

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
*Interview with*  
**Helen Kovach-Tarakanov**

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: February 12, 1998

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick



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**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV**

**Date of Birth: December 28, 1919**

**EDUCATION**

Law Diploma	University of Belgrade	1941
Ph.D., Political Science, Public Administration	Elizabeth University, Pecs, Hungary	1943
Teacher Certificate	Karlov University, Czechoslovakia	1947
M.S.W.	Wayne State University	1959

**OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

9-1-59	Instructor in Russian
7-1-61	Assistant Professor of Russian
7-1-65	Associate Professor of Russian with Tenure
7-1-71	Professor of Russian
8-14-86	Retired Professor Emerita of Russian

*Current as of February 17, 1997*



**Photograph of Helen Kovach-Tarakanov**

February 12, 1997

Photographer: Rick Smith  
Oakland University Communications and Marketing



Helen Kovach\*  
*Assistant Professor of Russian*

**Photograph of Helen Kovach-Tarakanov**

MSUO Yearbook 1963

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV**  
**February 12, 1997**

[Editor's note: In order to improve the accuracy and clarity of this transcript text, a number of editorial changes from the original spoken narrative were made , including many changes suggested by the interviewee.]

HARVEY BURDICK: Today's interview is one in a series being conducted for the Oakland University Chronicles project. The goal of the project to collect oral histories dealing with the origins and the early years of Oakland University. The project is supported by a grant from the Oakland University Foundation. Today is February the 12th, 1997, and we are in Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University. My name is Harvey Burdick and I'm a professor of psychology, and I've been here since 1962.

Our guest today is Helen Kovach-Tarakanov. Helen came to MSU-Oakland in 1959 as an instructor in Russian. She was later promoted to assistant, associate, and then in 1971 was made a full professor in the Department of Modern Languages. In 1986, Professor Kovach-Tarakanov retired, but missed teaching so much, she returned in the capacity of a special lecturer to teach Russian courses as no one else could. I want to welcome you, Helen, and thank you for coming and being our guest today.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Thank you. I'm always glad to be at Oakland.

HARVEY BURDICK: Helen, I know you were born in Russia and you received a law degree in 1941. You then earned a Ph.D. in political science in 1943, and then later a teaching certificate in 1947. And during that whole period during the war and after the war you had many, many harrowing experiences. But you finally escaped to West Germany and ended up in a displaced persons camp.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, with my son who was three.

HARVEY BURDICK: Your son was three years old at the time and you were carrying him around wherever you were going and that was not easy. You applied to come to the United States, but were told there was a six-year wait because of a quota. And instead of just waiting, you applied to many places, one of which was Canada, and they did accept you, and you came to Canada.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes. You forget just to mention one thing. I had a child, but my husband was arrested by Communists and taken to Siberia. That's why I was alone with my child. I did not divorce him, I just lost him.

HARVEY BURDICK: You lost your husband – was it in 1948?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes 1948 in Czechoslovakia he was arrested by Communists and taken to a concentration camp, and then finally he was taken to the Soviet Union, to Siberia, where he spent nine and a half years.

HARVEY BURDICK: You finally ended up coming to Canada in 1950. Could you tell us what happened after you came to Canada, and then how you ended up coming to the United States?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: [From the displaced persons camp] I tried to go to any other country, but nobody wanted to take me because although I was a young and strong woman, also I had a child. Therefore, they were not exactly eager to take me because they didn't know where to put the child if I worked someplace. So I was in so many interviews, and finally I went to interview for Canada, they were taking farm workers. Certainly I lied about everything to the consul, because they asked if I ever worked on a farm and I said, "Yes," but I had never worked on a farm – maybe in our garden at home.

So they accepted me. They said that a child can also be on a farm; my child was already four. So we went to Guelph. We stayed on this farm not very long, only about a month or something. Certainly the people, who were from Denmark, they knew very soon that I was not a farm worker. They had 53 cows and I had to milk the cows and in my interview, I said I knew how to milk cows. I had never even approached any cows! So when I had to milk the cows I was so afraid of the cows that it was really pathetic. I had to take my son with

me—he would come with me, and then I was not so afraid. He was just walking around and was not afraid of the cows. Those cows knew very well that I was afraid of them, because when I was milking them with the electric milker and then later, I had to do it with my hands—some of them, they would just kick the bucket, and the whole bucket of milk would be gone.

Now, the people there were extremely nice, because I had signed the contract that I would be there a year. They said they would not try to keep me for a year. Maybe they wanted to get rid of me, I don't know.

Anyhow, one priest—he turned out to be an Eastern Orthodox priest—to whom I wrote, "I want to go to Toronto"—he came from Akron and he took me to Windsor. He was absolutely sure that he would be able to get me to the United States, but it didn't work out, because I had no visa and the waiting list was very long. So finally he dropped me off in Windsor and he went to unemployment with me, and they couldn't find any other job than just a maid. So I worked as a maid there for two or three months, I forgot, but it was not exactly what I liked to do—it was just work.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was a job.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, but you know, they paid me \$13.00 a week. But it was okay, I at least had food for me and for George. Then I tried to contact our Eastern Orthodox church in Windsor, and the priest got me away from there and found me a job in a factory where they made sausages. So I was working in this factory, and then the factory went on some kind of wild strike, and I lost the job because they wanted the union and there was no union. I really don't know, now, how it was. So after that I worked at all kinds of work. I was making televisions; I cleaned some movies at night because it was very difficult, George was too small to go to kindergarten.

