who were not paid. And my father told me how he went to the railroad station to bring some food for the uncle who was sitting several nights expecting deportation to the Pale of Settlement. And all the experiences, how the Jews have been arrested on the streets and in woods. How many Jews tried to sleep on the benches in the gardens. So the Jews had a difficult time in Nikolai the Second period and many have been sent to Siberia. It is practically without any changes. Today we have over two million in concentration camps and if we take the population rate of three per cent, which would be sixty thousand Jews, that will never come alive from the concentration camps. And this is called "[detente](#)". And this is the result of the "detente": it was only a million and a half (before), half a million have been added with detente.

LB: If we could go back to the earlier times... Your father was an umbrella manufacturer. Did I hear you say that your grandfather was living in St. Petersburg?

RV: When my mother had to become a mother, every woman had to go to her mother to get a child because the hospitals didn't exist and the only place where they had care and which was clean was mother's home. So my mother had to go to the "*dacha*" - it means to the summer cottage - and I was born in the summertime; in August. It was August 6. Today it is called August 19. It's the Julian and the Gregorian calendar and it changes every century one day more. So now I am celebrating on August 19 my birthday, and next year I will be eighty; I will celebrate it at [the wall in Jerusalem](#).

LB: That means that your mother's parents also had permission to live in Russia.

RV: In St. Petersburg. My grandfather was a diamond dealer and he made - he was connected with [Faberge](#). He made beautiful designs and he was able to sell, for example, an egg - a [diamond egg](#) to the Tzarina.

LB: And where were your maternal grandparents from? Where had they come from; also Lithuania?

RV: No, they were from the Hasidic side. They came from [Shklov](#), Mogilevsky Gubernya. In Yiddish it was called Mulev. And Minska Gubernya had four big cities: Minsk, Pinsk, Bobruisk and Vanisa(?)

LB: Minsk - that's White Russia you see on the map. So your paternal grandparents came from the Lithuanian section. They were [Mitnagdim](#).

RV: Yes. Yes.

LB: And your maternal grandparents came from here. Here's Minsk, here's Bobruisk, here's Pinsk. This is [White Russia](#).

RV: Right.

LB: And you say they were [Hasidim](#)?

RB: They all were Hasidim. My mother was Hasidic. My father was a Mitnagid. So it was a mixed marriage. A rare one, but it happened.

LB: Some of the Jews we interviewed said that, in White Russia, if the father had been a Hasid and had come from another town into a Mitnagid city, he changed. In order to marry into a Mitnagid family he changed from being a Hasid into a Mitnagid.

RV: I think he did not change. He just didn't carry the rules because it is not a change in Jewish...

LB: No, but these men expressed it as change.

RV: Change in their behavior, but it is not something like being baptized or something like this. You know, the Jews are not only Hasidim Jews, Mitnagdim Jews. It's usually said, if you have a minyon, ten men, you have eleven different opinions.

LB: You were born in Petersburg?

RV: Only born, because at the age of six weeks I was back in Moscow. So I was practically raised in Moscow and between Moscow and Petersburg was a big difference, at least literally and culturally, from the Russian style. But the regulations against the Jews, I never saw a Jewish sign in Jewish letters, as I saw in the Pale of Settlement. It was a very anti-semitic town.

LB: Which one? Moscow?

RV: All of these.

LB: Tell me something about the kind of house or apartment you lived in. Did you live in your own house?

RV: No, it was an apartment house. It was called (?) It means the street that goes from the main street. It is a side street. What I remember from the age of seven, we had a house with an elevator and it was a very fine, clean apartment. Nothing comparable with the shtetl. We went to the shtetl. We were most interested in life of the shtetl. We always discussed and we had a couch - a couch in our dining room that was always for the use by people who came from the shtetl and had no right to sleep or stay in Moscow. And because my father paid twenty-five rubles a month to the police officer, he always knew in advance when the search will be made. The same relations I had with the Nazis. I paid two-hundred marks to the Nazi Party and I knew when something is beginning, not only against me, but against the Jewish community. I could therefore inform the Jewish community. This was one of the main reasons why I stayed in Germany until the last day before the war started and I did not get information of the [Kristallnacht](#), November, 1938, because the Kristallnacht was decided from the high circles and they did not tell it to the police. This information I didn't get and I am sorry to say that I could not take one picture during the Kristallnacht because I was in Nazi uniform. But the Nazi professional photographers, they had in their hat their permit, so if I would take the picture I would immediately be arrested. I could not take these very important pictures. And I am very sad that I don't have the Kristallnacht.

LB: You say you were in Nazi uniform?

RV: In taking pictures, for example, of the burning books by the Nazis, I was in Nazi uniform. When I was exposed to such a situation, I had to be in Nazi uniform. But this was for the Kristallnacht not sufficient.

LB: They had their permits in their hats?

RV: This was cards...

LB: Oh, I see. In the hats. And you had no such permit.

RV: No. This was impossible to get.

LB: This was not local.

RV: I made many false papers in my life and I made them myself. I didn't dare to buy because I would be blackmailed later. But to get such permit, I was unable.

LB: Take me back again to your apartment in Moscow. How many rooms were there?

RV: There were five rooms.

LB: How many people? Were you the only child?

RV: No, I had a sister. She died here in America from cancer, like my mother also from cancer. We have been two children and then always people who came from the shtetl and who could stay only in our apartment.

LB: Basically, you were four people.

RV: Basically four people, but my father always brought from the synagogue soldiers, Jewish soldiers. So they stayed with us Saturday, Sunday. So on the weekend we always had, I would not say visitors, guests. But Jews, Jews.

LB: What was the language in your home?

RV: We spoke Russian and my father and mother spoke in Yiddish.

LB: The children spoke Russian?

RV: The children went to school and therefore they had to speak Russian. And I learned Yiddish only listening.

(Tape side ends and the following is picked up from an off tape conversation.)

RV: And now my dear wife is upset after a talk that she thinks is wonderful and I had a big applause and everything...

LB: I know it's terrible. It really is terrible.

RV: And sometimes I give talks from which I intend later to make books; to use them for book on photography. I was teaching philosophy of photography. I am teaching photography, not in how the things should be developed, printed, but what should be photographed. And my course in the University in Moscow last year that I gave was, "Photography: the Wings of Hope and Concern". That is more interesting. And nobody speaks and nobody teaches and when I have to judge a contest, the pictures are sharp, that's all I can say. But nothing, why did this photograph, a piece of a wall or an apartment, there are so many apartments and that's what the young people are doing.

