



City of Alexandria  
Office of Historic Alexandria  
*Alexandria Legacies*  
**Oral History Program**



**Project Name:** *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

**Title:** *Interview with Irina Kosinski*

**Date of Interview:** *April 12, 2015*

**Location of Interview:** *Ms. Kosinski's home in Alexandria, Virginia*

**Interviewer:** *Sandy Carpenter*

**Transcriber:** *Sandy Carpenter*

**Abstract:** Irina Kosinski came to the United States to study. She grew up in a middle-class family in Novocherkassk, Russia, which is in the southern part of her homeland. Her mother was a university professor, and her father was a research scientist. Irina now works for the National Institutes of Health. Irina remembers her childhood as happy, with good, moderate weather. She is the middle child of three. Irina first came to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1994, when she was twenty years old, to work on her degree. After returning to Russia for two years, Irina moved to the United States permanently in 1996 to marry her husband, whom she met at Chapel Hill the first time she came to the United States. After five years, his architectural firm transferred him to Alexandria, Virginia, and they moved to Alexandria two weeks before the attacks on September 11, 2001. Irina loved Alexandria from her first time here and continues to enjoy her life here. She tries to maintain aspects of Russian culture by celebrating Russian Orthodox holidays, cooking Russian foods, and teaching her children the Russian language.

**This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.**

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<b>Introductions</b>	
Sandy Carpenter:	Okay, this is Sandy Carpenter. This is April the 12th, 2015, and I am sitting here with Irina Yurievna Kosinski to conduct the interview for the Oral History, and we are in Alexandria [Virginia]. Okay. So, Irina, you are from Russia and can you describe what it was like there?
<b>Childhood in Russia</b>	
Irina Kosinski:	It was fun growing up in Russia. I had a great childhood. I grew up in a town called Novochoerkassk, Southern Russia. I have two brothers. My older brother, Slava, is eight years older than me. My younger brother, Igor, is three years younger. I am a middle child. My parents, Galina Georgievna Ponomareva and Yuri Emelyanovich Ponomarev, were working at Novochoerkassk Polytechnical Institute. My mother was a chemistry professor and my father was a scientist. He was very successful and ran his own research lab. We were a middle-income family and we had a nice flat and a car. Every summer we were able to go to a resort and take vacations, so it was nice.
S.C.:	What was the climate like there?
Irina Kosinski:	It was very mild. Novochoerkassk is a small town in the Southern part of Russia, about six hours away from the Black Sea by car. We had cold snowy winters, but in the summer it was quite nice. There were rivers nearby where you could swimming. The winters were longer compared to Alexandria, but spring there lasted longer than in Alexandria. There were all sorts of flowers. I remember we had this particular flower, the lilac that I finally found here in Alexandria. I was so excited to see it because it reminded me of home.
<b>Education and Outside Activities</b>	
S.C.:	Oh, that's great. Let's see, you've told us about your home life and your brothers, what was your school like?
Irina Kosinski:	<p>First of all, let me tell you a little bit about how the system worked back in my days since it evolved somewhat now. You started school when you were six years old and you were in the same school until you graduated at the age of sixteen. There was no separate middle, elementary, and high school, like we have here in the U.S. That is really good, in my opinion, since you make friends and go to school with them for ten years. Everybody went to the same school building, but, of course, you changed teachers as you progressed to higher grades. The first three years were considered to be "elementary"; fourth grade through eighth was equivalent to a "middle" school; and then "high school," grades nine and ten.</p> <p>I went to two different schools. The first seven years of my schooling I was in one school, and then I was transferred to a different school, just</p>