HARVEY BURDICK: George is your son, of course.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: George is my son, and it was very difficult. Probably they told me that I should leave the child [at home], and I had to leave him alone when I worked at daytime. I would take him to the school and leave him there, and then he would come home and stay and wait for me, just sitting



on the steps of the house. But at that time, I had no other choice. So then I worked at night cleaning theaters. I mean, I did everything. One thing I did very badly: I was a very bad waitress.

HARVEY BURDICK: You also ended up in a factory as a punch press operator?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: It impresses you! I went to the factory, and I applied because the factory paid far better than any other place. I wanted someplace to work with a union, because with no union they paid you hardly anything – 68 cents, and I wanted at least \$1.00 an hour. When I started to work in Motor Lamps I had, I believe, a dollar five when I started, something like that. I was working, and learned how to work a punch press. So later when I came here [to the US], in my passport was written "punch press operator."

HARVEY BURDICK: For all times.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I couldn't find any job. I didn't know English and I don't know English well even now. I was going to night school, but the night schools there were not very good because some students had absolutely no education, and other people had a university education. We all learned English together, and a majority of the students didn't know what an adjective is, what past tense is. It was very difficult, but I tried to learn as much as I could. I met one person whom I knew from the [displaced persons] camp, and I said, "Misha, how is this English, you go to school and how is it?" He said, "You know, English is not difficult, but to write it is very difficult. You write 'cow' and pronounce 'tractor.'" Because it's a completely different pronunciation than what you write.

HARVEY BURDICK: Obviously you did learn to speak.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Listen, I speak five other languages. It is not so bad, except now I try to learn Italian and I cannot learn anymore. I forget, I forget. It is really the age, but everything that is connected with French, I can remember in Italian, but everything that is not, I just forget.

HARVEY BURDICK: Let's just review. You come in 1950. You end up in Windsor, you're doing all these things, many different jobs almost to survive –

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Not almost – just to survive.

HARVEY BURDICK: – and to keep you and your son alive. And then something happens in 1956.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: [My number] came up in the quota.

HARVEY BURDICK: The quota. You checked in with the embassy –

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, and the American Embassy informed me if I wanted to go to the US, I could. I didn't know whether to go or not, because I had nothing, I didn't know anybody. That's why I came to Detroit, because some people said go to New York, but at least Detroit was somehow closer to Windsor.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's right across the river.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: So it was not so difficult to move. So I came to Detroit. First I came over and I went to the International Institute before I moved my son and my mother. (My mother in the meantime came [from Austria], and she helped me a lot with George because otherwise I don't know what I would have done.)

So when I came, I went to the International Institute on Kirby Street in Detroit. They mostly help immigrants to adjust to this country, or to find jobs, or to learn English, take classes. (I attended their classes also.) They placed me, not as a cashier, but just working for a doctor in the office, because they had all kinds of nationalities coming to this doctor. There were Serbs or Czechs [and I was able to speak to them].

HARVEY BURDICK: That was your first job here, to work with a doctor?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, with doctors, Dr. Corbei and Dr. McQuigan, and it was in the Fisher Building. Then the International Institute wanted to know how well I worked, and so I went there and I spoke to Miss Day, who was head of the International Institute case work. She said, "You would be very good for us, if you would study social work and become a social worker, then we can hire you with full pay and so on." So I said, "Why not? I will."

HARVEY BURDICK: And so you went to Wayne [State University's] school for social work?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: The International Institute hired me and I worked from '57 to '59, two years I worked there.

HARVEY BURDICK: And also went to school?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: And went to school, yes, certainly, in the evening. At that time I was not afraid to stand on the corner of Woodward and Kirby and wait for a bus, because I had no car. I was not afraid to return from Wayne classes—some of them were ending at ten o'clock in the evening—and I would walk without any fear at all.

HARVEY BURDICK: But in 1959, in the spring, a call comes.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, I was working at the International Institute, there was a call, and they gave it to me because I was in charge of [clients who spoke the] Russian language. It was from Mr. Varner, Woody Varner. He wanted to know if the International Institute—because we had the whole list of all kinds of people who came from foreign countries and looked for jobs—if we knew anybody who was professor of Russian someplace and who was a native speaker, and would be willing to start at a new university.

I was not thinking about myself at all. Not at all. I was so involved in the social work, in this case work, and finishing [my classes and my internship], that it never even crossed my mind that I could be a teacher or professor at Oakland. So he said, "Could you come to Lansing—I will send my chauffeur," and I was very impressed. He would send the chauffeur, and the chauffeur

would take me to Lansing, and I would talk there, because there would be also Professor Poltoratski who is a professor at Lansing. He would speak to me in Russian—but it was not about me, but to speak about other possibilities.

