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Research Process and Scholarly Growth

In Fall Quarter 2025, I took the 200-level Honors College social science class: “Reform, Repression, and Revolution,” which centered around citizen-led political movements in the Soviet bloc. The culminating assignment was an argumentative research paper about the processes of reform, repression, and revolution in a specific central or Eastern European state of my choosing.

I immediately knew that I wanted to link the essay to my Judaic Studies major, but I didn’t know how. I am an Ashkenazi Jew (descended from Eastern European Jews), but until now, I’ve felt very distant from my Eastern European heritage. I didn’t know which specific countries my great-grandparents came from. The Yiddish language faded with my great-grandparents’ generation, and now I don’t know anything but “schmutz” and “shmear,” which is something any New Yorker knows.

In my early searches, I stumbled across *In the Shadow of the Shtetl* by Jeremy Veidlinger. Veidlinger conducted ~400 interviews with elderly Jews in small-town Ukraine about their lives in pre-war shtetls, the Holocaust, and their experiences living under the USSR. The book introduced me to Beyle Vaisman, whose family would run around and sing “Yay, yay, latkes, latkes” (139) as her mother cooked every Shabbat, and my heart warmed. And quickly broke again as I met Nisen Yurkovetsky, who was only a year old when Ukrainian nationalist fighters shot his parents and “the bullet went off [him] and [he] fell into the grave. [His] mother was holding [him].” It felt like my little college apartment filled with elderly Ukrainian Jews, telling me their stories of home and love and family and tragedy and heartbreak.

Veidlinger's use of oral history inspired me to incorporate at least one personal interview into my essay. I knew that my high school best friend's mom was born in Ukraine and lived in Israel before coming to America, but I had no idea what her life was like before Israel and why her life had gone the way it had. This led me to formulating my research question "To what extent did Soviet and Ukrainian government policies between 1945 and 1991 contribute to the repression of Jewish identity, and how did these policies shape patterns of Jewish emigration from Ukraine?"

To gather more sources for my paper, I used the library research guide for Russian and Eastern European History, which directed me to JSTOR, LibrarySearch, and the American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies. It took lots of experimentation to find the correct search terms to use.

I started by using different combinations of words from my research question: "Jewish," "Emigration," "1945-1991," "1900s," "20th century," "Ukraine," "Soviet." These original search terms picked up some relevant content, but were so general that I got lots of articles that were only tangentially related to what I really wanted to know. Nevertheless, these initial searches identified some of my starting articles that helped me understand the particular groups and events relevant to my topic, such as "Refuseniks" and the "Doctor's Plot."

Using these more specific search terms, I had more success finding related articles. For example, I found one of my more important sources, *Fear No Evil* by Natan Sharansky, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through my writing process. Its title doesn't include any of my search key words. I only found it because his name was mentioned in another article as a key refusenik activist; so later, when I was searching specifically for Refusenik-related material, I found his memoir.

In order to confirm the credibility of the information I was gathering, I began with peer-reviewed academic literature, like *Nazi Empire Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* by Wendy Lower and *Jews and Ukrainians: a Millenium of Co-Existence* by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and Paul Magocsi. Because I knew that these works had been written by academics who specialize in the field, and multiple experts had reviewed the works, I felt I could trust it to give me a strong base of contextual information. Once I had this contextual information, it was easier for me to evaluate information from other sources. I included multiple memoirs by refusenik activists because there is a certain level of authenticity that comes from first-hand experience. I also valued the emotional perspective that the memoirs are able to contribute.

After doing this preparation, I interviewed Sasha Feldman, my friend's mom. I was nervous because it was my first time conducting an interview, and I wasn't entirely sure how to go about it. I consulted the library how-to guide: "Doing Oral History on a Shoestring." Reading the guide prompted me to think through aspects of the interview in ways I hadn't considered. For example, the guide instructed me to use two devices to record, save the audio file in multiple places, and set clear expectations with the interviewee at the beginning. The guide set my mind at ease and ensured I was prepared if anything went wrong.

Going into the interview, I felt that I had completed the background research phase. However, during the interview, Feldman mentioned that her family wanted to go directly to America, but American immigration policies didn't permit that. In my preliminary research, I had only considered the effects of the USSR's emigration policies. Feldman's explanations made me realize the importance of looking beyond the USSR's policies. For her, the emigration decision was about both the USSR rules and immigration rules of her preferred destinations. This

insight forced me back to the beginning stages of research for this topic – doing basic googling and finding new sources to fill in this context gap.

Another challenge I encountered during my research was the emotional toll of reading about all of the tragedy and violence against the Ukrainian Jews. I knew that I was going to be reading about antisemitism, but the details hit me unexpectedly hard. Reading the details about Babyn Yar, such as the fact that the mass grave of Jews had been used as an unmarked dumpster, left me just staring blankly at the screen. I couldn't handle more information.

In a strange way, it felt like I had never really grieved the Holocaust before. I've always known the facts of what happened, and I've felt fear when I've seen "Six million wasn't enough" hoodies, but I'd never truly processed the sadness. The emotional toll made me think about switching essay topics entirely. I wasn't sure if I could handle reliving the trauma of my ancestors through the research. At the same time, that would have felt like I was abandoning them and their long-unmarked graves.

Throughout the process, I came to the realization that historical research related to my identity triggers all kinds of emotions: warm gratification of understanding my family more, deep sadness that lingers throughout my day, and sometimes a hollow emptiness from being unable to fully process the information.

My emotional response is a major part of the growth I experienced from the project. I've been proud of other research papers I've written before, but I felt far more invested in the success of this one. *I feel* the stakes of preserving the history of Jewish civilians, even if it upsets me.

The project was also a source of joy. My interview with Feldman was filled with laughter, and it all felt so real when she let me look over the books she hand-carried with her out of the

USSR. I hope that people read my piece and emotionally connect with Feldman and the other Jews included.

There is widespread misunderstanding and polarization about Jewish immigration and Israel. Though history is often taught by featuring high-profile historical figures, I think that highlighting the voices of ordinary people personally involved helps build empathy. My main takeaway from this research process was how important it is to showcase personal stories from history, and I will continue trying to do so through my Judaic Studies major. For people who do not fully understand the Jewish experience, I want my research to help them “meet” us, the same way that I felt I got to “meet” Ukrainian Jews through this process.