



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL  
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

## AUDIO TAPE LOG

Accession No.: KN-02-1-C Date(s): 3/27/02

Fieldworker(s): Kathy Neustadt

Interviewee(s): Alex and Irene Belozersky

Event: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Recording: their home in Brookline [REDACTED]

Recording Equipment: Sony Walkman Pro Microphone(s): Realistic (external)

Recorded in: stereo Tape Brand and Format: Cassette, 90 minutes

Amount Tape Used: Cassette: 1 DAT: ABS time:

Related Accession Numbers: KN-02-1-FN and KN-02-1-CS1-28

Brief summary of tape contents: discussion of Alex's sculpture (his background, immigration to the US, conditions in the Soviet Union for Jews, his artistic development and changing media, etc.) and discussion of Irene's knowledge of the Russian Jewish community in Brookline, MA (her training and work, a profile of the community, suggestions for future research, etc.)

Counter/ABS	Contents
2	KN introduction and set up
30	Alex: we came to US in 1980 from Moscow. Came by way of Vienna and Rome (the official way for refugees: in Austria had to choose Israel or America. The route to America was through Rome; they were there for 3 months--"it was the greatest time in our lives--absolutely. It was gorgeous. And that culture--specifically Italian culture--was the first powerful impression in my art and future."
83	Was a music teacher and pianist (training and occupation). Couldn't make a living as musician here, so he did lots of other things. He was tired of music by this time anyway--had been a teacher and accompanist since 16: "I worked too long to enjoy it more." Coming across Europe, "I was open." "Deep in my heart, I was maybe more an artist than a musician, and I was a pretty good musician."
126	"Life is pretty boring. Art is much more interesting thing." Went around Italy as much as possible. In US, survival is very prosaic. [Irene arrives home--he explains that her English was so good, she was able to get 1 <sup>st</sup> job after 3 weeks in US]. He painted houses inside and out; also had floor business for many years, "to survive." In 1989, started doing his own art--"it was pretty unexpected for myself, but I thought, if I don't do something immediately with my hands, I better die."

- 180 Started doing ceramics at Radcliffe College, studying with Katya Apekina (trained at Moscow Institute of Art) and became friends. Started from scratch, though he had used his hands for music previously ("that's a good point really")--very quick learner. THEORY about HIS ARTFULNESS: "I'm a musician, and my fingers know what I'm doing. It's why I took sculpture more than anything else. I've had feelings in my fingertips all my life. When I was a musician, I had strange visions when I played piano--a scene with bent wires: I saw these very intricate pictures of bended wires and combinations of them--the way I saw music visually. Maybe it's connected with my sculpture also, because I'm good with rhythms, with forms, with accompaniment, because it reminds me somehow about laws of art, whatever it is: visual or sound or movies or something else, because I see how to construct the object form." Artistic all of his life.
- 245 We start to look at some of his work[which is everywhere around the house]. One of the first of his pieces, a very architectural piece [see CS4]. Then a piece that looks like an Italian piazza (Irene painted it: I think he may not be very interested in color [CS 5 & 6]). A few weeks later, a bust with wild hair--"it was so powerful inspiration from inside, I really don't remember how I did it I didn't remember the process." [CS 7 & 8] (Something he'll never part with.)
- 293 Other pieces: a figurine, a pot thrown on the wheel. Something like a tall vase, with surface details that look like leaves (he will go on to explain that he made this by squeezing soaking clay through his fingers)--"it's a lot of fun." [CS 3] Other students were interested more in dishes and tea pots and how much they could charge for pieces and how many they could do in an hour--his answer to them, "I'm doing it because I love it." Renaissance poet figure.
- 358 Started being bored in a couple of years because he was limited by the size of the kiln--the big kilns were in NH and VT, and he couldn't leave home and didn't have the funds. Went to a lecture about working with big forms in ceramics (the teacher was from Philadelphia; can't remember the name)--use tar paper to support the large shapes until they have dried; creating forms. He started working with the tar paper (in a couple of hours producing CS10) and left behind the clay. He liked the immediate results: "from that moment, I started doing big forms," doing it for himself--"if artist doesn't do it for himself, he is not artist. The result could be a good sale--it's a result--but if it's a goal, believe me, it's no artistry in that." A musketeer and others [see CS 9-12]. People enjoyed the work.
- 493 The first piece: he had it in mind before he did it ("I always have something in mind." Heard about adult education at Brookline High School, and he took ceramics there, November 1988. Then 1989, was taking courses at Radcliffe College Ceramics Studio. {I note a strong connection to the face.}) People started buying, but people would say, I would buy it if it were not so fragile, being made from paper. That moved him to consider working in metal, looking for a place to do it--ended up at Mass. College of Art--but at first he was working in his basement with thin metal [see CS13: clear connection with tar paper mode: kind of braising]. People were telling him he needed to know how to deal with metal--it's hard--and he needed to learn welding, and he eventually started studying it. MCA, in 1993, he started metal shop, "and since that time, I am a permanent student, a continuing education student, and every time I sign for another semester, and that's the way I work now--almost 9 years."