LB: I know.

RV: Now, let's do our business.

LB: Right. We'll go back again. Your parents spoke Yiddish and you spoke Russian because you and your sister went to the Russian schools. Did your parents speak or know Russian? Did your father know Russian?

RV: Oh yes, because he was a manufacturer of umbrellas. He spoke Russian perfectly; German perfectly. He lived later in France, so he spoke French. And he started at the age of eighty to learn English. And he made some good progress in spite of this. Maybe I should also start to learn English and speak better.

LB: Now you're fishing for compliments.

RV: No, I know that not only my pronunciation - that I cannot change- but my language is poor. But in Russian I know every word and it is Russian that maybe [Solzhenitzyn](#) and even dissenters speak. The Russian people don't speak the classical Russian. They speak a pidgin Russian.

LB: That's what my mother says, from reading. Now you also told me that your parents' close friends were Jews.

RV: Only Jews. In Russia, the Jews were...on my passport it was written that I am not a Russian. That I am a Jew.

LB: According to what I've read, many of those Jews who were given permission to live in Moscow and Petersburg quickly became assimilated.

RV: Right.

LB: Did your parents become assimilated?

RV: No, they were Orthodox.

LB: They were Orthodox. How did they observe?

RV: Even I belong in New York to Orthodox synagogue. And the day before yesterday, [Shemini Atseres](#), we had the [Yizkor](#). So it was a very great man - not only a great rabbi - a great man, [Yaakov Mazeh](#). Yaakov Mazeh was famous. He established one Zionist organization, the [Hibat Tsiyon](#) movement. And he was fighting for reopening of the [Moscow synagogue](#) that was closed in 1891. Mazeh was a great man. And every time when he spoke I remember it was something out of this world. I watched the people, how later in Berlin I saw people under the influence of [Joachim Prinz](#). Yaakov Mazeh was involved in the [Beilis](#) "proces", if you know, in 1913. And this was a very interesting blood libel and I am the only one who knows all the details because I am the only one who read all the materials of the secret police of the Czar. From February to October, when the Bolsheviks came to power everything was closed because many Communists were before, members of the Secret Police of the Czar including our "Djugashvili", Stalin. And I received all the secret materials in February...

LB: What year?

RV: February 1917. February in Russian does not mean a month. February is the symbol of freedom. From March to October it was no Jewish... (phone rings interrupting conversation).

LB: "*Farshtests*"? (Do you understand?)

RV: I am returning to my grandfather. My grandfather was the patriarch of the family. And every...at first he had the shul in his apartment. This means that in the dining room was the shul and in the big drawer stood the two Torah scrolls. And the children, the grandchildren and many others, usually sixty, seventy people, especially on High Holidays. On Saturdays we had fifty people were praying there. It was always in private homes. The synagogue was not yet open. This was opened probably at the insistence of Mazeh. Rabbi Mazeh. And this was the Friday evening, all the children came and therefore one evening was grandfather's evening. What about other days? The other days everybody, all the children had a "jour fixe" and we had Thursday. Thursday was the day when I got chocolate because all the guests had chocolate and then cookies. Certainly Thursday was for me the day when I could stay one hour longer, before going to sleep. The discipline was very strong, but, as I said, it was not like in all the books about the shtetl. The exceptions, the strangeness of one or the other, the extremes are put as the features of the shtetl.

LB: As the norm, yes.

RV: And when I am reading the books, even the book that was the best seller with Margaret Mead, who is not Jewish, giving the introduction to it, all of these descriptions, I know about them. And my father, my mother spoke also laughing about this. But this was not the usual case. Neither in this time nor in the thirties. The shtetl that I photographed, that I observed, disappeared completely. Why? Because the historians of the thirties were all killed in the Holocaust and all the materials were burned, destroyed. And I had the friends, [Dubnov](#), [Balaban](#)...Dubnov was very often in my house and I was in Balaban's home. He told me of all this and I made some notes and they died in the concentration camps. I don't know if they were killed or they died from heart attack.

LB: Dubnov was already quite elderly when he died, wasn't he?

RV: Yes.

LB: But I don't know what his health was.

RV: Nobody's health was good in concentration camps.

LB: I mean before.

RV: When he visited me, he was in good health. I didn't see anything bad. I am now speaking that we had *jour fixe*, Thursday, and on all other days...

LB: *Jour fixe* means that people came to visit you on that day?

RV: Not people, but the brothers and sisters so the whole family was every day together. Every day. They played cards or they discussed politics, naturally. But it was never a dull moment, never boring. They were even not interested to go out. And then my mother made a revolution and one day was declared open for going into theater or concert. So this one day everybody could do what she wanted and not go to brother-in-law or to other brother. Everyone had a day and on this day, all the events were discussed. So this is typical for the shtetl. The shtetl that is a super family of Jews and therefore I miss very much when I read about the shtetl all the stories that are really only stories, but not daily life. Daily life was such a close relations. Naturally human beings are human beings. Sometimes it is jealousy, one has a little more than the other, but this was never so, in such a way dramatized as in the books that try to be more interesting. So my memories from my childhood is, and the great difference was that if somebody married into the family...in our family or in another Jewish family, he was not an in-law. He was a member of the family and he also came to this day and my feeling as a child was always that this

is close relative. Not somebody who is related in second or third degree. For example, when my son married, my “*mechutanim*” (in-laws), you know what it is, my “mechutanim”?, I saw once a year, once in three years, maybe in all the time, I saw them five or six times and he is in the same field, in the same area as I am, biologist. But it was an in-law. It was, again, this is the family, and these are the strangers. And in the Jewish case, even we helped with money, it was immediately after marriage, we became relatives. So we didn’t distinguish, this is not my first cousin, this is my second cousin. This didn’t exist. And this was also a feature - a very important feature in Jewish relations in the shtetl. This is something that you cannot find in any book and I am very sad about it. Because it is completely wrong impression, if (?) did not so, the shtetl would not survive. Because all this persecution, all the pogroms, they (?) and they built together. This unity of all Jews with the same interests.

LB: It was almost an encapsulated society. Is that correct?

RV: Yes. Right. In Hasidic, it was the rebbe who, if you have any problems... I have an interesting photograph when people are coming to ask a *kasha* from the rebbe.

LB: “*Rebbe, hast an eytse?*” (Rabbi, do you have any advice?) That’s my father’s favorite joke. I don’t know if you know it. He was losing his chickens, so he asked: “*Rebbe hast an eytse?*” And each time he would get another “*eytse*”. And finally, he came back for the fourth time and he said: “*Rebbe, has nuch an andere eytse?*” And the rebbe said: “*Yuh ich hab nuch an eytse. Hust nuch einer?*” (Yes, I have more advice. Do you have any more chickens?) Do you understand Yiddish?

