

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Olga Lozar

Interviewer: Julia Khanina

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/olga-lozar>

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Julia Khanina – My name is Julia Khanina. This is the Coney Island History Project and today we are talking with Olga Lozar, a member of the Polar Bear Club.

Olga Lozar – Good afternoon, Julia! It is my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me. And let's talk.

JK – Tell us, please, where did you come from and when?

OL – I am from Kuban, Stavropol [in the North Caucasus region of southern Russia]. I came to the United States of America twenty-five years ago, with my husband and child. We came straight to New York. We landed here and settled. And we have been living the last twenty five years, as I hoped, successfully, in New York.

JK – Did you settle in Coney Island right away? Or did you live in another area?

OL – No. As often happens in immigrant stories, we rented low-cost apartments at first. Then we started to flourish, renting more expensive apartments. And then we purchased our property in Sea Gate. It's been 16 years already. We moved here and now are enjoying Sea Gate. It's a special part of Brooklyn with access to what we call "an ocean." Well, it's Jamaica Bay really, with access to the water. It's a unique place. And I think it was a perfect acquisition in all aspects. [It's] the joy of life. And I would say that the quality of one's life depends greatly on the place where you live.

JK – What was your first impression of Coney Island?

OL – Well, Coney Island of 25 years ago is different from the Coney Island of today. First of all, Coney Island has easy access to the water. It has access to the beaches, enjoyment, swimming in the ocean and relaxation. Coney Island is not that small: it spreads from Brighton Beach to Sea Gate. It is a great place with fresh air. I had contrasting impressions. Once again, we have a lot of city housing projects here. Obviously, crime rates were completely different 25-30 years ago. Coney Island is changing now for the better. We, the residents of this area, are very pleased to see it. And I'm proud as a member of the Polar Bear Club (we call it 'walrus swimming' in Russia, and Polar Bear over here) that I can participate in the events of our non-profit organization that allows us to collect some money and donate it toward the development of Coney Island. I always try to be active and help out. This is my community and I feel, I know that I'm a proud patriot of Coney Island. It is known that the area still has some problems, especially social, but it's changing. It is very good.

JK – Tell us a little about the Polar Bear Club and how you got in it.

OL – The Polar Bear Club is a part of Coney Island. Coney Island was once a very vibrant area. I would say, a hundred years ago. It was something like Miami nowadays. And if you have an opportunity to take a look at the old pictures, you'll see how crowded the beaches were, how

people used to spend their time there. There were restaurants, and entertainment, and everything looked so nice. When you look at the same streets, at the same places, it was all reflected in those amazing pictures of Brooklyn, New York. You can't help admiring it.

I became acquainted with the Polar Bear Club truly by accident. My husband and I were walking by the water one weekend. I don't remember precisely, but I think it was about 20 years ago when I saw a group of winter swimmers for the first time. I have always been attracted to cold water. I always enjoyed it: I had an opportunity to be in the Caucasus Mountains, at Dombay and Teberda. And I always enjoyed their mountain rivers. It was not easy, obviously. But it was a great pleasure: incredible lakes, alpine meadows. And I did it [winter swimming]. And when I saw this group of people [in Coney Island], I remember that moment: I was stunned. I just stood there frozen. And I remember that a man came out [of the water], an American, and noticed my reaction. I don't even remember what he said to me. And I replied that I liked it very much as well. And he just said: "Come!" Very well. It took me some time to process that I wanted to come. And when we purchased property in Sea Gate, I started getting used to this idea. I started reading and looking for information. I found information about the Club: they had their own website. It was very accessible. And I remember one December I just came and asked to join them. And I became a member in the New Year. And I've been with the Club ever since. I also try to swim without the Club, given the opportunity of living in Sea Gate. We have our own beach. I visit it whenever possible even without the Polar Bear Club. And I aim to involve as many neighbors as I can, successfully. A group was formed in Sea Gate that starts swimming early and finishes late during the swimming season. And we have a very nice community. We might not know everyone personally, but we recognize each other. And we feel very comfortable when we are on the beach, especially in the swimming season. It's like a large family. We have a social club, so to speak: we talk, chat, meet each other, and discuss mutual interests. And it's a special time. It's not just swimming. It's life. It's our quality of life.

JK – How often does your Club meet?

