

Oral History Interview with Victoria Kauffman

Me (AK):

Do you consent to being recorded? Knowingly?

Victoria Kauffman (VK):

Yes

AK:

What was it like growing up in the USSR in the 70s? From what you remember?

VK:

Oh, the life – it was a little bit different than the United States. If you think about where you live right now, and like a building-wise and house style, it was all different. So we didn't have private houses or homes, it was kind of apartments or flats.

AK:

And then how many apartments were there in one building? If you remember. Roughly

VK:

In one building? It could, it could be, I don't know. Like, 500? Could be more. Because I lived in eight floor building. And I don't know, actually, I don't know. Because it was 10 floor building and two apartments on the floor. And there were many entries.

AK:

What do you mean?

VK:

To get to the building, like couple entries each – like townhouse, but it's not townhouse, you have like all your own elevator and your own entry to the to 10 floor apartment building, but it's all was connected in one building. So in one entry, it was probably 20 rooms or 20 apartments. And it was five or six of those. So it's like not a lot. Yeah, maybe like 200. Maybe something like this. And each apartment building were built like in a round shape.

AK;

Okay.

VK:

If you're looking from up to the ground. So it has it on kindergarten, for example school, and playground.

AK:

Within the building?

VK:

No, it was kind of square inside, and all buildings were like around the square. So I had my pre K through, like from age 3 up to 6 you in a building kind of like a pre K and kindergarten. And after you move to the school and school was like five minutes walk. And we've been lucky because usually in USSR in one apartment – it was couple generations. And we've been lucky because only me and mom and my dad and brother lived in one apartment. Some people were like living grandma with their kids and the kids of kids in one apartment. It could be like two or three bedrooms. Three generations were like together.

AK:

What was the layout of your apartment? Like you walk in, what do you walk into? When you open the door to your apartment, what did it look like?

VK:

There was hallway and we have just one single room. It was and the bedroom and the living room. Altogether. It was just long hallway – probably like five feet long. And three feet wide. And it lead you to the living room/ bedroom/ all the rooms that you have. That was approximately like 11 by 18 feet. And there was kitchen. Small kitchen probably like 10 by 10 square foot or maybe less. And bathroom. Like bathroom and toilet together. That's it. And we lived there like from when I was born up to when I turned 15. So in this room lived me, my brother, and my parents.

AK:

Where did you sleep?

VK:

It was couch from one side to another side of the room. And it was two couches together without any space in between. So you can sleep like bed to bed.

AK:

Were they foldable? Or was it just a couch?

VK:

It was just a couch, but a couch that was meant for sleeping. So it's like couch but a little bit wider than the ones here. Like single bed with pillows along the wall so you can sit, or you can

take these pillows and sleep. And this pillow we used to play with, we were like able to build a house from them because they were like a chocolate bar shape. So on one bed it was I remember two long pillows but the pillows had springs like a mattress itself. So you was able to build with them like a big logs. We were like building with my brother different shapes of imaginary houses. And you can play with this, you can jump on it so it was like a trampoline too. And we were studying in this room we have one table.

AK:

Did you share the table?

VK:

Yeah and usually in all USSR you have similar one manufactured beds and furniture so almost in every room, in every apartment when you walk in, it probably wasn't a big variety of furniture because it was similar to what you have at home. You might have like green chairs and they have red, but manufacturer was the same and it was all the same. Also it was very interesting that all street names in one city was similar to another city. So. for example, in Kyiv, we have Lenin Street – it's the same Lenin Street was then found in every, every, every town – big or small.

AK:

I don't know if you would remember, did your parents – did they buy the furniture or was it there when you got the apartment.

VK:

When I was born, I already probably was in this apartment and furniture was there. What they bought was probably additional couch/ bed for my brother when he born because he born like five and a half years after me. And it was the same furniture. It's what they get. And they slept on the same type of couch. But it was – you can pull out another section. And it went from twin to double bed probably. And they put the same pillows that were made of kind of small mattress. And it was very, very comfortable. Everything was foldable. And pillows and blankets were under the couch in a movable kind of big wooden container. Big shelf. But it was on the size of whole bed/ couch. And we had TV and on TV, we had only three stations: 1,2,3.