- 548 Started doing things connected with his cultural background. "Everybody in Europe and Russia read from early years, all through life, and we have a lot of worlds in us, and a lot of literature and poetry--a lot of layers of everything--and sooner or later it goes out, and this way I make things like that." Myths, historic novels (he cites Queen Margot by Alexander Dumas)--"a lot of stuff like that went through me and wanted out, and I make a lot of things." An Italian bust, e.g., and a page from the old courts of Europe. The big one: "something theological or Greek or whatever."
- 590 "Then something different came"--1<sup>st</sup> work when he started at MCA. 2 stratas of art that interest him: the early Renaissance ("I like but I don't like very much the High Renaissance, and I don't like at all the 19<sup>th</sup> century--sometimes I just hate it") and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has made a sculpture of a man lying on the backs of 2 chairs, one Renaissance, one modern [see CS 14]--"and I am hypnotized somewhere in between--it shows where I am." An abstracted head on top of wooden stand [CS18]; another in the kitchen, "I am now in this direction--it's not the final, I hope, but right now."
- 635 He has pictures and slides of another set of works. Sheet metal. He did the screen across the fire place, large curls with a Roman profile. I asked him if there's a Russian metalworking tradition, and he says no. Also that "I don't actually consider myself Russian," but more European. Wouldn't find Russian artists here who feel Russian: the academic culture was European, and taught as European artists, not specifically Russian. "Many don't like the very memory of Russia, or the memory is tragic. Or they are not proud of being Russian." He's proud of many things, but not excited by being it, and "almost always wanted out." His background is European, and the best in Russian culture is European also--the painting tradition was from Byzantium, for example. The Kremlin was built by Italians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century--so what's to be proud of?
- 703 Refugee status makes a difference. 100% Jewish--but no heritage: "everything is upside down in Russia; you don't feel related to anything really deeply, traditionally or culturally, because if you were religious, it was prohibited and persecuted. I was humiliated since kindergarten, and I was really ashamed to be Jewish. Here you are what you are, but at the same time your [Russian] identification is ambiguous--you are Russian because you are Russian-speaking; you are Jewish but you don't have tradition to be Jewish; you are Russian Orthodox or something like that but more through your intellect more than from tradition or your family, so who are we? What I really enjoy is freedom.. 728 end of SIDE 1

Side 2

- 3 [IRENE joins us and, except where noted, she does most of the talking for this side of the tape.]. We talk about MCC and this interview. Alex: learned metalwork here and learned it from himself: "what I learned here how to join 2 pieces of clay together--that I learned; I didn't know. I didn't know how to weld; I learned. But nobody taught me how to work with forms--I did it myself. So there is no connection in this context with Russia or with America whatsoever." Irene: more complex than that--"there are deeper, interesting connections." In Russia, no freedom, no spiritual outlets; escape through reading books: traveling in your

mind. Alex got beat up a lot as a kid "a little, scrawny Jewish boy", so he would be sick a lot and stay home and read. Developed a strong imaginary world that he still carries with him--traveling now is a reunion with his fantasy world. Alex: no reunion with China, but France, Europe., medieval times mean something. Irene: this is true for a lot of Russian artists.

