

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Yeva Novik

Interviewer: Julia Khanina

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/yeva-novik>

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This is the Coney Island History Project. My name is Julia Khanina. And today we're talking to Yeva Novik, an immigrant from Moscow who lives in Coney Island. And let's start our conversation with the history of your name. Tell us, how did it happen that you have two names?

Yeva Novik: Well, on the one hand, it's really funny, on the other hand, it's a very sad, very hurtful story. My father was the eldest son in the family. When his father died, he was only fourteen years old. His mother was authoritarian, but he loved and respected her very much. And the family rule was that mother's word was not to be questioned. When he was fourteen years old, his father, whose name was Yakov, died. My grandmother, as well as her late grandfather, was very religious. They lived in a remote Belarusian shtetl. And of course, religion was everything to them. Naturally, she wanted to keep alive the memory of her late husband. On this occasion she reached out to all the rabbis she knew, or other people who she believed could have known about it: she had her first granddaughter by her eldest son, and her husband's name was Yakov. It turned out [the baby] was a girl, and [because her son] was a boy, she needed to find out by any means necessary which female name matched the name Yakov by religious traditions and rules. Who and what was the area of his expertise, I cannot tell you, but one rabbi told her that the female counterpart of the name Yakov would be Iokha. And of course, there could have been no further discussion. My dad, in my opinion, was quite a realistic man. He had [experienced] many hardships in his life. But at that moment, I suppose, he apparently had not

properly evaluated the full extent of the responsibility he assumed, believing that he should give in to his mother and do as she wanted and demanded. That's how they named me. This was recorded on my birth certificate, which none of us, including me, had ever actually held in our hands. And my parents for their own reasons (I do not know which ones) gave me a short name, very convenient and easily pronounced, in my opinion, the name Yeva. This was known by them, by me and by everyone in our circle. The paradox was that all my documents in the Soviet Union contained the name Yeva. It was only when I was 16 years old, and I had to get a passport (and without a passport you were nothing and nobody over there, as you know), then I had to present [proof of my name] as recorded on my birth certificate. Nobody paid any attention to it. Naturally, I was recorded in my passport as I was listed on my birth certificate. And ever since, I have been Iokha in my passport; my father was Yefim, I was Iokha Yefimovna. And I remained Yeva in my daily life. No one paid any attention to it. But then this whole story was followed by very serious, tragic consequences for me. My father, feeling guilty somewhere in his heart, made a tremendous effort to try to change my name. Ultimately, it wasn't such a big deal. But no one wanted to hear about it, nor know about it, nor do [anything about] it. And I was stuck with that document. So, in my real life I was Yeva, in all my student documents, up to my graduation from the university, I was Yeva, too. I wasn't Iokha! But these problems had to be solved somehow. The gravity of the situation became clear when we decided and planned to immigrate. All my attempts to somehow reason, explain that it's a religious sign of equality... No superiors, nobody wanted to reckon with it. And it was so blatantly anti-Semitic! I was sent to... there was a famous academic institute in Moscow named after Mar. Mar was the last name of a very well-known expert on nationality questions. So, I was referred to the authority of this Mar: "Go to him. Let him give you a document that says you are the same person." Luckily, I probably wasn't

the only one in the Soviet Union in a similar position. I do not know whether it was because of this [circumstance] or something similar to it, but it prompted the Supreme Court of the country to make a special decision that was allowed to apply to the court, which made not a decision (as was the norm), but a ruling as it was called. What did it mean? I had to state that Yeva and Iokha were the same person. I could invite aunts, uncles, friends, or others as witnesses, who would testify to this absurdity. I was stating that I was Iokha and I was Yeva. This hearing was held in full seriousness with the people's assessors [invited citizens who sit together in judicial panels], according to all the rules of the art of legal canons. They conferred for a long time and wrote a ruling that said according to the explanation of the Supreme Court in such cases a determination can be made. They finally made this ruling, an original copy of which I have here with me. It's already yellowed, it's been already glued on all sides. But I have always kept the copy ever since in my passport and in all my documents, because later this question came up repeatedly for various reasons or no reason at all. I would immediately show this ruling, from which it was evident that Iokha and Yeva was the same person. Being frightened to death my entire life in the Soviet Union, because fear was the main driving force, it's not a discussion about someone being afraid of something. This was pure fear. God forbid anyone experience that feeling. It was sitting inside us. And this sense of fear sometimes prevailed, as they say, over the mind. I didn't even have the strength to think about making a difference. And when we had to deal with the KGB in connection with our departure, with the OVIR [Federal Migration Service of the Russian Government], with all these bureaucrats, who looked at us and admonished us: "What are you going to do over there? Are you going to be a janitor? What's your daughter going to be? Washing the floors or sweeping the streets?" Everyone thought that their duty was to meddle, to pinch, to say something nasty, to hurt us, release the venom, release the bile. And so, when the

