

The following interview was conducted with Victoria, for the Star City Treasurer's AmeriCorps History Project. It took place at 'F' Street Rec Center, on the tenth of July, 2006. The interviewer is Ieman Eltakawi.

IEMAN: First of all, I would like to welcome Victoria, and I would like to make an interview with her, because she is a very recognized well member of Lincoln Literacy. And she is very active there, and always trying to do many good things. So um, first of all, we are going to talk about your childhood, Victoria.

VICTORIA: Sure.

IEMAN: And um, please tell me about where you grew up.

VICTORIA: I uh, was born and I grew up in Moscow, Russia.

IEMAN: And uh, what about your family?

VICTORIA: Uh, they are from the city as well.

IEMAN: From the same – Moscow?

VICTORIA: The same, Moscow.

IEMAN: Uh, can you tell me about some of your family traditions, as you grew up in different culture in Moscow? For example, stuff like recreation, what you do for food and these traditional things.

VICTORIA: Uh sure, I'll be happy to. We had uh, a very tight family, close family. And um, it was quite typical, and still is quite typical, for a Moscow family to have no more than one child. So, I am the only child in the family. Um, probably because of the lack of um, space? Possibly. Because we were uh, like you know -- a typical Moscow apartment would be like a two-bedroom apartment, so you definitely do not, in a multi level building, so you definitely can't put way too many kids in, you know, that.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: But, um – I'm not going to discuss why, I don't have any brothers or sisters, but this is how it was.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: And um, one of the traditions would be just celebrating uh, like a birthday? Like, for example, my birthday is uh, in July. So, we would always go to our cottage building, a little cottage out of city. And uh, this was a tradition, that my dad would make some uh, what they call here, shish kabob type meal. And uh, we would have tons of friends and gifts. And, it used

to be my best day of the year –

[Interviewer laughs]

VICTORIA: – but then, after I hit twenty I kind of realized that there is not this much, you know, happiness about it. And by that – by now, I totally dislike this day!

IEMAN: So until the age of twenty, there was very wonderful celebrations?

VICTORIA: Yes, I was happy, I was happy! And then, the realization occurred, that no, actually there is not much to celebrate.

IEMAN: Yea, yea. And uh, what about uh, the food? Do you have some specialty that you --

VICTORIA: Yea, my um, let's see. My ancestors, from my father's side, they come from Armenia? Which is uh, small country close enough to, what should I say, Turkey? To make it understandable?

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: Um, and of course there, a meal would be different from a Russian traditional meal. So in my house, we would have a happy combo of uh, of Russian with uh – Russian meals with uh, I don't know, cabbage and potatoes and all this jazz. And uh, some typical Armenian dishes, like uh, stuffed grape leaves, you know, shish kabobs uh, chicken with nuts and all this stuff. So, whenever we would have company to entertain, we would serve something Armenian.
IEMAN: Yea.

VICTORIA: But, our everyday life would be Russian, because it was easier to cook.

IEMAN: Yea.

VICTORIA: And faster.

IEMAN: [Laughs] I, I think shish kabobs, are these things near to the Turkish?

VICTORIA: Yes. Yea, it's kind of typical for Mediterranean area, so.

IEMAN: Mmm. Which is very delicious.

VICTORIA: It is very good, too.

IEMAN: Yea.

VICTORIA: You know, and now I am speaking with you, and I just remembered I didn't have breakfast this morning, so *now*, I'm getting really hungry!

IEMAN: [Laughs] Okay, and what about your education? Can you tell me about your education?

VICTORIA: Yes, I uh, graduated from my high school. In that same year, I entered the University of Foreign Languages of Moscow, and got my Master's degree there. And uh, I have a double major in Education and English language.

IEMAN: Hmm, good – in English language?

VICTORIA: Mmhmm.

IEMAN: And so your major was English?

VICTORIA: Right, right.

IEMAN: Wow, great! And tell me about the schools you attended, and the courses you took.

VICTORIA: Um, you mean, the university?

IEMAN: No, uh, before the universities.

VICTORIA: High school? It's a typical uh, Moscow setting, when uh, you don't have separate building for um, elementary or middle school. It's all in one building. At least, this is how it used to be when I was growing up.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: And uh, so we would have – usually, it's very typical type of a building. So, you would have like, three-story building. And uh, usually the little kids, ages seven through nine, would be in one uh, end of the building, on the second floor. And of course the uh, older kids, they would have different classes, classrooms, which is typical to high school of um, you know, American high schools as well.

