

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Naum Barash

Interviewer: Mark Markov

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/naum-barash>

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Mark Markov – This is Mark Markov for the Coney Island History Project and today I'm interviewing Naum Barash. Talk about the first time you went winter swimming.

Naum Barash – It was a long time ago [laughs]. When I was a student, I studied at the Kursk Polytechnic Institute, and the institute was located almost on the bank of a river – it was just a five-minute walk. I started to swim in September, every day before lessons began. As time went on, I thought, "If I could swim yesterday, why can't I swim today? It's only a little colder." And so I would continue to swim until the water became very cold, and there was even a crust of ice. And then other people starting coming to swim, who were doing winter sports. And somehow we teamed up. From then on until today – this year is probably my fiftieth [winter] swimming season – I do this.

MM – So, in Kursk you first swam on your own and only later in a group?

NB – Yes, but I swam alone back in the fall. That is, I was just swimming (I used to do [non-winter] swimming) without the goal of doing so in the winter. But when I felt that this wasn't that bad, and met people who were into winter swimming, I joined their group. I am very happy about it – I have no regrets.

MM – How popular was the sport?

NB – At that time it was not that popular there. There were literally four or five people in Kursk who swam with me in the river [in winter]. What made that spot particularly convenient was that a lifeboat station nearby, and they kept a hole open in the ice in order to train in diving suits. Therefore, when we went to swim, we did not even have to break the ice – we just jumped in.

MM – How was it organized?

NB – There was no organization. It was just people who enjoyed it. Of course, before this, I read about the Minsk School of Cold Training. It is a very famous school of cold training. There, there were really whole groups of people participating. Later, when I went to Minsk on business trips, I would swim with people from this group. It was great, of course.

MM – So you did winter swimming outside of Kursk?

NB – Yes. I started there, when I was a student. Then I returned to Chernovtsy (where I am actually from), and went on to do so there. There I practically organized a group of swimmers. No one else would swim in the winter there, but then my brother joined me, and a few other people from my work, and thus we started a club.

MM – Tell me how you started the group. It is very interesting.

NB – It began very simply. Again, it was September-October. I said, "Guys, let's go for a swim!" We also had [fitness] enthusiasts, who would run along the bank of the river, and then go for a swim to keep themselves in shape. And I told them, "Let's do this in the winter as well." They said, "We'll try it out." They tried, and were pretty

happy about it. There we had to break the ice with a crowbar every time we went for a swim. But this worked well as exercise, as a warm-up before we went, so everyone enjoyed doing it.

MM – How did you start swimming with the Coney Island Polar Bear Club?

NB – When we moved over here, to New York, the year was 1990, and I started looking for a group of “walruses” [Russian colloquial term for winter swimmers] right away. But people explained to me that there are no “walruses” here – here there are “polar bears.” I said, “I don’t care, I just want to swim.” That first year, I worked in a hospital as a repair technician, and there was a woman who worked with us. She said, “You know what, I’ll find out about it for you.” And she gave me an address in Coney Island, so that I could come here and join the group. To this day I am very thankful and grateful to her. I did what she said straight away. It was practically my first winter here.

I began swimming with the club. At that time, conditions were not as cozy as they are now: we changed into bathing suits and back under the boardwalk. There was no warm room into which you could come and undress, leave your clothes and go for a swim, and then come back for coffee, tea... The conditions we, of course, not like now, but there were enthusiasts, there was a group. Later, I learned that the club has existed since 1903, which means that the club is over 100 years old. I remember how we celebrated the hundred-year anniversary. I am very grateful for the people that go [for club swims] and for those who take care of the club. The [New York] Aquarium helps us a lot: they provide the room for us to change every Sunday. We swim for six months in the year. The first Sunday of November is the beginning of the season and last Sunday of April is the end of the season. So if anyone wants to join us, please do! The swim begins at 1 PM, so you can come at 12:20-12:30 to the beautifully painted building on the boardwalk, where we change before swimming.

MM – How does winter swimming differ in New York, in Coney Island, and how you remember it in the Soviet Union?

