EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH GALINA VEREMKROIT (formally NIZHNIKOV)

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Interviewer

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TRANSCRIPT

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Heininger: This is an interview with Galina Veremkroit on February 17, 2009, in Arlington, Massachusetts. Where were you born?

Veremkroit: I was born in Moscow in 1940. My parents came from a little village near Odessa. They moved to Moscow, and my father built a house in the center of the city, which was very unusual. We lived in the house, on the second floor. Almost nobody in Russia had this luxury. But we didn't have running water in the house. We had to get water from outside. It came from a well. I even had my own room, and we had a garden. My father was a very big gardener, a lover of the earth, so he grew a lot of vegetables and fruits and berries.

Heininger: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Veremkroit: I had three brothers. They were all older than I.

Heininger: Ah, you were the baby of the family.

Veremkroit: Yes, I was, and I was the only daughter. My parents wanted a daughter so much, they tried until they got me.

My oldest brother served in the Soviet Army, and he got an education that earned him the equivalent of a bachelor's degree. My two other brothers had received master's degrees in engineering. I also received a master's degree in engineering. For women in Russia, it was not unusual, but it's unusual in this country.

Heininger: Was your father also an engineer?

Veremkroit: No, he was a carpenter, and that was why he was able to build the house. My mother never worked. She was busy with children and keeping the family together. My father made sofas and other things of very high quality from wood. He was the only one who worked and put food on the table when we were in high school. Only one of my older brothers was a full time student, the others worked, contributing to the family and went to college at night. I followed a similar path in getting my degree in mechanical engineering. I got married, started working and continued my education in the evenings.

Heininger: What did your husband do?

Veremkroit: My husband was a Ph.D. in computer science. He received a good education in computer science at MGU, the Moscow State University that is like MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology.] He was working for the National Center for Meteorological Research, similar to NCAR [National Center for Atmospheric Research] in Boulder, CO. We were a middle-class family.

My husband, had a good position—chief of the laboratory—even though he was not a Communist Party member. A lot of people, in order to advance their career, would join the party. Even if they were not in favor of Communism, becoming a member of the Communist Party was part of moving up. He understood, I think, from his youth, even when he was in college, during the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, that this was not a country that he wanted to give his allegiance to. The Meteorological Center would never allow my husband to go abroad. For example, there was an exchange program between Russia and America and when the first American astronaut came to the Center my husband showed him the program on computer for the launch they had created. However, he would not be able to go to America for an exchange even though he created this program. They would send someone to represent the Center who did not necessarily understand the subject but who was a Communist Party member.

We had a very good library. Because of his position, he was able to order certain books that other people couldn't get in the stores or anywhere else. Our children were lucky to have very good books to read at home. The atmosphere in our family was very open. We talked about the situation in the country, about our opposition to the regime. We always told the children that they were Jewish and that they had to keep their heads up. I didn't look Jewish, and if somebody missed out on that would start talking about Jews, I would always open my mouth. I would stand up. [*laughs*] I taught my kids the same thing. If they heard something and were assaulted because they were Jewish, they would fight. They wouldn't be quiet.

We were talking but we were still scared. My husband's father, Abram Nizhnikov, would tell my son that when he was fighting in Berlin in WWII, he didn't have anything except bread and water, but he was happy because he was fighting for freedom. He said to him, "Now I have everything but I'm crying." So he initiated the idea of leaving the country. I said, "If you go, of course I will go with you."

When you apply to leave, if you work, the authorities immediately tell the organization you work for. I was called by my boss, and they wanted me to quit. I said, "I can't leave my job, because my husband too was asked to leave his position." He had a lot of Jews in his laboratory, and they were afraid that, if he wouldn't leave, that it would be very bad for them. So he left the company for their sake, even though it didn't change anything, but people were so scared. I said, "I can't leave, because I am the only one supporting my family, and I have two children."

Heininger: What kind of work were you doing at this point?

Veremkroit: I was working at a government organization "GOSSNAB [State Supplies]." This organization doesn't even exist now, but at that time it gave funds to cities and factories throughout the country. I dealt with industry, because I was a mechanical engineer. I understood how to split the funds between the districts and States. In Russia it was very hard to give enough

money to all the people who wanted funds, because there wasn't enough money. Of course people tried to bribe you to get more funds, so it's like everywhere else. [*laughs*]

Heininger: Yes it is, isn't it? Wall Street.

Veremkroit: But I stood my ground. I said, "I'm not leaving." I even applied for some financial help. So I was a fighter from the beginning, I fought for fairness.

Heininger: Right. But you also had children to support.

Veremkroit: Of course.

Heininger: This was in the 1970s?

Veremkroit: Right, We applied in '74. I came to HR, human resources, and there always was a person in human resources with a background in military or intelligence work. I asked him to call the officials and to ask when they would give our family permission to emigrate. I said I would then be able to tell the company when I could leave. Believe it or not, he called. I was present, but of course he didn't get an answer.

