

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Lolita Divilova

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/lolita-divilova>

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Julia Kanin: This is the Coney Island History Project. My name is Julia Kanin. And today we are talking to Lolita Divilova. Greetings, Lolita.

Lolita Divilova: Hello, Julia.

JK: Please tell us a little about yourself and where you came from.

LD: I came from sunny Azerbaijan, from Baku. It is a big, beautiful, historical city. And very multinational. It has unfortunately undergone such historical vicissitudes... There was a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And it was hard times. And that led us to immigrate to America.

JK: What was your life in Russia before immigration? As I understand it, you had been living there for a while?

LD: We moved from Baku to Moscow. And my husband and I had a baby there. And we lived in Moscow for about seven years. And after that we moved to New York to be reunited with our relatives, with my aunt. That's how we got to New York.

ZH: How and when did you immigrate to America?

LD: We came in '93. And somehow, we immediately entered American life. And that's how we've been living here for 27 years. And we love it here. We have this tradition in our family. When we meet with our children on Thanksgiving, my husband always says the same phrase, "Thank you to this country for giving us unlimited opportunities." And I always remember that when I was leaving Russia, I was not a Russian citizen. But I wasn't a citizen of any country, as a matter of fact. Because I was born in the USSR. By the time I was leaving, the USSR no longer existed. I had not been to Azerbaijan for a long time, but I was leaving from Russia, of which I was not a citizen either. And in my Russian passport I had a note: "Please be advised that citizen such and such is not a citizen of Russia". And when I came here, I was stateless. And so it was written in my white card. And when, after seven years, when I got an American passport, I was very touched that after so many years I finally was a citizen of the country. Because it is not very pleasant to live somewhere without any particular rights and not to have... Although I have never felt this way here, but still, to get citizenship status of a country, it has some significance. Being stateless is not the most comfortable status.

JK: What were your first impressions of America?

LD: My first impressions were ambivalent. It was a bit of a culture shock. When we first arrived, everything seemed foreign. Well, first of all, the culture was a little unusual for us. The language, of course, well, was a challenge. Although I went to an English school, and therefore I did not have any particular problems as others did. So, it gave me a small spurt, so to speak. I was able to immediately

go to college and study. And I graduated here from two colleges. And now I work in a community hospital called Interfaith Medical Center.

JK: Was it hard to assimilate when you arrived?

LD: It was very difficult to adapt. The first five years were very hard. We were working different jobs, studying, bringing up a son. We had a daughter here in the first five years. And all this, of course, was very difficult. And if I were to do it again now, I don't know if I'd have had enough strength. But when a person has a goal and she moves toward it, she always achieves it. The most important thing is to set a goal. And moving towards it is a matter of technique.

JK: What was your first job in America?

LD: Well, I can't call it a job. It was probably some part time jobs in order to hold on while I was in college. I worked as a housekeeper for several families. I remember one family very distinctly. It was a Brooklyn College professor who invited me to host Saturday, help him to host Saturday. And he invited me for a few Saturdays. For me it was... I don't think he gave me this job to work for him, he just wanted to help me financially and just introduce me to the culture. It was very nice, and I will never forget it. I was more of a guest than a housekeeper on these Saturdays. And I look back at it with great warmth.

JK: What does it mean to host Saturday?

LD: The professor was Jewish. And he was hosting Saturdays, every Saturday. It's a holiday for Jews. It's a holiday. And he hosted Saturday, so he was meeting with his family, they were setting a very big table. His whole family was gathering, they were telling each other stories, singing songs. It's just a traditional feast. And I was a student, and he invited me to help, but I think he just wanted me to join them and help me financially.

JK: Where did you settle after immigrating?

