

**Transcript for Oral History Interview**  
**Conducted for University of Maryland Course HIST 428M - Spring 2015**  
**Instructor:** Dr. Anne S. Rush

**Interviewer's name:** Leah Singman

**Interviewee's name:** Natalia Siegel

**Interviewee's Country of Origin:** Ukraine

**Interviewee's Current Residence:** Olney, Montgomery County, Maryland, USA

**Date of Interview:** October 11th 2015

**Place of Interview:** Olney, Montgomery County, Maryland, USA

Leah: Today is Sunday, October 11th, 2015, and we are here in Olney, Maryland- Which is about 45 to... 45 minutes to an hour outside of the downtown DC area. And this is Natalia Siegel. My name is Leah Singman. Hi Natalia, thank you so much for meeting with me today!

Natalia: Hi Leah, it's my pleasure.

Leah: So... you said that you're from Ukraine, and um, you told me the city- the town where you're from, can you pronounce that for me?

Natalia: Ne-teesh-in

Leah: Netishyn, ok. So, what brought you to the United States?

Natalia: Well I met um my husband, back in my town in Ukraine. He was on a business trip. He was um an engineer who designed- at that point of time- the nuclear power plant simulators.

Leah: Wow.

Natalia: Yeah. So \*inaudible words\*. So I met him there.

Leah: Okay, so... he was on a business trip, how exactly did you...

Natalia: How I met him? \*Laughs\* My sister's friend met him and his colleague at the bar. And they invited him for dinner, and then they invited me for dinner.

Leah: Oh, okay!

Natalia: So \*laughs\* that's how we met at my sister's friend's house at dinner.

Leah: Ok! Awesome. Uh, so... let's see... um... so do you have any children?

Natalia: I do. I have a son from my previous marriage. David has a son from his previous marriage; we don't have children together. We've been married already for 18 years.

Leah: Wow, okay. That's great! So um when did you leave Ukraine?

Natalia: I came here in 1997 in May.

Leah: And how did your son feel about you leaving Ukraine?

Natalia: Well at that point of time when I was coming here actually I was coming actually to visit David on vacation, for one month. But it seems like ya know we click, and um like each other. So I never left. \*Laughter from both Natalia and Leah\*. But you know he felt- when I told my sisters and everything my sisters were there- I have 2 sisters in Ukraine- that I'm getting married and uh we'll start the paperwork for Alex to bring him here. So sure he was I guess ya know upset but he would never tell me that.

Leah: Right. So how old was he at the time?

Natalia: Uhh he was about 15. So he was 15, well you know we were communicating through the phone, and um in one year David went and brought him here.

Leah: Very nice.

Natalia: Yes, so... \*long pause\* well, I guess you know, I can help you here, myself is kind of unconventional why people would come here, right? I mean I came on vacation and whatever and I got married. So for me it was much easier than it would be for other people who would come and have no one in here, and they have to adopt and everything. So, I mean, but David was here, and this was the house I came to. So very same house.

Leah: Right. So how was the citizenship process?

Natalia: Oh that was very interesting \*chuckles\*. So that can probably write a book about- the citizenship. It was a very lengthy process. Um a very bureaucratic process- and no one wants to help. So \*clears throat\* I came here as I said, ya know, for vacation, and uh, and as we decided to get married, David decided to go uh to a lawyer. We found immigration lawyer so we did everything by a book, by law, ya know we filed the documents and everything. And um they call us... there is a period of time when you have to wait, till they will call you so they call us for the interview and um they... our neighbors had to give interviews, and everything. And um then they told me 'okay, you don't have a green card yet but everything is okay you will get it in the mail' right? So whatever. And then we kind of walking out and David ask me, 'why you not happy?' and 'I guess because I don't have a green card yet'. 'But you will receive it' he said, 'but I don't have it yet, so I'm not sure'. Well, that being said that, I didn't get a green card. And um ya know I had the employment authorization card, when you come to this country, when you um cross the border and whatever and the customs so and you go to the immigration office and they will give you the card. So uh I was able to go to work. But then uh ya know, after the interview waiting several months, nothing is coming, we are waiting, nothing is coming, and you go and you contact them and you go there and no one wants to answer anything no one knows anything and then finally someone calls us: 'Well, ya know what, you overstayed your visa'. And at that point sure I did. 'And we put.. someone put your documents on the wrong side of the folder.' You can ask David. It was ridiculous to the point that ya know, anyhow... and um so I was facing actually a deportation and a bar for 10 years, because I overstayed visa.

Leah: Wow!

