Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive
Interviewee: Khonya Epstein
Interviewer: Julia Khanina
http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/khonya-epstein

Julia Khanina – This is Julia Khanina for the Coney Island History Project and today we are talking with Khonya Epstein.

Khonya Epstein – My name is Khonya Epstein. I was born in Belarus, in Shepelevichi, in the Kruglyansky district of Mogilev region, Belarus. My shtetl [a small town with a large Jewish population, which existed in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust] is located on the border between the Minsk and Mogilev regions. This is the northern part of Mogilev region, the northernmost point. It is surrounded by deep forests. There are many glacial lakes. This is a rich natural area with mixed forests. I spent my childhood there.

JK – Tell us where do you live now?

KE – Now I live in Bensonhurst. I have been living on this street since we arrived in America. We were living in a small apartment at first, then we moved. Then we returned to this street. We arrived here, if you are interested, on October 18, 1989. It's been a long time. Our journey here was pretty easy for us, because our daughter had moved here after graduating from the Leningrad University of Economics and Finance. She got married and settled in America. She constantly asked us to join her. Though at that time I held a very respectable position: I was deputy principal of the largest school in Mogilev (School #7). It was difficult at first. But since I had been enjoying some authority, neither the District Committee nor Executive Committee nor Soviet Party agencies brought any claims against me. I was working until I retired. And then when I retired, I visited my daughter to take a look at American life. Then I immigrated.

JK – What were your first impressions of America?

KE – My first impressions were as a visitor. And I liked America. I liked Manhattan, Queens. We didn't visit Brooklyn at that time, but we had great impressions. And when we moved to America and settled here, I immediately started looking for opportunities to learn English. Well, it was 30 years ago. I was sixty something then. Naturally, everything went very well. I could read and speak, memorized words quickly. But then my daughter had her own kids, and I had to spend time with my grandchildren. That's how my studies got interrupted. Then I entered a community college, it was called Touro College. I graduated successfully. I could read and write very well. And I had already read Salinger and Steinbeck. However, because I have been in close proximity to the Russian speaking community, everything that I've learned started quickly disappearing. Now I can barely speak, but I can understand. If people speak slowly, then I can correctly answer the questions. I can read at the same level as before. I have some knowledge of English, but it is not sufficient.

JK – Tell us about your life as an immigrant. What have you been doing?

KE – As an immigrant, at first, I dedicated myself completely to my grandkids. I didn't pay enough attention to community service, though I had already started making some notes about my past because I thought it would be interesting to other people. I tried to write some stories. Well, my first was related to my story about my father's boots. Gendarmes [a police force of the Third Reich] who killed my father for his partisan connections (though such connections did not exist), removed his boots and brought them to me to repair the following morning. The heels were worn out and I was told to repair them. Naturally, I refused to fix the boots that belonged to my father who had just been killed. I was beaten, of course. That's what I wrote about. It was my first story: "Sapogi moego otza" ("My father's boots"). Then I started writing something about life under Germans in my shtetl about being tortured because I was Jewish. And [wrote] about my relationship with my mother as well as my younger brother. I wrote longer notes. And then I decided to write a more substantial book about the two years of my life that I spent in a partisan group and a ghetto. Mostly, in the partisan group. About three years of my life.

JK – Tell us how did you survive during World War II?

KE – Yes, it was very hard. The difficulty was because polizei and German [soldiers] had been guarding [us] all the time. Mostly, polizei. [This word found its place in Russian vocabulary during World War II. It has a very negative connotation and refers to local people who formed collaborationist police units to aid the Nazis and betrayed people in the community.] Every member of our nationality was put on some kind of list and under consideration. After my father had been shot, seventeen days later, which was November 15th, my birthday, they forced every member of the Jewish community to the outskirts of our shtetl and decided to shoot everyone. The pits had already been prepared at the edge of the forest not far from the shtetl. They planned to do away with me too, because they had already shot teens like me. My mother begged the leader because I was very close to his son and often visited him, studied with him in the same class. She persuaded him and I was spared. Then my mother and I moved from Shepelevichi ghetto to Kruglyansky ghetto. Well, what was I doing in the Kruglyansky ghetto…? The corpses of gunned down men were brought daily. They were thrown into the very last house [on the outskirts]. They needed to be buried, as they had been thrown into the garden. I and a couple of other boys like me had to bury them. And on June 15, 1942, the decision was made to completely destroy our ghetto. At 3am in the morning, my mother noticed that the military were already in position. There were mostly Hungarians, they were called Magyars. She concluded once again that I would be taken [by the polizei]. There were about 30 people at the entrance to our apartment [building]. It was a small apartment. When they were going to bed, they all went early because of such an intense concentration of people living there. So, she asked me to get into the cellar. And I got into that cellar. Then one German jumped into it too. I started crawling farther under the floor. He started yelling for me to get out, but I was crawling farther. No matter his yells… Then they started shooting and throwing grenades, but I went farther and farther. I had been laying down for a day. I heard moans, how people were kicked out from it… I felt that everything had calmed down, that nobody was there. I decided to get out of this cellar in the night and leave. Just when I approached the trap door, I saw a German. As soon as he noticed me, he started yelling "Halt! Halt! Halt!" I crawled again. Apparently, I had crawled to… it was a heating furnace, so under the foundation of the furnace. They sounded the alarm, started blowing up the floor. They were yelling. And I was