My father-in-law, a veteran of World War II and a survivor, organized a group of veterans refuseniks, He called the visa office one day. He knew the name of a person, Mr. Ivanov. Mr. Ivanov picked up the phone and my father-in-law said, "Mr. Ivanov?" and the man said, "It's not me," and he hung up on him. [*laughter*]

Heininger: Bureaucrats are all the same, aren't they?

Veremkroit: I don't think so. Despite the obvious similarities there is a very big difference between Soviet bureaucrats and their American counterparts. Then they would call him and tell him, "Stop your daughter-in-law," and he would say, "No. I not only won't stop her, I will go out with her to the streets to demonstrate."

Heininger: Had he applied to emigrate?

Veremkroit: We all applied together. There were six of us: my husband, two children, and my husband's parents. My parents didn't give me any trouble. The parents had to give us permission. Your employer has to give you the papers to certify that you are a good worker.

Heininger: So the process requires the permission of your family in order to emigrate. Your job has to certify, basically, that you're a good worker and that you can emigrate. So lots of people would have difficulty because their families would say no or their employers would say no. But you got yeses from everyone.

Veremkroit: Yes. Employers wanted to get rid of you because they didn't need employees who wanted to leave the country. Once this process started, if you lost your job, it was very difficult to find another one, because no one would hire you if they knew that you were Jewish. They wouldn't want to deal with all of that. Finally when we received permission to emigrate my

father would say to my relatives and friends, "Why are you crying? You have to be happy for them." He understood. He said, "They are going to have a better life."

Heininger: But they didn't want to emigrate?

Veremkroit: Well, there were too many of us in my family. Our applications were turned down because of my two brothers. They had a high-level security clearance. The officials called me and said, "If your brothers leave their jobs, then you will receive permission to emigrate." So of course we wrote protest letters stating that they kept us as hostages. My brothers didn't leave their jobs, and we continued to fight.

Heininger: In the 1960s you said that the invasion of Czechoslovakia was a turning point for your husband in terms of his view of the Soviet Government. Were people applying to emigrate during the 1960s?

Veremkroit: Yes. Not many, but some.

Heininger: How did conditions change so that there were more people who tried to emigrate in the 1970s? Was it that détente began to change things, or was it something inside the Soviet Union?

Veremkroit: No, I think it was probably détente. If you received an invitation from Israel, you could apply and you could leave. Even if you had no relatives in Israel, it didn't matter at the time, because the only place we could emigrate officially was Israel. Only much later, when the Berlin Wall had come down. did it became possible to go directly to the United States. But at the time we had to go through Vienna and Italy. So now, people would ask those who were leaving to send them an invitation, so that they, too could apply for immigration. I was able to do it for my brother, because I emigrated first, with my family. My father said that if one of my brothers would go, then my parents would go with them. But because they had this clearance—

Heininger: Where they were working, yes.

Veremkroit: Yes. The big secret was that all the technology and everything was 10 years behind the American technology.

Heininger: But nobody knew that at the time.

Veremkroit: The government knew, but they did not want the world to find out.

Heininger: You get that in companies here. They won't let employees leave. This happened to my father. He worked for a chemical company, and he wanted to go work for another chemical company. He wasn't allowed to do so because of the fear that he might take proprietary information. Yes, exactly. It makes a good cover for saying no. So what made your family decide to apply in the early 1970s?

Veremkroit: Our children were older. Our oldest son Sasha [Alexander Nizhnikov] was about the age when he could be drafted into the army. I was involved in the women's movement and demonstrations because I knew we had to get out of the country that year.

Heininger: So one of your biggest concerns was that your sons, starting with your first son, might be drafted.

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: We had a lot of that going on during the Vietnam War too.

Veremkroit: In the army in Russia, it's a completely different situation from here, even when they go for three years of training. Again, some Jewish draftees could be killed if they were not physically strong. They could be murdered. Both of my sons were pretty bright. The oldest son finished MIT, and he has his own computer company now. My youngest is a Ph.D. in behavioral neuroscience.

Heininger: They sound pretty bright.

Veremkroit: There was no way they would receive this kind of education in Russia. They could get into, but only college. We knew a couple of colleges in Moscow that would accept Jewish children, about a quarter of those who applied. Even if the Jewish students all had scores like 100, the examiners would give them lower grades.

Heininger: Even though you and your husband were highly educated, you were concerned that your sons' opportunities for both education and long-term careers would be severely restricted if you stayed.

Veremkroit: Yes. When I was at work, there were little things, like a girl came to our office, and she was very friendly with me. Then she told me, "The other coworkers told me that I have to be careful with you because you're Jewish." I am friendly with other people so I didn't sense that, but behind my back, people didn't think they could trust me or cooperate with me fully.