issue of paperwork arose, my husband and I had no doubt: these people should not be dealt with. It was written in my passport that I am Iokha, let it be Iokha. The biggest paradox was when we got here, and we went through the process of getting green cards, then citizenship, my daughter was smart enough that she was already in... and in my mind and my thoughts I was still over there. The feeling of fear continued to prevail. She was Natalia, she became Natasha in the documents, and she made the change when she got her green card. I didn't do it, still being afraid. That's why I remained in the documents this way for good. And now this problem doesn't provoke bile and poison, and now it triggers a smile, compassion, understanding, empathy. This is a sad, but instructive story.

JK - Tell us, how did you spend your childhood?

YN - Well, I want to tell you, my father was, as you say, a high-ranking man by Soviet standards. He was a rector of universities, but I cannot say that by today's standards we lived unusually well. Modestly, but in decent prosperity. The only thing was that, of course, the hardest time of the war was during my adolescence, my teenage years. When my father left for the front, [and] I had my mother, I had my only sister who was almost the same age as me. She was a year and six months younger than me. We had a very small difference [in years], we were very close, and so my mother whiled away the time after evacuating with us to the Saratov region, where we lived in the cruelest, most terrible, inhumane conditions. And when we came back, it was very hard as well. Therefore, on the one hand, pre-war childhood was an ordinary, quite acceptable for me Soviet childhood. We didn't have much advantage, my father didn't have a high income, but it was a normal life. But the years of war were of course, a complete nightmare and a complete horror.

JK – How did the events of World War II affect your life?

YN - Well, of course, you understand, on the one hand, at that time propaganda and agitation, which I was too young to be able to properly evaluate, had its impact and played its role. And the sense of patriotism ignited and fired us up; we all lived this life of endless victories, overblown or exaggerated, or valid, or unjustified (in terms of human sacrifice). It's all from a different order of things. Then, the years of my youth coincided with the beginning of anti-Semitism. I've had it to the full extent, I've drunk the full cup to the bottom... I can give you a small example. I had a supervisor when I was working as a legal advisor in a very large enterprise. The supervisor was a former instructor for the gorkom [the City Committee of the Communist Party]. I was like everyone else: young, blood on fire. Of course, men found me attractive. He liked to come up to me and say, "Oh, you're such a good girl! But a Jew!" This is what I had to go through. The instructor of the gorkom said that. Well, when I found out about all these cases with the anti-fascist Jewish committee, I was already a mature person. We've been assessing it all. And then it was a tragic story with doctors who were all jailed, killed, exterminated for being the best of the best. It all could not but affect and form an inner [understanding], you know. So, when I am asked how, to what extent and how I was prepared to turn our departure into a pipe dream and its realization... we were ready for it very early on.

JK - What prompted you to leave the Soviet Union?

YN - We were fully aware of where we lived. It was a completely dishonest, unfair life. Besides, my husband and I were both lawyers. Therefore, we knew very well what it all meant. And we faced it quite a lot: no promotion at work, no advancement, no chance to get a job somewhere, no claims on anything. I remember when we started, it was an epopea [an epic] that cost my husband's life. The epopea was her [Natasha, Yeva's daughter] attempt to be accepted to the famous university named after Maurice Thorez... It was, of course, a step that we took, but we did not fully

understand how we couldn't predict how this all can end. And we took it hard, we took it with such pain, because as I always said: when I got up in the morning, Natasha was already up, when I went to bed, she was still sitting at the table. That's why I always said to my husband: what happens if she cannot get in? What if she asked me why she wasn't accepted? What was the reason that she wasn't accepted to this institute? I said I didn't even know what we were going to say to her... Because for her part, she did not only do everything for her age, but she did even more than she was capable of. She overcame everything. And that's why our life over there was...we all got used to it. It was a double life. Sometimes I even wonder when I look back how these people didn't go crazy [yet]? Because to adapt to the fact that everyone lived a double life. We'd say one thing in the kitchen, we'd say another thing at home, we went out and spoke in public, and we – not someone else – we proclaimed "Hurrah! All hail!" We welcomed everything, we agreed with everything, we accepted everything, we supported everything. It was unthinkable to put up with it anymore. It was impossible to tolerate all this and all the humiliation we've been through. So, I want to tell you, when we were gathering with our friends in the kitchen... we had close friends, in fact, thanks to them we ended up in Brighton. They came ten years ahead of us. They managed to leave almost on the last day when it was still permissible, before the Soviet troops entered Afghanistan. When all emigration was halted for ten years. We, of course, lived in very difficult conditions. And they were aware of that. And every time we met with them the main, dominant subject, paradoxically for the young... we never really talked about clothes or anything else - we were wagging our tongues about our reality and existence. And about the pipe dream: to see Paris and die. It was a story that we kept repeating a hundred times. And then it happened that a gap, not even a gate or a window, but a small gap opened up, and it was possible to at least go to the countries of Eastern Europe. They were all close enough in their standards and lifestyles, and