quietly laying down, sensing that they were blowing up the floor and looking for me. That's how it went for three days: blowing up the floor. It was a very big building. The Executive District Council was there before the war started. All these offices were rearranged for residential apartments, without heating, or food or anything. It was just an existence, not a life. I felt that nobody was there anymore. Four or five days had already gone by. Laying down in that foundation I realized that it was pouring rain. I decided to flee. I stuck out my head: the entire floor had been blown up. I stopped by our apartment where my mom had been [before]. I thought to grab some photos, but it had been gutted. There was a ravine close to the ghetto. I went into that ravine. I was going farther, farther, farther.

It was such a terrible rainfall! As a matter of fact, I was barefoot, and I ruined my clothes when I was crawling under the floor. I walked for 4 kilometers in this condition till I reached Ogloblya village. I noticed a stack of hay nearby, but it was also wet. As was I. I entered the house of a peasant named Shevchik. He immediately ordered me to get onto the furnace. I climbed up on the furnace, they hid me behind the curtain and put out some sour milk and cottage cheese. I was so exhausted that I ate it and fell asleep. I heard a familiar voice in the morning. [The voice of] the man who once worked as the chairman of the district office, and then, during the repression was sent to jail and later released. [The term "repression" was officially used to describe the prosecution of people considered counter-revolutionaries and enemies of the people by Joseph Stalin.] And he was telling [them] that a few days ago all of the Jews in Krugloe had been killed. But one was nowhere to be found! He was beneath the floor and we were looking for him. Germans blew up the floor, but he couldn't be found. Where did he go? As if God took him. I heard this conversation and concluded that it was only 4 kilometers to the garrison. The Germans may come and look at this furnace. And I told the peasant that I could not stay there any longer. He gave me a shirt, some shoes, a jacket. And he said: "Go, my son, maybe you will find partisans in the forest." There were no forests, mostly villages. Such villages as Pasyrevo, Dudakovichi, Orekhovka. And I was walking by the edge of the forest and observing the villages. The villages were nice, beautiful. Better than ours, because [they had] nice roofs (we had thatched roofs, but they had real dwellings, lovely). And I had already walked for about 12 kilometers, when I reached the village of Orekhovka. I went around it, entered a settlement. My strength was already gone. And I decided to enter a house. They fed me in that settlement in Orekhovka. They decided not to let me stay because they were also afraid. And I left. I walked into the meadow. There was a huge oak tree. And I stopped by it and fell asleep. Then I woke up and I entered the forest. There I found a strawberry bush, then there were blueberries. I picked them and ate. And then I heard the mower who was mowing the grass. Then I went farther, farther and finally, after several days, I arrived at a partisan outpost. They greeted me, took me away to the headquarters of the partisan outpost. They sent me to Captain Suvorov's unit, a man who had joined the war from the beginning and was a graduate of Dzerzhinsky Military Academy in Moscow. He was the embodiment of the military. He said: "Son, you are going to be a young partisan." At first, I took care of the horses. I was familiar with this job because that is what I had been doing in my shtetl. Then they ambushed a garrison and brought some clothing. As a matter of fact, I didn't have any. And every partisan was coming to me and saying: "Khonya, this is for you! Khonya, this is for you! This is for you!" At that moment I realized how deeply they were attached to me, how special was their love for me. Moreover, they brought a small French carbine. And 120 bullets. The commander summoned

