Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Aisuluu Sartbaeva. Interviewer: Mark Markov

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/aisuluu-sartbaeva>

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Mark Markov – I am Mark Markov. I am interviewing Aisuluu Sartbaeva for the Coney Island History Project. Today is the 20th of February. So, tell me how you came over to New York, to America, and what were the reasons for leaving.

Aisuluu Sartbaeva – Hello, my name is Aisuluu Sartbaeva. I am from Kyrgyzstan. It is in Central Asia, in the former Soviet Union, and therefore we speak Russian. Our history in America began when I was sent to work in America (I am a journalist) because there was a national project at the television studio. We could report on everything that was happening in other countries, including America. At first, I lived in Washington – alone. That is, I was there without my family or my children. I was alone, working. Later my children visited me (in around a year). When they came over, we moved to New York.

Of course, we, having just moved to the States, were faced with a question – how do we send our children to school? At the time, my daughter was already in seventh grade; my son was in fifth-sixth grade. We needed to find a school. To my surprise, this was not that difficult. We lived right here in this neighborhood, in Coney Island. To us this place is very important, and we are happy to be in this neighborhood, as the neighborhood is quiet and schools turned out to be wonderful for our kids. In school they were able to—at that moment, their English was not too great: the same school English that they teach in our country. My husband and I were of course very worried: how were they going to go to school? How will they understand everything? But we were lucky. We chose our school—

MM – I am sorry, which school?

AS – IS 303. It is located on West Avenue (in Coney Island). They have a special program for those who just came to America. That is, students can learn partially in their own native language, and partially in English to make the transition easier, the transition from Russian or English (or any other language) to English. We were very lucky in this regard and my children were able to adapt. We were very worried about this because kids can sometimes find it very difficult to make new friends and acquaintances. Moreover, the kids here are American kids; there the kids are post-Soviet. Nevertheless, they managed to find friends, their own social group, and we are very pleased with the school. Of course, in the first few years, we, as parents, did not understand anything. We did not understand the way that the schools here work. My children had to figure it all out themselves, because we still had a bit of a language barrier, and we also had no time. At the time, we had more than enough on the plate, as they say.

Then, I became president of the PTA [Parent Teacher Association]. In every school in America there is an association of parents and students. These associations serve as bridges between parents and schools, where we share our concerns and advice: how best to hold classes and how to get the best results from our children’s education. I have been an active parent for more than three years already. I am also part of the Community Education Council of New York City’s Department of Education for those who are learning English [as a second language] in school.

MM – Tell about the time when you learned about these associations, that every school has, and how you became an active parent.

AS – I was struck by the openness of information here. Here everywhere, always, information is open to the public and easily reachable. Constantly, we get notices or calls from school about this or that happening, and consequently, what will happen. I was very interested in my children’s life in school. Therefore, one day, I went a parent-teacher conference. They needed to elect a president for the PTA. And I thought “why not?” though my English was not that good at the time. Nevertheless, I took the risk. I thought, “okay,” because I was told the school would help me. Indeed, both the teachers and the principal would help me. This is already my third year in the PTA since they elected me president.

What do we do? We try to get as many parents involved as possible with the life of the school and the students, though we understand that, especially for immigrants, especially for those who just moved to America, for those parents it is very difficult to constantly look after and constantly go to parent-teacher conferences because they don’t have time: they need to work. Some have double/triple shifts, a very busy schedule. Therefore they have to work during the day, and during the night as well. Thus, we need to find the solutions, the means to get these parents involved in the school because children are our future. If we neglect them today, it will be very difficult for ourselves in the future. Nevertheless, we understand that it is important to pay bills and to earn a living, but kids are still important.

And I also learned that the CECELL (Community Education Council of English Language Learners) was looking for new members. And so I sent in my application. I thought: “I’ll try.” I sent in my papers, and they voted for me, and now I am in my second year in the Community Council. What do we do there? The council also serves as a nexus between parents and students and the New York [City] Department of Education. Because, again, when parents face a language barrier, when parents have domestic issues, it is very difficult for immigrant parents: coming here with already teenage children, coming to strange country and starting over again. You have to begin a new career. You have to find work. You need to improve your qualifications, both in terms of learning a new language and special skills. At the same time, your kids have already grown up – they are teenagers. That is very difficult, of course. We try to help. We try to translate every notice, every newsletter into those languages that are needed. That may be Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Uzbek. What is the major problem for parents who do not know English? It is of course simple to understand: elementary communication difficulties. If parents do not understand [English], they will not want to go to school: “Well, why should I go there? I won’t understand anything anyway. What am I supposed to do there? I have no time.” And so on.

