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LUDMILLA DEMYDENKO

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KOLVA: . . . is December 27. I'm Jean Kolva and I'm in the house of my parents in Rochester, New York, and I'm here with Ludmilla Demydenko, and Mrs. Demydenko came to the U.S. in 1950, after living in Europe for several years. She's originally from the Ukraine in Russia, and, Mrs. Demydenko, I'd like to start by asking you what year you were born and where, where you were born?

DEMYDENKO: I was born in the capital of Ukraine, Kiev, in 1915 on the 20th of April, and times during the First World War. By the time I was three years old, I remember the events of the Civil War, which left a big impression like big fire, artillery shooting and the spotlighting. I lived in the house of my parents. My

father, after the Civil War, when the life came to normal, became a doctor at t/he Kiev Institute of Architecture, and my mother stayed at home and took care of the children. At that time I had a brother, and later came two sisters. The life was very hard. After the Civil War it took several years until life came to normal. There was no food. In the early childhood I learned to eat very limited diet, and very little other, which came handy in the later years. I didn't go to school, until the fourth grade, because of the events, because the schools were not heated. When my parents tried to send me to school to the seventh grade, I had to bring a piece of wood with me, to the classroom, to feed the potbelly stove. And it was still so cold, I got sick, and my parents kept me home, and hired a private, private teacher who was following with me and my brother the regular pattern of the school. So I was nine years old when I entered the fourth grade, at the best school in the city, that when I graduated from seventh grade—the system there was seven grades after elementary school—and then the last three years of, equivalent to the high school, we had to get a certain professional training in the professional schools. So after I graduated from the seventh grade, the next week I learned that all my teachers and the principal of the school were arrested as the enemies of the people, and later on, and yet later, they were in a big, staged process, a big trial, which was very false, and nothing perfect was the truth, but it was just attempt of the Soviet government to eliminate the brains of Ukrainian people. Academicians, some prominent scientists, teachers, were arrested and tried and banished and [not understood]. And that stigma of being a graduate of number one school, stuck to me for the rest of my life. After

that, I was admitted to the Technical School, which was the combined architectural training for draftsmen, art, and photography. Next year, they closed that school, and all the students in Architectural Department were moved to the technical of building constructions for the agricultural purpose. And I graduated from it in 1932.

KOLVA: And this, was this still in Kiev then?

DEMYDENKO: It was still in Kiev. We never left Kiev. By that time my father was proclaimed enemy of the people, he lost all the jobs. My mother had to earn the living, and she worked as a proofreader, mostly private. I started to work at the age sixteen to help my mother. My father was in fear—great fear—of being arrested, and he got the severe depression, and said to his good friend, he was taken to a special sanitarium, where he was hidden for the three years, and this way the KGB and that time, NKVD, just forgot about his existence. It's my strong belief that that fact saved his life. Because most of his friends had to say goodbye to the hometown, and go to Siberia or far north. I had to struggle very hard through the college. The only way to make the college, having so called "bad social descent," was to be an excellent student, and I knew it, and I worked it real hard. I did everything to be on the top of the class, and when they tried to expel me in 1936, when I was the fourth year student of architecture, I went to Moscow to see the Fourth Commissar who was in charge of my school, and it was known that if you have some difficulties which are connected with the politics, you had to go to the very top. Otherwise it doesn't work. So, I stayed in school. I finished the required six

years of architecture, and I got my license in 1939. I mention these things with my family and my father because it was one of the reasons for leaving the country later on. When the war broke out, we thought that during the German occupation we will be able to move west. My father was born in Switzerland, and he was raised in France until he was twelve years old, so his heart was kind of divided between Ukraine, his own country, and between the foreign country where his father had to live for political reasons. And it was a reminder to us all the time, that the father, my grandfather, was a fighter for Ukrainian independence, and he was expelled by the tough government later on, the Soviet government. He had the same approach and the same point of view, and our family had lot of difficulties. So I helped my parents to raise my oldest, youngest, sisters. I was the oldest in the family. My brother was two years younger and two sisters, six and eight years younger. When the Germans came, we really believed that the culture came, the Europe came. But in about two, three weeks, we already realized that Hitler's Germany was worse than Soviet Union, or maybe even equal. There was a popular saying whispered from one ear to another, that there is no difference between the Soviet and Nazi Germany. It just like two boots: One is right, another is left, but both of them. So, at the turn of war events, when Germans started to retreat, we realized that if we stay, it will be the end of our lives. Because having the history of the family of the enemy of the people, and staying in the Germany territory, and we learned from the people who were coming from the east, retreating, that even a prisoner of war was considered a criminal, because he had to kill himself, but not to become a German

