



LHL

Interviewed by Barry Chad

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Library of Pittsburgh

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Interviewer's Note

Tales of the 1936 St. Patrick's Day Flood.

Granddaughter of a Russian Orthodox priest. A glimpse of the Russian Orthodox community in Johnstown and elsewhere in Pennsylvania. The role of fraternal organizations in supporting the immigrants in America. Conflict in the Orthodox Church over authority between Rome and the East. Carpatho-Rusyn traditions. And, last but not least, growing up in Beechview....

Interview

[We begin by discussing Beechview.]

bc: From the interviews I've conducted I find that Beechview is an incredibly stable community and has remained quite stable over the years. People have lived there all of their lives.

LHL: That's right. What's nice about Beechview is that other communities have a major street running through them—like Lawrenceville has Penn Avenue, Oakland has Fifth [and] Forbes, Shadyside has Fifth Avenue and Walnut Street. Beechview is serviced by two arteries: Route 51 [and] Banksville [Road]. And the only reason you'd be in Beechview, up on that ridge, is if you know it's there. It's easy to come up from the service roads and then come up to the ridge top. People really don't even know that there's a Beechview. And that wonderful trolley ride....

bc: You're a native of Beechview.

LHL: Yes.

bc: Your family are long-time residents of Beechview.

LHL: Yes. My Dad died many years ago. My mother died in the last two years. And it was funny how we ended up in Beechview. I was a baby at the time. Two- or three-years-old. My Dad was a [Russian Orthodox] priest's son. And so he ended up moving all around. Priests are assigned to parishes [and they and their families move around]. [My father], being the oldest in the family, he ended up going to school, becoming an accountant, a financial secretary-treasurer for a fraternal organization. As he was growing up, he was in a huge family—like seven children. It was a hardship having families that large. He was involved with [one of the several] Johnstown floods and he believes that he got polio from the Johnstown flood. [That was the Johnstown flood that occurred in the early years

of the 20th century—possibly 1917. My father was born in 1909.] When he moved to Pittsburgh and he was going to school, he was living on his own. He was living in the YMCA. He was doing some office work for the fraternal organization he worked for. It was called the United Russian Orthodox Brotherhood of America [UROBA]. And somebody knocked on his door [at the Y, which was] a place to live for young professional men, Downtown, on Wood Street, and said, “Hey Phil, the water’s rising; you’re not going to have to go to work tomorrow.” So he continued writing to my mother, his fiancée. A little while later a policeman knocks on his door—and he’s on the fourth floor—and the policeman says, “We’ve got to leave the building. The waters are rising.” And so he was taken down one flight of steps to go to a rowboat; and they rowed him off to where there was land. And then he was driven off, as his letter says, to the far-off community of East Liberty, where he was writing in candlelight to his future wife, my mother. There wasn’t any anguish there; there wasn’t any concern. It was more [like]: I was rowed off and taken to this far-off community.

bc: This particular flood we’re talking about is the 1936 St. Patrick’s Day Flood in Pittsburgh.

LHL: That’s right. I have this letter that he had written regarding this. When the Heinz History Center had their flood exhibit, then I gave them a copy of the letter to use for their archives. Anyway, because of the flood in Johnstown, because he was involved in a flood in downtown Pittsburgh, when he eventually married in 1938, he decided he wanted a place on a hilltop that was far from where there would be water problems and, knowing that he had had polio, water was very very important so we moved to Beechview, the ridge-top houses on Alton Avenue at first. And then he looked around in Brighton Heights and Swissvale, I think. They settled in Beechview and then bought the house on Beechview Avenue near the firehouse. So that’s how we ended up in Beechview because of my Dad’s concerns. (We had bottled water in the house in Beechview. We had a container of bottled water there.)

bc: So your father’s father was a Russian Orthodox priest. Living in Johnstown, probably in a very ethnically homogeneous community, would be my guess—in a large Russian Orthodox community. Your grandfather was a priest. Your father was an accountant. Where did your father go to school?

LHL: I think it was called “Duff’s” at that time.

bc: Duff’s Business Institute. Downtown.

LHL: And his penmanship was fabulous, and his sense of humor.... I was young when he died, probably 15 when he died. I didn’t even know him that well. But I’m finding out about him in his letters.

bc: You have all of his letters?