NB – First of all, there are more facilities here. As I already mentioned, we have a warm room to change in, and so forth. To tell you the truth, I am not sure that I could have done winter swimming on my own. I had a few seasons when I swam by myself in the winter because my free time did not match with the club’s schedule. I had work. It is more difficult to go into the water alone. When you do this in a group, it feels very different. Therefore, I am very grateful to the [New York] Aquarium, which is helping us. Though we help them as well. You might know that every January 1st in New York there is a large, popular swim at Coney Island. Between 1.5 and 2 thousand people come. Many give money for fundraising – 20-25 dollars. On that day we collect around 60-70 thousand dollars, from which part goes to the Aquarium and part to other causes. It is pleasant to do and to help the aquarium. Right now the Aquarium is flourishing. Even after Sandy, it recovered fully or almost recovered. And this is great. We enjoy the fact that we are located practically on the grounds of the Aquarium and get to watch it undergo transformation.

MM – Tell about the ritual, the ceremony of the swim itself.

NB – First we go onto the shore. There we get into a circle do a short warm up for about five minutes: exercises to get a little warmer before going into the water.

Then, with the whistle, so to speak, of the leader [laughs], we go into the water. No one is constrained by time [in the water]: there is no minimum nor maximum. People who are beginners or people who simply feel that they cannot swim for a long time today, leave earlier. Others stay longer. Usually, in the winter, five minutes after the beginning of the swim, another circle formed – the five-minute circle. Then the ten-minute circle. Those who are still there after ten minutes of swimming – we form another circle. And after that, people swim for as long as they like. I usually swim for 15-20 minutes. And I swim – I don't just stand or walk. Though, of course, for the first three-four minutes the body gets used to the water. There are two ways to go about this. The first way is go into the water and start swimming right away. The other way is to get used to the water first, then to swim.

MM – Tell me a little bit about the swimming competition that happened here [in Coney Island] in February.

HB – In February there was a swimming competition here – it is called the United States Winter Swimming Association National Championship. There were participants from all over America, of course, and even people from Europe came (from Belgium, from France, from the Czech Republic). And the championship happened right in the ocean. Swimming lanes were made, and we swam different distances. I, for example, was in two breaststroke races – the twenty-five and fifty meters. And I won two gold medals. To tell you the truth, in the overall result, if you include the results of all who swam, I was in seventh place (for both distances). But the results are divided by age group – in ten-year periods. I was in the 60 to 69 age group. There I was the best. I used to do [non-winter] swimming, and so I swim pretty well. The point is not in the results though – the competition itself brings out such good emotions. It is not even in the medals. I got them for my grandchildren – I have a grandson and granddaughter at the moment. Each one gets a medal [laughs]. And it's a great atmosphere. People help each other. The competition does not degenerate into some kind of "I want to be first!" Simply, by competing, people have a lot of fun.

I am very grateful to the organizers of the championship. It is the United States Winter Swimming Association, of which I am a member, and which does a lot to promote the sport. Moreover, events like this don't always happen here, and there are competitions around the world. For example, there was a championship in Tomsk, Russia a few years ago, and in Latvia as well. Our representatives went there, and to China as well (there are also championships there). Whoever has the ability and the desire can take part. And I repeat, the aim is not in the results, but in the fact that you are taking part in something that you enjoy.

MM – How does normal competitive [non-winter] swimming differ from winter swimming?

NB – There is not much of a difference. There is only a difference in getting used to the water, to the temperature. Obviously, winter water is cold, and thus it takes three-four minutes to get used to it. People who swim in the middle of summer also [have this problem]. When you go into the water, it is colder than the air outside. But it takes only 20-30 seconds of the body to get used to. In the winter it takes longer. There is no big difference. More differences? There are of course. In the winter I have a maximum of 15 to 20 minutes in the water. In the summer, when I

train in the pool, I can swim for 45 minutes or an hour. That is, until I get tired. I can also add this anecdote, as my children are doctors. One day I noticed that when I came out of the water – and not just me but also the people who were bathing with me – we were shaking. It was not strong, but I became worried and asked my children if this is a problem. It is normal. The same way it is normal when you sweat in the heat of summer. In that manner the body reacts normally to the cold. The main thing to look out for is not to go over the limit because there could be some negative side effects.

MM – Tell me about the experience of winter swimming.