prisoner, and that all the prisoners, on the free territories, were taken right away to the concentration camps. None called that the [not understood], that there is no way, that we had to move west. And using all kind of possibilities, we finally get, got the necessary documents, and just packed each one of us two suitcases, and we left our house with my parents, with my father and my mother, we walked to the railroad station without even looking back. My brother, by that time, didn't live. He died as a German prisoner of war, in the prison camp, sometime in February of 1942. My sisters, by that time were married, and they went the same way as we did with their husbands. We moved to Sitavrieviev [ph], in western Ukraine, we used to be Poland before the Second [World] War. My father's sister lived there since she got married in 1902, and for six months we stayed in her house, just waiting what going to happen. Will we go back to our hometown, or not? We learned that the Russians are approaching real fast, so in September of 1945--in March of 1944--we had to leave and move to Prague, where my parents had several friends who immigrated after the First World War, during the times of the Civil War. We lived there for a little bit over a year, and we had to leave again. And this time there was no specific destination, just heading west, hoping to meet the American Army as soon as possible. In April 1945, we left Prague by train, and we could go a little bit west. Things [ph] got to the territory which was taken by the American Army, on the sixth of May. We accomplished our goal. We finally knew that we are safe from the hands of Soviet government, but it was the wishful thinking. When we got to Displaced Persons Camp,

we were admitted to Displaced Persons Camp in October 1945,

KOLVA: And, where was this located?

DEMYDENKO: And the Displaced Persons Camp was located in Regensburg, Germany, in American zone. When we finally got there, we learned about the Yalta Agreement, and also the Soviet citizens had to go back to the Soviet Union, and here, the fight for our life started. We used every chance to hide our former Soviet citizenship. Some people who couldn't do it, they even took their lives, but it didn't last very long, because the West realized that there should be something to it, that people take their lives in order not to go back to the home country, and that's very unnatural, and finally we got peace of mind. We left the Displaced Persons Camp, where I was a manager of the hen workshop. We did the things which were sold in our camp, called [not understood]. The life in the camp, [not understood], was organized beautifully, thanks to the refugee organizations. We really had everything necessary, including a very good cultural life. We had very good high school, which prepared our youngsters to study higher studies in United States, after they got there. Most of the people in the camp wanted to go to the United States. Some had relatives, some had friends. With my family it was different. We didn't have any friends or relatives. That, because of my grandfather, who was a prominent person, we happened to get the papers and go to Rochester. Because in Rochester, the branch of Ukrainian Workings Men Association, a Ukrainian insurance company, there's the name of my grandfather, and the members of that

branch arranged for the papers. We got our assurances after, room, board, and job, and then we had to go through the routine proceedings which involved the filling in the immigration papers, going through the checking by Central Intelligence Commission, going through the medical examination, because the people with the tuberculosis, or our other chronic diseases, which would prevent them to make, earn the living in the United States, were not admitted. I had a history of tuberculosis in 1930s, during the Great Famine, and I was very much afraid, not to be admitted. I was afraid that the x-rays will show my lungs in a bad shape after hard life and almost starvation during the War. But I was lucky, my lungs were in a good shape, but we found out that my husband's lungs are not in a good shape, and he had to go through several checkings until finally doctor realized that his lungs are typical lungs of a chemist, the person who spent over twenty-five years working in a chemical lab. So, finally on October the 9th, we boarded the ship in Bremerhaven.

KOLVA: Do you remember the name of the ship?

DEMYDENKO: General Lenkfield [ph], I think, or something similar. It was, I think so. I could get it for you because I have it in my papers.

KOLVA: Ok [Laughs].