HARVEY BURDICK: So somebody came—

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Moore came: Mr. Moore, Dick Moore. He was very handsome and the car was very beautiful—it was really a beautiful car. So everybody at the International Institute was asking, "Who is that, is that your boy friend?" "No, it's not," I said. Anyhow, he took me to Lansing and I had an interview with Woody Varner. I was telling him about possible candidates, and, as I like to speak, I talked about all that I did [in my life].

I forgot to tell you that when I was a graduate student in Prague at Karlov University, they had such a lack of Russian teachers there, and all at once they had to produce a number of Russian teachers for high schools and public schools. So I taught at the university there. I taught Russian to those Czechs who had to teach high school, and I taught them for almost two years. Afterwards when [I graduated], I went with my husband from Prague to Teplitse, and there I taught in a junior college. Then later when I came to Canada, nobody wanted any kind of Russian teachers. And here I was telling all this to Varner.

So we parted, I said, "That's all." [In the interview] I wrote down everything he wanted. I also spoke to Mr. Poltoratski, who was the professor of Russian language in Lansing, and I was telling him what kind of books I used in Czechoslovakia, and what we used in Karlov University. But you see, it's completely different to teach a Czech the Russian language, because Czechs have a Slavic background. Many words are the same in Russian.

HARVEY BURDICK: Cognates are the same.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Cognates are the same. So you say in Russian "stol" and they will say "sto" [in Czech], or they will say something else and it's very similar. But sometimes it is not so easy, because some words in Czech mean one thing and in Russian something different.

Like in Russian—it is a little thing I will tell you—in Russian "chostvy" means stale bread and in Czech "cherstvy" means fresh. When I was in Prague, I went to buy bread, and she said to me, "Oh, mame cherstvy housky" — that we have fresh buns. And I said, "What? Why would I take stale bread from you?" Again she said, "Mame cherstvy housky," and so I didn't buy anything. I went back and said to my husband, "You know these Czechs are terrible. They even have enough guts that they offer me yesterday's bread." He laughed and said, "No, it means fresh" — and in Russian, it means completely stale bread.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to get back to your conversation with Woody Varner at MSU. You were talking to him about these various people you were suggesting, and then you returned?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I returned home, and I was concerned about Lafayette Clinic where I wanted to work and to be a social worker, when a telephone call came again to the International Institute, directly to me. This was Mr. Varner, and he said to me, "Helen" — no, he said, "Mrs. Kovach, I want to ask you something. Would you consider coming to teach at our university?"

And I said, "I don't know. Listen, I have been studying social work here for two years. It was so difficult for me. Also, I don't know how to teach American students, I really don't know. I don't know how to approach them, because they have completely different backgrounds, because I have to start from absolutely nothing, because they don't have any cognates and language studies, and so on." So he said, "Why don't you come out and see us at MSUO?" And again Mr. Moore came and took me and we came here to Oakland and it was only two buildings.

HARVEY BURDICK: And that was when, in the summer of '59?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Summer of '59, yes. I believe it was maybe July, maybe June. It was so beautiful here, it was such a beautiful day, and those fields and flowers, and in comparison to Hamtramck where I lived — you know, it was not exactly the best part of Detroit, it was mostly the Polish part. Anyhow, I said, "Oh, it's so beautiful!"

Again, he asked me if I wanted to start. "How much do you make there?" I said, "I make like \$4,500 a year." He said, "We will give you 5,000, would you come? And because I have an intuition," he said, "I believe you would be a good teacher." He said, "After a year or two, we will evaluate you, and you could really lose your job." And I felt I could always then go and become a social worker again.

I came home, my mother was then already with me, and I said to Mother, "I don't know if I want to go there, because I don't know how to teach those students and how to approach them, and here I am already involved in this social work." She said, "[Try Oakland], instead of maybe going to Lafayette Clinic or to some kind of geriatric center" – at that time I felt that all the geriatrics was awful, all those old people. So I decided to come, and I came to MSUO again, and then I accepted the job. I had the interview with Varner.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did Woody Varner tell you about the university, what it was trying to be and trying to do, and things like that?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, yes. He told me that they were trying to be the Harvard of Michigan.

HARVEY BURDICK: He told you that?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes. He said, not exactly Harvard, but he wanted to be a different university. He wanted mostly liberal arts, and he wanted the students – because they were mostly students whose parents never attended a university – he wanted us to teach them, not only about just the language, but culture and so on. And it was wonderful, because it was an obligatory two years of language.

HARVEY BURDICK: And it made sense to you, you liked that, right?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely.

HARVEY BURDICK: You had a chance really to work with them?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Now, it is absurd. [Now, students need only] one semester. What can you do with one semester? I mean, some continue, but sometimes you start with a class of 20 the first semester, and then second semester it's only seven or something like that, because now they only need one semester of a language requirement, and this is it.

HARVEY BURDICK: Helen, when you finally came to Oakland, of course you moved up from Hamtramck and you ended up in Pontiac, I believe. And you were still not well-heeled, right, you still didn't have a car?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I didn't have a car, no.