As I say, I probably emigrated because of my father-in-law and my husband. When I applied, the officials called me and said, "Just divorce him. He is leaving the country. You don't need to leave the country. We will help you raise your children. We will give you, like, 10 rubles extra to feed them." "I want to emigrate," I said. "Because my family and my husband are emigrating, I'm going with them," but again I was the only one who provided for the family. Then, when the time came for my son to be drafted, I decided to leave my job, because I was so involved in the demonstrations that I couldn't do both. This was it.

Heininger: Did your father-in-law decide first that he wanted to emigrate? Then your husband decided he wanted to go too, and then you decided, but was he the driving force to begin with?

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: That's interesting. How old was he at the time?

Veremkroit: When we applied he was about 70.

Heininger: Wow.

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: It takes a lot of guts to do that at that age.

Veremkroit: Right, he was telling very interesting stories to my older son, and he remembered the war. He said it was a crime that what he had fought for had all gone wrong. I never, even for a day, regret my decision. Looking at my children and what they have achieved, I say, "Only in America." Of course there are many opportunities. If you want to reach your goal, you can, I think, in this country—Jews can make it and many others too.

Heininger: Was America, from the beginning, where your father in-law and you and your husband wanted to come?

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: Why here rather than Israel?

Veremkroit: Everybody asks that. The propaganda that Russia broadcasted about Israel was very scary. They said that people couldn't find jobs in their fields. When we applied, we received a postcard from the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti]. My cousin's family had left several years before, and they were living in Philadelphia. He was professor and taught at the University of Pennsylvania. So KGB sent us a card and made it look like it was sent from his address. It was a very scary card. The card said, "You decided to go to America. America is waiting for you. Your relatives are waiting for you. You will be sweeping garbege and brocken glass [sic] on the streets."

Heininger: So you already had relatives here. Had anybody besides your cousin come to the United States at that point?

Veremkroit: They were the first ones. When they left and we began to correspond, then we applied, because we already had some information. But he was a professor, a world-renowned economist. He was very well known in the West even before he came. He got a job right away. His wife was also working with students, teaching Russian. They have two sons. They said, "Just bring your butts over." [*laughs*]

Heininger: Bring 'em on.

Veremkroit: That's it. "Don't bring anything with you," because, of course, we were concerned about our library books and everything. They said, "Here you can get everything you want. You just need a job. That's it."

Heininger: Had anyone in your family emigrated to Israel?

Veremkroit: By now, yes.

Heininger: But at that point, people in your family had come only to Philadelphia. So it made sense for you to go to America because you knew you had family there.

Veremkroit: Sure.

Heininger: So once you made the decision, what was the process you had to go through to apply? What did it mean to apply to emigrate?

Veremkroit: You went to certain organizations that processed your papers. You got the application, filled it in, and you gave it to them to process. Then, you had to wait.

Heininger: And then they stamped "No."

Veremkroit: Right.

Heininger: You said you also needed permission from your employer and from other family members.

Veremkroit: And from my family. My father and mother never stopped us.

Heininger: But they didn't want to come.

Veremkroit: They wanted to come, but three brothers remained in Moscow and couldn't leave—

Heininger: They felt they had to stay?

Veremkroit: Right. They said that if even one of them would go to America, then they would go as well. It happened much later, but all of my brothers are now here, as are their families and all of my nieces and nephews. I brought them all over, but my parents weren't able to—I mean, I couldn't even go to their funeral because the authorities wouldn't let me back in.

Heininger: What year did you first apply to emigrate, '74?

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: That was the first year. What was the response? How long did it take to get an answer yes or no?

Veremkroit: I don't remember exactly now, but maybe three to six months. When the refusal came, it did not come with explanation. Then we would start writing letters. We already had a big community that would gather near the synagogue in Moscow, and people would get information from each other. The community was a mix. Some people didn't have a lot of friends who went to Israel and some who wanted to go only to Israel. We weren't brought up religious. We had no relatives in Israel, and we didn't feel that we could adjust there as well as in the United States.

Heininger: You thought you'd have more opportunities in the United States.

Veremkroit: Right. As I said in my other interview, Moses took Jewish people 40 years through the desert to get them to Israel. Here, of course, we are worried so much about the situation in

Israel, and we have a lot of relatives there and friends with whom I communicate and whom I visit in Israel.

Heininger: How did your sons feel when you made the decision to emigrate?

Veremkroit: Very good. My oldest son was very happy. He stopped going to school on Saturdays. He became orthodox—in Russia there is no such thing as orthodox or conservative. You are orthodox if you just believe in God. There were a lot of people in the Jewish community who were believers and who started learning Hebrew. It was all underground. He would educate his Russian friends at school. He would hear on the subway, "It's too bad that [Adolf] Hitler didn't kill all of the Jews." He would start fighting. He was young. He didn't understand that it was dangerous.