DEMYDENKO: So I, and my husband and my two-and-a-half years daughter, started our voyage to United States. It was a very interesting experience, because besides the basic crew

which was running the ship, everything else, like cooking, cleaning, entertaining, whatever, everything had to be done by the passengers. So that reason we didn't pay anything for the voyage. It was a ship which took a little over a thousand people. It wasn't a very big military ship. We noticed the excellent food right away, but on the second day the storms started and nobody wanted to eat anything. I, like a mother with a young child, was exempt from work, and my poor husband could not work because he was terribly seasick. I was one of the few lucky ones. I didn't get sick at all. Maybe because I was on the ship before, in the storm, and I didn't get sick, so psychological I was sure of myself. So I reported to the employment office, and asked for job, instead of my husband, because I was sick and tired of hearing his name as not reporting to work. And I was working in a special dining room for the aged and mothers with the children under five, as a waitress and interpreter. I met lot of nice and interesting people, and I really enjoyed it, and it made me even feel better because I felt useful, more useful than sitting on the bed with my child. We managed very well. My daughter could eat by herself by that time, so I was running around with the plates for the others, while she was sitting in the corner and nibbling on her food. On October 19th we arrived in New York. The representatives of immigration office came to the ship, and everybody was processed. And I don't remember now where we given the law documents, at that processing, or these documents were issued to us by the representatives of sponsoring immigrant organization. But anyhow there was a little piece of paper stating what we, who we are, and when we came, which we

used as a personal document before we got our green card several weeks later.

KOLVA: Do you, at this point, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you pulled in to . . . ?

DEMYDENKO: Oh, everybody, during the whole voyage, was trying for the nice, clear day when we will approach New York, because everybody wanted to see Statue of Liberty. We were approaching New York at about five o'clock in the morning, but almost everybody was up on the deck, looking and looking, and the people were arguing which side to go, which deck you'll see it better, some people were bothering the crew with these questions, but to see the Statue of Liberty, it was a very important thing for everybody I had a chance to talk and hear around me. And, I think, it's probably the privilege of an immigrant, to have that feeling and that impression, because the people who live in this country all their life, they don't notice the things we did, and we really appreciated that magnificent view, and that strength which the Statue of Liberty represents. We were lucky. The sun came up, and the second thing we were looking for after we observed the Statue of Liberty, and came closer, and we could see the shore, everybody was looking for the cars, and everybody was wondering how you can move on the street when so many cars! [Both laugh.] Because, we knew about the lights – they had the lights in Europe too – but, in Europe, the people almost didn't pay any attention to the lights. There were more street decorations in those days. Of course, now it's very different, but in those days nobody paid any attention. So that was a second thing about United

States we wanted to see very badly. The first, Statue of Liberty, the second thing, the cars, and the third, which the men were more interested than the women, how much makeup do the American women wear [laughs], and how artistically they do it. Is it noticeable or not? [Both laugh.] Because in Europe, especially in the war years, actually the women ignored the makeup. In Soviet Union, because there was no good makeup available, and what was imported on the black market was available just for the very wealthy ones. Most of the girls never used it, and I myself never used it in my life, and don't use it even now.

KOLVA: That's true, I can attest to that. [Both laugh.]

DEMYDENKO: I just cannot get used to it, and, I don't know, maybe I was too old. I was thirty-five years old when I arrived in this country, and at that time it wasn't so important for me. So those were the three basic things. Of course, people talk about what kind of job they will get, and everybody was ready to take whatever turns up first. No matter how well educated the people were, they would take anything to earn the money, and start to build the life, the new life. After processed, being processed on the ship, we were left out on the shore, our luggage was brought, and we waited alone for the customs, and meanwhile the representatives of the sponsoring organizations – my family was sponsored by Church World Service – they came over, they were introduced to us by immigration people, and from that moment we were turned over to them. From that moment on, they took care of us. They issued us three dollars a piece for the necessary expenses on the road, the railroad

tickets, and they accompanied us on the bus. They put on the bus the people who were going in more or less the same direction, whose final destination was in the same direction. With us were people going to Syracuse, Utica, Albany, Buffalo. That bus brought us to Grand Central, and from there we got on the plane [sic] and traveled to Rochester, where we were met personally by our sponsor.

KOLVA: Just to interrupt a little bit, were the people from your group, were they all from this Displaced Persons Camp, and were they all the same nationality?