HARVEY BURDICK: So how did you come to the campus?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I talked to Varner in the very beginning. When he hired me I said, "I don't know how I will get there. I don't have a car and I have no money for a car." He said, "My secretary Nadji [White] will pick you up in the morning before eight o'clock, and then returning, you can return with the bus, because they will have buses." So I did it, but it was not exactly the best, because Nadji was coming sometimes exactly ten minutes to eight, and sometimes at eight, so I was standing there on Saginaw, across from St. Joseph Hospital. She would pick me up, and I had classes at eight o'clock, and they had to start at eight o'clock, and here I was always trembling she would not come on time.

HARVEY BURDICK: But there were buses that were going back and forth and between Pontiac, the campus, and Rochester?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, but somehow in the morning it was not very convenient for me to catch the bus. I don't even remember how it was with buses back then. Sometimes I returned with some professors. So after a year and a half I got an old car. It was an old '53 Pontiac, but it was hard for me to learn how to drive, I didn't know how to drive. I knew how to turn always to the right, but to the left it was for me very difficult. When I picked up my son

once from camp and I was taking him home, he said, "Why do you go so far around?" And I said, "I just don't know how to turn left."

HARVEY BURDICK: You just didn't like the whole left turning, did you?

Now, I'm going to ask you a hard question. You've been around a long time. As I said, you've knocked around Europe, you really suffered through the war and afterwards, so when you finally came to Oakland, you weren't a kid anymore.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: No, I wasn't, I was one of the oldest teachers. The oldest were Varner, Matthews, Mrs. White, and who else? I believe that I was fifth or sixth, I was 39 years old.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were 39 and you were an older person at that time?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes. At that time, I felt that 39 is almost good enough for a grave.

HARVEY BURDICK: But compared to your fellow faculty, you were just a little older.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I was, yes, because here was Paul Tomboulion who was really very young, he was 24. I felt he was 18.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's right, he's famous for being young, I know.

Well, you come to Oakland and now you come to a meeting with the faculty, right?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, it was very difficult. First of all, it's a completely different attitude in Russia, or even Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, between professors because, first of all, nobody calls another by his or her first name. For me it was somehow very [different]—except [Francis] Tafoya, who was head of our department, he always called me Mrs. Kovach. He never called me Helen, and he was somehow very formal.



HARVEY BURDICK: Everybody else was on a first-name basis?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Oh, yes. And I couldn't, I couldn't even if I wanted to do it—I couldn't say to Varner, instead of "Mr. Varner," just say to him "Woody"—I just couldn't.

HARVEY BURDICK: But did Woody want you to call him by his first name?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, he wanted that. So many times I was talking to him, and I said to him, "Mr. Varner," and he said, "Helen, why do you call me Mr. Varner?" I said, "I don't know how to call you otherwise," and he said, "Woody." And I said, "I just cannot." He said "Repeat—Woody, Woody, Woody—repeat. Maybe you will learn how to say it."

And I don't know if I was saying to him "Woody" even later. It was very difficult for me. (Now, I have learned, you know.) Even to Simmons when he came by, I always said "Mr. Simmons" instead of "Bob." It was difficult, because it's a completely different [habit here and in Europe].

HARVEY BURDICK: It was a different kind of cultural experience coming to an American university.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely. I was so upset when the garage man, when I gave him my car, he called me Helen. I said to him, "Listen, I did not work with you in the fields, as we say in Russia, to call me Helen. Why do you call me Helen?"

HARVEY BURDICK: So this is an American thing?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely. Now I feel it's very good.

HARVEY BURDICK: You like it; you're getting accustomed to it?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: The first faculty meeting, I think you had mentioned something about that?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, we had the first faculty meeting, and it was very formal, everybody was dressed up, and I remember [Jim] McKay was dressed up very well. He was tall, and he had also a kind of baby face.

We all sat at this table and Mrs. [Nadine] Popluiko, who was also teaching Russian with me – she became my friend later – she had seen Paul Tombouljian sitting there too. And she said, "What is this young man doing here, I don't understand, with all those professors?" And I said, "I don't know." She said, "I don't understand. I don't understand why he came here when it is the Senate meeting of professors." (Everybody was in the Senate.) I said, "Maybe he's a representative from the students." I never thought that he could be a professor, because he was 24, I believe, at that time, and he looked like 18. And so I would never have thought that he was a professor.

And then I told you about [Bill] Hammerle. Maybe it's not nice to say, now he's dead, but he was not always exactly dressed very well. He was late, we were sitting at this table and here was sitting Varner, and [Hammerle] opens the door and he comes in. I don't know – then in '59 did they wear blue jeans or not? I don't remember.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, it was early for blue jeans for professors.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Maybe blue jeans or some kind of bad pants, I don't know. And he was in tennis shoes – very old tennis shoes – and some kind of cowboy shirt, and certainly without any tie. Mrs. Popluiko told me, "Look, what does this janitor want to do here? I don't understand why Varner doesn't tell him that he has to leave. We have an important meeting." I said, "I don't know. Varner sees – he's not blind, he can see him." And now here this janitor comes and sits down and puts his feet on the table. I just couldn't believe it, because, you know, this was absolutely –

HARVEY BURDICK: No professor in Europe would ever do such a thing.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: No professor, nobody would ever put feet on the table, it was impossible.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you've come to Oakland University and American culture, right? You've seen a faculty person dressed in a way you think janitors are dressed.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, but later on when it was the Hippie movement, half the professors looked like that.