- 133 I: he was always trying to create in Russia; he wanted to do woodcarving. Had to have the money, find the right tools; no facilities if not a member of Union of Soviet Artists: not practically possible. He would find wood and homemade tools and make some things; when he saw it again when we went back a few years ago, he was surprised that it was good. [Politics gets in way of tradition, e.g. Czech Republic observations. Irene: and this would have been less than Russia, since we had Soviet rule from 17, Czech since 45]
- 180 Irene's background: she majored in English, had a teaching job at a college [for a ruble an hour, less than \$1]; by luck, riding the bus and reading an English novel, got offered a job as an English interpreter at a scientific research institute (Academy of Sciences of the USSR) with an exchange program with America on earthquake studies and forecasting. Hired on spot because they were desperate (wouldn't have gotten it normally as a Jew, in any case): a glamorous job, working with American scientists. Story of how she was immersed in speaking English (an American wife talking to her for the 5-hour trip) and doing 8-hour scientific session at the institute ("trial by fire"). Worked there from 1974-79. She would also travel with the Americans around the Soviet Union (Russians could travel in USSR, but would be expensive and a hassle).
- 278 1979 was first peak of immigration of Russian Jews, c. 100,000; clamped down in 1980 around the Winter Olympics. 1985/6, more people, then big peak in 1989 again, diminishing since then, with changes in Russia that gave people hope. A trickle now. Got a degree at BU Social Work degree. Now doing only a little clinical; mostly planning, community development, program development (administrative) for the Jewish resettlement program (American Jewish community put up the money to receive the hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews who came here). A system in place to provide services and programs, and she's now at the top of that. [Russians are travelling lots these days: in London and France, Russians are being tourists, not just immigrants. Travel is what people missed most under the old regime.]
- 341 I: There's a Russian Christian community in Springfield and environs, western MA: evangelical Xians, not orthodox, but a persecuted religious minority (considered a sect, not denomination)--Pentacostal Baptists. They were denied rights and education, had to live certain places [near Siberia], only access to menial jobs (Russian Orthodox Church wanting to maintain its monopolies on religious issues). A case where 2 families took refuge in the basement of the American Embassy, demanding to be able to leave; Pentacostal churches in western MA (Poles and other Slavic peoples) sponsored them. About 11 thousand. They don't mix with Boston community: they're fundamentalists, uneducated/not intellectual, blue collar [A: like Shakers, hard working; I: drinking and family violence also].

- 383 Very dynamic Russian community now in Boston; with nearly open borders in Russia, lots of different people are coming: refugees (those statutes are still in place), non-Jewish people who win a lottery run by the State Dept. that gives out green cards to people from certain countries; people who come on student visas and tourist visas ("and stay"), people who come on work visas (lots of computer scientists and biophysicists, etc. So lots of different types all mixing together-- "Jewish, non-Jewish, doesn't matter"--change in character. Those on work visas are not mixing in so much--they're more oriented toward going back. Very diverse, but bulk is Russian Jews, who, in turn, are mostly assimilated to Russian culture, and lots of them have mixed families: Jews and Russians.
- 415 Part of I's job is to see if she can offer more Jewish education to the community. Great interest, but it's more intellectual than religious. Alex: Don't forget, we came from an atheistic culture. We were brainwashed. Didn't grow up with it, so don't feel comfortable with it; want to embrace their identity, but it's really cultural rather than religious. Irene: Wide spectrum of identities "or confusion about identities." Most of them are from larger cities; most coming these days are from Ukraine or Belorusse, where conditions are worse, than from central Russia--people are forced out. In this community, identities are unstable and undergo changes over time. They are "culturally and ethnically Jewish, tied to being Jewish by family ties, traditions, grandparents, family stories, like that. Culturally Russian, when you talk about High Culture: they value Russian language, they value Russian literature, art; some people find it superior to American," People are hiring Russian language teachers for their children, for the language and the literature. [Story about a client who is ultra-Jewish but insists his children speak Russian at home]
- 474 Russian Jews don't speak Yiddish because they forgot it--our parents or grandparents spoke it. Irene: my mother didn't speak it but understood it because her parents spoke it. Alex: Whenever my parents didn't want me to understand them spoke Yiddish. Irene: most of older Russian immigrants live in elderly complexes: convenient to have Yiddish because they can speak to their American neighbors.
- 497 Artists within the Russian community? Irene: quite an established community of artists, some gaining in recognition, all struggling with lack of venues for exhibitions. Two particularly well-known: Konstantin Simun, professional sculptor from St. Petersburg (has piece at the De Cordova; the tower filled with trash; recent memorial sculpture for Russian puppeteer who used to perform in Harvard Square: Igor Forkin?); Katya Apekina, ceramicist. Others still struggling, mostly known within the community. Russians very interested in arts and will come to shows, but life of an artist in this country (unlike in Europe) very difficult. Was a small gallery in Brookline Village opened by 2 Russian women art historians trying to create a Russian arts center that didn't survive (no source of revenue). All of these artists are very well trained academically: training based on Italian and French schools of arts.
- 544 Also a younger generation of artists. Suggests talking with Irina Gorbman, who is trying to run a virtual gallery and be an art dealer: Fine Arts Vision. Will probably include Alex's stuff along with 22 other artists (mostly Boston area). She was talking with Alex this afternoon. Alex points out that there is an exhibit

