

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Sofya Lobova

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/sofya-lobova>

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Julia Kanin: This is the Coney Island History Project. My name is Julia Kanin. And today we're talking to Sofia Lobova, a leader of the Russian-speaking community in Coney Island. Hello, Sofya!

Sofya Lobova: Hello, hello.

JK: Sofya, could you tell us about yourself and your life before immigration. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about your childhood?

SL: I'll tell you. You know, there are such words: life is like late autumn, and the years fly like leaves. It was twenty, then forty-eight, and now it's over eighty. I've lived a long life, and, of course, there is something I can tell about. I was born in Kyiv in '35. In June of '41, the war started. I was six years old. It was a wonderful day when the new stadium in Kyiv was supposed to be open. And my mom and dad dressed me up in a new dress, but unfortunately at 9 AM my father left for conscription. And he suggested that my mother evacuate immediately. I also had a sister that was four years younger. And that's how our life in the evacuation began. In August of '41, we traveled in a freight car train not knowing where it went. Under the bombardment at the train stops... But God saved us, we were lucky. When the bombing was starting, we were leaving the train cars. And my mother was hiding us under the bench at the stops so that we could stay alive. She thought that if we were under the bench, we would survive. It was scary.

We came to the Ordzhonikidze Krai [modern Stavropolsky] and lived there for a year. When the Germans began to advance, we had to leave. We were given horses. And my mother set off. Where? We didn't know. The German raids had already started. There were journalists who photographed evacuees from the airplanes. It was a huge steppe: children, adults, old people, they moved as they could. Some went on foot, some drove cars... It was scary. And I remember one episode, when a German plane flew very low above us. A journalist, a cameraman was taking pictures, a German with a gun was sitting next to him. I was very funny since my childhood, and I was very interested in what they were doing, "Nasty Germans!" (everyone said so and I did as well). And I remember how my mother punished me so I would not fool around because they could have started shooting.

JK: What did you do?

SL: I was messing around, showing my tongue, "What is this, nasty German?" So, we drove and drove to who knows where. There was no geographical map. Once we spent the night in the steppe with our horses. And at three o'clock in the morning my mother began to cry. I woke up. There were two Soviet servicemen in front of us (they were from Chechnya). And they said, "The army needs horses, we must take them from you." I remember my mother crying, asking what she would do. She didn't know the area or where to go in the steppe. They said, "Don't cry, don't worry, we'll give you an ox, a tsob-tsobe – a bull. "

My mom took the bull, harnessed it, set off to who knows where. We were going on and on, our troops were retreating, and my mother was told (we were alone, other evacuees were gone). They said, "Where are you going? The Germans are coming! " It was the North Caucasus. And as you know, there are mountains, mountains, mountains... "If you go," she was told, "along this path, you will fall into the abyss, into the water, and you will die if you meet someone." Still, we walked. Mom was worried, but she drove us. She knew we had to live.

We arrived in the Lezgin village of Khazary in Azerbaijan. We lived there for a year and my mom found a job. And fortunately, there was a military unit with the battalion commander that was a resident of Kyiv. So, he gave shelter to my mother, offered her a job as a laundress and a cook for command personnel (she was actually an accountant). So, we lived there for a year, moved to Qusar near Baku. And my mother worked in social welfare office. Our life got better. America sent parcels for children and adults. In '45th, my mom and I got sick with malaria. Mom was about to die. On May 9th the doctors came up (we were in the hospital with my sister, we were crying) and said, "Don't cry, children. Today is the day mom will to either get up or pass away. But she won't die because you came to her. " We were so relieved. Our mom survived. And we returned to Kiev in October '45.

In Kyiv, I went to school right away. Our life began. I've been a social activist since I was a kid. I've been the head of a biology club. I've been a class monitor in our class. So, I've been volunteering in addition to my studies since I was a kid. I grew up. I was very fond of... I wanted to be an artist. But it was difficult to become an artist because, firstly, they were small in stature, and, secondly, in Ukraine, only 2% of the Jewish population was accepted. So, I was advised to study cultural work. And before that, I got my first job at 16, because my mother was getting a pension for my father that wasn't enough to support us.