MM – Do you do this as a volunteer?

AS – Everything we do, the PTA presidency and the council, are all done on a volunteer basis. It is not paid for. We go on our own accord. We know what we are doing. Besides having to care for my family, my children, work, husband (cook for him [laughs]), and cleaning the house, looking after the kids, I need to go to council meetings or to conferences, where we have an effect on some issues, some problems, and try to find solutions for them. How do we disseminate information? Let’s say, there was meeting. We have a set of issues. We take the solutions we came up with and send them out by email to schools and to local Community Education Council (we are the citywide council, but there are local ones at every district). We must spread this information to every district, and they then disseminate information to every school and every parent, so that the information does not just stay here. It must reach every parent, regardless of his or her language or address.

MM – Can you give an example of how this top-down approach works?

AS – From our perspective, it actually works from bottom-up, because we are ordinary parents. We are not paid to do this. We do not work in offices. We do not have any special access or opportunities. Yet, we work from the people. How does it work? I go to school and someone comes up to me and says, “See here, this happened to my kid.” We need to see where the problem is and resolve it. During the next council meeting, I pick this issue up: “You know, this happened at my school.” For example, last time this happened when we were discussing safety in schools: about fights, both between young women and between young men in high school. Parents came to me and said that either the police were not doing anything, or the school was not doing anything. What do you need to do in this case? I picked this issue up during the meeting. At that meeting, there was a safety specialist from the Department of Education. I relayed directly to him the information, the full details, of what had happened. And we tried to fix this issue. In this way, we channel information right from the people, from ordinary parents. The information travels up. We let the Department of Education know what is happening right now in the schools. We are independent of the schools; we are independent of the department. We only relay information and try to resolve problems.

MM – When you just came over and started to take interest in your children’s education, what did you think of the education level in New York schools (in terms of academic performance), and do you have an effect on this in the council [Community Education Council of English Language Learners]?

AS – Of course, in order to understand the education system, I had to put out—to be an active parent, go to all the conferences—almost two, two and a half years. I only started to fully understand the education system now, and only now I fully understand how we as parents can help. Of course, education in America is very different from our school system [in Kyrgyzstan]. Actually, it is a very big difference because here the process is more… more, you know, goal-oriented. If in our Soviet school system you learn about everything and about everyone in the world, here it is more targeted, you learn about subjects in a more targeted manner. If it is American history, then it is only American history. If it is the history of, let’s say the world wars – it is about the First and Second World Wars. My kids first thought it was easy. They grasped the program quite easily; they easily followed the program. They were even surprised themselves: “Wow Mom!” They were surprised at how easy the system is here compared to our system. But here you must learn to solve problems logically. Here, there are no straightforward answers, straightforward questions like we had. That is everything is forthright and in layman’s terms: either you know, or you don’t know. That’s it. But here it is different. I explained to my children that here you need to turn on your logic. As they say, to think [in English] out of the box, right? You need to go slightly out of your comfort zone. I thought that this was very interesting.

MM – Do you think that there is enough attention being paid, in New York schools, to afterschool programs and time outside of school [lessons]?

AS – Thank you for this question. It is indeed a very interesting question. For me, when we came to America, this was very interesting and it is a very important subject: how will my kids spend their free time? Where can they go? Is everything here very expensive or is everything low-priced. In other words, how can we control our children during their free time, after school? I was really amazed. There are so many different afterschool programs here that are actually free and paid for by the government. The government pays not-for-profit organizations, and these not-for-profit organizations then make afterschool programs in schools. They have different specializations. For example in our school (IS 303), we have a dance program; we have a saxophone program (my son goes there, he’s a saxophonist). We also have a journalism program – that is, we teach journalism. And I too decided that it was important to help the school, help the project, and I teach journalism class in our school for free. This is very surprising because everyone thinks that everything is so expensive in America. Oh God, how do we find something! In our country we sometimes did not have the ability to send our kids to some programs because it was too expensive. But here, surprisingly, there are many programs that are quite free: children simply have to go at those programs. They have to spend some time – let’s say from three o’clock (when they are let out of school) to five – in that afterschool program. We know where they are; we know what they are doing. That is, we can check up on them. There are also many other programs provided by nonprofits. For example, there is the Coney Island History Project, which is also a very interesting program because it lets children go somewhere out of school, and it gives them the ability to get acquainted with Coney Island. Kids can learn the history and culture of the neighborhood because it had such an impact on New York as city and as a major metropolis. There are also other programs. My son also attends that NYPD Explorers program. It is done with the help of local police stations. In our case it is the 60th Precinct. The police teach our children how to protect their own rights and not violate the rights of others. They also go to different places where they are shown how the NYPD works, how dangerous it is, and how society and citizens, how every citizen, must help the police in order for there to be fewer criminal chronicles, and how to protect oneself and one’s children from crime. It is also very interesting. And there are many such programs, especially in the summer. There are programs in the Aquarium; the Coney Island History Project opens. In the summer, there are more opportunities, programs, and camps. I find these programs very interesting, as do my children. We enthusiastically participate.