LD: After immigrating I settled down, I came, and settled right away among my compatriots, or people from the same city, sharing the same culture. I lived on Ocean Parkway and it so happened that this was the place where many people from Baku settled (at that time). Now the demographics have changed, but at that time people mostly from Baku lived there, from around Church Avenue to Foster Avenue. It was very easy to adapt, because people knew each other, people helped each other a lot, there was a big community. And then, in the end, they even built a synagogue on Ocean Parkway (someone made a donation). And it was such a nice, friendly community. Everyone looked after each other, watched the children, got the children from school. It was very... It always helps a lot when someone is around, someone who understands you.

JK: Tell us what made you move to Coney Island and buy an apartment there?

LD: Well, you know, buying your own home is probably one of the first goals for every immigrant. For many - achievable, for many - unachievable. It took us twenty years, probably, to go through all these vicissitudes to buy our own housing. I've always loved this area. I've seen it in movies. There is a movie, *Angel Heart*, even the building in which I now live was very beautifully shot. It was somewhere out there on the horizon, though it wasn't supposed to be in the plot. It's always a holiday. Coney Island is a holiday. You go on the boardwalk, bright sun, attractions, carousels, people laugh, people dance. You forget about all your difficulties, problems, when you find yourself on a boardwalk,

when you pass by the aquarium. I was attracted to this feeling of celebration. And the feeling of home. And that's how it led me to Coney Island. I wanted it for a long time. Somehow, we were trying for a while, but we managed it. Again, when you set yourself a goal, the most important thing is to set it. And then you reach it.

JK: Please tell us about your first impressions of Coney Island?

LD: Well, that was the feeling of celebration. A sense of celebration, constant fun, smiles. I used to come here with the kids when they were little. For them it was such a big event when we were going to Coney Island, going to the beach, going to attractions and carousels. And I liked that feeling and I wanted to live here.

JK: And you now live, as far as I gather, at Brightwater Towers on Coney Island. How did you manage to become a member of a community board?

LD: You know, I really like our building. It's a beautiful complex. We have a nice big pool. We have beautiful property. At least, before Sandy, it was like a resort. When I walked into this resort, I thought it was all beautiful. There was one small problem... Although, on one hand, it is a great convenience, but on the other hand, there were complaints from the residents of our building about the loud pounding from the train (passing trains). I started with a grassroots organization. That means we started attending meetings of the community board and talking about our problems, that we can hear banging all the time, that here the screeching of a passing train (the F train turning) is very audible. And slowly I began attending all the meetings. Usually, people are given an opportunity to express their opinions. Before the board meeting starts, people can speak out. And I have several times spoken out with my, so to speak, well, if not complaints, then

JK: ... suggestions?

LD: Suggestions, yes, let's put it this way. And with the fact that I went to these meetings, I began to listen to what they were talking about, learning how the meetings were held. And I became very interested because I thought if you live in this neighborhood, then this neighborhood is just an extension of your home. You can't consider your house your little apartment, your little fortress. Everything around you is a continuation of your home. And I wanted to be a part of it, too, because I saw how people in the community board are active and enthusiastic, and how they are trying to do something better for the area, how they achieve everything, how they work with ~~urban~~ city agencies. It's a big job. There are continuous meetings. There's an ongoing participation in discussions about everything that happens in the community. And I was very interested in that. And I became involved in it too because I wanted to contribute to the development of this area. Especially after Hurricane Sandy, which no one expected. The district suffered heavy losses. There has been serious destruction, including our building. And we're still recovering. And we are trying to make the building even better than it was before Sandy. And I know that we will achieve that goal. And we are already on our way to that goal, halfway to the top. But I would like the surrounding area to gradually recover. I wanted to be a part of it.

JK: What does this panel do in general? What is its main job?