DEMYDENKO: No, they were different nationalities, but they were all from Displaced Persons Camp, and they all came to this country under Displaced Persons Act. So, they were mostly Ukrainians, and Poles. There were some Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, a quite sizeable group of Jewish people from different countries of Europe, and some Russians. I learned it because I was an interpreter on the ship, and I ran across all these languages, and sometimes I ran into difficulties because my knowledge of Estonian, Latvian, and [not understood] wasn't very good, but I didn't hear any difficulties with German, some people spoke French, Polish. There were some Czechs, but very few, because Czechs didn't believe in leaving the country, they started it one year later. They were very pro-Russian, and they didn't leave the country at the proper time, so they had to suffer first and then leave the country. So, we arrived in Rochester and to the Ukrainian Civic Center where the Ukrainian Workingman's Association, which boasts the name of my grandfather, my [not understood]. Gave us the low house,

which was next to the Civic Center, and was five-room cottage, where we lived until summer, 1953. My husband took the first job he could get, and he got it in about three days after he arrived. He worked as a meat packer at the Wilson Company, was busy mostly smoking hams, and he was getting lots of free hams, so we ate it to our hearts' content, because for several years we didn't see it. It wasn't available during the war. I didn't work. I stayed home until my parents came. They came two months later. They had a very interesting experience on the ship, because they were celebrating Christmas on the ship. And they got the touch of American tradition, and the feeling of American holiday, even before they entered the country. We had our first Christmas already in Rochester, which was absolutely beautiful experience, because finally we didn't have to hide our tree, we could have it freely, we were not afraid to go to church, and it was a tremendous feeling. After many years, we finally had some money, we could go and buy the things in the store, the things were available, and all this experience, especially for the people who came from Soviet Union, who since 1929 could not buy anything from the stores, unless you have the connections or unless you stand in line for several hours. It was the normal life. We finally felt that we live like normal people. We didn't feel any restrictions, any place, the things we were so much used living in Soviet Union, and then in Germany, when the war restrictions were pretty strong. When my parents came here, I started to look for the job, and I grabbed the first thing available. I just didn't want one thing. I could go and get a job at a tailor factory any minute, but I didn't want to go among the immigrants. Most of the workers at the Rochester tailor

factories were either Polish, or Ukrainian, or Italian. I wanted to go some place where I will be among Americans, among the people with American experience, not the people who stick to European tradition, and I got a job in a tiny factory with about fifteen workers, working on different kinds of machines. The factory produced electric percolators and the owner was working along with us. The working conditions were very pleasant. I loved the people, with some of them I still keep in touch exchanging Christmas presents. There was a lot to learn and enjoy about American way of life, which in many respects, is different from the life in Europe. After living in Bavaria, and I stress Bavaria, the American people impressed us as extremely unselfish. Their friendliness, their willingness to help in anything, when we came to that almost empty house, the people we never met before who lived in the house next door, they were bringing cots, dishes, furniture, clothing, everything. That willingness to help the people in need impressed us tremendously, and one of our biggest enjoyment was to reach the point when we could do it. After we were naturalized citizens, we signed seventeen assurances, and we brought our friends from Belgium, France, and Italy. We helped them to come to the United States.

KOLVA: What years were this in?

DEMYDENKO: It was in 1956, 1957. We became naturalized citizens in 1956, I in April, and my husband several months later. I got it earlier because I came to this country with the knowledge of English language, so I didn't have to go to the school or anything, and that's why I was one of the first to be

naturalized of the whole group of recent immigrants in Rochester. So there another thing was added to my activities. I was serving as a witness for many, many friends I knew from Europe when they were getting their papers. When I was expecting my second child, by the beginning of '53, I quit work in the factory. I stayed home for awhile, using that time to make some contacts and trying to get a job in architectural field. I went through a lot of difficulties hearing from the local architects that their experience with women wasn't very good. They would not hire the women because the men in the office use very bad language. I told one of them I'm not afraid of language, I was working from that construction, back in Russia [both laugh], so I'm not afraid of any language, [not understood]. But I had to wait until October '53 until one office was really in very bad need and how, so they finally hired a girl. I was the only girl in that office. While working there, I met several local architects, and I realized that I am not paid enough, so, finally, I changed the job and I worked with a very small office. Actually, I was the only employee besides the owner and junior director. I enjoyed it very much, but the luck was — came to the end. My boss didn't get any jobs, and I had to look for something else. And, through a newspaper, I got a contact and a job with the Rochester City School District Building Department, where I spent one year working on the renovations of Rochester schools. The job which I enjoyed tremendously, because it gave me the chance to meet lot of different peoples, starting with the office employees, and then teachers, principals, custodians, custodial help, the people who were from different groups and I loved it very much. And 1978, I retired, because I wanted, I took an early