LHL: Yes, that he was writing to my mother. I have many of his letters. And he talks about the floods; and there was another episode where, in 1937, there was a split in the Church, in the Orthodox Church, where the Pope of Rome wanted to have [dominion] over the different churches. And so my grandfather was at a church in Barton, Ohio. (I think it was St. Nicholas Church in Barton, Ohio.) And, from what I understand in talking to parishioners there as recently as six months ago, they remember my grandfather standing at the pulpit and saying, “We’re not permitted to be who we are!” and “Why can’t we be permitted to be who we are?”

We're Carpatho-Rusyn!" And so it became this court case. And, it turns out my Dad wrote a letter to my mother, his future wife: he said that he was going to go to Barton, Ohio, with his sisters, and they were going to celebrate because the Court order just came down that my father's church belongs to the people; and this is the end of the reign of Bishop Takach. And it's actually documented in the history too of St. Nicholas in Barton, Ohio. So I have that letter. I have several of his letters and so it's very interesting reading who he was since I did not know him that well.

bc: I've come across that splintering of the Churches.

My father left home and went to live in New York in the '30s and did the same thing: he wrote back to his mother, my grandmother. We don't have a lot of these letters. Also I think he was staying at the Y or at some gentleman's residence kind of thing. So apparently this was a fairly common thing. Back then they wrote home.... What did your mother do?

LHL: My mother [Julia "June" Dudish] lived in St. Clair, a small coal-mining town in Eastern Pennsylvania. And these fraternal were very important in the life of the community because immigrants were coming to the United States and they can't speak English and who's to help them? [The fraternal would help give them] insurance, financial help with houses and buying a house: property was very important to become involved with your new country. So the United Russian Orthodox Brotherhood of America had conventions throughout the United States. One of them was in the hometown where my mother is. They were hosting the convention: [the town is] called St. Clair, [Schuylkill County,] Pennsylvania. (Not to be confused with Upper St. Clair here [in Allegheny County].) The fraternal came to St. Clair. My mother's family, all the children, would help the fraternal set up food [and] provide places to stay and just [make them] part of the community for the weekend convention. My Dad met my mother that way. She was part of the help in putting the convention together and so were her sisters. All my aunts and uncles were part of that. My Dad seemed to have his eye on two of them: one was my mother and my mother's sister, Eva. (Sometimes I see in the letters: tell Eva I send my regards to her—when my Dad would write to my mother.) So that's where she came from—a coal-mining town. Her mother [Mary] came over from Mikova [Andy Warhol's family's ancestral hometown] in the Carpathian Mountains and worked for a family in New York for a while. Her future husband went to her and said, Would you like to get married. And she wanted money—she wanted money to "validate" the situation: in case anything happened, this would be hers. She was really a very good businesswoman. And so the marriage took place. So that's my grandmother and my grandfather. They lived in St. Clair, Pennsylvania. My mother ended up being the first one to graduate high school. It was a big deal because you were supposed to go out and work: go out and work! Her father died as a result of a coal-mining accident. He had a pierced lung. She was within a few months of graduating high school. It was so devastating—she decided she wanted to go work because she knew her mother needed the money. It was lots of hard times. They had gone through the Depression and, the banks were set up in such a way that the children were encouraging my grandmother to "put your money in the bank, put your money in the bank." She finally took that money out of her safe places in the house, put it in

the bank—Gone!—with the Depression and with the collapse of the banks at that time. Then, when my grandfather died, they really needed money—with eight children. So, my mother—within [just] a few months of graduating high school—she said she'll quit high school and she'll go to work. But everybody said, No! Go to school! Go to school!

bc: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

LHL: One brother. [She laughs.] That was it. My Dad was determined: No, we cannot support more than two children.

bc: Your father died relatively young. Your mother then....

LHL: She needed a job.... And so the organization that [my father] worked for offered her a job. My Dad had worked at this UROBA organization for 30 years. (UROBA—United Russian Orthodox Brotherhood of America.) (He died at his desk.) Then she got a job right after that at the same place. And she worked there for 30 years.

bc: Was the United Russian Orthodox Brotherhood of America located here in Pittsburgh?

LHL: Yes, right Downtown.

bc: Are they still in business?

LHL: They've been absorbed in different ways. It went from being the United Russian Orthodox Brotherhood of America to the Orthodox Society of America and, in the process, moving from Pittsburgh to Ohio. And then it just got absorbed maybe five years, six years ago, by the Loyal Christian Benefit Association (LCBA) in Erie. That organization, the Loyal Christian Benefit Association, is an umbrella of fraternals. The Orthodox Society of America is one division of LCBA.

bc: Where did you go to school?