Heininger: How old was he at that point?

Veremkroit: Sixteen. But the youngest, I was proud of what I achieved with him. In school there's a process by which they become Oktebronok. I don't know if you know this word. They will give you a star pin, with [Vladimir] Lenin's face on it. According to the school officials, Lenin was like a grandfather to all children, and they should love him more than their own family. And then, ten years later, the next step is to become a Komsomol member, one step down from being a Communist Party member.

Heininger: Right.

Veremkroit: So my oldest son never became a Komsomol member. He refused. They were calling me and asking me, "If he is a student, why is he not doing that?" I said, "Because he doesn't feel ready." So the youngest students, like my youngest son, Michael, are supposed to go through the procedure to get this star. When his time came, I just didn't send Michael to school that day. [*laughs*]

Heininger: We call that passive resistance here.

Veremkroit: Yes. So he was clean.

Heininger: How much younger was he than Sasha?

Veremkroit: Nine years. There's a big difference between them. We finally heard from the Voice of America that our family had received permission to emigrate. But we didn't hear anything from the officials. We were so afraid that we would never receive permission because the Voice of America had announced our names. Only months later did the government send us a card.

Heininger: Bureaucracy.

Veremkroit: Yes. We went out on the street after receiving the permission, and we saw the usual long lines. People on the street would sell fruits and things, and you never knew what they were selling, but you would get in line, because whatever you got, you got.

Heininger: Peaches today.

Veremkroit: Yes. We didn't get into line, and my husband said, "Look, and remember this line!" It was a line for apples from a store. For example, I went to a store and I was trying to buy potatoes, and half of the potatoes they put in the bag were spoiled. I noticed it and said, "You put bad potatoes in there." She said, "You don't like them?" She put them aside and said, "Next." This was how they treated people. I would run from the store crying, and I couldn't believe it was possible to treat people like this. I came to this country, and I thought I was born again here. We fit in so nicely. People would ask me in Moscow, "Why are you saying hello to this person? Do you know him?" I said, "No, but I just smile at him. I just want to."

Heininger: Muscovites don't smile at other people, okay.

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: How odd.

Veremkroit: It was very strange how I behaved sometimes. But here I feel very comfortable. We were lucky. My husband was a good professional, and by the time we came, there was a computer boom. He found a job right away. We were very happy here, of course.

In Russia, when we applied and when I started to demonstrate, I had two KGB people behind my back all the time for about three months. It was such pressure, and I would not talk at home, because they got into the apartment and put their listening devices, so I would go outside and write on a piece of paper whatever I wanted to say. A lot of people were imprisoned and tortured and became handicapped. One guy told me, "You won't leave. You will be carried out handicapped from this country if you go on demonstrating."

Heininger: How did you get involved with the demonstrations? Did they come out of the synagogue and the group of people who had been meeting in the synagogue, or were they organized outside of that?

Veremkroit: No. I don't know if you've heard of Ida Nudel. She was a refusenik for many years. When we applied, my in-laws were living across the street from her, and they knew her personally. People did not trust each other too much, because there were a lot of KGB agents infiltrated into these groups, pretending that they were refuseniks. We were introduced to Ida, and then we were in. A lot of people were going to the officials and asking, "When will you give us answers?" She called me one day and said, "I have an idea to start having women's demonstrations. How do you feel about it?" I said, "Count me in."

Heininger: I'm not surprised.

Veremkroit: She said, "But do you know that your parents may be worried about you?" and I said, "I wouldn't tell them what I am doing." [*laughter*]

Heininger: That's how our teenagers treat us.

Veremkroit: Yes. We lived separately. I was married and we had our own place. She warned us what could happen. I think of my father and how he behaved in many dangerous situations in Russia—how strong he was, physically and mentally. For me it was like a game. I wasn't afraid at all. I knew I had to follow their policies. They would break their rules, not me. Every time I went and something happened, I wrote all of it down. I had a good memory for dialogue and everything, and I would write new appeal letters based on that.

Heininger: Had your husband quit his job at this point?

Veremkroit: Yes, he hadn't worked for a long time.

Heininger: So he had left his job, and you were working and supporting the kids. That took even more guts to get involved with these demonstrations.

Veremkroit: It did. I came up with the idea to make a yellow t-shirt with a blue star on it, because the Germans had put a yellow star on Jews. Everybody was creative. It was like teasing the bull with red cloth. So I went to demonstrate with the yellow shirt and the blue *Magen David*. I thought that maybe this would help because I was too visible. I was on the list that Senator Kennedy gave to Leonid Brezhnev, and they probably just wanted to get rid of us.

