

THE SOVIET JEWISH EXPERIENCE

WASHINGTON STATE STORIES

**Violinist
Mikhail Shmidt**
**Moscow To New York
To Seattle, 1990-91**



VIOLINIST MIKHAIL SHMIDT PERFORMING WITH THE SEATTLE SYMPHONY

Mikhail Shmidt emigrated from Moscow to the United States in 1990, stopping first in New York, where he worked as a freelance violinist before moving to Seattle to accept a position with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra in 1991.

“I was born in Moscow, and not to a musician’s family. My mother was a teacher and my father was an engineer. An average Russian Jewish family. And it was just accidentally discovered that I have musical talent. My parents were friends with a concert pianist. He heard me singing and said why don’t you take him to

audition at this very famous, very difficult to get into music school, because he’s got perfect pitch.”



MIKHAIL SHMIDT

How did he choose the violin? “Actually it wasn’t my decision. Once you get into this Soviet Russian system of art education, you get into some huge, well-oiled machine. And then wheels start to turn. They’ll look at your hands and say, ‘Violin!’ You don’t have any choice. You just say, ‘Okay, violin it is.’ And then, if you’re not too good, in four years they’ll kick you out. Or it’s almost like a joke: ‘Okay, you’re not very good at the violin, maybe percussion?’”

But he was very good at the violin. He went on to the prestigious Gnessin Institute, then played in the State Symphony Orchestra and with the Moscow Radio String Quartet. “That experience,” with the Radio String Quartet, “actually pushed me towards emigration. **They didn’t normally actually take Jews. I had to go to the boss who told me that as a Jew I have to understand what kind of responsibility I have. I’m doing my job, what’s that got to do with my being Jewish? It was constant, every day you would encounter it.**”

So he decided to emigrate. “We all knew what steps we had to take to get out of that place. On a certain day you would go to the Dutch embassy, because the Dutch embassy represented Israel. So you go there, you leave your name and say we’re interested, and you wait. And you just hope that nobody was stealing your mail to prevent you receiving that first paper, which was an invitation from some mysterious Uncle Chaim from Tel Aviv who wants to reunite with his beloved nephew. Some people have a real relative but a lot of people didn’t. So it was this game. **The Soviet government knew that it’s completely fake. Jews were always pawns in this geopolitical game.**”

Freed of such games, in the United States he has found a deeper connection with Judaism. “When our son was born that was a huge thing. We joined the temple, and eventually he went through the bar mitzvah. I still consider myself pretty much secular, but we never miss the High Holidays. I feel very proud of who I am.”