MM – Do many parents know about these clubs and afterschool programs? How do you spread the word?

AC – Right. Through the schools, I would like to point out, we can send, disseminate information about community-based (that is, free) programs. We have the right to (as the Community Education Council) to disseminate information. Talking to parents – how does it work? In the form of brochures and flyers. Again, we try to translate them into different languages: into Russian, into Chinese, into every language needed. We disseminate through schools. Also, every organization comes to us to present what they do. Who are they? What do they do? Where are they from? We spread the information through our database of school emails. That is where we send the flyers and they then send them to the parents.

Of course, another problem is that, as you noted, do many people actually go there? Right? Do many parents send their children there? It is true, some parents do not know about this. Others who do know, choose for their children what they are interested in. Let’s say, someone is interested in the police, and someone else is not interested. They send their kids to the music program. There are many options. Parents can pick and choose. Me personally? I try to send my children to as many clubs and programs as possible [laughs]. Firstly, a child does not know what he or she wants right now. They actually do not want to do anything. They would prefer to sit at the computer and play games. But we, as parents, must direct them. You can send your child to study music – well, he doesn’t like it – tomorrow he can go to the police club. There he found what he likes, something that enthralls. Therefore, I feel that once should fill up as much of their children’s time as possible. However much time they have after school – fill all of it up, so that they do not start thinking of something else. There are clubs, summer camps, or projects, very interesting ones. As long as your children go, go, go, to the second, third forth place. The child can then pick on his or her own either to go to each place for a little bit, or to pick one area of interest. This is what I think.

MM – You said that you send your kids everywhere: they tried out this and they tried out that. Yet, it probably did not start out that way. Can you tell me how you found out about this, and how it worked out with your kids?

AS – Yes. Indeed, this did not happen all at once [laughs]. It took some time. First, we only went to those clubs that were directly tied to the school, because information about them was more accessible. We are told about it at school and we send our kids there. Then, I noticed that they were going to only one afterschool activity and that they still had all this time. They had a lot of time after the primary afterschool, where they did their homework. So then I sent my son to learn to play the saxophone. Still, it seemed like he could do more because he had music on, let’s say, Tuesday/Thursday. I found that the NYPD police explorers program happened on, let’s say, Monday/Wednesday. Why not send him there? What else can he do Monday/Wednesday? He’ll just end up doing nothing. It is better for him to spend his time usefully and learn something. My daughter, on the other hand, now goes to high school in Manhattan, but she also goes to modeling – in order to learn to be a fashion designer. Before that she only went to—as she has a medical concentration, she only went to the biology club. Then, I send her further, despite the fact that she wakes up at four in the morning. She has a long commute: she needs to go to the other side of Manhattan, from this side of the New York to the other. But that’s okay: she can do her homework there. She has enough time. I try to occupy all my kids’ time, so that they do not have free time.

I also get information from the Internet, of course. I have a wonderful, trusted friend, who is always with me. I open the Internet and search for programs for “nonprofit organizations for kids.” There are plenty of good, free options. So I also, try, spend my time and energy on this. If we have children, we need to spend at least a bit of our time on them so that they can find themselves in life and in the future.

MM – Now, please tell me about your work as a journalist, about the journalism program that you teach in school.

AS – I have been a journalist for over 15 years. I worked on television, and I also worked on the radio and in a newspaper – that is in print media. I have always wanted to do journalism, as long as I can remember myself. Maybe my profession affects how I raise my children. What is journalism composed of? It is research – one needs to find information, to get information. This information needs to be constantly worked on, which is something I strive for, and what I do. Therefore, as you get more and more information, you need to learn how to filter it, and find for yourself what is relevant and useful. It is the same with my children and me, or rather, with my constant search for best opportunities for them. Where can they additionally find themselves?