So many people were following me, and they saw that I wasn't afraid. I was able to escape from them several times, and I wrote about it in my book. It became like a game. But at the same time I knew my limits, I thought. I would say I got the last laugh. I can laugh about it and say that I was right, but I was very scared, especially for my children, because Sasha was like me. He looked up to me, but he wasn't processing everything as I was. At the synagogue, he could have been killed when they tried to hit him on the head by throwing a metal pipe at him, but luckily he moved at the right moment. As I said, he was very brave but was not aware of the scope of danger. So I was worried about my children.

Heininger: You were more worried about the children than yourself.

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: Was your husband supportive of what you were doing?

Veremkroit: He was very supportive. He also participated in some demonstrations, after which a lot of men were beaten brutally and put into prison. He supported the decision for women to try to demonstrate. Some people asked how he could put his wife in such dangerous situations, but I will tell you that I wouldn't have listened. If he had said no, I still would have gone.

Heininger: You would have done it anyway.

Veremkroit: Yes, because this is how I felt at the time.

Heininger: Many of the men were beaten and put in prison, but they didn't beat the women, did they?

Veremkroit: They were more sophisticated in how they beat the women. For instance, one woman was pregnant, so they just kicked her once in her stomach and then in the back. They tried to scare me during the demonstration. They would say, "We will put you in prison, and it's very cold there, and there are no mattresses." I said, "I brought everything with me, so I am ready."

Heininger: Did you carry warm socks with you?

Veremkroit: Yes. [*laughs*] I had a bag with things. Then they tried to trick me into signing some papers. They took my passport, even though it was not legal. They couldn't take the passport from me, but I left it with them, and they wanted me to come and get it. They were ready to put me in prison.

Heininger: Because they did put Ida Nudel in prison.

Veremkroit: Right, but she was the biggest fish. As I understand it, emigration was a trade-off, an exchange. So she or Anatoly [Natan] Sharansky, were bigger names that they wanted to keep and then, I don't know, exchange—like exchange Anatoly Sharansky for a spy. I was a small fish, I would say, but I was still bothering them very much. I didn't know English at all at the time, so if an American would come to visit, I never participated in any conversation. Maybe a couple of times some visitors came to our home, bringing us stuff that we could sell.

Heininger: Your husband had left his job, and when you left your job, because you were so busy with the demonstrations, what were you living on?

Veremkroit: My cousin, who was in Philadelphia, was sending us parcels with clothes that we were able to sell on consignment. We received parcels twice a year. There were a lot of Jewish organizations that were involved during that time, and somehow they had names and addresses. This was a huge support, yes.

It happened so fast when I left my job, my husband tried to find work. Nobody would hire him. He found a job as an electrician. We were laughing that someone did not call to inquire about him, because they believed him, and they even tried to teach him how the electricity goes through the wires. He would come home telling stories, laughing. We also had some income from this, so it wasn't the time when we both weren't working. We didn't need too much. In Russia, you pay very little money for your apartment and electricity and telephone. Food though is a big expense. We never bought any clothes or anything for ourselves. Whatever we had, we were still better dressed than many Russians.

Heininger: How did people in the West know the names of the people who were participating in the demonstrations and of the people who had applied to emigrate?

Veremkroit: They knew because of the Jewish organizations. A lot of journalists and visitors would come, and the Jewish community would give the names to them, with addresses. The information would come to the United States or to England. My cousin, who was already here, managed to get our name on Kennedy's list. I don't think we would be on Kennedy's list if not for that.

Heininger: Without your cousin?

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: Did he tell you that he had talked with Senator Kennedy's office?

Veremkroit: I don't know exactly how he got us on this list, but I would say yes.

Heininger: Or through an organization that contacted Kennedy's office. So the names were known, and there were a variety of ways that the names became public in the West, through Jewish organizations, journalists, and Americans who would come and go back. I'm assuming the same thing was going on with Israel too.

Veremkroit: Yes. When journalists would come to Moscow, people who spoke English knew who to contact, who to call. Then these people would invite other refuseniks to someone's home, where they would have a conference. They would have the names. When the six of us applied, the officials gave permission to my husband's parents, but they refused to give permission to us. So they were dividing families. They did it all the time. We decided not to split. We decided that our parents wouldn't go without us.

Heininger: So the first time you applied, your husband's parents were told yes, but the family decided, "No, it's all six of us or none of us."

Veremkroit: Right, exactly, and it was the best decision we made. It was a struggle for years that they wouldn't let the others leave.

Heininger: "We already gave two members of your family the chance to leave. That's enough. Forget the rest of you."

Veremkroit: Right.

Heininger: It was divide and conquer.

Veremkroit: Right.

Heininger: So when the six of you made the decision to have not just your husband's parents go, did you have to keep applying to emigrate, or once you had applied, was your name always there? Did you have to apply every year?

Veremkroit: No, our names were there. We just needed to write the letter asking for an appointment.

Heininger: Just keep bugging them.

Veremkroit: Right. No, you don't need to apply several times. You apply once and then it's a cycle. Now, later, once we had emigrated to the U.S., I wanted to send the invitation to my brother. Eventually, first my cousins came with their families, and then their parents, and then my brother came. But at that time, we could sponsor them. It was a different picture.