IEMAN: Hmm. And uh, what about your teachers and classmates? Are there some unique teachers, or some classmates whom you were uh, affected by, or they made some impression?

VICTORIA: Sure, I'm still in touch with um, some of my classmates. And it's funny, because you go – this is, this is the big difference to me. Um, in Moscow, you go to the first grade. And, the way we sit there -- it's not like what they do here, when kindergarten sits on the floor and, you know, that. There, we have those little desks for two people. And, it happens a lot, when two people would sit at the same desk and they go through uh, second grade, third grade, all the way through the tenth grade. And they would be still together.

IEMAN: Yea.

VICTORIA: So, of course, that builds a much closer relationship between children. Because they go through uh, the same -- unless their parents move somewhere else, and of course, the kids would go with them. But usually, they would go through the same -- like, in my case, I started at same school when I was seven, and I finished it when I was seventeen.

IEMAN: Whoa!

VICTORIA: So, and we were all with the same, you know, with the same kids, same friends.

IEMAN: Mmhmm. And the teachers?

VICTORIA: Yea, I -- yea, I remember a lot of the teachers. Like, lately, I don't know why, I keep thinking of our History teacher. Not that I was a, you know, majoring in History, but he was a really interesting person to hear, and to learn from. So, it was a good experience.

IEMAN: So um, how did this help prepare you. prepared you for your profession? For example, these teachers affected you to do English, or something like that?

VICTORIA: No, uh, I don't think -- well, well partially, yes. Because, I was typically -- I knew that I would not go to, I was not going to use my math or physics skills, just because I never cared much for those subjects.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, I, you know, I've always preferred um, some languages or, you know, literature studying.

IEMAN: Hmm. Uh, now we are going to talk about marriage and family customs. Tell me about your family and your customs relating to marriage. Do you have specific customs?

VICTORIA: Um, you know, we should probably say that Russia is a huge country. And what's typical in one end of the country would probably be not that typical in somewhere else.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: And uh, Moscow is the megapolis with eleven million population people. So uh, what's typical there would probably totally will not be acceptable in some little villages. So, I mean, in my, like in the, what should I say? In like the, layer of people I was dealing with, you know, this was a -- our family was quite traditional. My parents never got divorced, they stay together. Which is very not typical for Moscow, I should say, because the uh, rate of divorce there is very high. Probably, they say it's one the highest rates in the world.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: But they stayed together. And um, it was just a, it was a really nice, close family.

And this is the biggest thing, you know, with me, now that I am living here and they live there. This is the biggest challenge.

IEMAN: Yea, of course, because you are the only child. You are used to being very close to them.

VICTORIA: Right. Yes, definitely.

IEMAN: And, tell me about meeting your spouse.

VICTORIA: I was uh, it was our work relationship. Because, I was working as an interpreter and uh, John came there with his company, because they were showing some equipment to uh, Russian agricultural academy. And I was hired as an interpreter.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: And this is how we met. And uh, so I was interpreting for them for, you know, probably ten days, then. Then they left, then he came back, then again, then *again*.

[Interviewer laughs]

VICTORIA: So, we were dating for maybe two years, two and a half years of, you know letters and visits and um, big phone bills and all that [Laughs].

[Interviewer laughs]

VICTORIA: Then I came here, and we got married here.

IEMAN: Yea, so, tell me about your marriage.

VICTORIA: Very non-traditional American. Because here, I mean, I'm watching all the movies and going, attending all those huge uh, wedding receptions with tons and tons of people. We didn't, we didn't – I didn't know many people here. I just moved in here. And so, we just had a very quiet wedding. Then we took off to uh, our Seattle honeymoon. And then uh, we went to Moscow, and that's where I had a big wedding. Well, not *that* big, once again. Probably was about fifty or sixty people.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: But that was a fun wedding.

IEMAN: Hmm. And uh, what about coming to America? Uh, tell me when and why you decided to come to America.

VICTORIA: Well, just because – John would not feel comfortable living in Russia, and I guess,

I had to come to America.

IEMAN: Mmhmm. How you came to America? Uh...