JK: Your father never returned from the war?

SL: He died in '41. In '44, my mother received a notice. She searched for a long, long time, and we were told that they were surrounded near Kyiv in September '41. They were all in the militia. And he died.

So, my first job was in a printing house at the factory (I had no profession yet). I was a Komsomol worker. I worked and organized. After that, I went to study at the School of Kultprosvet Work

[School of Cultural Enlightenment Work]. After that school, I went to study Cultural Work. Then I graduated from the Institute of Culture (the Higher Trade Union School of Culture in Leningrad). I studied there. Everyone studied for four years, and I studied for six because I already worked in the Department of Culture of the Kyiv City Executive Committee. I was in charge of organizing the work of parks of culture and recreation. I had to organize all city holidays. They didn't let me go, I had to work. So, I studied longer, and then I worked at the Department of Culture. After the Department of Culture, as I was already retired, we thought what to do next. The children decided to leave for Canada because my daughter had two children: they had bruises under their eyes after Chernobyl. We were afraid to stay. She did not want to wait for America (we were in the system for processing). And she moved to Canada.

JK: What year was it?

SL: It was '92. And we came to America. We arrived on December 31st, '95 so we could celebrate the New Year in America. I always loved impromptu things like that. My sister with her family was here and they greeted me.

Well, we started thinking about what to do. There was an interesting episode when my sister wrote to me in Kyiv “mind you, Sofa, you need to make yourself a suit to go to the meetings with the government, to interviews, and so on and so forth. And buy yourself a dress in which you will clean the apartments.” Well, my husband and I thought... My husband was a choreographer. He danced in the Song and Dance Ensemble in the Kyiv Military District for twenty years. Well, I was a trained director, so I could do something. He and I thought that it would be difficult for me to work because of my torn ligaments. But we'd find a job.

JK: Did you end up in Brooklyn right away when you immigrated or some other city?

SL: We went straight to Brooklyn. Since my childhood, Brooklyn seemed to me... What is Brooklyn? It's working-class Brooklyn, it's not interesting. But then when we arrived, and when this work began, I said, “I like it. I like it very much.”

And so, it just so happened that my first job was in a kindergarten. I applied all my cultural skills and the experience of being a director. I worked for a year at the Russian kindergarten. Then we got an apartment in Coney Island on Surf Ave. I introduced myself to the Center. My husband and I promptly went to Haber House Senior Center. And I told them who I was. They asked me who I was, and I told them who I worked for, and all of that. Well, they said, “You need to help us.” I, of course, loved being helpful with all my heart. That's how I grew up and that's how my parents raised me. And my cultural and mass work here began: organizing people and theme events. The issue was that it was difficult for the elderly, especially war veterans. I paid special attention to these people. There were many events held for the veterans. And as a result, I received appreciation from the veteran organizations. And I had to do the work in such a way that it could reach minds and hearts. People wanted to talk, they wanted to talk about their fate. So, I held a series of these evenings when they talked about emigration, when they talked about the Holocaust, or where they had been. Those who were in the concentration camps brought the

things that they saved. The mother of the head of the Haber House was in a German camp. And she brought a downy shawl torn apart by her mother, which she had preserved in the camp [A knitted shawl made of goat down-hair that originated in Orenburg in the 18th century and is one of the classic symbols of Russian handicraft] and the utensils that were used there. And every person poured out their soul, and these evenings became a habit

JK: Were these events held at the Haber House?

SL: At the Haber House, yes. I had already become the president.

And there were the hikes and discoveries of America. There was always a lot of sightseeing. Of course, the director, the social worker helped a lot. And then, the visitors to our Center made their own suggestions of what celebrations they would like to have. We always celebrated a holiday of every nation, including Jewish, Chinese, Russian, Ukrainian.