AK:

What were they?

VK:

Just government three stations. 1,2, 3. It's no names.

AK:

Did the channels show anything different? Or did they all share the same stuff? But you had three channels?

VK:

No, varieties. 3 varieties.

AK:

Do you remember what they were?

VK:

Just channels?

AK:

Like did one have like music? And did one have news too? They all have news? Like what would you turn to channel 2 for? Or what would you turn to channel 3 for?

VK:

No, no they were all kind of the same style. I think it was three channels. Maybe it was one? I don't remember actually. No, it was three channels, yeah. But for example, if you don't want to watch movie, you can just switch to news. Or another movie. So it wasn't particularly any style for this channel. Just 1,2,3.

AK:

So did you have a TV?

VK:

Yeah! We had TV.

AK:

Where was the TV in the room?

VK:

So this room was rectangular shape. Because was probably like 11 by 18 feet. The room end up with a balcony. And we have window panels and TV was at the corner where the balcony is. So when you walk in on your left side – the short side of the room – there are two couches connected. It's where I sleep and my brother. In front of you was big ... I don't know how to name it .. but it was closet and it's connected to the table. It's connected to where the glasses are.

AK:

Like a china shelf?

VK:

Yes, China shelf. And another smaller vertical closet with a couple shelves. So it was along the wall like wooden, kind of, closet and shelves altogether and it connects. It actually gets to the end of the room and after it was balcony. And on your right side when you when you walk through the room it was just mom and dad's couch/ sofa, and it has like four pillows – like two big one along the wall and two small ones on the sides. Above it was, on the wall, because all structure was concrete buildings – no wooden panels then or anything like this. So it's very strong walls. They have bookshelves above this bed, on a wall. Was a big wooden shelf. Not big but long.

AK:

Also made of wood?

VK:

Yeah, everything was made of solid wood. Yeah. And the floors was linoleum everywhere.

AK:

What was the kitchen like? What did you have in there?

VK:

Kitchen was small. So one side of the kitchen was kitchen cabinets. I don't know maybe it was less than 10 feet. It was really tiny. But one side of the kitchen it was kitchen. Kitchen room I mean. And on the right side, in a corner, it was sink standing by itself. Usually it is not connecting to anything. Just sink and an under sink cabinet. And in another corner of the room, it was a stove.

AK:

Gas?

VK:

It was gas stove, and it's like standing gas stove by itself.

AK:

What do you mean by itself?

VK:

It's not installed, and it's like just standing in the corner like piece of furniture. So it was kitchen

on your left side. In front of you was window, and opposite side in each corner was or stove or sink. And my mom had sewing machine, so it was standing along this wall on the right side. So she was able to sew stuff.

AK:

Did you have a dishwasher?

VK:

No! It was only what we had in the kitchen.

AK:

No fridge?

VK:

Ah, fridge was... where fridge was ... fridge probably was on the side where the kitchen was, on your left side. It was fridge. Of course.

AK:

You say of course – I had to ask.

VK:

But it wasn't microwave then, and it wasn't hood. So it only what, you know, I mentioned. It was different type of windows because we have a window, like big window, and you can open or whole part of the window, or just top of the part, and it's going outward. It was going to the side of the street. It was always open because it's small. It's very small. It's like three foot by, I don't know, like two feet maybe. It was always open. I don't remember if big window were opened, but the small one was always open because it's kind of, good in the kitchen because we didn't have any hoods or anything. So it was actually, yeah, we had like three paneled windows, so you were able to open all of it, or just a small part of it on the top.

AK

Who was usually in the kitchen?

VK

My mom

AK

What did she do?

VK

She was cooking! And actually homework – we were doing or me in the kitchen, or at the table in the living room but we didn't have any table lights, so it was dark so we was able to do the homework only when it's middle of the day. But usually we were doing homework in the kitchen table. It was kitchen table in between freestanding oven and the kitchen and it was always kitchen table with table cloth.

AK

Did she cook? Who cleaned the dishes? Who did what in the apartment?

