

**The following interview was conducted with Oxana, for the Star City Treasurer's AmeriCorps History Project. It took place on June 29 at UNL, at the Teacher's College building. The interviewer is Jennifer Holstein.**

**JENNIFER:** So, Oxana, tell me a little about where you grew up.

**OXANA:** Um, I grew up in Kiev, Ukraine. And I was born there and lived there until I came to United States um, when I was eighteen.

**JENNIFER:** Oh.

**OXANA:** So, I uh – Ukraine is my home.

**JENNIFER:** Tell me a little bit about your family, and what was going on, and how you grew up – a little bit about your family traditions.

**OXANA:** Sure. My, uh, family – I have the immediate family. Um, when I left it was my mother, my father, my sister and myself. And uh, both my parents were civil engineers. And, my sister's two years younger than me. And um, since then my father has died. And um, my sister and my mother live in Ukraine still, so they are there. I also have a very large extended family. So, I have a lot of uncles and aunts, and cousins and second cousins, and we're very close. And most of them are also in Ukraine. And, I um, so I stay very much in touch with them. And the family traditions I think would be interesting is that my father's side of the family – lot of people are from 'Kozak' background, so I'm a proud 'Kozak' person. And, we also had a number of families who were persecuted during Stalin-era times, and so they were killed in concentration camps. So, that was a big tragedy for my father's side of my family. My mother's side of the family actually comes from um, Asian part of former Soviet Union. Actually, my um, great-grandparents lived and worked what's now China, which used to be Russia. And, then they moved to Ural Mountains, which separate Europe and Asia, so it's kind of, was right down the border. And then when my mother was three – and they, they worked on railroads. And then my grandfather was um, he was homeless and so we don't know much about his family, so. They – when she was, my mother was three uh, my um – her family moved to Kiev to work in the military factory, so that's um, so that's how they all ended up in Kiev. And my parents met in engineering school, and then got married and had two kids. And so, that's...

**JENNIFER:** Um, are there any special wedding traditions?

**OXANA:** Wedding traditions?

**JENNIFER:** Yes.

**OXANA:** Yes! You know um, during the Soviet Union, people weren't really wasn't encouraged to be married in the church, which is very common here, of course. So, people – all people in Soviet Union had civil marriage ceremonies. So you had usually um, a ceremony at like um, would be here like a court house um, that was actually specially set up just for weddings. And then, you would have a party. And so people would, you know, celebrate, party. Usually, the

difference between, for example, U.S. weddings and ours – we don't have twenty "bridegrooms" and "groom maids", or whatever they're called! We have just one. So, you have – and they're called witnesses. So, you have one on each side, a man and woman usually, you know, for a couple. And then, um, so let's see. One tradition would be, during the wedding people yell 'Gorka'. And they would say, 'Gorka! Gorka!'. It means the couple must kiss. It's kind of like banging on the glass here?

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm.

OXANA: And it means, actually, 'bitter'. And, I think people yell bitter because they say, 'It's bitter, you haven't kissed yet! So, make it sweet and kiss!', so. Um, now it's changed a little bit, the traditions, because it's okay now, getting married in the church. So, a lot of people now still go to the civil court, have a civil ceremony, and many people now have a church wedding, too. And then, always a party, so.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm, sounds very special.

OXANA: Yes!

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Um, is – are there any special foods that you enjoy?

OXANA: Yes. Yea, I do um, like Ukrainian Slavic foods, that I miss. Um, and there's some stores here in town that carry that, so it helps. Um, but what I miss, of course, my mom's cooking. Like, you know, like your mother's cooking is always best.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmhmm.

OXANA: But then what we usually make is a lot of um, um, soups from vegetables, like borsch. And you can make it here, it's just never the same. And also I, you know, think that I miss like, ice cream and chocolate and bread. They just taste so different. And the other thing, during the summer, we have lots of berries. Lots and lots of different berries. Sometimes, I don't even know the names of them in English. But here, you know, you have one kind of cherries. And, I grew up with, you know, five kinds of cherries. And they'll be plentiful and wonderful. And just, you know, things here are such a um, capitalist production, big production. And they produce one kind thing, and it's shipped from faraway places, so. But there, it's all local and it's so many varieties, so I just really, in the summers I miss all the food. All the berries and vegetables and stuff, so. So, I do miss that.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm. Can you tell me a little bit about your education?