RV: And how I understand! I understand it better than English.

LB: That’s my father’s joke. That’s his favorite.

RV: No, this one I did not know. Otherwise I know many, many Jewish jokes.

LB: You say your family was not assimilated. How did they relate to those Jews who were? Or was your family so large and so close that you didn’t even have to bother with those other Jews?

RV: No, we had friends - other Jews. But only Jewish friends.

LB: If your family was not assimilated, they continued the practice of their Judaism. There were other Jewish families in Moscow and Petersburg who became assimilated.

RV: Then they were not Jewish.

LB: They were considered not Jews.

RV: No, no, no. On the contrary. They immediately went into restaurants, they ordered ham and it was not only cut (?). In all the thousands of years, don't forget that everybody was Jewish. Is Jewish in some former generations. Who else could they be? Romans? Pagans? No, they were all Jews. And all the five-hundred million Catholics are also, from this point of view, they are Jews. Everybody, if he is not black, he is a Jew. All whites are Jews. But there are black Jews again. And therefore there are many more Jews. Jews are everywhere. No, we never had connections. A "[meshumid](#)" is somebody I never would give a hand.

LB: A meshumid?

RV: One who is baptized. That is something, especially to become a doctor, it was always better to be baptized. In the Russian-Japanese War, 1904, the Russian doctors didn't want to go to the front. So all the Jewish doctors were drafted and sent to the front. It was too dangerous. The Japanese had a better artillery than the Russian army. Now, to get a professorship, a Jew had to be baptized. But this conversion means complete cutting. We never had... we belonged to the shtetl. The shtetl in Moscow was no different than the shtetl in Berdichev or in Warsaw or in a small town in Krassilevka or in Molov. It was the shtetl. And I was... I had Russian... you see, in my class because it was a three percent norma, it was always one Jew. Thirty boys, one Jew, one Volga German and one Armenian, presumably. This was the normal situation. So I was always the only Jew in the class who had to fight. And I confessed in the class, when I entered, that I killed Jesus Christ. I did it.

LB: You had to confess it?

RV: Not I had to. But I had to defend myself against the thirty boys and defending was to take the belt and on the belt you had the metal part and this was your weapon. No other weapon existed in my time, so I was raised only with the belt. And I defended my Judaism with the belt.

LB: Did I hear you say that you also had to confess that you killed Jesus?

RV: I mean this is an expression. This is the guilt. Symbolic. I took the guilt.

LB: You didn't take it; they put it on you.

RV: Yes, they put it on me because they heard it. Not that the boys... You see, the children are becoming anti-Semitic because they hear at home always; not Ivrei, but [Zhid](#). So I was Zhid. And as soon as I heard the name of Zhid I had to take out my belt and defend Judaism, what I did while the Czar was alive. And then came the wonderful three months of freedom and then came the Bolsheviks who destroyed half of the shtetl in 1918. And the next was the Germans who,

from 1939 to 1945 killed six millions. The Russians, they did it another way, but not in a different way. Usually it is said that the Nazis killed six million and the Russians killed four million. Well, it is hard to count. In my family, over a hundred members died from the Nazis, from the Bolsheviks, from the Arabs. So it is evenly divided. And the future of Israel looks one day a little better and the other day a little worse and I don't know how much better is [Assad](#) with having in the background with soldiers and Saudi Arabia oil who can every time bring a new [embargo](#) up. How much better it is to be a neighbor than the [PLO](#). It is a very strange situation. And my cousin, Rubashov, who became a president of Israel under the name of [Zalman Shazar](#), he had a letter from Johnson who told in this letter - and he read me the letter - that the Jews had not to worry as long as I am president. Israel will have always better weapons than the Arabs. And this is a guarantee of peace because Israel will never start a war and the Arabs will not start if America gives good weapons and therefore [Kissinger](#) is considered by me to be a traitor, not only of Israel, but also of United States. Why should somebody be a traitor if he starts only to his former affiliation. He will be the same way the next affiliation. But it is always the power that decides. And this was said two and a half thousand years ago by the statesmen of Greece and it didn't change today. If somebody is powerful then the war will not start. One who is more powerful and if he is peaceful, then... And we have peace because we have China in the back of Russia, because the crop in Russia is poor and America must supply. As long as we have peace. So it is not so much my president who is keeping the peace with his detente situation. And the economic situation, as I am reading in the last three days, is becoming worse and worse everywhere. In France, in Italy, even in Great Britain. I remember the expression: "He is so solid as the Bank of England". The Bank of England was the most monumental financial power. No more.

LB: Let me take you back from the Bank of England to Beilis. We started on Beilis and you said that you knew things which apparently were not known. Could you tell me something about your knowledge of Beilis?

RV: Jews are not using human blood and even the animal blood. To make it kosher, meat must be made bloodless and he was very impressive. You know, the jury in America must decide unanimously. All twelve. In Russia, it was the majority that decided. And even if only half would say "yes", and the other "no", then you could not condemn this man. So he impressed. And you know probably, or maybe you don't know... I think nobody knows. I see someone who wrote, with very little information, a good book about the Beilis proces. But he didn't know the details. Six peasants said that Beilis is guilty and six said that he is not guilty. And these six that said that he is not guilty were mostly impressed by [Gruzenberg](#), the Jewish lawyer, who was later my close friend in Riga. And the peasants were especially chosen by the government to be uneducated because they thought that they will be persuaded easily to say that this is the case of blood libel. And Gruzenberg was the only Jewish lawyer among all the good Russian lawyers who were pro-Jewish. For example- [Kerensky](#) was not Jewish but he was much better than all