VK

We did.

AK

Who is we?

VK

Me, Mom, Dad, because it's no place to put the dishes to dry. So you need to dry them with towel and put on the opposite side of the kitchen on the shelf.

AK

Who did what chores in the apartment? How did you do laundry? Who did it?

VK

We had a washing machine in the tiny bathroom. And it was round shape. And it was, kind of vertical cylinder. And the motor like a fan was visible on the bottom of this washing machine. So it was spinning, it's only was one direction it was spinning, and it's no dryer. So, then, it was very smart equipment so you can put two rollers connecting in between and a handle. So, you have it's kind of funny bridge that was connecting to the round washing machine, and one part of the rollers had the handle. So when you spin the handle, it's make the rollers spin to each other, so what we're doing when washing was done, it was a hose that we connected to the bathtub, and the water was going out. And the clothes that left on the bottom, you can slide in between the rollers and spin the rollers and it was drying the dry clothes – not dry dry but it was like taking extra water, expel the water from the clothes. And after it was going to the container.

And we have on the balcony, we have ropes so you can put the clothes to dry. And when my brother born, we didn't have pampers or anything like this disposable. So we have like cotton cloth. And my mom was washing in the washer and after she was putting in the big pot with hot water – everything – and sanitizing.

AK

His pampers?

VK

Yeah, everything. Clothes, you know, everything what it was. Might be mine too. Kind of in Russia, you used to sanitize everything. So she was boiling the you know, clothes, clothes and everything. And usually you, I don't remember if you were able to buy it, but I remember my mom and my grandma were making it, like sewing it by hand.

AK

Sewing what?

VK

Baby clothes! Like newborn stuff. And I don't remember if it was pants because pants it's very hard to make, but it was shirts and always hats.

AK

Where would you get your clothes? Did you buy most of it? Did you get passdowns?

VK

No, because I born – my mom has a lot of friends but I born the first from all her friends so she couldn't borrow from anybody. Probably she was buying or making it and she was knitting. Yeah my Grandma, she was knitting a lot so I have all clothes knitting mostly and yeah, when you're not newborn anymore you can go to the store and buy stuff.

AK

What were the stores like? Are they similar to here, or were they different?

VK

No, similar, like department big stores and usually it was almost nothing there, always, but sometimes you can catch some stuff. And you can buy. And if store deliver some stuff and people know about it, so it's huge lines just to get the same stuff.

AK

How far away was the store? Did you walk? Was everything within walking distance or were you driving?

VK

No, we didn't have a car until later, until later eighties we didn't have a car. But we have good public transportation. So you can take a metro, or tram, or we have public transportation. And it was all walking distance store, all were usually walking distance – like groceries stores, and restaurants you need to drive. But cafe were around.

AK

Did you go out to eat a lot? Was that common?

VK

No! Usually kids, no, it's very expensive. So we did have restaurants in downtown, but it's usually for some big events, like REALLY big event – anniversaries or big events. And very rare. But cafes, yeah, like, go to have coffee and desserts. I remember it was very good dessert place close by. Yeah. Yeah, cafes mostly, but not restaurants where you eat, really, meals. It were, but it's also rare that we were present there kids. Usually parents do not take kids to the restaurant somehow.

AK

Did your parents go out to restaurants a lot?

VK

I don't remember a lot, but probably they were more than me. [laughs]

AK

I mean, yeah, probably. What was school like for you? Similar to what you saw me go through here? Was it different?

VK

No, it's very different. Because usually, at school, when you get the first grade, you stay in this group of kids until you graduate. And when I born, it was kindergarten after I went everybody like from the same building, the same apartment building, going the same way. So everybody going to the same kindergarten, or day care, and everybody going to the same school. But after the committee dividing kids by age, and by grades, probably, we all end up in a classroom. And teachers stay the same. Until, like elementary school, like here. Maybe until third grade.

AK

Did you have the same teacher each year?

