

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Zinovy Pritsker

Interviewer: Mark Markov

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/zinovy-pritsker>

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Mark Markov – Today is April 21, 2016. I, Mark Markov, am taking an interview with Zinovy Pritsker for the Coney Island History Project.

Tell me how you lived before you moved to America. What did you do? Where did you work?

Zinovy Pritsker – I lived in Leningrad, worked as a musician in a band, and lived off of that. I had an apartment. I was married. I had a son – Eugene. That is how we lived in Leningrad.

MM – Where did you work?

ZP – First I worked in a band. It was called the Batkhin Orchestra, but officially it was called the Leningrad Young Communists' Orchestra [laughs]. That is why it was never disbanded. Later, when I got married, I needed to by an apartment. So I went to work in a restaurant. In Leningrad there was a restaurant called Sadko in the Hotel Evropeiskaya [Belmond Grand Hotel Europe]. And I worked there for many years as a musician – almost to the time when we left. I was the director of the band, and I played the saxophone and the clarinet.

MM – What music were you interested in at the time?

ZP – I was always interested in jazz and nothing else. Well, I did enjoy listening to and playing classical music. I really like classical music. There was also a time when I worked at a symphony orchestra. But in general, in the time before we left, I listened to jazz and played jazz.

MM – Was it common?

ZP – Among musicians – of course it was. There were many musicians, wonderful musicians who played jazz and took a great interest in jazz. I was among them.

MM – How did the government look at this?

ZP – That we were involved with jazz – no one really knew about it. I think that even if they did know – maybe they did know – it did not interest anyone because there were many different people... There was even a club in the Palace of Culture. I unfortunately do not remember what it was called... It was called the Kvadrat Club. Musicians would come in and play jazz. It was a grassroots affair. People themselves created it, and they would play music themselves. We even played jazz in the restaurant as the first act.

MM – Tell me about the first time you heard jazz.

ZP – The first time I heard jazz, I was still a boy because my father was also a musician. He played the trumpet. He was a very good musician. He loved jazz, and the first time I heard it I was just a child.

MM – Did you hear it live the first time?

ZP – Yes, the first time I heard it live. Russian musicians from father's band were playing. They played the jazz music that is played in America. At the time, everyone would get everything from music X-ray sheets because, of course, there were no

records available. My father also listened to Voice of America a lot. There was a commentator called [Willis] Conover – a jazz commentator. There was a program that had half an hour, maybe forty minutes of jazz (I do not remember) [Voice of America Jazz Hour]. Many people listened to it. And many would copy the music from there onto X-rays [for lack of vinyl records]. Then, you could listen to the music later. When I became older, I also began to copy and imitate the music.

MM – What was this called?

ZP – It was called “records on bones.” Well, that is a bit over the top [laughs] — because there were really human bones there from X-rays. How the actual X-rays sheet were made into records, I unfortunately do not remember. I don’t know, I never even took interest in it. I just had them, and copied onto them. Later, of course, I had actual records. I listened to records.

MM – Did it come from *fartsovshchiki*?

ZP – Records? Yes... Some people had them mailed or brought from abroad: that is how I think it went. Then you could buy them. It’s not like they were sold everywhere. You needed to know where to buy them, and how to copy them. Tape recorders were also becoming available. You could record sound right onto the taper recorder. I had some Soviet tape recorders. People copied onto them – and you could listen to it later. I personally only saw X-ray records for five, maybe even three years. Then you actually got some actual records, tape recorders – people recorded directly from Voice of America despite the fact that they always tried to block it, but we still managed to copy the music from the radio.

MM – Did you go out into the woods to listen to the radio?

ZP – No. My father had a good short-wave receiver that was able to catch the station.

MM – Can you tell me a little more about the *fartsovshchiki*?

ZP – About the *fartsovshchiki*? I never actually met a *fartsovshchik*, but on Nevsky Prospekt there would be people – young guys mostly (though even young women would do this) who would go up to foreigners, and barter with them: a pair of jeans for a shoddy balalaika or something of the sort. Then the jeans would be resold. Just like that. I just saw how this happened. All of this was done very quietly, in secret. There were also undercover policemen. That is, the KGB. But they knew everybody. They probably let some people do it, and not others. I do not really know, to tell you the truth.

MM – When did you decide—how were you able to leave the Soviet Union?

ZP – I was already thinking about leaving in the 70s because my son was born in the early 70s. I knew that he had no future here [in the USSR] with my Jewish last name. I wanted to leave earlier, but I could not due to some family issues. But in 1978 we emigrated, and I moved to America with my wife and child.

MM – How did you prepare for it?