Natalia: Yes. So, I, ya know, cannot tell everything, I already forgot, but there's so much into it. So there was the other way that um actually we could reapply, for the visa as his spouse. But that needs to be done outside of the country- from my own country. So we had to go to a psychiatrist so he can evaluate the hardship of our separation- people will be separated. So we did that. We had to uh file a waiver, it's called, a waiver... some form. And ya know \*beep in the background\* each time, any time you file that you're paying money. It's like a good money. You're paying money for that form. And that waiver-form goes to somewhere in Austria that one officer sits and does this for the entire world for who wants to come to the United States \*beep in the background\* and use those waivers. Okay. So we did that and I said 'ya know, I cannot stay because my work authorization expired, and I cannot go to school, I cannot work, I cannot do anything! I'm leaving!' I'm leaving, I need to start the process. So we risked that. So if that way I would not be approved, and then I am barred- 10 years. So... and my son was already here. So David had my son here! So he was going to school- to high school.

Leah: Oh okay, so was your son also-

Natalia: He had no problem.

Leah: That's very interesting. Is it because-

Natalia: Because I came on vacation and I got married. And he, David started documents for him in here. And he brought him here, his green card came in the mail so he had no problem. So anyhow, um, I think it was in 2000... in the fall of 2000- I came in 1997... In the fall of 2000,

I'm leaving the country with David and um hoping that we gonna um get re-approved visa in there, and coming back. So the problem is that Ukraine doesn't have immigration office, and Poland, in Warsaw, they take care of Ukrainian people who uh want to immigrate. So... in Ukraine they have only the tourist office and whatever. So, yeah. Sooo we come into Poland and we go in there and uh we have to go through the- you have to go through the medical and stuff and everything, like you know, in different countries you have to find doctors who does this stuff. And we have 3 days windows to complete everything. So we come in there with all of the medical records and everything, and then whatever they were giving to me- some kind of shots and everything- so we come into the American embassy with everything and um we give them the documents and they said 'Well you have to file the waiver!' I was like, 'but we did, we have copy here, we have copy there...' 'It doesn't work in here.' So ya know it seems like you came to a totally different country, even that's the American embassy. So there we had to file the waiver again, pay money again, and wait- 3 months- actually they even didn't tell us how many, it could have take years for him to review. So, and, well, that's the whole process! We returned to Ukraine, David stayed with me for a few weeks. But he couldn't because Alex was here by himself going to school and taking care of everything! \*Laughter\* So he was a year younger than you are, and um so um I was there, in the- and finally, I started preparing documents to completely leave the country and immigrate and that's also a totally different story. Corruption in Ukraine is very high. Every step I took I had to pay. I had to pay everyone on top of the legal fees that you pay. So and um you know, anyhow, all the documents were ready, and finally, in 3 months we actually got um, a go-ahead approval from the waiver from the guy from Austria. We had all the documents and um David flew to Poland, and I drove by car to Poland. So we met

there, we went to the embassy, I got my green card, and we came here. But it was just probably 1/10th of what I told you what happen- it was much more of a involved, everything.

Leah: Wow.

Natalia: But that's kind of overview. Yeah. It was very difficult process. So um I got a green card and then ya know, in 2003, I believe, I um got my citizenship. So we applied, and Alex got his citizenship in one day- the same day that he applied! For me again was problem. I had to wait and whatever to come back and um so but yes, I got it. Yep.

Leah: Awesome. So was Alex, um, did Alex like being in America?

Natalia: Not at the beginning. He couldn't adapt. Ya know he came as the teenager that ya know teenagers \*my mom coughs in the background\* they establish their name between their peers and everything. And then here he came at 16! So he went to Sherwood High School and um, the ESOL department there is just amazing. Wonderful department, and uh he had a teacher, Mr. Donnely, and um ya know they help him a lot considering he didn't know the language and everything so. But still he could make it and they uh I guess elected him to ya know... homecoming walk-game? So he was walking with a girl, anyhow, so.

Leah: Oh that's so sweet! So he was on the homecoming court?

Natalia: Yeah, yeah.

Leah: That's really cool.

Natalia: He didn't like the food, he didn't like the... it was different food, but he is good now.

Leah: That's really good. So you told me that you left Ukraine in 1997. So um you had been in the Soviet Union, like before Ukraine became independent. What was it like living under communist rule?