the other Jews. He defended the Jews in the [Duma](#) and he made the traveling to the places of the pogrom. So it is very strange that we have here a Jew, Kissinger, a non-Jew. Kerensky was a wonderful man, a great man. A great personality. And if Lenin would not have arrived maybe we would not have the Second World War. We would not have the six million holocaust. Everything would go another way. I don't believe that history is moving according to some prescription. Or that one personality - is it Napoleon or Alexander the Great- cannot change. In Russia I observed it. In France, in 1940 I observed it. That it is not something that is logically predictable. On the contrary, the events you cannot predict. Everything can happen everywhere and even, excuse me, here under our circumstances. I don't know - oil embargo or something else- we can have anti-Semitism. We can have everything the most terrible. We know what happened in Detroit when suddenly a mob started to... So what happened in Russia and what happened in Germany and happened in France... I know the pogroms in France. Usually nobody speaks about it. It is no good when things are politically silenced by force. I am in the New Columbia Encyclopedia. A very big article. I am between Vishinsky and Vishnu. Now about Vishnu it is correct and we part. I have the same part as Vishnu. I play the same role as Vishnu. But Vishinsky is not described in the most interesting... they just don't dare. I know, for example, that Vishinsky wanted just to jump out from the Soviets and remain in the west. And the Russians found it out so he was invited. He was poisoned, he died and in the next hour he was brought to the airport and brought to Russia not to give American doctors the possibility of the examination of his corpse. And that is again against the rule, because if something happened in New York it must come an American doctor. So in Russia, who cares, live in New York, not New York - who cares? And this is not mentioned also in this New Columbia Encyclopedia, that he was poisoned. I know it and certainly they could find it out. It's very simple to find it out. Many things politically dangerous are not being touched by any president. Even the Democratic presidents didn't touch. We have today in the detente and everything must proceed.

LB: This is also true of rabbis and so on. I mean rabbis don't tell the congregation everything they should know or that there is to know about a religion because it seems as if it's easier to maintain control by keeping some things quiet. It's not only true of political leaders. It's true of parents, it's true of spiritual leaders, it's true of anyone who is in charge of anything.

RV: But it is true that the whole truth is very seldom said. That is true. The whole truth, if you swear that you tell the whole truth... but you do not say the whole truth.

LB: But back to Beilis, to finish. What convinced those six peasants? How did Beilis get off if it was six to six?

RV: Six to six means he must be freed. You had to have the majority. You had to have seven against five. And very interesting, I read how the judge was fighting and again calling the

peasants and again explaining and demanding and threatening and he wanted to have one change his mind. But these six remained strong.

LB: So your deduction from that would be that there would have been huge pogroms before the First World War if Beilis had been found guilty?

RV: Correct. I mentioned yesterday that the Christian wafer, that is becoming that he brought the destruction of whole communities because all of these people...

When I was in Kabala, I have one slide that I photographed from the original in my possession. I have very important and interesting books, books that are unique, that shows this holy [Simon](#) which was the boy in Trent that was cut open and his blood was used for making of *matzohs*.

LB: What year was this?

RV: 1475 in Italy, in Trent. And this was a very interesting event and I have in the picture all the men who confessed under the torture of the Inquisition: Mr. Meyer, Mr. Seligman. All the names and one woman around. You know, presumably, that several years ago, the holy Simon - this child- was declared not to be holy anymore because it was in the Vatican materials found that he never existed. Not that he died another way, but that he never existed. But this child did exist and he was killed by the thieves, but the murderers because they were paid for it. And on the other side they were a little afraid of this child.

LB: Who is this now that we are talking about?

RV: We are going back to the Beilis. And I speak how the little child was killed. And he played with the son of this terrible woman, [Mrs. Yushchinsky](#). He played and he went into the basement of the house. And in the basement was stored everything that was stolen. And he asked: "How did these things come?" And in this moment they found out that the boy is in the basement and seeing so he had to be killed. And this was immediately taken by the government and even by the Minister of Justice. The Minister of Justice promised to the Czar that he will prove the Jewish guilt. And this was as late as 1913 when I was sixteen and I was standing with Father in the court of the [Russkiye Vedomosti](#), Russian News, a liberal paper that always brought big signs with latest events. And we awaited this decision. And I remember how Father cried and was excited because we expected a very big pogrom in case Beilis will be guilty. And Father tried to call Mother, but it was impossible to get a driver. A *droshtky* was impossible because everybody rushed. All the Jews of Moscow were so excited. So we had to run home and to tell the good news but we came too late. Mother knew already. So, these are some pleasant... and this was just the year before the war.

LB: Do you want to tell me something of your usual life before the war? What kind of school did you go to?

RV: You see, it was necessary to do something to get the Jewish boy in Moscow into a school. It was impossible just to be a good scholar. You had to give some money. So my father gave some money for the school and it was not a bribery to a person, but just for support of the private school; it was a real gymnasium. Real gymnasium means a school where they use more teaching of mathematics, language and biology and it was no Latin, because at this time Latin was not considered as being so important as the new languages. So I was in this school of (?). It was a very famous school. It was called before, the school of Fiedler and in time of revolution, 1905, the revolutionaries were in this school, so finally I became... First, suddenly it became a political spring. And Schneerson was permitted to open a Jewish school. You heard about it? No.

LB: I've heard the name. Certainly. And I know that he was permitted to open a Jewish school.

RV: Oh and Mazeh was a teacher in this school. But this school was only one year. They opened this one class for the ten year olds and then they were promised every year, add another class but the next year was no springtime, immediately came winter time...

LB: What year was that?

RV: I was ten in 1907, so at the age of ten I was in the first class. We didn't have the nursery schools. Then the next year I didn't have a school and finally my father paid money. I think it was two thousand rubles to the school and I was accepted in the school. And I became immediately the first. It was absolutely necessary. My parents told me that you must finish with gold medal then you will be permitted to enter in the university and then the world will be open to you. So I studied even at this age, until three o'clock in the morning, which was very sad for my mother. But I had to learn...

LB: It was sad for your mother?

RV: That I had to go to bed until three o'clock at night. But she wanted me to go into the university. So I learned. I learned the hard way and I learned to learn and this is always very important. I learned many unnecessary things; completely unnecessary that I am trying to forget. Very difficult, but when I finished this school, nothing helped me because a new - this was in Russian called Minister of Enlightenment, education enlightenment: *Procescheniia*. Minister of Procheschenniaa, Enlightenment. Proschenniaa means in Russian to make light, introduce light into education. His name was Black, Schwartz. And he said: What are we doing? We are raising the greatest competition. We are making all the Jews into scholars. And then all our doctors, our lawyers will have the Jewish competition. So, this being the best, I didn't get a gold medal but I got a slip of paper that I have the right to buy myself a gold medal. I never used this

right. Maybe I will do it today. I didn't get the gold medal. I got many medals. I have a collection of medals but they are bronze. In America you are not getting... or maybe some commercials are giving gold medals. I have very nice bronze medals but not gold medals. So when I received my right to get to buy the gold medal, I could not enter the university because it was a lottery. A lottery, all Jews; that was the rule what helped the government to give not so good students into the university. Just by lottery.