VICTORIA: By plane.

IEMAN: So, through a specific organization, or just by yourself?

VICTORIA: No, just by myself.

IEMAN: Hmm. Tell me about what it was like to first come to America.

VICTORIA: It was uh, I came to New York City. And of course, we were touring New York City for three days. And then um, that was a big change, to fly from New York City to Lincoln, Nebraska. So, that was hard. It was hard, it was – I was not used to small town living. And, it was a little challenging and boring, first year.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: But then, it's kind of getting, it got better.

IEMAN: Yea, but when you came to Lincoln, did you come to work here, or just to see Lincoln? Or...

VICTORIA: No, John lived here by uh, that time. He had his house and he had his job here, so.

IEMAN: So, he came first here, before you?

VICTORIA: Yes, yes. John came – he's an American, he was born here. I mean, he wasn't born in Lincoln, he was born in New York state.

IEMAN: He was born in New York?

VICTORIA: Yea.

IEMAN: And, then came back to Russia?

VICTORIA: He worked here. Yes, uh, he was there, just was short visits, to represent their company.

IEMAN: Oh. Uh-huh, I see. But, but he was born in Lincoln?

VICTORIA: No, in uh, New York state. Upstate New York.

IEMAN: Mmhmm. Okay, great. Then uh, when you wanted to come to – from Moscow to here -- uh, did they forbid you or something? Or, they don't forbid you.

VICTORIA: No. No, it was very easy.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: It was, you know, we had this in Russia. In the Soviet Union, we had this period called 'perestroika' when, you know, they let people go anywhere.

IEMAN: What did you call it?

VICTORIA: It's a Russian name, called uh, basically it's called 'perestroika', which some people know.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: But, it means 'reconstruction', so they reconstructed the Soviet society, and uh, you know, it became more Democratic.

IEMAN: Wow, good! Because, before I hear it used to be very difficult to come to the States.

VICTORIA: That's right. But once again, what you hear here, uh, what you get to hear is not always what uh, you know, what I saw. I mean, I don't want to say that everybody is not saying the truth, but everybody's coming up with their own stories.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, my experience with the Soviet Union was very positive and nice.

IEMAN: Mmhmm. Good. Uh, tell me about what you expected to find when you came to America? Did you expect specific things, or...

VICTORIA: You know, I was in so much *love* with John, you know, so I didn't you know, think about much what to expect here. I never thought much about living in America. I kind of was thinking about Europe. Europe always attracted me, but in America – like, you would ask me, 'What do you know about America?' Well, New York City, with big skyscrapers and uh, Disneyland, something like that.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, definitely I didn't find either one of them here in Lincoln. So, it was a little -- uh, I guess I lucked out, because the first year I moved in here, I got a position at the University. Was teaching Russian there, as an instructor.

IEMAN: Mmm, good!

VICTORIA: So, it got me busy for several years.

IEMAN: Yea, so you were teaching at the University here?

TVICORIA: Mmhmm.

IEMAN: Oh, good!

VICTORIA: Mmhmm.

IEMAN: Why did you leave, then? [Laughs]

VICTORIA: Oh, they had um, first of all, financial cuts. So, they had to cut off several positions.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: But also, it was just I -- not mine. I wasn't, it wasn't um, challenging enough, or whatever. I was...

IEMAN: Mmhmm. And um, tell me about your job now, that you are holding. Do you find it interesting?

VICTORIA: Um, well Lincoln Literacy Council is a big organization, and we work with a lot of volunteers who want to teach English. Um, and mainly, lately we have probably eighty percent of our students second – what do I want to say? I want to say they are second -- no! English as a Second Language learner. So, which means they are all immigrants or refugees from different countries.

IEMAN: These volunteers, you mean?

VICTORIA: No, the students.

IEMAN: Oh, the students.

VICTORIA: Our students. So our volunteers, mainly, they work with English as a Second Language. Uh, students. But some of them do work with uh, those who were born here, but they never knew how -- they never *learned* how to read and write. So uh, probably twenty percent of our volunteers work with what we'll call a 'basic project'. But the majority's uh, you know, working with immigrants and refugees. So, which is fun, it's interesting. I like that. And I really, really enjoy uh, tutoring our new tutors. We do, we do that tutor training?