LD: The job is to convey some of the wishes of the people we represent to the city agencies. You know, for example, let's say, if there's a problem on the street, public safety, we have a lot of committees. We have a Public Safety Committee, we have a Transportation Committee, we have an Education Committee. We have a Library Committee. There's a committee that determines how

many liquor licenses should be in a certain area, for example, in our area. We have a committee that is called the Interfaith Committee, it's a committee that connects people of different cultures. Housing Committee... these are different subcommittees of the main board, and each deals with its own tasks. And decisions are made by committees, and then put to the entire community board for a vote. That's why we convey many issues that we have in this area to the agencies, to the board, and to [Brooklyn] Borough Hall, to City Hall, we convey everything that happens in the area and all the concerns of the residents of our district.

JK: Do you assign the roles yourself who serves in what committee? Or do you choose by your interests? As far as I know, you're on one or two committees, right?

LD: Initially, the chairman of the CB's board invites board members to choose committees as they wish. Then committees are formed and, of course, there must be a certain number of people on the committee. And it often happens that it's either the chair, or the co-chair, it's usually by appointment. They are appointed by the chairman of the board. She assigns two co-chairs. There are two co-chairs on each committee, it's imperative that two people run a certain committee. They are leading this committee, so to speak. And that's how the board works. There are several.... A dozen committees, and each committee has two co-chairs and members of these committees. The city agencies come, and they speak, make presentations. We have a Land Use Committee, for example, which determines if the community board supports specific construction in our district.

LD: I am a member of the Transportation Committee and the Environmental and Sanitation Committee. So, we have certain issues, we have certain problems in the area that we want to resolve. So here we have a contaminated canal on Cropsey. Then we have a lot of work going on [related to] air pollution, there are a lot of developments going on to clean the air, and so on. It's an Environmental and Sanitation Committee. And the Transportation Committee deals with public transportation.

JK: It is a voluntary participation in these committees, as far as I understand. It's not a job, is it?

LD: No, it's strictly voluntarily. But it's by appointment. That means not everyone can get it. It requires an application to [Brooklyn] Borough Hall. And every nominee is reviewed because it's considered a public activity. This is very important for the area, for the city, and for the borough.

JK: And you talked a little about Hurricane Sandy. And that the area has not yet recovered, so to speak, and your building in particular. Tell us a little bit how you survived this hurricane. Because from what I understand, you moved just before the hurricane hit. Correct?

LD: I moved just two weeks before the hurricane landed. And I spent the night of the hurricane in my home [in the building]. But then, unfortunately, I had to evacuate because I was just afraid to stay here. I thought it was a little unsafe, although our building recovered very early, we already had electricity in a few days, we already had working elevators. I couldn't complain. Everything was done very quickly. But the whole area was somewhat gloomy at that time and I moved for a few weeks back to my relatives on Ocean Parkway. Well, then I came back, and we slowly started coming back.

JK: Unsafe in what way? There was no electricity?

LD: There was no electricity, there was still sand and puddles in some areas. Some garbage was on the street for the first time because the wave washed away, everything was floating. The first night it was like the Titanic: everything went out and the cars were swimming in the water. It was pretty scary. Well, it was a little traumatic. It was necessary to overcome it somehow and then come back.

Some fears have to be overcome. Well, gradually everything was forgotten. Well, not completely forgotten, but everything is now recovering. And now the Aquarium is being restored. Although half of it was also underwater. I saw it from my window. So... Of course, when such natural disasters occur, it is a little hard to take. But fear... We're all human beings. We have an animal fear. But then you get through it, and you overcome it, and you move forward.

JK: How quickly was Brightwater Towers restored?

LD: Relatively quickly. We had all the infrastructure working, so to speak. They worked, and they started working very quickly. But we are trying, so to speak, to restore the exterior, so that everything will be better than it was.

JK: The board must have been directly involved in the recovery? Correct?

LD: I am a member of the board at Brightwater Towers. I am involved in the restoration, and in the life of this condominium. It's very important for me. And I try to take all the wishes and criticism and everything else from the community, from our residents. So, I try to accommodate them, help them. In everything they need, so to speak.

JK: Do you think Coney Island has changed since you moved to Coney Island, and how does it look like now?