me: “We brought a weapon for you. You should know that there are 120 bullets. It means that you mustn’t waste them but fire every bullet at the fascists.” I spent 6 months of the war with this carbine till I got my first German rifle, and then a Russian one. Within a month, I had started actively engaging in all operations. It was a war via railway, in 1943 and 1942. They took me with them. First of all, the commander of our unit saw in me an eager young man. He appointed me his adjutant. And I became his aide. We spent six months of the war together. Then our partisan brigade was surrounded on all sides. We had to flee to the Lepel forests of the Vitebsk region. Our brigade was divided in two groups. My group encountered an ambush in the area of Orsha-Smoliany. We were greeted with such rifle and mortar fire that we had to leave. We stayed in Berezovka village. There, in Berezovka village, we realized that we wouldn’t be able to go through the Lepel forests. We decided to go to the forests that were close to my shtetl.We arrived in the area near my place in a week. The first village where we stayed was called Zeleny Rosha. The kids from that village were attending our school. Naturally, they all knew me. And they thought that I had been killed long ago. They noticed me in the partisan unit, with a weapon, and they started hollering: “Khonka is alive! Khonka is alive! Khonka is alive!” [The name plus the diminutive suffix -ka is a term of endearment.] The news spread quickly. Then I decided to visit my shtetl. It happened that our commander became the commander of a regiment. At night, he was preparing maps of military operations. It was getting dark early, as it was September of 1942. He was looking for kerosene for the lamp so he could work. He summoned me and said: “You’re local here. Maybe you can find some kerosene in your shtetl?” When the war started, my father was afraid: we had kerosene, a supply of kerosene (2 large bottles): “Let’s bury them, my son, in the barn, because there could be a fire and this kerosene…” And we buried it. So I said: “We had some [kerosene] buried, if my house is still intact.” At that moment I didn’t know [if it was]. “Then” – I said, “I will get that kerosene and bring it [here].” Two other men accompanied me. I was going to my shtetl for the first time. [I saw] a man was digging potatoes in the field. There was a crossroads where three roads met. Where were we supposed to go? One road to Shepelevichi, another to Glubokie and third to Kostyukovichi. I summoned the man and asked: “How,” – I said, “can I get to Shepelevichi?” We were three men on horseback. He looked up at me and said: “And you don’t know the road to Shepelevichi? And you don’t know??” – he asked me. He recognized me. I said: “I know, I know, dyadya Vasily” [‘dyadya’ is a formal way to address a man in Russian]. I knew him. “Then go!” We arrived, but our house was occupied by a man who was making valenki. [Russian winter footwear made of wool.] The door was locked. One partisan who was riding to Makushino said: “Aren’t you the owner? Just break the lock and enter your house. You are the owner of your house!” I didn’t touch the lock, but we entered. And then we went to the barn. On the spot where the bottles with kerosene were buried it was filled with hay. We called a neighbor, he helped us get rid of the hay. And we started looking for the kerosene. I knew approximately where it was buried. We stumbled onto a stockpile of 70 pairs of valenki. He was probably producing them for somebody. Then there were some leather boots, some materials. It was a vault, a natural vault. And there these two bottles of kerosene. I took them, and we took valenki. That’s how it happened. Then I started actively taking part in almost every operation. It could be a railroad, ambush of the garrison or scouting. Mostly scouting.

JK – You wrote a book called “Privet, tezka!” (“Hello, namesake!”). How did you get this idea to write this book and how does the story told in it relate to those circumstances that you endured?

KE – I was thinking about it for some time, but the job of the school's deputy principal was very difficult. We had about 60 classes. And even though I had my own assistant it was really hard. It was hard to find time for something and write something… I was writing scholarly articles about the methodology of the teaching process of [various] subjects. I was looking for ways to improve the teaching process in schools. Even though I was a teacher of Russian language and literature, I had to know math, physics, chemistry and other subjects. I visited classes and had to give some useful advice. That's why I had no time. But my short methodological pieces started appearing in the magazine "Narodny Asveta." I had more time when I moved here. Early one morning I just sat and wrote my first story, "Sapogi moego otza" ("My father's boots"). And then I had an idea about writing something else. What would be a literary device then, I thought? I used the literary device of narrating the story to my great-great grandson. And I decided to give him my name. That's why my book is called "Privet, tezka!" ("Hello, namesake!"). And I even included a foreword in my book: "I could have continued telling you more, but I decided to talk only about the hard times. About the hardest one." It would have taken two or three more books to tell more about my time in the service, how I worked and studied, and how I worked as a deputy principal. I limited it only to this book. Then I wrote several stories. For example, I wrote the story "Trizhdy rozhdenny" ("Born three times") – that was about me. Then, there was a doctor in the military who became a commander of the unit. I wrote about him specifically: "Chelovek-legenda" ("A legendary man"). Then, it was a boy partisan of my age, elusive Havrosh. I also wrote: "Zdravstvui, Bork!" (Hello, Bork!). His name was Borka. He died, but the school where he studied was named after him. I wrote that story and then another one: "Posledny den' moei partisanshiny" ("The last day of my partisanship"). So, I finished by writing these short stories. I wrote some poetry as well.