NB – When you get into the water, you feel that it is cold. The same happens in the summer. When I go into the water in the middle of summer, it is colder than my body and feels very cold. The difference is in the time it takes to get used to it. In 30-45 seconds you feel that the cold water is actually not cold anymore. In the winter, this takes more time – usually 3-5 minutes. But think that every person has the ability to do this and get used to the water. After that, it is not difficult to stay longer in the water, do some swimming, and so on. The most important thing is to overcome oneself. The most important thing is to control the feeling, to have motivation: “So I know that in a couple of minutes my body will get used to it. Yes, the water is cold. Yes, it is cold to get in. But I know that in three-four minutes it will go away.” And indeed it does go away. Then you can bathe, swim. You just can’t stay in the water too long because you body may not be able to take it. That is not good. Therefore, everyone must have their own time interval that does not harm the body, but only strengthens it.

MM – Does it feel good?

NB – Yes, it feels very good. It seems that some hormonal changes happen in the body when you do it. You come out feeling like a newborn, like you were born just a second ago. It is such a good and curious feeling. I have done this for many years. This year will be my fiftieth season of winter bathing. Every time I get this awesome feeling from bathing. Each and every time. I thank fate for winter swimming and the fun I get out of it.

MM – Do you feel any health benefits from winter swimming?

NB – Personally, I feel that I practically do not get any catarrhal diseases such as colds. I do not know what the flu is. I do not know what a cold is. Despite the fact that the flu is of course an infectious disease, it seems an immunity has been built into me as well. As to other diseases... Whatever health problems someone has, they are not tied to winter swimming. I do not think that it is possible to cure something with winter bathing, or, conversely, to catch something from it. But it is possible to harden the body. That is, to increase the resistance of the body to the cold. I think that it is something very positive. That is how winter swimming is.

I will tell you a few stories about swimming in Kiev, in the Dnieper, in the winter. There were of course a lot more people than there were in Kursk. I had a few interesting experiences. The first one went like this:

I went into the water. This was freezing water (it was December or January). A woman went in with me at the same time. Well, I swam around for my three-five minutes and its time for me to go, but she was still swimming. I think that it's a little

embarrassing. I went in with a woman; I should wait for her. Well, I waited for another two-three minutes. I see that I have to get out now [laughs]. My time has ended. I got out, dressed, and dried myself – everything. And she was still swimming. So I asked the people who knew her there. I said, "How long does she swim for?" "45 minutes." Then I understood that you need to swim only as long as you need to and not hold yourself to someone's else standard, for how long to swim for. That was one story.

The second story was funny. It was the 23rd of February of the year 1973 (I think). There was a public bathing dedicated to—if you remember February 23rd was Red Army Day. A large public bathing was organized. At the time there were maybe one hundred people in the group. A general came out and addressed the crowd in his underwear, made a speech. Even the television crew was there. This general ran toward the river, and everyone followed him. Then I see that this general quietly turned around and went into his car [laughs], without having even touched the water. I thought it was really funny. On the other hand, it was nothing special. These things happened.

MM – How important is it to swim in good company?

NB – Indeed, it is much better to swim in company. The thing is—how do I put it? I of course can organize myself and I am a very independent person. There were a few seasons when I swam on my own. But it's so much better to do it with other people. You do not need to push yourself so hard, because when the group goes in the water, you go with it. It is easier to overcome the psychological barrier when you are with other people. So, I recommend anyone who wants to swim [to do it in company]. Though there are people here in Brighton, in Coney Island, who live close and are Russian-speaking that swim on their own. Sometimes they join the club, and I suppose they are content with the way they go about winter swimming.

MM – Can you tell me more about the Coney Island Polar Bear Club: who takes part and how does it work?

NB – As I already said, the club was founded in 1903. It is more than a hundred years old. It is wonderful that its traditions, winter bathing, continue. There are probably over 200 members of our club. That does not mean that every weekend, 200 people go swimming, but somewhere around 40-60 swimmers are there every weekend (every Sunday, when we swim). There are people of different ages. We had a little girl who was only eleven (she became a member of the club). In order to become a member, you need to bathe 12 times during one season. After 12 times, you can join the club. Members vote whether to let you in or not, but the vote is nominal. Every year, a few new people join the club. Somewhere between 4 and 8 join the club every year in exactly this way.

The president of the club [Dennis Thomas] is a very interesting person. He gives himself to the club. We once had a swim when he brought out the banner of the club, which had been in space because his twin brother is an astronaut [Donald Thomas]. He took with him to space our club's emblem, which returned to earth and is kept by their family.