ZP – I did not do anything special. We sold the apartment for what it cost. We had more money than we knew what to do with because we were only able to change Russian rubles for I think 120 American dollars. So, there were three of us. That makes 360 dollars. I gave the rest of the money to mom and dad, and my sister. Some of the money we simply spent – we just hit the town [laughs]. What could we do with it? We did not buy too much to bring with us. Well, I bought some photo cameras, some bed sheets. We took some things with us. And I knew these were all

trifles, of course. But everyone brought things over, and we thought, maybe we could sell something in our first few months. We had to get some money. After all, we were going with a child. That is important. That's how that went.

We went through Austria. We got to Austria just in time for the Jewish holidays, and lived there for almost a month. We lived in a hotel. Then we lived for a month and half in Italy. And in Italy we sold everything; we sold everything for pennies. But still, we needed some money. Despite help from HIAS, or whichever organization there was, which helped us, it was not enough.

MM – Were you able to bring your instrument with you?

ZP – Yes! I brought with me a clarinet and a saxophone. Unfortunately my saxophone – I had an American saxophone – they did not let through, but I bought a Czechoslovakian saxophone for the first few months. I sold the other one. Unfortunately they did not let me take it. The clarinet, however, they let through.

MM – Tell me how you came to work as a tuner.

ZP – Before we left, I knew full well (I was told beforehand) that it was impossible to work as a musician, especially a jazz musician, in America because first, there is too much competition. Secondly, there is not that much work out there. It is episodic. You do one job and then another. Or as they say here: from gig to gig.

But I had a family, a child. I needed to pay rent and the rest. For three-four years, I think, I trained to be a piano tuner. There was a special factory in Leningrad at the Apraksin Dvor. That factory was called Accord, and it specialized in piano restoration and repair. I studied there during the day, and in the evening I worked as a musician. Luckily, the factory manager liked me: he gave a form for working in more than one place. That way I had the right to work during the day and evening. This was also a problem in Russia at the time. You could not work two jobs. So I picked up the trade there, moved here, and have been working for many years: I have been a tuner for 38 years. If you count my experience in Russia, then over 40 years.

MM – How did you find work here?

ZP – How I started working as a tuner? I went straight to work: my first employer was Frank Lapiano – an Italian. He had a company, and I went to work for him. At the time, I would like to add, it worked like this: one learns the language and the other goes to work. Thus, my wife went to learn English – naturally, as she is a woman. And I went to work knowing in English: “Hi! Bye!” That's all. I didn't know anything else. Well, maybe three-four more words. When I went to work, they would just point to things: do this, do that, and I did it. Fortunately, I had the experience to be a tuner and repairman at this small factory. Then I went to work for Steinway, where I did not work for too long because it was very difficult for me. After all, I was a musician in Russia. Here, you had to come to work at eight and work for eight hours while the foreman and some other managers kept close watch. There was a union; the union also kept close watch on you. The work was rather boring – it involved regulating pianos. That is, the same thing over and over again. It was very serious work for a tuner. But it was monotonous. New instruments had to be made, the same thing over and over. That is the first point. I also did very little actual tuning. I did a lot of regulating, but I never got too into it. I could have gotten a

pension and everything from there, but going to Queens from Brooklyn everyday (it is located in Astoria) was quite tiresome.

Moreover, I played in a band in the evening. My first job was in a Polish jazz band. And I played in a Polish band. They paid pretty well for the time. I did not care where I was playing because I needed money. So I played in the Polish band, and during the day I worked as a tuner and a regulator. I left Steinway and went to work for a different company. For many years I worked at the Pro Piano Company where they rent out the best musical instruments in the world for concerts: for Carnegie Hall and Avery Fisher Hall. And I worked there, serviced the instruments, and tuned them. They also rented instruments to individuals and private residences, and I would work on the instruments apartments and houses.

I worked there for many years, and then I started my own company, which is called the Piano Craft Company. It is still called that. It was first based in Brooklyn on Bay Ridge Avenue. We have both new and rebuilt instruments. That is, we have instruments that we restored and refurbished for sale. At the time people started coming—it was in the 1980s, let's say in 1985-6 (I don't remember exactly when). Many started coming over [from the former Soviet Union]; the big wave of immigration. Many Soviet tuners began to come to me – that is, from Russia. I taught them and we worked together. All of them settled down and famous tuners in America, in New York.

MM – When did you stop working in the factory?