of Russian artworks at the Cambridge Multi-Cultural Center going on right now: Konstantin Simun, Katya Apekina, Alexander Gassel (trained in Russian as restorer of icons, so he paints with egg tempura like that, marrying traditional iconic style with contemporary motifs), "with mixed results"; and Anatole Zukerman, a professional architect "who wants to be an artist").

- 584 A crafts tradition? Yes, has become tourist and almost kitschy today, but it used to be tied to old way of life, produced in villages by peasants: "peasant craft." If talking about urban crafts, today is jewelry and ceramics, Traditional Russian crafts were abundant: woodcarving, toys, lacemaking, pottery, metal, etc. (Alex: some is gorgeous, but almost lost--we are actually collectors of folk art.) Irene: we have unique collection of traditional clay figures collected from different parts of the country [see CS 21-28].
- 603 Not suppressed (folk art) but actually supported--sold in art stores, e.g.. But village life has eroded over the years; young people are leaving as old craftsmen die off, so no continuity. Most famous celebrated Russian craft are the laquer boxes, which sell well, and wooden painted spoons. In Moscow, heavily marketed to tourists, machine made and all the same, but that is happening all over the world. Tatiana Loskutova here uses femo clay to make 3 dimensional pictures, very stylized like 19<sup>th</sup> c. stores of gallantry: ladies with parasols, officers, little dogs--people love it here; will find it in most Russians, very popular (not here because we don't care for that style). She paints background and characters are 1/2 painted and 1/2 relief. It's 19<sup>th</sup> c. literary form, not Russian, but might have lamp posts from Old Petersburg--almost Victorian (but Russian Victorian). She's the most traditional artist I know of.
- 633 This community is very urban and well-educated; wouldn't find folk artists here. (A: Russian vilages are where the folk art is, but not Moscow, Petersburg, or Kiev, no.) Irene got interested in folk art when she had her good job and was able to go on tour to Volga area: old architecture and such. Saw some bright figurines: traditional clay toys from Dimkova village [see CS 21]--fascinated them and they started looking (still making it in 1975), and they got hooked [the piece Alex has brought out is a large clay bird with opened tail, bright oranges on white slip--delightful.] Still making it, though now being mass produced, so hard to find good quality. They have a school and factory, with young artists being trained, with best pieces going to special places. This tradition is alive because it is popular and sells well; there are others that are less "glamorous" but still important as expression of peoples' beliefs, but not as eye-catching, so they are more haphazardous in their continuation. They have books about all of this stuff.
- 689 [Tour of the collection, on their own shelves and in front of the book shelves: tons, CS 21-28] From different parts of USSR, some by certain families, old and new, different kinds of figures: involved in occupational activities, primitive, with and without glazes; centaurs from the Russian north. Russians have tradition of decorating gingerbread figures with white icing; they have an example of French ones. Along the bookshelves: figures from Central Asia, from Ethiopian Jews, Russian tiles (Alex makes some and they collect them)..

731 end of SIDE 2