MM – Let us switch topics now to immigration. Tell me how you moved to America, how it happened, and how you ended up in New York?

NB – We immigrated in 1990. We came here, right to New York, because my brother in law was already living here. So that the family would be together, we decided to move to New York, something which I do not regret for a second because New York is a wonderful city: a city with history, a city with tradition. Just look at the [Coney Island] Polar Bear Club that I am a part of. And Coney Island itself, a place where people come to have fun, not just in the winter, but in the summer as well. There are so many rides, games, places where you can get sausages [laughs]. There's everything here. We are here from the year 1990. It is already twenty-seven years.

MM – How did you begin to work in the subway?

NB – When we just moved over, my first job was in a hospital. I worked as a biomedical technician. I really enjoyed working there. But, when I worked there I took city tests for city jobs. I was told that it wouldn't be too bad to work for the city because of pensions etc. And so I finished an exam and forgot about it. Around six-seven months went past, and I was invited to work for the transit authority, at the subway, where I work to this day – that's already 26 years. Again, I have no regrets. It's interesting work. I work as a systems administrator for the computers that send electricity to the third rail for the subway trains. We have a large control center, which has four different systems. I am really proud of this occupation.

MM – Did the work change over the years?

NB – The work was always interesting. Every few years (five or six years), a new system is brought online, which is more modern, made for newer equipment, infrastructure, servers... Therefore, one needs to learn a new mode of operating that is of a higher class and quality. And this goes on. All these years the technology is changing, and our work is slowly changing with it.

MM – Is it very different from what you did in the Soviet Union?

NB – Actually, no really. I worked at a computer center tied to a factory, where there was also modern, by the standards of the time, technology. If you remember the machines Minsk 32, Minsk 35 – an analog of IBM 20. I really enjoyed working there as well.

MM – So you worked with the old punch cards?

NB – Yes, there were punch cards and there was perforated paper tape. Then we had magtape. I began, if you will, from scratch, from the very beginning. The first PCs, desktop computers – I saw the first ones. We played video games on them, sent the snake around the screen.

MM – When you moved, did you experience the so-called "cultural shock?"

NB – I didn't really have one. Everything turned out basically how I expected it to. Though there were some strange moments. If you are interested, I will tell you about something that amazed me. My son studied at Cornell University, which is located in upstate New York. There are wonderful waterfalls and beautiful nature up there. And so one day we decided to check up on him there. We were going to see a waterfall along the way. We were on a forest road. And then we saw a small booth to the right – it was like a small cabin. In front there was a sign that said "Honey" in English. We became curious and went into the house. Inside there were stacked jars of honey of different sizes and of course with different price tags: 20 dollars, 15 dollars, 5 dollars. There was honey poured in little plates for tasting. Next to it stood a large metal jar, which you could open. If you wanted to buy some of the honey, you

just put the money in the jar and took change if needed. This amazed me. There was no one there; it was an unguarded place. There were maybe 40-50 jars of honey. In the money jar, there were a couple hundred dollars: twenties, fives, singles. I was amazed at the honesty of the local people. I could never even imagine that such a thing was possible. This really amazed me – I was “shocked” there. I took many pictures there and told everyone about it. I don’t think that this can be done in New York, for example. But there, at the time, it was possible.

MM – Did you ever return to Chernovtsy?

NB – Yes, it was ten or twelve years ago. I went back to Chernovtsy. Of course, I walked through the city with great pleasure. It is my favorite city, a beautiful city – European style, the former Austrian Empire. It was wonderful to be back for a few days. Of course, one of the aims of my trip was to visit the graves of many relatives in the small cemetery where my grandmothers and grandfather are buried. This I did. I restored my grandfather’s grave – its headstone was damaged by time. I had to change it. But the city brought about the same feelings in me that it always does. It is a wonderful city. But it became a little strange and foreign, because the people with whom I was friends and mingled were no longer there: many had left. Therefore, I felt a little lonely, to be honest. But I received great pleasure from walking along these streets, on which I grew up. It still has beautiful monuments: the University of Chernovtsy (I have never seen a building more gorgeous in Europe), the Chernovtsy Theater, which is a copy of the Vienna and Odessa theaters (it was designed by the same architects). In sum, I received a great pleasure from being there.