

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Betya Shenker

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/betya-shenker>

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Julia Kanin: My name is Julia Kanin. This is the Coney Island History Project. And today we're recording an interview with Betya Shenker, a Brooklyn resident and immigrant who survived the ghettos in Ukraine during World War II. Hello Betya.

Betya Shenker: Hello!

JK: Please tell us about yourself and your difficult childhood.

BS: Before the war, I resided in Haivoron, Kirovohrad region. I was three and a half years old when the war started. And we ended up in a ghetto, the Bershada station, also located in the Vinnytsia region of Ukraine. I was a child during the war. What do I remember? Only specific moments. When they were coming... either they were the polizei, or the Germans, or the Romanians, we were cowering and hiding: my mother, my elder sister (who is no longer alive). Me, my mother and my sister, the three of us were in this ghetto. We lived together with another family; they were my father's relatives. That's because we didn't have our own housing, because we were newcomers there. It wasn't our place. But since we had relatives, we lived there. I remember that we were hiding in the basement. Mostly, the family was hiding, my mother and mother's sister with a small child who had just been born on June 28. They were all hiding in the basement. And my grandmother and I – we stayed. They left us upstairs. Why were we left? I do not know.

But there was one episode, when the Romanians, not the Germans, came in. The basement was covered with a narrow carpet. And it was just covering the entrance to this cellar. And my grandmother put up a chair and I sat in her arms. And they started asking my grandmother something: I didn't understand it... But I heard the word "mama," and I jumped out of my grandmother's arms and started screaming, "Mama *tuta* (there)! Mama *tuta* (there)!" And my grandmother got up and started dancing, she said, "yes, yes, you're tuta, tuta!" "She," she said, "asks me to dance." That's the moment I remember. What was it? My grandmother never wanted to dance with me, but here she was dancing.

And I remember the second moment very well. My older sister... There was a rabbi who gathered children up to the age of 16. Not children like me, but former schoolchildren. My sister finished four grades before the war. So first, second graders... And he taught them.

JK: Did he teach there, in the ghetto?

BS: In the ghetto, he taught in the ghetto. Apparently, they studied mainly mathematics or the Russian language in order to... Everyone hoped for victory! Thank God, there was a victory. I remember that my sister was very pleased because she was gaining knowledge.

But there were executions. Households got shot. Well, that was what happened. We lived on the outskirts. And this rabbi said that one should respond to death with weddings. Let's have 16-17 years olds (no older than that) and arrange weddings! My cousin lived with us at the house. Or, rather, we lived at their house with them. And she dated a boy before the war because she was seventeen or sixteen, I don't remember exactly. And they decided to have a wedding. I recall the poles, and there was a sheet at the top. They did it to do... how is this called?

JK: Chuppah?

BS: Chuppah. And all the neighbors gathered. I don't know what was on the table. But the only thing I remember from all this is that my mother and I were sitting on the stove. And my aunt made me a dress out of her ragged dress. It was new to me. And my mother was sitting there crying. Everyone was crying there. As the saying goes, the wedding was a feast in a time of plague. And I yelled at her, "Mom, you're going to ruin my dress!" I didn't know Russian because I hadn't learned to speak well before the war. Everyone spoke Yiddish, and I only learned to speak Yiddish. I told her, "Why are you crying? You're going to get my jacket stained."

That was one moment. And the next minute, suddenly there was silence and two Romanians with machine guns came in. And everyone sat down: they started praying, probably. I didn't see it. But everyone feared that he [a Romanian] would shoot with a machine gun and that would be it. I didn't fear it, but I was surprised. And they immediately went under the chuppah and started chatting there. And then they noticed the bottles of vodka. Long story short, they left. They didn't touch anyone. They left. They were apparently very drunk because there was not even water left on the table. And they were gone. And that's it. But there was no more chuppah. That's what I remember that they took off the sheet and put the poles somewhere.