VK

Same teacher and after, teacher are coming into your class, so you're not switching the

classroom, you stay in the classroom. We had three floors, four floors. So the elementary school was on first floor. We have four classrooms and it was about 25-30 kids. It was first grade and we stayed there until, probably, first three years. And after you move kind of upstairs and you stay there a couple more years. But usually when subject is different the teacher is coming to your class, and you stay in the classroom from the morning until you done

AK

Would you have one teacher for each subject? Or did you have different teachers teach different subjects?

VK

Every subject. Some teachers were able to teach, like here, two subjects, but usually you stay in this classroom. You're not switching the rooms by teacher, but teacher are come by major to your classroom. And you stay in this same group of kids from first grade until eighth or tenth.

AK

What kind of classes do you remember taking?

VK

All kids from the USSR were taking absolutely the same classes at the same time all along the whole country. Yeah. So you didn't have to choose your electives. You don't have elective. You have like Math, Science, English. I learned English from fourth grade so. We didn't use English so it was like here, some people learning Spanish you just learn at school and you forget because you don't use it. So it was the same because on TV, you don't exposed to English.

AK

Was everything in Russian on TV?

VK

Yes, of course because country was closed. So no, you couldn't hear or see another language. If it was displayed some different movies, it was in Russian. So it was it was only Russian. It doesn't matter if actors were speaking English, but it was muted and it was like it was kind of another voice who was in Russian. So you do not hear English or any other language. At least I don't remember

AK

And then after you finished eighth grade, where did you go?

VK

So usually you have two choices: or continue school until tenth grade. And after tenth grade it's final graduation. And you can go to university or, you need to pass exams, to go there. So your choice was or after tenth grade to graduate, or after eight. But after eight you need to go to technical school, or nursing school, it was a choice. So after eighth grade I graduated, and I went to nursing school, but at nursing school, you kind of continue school education, to have complete your degree.

AK

Did you take the same classes that everyone around the country was taking in those years, and also nursing classes?

VK

It was nursing classes plus school together, but it wasn't the same this time because it was just major subjects. I didn't took, for example, astronomy, because I was in a nursing school, but I took chemistry and math and English and Ukrainian language as a foreign language. It was a second language. It wasn't foreign because it was in Ukraine. But foreign language was considered as English. And classes were taught on Russian, but Ukrainian we took as a as a language class too. But we have, from the beginning from first grade, as I said, it was four classes. So two of them were taught in English and two them were taught in Ukrainian as a major subjects. So depends what your preference, I went to Russian classes. So all majors were taught on Russian. And Ukrainian was learned as an additional other language.

AK

And then when you were in, it must have been like eighth grade or seventh grade, Chernobyl happened. What do you remember? How did you find out? What happened? What do you remember from them?

VK

Oh, it happened when I was in seventh grade. So when it was officially announced that Chernobyl happened, we were evacuated. Whole kids, except eight, eight and 10th grade. Because they were graduated classes. We were evacuated to Western Ukraine. And it was another boarding school where we continues to have the classes and I don't remember if it was the same as everybody else or not. But I lived maybe three or four months in boarding school with all different kids because it was mixing classes from all around Ukraine in different locations. So I end up in very West Ukraine. Language itself was a little bit different too. So it was funny because I couldn't understand 100% Ukrainian because it was on the borderline with Poland.

AK

Do you remember where you were?

VK

It was Sokal. Yeah, I think it was Sokal. It was somewhere...

AK

Were your parents evacuated too? Or was it just you and your brother?

VK

Just me and not my brother. My brother was evacuated in different place.

AK

So you were evacuated to Sokal, but they were evacuated but just to somewhere else?

VK

I don't remember. He was in second grade, I believe. And I don't remember. I don't remember if he wasn't living by himself as I think my mom was with him in the south part of Ukraine. And last for three, four months and after we come back.

AK

How did you get evacuated? Like Well, how did you end up Sokal for me from Kyiv?

VK

I don't remember. Maybe by bus? I don't remember this part at all.

AK

Do you remember how you found out? Did your parents tell you what happened? Or did you see it on the news? How did you hear about it?