	a different location, but the same exact system I just described. Generally speaking, education in Russia is very good. For example, I started learning English when I was nine years old [in fourth grade], and I continued all the way throughout until I graduated from school and entered the Novocherkassk Polytechnical Institute and went on to Rostov State University. Math, sciences, and classic Russian literature are also taught very well. I remember having to memorize poems by Pushkin, Lermontov, and Yesenin. I am still able to recite some of those poems.
S.C.:	Okay. Now, let's see. Did you work while you were in school or just a student?
Irina Kosinski:	I was just a student. The majority of my college years I spent at Rostov State University. My major was chemistry with a minor in education. I had internships. I went to Pioneers' Camp in the summer and I was a camp—.
S.C.:	Counselor?
Irina Kosinski:	Counselor. I worked with children. I also had an internship in a laboratory. The lab was responsible for testing food samples that were to be sold in the city. It was quite interesting.
S.C.:	And did you have to help out around the house at all?
Irina Kosinski:	Oh, yes. Yes, definitely! All the kids, we had chores. I remember we either had to sweep the floors, wash the floors, walk the dog, or go to the store. You know, pretty much like here. We all helped out since my parents worked full-time.
S.C.:	Did you play sports or have any other outside activities? Music, or anything like that?
Irina Kosinski:	Yes, I did. I played basketball when I was in eighth grade. I was on the swim team for a short while. I attended music school for seven years [piano]. Gymnastics, running, sewing. So, you know, here and there. A few things.
<b>Moving to the United States</b>	
S.C.:	Just like here. Okay. So when did you leave Russia?
Irina Kosinski:	I moved here permanently in 1996. I graduated from college, came here, and married my husband. But the first time I came to the United States was in 1994. I was an exchange student. I went to UNC [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill.
S.C.:	Oh. Okay. So, you stayed with an American family while you were here?
Irina Kosinski:	No, I actually stayed in the dorm.

S.C.:	Oh. Okay.
Irina Kosinski:	It's funny, I met my husband the very first day I arrived at UNC. He opened the door of the house we were staying at overnight. My fellow exchange students, our professor, and myself came straight from the airport late at night. Our dorm was closed, so we all arrived to the "Russian House"—the place where students who were learning Russian language lived. My husband answered the door when we knocked. We met right away.
S.C.:	Oh, that's so fun. Right away. So, that's why you came back then, I guess?
Irina Kosinski:	Yes.
S.C.:	Okay. What was your route? How did you get here from Russia?
Irina Kosinski:	As I mentioned earlier, I came to study at UNC Chapel Hill [in the Fall of 1994]. After that, I went back to Russia to finish my studies and returned to Chapel Hill in 1996. My husband was still working on his degree at the time. After he graduated, we stayed in Chapel Hill for seven more years. We got married on 31 of December 1996 [New Year's Eve, so we do not forget]. He got a job working for an architectural and engineering firm, HDR. They were building a research facility on UNC campus. I started working for a pharmaceutical company, AAI in Research Triangle Park. After my husband's company finished their project, they moved us to Alexandria since they are based here on King Street.
<b>Moving to Alexandria</b>	
S.C.:	Okay. So, he's not from here originally?
Irina Kosinski:	He is from High Point, North Carolina. We moved here right before the plane hit the Pentagon. Two weeks before.
S.C.:	Wow.
Irina Kosinski:	His next project was supposed to be in the Pentagon. A renovation.
S.C.:	Really.
Irina Kosinski:	And so, when 9/11 happened, the project was cancelled. He was assigned to another project somewhere in [Washington,] D.C. We found an apartment about one exit south from here on [Interstate] Highway 95. We lived there for three years. Had two kids, and the apartment became too small for us, so we found this place.
S.C.:	You've been here since then?
Irina Kosinski:	Yeah, we've been here in this condo for ten and a half years. I remember my daughter was two weeks old when we moved in.

S.C.:	Time goes by fast.
Irina Kosinski:	Yeah.
S.C.:	So, you never lived in another country or anywhere else before you came here. You came here directly from Russia to North Carolina and then to Alexandria?
Irina Kosinski:	Right, right.
<b>First Impressions of Alexandria and Adjustments</b>	
S.C.:	Okay. So, what were your first impressions of the area here, of Alexandria?
Irina Kosinski:	I loved it here. Old Town Alexandria is so beautiful. Go there; take a boat to Georgetown. Of course being so close to the nation's capital, it is so much fun! When we first got here, we would get in the car and just drive around, exploring. We would get lost in all these highways, trying to get to where we needed to go. We didn't have a GPS [Global Positioning System] or anything like that, so my husband would call his mom in Greensboro [North Carolina] and he would ask her, 'Can you look at Google Maps and tell us which exit to take?' It was fun exploring here. There are so many trails for biking; we went biking quite a bit. We also went to all the museums. We really like contemporary art. It was quite a difference from North Carolina. It's very diverse here. I've met so many different people from different countries and experiencing that is really nice.
S.C.:	Yeah, there's a lot to see here and I'm sure that was exciting at first. So, it was easy then to settle here. You were with your husband and I guess you didn't run into any difficulties or problems settling here?
Irina Kosinski:	There are always difficulties and problems but it wasn't too bad. I missed my family, though. In the beginning especially, when I first came here. Back then it took a really long time to get naturalized. It took several years for me to finally get my Green Card. I couldn't go back home. I couldn't go visit. Not being able to see my family was really hard. I remember being very homesick, but then as I got older and kind of got used to it, it's gotten much better. I was able to call them on weekends.
S.C.:	So, you were not able to travel over there, they were not able to travel here, so—.
Irina Kosinski:	I had to wait for my Green Card until I could travel abroad.
S.C.:	Okay.
Irina Kosinski:	I did apply for an "Advanced Parole," which allowed me to travel outside the U.S. while I waited for my Green Card, but that took six months to get through. My parents weren't able to afford to come to