We came back to Haivoron in 1944 after the victory. We were given a cart and some stuff. We drove very far because Bershad was about twenty kilometers from Haivoron, the town where I lived. And off we went. We had to cross the Bug River. The shore was on one side, and we had to either take a ferry or somehow cross to our side, to Haivoron. And everything fell to the floor. And I found myself locked up in a wardrobe. That's what I remember, because I was six and a half years old when we came back. Three years... Yes, about seven years. And I was shouting, and they were calling, but couldn't find me. And I was shouting and banging to be released.

When we came to Haivoron, I didn't go to school when I was seven because of Yiddish. I went to school at the age of eight. And at school, unfortunately, I didn't know a single Russian word. All I knew was Yiddish. And my mother was told to either remove me from school, or get me a teacher to learn Russian. Where to get the money to hire teachers when there is no work and father is at the front? How? Well, my mother said to my sister, "Come on, teach her Russian." And little by little, I started learning Russian. But the first grade I got was one (*equivalent to F - JK*) written with a red pencil. Back then, there were no red pens, but black and red pencils. Black

was for good grades, red was for bad grades. I remember I came with joy to my mom, "Mom, I got a one (*F*) with a red pencil!"

That was after the war. I graduated from high school; finished ten grades. And I went to Odessa to enroll [*in college or university - JK*]. We didn't even submit the application because we were told... My mother's brother married a woman with two children. And one girl was the same age as me. And we wanted to study linguistics. We studied English at school, and we liked it. And when we came, there was a Jewish woman sitting there, and she said, "Girls, don't submit the application, you have no chance here." That's how it is she said.

"Regardless of your grades, regardless of whether you pass the exams or not, you don't have a chance here." She said, "Don't waste your time, enroll in a technical school after the tenth grade." So, I enrolled in a technical secondary school that was called the Food Technical School of the Ukrainian SSR, but I wasn't accepted to a good department. We enrolled after the tenth grade. I studied to be a construction worker for two years and ten months. It was industrial civil construction.

After that, Sovnarkhozes were established in Odessa (Councils of National Economy). Almost half of the students stayed in Odessa and were given jobs. At first, you had to work for six months at workplaces, also as plasterers or painters, get a category, and then the lucky ones got the job. So I went to study plastering and painting. It took three months, I think, and then I was appointed to be assistant controlling manager by a foreman. And I worked as controlling manager for ten years. And in 1969, I was transferred to the estimate and contract department, and I worked professionally there as a technician until leaving for America. At first, we didn't want to go to America, but my husband's son and his family immigrated to America. He was eighteen years old. But we hesitated until 1992. In 1992, his son invited us. It was after Gorbachev when there were direct flights already.

JK: Why did you decide to move? What was the reason?

BS: To America?

JK: Yes.

BS: The reason... First of all, my son was in a class where there were only two Jews. The rest were all Russians. He was in the second or third grade. A girl said to him, "You're a little zhid!" He was absent from school for ten days. I didn't know about it. One mom from the Parents' Council told me about it. And she said, "for some reason, your son is absent from school." I asked, "How could that be? He is taken to school every morning." She replied, "No, he doesn't go to school," and we were told to look into it and report to the teacher. "I don't know why." She said, "We'll find out and tell you." And they told us that a girl called him "a little zhid," and he stopped coming. He didn't know the word, and then someone probably explained it to him. It was the third or fourth [grade], I don't remember.

I remember when we were in the seventh or eighth grade, when we were already grown-ups. We lived in Haivoron. We had a private house: a room of eight meters, a kitchen of nine square meters – two closets. There were four of us living there: me, my sister, my father, and my

mother. This was after the war. That's what we left there. The bathhouse was far away. And we had to go there once a week. Bathing at home was nothing. We went to the bathhouse. When I was going to the bathhouse with two other girls (my friends were Russian, because I'm telling you, we had only four Jews for 30 people in our class), well, we did not hear that word in the class, but when the guys who were younger than us, whose parents knew that we were Jewish, shouted, "Zhidovka is coming!" And the boys who were escorting us fought them.