LB: What year was this?

RV: This was just before the war. And I was again not in the university and I was very upset by this and my parents and again with the help of money, I entered an Institute in Moscow with the best professors. It was called *Kommercheski Institut*. It had nothing to do with commercial values. One faculty was Jura, and I got this Jura, but a Tsarist Jura, with which you cannot do too much today. And then the other was the technical division in which you learned so many other things. And on the Jura, we learned the international law and then the idea of the law. So I became the docent in political science. This was the political science and because I was interested in other things, I was simultaneously listening to lectures that I was not necessarily... but I was... and then I was in other universities, at the same time. So I rushed from the University of [Shanyavsky](#) that existed from 1913 to 1920 and to the New York University where I got...

LB: New York University? No.

RV: Oh, Moscow University, where I got an entrance ticket.

LB: Oh, you did. And so there were three, Shanyavsky, Moscow and then your institute, Kommercheski Institut?

RV: Kommercheski Institut. So I was learning, at this time, biology and then the law, or *prava*, which is political science and these were my interests in addition to photography and art.

LB: You haven't mentioned anything about *cheder* or Hebrew education or anything of that sort. Did you receive any of this?

RV: Yes. When I was Bar Mitzvah I had to give a [drasha](#). Drasha, at this time, not only in Moscow but in all the synagogues, the boy had to give a thirty minute talk by heart. I still remember. I cannot forget it. It was written by the teachers and I had only to know it by heart.

LB: If you were going to this...

RV: I was not going to any other schools.

LB: You were tutored?

RV: Yes, by a teacher who came to us.

LB: So you would go to this gymnasium...

RB: A cheder did not exist in the city. In Moscow didn't exist neither a Yeshiva nor a cheder. They would never permit anything of this kind. Mazeh tried everything, but it was only in the gymnasium of Schneerson, where he was teaching. But he was teaching more Jewish ideology, not just the Torah; therefore I excluded completely, this part.

LB: From your education?

RV: No, I mean I had the education by the teacher, but the teacher came to me. I was never in a cheder, a Yeshiva...

LB: In a formal situation.

RV: In a formal situation.

LB: Could you read Hebrew?

RV: By heart. You see, it was not Hebrew, it was *Loshen Kodesh*.

LB: The Holy Language.

RV: The holy language was more for praying. I know by heart the prayer. When I am in Israel, I speak English. I cannot speak Hebrew. I can speak Yiddish, but Yiddish is not too popular in Israel. So I speak English. It's better English than Yiddish.

LB: Is that right?

RV: In Israel.

LB: Yiddish is the language of the [*Galut*](#).

RV: Israel is becoming now better, tolerant. But still in all schools, they teach at first Hebrew and much later English, but they never teach in the school Yiddish because they feel it is not

necessary if we have Hebrew to teach... If somebody is interested to read, there are many authors who wrote Yiddish who later were writing in Hebrew. Many writers. Bialik. I know that Sholem Aleichem was unable to write Hebrew. I knew them all. I knew them all but I was a younger generation than the famous writers, so I spoke with them and they didn't speak too serious to me.

LB: When you were attending these three different universities, interested in biology as you say, in photography and political science. Were you at all politically inclined at this time?

RV: Yes, very much so.

LB: In what direction?

RV: We met clandestinely. For example, we are meeting; here is the house where we meet, so we walked around to look and one would walk into the door and then a couple of minutes later another young man would walk into the door. Because everything was observed.

LB: What party was this? Was this a party or like a "kruzhok" (circle)? Or what?

RV: This was a Jewish liberal movement that belonged into the interests of two parties. One was the Social Democratic and the other was more interested in the life of the peasants because it was more peasants.

LB: [*Narodnaya Volya*](#)?

RV: The Social Revolutionary Party of Kerensky. So we heard lectures of boys who were seven, eight years older than we were and most of them died in Siberia. Some died by the Czar, some died by the Bolsheviks. And I was a revolutionary. My interests were more to the Kerensky side. The other was [Martov](#). That was the leader...

LB: Was Martov in your group?

RV: No, Martov was in the other group. Martov was the leader of the Social Democrats. And later, in New York, I became very closely associated with the son in law of Martov. Abramovich. Abramovich was a very close friend of mine and this was 1941, 1942 when he wanted to publish a book with Jewish photographs. It was the time of the great assimilation in America. It was the time when the Jews tried to destroy all memory of the shtetl. And I was even offered money for the negatives. They wanted to destroy my negatives.

LB: Who offered you the money?

RV: I refuse to answer this question. But, sorry to say, these are Jews. Jews. My Jewish experiences are not always good. I met Jewish mafia who were much worse than the Mafia and when I told it to my friend, Joachim Prinz, he told me, sorry to say it is so. He is and was here a rabbi in Reform in New Jersey. In Berlin, Reform didn't exist. It was called the Jewish synagogue. And I am now speaking about Joachim Prinz. He was a hero in our eyes. He was. He was the only man, not only Jew or rabbi, who spoke openly, frankly against the Nazism in the most dangerous years.

LB: You were a revolutionary in your teens in Russia with the Socialist Revolutionary party. And was it this that landed you in prison?

RV: I was speaking as a soldier, because I was drafted in 1916. I was speaking openly against the war and this brought me into prison and to the death sentence.

LB: But actually Kerensky's party was for continuing the war. It was Lenin who wanted to stop the war.

RV: Right.

LB: How come you were...?

RV: In Czarist times it was enough to speak, for a Jew, against the war.

LB: Oh, 1916 was still before the revolution. That's right.

RV: And Kerensky was not continue the war. He was forced by the [Allies](#) to continue the war. It was not his opinion and not his wish. But he was forced by the Allies.

LB: In 1916, you were in the army and you spoke out against the war. Was your father at all interested in politics? Was he a political man?

RV: Yes. He belonged to the party that was called "*Kadetii*". The was the *Konstitutsioni Demokrati Partii*. But he could not resist and refuse to his nephews who published illegal literature to give a room where this literature was secretly hidden and he was in trouble with the police when they came once without telling in advance. But this is a short moment. He was not politically in the Revolutionary or a Social Democrat. He was the same thing, I will say, he was the Democratic Party in the United States.

LB: How did your life proceed once Kerensky's government, as we say here, once that government was in power, how did your personal life proceed in politics?