everything in the world. They were close to the Soviet reality. Nevertheless, for us it was still foreign. Because there was still a generation that hasn't died out, that still preserved those traditions and foundations of the time in most aspects. That's how it happened that our friends managed, as they say, to breach a hole in this crack. And they invited us to go to Poland. In the Soviet reality it was like that: if you were permitted, if you have already returned, and you did not carry anything, did not violate anything, no tails followed you, then you were then allowed almost unconditionally. Well rarely, you still had to go through the district committee, [and] bring a character reference, in order to go on vacation to your friends in the GDR or Hungary. This was such an absurdity that it cannot even be analyzed! And every time they said to you, "Why are you going there? Look at what we have: what forests! What a Ural! What a Siberia! Have you been over there? What are you going to Hungary for?" At any cost so nobody even... no-no! You see, the whole life was arranged like this, pushing us. It forced us to make that decision, to turn this desire to leave into a pipe dream.

JK - How hard has it been for you to move, in terms of the moral and legal aspects?

YN - Well, you know, moving in any case, as we have always been saying, is tantamount to a fire. It's really close to the truth. We left the apartment, most of our belongings. You were not allowed to take anything with you! You were released as actual naked beggars! I have nothing left but feelings of indignation and anger. Well, of course, I probably exaggerate it a little bit, because there were certainly nice, as they say, periods. We, like everyone else, partied and celebrated and walked and tried to go somewhere... Although it was difficult, it was excruciating, It was a struggle. We couldn't get into any hotels, it was impossible to find a place to stay. And even if you managed to stop somewhere on your way, in such a case the living conditions were impossible to even think about. I recall when we were here, unfortunately, it was a short period of time that my husband

was still alive. We didn't have enough time together. But we managed to get to Canada at least. And there were a couple of motels we stayed at. So, I remember, there were no questions in any of hotels about the need for water, a shower, a toilet! Over there, it was only a cesspool. It was just a hundred kilometers from Moscow!

JK – How did the immigration process go? You got to another country first, correct?

YN - Yes, so we, like all others, because we were people of Jewish nationality, so to speak - refuseniks, the Soviet government and the Soviet reality did everything to ensure that no one else was tempted. There were a lot of anecdotes on this subject that no one would have stayed in this country if they were allowed (to leave). So, of course, all the spokes were put in the wheels. And it was forbidden to take anything with you, and you were deprived of everything in this world, and you had to pay a king's ransom for the diploma [Since they were leaving, the government wanted to be compensated for the cost of their free education]. The process went like this: we were all formally going to Israel. We were sent to Vienna. We came to Vienna, we were greeted at the airport and told: "You are in the free world! Where do you want to go? If to Israel – over here, if to the Western countries – over there." It all depended on your wishes. There were many of the patriots who did not imagine immigration to any other country except Israel. There were a lot of them. We, in particular... first of all, our friends have already been here. We have formed, Natasha had already managed to visit France once. She went to Paris. She had a lot of friends there; she was greeted triumphantly. Of course, you know, it's one thing to go living on your own, it's another thing to come to visit as a guest. Of course, it's all day and night. And since she has a very impressionable, very sensitive nature, our first call, and we were already, as they say, ready for departure, while she wasn't so much. She wasn't 100 percent sure as we were. And when we called her when she was in Paris, the first thing she said to us was, "Mom, if we cannot go, we have to



crawl!" We had the following priority: our sister left with her husband, then we did. Still experiencing a sense of fear and distrust for the Soviet life and the Soviet system, to escort her (her daughter), using the opportunity. Frankly, when we took her to the airport in Moscow, in Sheremetyevo, we were not sure that we would see each other again. We escorted her, then we left, and then our niece, my late sister's daughter, left along with my parents.

JK – What was your first impression of Coney Island? What did you remember the most?