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: Uh, and we conduct it every month, so I, I teach that training and I'm enjoying it.

IEMAN: Mmhmm. So um, did you teach volunteers uh, who are from different background, and American?

VICTORIA: No –

IEMAN: Do you teach --

VICTORIA: Well, our volunteers probably – I've been doing it for five years, and I've met maybe up to ten people, out of all of these volunteers, who were not um, Americans. Uh, so I met like, one person from – like two young ladies from Armenia, and one person from, I believe, Vietnam. I can't even think of uh, the countries. But these are not -- like I said, probably no more than ten people. But the majority of, um – we have about 800 um, volunteers, tutors?

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, definitely the huge majority of them are native -- well, they are Americans who are born here. I don't want to say *Native Americans*, they're just the people who were born here.

IEMAN: Hmm. Why I'm asking you, because I wanted to know whether you have non-American, uh, and whether – have they improved to have the good accent, and to have good language to teach?

VICTORIA: Are we talking about volunteers, or students?

IEMAN: Volunteers.

VICTORIA: Volunteers? Um, well, we will not be working on volunteer skills, we will be working on student skills. So, those who came to our trainings, they did have pretty good English. They did.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: Oh! I'm sorry, I probably forgot about this. The Lincoln Action Program, they were sending some AmeriCorps. And they were, a lot of them were not Americans.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, you know. Yea, so, probably it wasn't more than – it was more than ten uh, people, that went to our training.

IEMAN: Hmm, good. And uh, there is one more thing. Uh, what else do you -- do you have any other work, other than Lincoln Literacy?

VICTORIA: Yes. I also work as a court interpreter, at the court. And I am interpreting the court sessions to those uh, Russians who are in trouble.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: And I work a lot with the lawyers and um, you know, things like that. When, you know, we need to find some legal advice, and all that.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: I also am a real estate agent.

IEMAN: Oh, good.

VICTORIA: So, I work with uh, populations of some people from Russia or Ukraine, as well as with uh, Americans. Finding homes for them.

IEMAN: Oh, great! Which means you are very active. [Laughs]

VICTORIA: I'm active, yes. Plus, having two kids at home, yes.

IEMAN: Whoa.

VICTORIA: Yes, full-time.

IEMAN: And uh, do you have to travel sometimes, to go away?

VICTORIA: Yes, yes. I love it, love traveling.

IEMAN: So, do you travel for which uh, part of your work? Do you travel with the uh, home real estate? Or, do you travel with the other, court?

VICTORIA: Oh! I don't have to travel as a business, uh – on the business trips. No, I don't have any business trips. But, I have a lot of vacation trips. [Laughs] Which shows a lot on my uh, family budget!

[Interviewer laughs]

VICTORIA: But, we just love to travel. John gets to travel -- my husband gets to travel a lot –

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: And uh, usually we go with him. And uh, but in summer, of course, I go to Russia and I take both of my kids with me.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: And uh, they get to — not only to learn the language, but also to get that experience of living in a foreign country, which is very –

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: – uh, I think it's a unique experience.

IEMAN: Yea, good. And do they speak Russian?

VICTORIA: Yes, they do, they do.

IEMAN: That's so good!

VICTORIA: Um, Liza, who is fifteen now, she is um, very fluent in English -- oh, I'm sorry, in Russian. And I'm thinking, because she has friends who are her age back in Moscow --

IEMAN: Russian?

VICTORIA: Mmhmm.

IEMAN: Oh, good!

VICTORIA: So, once they are there, you know, she's pretty much forced to speak Russian. And that works.

IEMAN: Mmhmm.

VICTORIA: While Eddie, who is eleven, he doesn't have friends of his age back in Moscow, so he is not developing his Russian language skills as much as I would love him for to do.

IEMAN: Hmm. But hopefully, he will, when you take him for the next holiday. [Laughs]

VICTORIA: Hopefully he will! We can always hope!

IEMAN: Uh, tell me about um, what you think about Lincoln when you came first, and what about Lincoln now.

VICTORIA: Um, that's a good question, because I – to be honest with you, I did not like Lincoln the first time I came in here.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: It was too small, it was, I want to say, boring. I just didn't enjoy it. Uh, I always, always loved people who live here. People are um, very nice, smiling, welcoming, kind. This is a very positive uh, you know, experience, meeting people here.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: Um, the city or the town itself, no, I didn't enjoy it. By now, I am well-acclimated. I am used to it, and now I am enjoying it. In fact, I am enjoying it better than busy city life.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, I guess I am getting spoiled here.