VK

From Finland! Finland who first noticed that something happened in Ukraine. And then, in Russia or USSR, you couldn't get the *news* news from TV. So what people were doing, kids were like taking the radio and finding the BBC translated on Russian. And it was very secretly, at night, my parents or my grandparents, they have antenna on a portable radio. So you need to find the BBC in Russian. And listen actual news.

Because what they were translating on TV, it's wasn't really something. So I think like rumors were first. And after maybe a week or two, the government announced that something happened, some minor structural problem was, I don't remember how it was exactly, but something happened to Chernobyl.

And people starting to panic. And so they started to buy Iodine. Iodine that's for the wound. And I remember my mom was giving me drops of pure Iodine.

AK

How did people know to do that?

VK

I don't know. Maybe the doctors, since it wasn't officially released what we need to do, but it was said that we need to close, maybe it was on the radio, I don't remember, but my mom was taking clear nylon. And just like here, when it's cold, you can go to Home Depot and buy big sheets of clear plastic and close the windows. So we did the same in Kyiv. And my mom was taping, I don't know how, all windows shut completely so the dust will not get to the room. And she was cleaning the floors and mopping every day with wet mop just to take the dust off. And me and my brother were taking, I don't know how many drops of pure Iodine.

AK

So this was before you were evacuated?

VK

No, it was I don't remember what it was through, you know, at least a year or so. So it was for a long period of time.

AK

Do you remember anything else from that time?

VK

About Chernobyl? People were staying the most at home. Cleaning was done. Streets were washed out outside with big machines. Everything was washed out – roofs and highways. We didn't eat mushrooms because mushrooms absorbed metals, or at least it was said like this. That's it, not something more than this that I remember. After we come back and we continue school, so it was probably six months or so.

AK

And then when you were evacuated, were you living at a boarding school and still doing classes?

VK

Yes. Yeah. We have classes, grades and everything like in school.

AK

And then after it ended you just went back home.

VK

Yeah, but again I don't remember how, I need to ask my mom [laughs].

AK

Do you remember anything else about like the food that you ate? Like what did you usually eat? Separate from Chernobyl, what did you usually eat every day?

VK

What we eat? Yeah, we have a store so some food that my mom prepared. Usually it was like a borscht. Or pelmeni. Lobsters. I remember one time I did both lobsters, but he brought a huge fabric bag. It was huge. It was probably like four feet high and one and a half feet wide, full of lobsters. And we have small kitchen and small fridge. And lobster were high. So we pull the bathtub, and put all lobsters inside, they still alive. They were like swimming. And after I remember how my mom took a big pot and we starting to boil them. And I was very enjoying that, as a child, how colors change from green to red [laughs]. I was standing on a chair in the kitchen

AK

What else did you eat?

VK

I remember my dad again, he was like bringing caviar, red and black, in huge glass containers, probably at least like gallon containers full of red and black caviar. And my mom was force us so we will eat it. And I didn't like the caviar then until I liked it. But this disappeared in probably in 80s. Probably it disappeared from all stores.

AK

Do you remember it being like a luxury back then? Or just like same way you'd go just buy something from the store?

VK

No, he had like business trips. So he was buying from north of Russia because he was going to business trip in somewhere in northern part of Russia. And it was very easy just to go and buy it. But it wasn't, it wasn't in in Kyiv wherever. In Kyiv we had the small containers like tuna or something. But then it was everywhere.

AK

It wasn't like a luxury or something.

VK

It wasn't luxury. It was just there. And what I remember that it's not like here, you were not able to buy part of chicken, for example. You need to buy whole chickens, whole completely with head and feet. And usually you buy one or two, and I remember my mom or grandma were like taking the chicken and cleaning up. And sometimes it was with feathers. So you need to clean the chicken from feathers. With the gas stove. So you just pull very close to the gas. So you burn the rest of the feathers, but it wasn't a lot of feathers. It's just not cleaned well. So you just take some part where it stick, you like going through the gas stove and you burn the feathers, and you cut the pieces to make a soup.

AK

When you would go to the store would you get all of your things from one store? One supermarket, like here? Or would you go to one store for one thing, another store for meat?