I organized an amateur team of 15 singers. We traveled to the nursing homes to help, performed in Manhattan nursing homes, in our nursing homes here on Twenty-Ninth Street. Poor, unfortunate, and sick people listened to us. But when our singers started singing, they somehow were coming to life. They were brought to the hall in the wheelchairs. They came to life, it was beautiful, of course.

The director suggested to us that we bring the gifted children of the Mark Twain School to the Center on a voluntary basis. Well, we agreed. My husband taught them to step dance. People love step dance in America very much. The students of fifth and sixth grades were coming to us with teachers and parents. Parents liked it very much as well. We broke the bad habits of these children. They all learned how to dance. Then they invited my husband to create dances for wedding couples. So, we taught these dances. I was an interpreter. My English wasn't very fluent back then. Well, there was a case... My husband loved the discipline in the dance groups. He was nervous when these kids were coming. He wanted everything in order. And instead of saying "Attention!" he says "Uwaga! Uwaga! " – in Ukrainian. Well, the kids didn't understand what it was. I started laughing, so a mom came up to me, she said, "Why are you smiling? What does it mean?" I said it's "Attention" in Ukrainian. Well, that's how we taught them for a year.

JK: Did both of you do art your entire life?

SL: Yeah, that was our profession. He was a very kind man, very friendly. Everyone loved him. He produced a lot of dances. I included a dance in every event. I was writing the script and he was making the dance.

We organized theatrical performances, fashion festivals. Our ladies and gentlemen changed their attire. Everybody liked it very, very much. We had meetings, discussions, and a round table, as far as politics is concerned. Politicians came a few times. Well, what can I say? Everything was done for the people! I've worked for 17 years at this job until today.

JK: I wanted to clarify if you worked or volunteered?

SL: You know, I said to my husband, "You know what? We got SSI." My husband was 71 years old and older than me; he got it right away. And I was 61 years old. Well, since they gave me SSI, we didn't work here, so I decided to be a volunteer for the rest of my life. I've been doing this work for 17 years. Well, in addition, I've always participated in political elections. And I worked during the elections. And I was telling people because there campaigning had been week before the elections. We had politicians coming to every holiday event because the director invited everyone.

The first event I organized was the fifth anniversary of our Center. I made suggestions, and all of my requests were fulfilled. They agreed with everything. They bought everything we needed. It was very interesting, because I gathered different nationalities... And I recorded everyone's voice on a cassette what they liked about America. The Hispanics talked about themselves, the Americans talked about themselves, those who came here talked about themselves, what country they came from, how they like it here, how they were grateful to America.

JK: Who took part in the productions?

SL: The visitors themselves. It was our initiative. Well, what can I tell you about the work? It was always hard for the people who are lonely. And when children were born, grandchildren, they came to tell us and ask for advice. That's what we've always been doing. In addition, there was a cooking initiative. Women talked about their culinary techniques, what republics they were from and what they cooked there.

JK: It is said that you're a community leader. And that's how you identify yourself. And how did you become a leader?

SL: Well, I get along with people very quickly. I get to know them quickly, and there's always been people around me. That's how it's been my whole life. And we had a different president, an American. And in the beginning, I was elected Vice President. I had been Vice President for a year. And he died. And then they said we needed an election. Who will be elected? And people started saying, "Let's go with Lobova, let's elect Lobova, let's go with Lobova." They already knew me because I created several events: birthdays and anniversaries of people who were coming to us. Well, I did everything I could to make it interesting. After we started performing in other centers and nursing homes, we became prominent. They began to recognize us. Lobova, Lobova... Okay, if Lobova then it meant I had to work. Well, I did my best.