LHL: South Hills High School.

bc: Which isn't there anymore.

LHL: That's right. I also went to Beechwood Elementary, which is where Bill Cowher [former Steelers coach] had gone. I remember getting vaccinated with the polio vaccine at Beechwood.

bc: Did you go on with your education?

LHL: When I was going through high school, I knew that I wanted to go to college; and so I decided that I was going to make sure that I had the entrance requirements for college. So, I made sure that I went to summer school to get proper credits to go to college and to work—if I had to. I had a background to do secretarial work and then I had credentials that enabled me to enter college. But there was really no money to send me to college. What was really ironic, I thought—and I brought this up to my mother one time—[my mother] said to me, that I should go out and help the family [by working], to bring in money and [that] I should live [at home] and be part of helping her: I should not go out and rent a place and be on my own. She told me afterwards that, when I was going to high school, she told the high school counselor that I had to go out and get a job [and that] there was no opportunity for me to go to college. (I didn't know that, but I just knew in my mind that I wanted to go eventually.) As the years went on,

I brought that up to my mother when she was complaining to me one time about why I never help her. (You know how mothers and children complain, Oh you never help me!) I said [to her], “Well you left your mother! You finished high school! And then you left her and came to Pittsburgh. Why didn’t you stay there and help her?” And she started laughing. She said, “You’re right. I did do that.”

I eventually got a job as a secretary after high school and worked at the University of Pittsburgh and managed to get credits at night in the College of General Studies. (That’s when you only could be a nighttime student.) And then I met my future husband and I got married and I had not finished my college degree. When I got married, I said I wanted to finish my college degree and so I did. Then I took courses at, not only Pitt, but Seton Hill College. I majored in merchandizing. They didn’t have a degree in that at Pitt or at Seton Hill. What they permitted me to do at Seton Hill was to create my own major. So I described how I wanted to achieve that and I told them the courses that I thought I needed to do this and so, with the blessings, so to speak, of Seton Hill College then they gave me a degree.

I wanted to go into sales and merchandizing in stores. I wanted to be a buyer. I wanted to be aware of design. I took art courses. I took business courses. I had all my “basics” from Pitt—the English, writing courses, &tc.—so I had all that put together and that’s when I proposed the project to Seton Hill College. That’s how I did it.

When I eventually graduated, my husband [Irv] and I moved. We left Pittsburgh. He started working at Los Alamos, New Mexico.... We lived in Santa Fe for six years.

bc: Did you find yourself a job out there?

LHL: No, it became like a—I don’t know how to describe it—it became like a constant vacation. (I did work at an art gallery there: I did become a sales person at an art gallery. The [artist/owner of the gallery] was Vladhan Stiha. He was the artist and also the owner of the gallery, [which] was in Santa Fe.) It was living on the mountaintops; sunshine all the time. Snow—it was cold in the winter and lots of snow, but the sun was shining. It was really fun.

We got involved with things like—there was a fellow who his ambition was to really be politically well-known. He had a lot of charisma and he decided we’ll have these float-building contests and they would always build these floats at the time of a celebration in Santa Fe. He always had people come over to his place. This was a big deal: they had architects involved; they had engineers involved; they had artists involved. There would be a design for this float; then you would build the float; and you would ride on the float. And we always got the “historical hysterical” award because it was a satire on some political debacle in Santa Fe. It was just a fun time.

bc: Is your brother still alive?

LHL: Yes.

bc: Is he still in New Orleans?

LHL: Yes.

bc: What did they go through?

LHL: A hurricane.

bc: How did they handle it?

LHL: It's remarkable to me that he still lives there.

I asked him, Why are you living in a fish bowl?

He put himself through school. He was an anesthetist, a nurse anesthetist. He had a very good profession; he really did.

[And I thought to myself:] What are you doin' livin' in a trailer next to your house with a hole in the roof?

bc: What's the difference in personality between the Far West and Western Pennsylvania?

LHL: That's a playground there. One thing that I liked: a mingling of the different cultures: the Indian, the Spanish, and the Anglo. (You could be Black—and you're an Anglo.) And there really was a lot of mingling. And I did enjoy that aspect of it. It is a small enough place—it's only 50,000 people. Maybe it's 60,000 by now, but when we lived there it was 50,000. And what was so nice—you lived a mile from the center of the city where the Court House is, and you'd live on a dirt road. The Governor's house was two blocks away on a dirt road. It was just bizarre. You had an ability to mingle with all different stratas of people in Santa Fe.