ZP – I moved the factory to Manhattan to West 29th Street. We closed the factory after 9/11 because business became terrible, and it was expensive and difficult to maintain the factory. I closed the factory, and began to work for myself. The company still exists: I am just the only one working – I and my wife who does the booking, telephone. And so I work – I tune pianos. I do small jobs, sometimes even big jobs. I just don't have the utilities to do big jobs anymore. I give the big jobs to my friends who can do them. They do the big jobs for me.

MM – Please tell me about your jazz band. How did it start? What are you playing now?

ZP – The band came into being around 20 years ago, maybe 18. I don't remember exactly. My friend and I—he is a dentist, Dr. Mark Rosen – I remember him from Leningrad. He worked as a dentist there and a little bit as musician on the side. We decided to make a band. At first, we wanted to make a small band, but in the New York there turned out to be so many Russian musicians that had nowhere to play, and many people came to us. So we made a jazz big band – that is around 17-18 people. It exists to this day. Some people changed: some have passed away, others grew old and moved out. A very good musician moved to California: Pier Blainstein. And some people died because they were fairly old – 50 and over. Time passed. But the band still exists. It is composed of Russian musicians plus a few Americans. When we have an opening, we take in Americans.

What does the band do? We play popular jazz music (from the 1950s to today) – that which is written for bands like ours. It is similar to the band of Tom Dorsey, or Duke Ellington, or Count Basie. That is the type of music that we play. We are not on that level of course [laughs], but we play that type of music. We play a lot of dance music that was popular in 1950s America. It was very popular back then. We

rehearse every Tuesday. In order to rehearse, you need room. Doctor Mark Rosen has an office on East 13th Street in Brooklyn. It has a basement. It is not too big, but we all fit there. Every Tuesday we rehearse. Our next concert is on the 17th: we are playing in a club in Manhattan. We have vocalists – Nina Brodskaya is a very famous singer. She was very popular in Russia. She made the soundtrack of many movies and worked with Eddie Rosner in her time. Lev Pischik also worked with Eddie Rosner and in other famous, celebrated ensembles. We have a younger singer Barbara (she is also from Moscow). She sings very well. She sings a lot of modern jazz music and improvises well. That is more or less it. I do a lot of arrangements for the vocalists and the band as whole – just the music for the band. I get many arrangements from my American friends. That is how the band works. Every Tuesday we rehearse. Everyone is happy [laughs].

MM – What neighborhood did you move into when you moved to New York? Where else did you live and how did those neighborhoods change?

ZP – First we lived on Cortelyou Road. I rented an apartment. It was my first apartment after we moved out of the hotel. At the time, the apartment (two-bedroom) cost 250 dollars, which was very expensive. It was 78-9. In time, my wife found out about the Sheepshead Bay Projects. Most of the people who lived there were Italians and Jews. It was a clean and pretty project, well kept. When we moved there the rent was 90 dollars for a two-bedroom apartment. It was significantly smaller for that time period. We lived there for 15 years, and then got in line for Trump Village: these are subsidized apartments and we got one. And here we have been living for many years. The apartment became a co-op. We live here because it became impossible to live in the project. [Mayor David] Dinkins put people from the street there, mostly alcoholics and drug addicts. We moved from there to here. My second child was born there – a girl. The age difference between my children is 13 years.

How did the neighborhood change? Of course there has been a lot of change. I think that the neighborhood where I live now [Coney Island] changed for the better. It has become cleaner. We are not afraid to go the boardwalk in the evening. There are always policemen there: you feel that you are being protected. The neighborhood which I left became worse and worse. Right now, I think that it is impossible to live there. It has really changed. Yet, people live there as well.

MM – What about in terms of the amusement park? It is Coney Island after all.

ZP – Yes, the amusement park is wonderful, but we do not really go there often because kids grew up, have their own families. Sometimes, when the grandkids come over, we go there to play on the swings or something of the sort. Or we would go the Aquarium, before they started restructuring it. But that is also very rare. In general, we walk along the boardwalk or in the summer we go to Pennsylvania (we have a little house there).

MM – To the *dacha*?

ZP – Yes, like a *dacha*. Yes.

MM – When your children were younger, you would go there more often, no?

ZP – Comparably more often, yes. Still, we almost never had time because my son was studying music. He would practice, and every Saturday we had to bring him to the Manhattan School of Music. Then after school, he would always sit and practice

with his instrument. My daughter was also learning to play the piano. We were generally very busy. Music was the thing that made us work.

MM – When did you buy the *dacha*?

ZP – We bought it seven years ago. Absolutely by accident we somehow went there one day with friends. We looked around, we liked the place, and we bought a small house. It is not even a house – more of a trailer: two bedrooms, a tiny kitchen, and a big porch where we spend most of our time. It is warm in the summer. We only sleep in the house, and my wife cooks.