RV: I want to say something. One thing that I am thinking, remembering. When I was sentenced to death, my father succeeded to get it, or he thought that he succeeded by giving all, everything that he had, I think it was 50,000 rubles, to cancel this death sentence. The money was taken away but he was just in the hands of some blackmailers. So I remember, when I was in prison, something very unexpectedly happened. I saw my mother in my cell, in a very fine fur coat. She tried every day to bribe the guards, they should let her in. And one day she succeeded when she didn't expect, she was in her best fur coat and in this condition, to see my mother, in a fur coat, was very important for me. It gave me a simulation, the danger is not so big, mother is even visiting me. And I decided for some time to fool my parents and I wrote them with a man, who left the prison, a note, that everything is in order and that I will be released. And I was very happy that I succeeded to send this note. They, I knew, took it much more serious than I. And for a man of twenty to die is not a big tragedy. It is not a big tragedy. Like for [my son, who risked his life at the age of fifty](#), he was a hero for science. And I was for political reasons, always. For example, [Eisenstein](#) was of the opinion that art is above all and he sacrificed his political motives just to work for the Bolsheviks. For me, freedom was above all. And after I saw that I am fooling my parents, came the day when I was led to the station and it was early morning, six o'clock in the morning, February. And the sun was rising and I saw the sun reflected from the rails of the electric tramway in Moscow. And suddenly on the corner, on the corner of the street, stood always around it, stop a stone.

LB: Like the one in that photograph, you mean? That big stone that was leaning against the building? That was in Poland.

RV: No. On the corner in Moscow, for the vehicles they should not damage or come close to... it was called *tumba* (curbstone).

LB: Tumba?

RV: Tumba. And suddenly I saw on the corner on the tumba my father sitting there. So I understood that I did not fool them. On the contrary, they knew more than I did. So I wanted to signal him that everything is all right, O.K. and I started to dance. And I saw suddenly that my father was crying and weeping.

LB: Crying! Oh!

RV: So this was the very strong memory that came this moment to me, and I understood that I didn't fool my father.

LB: Oh, children are so thoughtless. I would have wept myself.

RV: Yes. And we had always very close relations and in my dreams I always see him and my mother at the age of eighty. Presumably, I remember him so well; he is always alive in my dreams. I am always astonished because I am counting how old he must be. How could he be alive? These are always the dreams that repeat and repeat and repeat. I never dream of naked women or erotic something, that Freud, the father of my friend. I knew the son of Freud. I never had sexual dreams. I will not say that I'm abnormal, but in dreams - no! In fact it's something different. But never in dreams. In dreams I was always with the members of my family.

LB: Oh, your poor father.

RV: And then my children, lately my son. I see my son falling and crying: "Father! Help me!" Difficult dreams. And valium doesn't help. So, to lose a son - it's difficult, very difficult.

LB: That's right. And that's how your father felt, sitting on the tumba.

RV: He was sitting on the tumba. Yes, you pronounced it so wonderful that I...tumba, yes. So I could not fool him and then came February and the door opened and this was again miraculous. I had these several miraculous feelings. Sometimes something happened to me that could not happen. It was supernatural. The first time, when I visited Israel, I went down the staircase and I said a prayer. A prayer that I did not know, but I said it. Somebody, somebody, a *maggid*, my grandfather who always spoke "*a shana haba'a vyerushalaim*", that they these are the genes as a biologist I can say that I inherited, including the prayers that I did not know.

LB: Incidentally, just as an aside, when my youngest daughter was in Israel, this summer - she was there for six months - she said the thing that annoyed her was that when she went to Jerusalem, the women were not allowed to go down and this was very annoying to her. The women could not descend by the Wall.

RV: Oh, by the wall. No, I speak when I descended from the plane.

LB: Oh, from the plane. Oh. I understand.

RV: No, the women - it is divided. The left part...

LB: Yes, but she was annoyed. She felt it should be the same.

RV: But on the other side, yesterday, when the rabbi made the brucha (blessing) I put my cap on and when I am showing the pictures of the death of the six millions, I always, *Kaddishim*, I have to care for that. This is tradition. It's something that I just couldn't do it. And saying the *brucha* when we go in our country house, the nearest synagogue is (?) Park, and it is a Reform

synagogue... No, it is a Conservative. It is a Conservative. But we sit together, I'm sitting with my wife, who is enjoying it always because she sees where we are. And when she is in Moriah Orthodox in New York, she is in the other department and the women don't know and either they go to the *rebbitzin* (wife of the rabbi) and she doesn't want to go to the *rebbitzin*, she doesn't know where she is. But I can come to her. She cannot come to me but I can come to her. So before the [Nesanah Tokef](#), in the Musaf, you know the Nesanah Tokef?

LB: No, that I don't know.

RV: Nesanah Tokef is: and now is the time when the decision is being taken, who should remain alive and who should die. So when in the Nesanah Tokef or in the big important pieces in the prayer, I am coming always to her and showing and I am very happy if I hear that here is just where we are and our rabbi speaks Yiddish. So when he is speaking or praying it is ceremonial. But if he gives a speech it is Yiddish. And she understands Yiddish but not the American Yiddish. She understands the Yiddish of my father. The German Yiddish. There are several. American Yiddish is American expression, English expression.

LB: I want to get you back... How did you get through the Kerensky and the Bolshevik period? You must have survived it? How did you survive it? You know, we've been talking two hours almost. Is that too long?

RV: No.

LB: Because I can stay until it's time for lunch.

RV: I had eight hours continuous talk. The most amazing is not that I could speak eight hours but that my listeners could stay. In America they are not used... after forty minutes I see that they are tired. So this was I think in Pennsylvania, eight hours I spoke.

LB: Come back to Russia.

RV: Now, let's come to Russia. In time of Kerensky was the time of freedom for the Jews. Complete freedom, complete equality. All those against the Jews, I think it was March 27 was the date where Knazh Lvov made the declaration that all the minorities are equal in Russia and all religions are permitted. This date until the October Revolution, October 1917. In time of October Revolution I had a gun and among my closest group, twenty eight fell. Twenty eight died and we were not permitted to bury them in Moscow. We had to go thirty versts which was about twenty miles, to carry their corpses on our shoulders.

LB: Were most of these boys Jewish? Or were they all Jewish?

RV: No, half of them were Jewish. The Jews were more interested and among the Communists were very few Jews. So I remember the speech of the mayor of Moscow from the Socialist time, and he said that we'll not forget the dead ones. Then came the triumph of the Communists, that was illustrated by Eisenstein. I feel that this was a political treason, everything but he did some. We parted. I mean artistically, I am completely of his opinion, and when I am teaching cinematography I always start with showing his [Potemkin](#) film or anything. I feel that he is the greatest. But in addition to art and artists, we must fight for freedom and equality. This is more important, I feel, than making films. But this is my private opinion. We had a demonstration. I think it was November 2 and this demonstration was defense of the *Uchelditenyi sobraniye*. I could translate to give the Constitution.