JK – Tell us a little about your leadership of the Holocaust survivors club.

KE – I've been leading this club for 12 years already. I didn't have time before that. I was an active member of that club. Then as people started coming, our [previous] leader didn't have… well, maybe she just wasn't feeling well. She stepped down as a leader of the club. Lyuba Mikityanskaya invited me then. And I started working on the creation of this club. I had to invite people again. We started working on a curriculum for the club. Now I have decided to pay more attention to expanding the world view of our members. For instance, I recently did a literary conference about [Isaac] Bashevis Singer's book "The Slave." I invited a psychologist for it. I decided to introduce everyone to a painting by a famous painter, but not everyone was aware of him. I invited an art critic. I started inviting [Mark] Shteinberg, a war historian. The purpose was to instill interest, because people pass away. Many members of my club passed away. About 20 people went to the next world. I'm getting older, too. I'm not getting younger, and it's getting more and more difficult for me to organize it. The most difficult task is to gather everyone. Sometimes it can be a weather-related issue, or something having to do with their health. I talk to members of my club on a regular basis. I call them with inquiries about their health and well-being. I'm always in contact with them. I work with them not only once a month, but almost every week, sometimes every day. It depends on how a person is doing. I never forget about birthdays. I always call them and wish them well.

JK – Victory Day is a very important day that is celebrated by many people around the world, but it is especially important for people who actively participated in those events and their descendants.

How would you describe this day to those listeners who don't have Russian speaking ancestors and who are not familiar with this holiday? [Victory Day is an annual holiday on May 9th that commemorates the surrender of the Nazis in 1945.]

KE – I would tell them first about those struggles that Russian people endured, and those other folks who participated in the war with fascists. And I would tell about events that people suffered as a result of participating in this war. I even wrote poetry dedicated to the veterans, where I describe everything we've been through and what we've felt.

JK – What does this day – Victory Day – mean to you?

KE – You know, when I was a partisan, and then at the front, then in the army where I served until 1951, it was so hard for me to carry a rifle and bullets (a bag with bullets and grenades). I thought about the time when I can take it off my shoulders. When will it be easier for me to walk? When will this bloody war end? And then Victory Day arrived. I felt it immediately, that I will continue carrying my rifle, but not every day. I continued serving until 1951. I returned home in 1951 without education or anything. I needed to catch up, complete my education externally – school education, then higher education. It was difficult.

JK – Is there a difference between how you and your friends celebrated this day before immigration and now?

KE – I had more close friends before immigration. I have fewer friends here, but then I got to know more and more people. That's why there was a big difference at first, but now, as a matter of fact, I try to meet everyone who participated. Many people moved to the next world. But those who stayed – I never forget about them. Some of them are very ill, who have mobility issues and cannot come, I have to call them, talk to them, meet them if possible. I pay very close attention to that.

JK – Do you remember one day in particular?

KE – I remember my first Victory Day. After being wounded I was in the town of Syzran, in the Samarovsk region (the former Kuybushevsk region). After getting out of the hospital I started serving as a police officer. Colonel Serednitsky was the director of the town division. He added me to the group of Major Kanaev who was patrolling the main street in Syzran. I had to patrol [it] with my friends who were policemen. And it happened that one drunk pilot (I think he was a captain) went outside, picked up a brick and started threatening pedestrians. And then our Serednitsky arrived! He went right at him! I tried to shield Serednitsky so this brick wouldn't hit him. My friends picked [the pilot] up and helped subdue him. That was one special Victory Day. Then there were just regular holidays. In regard to my military service, they [holidays] were related to the parades. Military parades. I participated in military parades. I served in military school, so I was preparing sergeants, junior commanders. And I always participated in the military parades. Then in school I was preparing children for this day. I was always telling them [stories], meeting them. I have some photos of me telling children about Victory Day, about its importance.

JK – Do you attend parades on Victory Day?

KE – I go to Brighton, but not every year. There is a parade. The veterans gather and I go with them. I invite members of our club who can come. Not everyone can come, because there are many old people. Can you imagine, I'm living my 91st year. Many who participated in the war are older than me. They are 93, 94. There are many deaf people, they can't hear anything. They come to me [in the club] and I seat them in the first row. They sit, but they have difficulties hearing. It's very difficult for me now. That's how it is.