OXANA: Yes. Yea, I um, went to what we call secondary school in Ukraine. And that usually goes from when you're seven years old to when you're about sixteen, seventeen. So, I study for ten years, secondary school. Then, that's when I came to United States. I came to Los Angeles and I received my Bachelor's in English – oh, English, not English! [laughs] – in History. And then, I switched directions, and I got a Master's degree in Psychology, and a PhD in Psychology, so now I teach in Educational Psychology.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: And so was that your main decision in coming to the United States?

OXANA: Yes.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Education?

OXANA: Yes, education was – I, I got, I translated for a, right between high school and I was working and coming here. So, actually, I graduated at sixteen, and for two years I translated for groups that came from all over the world, some from the United States. So, at eighteen there were people who offered me an opportunity to come and at the time, Soviet Union was really falling apart –

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm.

OXANA: – and my parent's encouraged me to come and study here, so. So, education was the main reason to come.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: What was it like when you first came to the United States? What do you remember?

OXANA: Yes. Let's see, what I remember... You know, I went to school in Los Angeles, so I remember – I think I remember thinking that United States would be like New York City.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmhmm.

OXANA: Skyscrapers everywhere, big cities and so forth. And, I don't know if you've been to L.A., but L.A. is big! And, low to the ground, and many – very few skyscrapers. And it's brown! The air is brown, the grass is brown, everything is brown! The buildings are brown. It was just very – not how I imagined it to be. Um –

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Yea.

OXANA: – I remember very much being shocked by – at the time, Soviet Union and Ukraine were in economic crisis, and food was short, and we had lines. And so, I just remember being shocked at how much food there was in the stores, how much clothes people had and um, my family never owned a car, so I was in cars all the time. I remember getting sick often, and I thought it was because of air conditioning, 'cause I never grew up with air conditioning. So, in Los Angeles you come from hot outside to cold inside, hot outside, cold inside, so I don't know if it was that. But, I remember getting colds a lot, so. So, it just was very surprising. People were kind, I remember. But, also um, I don't know – um, at home people don't say hello the way people do here? But they're also much more, much more friendships and family connections, much warmer in that way.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmm.

OXANA: But here, people always say hello, and they are seemingly nice. But, people don't

seem to have as close friendships. So, I remember thinking that. And, for a long time it was hard because I was very homesick, and all my family was far away, so.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm. Um, going back to your um, your – Ukraine. Um, tell me a little bit more about your education, about your classmates and your teachers, and...

OXANA: Hmm. It was, let's see, it was – the only, let's see. Similar things to United States, I can be comparing, is that you went to school in the same building. I went to school number 31, in Kiev. The same building, from the time you started seven, to seventeen. So, first grade to tenth, now. And um, then it was divided, however, into – first you had like, elementary years, and first through third. And then, fourth through eighth were middle school, and then last two years were high school. But you studied with the same people, pretty much, from first grade to last grade. And, you had a, you were usually in groups of about thirty, forty students. And, in my case, we didn't have a large school so there was um, all the grades studied together. So, elementary school is not in a different building, high school is not in different building, so. What we have, so there'll be, for example, two or three classes that are first graders and, of groups thirty. So, in – we had two, two classes that were eight, nine and ten, I remember. So, it was like – I was in, so it would be, I was in 8-A, then 9-A class. And so they were named by letters, A-B-C, so forth. And so um, so I – you got to know a lot of people very well. And your teachers, because everyone's in the same building, you don't leave your elementary school teachers often, in the same building, so. The teachers change, so of course when you study algebra, physics, you know, you don't have an elementary school teacher. But, but everything is just – all the generations, all the teachers there, people know you very well. So, I'm still close friends with the principal of my school. I don't um, have as many friends from school years, that are friends, but you know, we just were this, you know, group of students. We all went different directions. Our schools were much less focused on – kind of what, I think, in U.S. it's much more entertaining? Much more sports oriented, much more – it was much more academically oriented, so we were, we had academic competitions, not sports competitions, between schools and so forth. So, we had, um, you know, so – you know, things like that that I feel like, were different.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: And how did this help influence your profession now?