IEMAN: [Laughs] When did you first come um, to Lincoln?

VICTORIA: Here? In 1990, sixteen years ago.

IEMAN: Oh! Sixteen years ago, long time ago.

VICTORIA: Yes.

IEMAN: And uh, has Lincoln changed, from that day?

VICTORIA: Yea, I think so. I think so.

IEMAN: Do you find a difference?

VICTORIA: And also, to me -- well, yea, I think it's grown more, and we have some...I don't know. The Lied Center was always here, the, you know, Stadium was always here. Um, stores are closing and opening up, so we can't even say, you know, /this/ is new.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: It's pretty much, probably, staying the same. It's just me, who is getting used to it.

IEMAN: Hmm. Because, some people think that before there were less foreigners. Now, Lincoln is full of foreigners.

VICTORIA: Multi-cultural.

IEMAN: Yea, more multi-cultural.

VICTORIA: That's what I'm hearing. I don't see it that much. I mean, you know, I see it at Lincoln Literacy, at my job, yes. But I don't see it in everyday life.

IEMAN: Hmm. Uh, tell me about citizenship. Do you have citizenship?

VICTORIA: Mmhmm.

IEMAN: Or are attempting to have?

VICTORIA: No, I did get my citizenship.

IEMAN: Hmm. So, were you interested to get citizenship?

VICTORIA: Was I?

IEMAN: Yea. Are you going to get your citizenship?

VICTORIA: No, I did get it. I am a citizen.

IEMAN: Yea, you *are* a citizen. And, uh, there is one more thing about your children. Do you find something – do you find your children now uh, coping with the situation here? Or, do you find here is different than in Moscow, or do you find it's okay with you? And how do you, um –

VICTORIA: Raise kids?

IEMAN: Yea.

VICTORIA: Well, the theory goes that Lincoln is a good city to raise a family.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, hopefully we don't have many problems here, as other big cities do.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: But, sounds like, you know, people still – in high school, they still have drugs and they still have, you know, pregnant teenagers, so. You know, we are not guaranteed that things are not happening in this town. So, we still need to – I think that I still need to watch after my kids as much as I can.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: Not to let it happen.

IEMAN: As you look back, what do you think about leaving the country you were born in and coming to the United States?

VICTORIA: Well, let's keep that – that's a long question. Let's talk about something else.

IEMAN: [Laughs] So, what recommendations would you give others who are following behind you?

VICTORIA: Um, probably to follow their – well, to be very careful with making up their mind,

and um, really really think about what they have there. And be aware of the fact that they will *lose* whatever they have there. You know, they will gain a lot here, but they will never get the old stuff back.

IEMAN: Hmm.

VICTORIA: So, be very careful in choosing, and making their decision.

IEMAN: Yea. And what do you want your children to learn or remember from this?

VICTORIA: From?

IEMAN: From this uh, experience.

VICTORIA: Um, which experience would that be?

IEMAN: Uh, the whole experience of moving from Russia –

VICTORIA: *My* experience. Okay, I want them to learn that – well, I just learn, I just want them to learn to be good kids, you know, good people. That's all. And you know, they watch me all the day. And, I want them to be really nice and kind to my parents, and uh, you know -- American family, sometimes, the family itself is very close, but it doesn't go uh, the closeness does not go to the grandmother and grandfather. Like, the other day, I talked to a guy who is saying, 'Yea, I think I have my mom --', who is like sixty miles away from Lincoln. But, last time he talked with her was Christmas time. And I *really* don't want this happening in my family. I really want them to be close with me, even after they grow and, you know, have families of their own.

IEMAN: A close relationship.

VICTORIA: Yes.

IEMAN: Within the family.

VICTORIA: Yes.

IEMAN: Yea, good. Um, do you have anything to add?

VICTORIA: No, I think we've done pretty good.

IEMAN: Thank you very much, Victoria. Thank you for this interview, and I hope that you uh, get good, interesting life here in the States.

VICTORIA: Well, thank you! That's very sweet of you to say. Thank you, Ieman.

IEMAN: Thank you.