HARVEY BURDICK: Everybody sort of moved into those [clothes].

Tell us about the department a little bit, how big was the department when you came here?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Oh, in the department was also Tafoya who was head of the department. He said that he's Spanish, but I believe he was Mexican or something—I don't know.

HARVEY BURDICK: I think he was from the Caribbean.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: And there was Mrs. Popluiko (Nadine), myself, and Madame [Helene] Desparmet. Because they couldn't find a professor of French, Madame Desparmet was teaching French, and she was the wife of a French consul. Several times she gave parties at the consulate and invited either everybody—because at that time we were only 24 professors, so it was easy—or invited just the language department, it was only French and Russian.

HARVEY BURDICK: Just French and Russian.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: So we had 400 students, and everybody had to take languages. You know, we never had so many Russian students in our life as then!

HARVEY BURDICK: How many sections were you teaching when you first came?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I was always teaching three sections. Three sections, five times a week.

HARVEY BURDICK: And how many students in a section, approximately?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Approximately 25, 20, something like that – 30, maybe. [There were more students] in French. More students studied French than Russian because – as even now – people are scared of Russian language, that it's so difficult – but is not true at all.

HARVEY BURDICK: You must have been pretty impressed with the fact that here at Oakland University two languages were being taught, one being French, which was common, and the other Russian.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, it was very interesting, it was excellent. I loved it, you know. But I had to work very hard, because we had at that time a small lab, we had only two tape recorders in the whole lab. And then I used the book that was used in Lansing, and I didn't like it very much. So I wrote lots of additional exercises and I also – because we had no language tapes – I made all those tapes myself. I read the whole book on those tapes so that they could listen to my reading. They would come to the language laboratory, just one room, and they would sit around the tape recorder and listen to these tapes.

HARVEY BURDICK: And the language lab in the department, in what building was that?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: The language lab was later in South Foundation. I believe [Pat] McNeil was there – or not, I don't remember who was the first to start.

HARVEY BURDICK: I think Pat may have come a little later.

So, your offices were also in South Foundation, or did you end up in North Foundation?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: No, no, we were in North Foundation. And then second year, we were transferred to South Foundation. Mrs. Popluiko, she taught Russian and French, because she was able to teach both languages. It was so much different than teaching language in Czechoslovakia or what I taught in Czechoslovakia; it was completely different.

HARVEY BURDICK: And your relationships with the students probably were quite different?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely, yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: Could you make that comparison for us, Helen?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: What I did was: the first day when they came in, I told them exact rules. I do not accept coming late, they had to prepare their homework each time, and if they couldn't, they had to tell me before class why they couldn't. They could not be absent. If they were absent, they had to explain to me why they were absent, and I didn't want to hear three times a week that their grandmother was dying or something like this – because all the time they said either their grandfather was in the hospital, or their grandmother died and they couldn't come.

I was telling them that they had to prepare their homework, give me the homework, and the next day they would receive this homework back. Now, I would not correct the homework. I would just underline the mistakes, and they would have to correct it. So they had to write on every second line, and they had to write the corrections above.

HARVEY BURDICK: So were you a pretty tough task master, right? And if they were going to learn Russian, you really were going to make sure they worked hard.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Now I think that I was pretty silly – I was not afraid that I would lose the job – but I always said, "If you don't want to learn the language, here we are on the first day, so why don't you transfer to something else?" This is it, because if you cannot see yourself preparing every day your homework, then [drop the class]. You know, in Russia [in universities] they don't prepare their homework every day; this is more or less like in high school.

First of all, it was very difficult to teach them Russian because they just didn't know anything similar, nothing similar to the Russian language. I remember something very interesting – I never thought it would be like this: all the students who were of Slavic background, first semester they were okay, they were better than the others; second semester they were worse; and third semester they were either out or very bad students. The best of my students were Americans who never had any Russian or any Slavic connection. You see, if a student was Czech, he could believe that "cherstvy" is fresh!

If they came of Slavic background, it was very easy for them in the first, say, two or three or four lessons, but then it was more difficult. If they got used to not studying because it was easy, then they could not catch up anymore. I was explaining to them all the time: this is not psychology or history. Say, if it's history, you can neglect to study for a week or so, then you can sit down and study over your weekend, and if you have a good memory, you will remember all that you studied, but with language you cannot do this.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm sure that's true, and you insisted upon it, that they were going to learn. But you were not only tough, you became very much involved with the students, weren't you, outside of class?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, I insisted they come to my office if they had difficulties. I would sit there and explain to them and work with them. If they wanted to work, I would always help.

Then, maybe because I studied social work, maybe it was my background of social work, I got involved – at that time, it was somehow very difficult. The kids very often would tell me, "I hate my parents." I don't know why it was at that time they started to be rebellious against the family, and they would come and talk to me. Maybe it was because I was a foreigner and I didn't know how it

is in America, what is the relationship with the parents. Maybe that is why they were coming. Very often they came to speak to me about their problems – problems with their girlfriends, problems with their parents, problems which had nothing to do with Russian. And I always was willing to listen to them.