OXANA: You know, I think, let's see, I think – for example, now, one of the areas I teach and study is differences in gender. So, in Soviet Union one of the things in schools was that girls and boys, more or less, had options and encouragement to study same subjects. And so, there – so, for example, I had a music teacher who was a man, a uh, physical education teacher who was a woman. Physics and my math teacher was a woman, uh my uh, English teacher was a man. So, it just was – History teacher was a man – so, it wasn't gender-wise? So, now that I study gender differences in – in United States it's much more divided. So it's interesting to look how girls, for example, or people of all – they limit themselves from certain occupations, because they think it's not for women or it's not for, you know, African American women or it's not for, you know, for *me*. Because, they don't see other people like them. So it's interesting cross-culturally to look at that. So, I think – um, and probably there are other ways. That's such a good question, you know, I'll have to think about it. Maybe I can think of other things, but that's what comes to mind. Hmm.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Do you have any other fond memories of your childhood, that specifically stand out to you?

OXANA: Yea! I feel like I had a – yea, a good kind of childhood experiences. I, I tell sometimes people that, when I grew up, I felt very sorry for everyone in United States, or other capitalist countries –

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm.

OXANA: – because I felt like, I grew up in the wonderful socialist environment that gave people equal chances. And, I remember crying for poor kids in United States who had war toys, and had poverty and racism, and you know, we always shown on TV the lines for, you know, food banks and so forth. So, you know, it's just opposite propaganda. So, I feel like – I remember feeling proud that I was socialist, and so forth. But, I also feel like I grew up, um – and a lot of it was my family influences – I grew up um, playing piano and going to a lot of classical concerts. Unlike in United States, it's very inexpensive. So, you can go to classical concert there, for what would here would be a dollar. Because there, they – people really support it. Lenin actually said that 'Art belongs to the people', so it had to be accessible for people. So, but here it's all, you know, frou-frou rich and famous. You know, if you have money you go to expensive classical concerts. But, I feel like I, I'm very appreciative of that. We grew up kind of close to the earth. We always gardened, we went to the forest and picked mushrooms and flowers and berries, and so. I really, I miss that. I, you know, and I have fond memories of mushroom picking and so forth, so. That's the kind of things. But I also – looking back I think, it was restrictive. Now, as adult I look back and I think, you know um, there were ways like – for example, my family would sometimes get books that were censored? So we would, um – and they weren't real books, they were copied and copied and copied, and they were secret books that we couldn't read because they were forbidden. And um, I also remember that I stood in lines very often for necessities – bread, you know, milk. Long lines, sometimes they would be out of them. So just, you know, things weren't available sometimes, so. Um, so those things um, I feel like – now looking back, I think they were different. But as a child, you know, as a child you live and you think, 'This is fun!', you know. So, I feel like I had a, you know, really good memories of childhood.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: And holidays? How are those?

OXANA: Holidays – you see again, because a lot of, if you think 'holidays', even here in U.S. – uh, in the west and western countries, they're religiously based. So Christmas, right?

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Yea.

OXANA: Easter, a lot of other holidays. Big holidays, that are religiously based. So we didn't have any of those. So we had, for example, New Year's Eve. So, we had New Year's Eve tree, New Year's Santa, New Year's gifts, so it was first – you know, thirty-first to first. So we never celebrate Christmas or Easter, or other stuff like that. But, but we also had socialist holidays. So, for example November 7th and 8th were the revolutionary days, so we had parades. May 1st is uh, uh, Labor Day. And that usually is around the world too, but. Um, so parades and

celebrating people, working people. And um, now it's changed. And of course, so you know, I left when it was still kind of Soviet Union. So now, when I go back, there are both religious holidays, there are old holidays and now there's new holidays. Because there is now 'Independence Day!', and 'This Day!' and 'This Day!'. So, you know, it's confusing because there's lots of new holidays, I don't even know about now, there! So um, but it's, you know, I grew up -- so now that I'm here, I sometimes celebrate New Year's much more, and I um, think about um, like November 7th or March 8th is the international [phone rings in background] – Oh, I'm sorry! We'll let it go, it's...there. My phone, far away in the pocket. But, March 8th is International Women's Day. So, all – it was day of, all the women get flowers, all the girls – you know, it's just celebration of women, so. It's something different.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Um...

OXANA: It should stop here (referring to phone ringing). [Laughs]

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: After, after coming to America – and I know you said you arrived in California, and it was very much a cultural shock, like that. Um, tell me why and how you decided to come to Lincoln.

OXANA: Well, I –

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Nebraska.