JK: Did you live in Odessa or in another city at that time?

BS: It was in Odessa. She informed me that, upon questioning her daughter, her daughter had disclosed it to her. "What's the matter? Why doesn't Borya Shenker go to school?" She said, "Mom, he was called a zhid (she said his last name there)." And when she told me, I went to school and talked to the teacher. She taught the Russian language and literature, and she was a great person, the Secretary of the Party at that school. And I said to her, "How did that happen? The child has not been going to school for ten days and the parents have not been informed." We didn't know about it. We took him to school in the morning, he came back home in the afternoon. We lived not far from the school. He didn't have a key; he was coming in the afternoon. He was running around outside until his father returned. He was coming earlier, and I was coming late. He said that he was running around the streets until his dad came. What homework was he doing? He did something at home and that was it. Anyway, that girl was scolded, her parents were summoned.

That was the first nudge. The second nudge was that my husband's eldest son was already in America. I don't know why his family left. But then the parents had to agree that they would allow the other half to take the child. And they left. And the calls began. Of course, he missed his son. It's natural. And when direct flights became possible... He invited us, and we decided to go. And our children. The son [Betya and her husband's son] said, "I don't want to be here anymore," and the daughter-in-law too. The question was what we should do. My son, his wife and her parents wanted to move to Germany. And I said to him, "Over my dead body. The Germans were killing us, and you want to go to this country? Over my dead body." And that issue has been resolved. I called his son myself (well, we were on good terms back in Odessa when he was little). I called him and said, "Volodya, can you petition for us [to come to America]. He said, "Of course!" That's how we ended up in America.

JK: What year was that?

BS: It was 1992 when we came to America. Well, like everyone else, we have difficulties of course... His son lived in New Jersey. We ended up in New Jersey. We lived there for four months. And then my husband's cousin called, "What are you doing there?" We couldn't get employed. We started learning English – there were Jewish centers there. There was a Jewish center, where Jewish teachers – Americans, true Americans, not Russians – volunteered to teach us English.

We were assigned the language level. My son got the fifth, the highest level, and my daughter-in-law got the fourth level. My husband studied German at school. And my husband managed to evacuate, he was not in the ghetto – his family lived in Kazakhstan, Alma-Ata. They learned

German there. So, he didn't even know a single English letter. When they tested him, he was told he was at the beginner level. And I was given the second level. After all, I studied English at school and I already knew the alphabet and some words, and I could read. I declined only to go with my husband to the beginner level in order at least to help him with the letters.

She [the teacher] said, "A," and he was sitting. I said, "It's spelled like our A." I helped him. And what I liked was that these teachers knew who they were dealing with, that we were the people who didn't know a single word. So, she took a chalk, and walked around like this (it was a small group), and she walked around and showed it to everyone – "*chalk*." And she said, "Remember! Remember!" "Repeat this word after me!" and everyone repeated in unison. I helped him. And then when she said, "What is it?" I gave him a hint. That's how we learned together with him. They all did demonstrations. They had patience with us. This was very valuable.

And then his cousin (she's been living here in Brooklyn already) came in and said, "Please, let's pack your things and move to Brooklyn!" And I said, "Why Brooklyn?" She replied, "You'll enroll to study, and your kids will enroll to study, you'll get jobs. And you'll find a job, you'll be doing cleaning. You must forget who you were in Odessa. No! Your specialty doesn't exist here." That was because nobody wanted to take us without knowing the language. In 1992-1993, there were few home attendant agencies. Now they are on every corner. And they didn't want to hire me because I had already forgotten Yiddish. I could have gotten a job at the Jewish nursing home, but I didn't have Yiddish anymore. I knew some of the words. And the job required working with patients who spoke Yiddish. So, I couldn't find a job. And then, after a while, I started working as a babysitter. I worked a little as a babysitter. And then we lived like this: my husband couldn't get welfare for five years. He was sick. He couldn't work. He never got a job. And my son went to study at Touro College in the evening. And my daughter-in-law went to Kingsborough College. She enrolled, graduated in two years, and started to work.