But they said that I always had an iron hand. This is one thing, they had to obey. And you know, it was very good because the jump between high school and university, I believe, it's quite a bit. They had to study here in the university far more than in high school.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, you were seen as someone with an iron fist, weren't you, but you were also someone very warm.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I was always very warm, but as they said in [the critique of professors] – you can read it, just one sentence about me.

HARVEY BURDICK: Let's see. [Reads.] "Mrs. Kovach: Iron will, combined with her warm heart, has endeared her to the members of the Slavic Ensemble." Maybe you could tell us a little bit about the Slavic Ensemble.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: When I started to teach Russian, I was thinking lots about what to do, how to involve them into this Russian language. So I decided that I would make a Russian club. We decided to have a Russian club, and we would meet everybody. Nobody knew Russian at all, they were only in the first year. We would meet, say, every Wednesday. We met after classes or when they could. At that time, in the evening they had no classes. So we would meet for one hour and have coffee if we could, or I would bake something and bring it, and we spoke Russian.

Now, in Russia, they believe that it's very good to learn poetry, because when you learn poetry – people here don't learn poetry, I believe, in high school – anyhow, they learn poetry [in Russia] and it lets you learn the language that is [spoken]. So we learned some poetry, and we tried to speak as much as we could.

Then we had every year – in '60 they started – the university started to have a fine arts festival. So the French class would put on a play, the German class would put on something else. Now, I felt that to put on a play it would be

absurd because nobody understands Russian. And to, say, invite high school students, what would they understand? Nothing. If you put on a play in French, you can invite students of French from high school, and they maybe will understand something.

So I decided we would dance, because Russians have Russian-type dances. So first it was just a 15-minute dance, and they were very, very good. We had lots of applause. So the French and Germans were in some way upset. Even the Spanish class tried to dance also. And then I had no material, no money, so I took out my old curtains, and out of my old curtains we made some Russian dresses. This was a beginning, and then we started to have rehearsals.

Now, to be clear, I don't know how to sing, I don't know how to dance. I invited some Russian friends, who knew how to dance and who knew how to sing, and they were teaching the students [free of charge], and it was amazing how eager they were to learn it.

First it was the Russian club, and then later on we danced Ukrainian dances, and then I decided to call it Slavic Folk Ensemble. The first outside concert was in Flint, at a Russian Orthodox church in Flint. Then somebody else had seen us in this Flint performance, and they invited us to go to Michigan City, not far from Chicago. So we went there to perform, and like this we started to perform around here.

Then I said, "Why should they be only from Russian classes, they can be from any place." You know, they can be engineers and so on. We had all kinds of flyers and invited everybody. Every year we had a big performance here in the recital hall [and made some money]. Before that I went with a student who was dressed in Russian or Ukrainian dress, and I sold tickets by force to all of [the professors]. People said, "Oh, again, is it a year already passed that you're coming again?" They were very good performers, and I believe their performances were excellent.

Then later on in '76 was the first time I made a contact with somebody who was called a [Friendship] Ambassador. I met with them and then we had contact with Poland, and so we went to Poland [to perform for three weeks]. Then in '83, we went to Russia and Rumania. Then in '87, we went to Yugoslavia, to Bulgaria, and Istanbul. Then we went one more time, to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Eastern Germany. It was in '89.



Then in '90, this was the last trip to Europe – we went to Russia only, and went to several cities in Russia. This was very, very nice. You know, the kids paid for their trip, but nobody could pay everything. So I insisted, and Varner gave me some money, and then later also [Donald] O'Dowd gave me money. Then I was asking all the people from the Russian community to donate something, and also here in the community of Rochester.

HARVEY BURDICK: Does the Ensemble still exist?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Slavic Ensemble, no, unfortunately not. I left in '86, [but] I returned in '87 – which is ten years now that I continued to teach here – and we continued [the Ensemble] until 1990. Then I felt that it was difficult to recruit students – even though I was giving out all kinds of fliers at the beginning of classes, and now the university has evening classes.

At that time [when the Ensemble was started], there were no evening classes at all. So on Tuesdays and Thursdays twice a week for two hours we had rehearsals at night, and every time I went to the rehearsal. So it was like another job, but I just loved it.

HARVEY BURDICK: You know, Helen, I remember when we were chatting the other day about your relationships with students, not only were you sure that they did their work, but also I think you were concerned about their appearances. Sometimes students came in and you didn't like the way they presented themselves.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, that's right. I told them, I really told them. Maybe some of them felt I'm too much like their mother.

HARVEY BURDICK: Mama Kovach – weren't you known as that?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: They called me Mama Kovach always.

But you know, when they started to come into class, dressed I don't know how, I did tell them this. Certainly I could call a girl and say to her, "Listen, you're a nice looking girl, how can you walk around in this terrible sweater and with dirty [clothes]?" They were all dirty, they were just not clean even. I don't

know: was it on purpose, or what, and the hair was oily and so on? But I don't know if I changed anybody or not.