OL – We meet every week. The Club's season starts on the first Sunday of November and ends on the last Sunday of April. And we see each other, meeting to swim together every Sunday at 1 pm. We have our swim. We are ready at the beach, regardless of the weather. We are grateful for the opportunity to use the NY Aquarium's facilities for our activities. And it all depends on the water temperature. When the temperature is 37°F, as happened last year (2018), the water is cold. We can stay in for only 10-15 minutes. And then you start considering [coming out of the water]. But if the temperature of the water is 52°F, then we can swim for 30 minutes. Once again, nobody forces anybody to stay for 10 minutes. It all depends on your condition. And our president, the leader, always announces: "For anyone who doesn't feel well, please consider if you want to swim today." That's for sure.

JK – Do you swim or just plunge into the water? What are the different members of the Club doing in the water?

OL – I swim. The water is cold, I have to get moving. But we have people who absolutely cannot swim. They walk in, plunge, splash. And it's an incredible state of mind. They share this joy with

everyone. There's a huge difference between individual swimming and group swimming. I know it for a fact. Individual swimming is very nice. You're not dependent on anyone. You can choose your own time and period of the day. You can walk and swim whenever you want. You're conjoined when you're with the group: time and certain requirements. It's not a big difference, but the group is the group. You are together. However, with the group you can spend more time. You have more fun. You enjoy it more. It motivates you on the one hand: how can you leave when everyone stays? On the other hand, you don't really feel it [cold]. We all share our emotions. And we always say: "How great! So warm, warm, warm! Not cold at all!"

JK – Do you swim even if the temperature is very low? Like today?

OL – Absolutely. It doesn't matter. It absolutely doesn't matter. And I believe, and I think that I can speak for most of our members that the colder, the better. [It's] more fun. It's a contrast. You just have to try it, it's very hard to explain.

JK – How do others react when they see members of the Polar Bear Club going winter swimming?

OL – Very positively. With admiration. It's very nice. They always say nice things. They are just people walking by. Sometimes relatives or friends come as well. [They react] normally, fine, calmly. I would say, with enthusiasm. That means positively.

JK – Can you recall some interesting anecdotes in connection to your Club?

OL – You know, we have a tradition of celebrating holidays, national and social, like Valentine's Day, and, of course, Christmas. Although we are just wearing swimsuits, we have a variety of accessories; we try to highlight aspects of the upcoming celebration. We wear red, buy some ornaments and decorations. It's very interesting. We even did St. Patrick's Day once. And I want to point out that our Club is definitely alcohol-free. We have our choice of hot tea, coffee and cocoa after swimming. Our Club provides the refreshments. And we don't have a care in the world.

JK – Do you have such a wide gap [between meetings] till the next season? You don't see each other? Or do you keep in touch with the members?

OK – Yes. Obviously, we try to keep in touch. First of all, we have a group email, a mailing list. If there are some occasions, events, we get this information from the management of our Club. And we meet each other during the summer. However, it's not on Sundays, it's on Saturdays. We have a special place in front of "Tatiana" restaurant. We have another group of winter swimmers. They are called CIBBOWS [Coney Island Brighton Beach Open Water Swimmers]. We combine our groups and spend some time together. I really appreciate some members of our club. They (who are professional swimmers) give free lessons to other members of our two groups. And we go swimming.

JK – Do you swim in the summer as well?

OL – We are officially closed in summer. But every Friday of that season we greet sunrises together with our group. It's very, very exciting. And the season, from Memorial Day till Labor Day, all these three months every Friday we... as you understand, the sunrise might be at 5 am or 5:40 am, or 5:30 am. But it has to be the sunrise. We have about twenty or thirty people.

JK – Do you greet the sunrise on Coney Island?

OL – On Coney Island, in the water. And it's all published on the website of the Polar Bear Club. We have a group of people who have cameras and who can capture pictures in the water. And it happens quickly, in a matter of an hour or two: everything is published.

JK – Do you remember your first time swimming? What were your feelings and memories?

OL – It's been a while. I think, these feelings are different, depending on the person. It's a blast for me. It happened in the Caucasus Mountains, at the altitude of the Alpine lakes. It was very interesting: a very hot summer day, but the water is always cold there. And it was an incredible feeling. It was a combination of ice and fire, [both] within you and on your skin.

JK – Have you noticed any positive changes in your health in connection to the winter swimming?

OL – I would say, yes. I think, yes. I can't say that we 100% never get sick. We certainly do. But we get better faster. We recover better. And easier. We have fewer complications. And I am absolutely positive that any changes in regard to staying in cold water are good. It positively works for us.