Natalia: You know, um, I can tell you that um maybe because I'm a younger generation in that era, so it was, actually I was good! I had money, I had um it was like before the Perestroika that happened in 1980s. So I was single mother, I divorced Alex's father, and I was able to put money away, I was able to have enough money for the food, I was planning to buy a car in a few years and everything. So it was good. I mean, you know... But when Perestroika hit, that's where um things turned out bad for everyone. 'Cause during the Perestroika everyone tried to get independent, and the country that all of the \*inaudible word\* powers worked together as one. And suddenly each one tries to break out. You know, and go on their own was not good for the economy, and one of the ways that you can think of that, you know, it's one factory was making refrigerators so, different parts were making in different countries. And then one wants to break out, 'Ok I'm not going to give you to these parts'. It was really bad and um we still could make living but it was not as good as it was before the Perestroika.

Leah: That's really interesting. I'm just going to check to see if the recording is still going...  
Great, it is still going. Ok. So has your family always lived in Ukraine?

Natalia: Um, yes and no. So my uh parents, my mother and my father actually left Ukraine in 60s. They went to Kazakhstan. At that point, they were rebuilding the country, they tried to bring more people. Like, you know, the gold rush was there. I was born in Kazakhstan with my older sister. So and then they came back to Ukraine and lived there ever since.

Leah: Oh that's very interesting. So do you remember anything from Kazakhstan?

Natalia: I, you know, very little. I was little, I was about 5 when we came back to Ukraine. I remember tulip fields. Ya know, really very pretty tulip fields and the house and very little. There's not much memory.

Leah: Why did your family move back?

Natalia: My mother... My father was not really a good man. So she needed family support and that's why she came back.

Leah: Okay.... So what was your childhood like, if you could describe that.

Natalia: Uh childhood... you know, that we were always helping family to do things. We grew up on a farm, so you have to work. So, really I know how to milk the cow, I know how to do

everything; so put me on an island and I will survive. \*Laughter\* So um, but it was loving family! Each one help others, and uh we- it was worry free. You didn't have to think that you go out and someone is gonna kidnap you, or whatever so it's very very safe environment. We lived on a self-sustainable farm. We had everything. You know, the milk, the cheeses, the butter, the meat, the fruits, vegetables, we grew everything ourselves! So, yeah.

Leah: So like your own grocery store?

Natalia: Yeah! \*Laughter\* So everything was without any pesticides and so it was organic. Yep. Yep.

Leah: So is your sister still back in Ukraine?

Natalia: 2 of my sisters- basically everyone from my family- back in Ukraine. My cousins, my older relatives...

Leah: So what is it like for them in Ukraine right now?

Natalia: Um you know that my younger sister, she's well-off in Ukraine. They have a restaurant, she has a store, she has 2, like uh, tea/coffee shops, and they have businesses. They rent one of the places, so... Yeah, she travels more than I do. \*Laughter\* So, um yeah, not bad. Everyone has um cars and everything. My older sister's little bit not uh ya know the same level as my younger sister. Bur otherwise, they are among the people who have money.

Leah: So, uh, do you ever go back and visit them?

Natalia: Mhmm. I just came from there! \*Laughter\* So um not often, you know since I came to this country, so I was studying a lot, so 17 years I put into studying. But, um, when we married David still was working for the company that had the contract with the department of energy in the United States who actually help in my town to build a nuclear power plant. So he would go there and I would just tag along... for a few days and whatever.

Leah: That's convenient.

Natalia: Yeah!

Leah: So, you said that you were studying for 17 years?

Natalia: Oh yeah, Les- oy, Leah. So you know when I got my green card, I came and I enrolled right away to Montgomery College. It took me probably... I was working full time, took me 4 years to get my associate degree. Um in business administration. After that, I um enrolled into um University of Maryland, University College. Got degree in global business and public policy. And then after that, you know, taking a year here and there off, and I uh enrolled back into University of Maryland and got my masters in finance and accounting.

Leah: Wow, that's really- that's dedication!

Natalia: I know!

Leah: To just keep going back to school like that... wow, don't think I could do that. \*Laughter\*  
Um...

Natalia: I had to. You know I had to start from scratch in here. Make something out of myself.

Leah: So had you not gone to college in Ukraine?

Natalia: Nuh-uh, well, my son is 34 years old. Means I had him right after high school. So I was taking care of Alex. But I had a good job, I was the uh in HR- a personal officer, whatever. Taking care of like, all of the uh hires and fires and paying salaries and stuff and helping the accounting department as well. So that's kind of you know I guess um when I finished my um associates degree. First of all I actually started working in retail- I worked 7 years in retail. Was ready to move to... When I got my associates degree, I got my first accounting job and I'm like 'Oh my God it's so easy for me, I can do it.' So and that's uh how everything became \*laughter\* with accounting and everything, and more education and everything.