	the U.S. at that time. They were really struggling financially. So, we just had to call each other. And write letters.
S.C.:	So, how much time elapsed before you were able to see them again? The two years, or was it more than that?
Irina Kosinski:	Couple years. Yeah, roughly two years.
<b>Visiting Russia and Family Moving to Virginia</b>	
S.C.:	Do you go home every now and then now?
Irina Kosinski:	Last time I went was about seven years ago. My father was really ill. He had lung cancer. We all went to see him, my kids and my husband. He passed away two weeks after we got back to the U.S. After that, my mom sold everything she owned and came here.
S.C.:	Oh, really.
Irina Kosinski:	She lives here with my younger brother and his family. He received a Green Card through the Diversity Lottery a few years after I moved here and brought his wife and daughter. They live in Burke [Virginia].
S.C.:	Oh. Okay.
Irina Kosinski:	Since they moved here, they had two more daughters, and my mom lives with them.
S.C.:	Now you have your family here.
Irina Kosinski:	My older brother is still back in Russia. But, yes, the majority of my family is here.
<b>Other Support Systems in Alexandria</b>	
S.C.:	Okay. Let's see. Do you have any support systems here? Well, you do have your family, I guess that's a big support, but are there other refugee services or community organizations that you use for support?
Irina Kosinski:	I don't belong to any organizations. I know a lot of Russians that live in the area. I've lived here for many years and I was able to meet a lot of people from all over the world. I have a very international group of friends. And that's my support system. I don't go to any refugee organizations or anything like that. There is a Russian church that I go to. As a matter of fact, I went there yesterday. It's in D.C. on 17th Street. Orthodox Church. It is Orthodox Easter; there was a big celebration. They bless the bread, they bless the eggs, so that's always fun.
S.C.:	What's the name of the church?
Irina Kosinski:	Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist.
S.C.:	Well, your support system has changed since you came here. Obviously, because of the arrival of your family, I'm sure. I wouldn't

	assume there's anything other than that because you don't have community groups that you go to.
Irina Kosinski:	No.
<b>Naturalization and Finding a Place to Live</b>	
S.C.:	Okay. And you learned English in school. And you've gone through the naturalization process?
Irina Kosinski:	Yes, I'm a citizen now.
S.C.:	When you got here, how did you find a place to live? Did you guys use a realtor company or—?
Irina Kosinski:	We got an agent. She was real nice. It was hard for us to afford anything extraordinary. We were looking for something in the Alexandria area that was just big enough. My husband works in D.C., so we did not want him to commute too far. We actually almost bought a place right up the street, but somebody offered more so we didn't get that place. I like our place better.
S.C.:	Well, you've got a lovely backyard.
Irina Kosinski:	Yes. The other place didn't have quite a huge backyard. This is perfect.
<b>Career in Virginia</b>	
S.C.:	So, how did you find a job when you got here?
Irina Kosinski:	<p>I've had many different jobs. After we first moved to Alexandria, I worked as a chemist for a pharmaceutical company called Biovail. I was a stay-at-home mom for several years when the kids were young. Went back part-time and worked in retail. Got a government job with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Worked as a chemistry professor at NOVA [Northern Virginia Community College], Annandale [campus]. As of two weeks ago, I am now working for a private company contracted by the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda [Maryland]. I used different resources to help me find my jobs: internet, paper, networking.</p> <p>The way I got this last job was sheer luck. I taught chemistry at NOVA, Annandale campus, for four years. I was adjunct faculty there and I was just not getting anywhere with my career. I couldn't get a full-time job with them. I remember I was sitting in the conference room, because I didn't have my own office. I was miserable—huge pile of papers to grade. All of a sudden, a professor that worked there comes in and asks me, "What's your name? How long have you been here?" We started talking and then he goes, "You're wasting your time here. You need a good job!" "Yes, you are absolutely right!" I could not agree more. He gave me a [phone] number of a woman that works for this company. I called her, got an interview. Two weeks later I was</p>