HARVEY BURDICK: But they knew, when they came to your class, you were going to notice if they were properly dressed?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely. Varner loved the story about this barefoot boy. You know once, it was in the '60s sometime, a barefoot student came—completely bare feet. So he came and kept open the shirt down to his navel, and he was sitting in the first row.

After class, I told him, "What is your name?" He said his name. I said, "You know what, you will go to the office and drop this class." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because when I signed the contract, I never signed a contract that said I have to look at some kind of dirty feet, and I will not accept any dirty feet in my class." So, he said he could go to English class with bare feet and everything was fine. I said, "Doesn't matter to me. You can go wherever you want, but not here." He said, "How about if I don't have shoes?" I said, "We will take up a collection. Now, [maybe there are] 20 people, [everybody will give a dime], we will have \$2.00 and we will go now after this class to the Salvation Army, and I will buy you for \$2.00 a pair of shoes and you will have them."

Second I said, "Button up your shirt." And he said, "Why should I?" He had such a hairy chest, and I said, "I don't want to be reminded that we come from apes. So, please button up." So he did. Later, after this, I felt that [maybe] he would never come back to class. But he was a very good student. I liked him very much. He [later] had shoes without socks, but anyhow, he was an excellent student, and we were very good friends.

HARVEY BURDICK: You developed a lot of friendships with students, didn't you?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes. You see, I had lots of students, not only my majors. Even now I have students whom I see very often, who call me, send me always Christmas cards and so on, and from all kinds of places. Just like Carol Reamer, she graduated in '64, and others graduated in '80 or whatever, and I had lots of them with very good relationships.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you still keep in contact with them.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely. I went to Washington this summer and I have seen five of my former students; they graduated '71, '78, '82, something like this. I have seen all the children and husbands and so on—because I liked them very much, and they knew that I liked them.

You see, the problem was this: up until '75 I have had my son [at home], but [after that] I really didn't have family, because my first husband was arrested, taken to the Soviet Union. So Oakland University became my family, and I liked Oakland very much. Somehow I believe this was the best thing that could happen to me.

HARVEY BURDICK: Helen, we were talking about your relationship with the students, and I remember you were talking about their names. Could you tell us about that?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, when the students came in the first year, I said to them, "You know, I really don't know very well American names. I forget them and sometimes I even don't know if it's a male or female name. So we will try to give you Russian names. If you are, say, Carol, I can give you the Russian name Katya if you want to start with the same letter. If you want to start, I will write you a whole big list and I will give it to you, and you choose the names." And they just loved it. They just loved to change their names. So we had Katya and Igor and [Tanya] and whatever, and all of them had Russian names.

Even later I just remembered them by their first names, by their Russian names only. Very often I didn't remember their last names either, because it was complicated. So when they wrote me a letter and asked me to write some kind of letter of recommendation, and didn't write their Russian names, it was very difficult for me to write the recommendation. I would not remember who is the man, because maybe he was [really] Simon or whatever his name was, and he wanted to be Radion [in Russian], or he wanted to be something else.

They loved to take their Russian names from some novels they read, from *War and Peace*, or [Anna Karenina], or from *Crime and Punishment*.

They could take any Russian name. Even now, you know, when I meet somebody, they ask me, "Did you have any news from Katya?" I ask, "Which Katya?" "The Katya that was in our class." Or Nadia: her name was Tina and we called her Nadia, and everybody knows her as Nadia even now.

Every year when we finished class – at that time I had a big basement, and we had a big party. They would come first beforehand. On Saturday we had a party, so they would come downstairs and they would decorate the basement, and we prepared food. I prepared lots of food and they prepared something, or their mother prepared it. I said that all their parents are invited, but somehow the parents never came. I believe the kids never invited them, so they didn't know it.

They had beautiful parties, and they danced, and they chatted. It was so [friendly] – there were third year, and first year, and fourth year, and they got together and they loved it. And my mother – who was at that time 70, and I felt that she was extremely old, but now I feel that she was young – she also came sometimes to those parties and also was very happy with them. Everybody loved these parties.

HARVEY BURDICK: I was going to ask, and you've already answered part of it: What were some of your good memories of Oakland?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I believe, everything. Somehow, maybe because I was not so involved in all kinds of [politics].

In 1968, I believe, I had nodules on my vocal cords. They took it off – it was not malignant – and they said that I shouldn't talk too much. So I said to – who was head of [the department], I believe Simmons – I told him I cannot participate in any kind of meetings or be on committees, at least if he wants me to teach. I mean, Simmons was very nice. They arranged for my teaching, so Pat McNeil put in some kind of microphone so that I could speak, because I spoke in a whisper mostly.

So that's why I never had any kind of bad relationship with my colleagues, never had any kind of feeling upset about somebody. I always heard afterwards that this or that happened.

HARVEY BURDICK: You didn't get into all the political stuff?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: No, I was never involved in the political [issues] at the university. And I believe maybe that's why people mostly liked me, I don't know.

HARVEY BURDICK: It seems to me that teaching was your career. This was all your energy.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Absolutely. I spent so much time preparing for teaching, and I wanted so badly [to help] them to speak Russian, to learn Russian, to like Russian culture.