I like Pittsburgh. Health care in Santa Fe [leaves] a lot to be desired. (We have friends [in Santa Fe] that go to Arizona to have their health taken care of.) [In Pittsburgh] it's nice taking a bus somewhere. The cultural aspects we have [here are nice].

bc: You're living in Beechview now?

LHL: No, I reluctantly sold my mother's house.

Growing up in Beechview was kind of nice because the fire house was so close and the firemen would always be surrogate fathers to the neighborhood kids. They'd sit out on their chairs and you'd come by on your roller skates. They had the first television set in the community. So they would let us come into their kitchen. They'd have big tables like this [the one that we are seated at in the library] for their eating tables, and the television was at one end of the room; and they would let us come in as kids and we could watch television there. They'd fix our skates, fix our bikes, and kind of [watch] over the community.... [The firemen would look in on my mother.]

bc: The firehouse scene that you describe was important to the community on Troy Hill and to my neighbor in just the way that you describe it in Beechview.

What did you do when you came back from Santa Fe?

LHL: I did a lot of volunteer work and that's what I do now—volunteer work.

bc: What kind of volunteer work do you do?

LHL: The one that takes most of my time is the Carpatho-Rusyn Society. I'm their Treasurer. [We have a membership of about 1200. That's throughout the United States.]

bc: [I mention the band "Air Guitar Magazine" that has Carpatho-Rusyn musical roots as part of its mix. They've played at the Andy Warhol Museum. Think of Carpatho-Rusyn melodies combined with Rock 'n' Roll and abstract Jazz.] Were you at the Museum when they dedicated the Warhol stamp?

LHL: I was not there that day, but the Society was represented there.

[The Society] has bought a building and we're trying to become tax-exempt. The building is in Munhall. The reason we bought the building is because it was the first Carpatho-Rusyn Cathedral in the United States of America. We bought it three, four years ago.... Originally it was St. John's Cathedral, 10th and Dickson St. We got a plaque through Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation.

What I really am interested in is Genealogy. I want to look through my Dad's letters. I want to read my mother's letters. I want to go through the photographs. (I have old photographs that I need to have preserved.) That's what I really want to try and do.

bc: You may want to speak with our Preservation person at the Library about what's involved in that.

LHL: I also found out that my great grandfather was an Orthodox priest in Duquesne, [PA]. I stumbled on some information: I just found that out a few months ago. There's some centennial book of a church in Duquesne that was written up and I have a copy of it—Saint Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church Centennial Commemorative. And there was a write-up in there:

Father John H. was conducting Service holding an umbrella because the roof was leaking. The parishioners asked him to come back and be the priest there [and he said], "I'm not coming back here!" [LHL laughs.]

[We discuss the importance of preserving records, documents and people's memories—especially as the ethnic make-up of Pittsburgh changes.]

bc: How has Pittsburgh changed in your lifetime?

LHL: Cleaner. I remember when the snow was black on top. I remember traveling out to the slag heap in the South Hills. We used to go out and watch [the slag heap burn].

bc: Someone else that I interviewed also said that that was the thing to do—to go out and watch the slag heap burn.

LHL: The other thing to do in high school was to go to the morgue.

bc: I've heard this mentioned before. This was like a prom activity....

LHL: No, we did it after a day at high school: you're finished high school at three, four o'clock in the afternoon, 3:30.... You still had time on your bus pass; you'd go Downtown. Let's go to the morgue! Then we'd get on the trolley and go home.

What I'm hoping is that we don't get overcrowded with gobbling up all this green space—building on the hillsides.... That's what I'm hoping is not going to happen. The Hays woods—it would be dreadful if the Hays woods got "decapitated" and

have that racetrack put in. The Carrie Furnace site—there's a plan to fill it with structures. And I'm part of a trail group that really wants to make sure that we get a trail to go through there.

The trail will hopefully create a continuous, interconnecting greenway wildlife corridor along our rivers. I'm sorry we lost the steel industry and all the wealth it generated: looking forward, I hope we can get back our economic wealth by leveraging our universities to attract entrepreneurs that develop the next Silicon Valley or Route 128 in Boston.