YN – As I already told you we had our closest friends who were like a family. They were very close, we were constantly in contact, constantly. And life and circumstances had separated us for 10 years. They ended up here, and we were over there. And when we arrived, obviously we had no choice at that moment. We came here to our friends. We were met at the airport, brought here, to them, to Brighton Beach. That's how we ended up trapped in this area, which, in all honesty, I would say today ... Well, there are some advantages, some convenience, proximity to the ocean, familiar environment, familiar stores. At first, it was especially important. But anyway, most likely, we would not have been here if not for these special circumstances when we came to them and had to be here, not even being aware of where we were and what we were, and how we were. So, of course, the first impression, as I remember, was absolutely stunning, especially the train. When we first, you know... Now there is no reaction, it is something normal, this loud rattling sound and all that. But the first impression was... man is like an animal, you get used to everything. We are used to it, and I already consider it my neighborhood, I am very used to it. I have to tell you, at some point, when I was in relatively good physical condition, I enjoyed the proximity of the ocean. I was using it a lot. And I walked along the shore, and bathed. So, the first impression was stunning, and now I'm used to it.

JK – What did you do when you moved in?

YN - It wasn't as easy as it sounds. You see, it was an influx, a breakthrough. There were complicated political games that were behind the arrival of Jews here between Israel and the United States. So, it was a wave of people. And like a wave, it always creates a deficit in everything. There was a terrible shortage of apartments. First, it was expensive. Second, it wasn't close. They were neither acceptable nor decent. In short, these problems were quite serious and acute. The need to pay the rent forced us (to work). My husband by that time was already quite ill, Natasha started working. My husband was taking care of her daughter, our eldest granddaughter, and I started working as a babysitter. We had to pay the rent somehow, and he was, so to speak, a house husband. Then later, thanks to Natasha, I worked at Touro College, in the registrar's office. Despite the fact that I had quite serious problems with the language, nevertheless, the head of this department was in a very close, kind, cordial relationship with me, up until her death. She was my manager; I was working with her. And despite my problems with the language, she really appreciated me for my accuracy, dedication, discipline, organization, and order. And I did a good job. The management knew me, they asked me to stay there, but my husband was seriously ill. Very ill. He died of lung cancer. In short, these circumstances, of course, forced me... I spent some time balancing it, and then I had to leave in order to completely dedicate myself to care for my loved ones.

JK – Did you start to learn the (English) language in the Soviet Union?

YN – When it was absolutely definite that we were submitting the documents, I went... there was a system of paid (classes), where Natasha also worked for some time. I was attending these classes. Well, it was just a basic level. I graduated from Touro College, where I worked, with all the regalia, I got a diploma with honors. And I was even included in the book "Who's Who?" One day my late parents received a letter. They got a thank you letter for the daughter that they raised so

exceptionally that she was included in the book “Who’s Who?” And then, I just couldn't do anything physically except for serious problems like my husband's illness, going to hospitals and all that. When I got myself together, I made a decision for myself that I had come here. And to see how all the Russians continue their style and their lives with absolutely no regard that they are in another country, that they are here. One day I canceled Russian television, I don't have it anymore, I have only American television. Only. For a very, very long time, many, many years. I started to learn the language on my own. I can't say that I've made great progress, but I read absolutely freely, absolutely. As a general rule, I can translate what I read as well. I have problems, of course, with speech. Because first of all, there is no practice. No experience. And the further I go, the more I lose it.

JK – Do you consider yourself a patriot of America?

YN - Yes, yes, yes, yes! Unconditionally and unquestioningly. Yes, yes. There are problems here, but I judge from a position, first of all, as a professional, as a lawyer and a person who is part of the legal profession. This is the country of laws, law enforcement, and leadership. The Constitution is the law. And no one's going to change it. And, as they say, God bless the creators and founders of this country. The wisest of the wisest people who could have been created by life and history. Those, who created the principles of law for this country that don't exist in any other country and never will.

JK – Did you visit Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

YN - Yes. It was only once. And I want to tell you that I was in awe of this upcoming reunion with Moscow. We had lived there all our lives, it is still not a village after all, even considering all its externalities and shortcomings. And I was looking forward to this reunion with great excitement

and trepidation. I was very afraid. I'm a pretty emotional person, too. I was very afraid that it could somehow... awaken nostalgic feelings in me. We did not experience any unpleasant feelings, any sensations, any serious problems. We were with our relatives, she (Natasha) was at her friend's place. Well, I visited all the museums again, and Tretyakovka [a famous art gallery in Moscow], she took us to the show. And we went to a couple of restaurants. We visited the cemetery, of course. But I left without any, you know, feelings... On the contrary, I wanted to come [back] here soon. I felt at home here. I wanted to go home. You know, it's a special feeling of home that is not comparable to anything.