I found someone in Israel who had the same last name, like my maiden name and my brother's name, and through my friends who already lived in Israel, I got in touch with them. They had the same last name, so it was like they were relatives, and they sent the invitation to my brother. Invitations are supposed to come only from Israel. That's why it was like a game. Everybody knew that we had no relatives in Israel, but the invitation had to come from Israel. Then all of my family came here because we were sponsoring them.

I am very proud of my brother. He worked. When he came, nobody was on welfare for even a day. He worked six months without pay, on the wastewater project in Boston, because that was his profession. He came to work every day, no pay, for six months. Then when they saw his knowledge—there was a contract that ran for nine months and then another one—one of the staff members said, "It wouldn't be right if I didn't give you the position of project engineer." They opened the position for him as a project engineer in this field. Now he's 75, and he came when he was 57. It's a hard age to find a job.

Heininger: It's a hard age for anyone to find a job.

Veremkroit: Right, of course, and I'm very proud of him. He worked for years, and now he's retired. Everybody—my nieces, my nephews—they are all professionals. They are computer programmers, engineers. They all found jobs and settled down with their children. When we are all together, it's about 40 people.

Heininger: Wow, that's a lot.

Veremkroit: A big family. I stay in the corner and cry.

Heininger: Where did the term "refusenik" come from?

Veremkroit: It came from the word refusal.

Heininger: What's the word in Russian?

Veremkroit: Otkaz in Russian. Do you know Russian?

Heininger: No. Chinese, but no Russian.

Veremkroit: Refused. You were refused permission to emigrate; the word came from this root, the refusenik. It became a legal word, I think. I don't know if it's in the dictionary.

Heininger: Was there an increase in the number of people who tried to emigrate in the early 1970s?

Veremkroit: Yes, there was. The numbers grew, but then they stopped. They closed the border for several years. It was like a wave. They would let people go, then nobody, and then they would increase the number of people again. I didn't know the rules, but everybody said it was trade. They were trying to accumulate people and then trade them for grain.

Heininger: There were big grain sales then.

Veremkroit: Yes.

Heininger: You're right. That's part of what was going on then too. The Soviet Union needed grain in the early 1970s, and we wanted people out. Trade.

Veremkroit: Yes. So this was what people were talking about. Nobody knew what would happen. But as I said, I have lived three lives: before we applied to emigrate, then the years of refusal, and now we're in the United States. All of it is very meaningful. For my children these experiences were so meaningful. To see how we behave and how strong we were, and to see that we emigrated not for economic reasons. I wouldn't call myself a dissident, but even my husband, who said he didn't want to give his allegiance to that country, it was more about political reasons than economic ones. This is how our children were brought up. The little one, of course, was proud that he wasn't Oktebronok.

Heininger: He was the one who was sick that day.

Veremkroit: Yes. I told them to be proud and to fight for their rights and for their freedom. I said, "It's a different word, freedom here and freedom in Russia."

Heininger: What were the demonstrations like that you participated in? What about the one at the Kremlin wall?

Veremkroit: At the Kremlin wall, we knew that some American journalists had been informed that we would demonstrate. They came to the square, and they were beaten, and their cameras were taken away from them. It took the KGB by surprise. We walked up to the wall, and then we lined up and opened our banners. Near the Kremlin wall, of course, there are a lot of KGB agents. Everyone was watching, and when they saw it they were in shock. They started climbing up, trying to get us down. They brought us to the police station again, where we had already gone before, so they knew us.

Heininger: "Hi, back again."

Veremkroit: All the questions. They talked to us separately, one by one, not in groups, asking us questions, trying to scare us.

Heininger: How frightening was it being questioned by the police? Were you afraid?

Veremkroit: No. I think this is what made them ask, "Why is she not afraid?" They want everybody to be afraid. I was very straightforward when I answered questions. Instructions had been given to the refuseniks—how to behave, what to answer, what not to answer, what your rights were during an investigation. So we were prepared.

But there were only six women. I thought at the time, *Be a man*, because not many women would agree to participate. Some women, when the demonstration was inside an apartment, took their children with them. I didn't do that because I didn't want my children to go through this hell. They stayed home and I went by myself. But when the KGB got inside the apartment, I slapped one of their guys on his face. It was in Natalya Rosenstein's apartment.

Heininger: Oh, that's too bad.

Veremkroit: Yes, I was so angry. I thought he would kill me.

Heininger: Nothing happened to you?

Veremkroit: No, because they just follow instructions. I would test people if I wasn't sure that they were KGB agents. One photographer was very friendly, and he wanted to go to every apartment, take pictures, and then plant bugs. I said to him, "I have a friend who is single, and I want to introduce you to her. She's a very pretty girl. Do you want to do it?" He said, "No, I don't know." The next day he called and said he wanted to do it. [*laughs*] He had spoken with the KGB.