LD: Of course, it's changing drastically. New York is generally a very dynamic city. But now, I think, Coney Island blossomed before Covid. Now we have paused a little with the fact that the [amusement] parks were temporarily closed. And of course, it is a pity to look at these empty bars, restaurants, and all the establishments on the boardwalk. Everything was, of course, much brighter, and more colorful. And we hope that everything will recover. But I think since I moved here in 2012, I've seen just a takeoff in these 8 or 9 years. There's a lot of developments, a lot of amenities that we have now, and the Ford Amphitheatre on the boardwalk was built, the new buildings around, the improvement. A lot of young people have moved here, young people with children, mostly because there is a very good school district. There are good schools here, so people are eager to come here. It's a very nice area in itself.

JK: Do you have any interesting stories related to Coney Island? Maybe some memories?

LD: I can't say that I've had some stories happen here in 12 years. But for nine years I worked at the nursing home on 27th Street, on Surf and 27th. This is the Saints Joachim and Anne Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. I am a physical therapist. And I worked there as a therapist on weekends, on Saturdays. And a lot of people in this nursing home were Coney Island residents who grew up here. They grew up here and in the surrounding area. And they... Every person is a story. It can be interesting, tragic, comic. And I met a lot of interesting people there. They told me stories about Coney Island, how it evolved, what was going on. They told me about the hotel where Shorefront Nursing Home is now. Seagate, I think it's now called Seagate Nursing Home [Seagate Rehabilitation and Nursing Center]. They told me about this hotel, what was going on there. This is probably an interesting story about Coney Island I was told by the residents of this nursing home I worked with. It was the most pleasant time for me. I don't work there anymore, unfortunately. But I was very pleased to work there.

JK: You probably know a lot about Coney Island if you heard so many stories?

LD: I know a lot about Coney Island, fortunately, because of your project. At some point I started researching. I was very interested in where Brightwater Towers is, and what was there before. And inadvertently I somehow came across such a small headline, "Ask Charlie." [Charles Denson, director of the Coney Island History Project]. And I started reading what people were writing about Coney Island. And I became very interested. And I even found an old map of our development, what was there at that point. I found that there was a Vanderveer Hotel and that there was, I think, even a skating ring at Culver Depot. And so, I've probably learned a lot from the people I've talked to, the residents, and a lot because of your project. So, thank you very much for what you do. It's a very interesting job.

JK: You're interested in history, as I understand, right?

LD: I was interested to know where I live. Probably about the story of this development. And I've unearthed a lot of information. Next year, or maybe in two years, we're going to have the sixtieth anniversary of our development, and I'd love to do something, well, I don't know, an exhibition, or something interesting to put on the website, or even some large photos in the building, so people know where they live. It's very important. History is very important.

JK: How do you see Coney Island in the future?

LD: I can see it probably get bigger. I want more of this holiday feeling. I can see how the boardwalk will develop in the future. I'd like to see more young people here. I'd like to see more new developments that will allow people to move forward. It means more technology. It seems to me there is not enough... Well, let's say there are no banks on our side of Coney Island. It's a very residential area, there are no banks, there aren't enough stores. There are amusement activities, small shops for tourists, but I think on our side there's not much commercial development. I think it's necessary to have something here so that people don't have to go far for things they need to buy. There are not enough supermarkets. I think the most important thing, as someone who has something to do with healthcare, I don't think there are enough stores with organic food, or some healthy foods. It would be very important, because even at one time people were putting together a petition to have Trader Joe's open its development here. But unfortunately, they declined. But it would be interesting to see more health and wellness sports clubs here. Because there are more and more people here, young people are arriving. And people are paying more attention to health and wellness, and I think this area lacks it. But I think we will slowly get it here too. I would like to make this place so that people can enjoy life here. I would like to see a contemporary Coney Island where there would be all the amenities that are needed for an area where people can enjoy life, that they would have everything they need, everything they require. Something is missing here. Well, we'll get it. It takes time.