	hired.
S.C.:	NIH [National Institutes of Health]? Oh great. So, you have to travel to Maryland?
Irina Kosinski:	I have to travel to Bethesda, but I leave early in the morning. I leave at six thirty. At the office by seven. And then I leave at four thirty. I try to avoid the traffic, not always very successfully. But, it's a beautiful ride. I love it. GW [George Washington] Parkway, great views of the Potomac River.
S.C.:	Yeah. That's great. I used to take that route myself. Are there any places or people that helped you get settled here in Alexandria?
<b>Help Along the Way</b>	
Irina Kosinski:	I remember people. People are very important. I remember when the kids were young and I stayed home with them. My oldest was two and some change, and my daughter was a baby. We lived in the apartment complex where we met this wonderful family from Slovenia. They had two kids—a daughter who was three and a son who was twelve. We started spending a lot of time with them. We'd go to their house, they would come to ours. The kids would have play dates. We went camping together, even traveled to Croatia together years later. They were very nice people. The husband worked for the Slovenian Press Agency, which meant that they had to go back to Slovenia. So they left. This is very typical for this area. People come here for a few years and then they go back, or they move on to a different place. It happens frequently. And at first it was hard for me to lose close friends like that, but I guess I adjusted. I just know that they are still my friends, even though they are not here. Regardless, it was great to be able to meet people like that.
S.C.:	Yes, people come in and out of your lives, but once they're there you can reconnect.
Irina Kosinski:	Exactly.
<b>Maintaining Traditions</b>	
S.C.:	Let's see, you told me about your other family members, in Burke. Have you brought traditions from Russia that you've been able to maintain here in Alexandria?
Irina Kosinski:	Definitely. You saw today that we had an Easter egg hunt, because today [April 12, 2015] is Russian Easter. We also celebrate Russian Old New Year, which is thirteen days after the New Year. We always celebrate birthdays like I did when I was a kid.
S.C.:	How was that?
Irina Kosinski:	We just have a huge party. I bake a cake that my Dad used to bake, the

	baker of the family. Yeah, he always made wonderful cakes.
S.C.:	What kind of cake is that that you make?
Irina Kosinski:	I make Prague cake. It is very chocolatey, very rich because the cream is sweetened condensed milk and butter. It's to die for. The whole thing is covered with chocolate glaze. Sometimes I put raspberries or strawberries in the middle. I develop my own twist. There's also another cake I make called Napoleon. That cake takes an entire day to make. Because it's got seventeen layers. I roll the dough layer by layer and bake it separately.
S.C.:	Seventeen layers?
Irina Kosinski:	Yes. I make a huge pot of cream, put the cream in between the layers and the cake becomes very thick. It has to be refrigerated overnight to get moist throughout. It's ready to eat the next day. The layers fuse together, it is delicious! The preparation is really involved. I don't make that cake often.
S.C.:	I can see why. If it takes all day.
Irina Kosinski:	I made it for my Mom's seventieth birthday. That was a big thing. We had a party, my whole family came.
S.C.:	Is there usually a party here at your place, or your brother's?
Irina Kosinski:	It just depends. Back and forth. Of course, if it's my kids we have it here. Or we go there. But we get together very often.
S.C.:	That's good.
Irina Kosinski:	There are a lot of holidays.
S.C.:	Always something to celebrate. Right? So you told us about the cakes. Are there any other foods that you like that are Russian dishes?
Irina Kosinski:	Yes, I make blintzes. A blintz is a very thin pancake. I make them sometimes for breakfast. My kids love them. What else do I make—borscht. It's a beet soup with cabbage. Also, shashlik—that's meat, chicken or pork marinated in vinegar with onions, salt, pepper, then skewed and grilled. It's very good. I make traditional Russian salads. When I feel like it, I make it. A lot of Russian dishes take time. They are elaborate. I don't have a lot of time now that I started my new job. On the weekends, sometimes.
S.C.:	So, are there any other cultural-type activities that you do here, like movies, that are from Russia, and how do you access that type of activity? If you do any of those.
Irina Kosinski:	YouTube! It's easy to access anything through the computer. Sometimes we watch Russian movies. There are international festivals in D.C. Ballet companies come through. This area is wonderful for