That's how I got it. I'm grateful to America from the bottom of my heart that they knew, understood, and helped. We always got help, whoever and whenever we asked. We always got help. And the people in our Center were volunteers, too. There were 25 of them. They helped by serving in the dining room. They helped to give out food when we received it once a month. They were also rewarded at the Center. Well, there was a tradition on Thanksgiving, I asked the City Hall to give us turkeys. And they brought a turkey for each volunteer.

Well, to this day, we keep our friendship. But many went to adult day care, and the rest are here. There's nowhere for us to go. We have a synagogue on Surf Avenue. So, I helped the rabbi to organize the holidays. He brings me leaflets with my name and with the phone, so that our Russian-speaking people from Coney Island can call, book their seats, and come.

JK: You said you were president for a long time, and now you're no longer president?

SL: Now? No, I haven't been president for five years already. They began renovation and closed everything. And we've been suffering for six years.

JK: Are there any plans to reopen?

SL: They fight, they fight, they fight. [City Councilman] Ari Kagan has been grilling the Housing Authority. There was a roundtable with [Mayor] de Blasio when the renovation had just started. And I was speaking there. And de Blasio offered all the services of City Hall. I asked, "You're starting the renovation, what is it going to be? How is it going to be? How long will the Center stay closed? " He called on the head of the Housing Authority and asked, 'Well, answer them. What it is going to be!' And we were promised that it would be better than it was, that it would be great for the elderly. Well, we see that it has closed and probably will never reopen.

JK: How long was your Center in operation?

SL: The Center? Thirty years. Thirty years. The director retired; a new young director came. She managed to work for seven years when they shut it all down. Well, when [Hurricane] Sandy happened, we had to help people.

JK: Yes, tell us a little about Sandy and how you got through it.

SL: So, an evacuation was scheduled. They announced that there would be buses. Whoever wanted to go could go to the places which City Hall designated for the evacuees. That's for the duration of Sandy. We organized it so that there was order. People left. Whoever stayed here or didn't want to go – City Hall and politicians helped. There was no electricity for three days. The electricity was cut off, it was dark, the elevator wasn't working. The politicians were coming up with bread and other [food] products to distribute to the people who stayed. I am thankful to them.

JK: Did you stay or leave?

SL: I went to my sister. I didn't stay. She lives in Starrett City. I stayed with her. They were calling and telling me about the situation. The water was already receding, and it was safe to return. I came home to the devastation if I could call it that. We helped people as much as we could. The Center was flooded. All the refrigerators were upside down in the water. The musical instruments were drenched. We had to throw everything away, clean everything. So, we, the director, a social worker, and I were mopping up water and pulling out stuff... All my work was gone, the microphones were gone. Well, later we continued to work after everything had dried up.

JK: What public projects are you currently working on? After all, you didn't stop your work with the closure of the Center?

SL: I didn't stop. Well, they call me with any question: someone had something going on in the apartment, the elevator stopped... I immediately report it to City Hall: Take action! They take action. If anything happens, "Lobova, how much can we endure? Why don't they do anything?" Well, I don't work for NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority]. I'm in the same position as you are. But I have to help. I complain to City Hall. Well, that's the job.

What can I say? Time flies. And people, of course, are getting old, they're aging with me. And we need to resolve the issue that we're currently facing. This is the heart wrenching issue of renovation. Our governor approved the law regarding organization of the trust called Public Housing Preservation Trust. And the second construction organization is the PAC. They sent us the booklets. The first booklet was sent in June informing us what this organization means. They printed their charter. The Housing Authority rented them the land and the houses that are on it for 99 years. It's not only the Haber House, but 25,000 apartments had to be repaired. And since they fall under the renovation, the people had to be resettled because they're going to change the pipes, the windows, the walls ... Well, a renovation is a renovation. That's understandable. People have to be resettled for two to six months.