OXANA: Yes, yea. The, the um – I received my PhD from University of Missouri-Columbia. So, it's only five hours away. So, I've known about, you know, Lincoln and Nebraska, have driven through here, you know, been. But uh, Kansas City a lot. So um, but when the jobs – looking for academic jobs, it was mostly decision to go where academic job was.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmhmm.

OXANA: So, we came here because it was a good academic job, and I liked the university and so, it wasn't – it wasn't specifically Lincoln. It was, if it was Omaha or some other place that had academic job, I probably would've ended up there. But it just happened to be here.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Um, tell me about what you were expecting – what you experienced when you first came to Lincoln. I know you said that how it wasn't specifically Lincoln, that it could've been Omaha. I further know that you said there was education. But was – did anything shock you? As far as coming from California to Lincoln?

OXANA: Yes, yea. Let's see, I um, things that – I remember driving through Lincoln on Highway 2, and I remember thinking it's not very attractive, and there's a prison and there's barns. And you know, it's just Highway 2 isn't that – parts of it are not very attractive.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmhmm.

OXANA: It's very 'business-y', and you know, just not quite...So, I remember thinking that. But

then, when I came for interview here, I remember thinking the university was fairly attractive. Universities usually are. And then um, we found – my husband and I found a house and uh, kind of in the older part of town. And we just thought it was really beautiful. We – you know, the big trees and older homes, and we like it. We like all the trails. I run, and we bike and walk a lot, so we feel like, I remember. But, culture shock, if I thought – because between California I was also in Missouri, so it was very similar to here in a way.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm.

OXANA: But between California and here, I think there would be the shock of it's much more white. It's much more, kind of, homogenous. There's less immigrants. There's much less cultural events than California, say. Um, just those kind of things. But also the nice things. It's like, no traffic or, you know it's like, peaceful. There is no gangs or, you know, stuff that's not – it's stressful to live in California. I wouldn't, I don't want to live like in – you know, there are parts of California that are not stressful, but Southern California where I was, Los Angeles area, it's just always fast and busy and dirty and stressful. So, I feel like I'm, you know, I don't miss that.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Looking back, tell me about meeting your spouse.

OXANA: Well, we met in uh, Los Angeles, in school. So we just uh, um, got to know each other through that and really um, liked each other. So, you know, we kind of um, spent a lot of time together. And um, my husband is very open to culture, different culture. So it was kind of a good match for us. We love to travel, and hike and so. Mmhmm.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm. Is there any, um – what do you think about Lincoln now, um, compared to when you first came and Lincoln now?

OXANA: You know, I think I feel much more at home. At first, I felt like I couldn't quite find things. Well, you know, you don't know a restaurant you like, or parks you like. And I think now, more and more, I have favorite places. Like I have a favorite trail, and I have restaurants I enjoy. Um, I feel like um, again I really like where our house is, and I um, feel like it's – season wise, it's not too bad. You know, it gets a little hot and humid, but. Like, California is not humid but um...And gets sometimes a little cold, but it's fairly mild. I feel like, now that I've been here, there are things – and also, I've gotten to know a lot more immigrants, because I also study immigrants and I meet a lot of Russian-speaking immigrants. So, I feel like I'm, you know, feeling like it's more of a home community now, so. I feel, I'm liking being here.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Great.

OXANA: Mmhmm.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Great. Um, as you look back, what do you think about leaving the country you were born in and coming to the United States? As you look back now.

OXANA: Mmhmm. You know, what do I think about...Um, there are times I feel sad, because I

think America will never feel like home because it's just, it's not what I'm used to. I always feel foreign here. Even though I look white, I speak good English, I have a degree, and I teach and stuff, it's just – when I go home to Ukraine, and I do about once or twice, once a year or every other year, I feel like a fish in water. It's hard to explain. The smells, the food, the stuff that's my own. On the other hand, Ukraine and Soviet Union – Soviet Union is no longer there – but, Ukraine is changed so very much since I left. So, over last fourteen years, it's so vastly different that it doesn't feel like home anymore either, so. I feel a little, sometimes I feel countryless, like I don't – but I also feel like I like making home here, so I know, I feel like my home is here. And then also I feel like, culturally, my home is in Ukraine too, so. It's just, I feel kind of in both places. [Laughs]

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: What would you recommend – what recommendations would you give to others who are following behind you?