In Vermont, they have the school called Middlebury. I was sending some of my students to Middlebury. Mrs. Poltoratski, who worked there, always wrote me a note that my students are best, you know, one of the best.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, that's something to be proud of.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: If my students were second year here, she would put them in third year, because she always said they were very, very good. Most of the letters I kept, you know, that they praised my students so much. We had Mike Deller, who was one of the first graduates, he is still here [in Livonia], he's a librarian. He was there [at Middlebury], and I remember, about him she wrote that he was one of the best students in the school, because he had such a good background.

But you know, I spent lots of time—I like teaching. That's why it was not difficult work for me. Some types of people would say, "Ah, it is so difficult!" But it was not difficult for me because I just loved teaching.

HARVEY BURDICK: I know you used to teach many, many sections because there was nobody to teach the advanced levels, right? Sometimes you were teaching, what, almost six courses?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: One time I was teaching six courses, yes, because one time we had four professors, and then somehow one was retiring, the other left, and so on, and then I stayed alone. I didn't want to have

[the situation] that we would not have majors, because if we did not have [courses] then—you know it from the Senate—that you will never get them back. If they would say that we don't have majors in Russian, it would be very difficult to put back this [program].

HARVEY BURDICK: So even when you went and said, "Look, we have these majors. We need another instructor in Russian," they said, "Helen, we don't have the money."

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: They had no money, yes. Do you want to hear about [Brian] Copenhaver?

HARVEY BURDICK: Sure, tell us.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Copenhaver was very young, he was just as old as my son, and I went to him.

HARVEY BURDICK: He was dean of the school of liberal arts.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: And I went to him, and I said that I need somebody—at least one course to be taught in beginning Russian. I have one of my former students, she is here in Rochester, she's doing her doctorate in Bloomington, Indiana, at the University of Indiana. Maybe you can hire her, it is not very much—I know they pay \$1,600 for a semester or something like this—so that I can have the upper level courses. He said, "No, we don't have money." I said, "The university does not have \$1,600, I just cannot imagine this!" And he said, "No, we don't have money."

Then, because I didn't think—you know, all the other [deans] knew me very well, but here he was a very new one—and I was very angry, and I said, "Okay, if it's like this, I will quit. I will retire." And he said, "Okay." Then I felt that I could not say, "No, no, I joked."

So I just had to retire. And I felt very bad about it, because I didn't plan to retire, but it was the just spur of the moment. I said, "Then I will retire, if you don't want to give me somebody." Because of what he said: "Why do you need the third and fourth year of Russian? Nobody needs Russian so much. Chinese

is very important." I felt it was really ridiculous: Chinese, not Russian. And he said, "Why do you teach so many courses? You can have first year and second year, two classes of first year, one of second and this is it, this would be your load." (Because then we taught three courses.) I said, "But I don't want to drop third and fourth." [I loved to teach literature and advanced classes.]

HARVEY BURDICK: You were really committed to the major.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: And I told him, "I have now from the second year, about five students who want to continue, who want to have the major." And he said, "So send them to Wayne." How can they go to Wayne from here?

HARVEY BURDICK: You know, Helen, one of the characteristics of Oakland was a sense of commitment, and I think you represent that in a very significant way.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I think everybody was committed. (I don't know the new ones.)

You know, when we started Oakland—you were not here, but it doesn't matter, you came very early—we knew everybody. We knew when children were born. Now Alice [Tombouljian], when she said how old are her children, I almost fainted—then I knew how old I am, how old we are. And then for a very long time, nobody was divorcing anybody, everybody was such a very good university group. And then one professor divorced his wife, and this opened the Pandora, you know, all at once.

HARVEY BURDICK: We're coming to the end now, Helen, and I have one question, and I suspect I know the answer. You had a choice of continuing as a social worker or to come to Oakland. Are you sorry about [your decision]?

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: No, not at all. I felt I might be sorry, but I'm not. I feel that I really gave more here than I would give [in social work]. Every American can be a social worker, and maybe do a better job than I did. You know, with social work, very often I didn't understand many things in the

relationship with parents and children and so on. Even though I studied all this, it was difficult to understand many things – the way of life.

I was here from '59 to '86, so it is what, 26 years? My math is very bad.

HARVEY BURDICK: 27 years.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: Yes, and then I stayed –

HARVEY BURDICK: 37 years (my math is not so good either).

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: I was teaching up to last year. It has been just one year that I don't teach at all.

HARVEY BURDICK: So it was a good choice for you.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: It was the best thing that could happen to me, the best thing always, because I was very happy here. I never, ever said, "Why did I come to this university?" And even as I told you, I was so devoted to Oakland that when they offered me at La Jolla in California, to teach there at the university – it was in June or July, and I had to start right away – I felt it would be not ethical. When I asked Norman Susskind, he said, "Oh, Helen, you know, I would just go and do it." But I felt it would be not ethical.

I loved this place, I felt just completely at home.

HARVEY BURDICK: I think on that note maybe we could end, and thank you again, Helen, for coming. It was very nice.

HELEN KOVACH-TARAKANOV: And I was very glad that you called me, and that you asked me to speak about Oakland. I believe that really Oakland is a very good university.



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