Heininger: He got his instructions.

Veremkroit: There were witnesses. So if one would hit me or do something to me, I could go to court. I tried to create situations in which they would do something wrong, then I would attack. I would write letters. I would go to court. So I was able to do it, but he wasn't. It was very risky, and I was playing on the edge.

Heininger: What was it like having the KGB follow you?

Veremkroit: It was a game, as I said. I was very happy to distract them and to get away. When they would go after me on the bus, I would smile. I would turn my head and smile at them. I even tried to talk to them, which disarmed them.

Heininger: You also acted unpredictably.

Veremkroit: Right.

Heininger: It sounds like they were bound by their instructions. Maybe one of the successes of the Kremlin wall demonstration was that it caught them by surprise and they didn't know how to deal with it.

Veremkroit: Yes, they only knew that they had to take us as quickly as possible away from there, so that not too many people would see our banners. They would then bring us to the police station. The police knew, of course, that we were on the way, and they were prepared to talk to us and ask questions. They tried to scare us. They tried several tactics, but I think all six of us were strong. One of the women in our group told me not to go to the last and most dangerous demonstration: "Don't you see, it's not working, and you're just going to be hurt, especially near the KGB building," but I went with my yellow shirt. I didn't know another way to break through, because we wrote letters, we demonstrated, and nothing was working.

Heininger: How many of the six of you got out?

Veremkroit: All of us.

Heininger: In what time frame?

Veremkroit: Very short.

Heininger: Really?

Veremkroit: Yes. I mean, [Natalya] Katz and her family, I assume, they got out first, in maybe two months. Some of the six women received permission immediately. They were on the Kennedy list. There were three of them, like me and the Khait family. They are in Canada, I think, in Toronto, and the Katzes, also Nataly Rosenstein's family who went to Israel.

Heininger: But Ida Nudel didn't get out until the late '80s.

Veremkroit: Right. They wouldn't let her go. She had an apartment in Moscow, near my in-laws' apartment. It was all furnished and everything. Her sister lived in Israel, so somebody asked us if we could get all of her furniture and send it to Israel, to her sister, because we didn't have any of our furniture to send. Believe it or not, we carried blankets and pillows in our suitcases. We pretended it was our own furniture, and we shipped it to Israel, to her sister. My cousin in Philadelphia wanted to take us, but because we were not immediate family, only cousins, and there were six of us, the Philadelphia JCC didn't have the funds to get all of the family members in. We ended up in New York, on our own. We were put in a hotel for two weeks, and then we had to find our own apartment. The Jewish organization HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] gave us some money to do it.

We were walking on the street, and there were some Russians who we asked, and we found an apartment for our parents and for us. My father-in-law was on the street, and some guy was throwing furniture from a window, and he said, "Stop!" We went to his apartment, and he gave us everything he planned to throw away, even spoons, forks, and knives. As I said, we didn't have anything. We slept on our suitcases. We didn't have mattresses. We found some mattresses on the street to sleep on. At the hotel where they put us, we could see the Statue of Liberty through the window. There were cockroaches, and it was winter, a blizzard, a blizzard of 1979. People were skiing on the streets. It was scary.

Everything was new. It's interesting. In Russia there are different kinds of toilets. There is no water in a Russian toilet, and if there is water in one, it's broken. So my father-in-law saw the water—

Heininger: And he thought the toilet was broken. [*laughter*]

Veremkroit: Yes, and we called the plumber to fix the toilet. My son was fighting cockroaches.

Heininger: Did any of you know any English?

Veremkroit: Not really. I learned German at school and in college and at the university. I knew a little Yiddish, like my parents. I also started to learn English while in refusal, privately, but not too much English.

HIAS, the Jewish organization that assists you when you come to New York, you need to pay back that money when you start working, which we did, of course. They will also send you to school. One person from the family can take English classes.

Heininger: Only one.

Veremkroit: Right. I think I got to go. Yes, I was lucky. My husband said that because he was a computer programmer, he didn't need too much English. It's the same language in computers.

Heininger: Zeros and ones.

Veremkroit: Right. He had a former coworker from Moscow who already worked here—and my husband was invited by several companies for an interview. He got a job in three months, so the company moved us from New York to Boston.

Heininger: So that's how you ended up in Massachusetts.

Veremkroit: Yes, we came here, found an apartment to rent, and then I went to New York. I was buying some furniture or whatever at garage sales, because I knew already what kind of apartment we had and what we needed. When the company came to move us, I think they were in shock of what they were moving. It was our first furniture. We were happy. We didn't want too much. We knew we would find a way to settle and be happy. Every step was like an adventure.

Heininger: When you were still in the Soviet Union, did you know that you were on Kennedy's list, that Kennedy was trying to get you out?