JK: Were you able to get a job in America?

BS: I couldn't work in America. I worked a little bit as a babysitter.

JK: How old were you when you moved to America?

BS: I wasn't even 55. I did not get my pension in Odessa. My husband had been retired for two years. He was seven years older than me. And I didn't get a pension and I turned 55 here (not in Brooklyn), in New Jersey I turned 55 in 1992.

I understood that I ended up in a country where there is kindness and help... I had, as it was later determined, fibroids. And I was losing hemoglobin. And when we arrived in New Jersey, we had to undergo a medical examination. And when they took the blood, they found out. And they said, "What condition do you have?" I said, "Nothing." I knew I had fibroids. I was diagnosed back in Odessa. But I refused to undergo the surgery there. I said, "Nothing." They couldn't understand why I had such low hemoglobin. I was embarrassed to tell my husband's son. He was our interpreter whenever we went. And I didn't say anything.

And then, my son was visited by a friend from Chicago with his wife. They came early to America. And I said, "Alyonushka, come with me to the doctor." She said, "Of course." And she

said what it was, why my hemoglobin was so low. And I was told I needed an urgent operation. But how do I do the operation? It cost money. We weren't eligible for surgery yet. And it had to be done immediately. And so I went to a Jewish doctor. It was October 15, '92. I remember that day because it was my birthday. I came to a Jewish doctor. At the same time, my sister came to visit me from Israel. And she and I went to this doctor. And he said, "How am I going to talk to you? You don't speak English." I told him that I don't speak English, but I understand some words. He said, "No, I need you to understand well." I said, "No, I can't." He said, "Well, I don't have any interpreters." And my sister suddenly said to him, "Do you know Yiddish?" He said, "Very well." My sister was very good at Yiddish. She was the eldest.

And she knew the language. And she didn't forget it as I was beaten so I forgot that language. Well, they didn't beat me, but they slapped my hands, "Don't write it! Write in Russian letters!" I'm telling you that I didn't know [Russian] at all... So, I quickly forgot Yiddish. But till this day I can understand it. And my sister started talking to him. He said, "She needs surgery. Needs it! Otherwise, this hemoglobin will kill her! She's losing blood! Look, I don't know how to help you."

When I told Vova (his son) about this, he said to his wife, "Come on, take her to the doctors." I went to a Chinese doctor, he said, "You need to do it, but I don't do it for free." The second doctor was from India. He said, "We don't do the surgery for free. And you don't have enough to cover this operation yet." And we went back to that Jew. We came on October 15, my birthday. And it was Rosh Hashanah, a Jewish holiday that we didn't know about. In Odessa, it was forbidden to go to the synagogues, so it was a secret. And then she told him that no one wanted to take me. He took my chart again. And he said, "Oh! October 15 is the first day of Rosh Hashanah! I will give her a mitzvah. I'm going to do surgery for her. I have three spots in the Catholic hospital. I'll do it for her. I am giving her mitzvah." We didn't know what a mitzvah was. And when my sister found out, we started crying. How so? The place was expensive, and the surgery, and he was giving the mitzvah. That's how a Jewish man, a true American Jew, who didn't know us, operated on me. I thank God that I live in this country.

JK: Did any of your relatives or friends move to the U.S. as well?

BS: A lot of my colleagues are here.

JK: Did you manage to keep in touch with those who stayed in Ukraine?

BS: Yes. To this day.

JK: Tell us about it.

BS: Well, they are my former colleagues that I worked with. I worked in this organization (it was called OdesTransStroy – Odessa Trust of Transport Construction). I worked there for about 30 years. And when I was leaving, a lot of people saw me off. And also, our team was mainly Russians and Ukrainians. There were very few Jews. And two people still wish me a happy birthday. Except for the last year. And all of a sudden, I got a call from San Francisco. And I don't have anybody in San Francisco, I don't know anyone there. I wondered who that might be? But I picked up the phone. And I heard a female Russian voice, "Don't hang up the phone! I'm

from San Francisco. I am a friend of your co-worker. She wishes you a happy birthday every year. And this year, she couldn't. And she begged me to call you on October 15 and wish you a happy birthday, because she couldn't." And I've been here for almost 30 years! And there is another co-worker like her. And then I have a friend who lives in Los Angeles. She is a native of Odessa. But again, we talk on the phone once a week.