LB: It's like a [juridical](#) group?

RV: Not the whole group...

LB: *Uchelditenyi Sobraniye*

RV: *Sobraniye*, it means we spoke about the Parliament. And we had at this time, and this was, I think, even the end of October, we had to vote. And the election gave 98 percent to both parties. We both were together. The party of Martov and the party of Kerensky.

LB: Which year? This is after the October Revolution?

RV: That was during the October Revolution. We had the election and the Socialists won by 98 per cent and the Communists got less than two per cent. And the next day they took the power. And then it was a demonstration, one big demonstration and the Communists had machine gun fire just against our group and I was holding the banner. All Power to the People's Parliament. And suddenly, from the sides, from the court of the third gymnasium was another machine gun fire and we were crossed here. So the people around me were killed and I fell peeping under the corpse. Then in the '60s I met in one house a woman, who was also in this demonstration. And she spoke about these minutes. And she said that she was walking close to the man who was carrying the banner and she saw how he was killed. And I told her, he was not killed. That's a mistake. And she became angry and told me: "How can you tell me? I was present there." I said, "Woman, look at me." She looked and fainted.

LB: Really? Is that true? Oh, that's funny.

RV: You cannot come to such a thing. She recognized that I sometimes say he because in Hebrew, he is she. So when I am excited, when I wanted to say she, I said he.

LB: But it didn't matter with your demonstrations and your banners. The Communists took over anyway. The Bolsheviks, Right?

RV: When the students demonstrated in all the universities, Lenin gave the order, "Dispose of them." So twenty-two thousand were killed.

LB: You mentioned this last night (at a public lecture). I don't think I know about this.

RV: This is ... Americans don't know it.

LB: Would you mind telling me?

RV: When all my friends and cousins were being killed, I decided that the only place for me to be safe is the Red Army. So I rushed to the *casarne* (barracks) and said that I want to serve in the Red Front. And I became a [Red Guardist](#).

LB: How old were you then? About seventeen?

RV: I was twenty.

LB: Twenty. Right. 1917.

RV: But this was in 1918 so I was twenty one. So what I did, I was in the army and by buying vodka, giving it to the officer he gave me time so that I could go into the university and study and to work.

LB: While you were in the Red Guard.

RV: It was the Red Army. The Red Army and at the same time I could attend all the lectures. And it was not too bad organization because I was in uniform and then I took the uniform off. I took the suit civil and at night I was sleeping in the *casarne* and in the day-time I could work. But one dirty person didn't want to give the officer vodka because it was very expensive at this time, so he gave *sivukha*, means methyl alcohol. So he drunk and he was blind and then he died.

LB: Yes, that's what we call here rubbing alcohol.

RV: Yes, but rubbing alcohol is diluted. *Sivukha* is methyl alcohol and he died. So we had another officer with whom it was so bad that I had to desert. I became a deserter. I was two

times a deserter and then I became again a Red Army soldier. Every time was the manifesto published that if I return and, I don't know if I may say repent, this is something that is...

LB: There would be an amnesty. All would be forgiven.

RV: Forgiven. So I got my forgiveness, but the third time when I deserted I could not repent and ask for forgiveness. So I had to go out.

LB: What year was that?

RV: This was 1920.

LB: What happened to your parents in the meantime? Because your father was a well to do man?

RV: I moved them through the help of a man who became later very famous in America. A young man came to me and he said, "I know that you want to take your parents over the border. Parents and sister. Over the frontier. I can do it. And I can give you recommendations that I am an honorable and honest man. And you pay me only the trip to America." He did it. He came to America.

LB: Where did he bring your parents? To where?

RV: Over the border to Kiev.

LB: What border? You mean from Russia into the Ukraine, then.

RV: Ukraine. Yes.

LB: I thought maybe the western border into Germany or Poland or something like that.

RV: It was to Kiev. And he came to Los Angeles and he went to Hollywood and he became a very famous man. His name was Grischa Ratoff.

LB: [Gregory Ratoff](#)! Ah!

RV: Gregory Ratoff.

LB: Yes, I know. I remember him. Surely I've seen him in the movies. So what was he? A Russian Jew?

RV: He was a Russian Jew who saved my parents and I gave him the position in Los Angeles.

LB: But after all, Kiev was not so safe during the Civil war, was it? How did your parents manage? There was trouble in the Ukraine too.

RV: It takes much too long. But I have only to tell you a few words how I feel. I made many mistakes in my life. Many mistakes. And one of them was that I thought that the Allies, British and America, will never permit Lenin to stay in power, that they will finish him. And I visited my parents in Kiev, from Moscow. The trip took one month. One month. Sometimes I had to walk through forests. Sometimes I went through anti-Semitic armies. One is called [Ataman](#) and everyone had to undress to see if he is circumcised. But this is a long story of my experiences. One thing I wanted to tell; I wanted to have a seder with my parents.

LB: In Kiev.

RV: In Kiev. And to eat, everything was *Pesachdicher*. It took me over a month, the trip from Moscow to Kiev, and I thought as my father is the founder of [ORT](#), I will ask a Jew where is here ORT. And then I will find my father there. But where I went down the stairs from my car, the last piece of the trip I made in a railroad car because it was already in Denikin's hands. So it was a real railroad. And I went the stairs down, my father stood again, at the station. And he said, "You are always late for Seder."

LB: (Laughter) That's funny. How late were you? Was it days, or a week, or hours?

RV: Ten minutes before sundown.

LB: Oh, you mean you did get there in time for Pesach? Oh that is very funny.

RV: And my father went to the railroad station because for Seder he will tell me "Who will ask the four Kashas?" I wanted to tell it again. You know, suddenly you remember it, arriving and my experiences with my parents were very strong. Very strong. All the details...

I had a wonderful Pesach and after Pesach I had to go back to Moscow. And Mother told me that she didn't want to give me too much food. This can be dangerous. But if I will take two pounds of sugar, I will not be called *despikulant* and a *kulak* and I will not be arrested. But when I returned to Moscow, and the two pounds of sugar were found, I was immediately arrested. At this time, I was in uniform already, again, and I had all my papers. But they told me that they will call my division and ask. And I didn't like this idea because I knew I was a month away and anyway I was not good in the army. So I decided that I must escape.