Veremkroit: No.

Heininger: That must have come as a surprise when you found out.

Veremkroit: Yes, it was a big surprise. We found out everything from the Voice of America. After we found out, I asked my cousin, and she said yes, her husband somehow had been able to get us on the list, but we found out only after the fact. It was such a happy night. Everybody was calling. They couldn't believe it when they heard the names. It was my name that they said, not my husband's name.

Heininger: Really? It must have been your t-shirt.

Veremkroit: Right, and I was afraid that they wouldn't let me bring the t-shirt over. They go through the stuff, so I left it with one of the refusenik families in Moscow. I think they later emigrated to Israel, but I never found out if she had the shirt.

Heininger: Oh no, you don't still have it?

Veremkroit: No, but I again had the idea to wear a yellow t-shirt with some signs, and when people were going to Washington to demonstrate at the Soviet Embassy, they all were wearing yellow t-shirts. So the idea still worked, but my t-shirt, no, I never got it.

Heininger: That must be a shame not to have that.

Veremkroit: Yes, I wanted it badly, but it didn't happen.

Heininger: Well, of the six women who were involved in the women's group, we know that Ida Nudel wasn't allowed out until the late '80s, and she ended up in prison. You got out fairly quickly. What about the others?

Veremkroit: Katz.

Heininger: Katz, and you said there was—

Veremkroit: Khait.

Heininger: Went to Canada, went to Toronto. Another one went, you think, to California.

Veremkroit: Natalya and Gregory Rosenstein with their two sons went to Israel.

Heininger: And there was one more?

Veremkroit: It was the Galina Kremen family, who live in Israel now, but they didn't receive permission to emigrate. The Russians charged their son with possession of drugs. They put the drugs in this little packet, and then they caught him and said that he was a drug dealer.

The Kremen family was targeted by the KGB because of Galina Kremen—the demonstration at the KGB headquarters was known about beforehand. When we got there, we knew that they knew about it. She had told a family friend, the same photographer, about the demonstration. Her husband was in prison, and the friend was so kind. He asked, "Tell me what you are planning." Even our husbands didn't know where, to the last minute, we were going. My husband would say, "I don't even want to know because if I am tortured, it's safer not to know. I can't tell." We couldn't believe she told this guy about our demonstration. We found out because we started asking if anyone had told anyone about the demonstration. All the others had been safe, surprises, the first one and the one at the Kremlin wall. Her husband and her son finally got out but not immediately.

Heininger: Much safer that your husband didn't know.

Veremkroit: Right. This was our policy.

Heininger: Of course it makes sense. It's the only way to protect yourself. Once you came here, did you have any contact with Senator Kennedy or with his office?

Veremkroit: Yes. First of all, I left so many people behind, and they put all their hopes in you. You are leaving and maybe you could do something for them.

I studied English, and when I was able to communicate, I found some organizations involved with Soviet Jewry, and then found the Action for Soviet Jewry. Through this organization I got connected with many temples and was able to get involved. Temples would adopt certain families, and I became very friendly in Wellesley with a temple that was willing to adopt families. Our friends were in refusal, so we gave them the names of people we knew personally.

Heininger: Right.

Veremkroit: Somehow the office of Senator Kennedy knew that we ended up in Boston. I was invited to give a speech at Brandeis University, and Senator Kennedy was there. I met him and thanked him for all his help. It was very nice, very touching. In Washington there was a huge rally, and Senator Kennedy was also involved. That was when Ida Nudel and Anatoly Sharansky had come from Israel to Washington. The stage where they were talking, you couldn't get through to it. It was all chained off. Believe it or not, I got through it. [*laughter*]

Heininger: I do believe it.

Veremkroit: I got to Ida Nudel, and then we took a lot of pictures together. So Senator Edward Kennedy invited many refuseniks, like Natan Sharansky, Ida Nudel, and my husband and me, to his Virginia summer home. It was very nice, this personal touch. We felt his sincere desire to help people, and as I said, he gave hope to immigrants who kept believing that maybe some day they also could emigrate and become free people.

Heininger: I bet you voted for him after that too. [*laughter*]

Veremkroit: You probably would be surprised. I am a Republican. I'm, like, a Republican Independent, but more Republican. I mean, a lot of people from Russia believe in a strong country and in defense, because we knew where we came from. I am afraid that here in America, we are now seeing signs of socialism.

Heininger: Oh, yes. The government now owns the banks.

Veremkroit: I was there. I came to this country and don't want to go back. I appreciate very much his help and his effort and support. He was very much involved in Jewish emigration from Russia. I was writing letters to his office and ask him for help, because of separated families. Russia would let only one part of the family go, and some young people here would turn to me asking what they could do. We would write a letter and send it to Senator Kennedy's office. They were very responsive. It was good to find a place where you could ask for help and get it.

Heininger: A change. Well, this has been delightful.