Leah: Ok. So... one question that I'm really interested to hear the answer is what is a common misconception that people here have about Ukraine or Eastern Europe?

Natalia: I think, 'that we're the same as Russians'! It's the common misconception but I think after the Russians invaded Ukraine, a year and a half ago, that it became known that Ukraine is actually its own country with culture and everything. Yes, it's Slavic, it has very um large similarities with the Slavic group of population in Eastern Europe- but it's different, it's different! You know the language is different, and everything is different. So... that's the kind of... I guess.

Leah: Uh, can you tell me about some of the major culture differences between America's culture and Ukraine's?

Natalia: To me I think cultural differences is um the family ties. You know I- I don't see that with you and your mom 'cause I guess she has more from Eastern Europe, like you know, from Ukraine, but um I cannot go talking to my sister a week. So, and Americans can go years. And even they live 10 miles away. You know they don't talk to each other. And um, we take care of our parents, our parents take care of us, you know um... it's kind of on-going thing. You just don't leave your kids on their own even they're 6 years old and... you know, they do help. So that's kind of, I guess, the major difference. Also, what I notice, I don't know and you know, not considering your family; your family very resembles our Ukrainian customs and everything. But you know I worked at retail store and we would go have lunch and everything and we liked to share, so you offer your lunch, you know to people and they take it. But they don't reciprocate! They would not offer whatever they having! But they will take yours if you offer them. So that's kind of um..

Leah: And that's here in America?

Natalia: Oh yeah. It's here. They don't share. They don't like to share.

Leah: We have this uh, independent theme going on.

Natalia: I guess.

Leah: So... so your occupation before coming to the United States- you mentioned that before...

Natalia: Yeah I work in HR department as the personnel, officer, however you would pronounce it... \*My mother coughs in the background\*.

Leah: And how would you describe your relationship to America before you came here?

Natalia: \*Laughs\* Relationship... At that point of time when I came, the uh the information technology was not as much available there. So the only thing knew maybe from the movies and everything that whatever came on TV. So it was fine. But before I was saying when we were at school, they uh told us against capitalism. They were saying its decaying capitalism and everything. So that was you know, with propaganda again, against the capitalist countries and everything. But, with the internet coming up and the phones and everything...so.

Leah: Interesting. So tell me about some of your hobbies...or interests.

Natalia: \*Laughter\* You know I even cannot- I like to read. Right now I'm reading, but, since like, last 17 years, you know, I've been studying and reading the finance books that thousand pages long. So that was my kind of hobby I guess you can tell. But um right now we're reading, we like to travel. So uh, David and I took the trip last year. We went to Machu Picchu and we went to France, and uh this last summer we went to Ukraine... and then we planning to go to Italy next year. So guess this is hobby, travel, reading.

Leah: Very nice! So... let's see... \*David in the background says "You tried dance lessons and that didn't work out."\* \*My mother says to Natalia, 'You like to garden!'

Natalia: Um, yeah! You know I like to garden, and my son says that I have cleaning disease. So I guess the house needs to be clean! \*Laughs\*

Leah: So where is your son living now?

Natalia: He lives in uh, Middletown, it's uh north east of Frederick? \*David agrees in the background\* Yeah.

Leah: And what does he do?

Natalia: He is the system engineers, working for the company that do the uh parking point of entry systems- you know when you go and you scan the whatever, get the ticket... that's what my son installs stuff and everything and keeps that working, so...

Leah: \*Chuckles\* So how did your parents feel about you coming to America?

Natalia: Well, they didn't feel... my parents passed away before I came here. My father passed away um in 1980? So, as I told you, he was not a really good man. He actually was an alcoholic. And he passed away from alcoholism. And my mom had um heart failure so she had to have the surgery and you know she was 10 years on um different drugs helping her heart, and kill her liver and um so my mom passed away stage of 59. And in 1996. No, in 1995 she passed away. So and um so..

Leah: I'm sorry to hear that.

Natalia: Yep.

Leah: So how long had you and David been in communication before you decided to move?

Natalia: Oh, that's very interesting. So I met David in 1996 uh kind of in October, right? So then um you know, you could say it was destiny. We met at the dinner at the friend's house, and it was, I don't know, an hour together. Then we walked them to the hotel and in one week they were leaving. They call us just to say goodbye, it was like 10 minute short goodbye. And then um in about 2 to 3 months- he took pictures that he said he's gonna send, you know which he sent to the others and everything. So in about 2 to 3 months, I didn't hear from him and yet so my friend was sitting and she said 'let's call him!' I was like 'I really don't speak much English

to call someone.' She said 'let's call' so apparently I did not dial correctly the country code- I'm not sure what I did but it didn't come through. But very same day, when we came home with my friend, you know the uh... and she said 'well you have a phone message, on your phone'... David called. So it was about 2 months and we started instead of using the snail mail and we started faxing letters- it was faster. And then you can imagine it was October, 1996; May 1997 I was here.