	this. There's always something going on.
S.C.:	Do your children know Russian?
Irina Kosinski:	They speak Russian. They write and read in Russian. They went to a Russian preschool when they were young, now I teach them. Every week I catch them and make them read and write. Usually when we are in the car on our way somewhere.
S.C.:	They can't get away.
Irina Kosinski:	They can't get away, that's right!
S.C.:	Great idea.
Irina Kosinski:	They're not really thrilled with that.
S.C.:	They'll appreciate it later for sure. So, other than your family, are there other Russian contacts that you come into, associations, periodically?
Irina Kosinski:	I have Russian friends. I work with Russian people. I hear Russian everywhere, actually. In Alexandria, though, there are not many Russian families. Mostly they are in Maryland or Fairfax County [Virginia]. Here in this immediate area, not many.
S.C.:	If you run into someone, you generally talk about home or about Russia, or—?
Irina Kosinski:	We talk about things, depends on how the conversation goes.
S.C.:	I just wondered if it was so rare, it was like, oh, someone from home.
Irina Kosinski:	It's not rare. Not like that. When I first moved to North Carolina, I was a black sheep. There were no Russians and that's why it was so hard for me. I missed my home so much because there was nobody from Russia around me. I eventually found some Russians, though. But here, it's not a rarity.
S.C.:	Not a problem.
Irina Kosinski:	Not a problem.
S.C.:	So, is there anything that you can't replicate here that you had at home that you miss, wish you could?
Irina Kosinski:	The food. Yes. There is a Russian store here, but they make everything in New York. It's not the same. And particular kinds of candy that you cannot find here. So, every time I go back, that's the first thing I get.
S.C.:	Candy.
Irina Kosinski:	Candy or cakes.
S.C.:	So, you didn't eat in Russia like we do here in the States at all?
Irina Kosinski:	No. It is very different. The cuisine is not the same. There's a Russian

	restaurant called Mari Vanna in D.C. You can go there and try Russian food.
S.C.:	Give it a try. So you didn't do like pastas in Russia?
Irina Kosinski:	We eat pasta. Now you can get pizza. But we have very specific cuisine. We cook hamburger, but not on the grill. We fry the patties and add sauce to them. Russian cuisine is close to the Greek cuisine a little bit.
S.C.:	With seasonings and sauces.
Irina Kosinski:	Yes and it takes a long time to prepare. For example, borscht, the beet soup, that takes a few hours to make. You have to cut all the vegetables—beets, potatoes, carrots, onions. Everything has to boil. Sometimes you make it with meat, sometimes without, just depends on what you want to do.
S.C.:	When you were growing up, who cooked in your household?
Irina Kosinski:	My mother and dad, they both cooked.
S.C.:	I mean, if it was so time consuming, they both worked.
Irina Kosinski:	My mom was a professor, she had a flexible schedule. We also had a nanny. This woman came to our house. She was full-time with us. She cooked a little bit too.
S.C.:	Did she live with you?
Irina Kosinski:	No, she lived nearby.
<b>Conclusion</b>	
S.C.:	All right. Well that's really the end of my written questions. Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to add or we might find interesting to learn about from you?
Irina Kosinski:	I've talked for like half an hour now.
S.C.:	I know, it's been great, you've been very informative.
Irina Kosinski:	Just one more thing I wanted to add. There's a web site, <a href="http://Russiandc.com">Russiandc.com</a> , where you can find information about any kind of gatherings, any kind of shows. People who are new to this area can access all that information. Twice a year there's a Russian picnic at Fort Hunt Park [in Alexandria, Virginia]. So many Russians come! Sometimes the police come and close it down. Too many cars. People from everywhere. We went a few times. It was really nice. You just go and grill out. There are concerts and things for kids to do. When the kids were younger we went quite a few times. Now we just kind of grew out of it.
S.C.:	Yeah. Well it sounds like this is one of the best areas to live in.

Irina Kosinski:	I think so.
S.C.:	If you are an immigrant from Russia because you've got a lot of exposure to things that you want to continue.
Irina Kosinski:	Yes, this is a great area for that.
S.C.:	Well, great! Thank you very much for talking with us today.
Irina Kosinski:	Thank you for coming.