OXANA: Oh, goodness grief! [Laughs] Um, I think – well, I would encourage them to um, connect with their cultural roots. Sometimes I see immigrants who just say, 'Ah, I'm in America. I'll be like Americans, and I don't like anything,' say, Ukrainian or Russian.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmhmm.

OXANA: And, I feel sad about that, I think that's sad. I think that we should keep our cultural roots and um, nurture them and encourage children to do that. So, I feel – so that would be one thing – but I also feel like there are some people who come here and are fairly closed to new things. Like, everything was better at home and it's not the same here. And, and to be open to people and to new experiences. And, I do think that in United States there's a generally, a strong negative feelings about immigrants. And so, people who are immigrants coming to Lincoln, I would, I would encourage them to listen to that and to not – when people are discriminatory or unkind, to um, talk to people about it, to get help, to seek to get involved with organizations that will support them, so that those things don't continue to happen. But at the same time, I would also just kind of encourage people to just jump in, and get – kind of be part of community and get to know people. There are wonderful, kind people here, lots of them, so. Mmhmm.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Is there anything you remember about citizenship? Like your citizenship?

OXANA: Citizenship. You know, I didn't, I – my husband is an American, and so I had a green card because I, by virtue of marriage. And so. actually for a long time, I didn't want to have a U.S. citizenship, because I felt like I'm Ukrainian, so I'll keep Ukrainian citizenship and have green card here. But um, both professionally – just, it felt like it was hard to navigate professionally, because a lot of things you needed to have citizenship for. I was thinking that it looked like that I would probably live here most of my life, more than I would live in Ukraine. And then, traveling. I like to travel internationally. It was very hard with Ukrainian passport. I needed visas, and people didn't like giving visas to Ukrainians. And so, it was – U.S. passport is very nice thing to have for international travel! So, I remember making a decision much later than I could have, and feeling like, 'Well, it's kind of functional, so I'll do it.' I felt sad giving up my Ukrainian citizenship, because I can't have – I would, I would *love* to have dual citizenship,



because that's how I feel. But, Ukraine doesn't allow it, so I can't have dual citizenship. So, I – so I feel like um, it was sad to kind of, give it up, but I also felt like, you know, just it's a new step, it's kind of who, who I am now. So I felt, I felt also really good about that too. I'm very glad I have citizenship now.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: As you look back, do you ever – I know you said um, that you feel like home here now, and that you go back and visit...But, do you ever think about going back to the Ukraine to live?

OXANA: I do, sometimes. My husband and I talk about that, and we think, sometimes we think about moving back and just – first, trying maybe for maybe five years, and then if we would like it, to maybe move permanently at some point. What stops us, again, is that it's – Ukraine has changed so very much. So, it's not like, say, I grew up in Boston, and then I moved here and then well, maybe in ten years I'll go back living in Boston. People have changed, but you know, in some ways, things – it's kind of the same city and so forth. But Ukraine, it's not socialist anymore. They're just, it's such vastly different country, that it's very hard. So, I grew up speaking Russian, and I speak Russian. And now, Ukraine is Ukrainian. Majority of people teaching Ukrainian, and so forth. So it's much more difficult for me to speak in Ukrainian. So, it's just things like that make it much less easy for me to move back.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Mmhmm.

OXANA: But I'd love to move back to eastern Europe, so maybe that would be a, a good option. Like to Czech Republic, or Poland or another in between. It's close to Ukraine but not quite, you know, so it would feel kind of, maybe, in between. Something.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm. What would you like people, or your children, to remember from this interview?

OXANA: Um, let's see. I think, maybe that I will tell them stories about how I grew up, and our traditions. I, I have a small child, who is fourteen month, and I speak only Russian to him. So, I'd love for him to speak Russian, and Ukrainian maybe, at some point. I'd like for him to be proud of his heritage. I also would like for him to um, get to know this city, this community, and feel like it's home too. And, you know, so I think I'll remember those things. It's nice to be asked and think about these things.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Hmm.

OXANA: Yea.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Well, thank you Oxana, and thank you for your time. It was wonderful getting to know you.

OXANA: Yes, yea! You're very welcome!

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: So, thank you very much.

OXANA: Yea, if you have any other questions or, you know, need to reach me, or –

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: Yea.

OXANA: – Kind of clarify things, please, please contact me.

JENNIFER HOLSTEIN: All right, I will! Well, thank you very much!

OXANA: Yea, you're welcome!