LB: Was this the third time now, or the second?

RV: This was the third. And this was very dangerous.

LB: What year was this?

RV: We are now coming to 1919. And here I decided just to jump from the second floor.

LB: Oh, you mentioned that.

RV: And it depends on what is there. If there is a hard object there, it's no good. So you can just say *Shema Israel* and jump. And God's help was there. The soft ground was sand. And I couldn't know. I couldn't see what was there. It was night. Now or never.

LB: Where did you go when you left? Did you leave Russia then? What did you do then when you deserted the third time?

RV: The third time I went to another army center. It was militia and it was possible- you had to be very imaginative. There were possibilities and you had to take the risk or else. But I took the risk in Russia, I took the risk with the Nazis, I took the risk with the Vichy government, when I escaped each time. I could not take my earthly possessions with me, but I took my life with me.

LB: What you call imaginativeness- where does it come from?

RV: Oh, this comes from the Talmud.

LB: No. You think so?

RV: Oh. I know.

LB: From the study of the Talmud.

RV: From the study of the Talmud and the Kabbalah. You cannot... if you read Kabbalah, you see that it is full of unbelievable imagination.

LB: I mean for an individual.

RV: An individual is inherited the genes of this kabbalah, we can inherit nose, chin, all features. You know the Bourbons, all this. Why not the psychological? These are the genes.

LB: Some people could get themselves out of almost any corner. And others died.

RV: My father... Something very unusual happened that I wanted to mention. I was in that relation with my cousin who died now, a month and a half ago. He was the editor, the vice editor of Time magazine: [Mark Vishniac](#). He died in the nursing home. He didn't want to see me last month. He was angry with me. Something very, almost funny. When my grandfather Wolf decided that his time to die is coming, he went to this (?) and my mother told the story how it was. It was 1908. I was eleven years old. Somebody rang the bell at the black door. You know what means the black door? Every apartment has two doors, for the guests, for the family and for the *dvornik* - the doorman and the maid. They went through the black door. Somebody rang at the black door and mother opens the door and she almost fainted. Who stood? Grandfather Wolf. Grandfather Wolf, who never came to us, never. We always went to his. He never went to anybody. And my mother said:
"What is it? At the black door?"
"Yes. I found your black door. I didn't want anybody to see me, so I used the black door."
"What can I do for you?"
"I want to have Roman, the little Roman. I decided that he will inherit all my..." (And this is something that you cannot understand - not my possessions, physical, but my spiritual attributes).
"I want to bless him."
And he put his hands and he gave me the great blessing. This is the great blessing.

My father gave the great blessing; he was brought to me when he was dying in the hospital. He gave me the great blessing. He went. I didn't understand what's happening here and it would be the best if my mother would keep her mouth shut. How could she? So, my cousin, my oldest cousin, who was thirteen or fourteen years older than I am, twenty one, and he was extremely gifted and at this time almost recognized very much. He always repeated, "And me?" He could not forgive it. Neither to grandfather. He wrote a book that is now translated into English and Russian and he speaks very derogatively of my grandfather Wolf.

LB: He wrote it in Russian?

RV: In Russian and it's published in New York and he spoke derogatively about grandfather. He didn't mention me but he didn't like grandfather. And I gave the name of my grandfather to my son and presumably... he died, my son, he had a son and his son will be also Wolf and I go to [his grave](#) every three years to clean the grave and and in my lectures I am trying to give (?) this Jewish guilt. And my mother taught: today you are a silly boy. When you will be in this old age, you will be wise. But don't forget- it's not your wisdom. It's grandfather Wolf in you.

LB: What is the Russian name for this door? *Chernyi dver*? No.

RV: Black door.

LB: How do you say it in Russian?

RV: This is *Belaya dver* and this is *chernaya dver*.

LB: That's what I said. *Chernyi dver*. I never heard that. In an apartment then there would be two doors?

RV: Always, two doors. Always two doors.

LB: So who would use the white one?

RV: Even in our apartment in New York, there is a black door and there is a white door.

LB: In two different places?

RV: In two different places.

LB: I never knew that.

RV: We have the two doors. One for our guests the other for us. The black door leads into the kitchen and the white door, you are immediately with the great paintings of the eleventh century. This is how our apartment in New York is being arranged.

LB: I never heard that.

RV: We had the same in our country house. The black door leads into the kitchen and the white door leads into the best room.

LB: Do you read [Saul Bellow](#)?

RV: At first I read him in the New Yorker. Now he has the books that I didn't buy yet, but I will buy as soon as I will return to New York about Israel.

LB: I'm talking about the last novel he published, Humboldt's Gift. No?

RV: No.

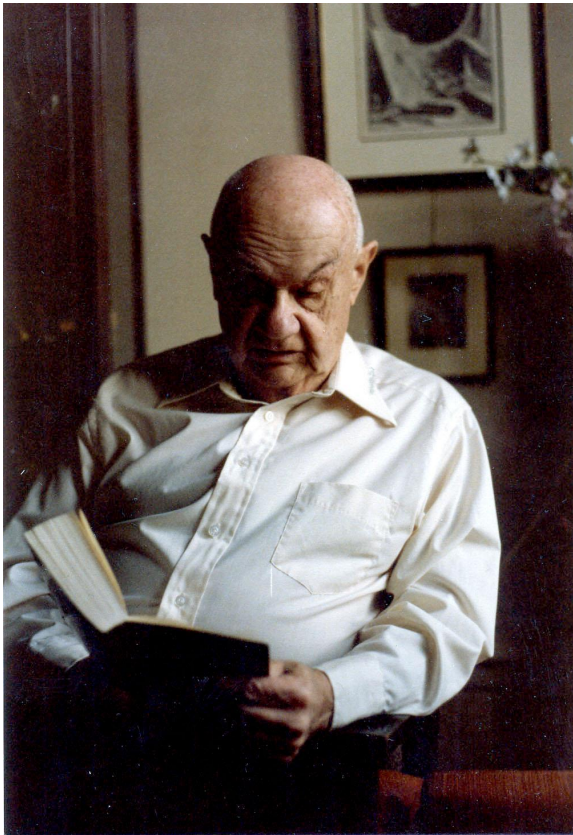
LB: In that he deals with life after death, in a sense. And how one person's personality comes from the dead into the living. It was a most interesting book. He's a very gifted man.

RV: I see. I will read him.

LB: Yes, maybe, if you have time. Now do you want to stop or shall I think of more...?

RV: I think we can stop.

LB: All right. And I thank you very much.



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