Where to resettle? To other places. We haven't even been told yet. Now there has to be a vote. And we have the right to the status quo. Our status quo is to stay here. All the low-income homes fall under the Section 9 program. We want to stay here. To stay with NYCHA. Let them repair it if it's bad, better, or worse. So, what should I do? Take action. How do I take it? I've set up a group of very interesting people that are going to help. They're calling and finding companies that want to help us. And now we have prepared a petition and collected the signatures. As we are living with this problem, we are looking for someone to write and send petitions to. We want to know the phone [numbers], we want to know the addresses. That's the work that is being done right now.

JK: You showed us several of your awards, both from Ukraine and America. Please tell us about them.

SL: That's the seventieth anniversary of the Victory [WWII Victory Day], I organized the event. I helped in the city when someone needed it. I got a diploma. A member of the Assembly came more than once. She helped and noticed our work. I can't and don't even want to talk about everything... I wrote scripts. I brought these scenarios to life. Everyone helped me. I am grateful to the husband of our director and a social worker. It was a combined work. I was awarded this diploma.

JK: Did you also receive the Woman of Distinction Award?

SL: Yeah, that's right, I did.

JK: Was that in 2019?

SL: Yes, in 2019.

JK: Tell us also about the awards you received in Ukraine?

SL: So, I created the 1500th anniversary of Kyiv. We had 14 districts in Kyiv, and now there are more. Each district had its own director. I was a director, but there was also Pakhmutova [Russian composer, songwriter, very famous and influential figure in Soviet art] with her husband, a poet, Dobronravov [poet, author of many Soviet songs, actor]. I came up with this idea in my head so it would be amazing: that my stage for the actors would be like a golden gate in Kyiv with so-called terraces. The party bodies (the district committees of the party) in Ukraine always assisted. I was not a communist, but just a director.

It was difficult to make this terraced stage. But the district committee of the party asked the directors of all the enterprises. They listened to the script. I said what was needed. And they each got a task. They made this terraced stage. We ordered the fireworks. They suggested the theme themselves: from the fire, Kyi, Shchek, Khoryv, and sister Lybid appear [according to the legends, the founders of Kyiv]. And when the concert ended, I went up and asked Dobronravov and Pakhmutova. And the biggest celebration was at the stadium in Kyiv, which was organized Genkin and Petrov from Leningrad. And I asked, "And I'm not Genkin, and I'm not Petrov, but how was it?" They said to me, "Thank you very much. It was a celebration for the people." Well, I received the 1500th anniversary of Kyiv medal.

JK: Did you settle in Coney Island when you immigrated or some other area?

SL: No, not in Coney Island. We rented an apartment on the corner of West [Street] and [Avenue] U. And then I applied for an apartment, and thankfully within seven months we got an apartment in Coney Island across the street from here. When I created the fifth anniversary event, the whole [city] government was there, and they asked the director, "Tell us please, who created this event? How much did you pay?" She says, "I didn't pay anything. It's free." "But who did it?" "This lady." Well, they came up to me from the Housing Authority and asked, "Where do you live? You've created such an event! And where do you live?" I said, "Across the street." "Would you like to live here?" I said, "I don't believe it. Please, repeat". They asked me again. I said, "Of course." And then I got this apartment.

JK: How do you think Coney Island has changed since you've been living here for a long time?

SL: On the one hand, it has changed for the better: a lot of new houses, private construction, improved landscaping. A theatre was built, which is marvelous. Shows, performances are amazing. But now there is very little space for transport. That's too bad. Underground communications have changed. And they are endlessly digging and repairing, digging and repairing. The environment has become better. Now it's gotten worse lately. But it was much better, it was quieter. There were no shootings.

JK: Are there any positive changes?

SL: Positive? Well, the positive thing is that people are happy that it's like Broadway. A wonderful amusement park with great events. Thankfully, there is the stadium, as well. They hold events. Recently I've been told, people were skating at the rink, there's a building for it. Well, I'm invited to all these interesting events. I'm glad to hear that people like Coney Island. And that's why a lot of people want to live here in this area.