VK

We have a big supermarkets, it's called supermarket where you can buy all different stuff in one store. But we didn't have this closeby, so we have bread store for example. It's only like a bakery. But it was just bread. And to get to the bigger store my mom were taking public transportation. And you have, it wasn't plastic bags like here. It was made of like ropes, only mesh bags. No plastic there.

AK

When we buy things here, a lot of things are packaged in plastic.

VK

No, it wasn't plastic at all. Glass containers, like jams here. No plastic. No plastic at all. We didn't have plastic. No plastic, no such stuff.

AK

You had nylon. For the windows.

VK

Yes, probably for construction stuff, but it wasn't for the for the home. We didn't have disposable anything — you don't have disposable stuff

Like trash can, it's only like a metal one with a handle. And after you need to wash it because you don't have a plastic bag to put in between and just throw the plastic but with your trash. In an apartment building, like actually it's some something similar in New York, you're not going outside. We lived in eighth grade eighth floor you're not going throw the trash can somewhere

outside, you have big tubes where the staircase so you just open the door and you throw the stuff inside and it's get through this big metal tube downstairs where it gets probably to the bigger trash can so each floor has own like door where you throw the stuff so you don't need to go outside.

AK

What would you do if anything broke? If your fridge wasn't working? How did you fix things?

VK

Probably technician will come. Yeah, like a plumber if something's going wrong, somebody is coming. Also if you in USSR, if you sick, doctor comes to your house evaluate you by visits. So you if you sick your stay home and doctor comes to you. But if you need immunizations, you going to medical office.

AK

And did you keep any medications at home?

VK

Yeah, we have pharmacies so you can buy everything what you need.

AK

And then, I mean here a lot of things are in plastic bottles What was your medicine in?

VK

It was in tablets, tablets were in, I think it was, I don't remember. Or in a bottle or in a pop-up plate. I don't remember if was pop-up plate or not. But bottle for sure, and vials. Everything was glass. And actually IV were not from any plastic bags it was all glass and rubber lead. So if you need extract the fluid from it, you just poke with metal needle and it's connected to the IV for example. So you have a pole and a metal glass bottles upside down and rubber cover and you just poked with a needle and like medicine can go to IV.

AK

Was the tubing also glass? Or plastic

VK

No tubing were like plastic. Yeah, like here. And I like these tubes, the plastic tube from IVs line. It was not just me but kids were making from it all different stuff. Like keychains and fish. I knew how to make a fish, it was very pretty.

Yeah. It was very pretty. You can cut it and it was spiral tail and after you can, like a decoration

you can put on a window on a Christmas tree. Out of IV tubing. Yeah, it's only tubing. And also when, as kids, when we were finding, for example broken TV on the street on the trash. So we're taking the wires because they have insulation different colors and you can make a lot of stuff from it.

AK

What else did you make?

VK

Yeah, key chains, bracelets, from wires. It was bracelets and rings, as kids. From IV lines it was Christmas decorations.

AK

Do you have anything else that you wanted me to ask about? Or anything else you remembered?

VK

Yeah, I remember I was taking care of my brother who was 5 ½ years younger than me. My mom was working so she was giving me to take care of my brother when he was a newborn. So I was taking care of him by myself. I was changing his clothes, I was bathing him. And I was going for example, I knew that I cannot leave him alone. So feeding him with bottle and milk. So when my mom was working, I was taking care of newborn when I was 7 ½, 8 years old. Like 6, 7, 6 ½, I was by himself with him and it was okay in USSR to leave kids at home. So my mom was like able to leave me, or just to leave him and go to jump to buy some bread from around the corner. So it wasn't unusual that kids can be by themselves, outside or inside apartments. And parents were working, so it was okay then. And we didn't have phones – home phones or cell phones. So we have a street phone, and you can go and put the money, coins, and make a call. We were waiting in a line to get home phone for 15 years. And we did get it like after 15 or 17 years, and we use it for six months and after we got another apartment.

AK

You didn't take the home phone with you?

VK

No, and we were in a new apartment. It was in 90s, and we still did not have a phone. But after we just moved, so we had a phone and I remember having phone only in my life was like probably a couple months. In this old apartment.