Subsequently, I proposed the journalism program to the school myself. I work for free, as a volunteer because I feel that today journalism is a very valuable profession. Maybe tomorrow she (the high school student) will not become a career journalist, but she will already have some major skills: how should one use information? Why is it needed? How does one pick it out? The stream of information is endless, but you must select from it that which you specifically need, and how to use it properly. I also teach my students to present themselves to society because every one of us is intelligent; everyone does something interesting and has dreams. But if you simply sit and stay in your room, without leaving it, who will know about anything you do? In other words, you must know how to impart information. Not just receive information, but also share it. Who will know about you? I also worked in PR, which can be seen in my work. Journalism is not just journalism proper, but also PR and many other things. As a journalist, you must understand how to present your information. You need to make sure your video is the one that is watched. There are tons of videos – people do not have the time to watch all of them. Yet, you need to make sure your video is the one. How do you do this?

Of course, among my students, there are those who are really interested in journalism and really want to do pursue this career. And there are those who are not really sure, because they are of that age. They do not really know what they want. I teach eighth and seventh or ninth and the tenth grade. Thus, they are in that time of their life when they do not really need anything, to tell you the truth [laughs]. Nevertheless, there are some pretty talented kids among them who know exactly what they want to do in life.

MM – Tell me about your class. What do you teach?

AS – In the journalism class, I teach my students to use a professional video camera and a professional voice-recorder. As I said, it can be difficult to connect with kids at this age. They find everything boring. It is my job to get them interested. What do we do? We record a sound clip. We do an audio interview, as if they were working on the radio discussing this or that issue. Then we do the editing together. Then we divide into groups and present. Each group presents: one made a newspaper; another made an interview for the radio; the next made a video. We try to make this as close to real life as possible, so that they know that these are not toys and that journalism is very much a serious and interesting job. As a journalist, you have freedom. You can travel to different countries, you must learn new things, and you must take interviews from different, different people. The kids need to be completely enthralled with the idea. They should understand that they do not need to sit in an office and just type up reports all day. It is an attractive profession. That is what I try to convey. We made a newspaper, which they really liked. To do this, we took some news (even from school) about how it may best be shared. This group made a newspaper, as if they were doing so in real life, and then presented it to the rest of us. Then the other students graded the newspaper. So, one group presents, while the others sit and evaluate, and give them points. Then I ask if the information that the group wanted to present was understood (by the viewership, readership, or audience). Did they get the news? What was the main idea? What were they trying to carry across? If they understood, then the work must be more or less good. How do you get them interested? You need to make things as realistic as possible. You need to use real editing programs, a real voice-recorder, and a real camera. Of course giving kids a professional camera, as I did [laughs], is risky, but what can you do. We did this under my careful supervision.

MM – Thank you very much. Is there anything you would like to say that I did not ask you about?

AS – Yes, thank you for the inviting me for the interview. The interview brought out some nostalgia in me: how we moved, how we just began to get accustomed to New York, and in what position we were at first. During this interview I relived what my family and I went through. At this point, my husband has more or less got on his own two feet, as did I, and the kids seem to have adapted well.

What did I want to say? It is indeed really difficult to be an immigrant, or that person who has just moved into a new country. Very difficult! The older you are, the more difficult it is, as your children are also older, and you do not have the time as you once did to do this and that (just to try). There is no time. You need to pay bills, the children rely on you, and your whole life turns upside down. It is really difficult. You must hold on, persevere, and don’t forget about your kids. Why do we live? Why are here? Why did we come here? For immigrants, the decision to leave was based on the needs of their children, so that they could get the best education, the best future. I think that America is the place where our children will certainly get a better future. The situation and development are better here, because everything is more or less accessible here. You want to learn – learn. You want extracurricular lessons – please go ahead, get them. Everyone is happy to see you. Everybody is trying to help. Nonprofit organizations work a lot on the integration of immigrants. Also, many historical organizations work on making sure that we do not forget history and to make us patriots of this country. I am very grateful to the Coney Island History Project for giving us the opportunity not to forget our past and at the same time look to the future. Thank you very much. That is all I wanted to say.

MM – Thank you.