retirement, because I knew that I am going to have a decent pension and Social Security, and we talked a lot about it, that only in this country that people don't have to be afraid to live to the old age, and they can have, to have, as good a living and sometimes even better than the working people, on their pensions and Social Security, which they earned through the years. I know what the pension is in Soviet Union, and what the French who are still there are getting. They hardly can live one week on what they get. But, like everybody else, they make their living in a different way.

KOLVA: Maybe before we close we could talk a little bit about your Ukrainian culture. I know that you are an artist, in creating Ukrainian Easter eggs, I think it's called,

DEMYDENKO: So as I mentioned, that I quit working because I wanted to devote more of my time to something else, and that something else is the Ukrainian heritage. While still in school, I got very much interested in Ukrainian folks art, and between 1942 and 19-, 1932 and 1943 when I left the country, I managed to create a large collection of embroidery designs, motifs of the folks architecture, the wooden churches, and one of the unique things, which only Ukrainians do, the Ukrainian Easter eggs. Mika and I started to work and propagating that Ukrainian heritage among the Ukrainian, among the American people. The Ukrainians do like that work, but they do it within their own community. I decided to go outside of Ukrainian community, and first I'd been lecturing with different women's group, garden clubs, schools, and then I think my name became quite well known – the articles appeared several times in the local newspaper

– and, since 1969, I'm working for the School of Science and Man with the Rochester Science Museum, permanently teaching the different classes in Ukrainian folklore, like different . . .

END SIDE A, BEGIN SIDE B

KOLVA: OK. Do you make dolls in Ukrainian customs and representing different parts of the country in the class?

DEMYDENKO: The classes, the topics, change from one term to another, and every year, in January and February, I teach a class in Ukrainian Easter eggs. It takes ten sessions, because I include the history of the custom, different legends connected with it, different folk tales connecting with it, and general composition of the design, so the students get the feel of specific design when they create their own. It's not only decorated egg done using the batik process, it's a really specific composition of the design typical for Ukraine. Here's great variation, it's a very interesting subject, and the students thoroughly enjoy it. And embroidering, I have a group of students for fifth year already. They want to study all the time, learning the new ways, something they didn't take in class yet, etc. And, because of the serious illness last summer, I had to interrupt teaching in the museum. This my former student ask me for private class in my home, which I started while recovering from my illness, and we continue on. We are studying now the ancient way of embroidering typical for eleventh and twelfth century, in Ukraine, something which is not very well known, and they enjoyed very much. They are good students. They already

did one exhibit of Ukrainian embroidery at the Rochester Museum when I was sick in hospital, and they managed to do it real well.

KOLVA: Wow, that's marvelous.

DEMYDENKO: I love my students, and I love the people, and now when I live in United States, almost as long as I lived in my own country, I still love my own country, but I feel hundred percent American. I tried to adapt everything, what American people have, and the people in Europe and Soviet Union don't even dream of. I tried to learn their kindness. I tried to learn their way of fighting for better life, which, in Soviet Union has a different aspect. In Soviet Union, the only way to fight for the better life is using all kind of illegal means, which is not fun for some people. And I'm very happy that my children and grandchildren were born, and live, in this country. I consider that I made a very good move when I choose United States as the place for building new life. Maybe it was because I knew about United States more than I knew about the Brazil, Argentina, and Australia. I even had an offer to go to Iraq, to work as an architect, for some very, very wealthy person, but of course I am very happy I denied it. So, I really have to thank God for a lot of things, and for being safe from all that persecution, and all those horrible things the people in Soviet Union have to go through, only because they want to think like the free people. And that's one of the reasons, why in the recent years, I became a very active member of organization, Americans for Human Rights in Ukraine, because I want to help those people, at least to have the feeling of the free mind. [pause]

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And I thank you very much for having the interest in my experience.

KOLVA: Well, I thank you very much for sharing your, part of your life with us. Thank you.

DEMYDENKO: I hope it will be useful for the great thing you are starting and you are doing for the Immigration Museum.

KOLVA: [Laughs] Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW