Immigrant: **, ID #9 Alexandra Melnyk nee Yezerska (Yeserska, Jezierska)**

Interview dates**: 3/22/2005**

Interviewers: **Hania Essenhigh and Arkadia Melnyk**

Documents

1. **Id (Kennkarte) # 03459**
2. **Report Card from school #5 in Lviv 1941**
3. **Masters Degree certificate Case Western 1964**
4. **PHD Chemistry OSU 1972**
5. **Confirmation of Request for Release from Refugee Camp Lesti-Oremlaz 24, Aug. 1944 (camp came under Communist Partisan Occupation the day Alexandra left)**
6. **Religious (2nd) Marriage Certificate from Munchen, 3 July 1945 (legal)**
7. **Civil Marriage Certificate (required for immigration to America by Naturalization and Immigration Services) 7 August 1950**
8. **US Naturalization Certificate January 1957**
9. **Document about Alexandra's hospitalization in Switzerland, dated January, 5th, 1950**
10. **Index of courses attended at University of Lemberg (Lviv) in First Year of Medical school 1944 pages 1& 2 and pages 3& 4**
11. **Index Page of courses attended at UNRRA University in Munich in pharmacy**
12. **1948 IRO certificate of registration**
13. **Travel Document for Stateless persons and persons of Undetermined Nationality**

Photographs

1. **Family portrait in Munchen in 1949: Alexandra, daughter Arkadia, husband Konstantin, mother Anna Yezerska and father Konstantin Yezersky, and brother Zenon Yezersky**
2. **Alexandra at 18 October 1944, Munich.**

Biography:

1926 May 14 to 1944

Alexandra was born in Lviv to Konstantin Yezerski and Anna Yezerska nee Bihun, on May 14th, 1926, their second child. Her brother was named Zenko Melnyk. The family was proud of its Ukrainian roots. Konstantin Melnyk was active in the co-operative movement, specifically in the dairy co-operative. Anna Yezerska was a teacher and a principal in a Ukrainian school in Lviv. Lviv was in Western Ukraine in the area known broadly as Galicia which was under Polish Administration. There were conflicts between Ukrainians and Poles that centered on matters of nationality and religion and specifically on matters of education. Alexandra, called Lesya by her dimunitive, was attending the Ukrainian Academic Gymnasium named for one of its former Principals, Illia Kokorudz when the Soviets invaded her town as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of Non-aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union.

The Soviets transformed the Gymnasium into a school dedicated to teaching such things as songs celebrating the Red Revolution, a new version of history, and a smattering of Russian. People of prominence were asked to perform duties or present opinions that ran counter their own beliefs. Anna Yezerska who was a member of the Sich Riflemen, a Ukrainian para-military organization that came into existence at the end of WWI, was elected to the city council without her permission. She was asked to make an acceptance speech from which she excused herself on the pretext of her son's sickness. Alexandra was asked to join the youth pioneers and she refused. To prevent any Red soldier to live in the Yezerski apartment, three members of the Dairy Co-operative moved in with them.

Just before the German arrival in Lviv June 1941 when they pushed out the Soviets from Western Ukraine with the abrogation of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Lesya, then fifteen, saw the bodies of the tortured prisoners left by the NKVD at the Loncki Prison in the center of town. They were stacked 2 meter high, by size, their faces not recognizable, their limbs twisted, their bodies decomposed. Lesya became sick.

Once established, the Germans informed the population that schooling was going to stop at the fourth grade since anything beyond that was superfluous for people destined to serve the Master Race. The Master Race then closed the Academic Gymnasium. At that point, the Yezerskis, still determined to educate their children, decided to hire private tutors for Lesya and her brother. Under the circumstances, there was no lack of teachers. Lesya was schooled by four of the best in the city who came to the apartment so that she and her brother would not be exposed to the daily street round-ups of young people who, if caught, were deported to Germany for forced labor. The Germans relented this policy after their defeat in Stalingrad and Lesya started her studies at the Lviv Medical School in 1944.

In the meantime, that is before starting her medical studies, Lesya met Konstantin Melnyk and Oleh Kandyba whose nom de plume and nom de guerre was Oleh Olzhych. Both men had been active in the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Konstantin was arrested by the Gestapo in January 1944, as Lesya completed her matriculation exams, and Olzhych a few months later, in May. Lesya saw him a few days before his arrest in Lviv when he gave her a message for Konstantin and all the other people who had been taken prisoners by the Germans. He thought that they should save themselves and that the

time for heroic gestures was past. At the time of the arrests, Lesya did not know where they were being sent.

As the Soviet Front was moving steadily westward the Yezerskis decided to go first to the Carpathian mountains and then, eventually to Czechoslovakia. From Czechoslovakia Lesya took a circuitous route to Vienna. She was accompanied by a friend who was slightly older and who had relatives in that city. Konstantin Yezerski encouraged that trip to spare Lesya the humiliating delousing process that people were subjected to at the Austrian border. For support Konstantin sewed a few gold coins into the hem of his daughter's gray coat.

1944 October – 1945 March

In Vienna, Lesya frequented the 'Die Ukrainische Vetraungsteller' Information and Help Center. It was located near the center of the city close to the inner ring road, off Mariahilfer strasse. There, she formed friends and found the address of a shelter for homeless people where she moved. She also found information about other refugees and prisoners of war. The information disseminated was mostly word of mouth from refugees but sometimes there were messages brought by agents or couriers.

It was at the 'Vetraungsteller' that she found out in late November 1944 that Germans had released from the Sachsenhausen, Oranienburg (near Berlin), concentration camp the Ukrainian political prisoners. She suspected that Konstantin Melnyk - known as Kostyk to his friends, might be among them. But she had no proof as his name was not on the list of those released. With a friend of her family, Dr. Borys Andriyevsky, she made plans to get train tickets to travel from Vienna to Berlin to the address of the safe house given at the 'Vetraungsteller' to get Kostyk out of Berlin. This was critical as the Soviet Forces were beginning to mass east of Berlin for one of the bloodiest battle of the war.

Lesya bought the train tickets with money from Dr. Andriyevsky using a visit to a dying grandmother in Berlin as an excuse. To convince the station Master of the validity of her claim she put on the oversized trench coat of her landlady. After the successful purchase of the tickets valid for 24 hours she returned to her shelter only to find that the landlady had washed her gray coat. There was no sign of the gold coins.

Lesya made the journey with Dr. Andriyevsky whose bother Dmytro, a Foreign Affairs Specialist at OUN, was listed among the released prisoners. Once in Berlin, Lesya and Andriyevsky had to find the safe house in a bombed out city whose inhabitants were antagonistic to the point that neither of them thought it prudent to ask for directions. But Lesya trusted her instincts and led the way through the ruins. They found their loved ones exhausted but still ready to fight for their ideals. In the safe house the freed people, 2 women and 20 men, all people of experience, were assessing their setbacks, the most important being the death of Olzhych from beatings in the camp. It had occurred a few months before their release but, as he had been in seclusion, they were just coming to

terms with it. The ex-prisoners had been given a document attesting to their false imprisonment but requiring them to report daily to the Gestapo (Gestapo representative Wolf for Ukrainian affairs) in Berlin and requesting that they work with the Germans against the Soviets, who were called their 'common enemy', specifically that they fight for Berlin. It was at that point that Lesya relayed Olzhych's message. They listened attentively to her in spite of her youthful age. The following morning Kostyk and Lesya returned to Vienna. They intended to marry as soon as possible. However, Lesya fell sick even before they arrived in Vienna. Kostyk attributed her illness to the damp gray coat she had to wear for lack of anything better.

At that time Vienna was still in Nazi hands and Allied bombings were a daily hazard. The bunkers available to the population were damp and moldy which did nothing to help her out of her illness, nor did the starvation diet of the times. Her health deteriorated to the point when she could no longer walk. In January at wits end, he finally took her to the nearest hospital.

At the hospital, Lesya was transferred to a small ward with five other Ukrainian girls. There were few medicines available but she got some injections. However, her condition worsened. She could no longer move her arms or her legs, she couldn't even talk. She lay on the bed half comatose and helpless. In that half conscious state she overheard the Sisters saying that the other girls had been injected with the same serum and that they all had died within days. They were waiting for her to die too. She couldn't sort out in her mind how much of that conversation was a dream and how much of it was real, improbable though it seemed. She had been aware of talks about medical experiments the Nazis had been conducting on humans but now she had to face the possibility that she was part of an experiment. The Medical staff continued its impersonal monitoring of her condition. She grew thirsty but could not find her voice to ask for some water. Once an aide came in with a glass of milk but the Sister shooed her away saying that the milk was reserved for their own people. And the image of the glass of milk stayed with Lesya, haunting her dreams and nagging her wakeful moments. But she was determined to survive.

The first thing to do was to get out of the hospital. At the end of February she just had enough force to whisper to Kostyk to take her away from it.

And so he abducted her from the hospital, wrapped in a kilim, and arranged their marriage in the Vestry (for they were not Austrian) at the Saint Varvara Church in Vienna on March 9th, 1945 in a small ceremony attended by witnesses and Lesya's father who had heard of the approaching nuptials and traveled from Czechoslovakia to Vienna. He was worried that once she was married Lesya would not finish her studies. She promised him that as soon as the war was over and she felt better she would attend university.

Kostyk was nineteen years older than Lesya.

Kostyk and Lesya moved to Munich in advance of the Soviet attack on Vienna. There they were joined by Konstantin and Anna Yezerski who obtained a release from the Refugee Camp Lesti-Oremlaz. A second marriage ceremony was performed on July 3rd, 1945 in the church of St Anton for the benefit of all their friends and relations.

1946-1951

Lesya still could not walk. She consulted doctors and was sent to a sanatorium for two years in Leysin in Switzerland where the Swiss doctors diagnosed her as having bovine tuberculosis that paralyzed her spine. They speculated that she had been injected, in Vienna, with an experimental strain of the Bacillus Calmette-Guerin. After her stay in Leysin she started walking on crutches but she enrolled in the Department of Pharmacy at the University of Munich. Also in 1946 she gave birth to a little girl, Arkadia.

Munich was in the American Zone. As soon as they could the Melnyks and the Yezerskis applied to emigrate as Displaced Persons (DPs). In the process, Lesya and Kostyk discovered that their wedding papers had not been sent to the civil authorities. They were married for a third time on August 7th, 1950 in Munich. They were accepted by the United States and took the boat from Bremen to New York where they disembarked in December 1950. They received six dollars from the Catholic Action Committee.

1951 – present

From New York, Lesya and Kostyk Menyk moved to Cleveland where Anna and Konstantin Yezerski had settled. In the late fifties Lesya re-started her studies, in physical chemistry this time. She got a bachelor's degree, followed by a master's degree from Case Western University in 1964 while working for a pharmaceutical company, Strong Cobb, Inc.. After her master's degree Lesya found a job at Chemical Abstracts in Columbus where she moved her family that now included a son. In Columbus she enrolled in the Department of Chemistry at the Ohio State University and got a PHD in 1973.

On September 11, 1978 she founded the Small Business Division of the American Chemical Society, of which she was elected President.

Her husband died in 1984, too early to witness the formal disintegration of the Soviet Union in August 1991 but in time to see a small amelioration of the conditions that prevailed in Ukraine.

Lesya retired from Chemical Abstracts in 1996 now shares her time between Kiev and Columbus.

Current Activities

Member of Saint John Chrysostom Catholic Church

Member of the Ukrainian Cultural Association of Central Ohio

Vignette : A Woman for Her Time