JK – Could you tell where were you when Hurricane Sandy happened? Did you live in Sea Gate already?

OL – Yes.

JK – How did you manage it?

OL – It's impossible to resist natural disasters. That's why we prepared as best as we could: fixed some things, tightened and fenced the others. The force of nature was truly unstoppable. We live just one block from the water. And when the ocean started rising, we watched it hour by hour: approaching, and when the water came flowing and started filling the streets... well, we just stayed and watched. We moved our cars. We were prepared. We had another hurricane a year before that, Irene. It wasn't so dramatic or devastating. But we learned our lesson from that and decided that we were ready. We didn't leave our area, we didn't leave our house. We had a flood. Our basement was completely flooded. Thank God nobody was hurt, everyone was alive and well. The next two weeks we didn't have electricity. But I can tell you one wonderful thing: we have never been alone. We have been taken care of. Our policemen (we have our own police) served their duty so well. I have to tell you that policemen closely watched all visitors. It was so incredible! A car with electricians showed up in the dark, it was around 6 or 7 pm in the fall. In two minutes, a police car arrived, and we came out to greet them. "Who are you? Where did you come from? Who are you coming [to see]? Why? What are you doing here?" Until the owner came out to tell that they came to see me. Nobody was allowed [there] to prevent any cases of looting, theft or robbery. And everyday Americans also stopped by, not even from our state. We had people from New Jersey in the daytime. The car would stop, and they would shout out: "Come and take water if you need it." I'm not talking about organizations. People, ordinary people brought water, paper, cleaning supplies, and they just were giving it all away. And we had a hot meal service in Sea Gate. We always had hot meals from morning till night. We had hot drinks upon entry to Sea Gate. Burgers

were made at lunch time, and all were handed out. A car drove by and “Come out!” was announced through the megaphone. Food was offered, but it was free. It was all free. You know, it had some moments of positivity, the unity of all living there who decided to stay. Sure, some people just got up and left (and children, and elderly, and everybody). We didn’t want to leave our house and we stayed. We never felt lonely. It wasn’t easy. It was very cold. But we had our electricity in two weeks.

JK – Would you say that Coney Island has changed in comparison to what it was 5 or 10 years ago and now? And how?

OL – It’s changed for the better, definitely. And I hope that it will continue changing for the better. Absolutely. I would say some events happen, such as the Mermaid Parade. I assume it was started a long time ago. And we attend it with our Club. And we all have fun. We have other events. Especially important is January 1st [The New Year’s Day Polar Bear Plunge]. We are working. We go swimming very early, at 9am. And we start working later. We organize the plunge. And we collect donations from participants, who can register in advance or spontaneously [on that day]. It’s a formal procedure. Groups of people are divided into teams, and these groups... are allowed, with applause from everyone [to take the plunge as the water clears from the previous group]. HBO and other channels are filming. And it all happens. It’s all very organized. We sell some items with the Club’s logo. And all the money that we earn we donate to the development of the Coney Island community. I can proudly say that this year, 2019, January 1st, 3,800 swimmers were registered. All these people registered and got permission from us, because it’s important to do the paper work. They are all under our supervision. People have fun swimming on January 1st. And I want to thank everyone who participated. We managed to earn \$82,000. And all of that will be spent on the Coney Island community. We have great relationships with the NY Aquarium. Of course, we do support the Aquarium by sponsoring it. It’s all redistributed. And we see it through emails, how our money is spent. [The final tally is over 4,000 participants and over \$86,000 raised.]

JK – What do you like most in Coney Island?

OL – Coney Island? Ha. Access to the water, for sure. The boardwalk. Surely, it’s the boardwalk. Absolutely. People who live in Coney Island and who love Coney Island, we are all united by our common passion and feelings. And we are proud and hope that Coney Island will thrive.

JK – Do you have any happy memories about Coney Island?

OL – Of course I have – 25 years! The last 25 years, since the moment we came into this country, we have been closely connected to Coney Island. Even when we didn’t live here, we were seeking opportunities to spend our time on the beach or on the boardwalk, amusement park. Our daughter was growing up. We’ve been spending a lot of time in Coney Island. And even when you’re coming back from work, no matter how tired you are, once you enter Coney Island, even in the hot summer, you can turn off the air conditioner and open the windows. Fresh air rushes in right away. And your exhaustion goes away. Once we reach home, returning to Sea Gate, or Coney Island, no matter how exhausted you are, your rest starts that minute. Just when we get here, we start relaxing. It is tremendously energizing.