JK: What were your first impressions of America, and did it meet your expectations?

BS: It didn't meet the expectations, because, you know, a lot of people who went to America gave bad reports. And my husband didn't want to go. His son insisted, but he didn't want to go. I had a great job with a good salary. I was no longer working as a technician, but as an engineer. They gave me a raise. And we didn't want to move anymore. My son really wanted to. We didn't really want to go – we knew about the bad reports. But when the first difficulties passed... It was very difficult. And my daughter-in-law was cleaning and studying. We weren't making much and almost everything went towards rent. My husband didn't make anything. And he couldn't work. That's how it went: me, my son, and my daughter-in-law worked part-time. And then it became easier, when daughter-in-law and son got jobs. And then I began to be grateful to America: such good people. They treated you well when they learned that you were from Ukraine. We have maybe five or six American families left in the building now. And when we came here, it was the other way around. 80 or 90 percent was American Jews who came from Poland in 1947. Do you know that there was a persecution of Jews in Poland?

And what surprised me was that they didn't visit each other. The bell rang and I went downstairs. And so there were ten of them there. And they chatted among themselves. And when we passed, only one of them knew Yiddish. The rest did not know Yiddish. And when we were crossing the lobby, my husband first, they addressed him, but he did not know English. And he didn't understand. So, one of them said, "Who are you?" He said, "A Jew." "Oh!" she said, "Do you know Yiddish?" He said, "A bit." He didn't know Yiddish either. But when I passed, I already knew who it was. So, I said, "I can speak Yiddish with you." At that time, I remembered Yiddish better.

JK: Do you remember the first time you went to Coney Island?

BS: Yes. The first time we got to Brighton across East 11th via the bridge. It was with his cousin, who has lived here for many years, and the first impression was that I really didn't like Brighton. It was terribly dirty. There was only one Russian a restaurant called "Odessa," and that's it. And on the other side [of Coney Island] there were no Russians at all, no restaurants, nothing. And among them was an Italian fish shop. That was the only clean spot. And it was dirty, it was terrible. And then, gradually, the Russians started... The "National" was established by the Russian owners. "Odessa" was established, well, there was a "Primorye" restaurant – a Russian one too. And then gradually, shops, a few pharmacies. Brighton has become a beautiful street!

JK: What about the Coney Island part where Luna Park is? That's what we mean by Coney Island.

BS: I was there very often when I babysat a boy. I frequently went with him to the aquarium. And then they always have these fireworks on holidays. I don't go anywhere to see the fireworks. I watch them from this window... That's where I see the fireworks. I'm very happy to be in America. I am very glad that we came here, that I have been living in America for 31 years. And thank God for everything, for everything that was done for us. We are happy. And I'm an old woman. I'm 85 years old, I'll be 86 soon.

JK: As a person who lived through the war, and went through the ghetto, what does Victory Day mean to you?

BS: Victory Day meant a lot to me. I started understanding Victory Day when I was an adult. I'll tell you why: schools educated us. My parents worked. So, we had to be the pioneers. At first, little octobrists, then the pioneers, and then the Komsomol members. When it was Victory Day, our parents celebrated. And we celebrated Victory Day with them. Mostly, Victory Day only. Sometimes we went to celebrate the May holidays, and sometimes we didn't [*In Soviet Russia, May Day was a holiday that was celebrated with huge parades*]. But then **you** could have gotten a reduced salary if you didn't go. They were trying to scare us... It happened. But Victory Day is a big holiday. And now, we do not celebrate Victory Day. But in my heart, when it's May 9, I watch the Victory Parade on Russian television. But I haven't watched it for the last three years.