Leah: Wow. That's so cute! \*Laughter\* That's really cute.

Natalia: Yeah and 19 years after we're still here.

Leah: Very nice! So did you uh make the wedding fast?

Natalia: Well it, you know, we really just went to the court house and that was the suggestion of our lawyer- to get married. To start the process of documenting.

Leah: So were you working um after you got your green card or even before?

Natalia: Um I was able to work before because I had the um authorization card. How is called, Leslie? \*Leslie is Leah's mother.\* Authorization permit card? \*My mother starts to speak, but doesn't\* Something, it's called authorization card somehow. Employment authorization card! So that's how it's called, yes. So when you know when you come to your country on a visa- a certain type of visa- so they give you the card so you can uh work until you will receive your

green card or whatever or they deport you or whatever for some reason. Yes, I did have the card, I worked. And the first job I got was at JCPenny and uh before Christmas they told me that they hired me and I did not understand a word what she said because my English was so bad but she said 'well you got the job'. I said 'Ok, thank you'. So anyhow I met many many nice people that help me with the language skills and the job...

Leah: So how long did it take you to be fluent \*my mother coughs loudly\* in English?

Natalia: Ohhh, I don't know. I mean it's you know, years and years. It's still you know, sometimes right now, you're thinking 'what the word to use' but um you know probably when going to Montgomery College and start writing and learning the uh correct grammar and everything. So that kind of helped me.

Leah: So tell me about your job now, what do you do?

Natalia: I am a finance manager at the government contractor company... which I love. Uh it will be almost 5 years since I started working for this company. And um I basically know long numbers. So, and I love everything about my job. People are very nice to work with, and um the management of the organization is also not um micromanaging so they let you do your job. And they are flexible. So if you need to go, you need to go! So family comes first.

Leah: So you mentioned how the uh Russia and Ukraine incident a year and a half ago- how did you feel about that?

Natalia: How I feel that Mr. Putin had no business being in Ukraine! It was the internal conflict, and Ukraine could uh resolve the conflict with um its own forces and everything. That's how I feel... And you know the conflict is still on, the conflict is in the um eastern part of Ukraine. And where my family lives they close the western part. And the last time we went to Ukraine um you know, we stay in L'viv, which is the western city adjacent to Poland, beautiful city, there is like no war and everything but everyone is very patriotic about their own culture and own country and everything and they wanna remain Ukrainians. You know they don't wanna be part of Russia.

Leah: So is there anything else you'd like to tell me or show me before we finish?

Natalia: Um I don't know, I have few souvenirs that we brought from Ukraine several years ago I guess. You know, the one is sort of like a weapon that was used by Ukrainian Cossacks in um several hundred years ago. And they were mostly in like mountains-man, so this weapon- can you bring that weapon? \*Pause\* No! The weapon! \*Pause\* Oh that is the, the vase is also from Ukraine. Um the weapon actually is looks like a bowl and it has this spikes all around this bowl. And then they would um- I believe- it doesn't have a chain, but I believe it was on a chain, an they would sway. And then hit um enemies with that so that's kind of interesting. We have um... I think that any country you'll go will have all of these souvenirs that resemble national cultures and everything so... Here's the weapon! If you wanna take picture of the weapon. But it's a souvenir! But the real one was from the mantel and everything was very heavy. Yeah. Um I do

have um a book which is- I believe it has English version and it's called 'Ukraine'? Well this is 'Ukraine' and so it can help you to learn about uh country so I can give you that book too.

Leah: Okay, I might actually take you up on that with the book.

Natalia: So can you- can you bring that book? So you can borrow the book, it's Dave's gift from someone. When he was going to Ukraine you know he met lots of people who- it's on the shelves!- he met lots of people who uh help him and someone gave him as a gift. I believe the book has the Ukrainian version and the English version so you can see it has the pictures and everything.

Leah: Ok! So everything you said was really interesting, um this will be archived. So um other people will be able to hear this for their research. Uh and thank you so much for your time.

Natalia: You're welcome, you're welcome!

Leah: And talking with me.

Natalia: Interesting to reminisce. \*David says something in the background\* Still the history is there, you know...