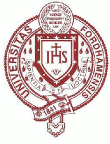

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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Kathleen Palmer
Interviewee: Robert Peterson

Part I

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Today is Tuesday August 5th 2009 and we are interviewing Robert Peterson, a lifelong resident of the Bronx. This Dr. Mark Naison and my co-interviewer is Mr. Peterson's niece, Kathy Palmer. Mr. Peterson, could you spell your name and give us your date of birth?

Robert Peterson (RP): Robert Peterson is R-o-b-e-r-t P-e-t-e-r-s-o-n. I was born in Brooklyn, December 18th 1926.

MN: Okay. Mr. Peterson, could you tell us a little bit about your family history.

RP: Ok. It started basically when my grandmother came from Sweden. Her name was Louise Bard, B-a-r-d. She went to some Lutheran Church and she went to Yonkers, New York and worked as a housekeeper – and up there, she went to a Scandinavian dance and meant my grandfather who had come here from Norway and he was a police officer up in Yonkers for eight years. They fell in love and they got married. When my Uncle Johan was born in Yonkers, I believe, from what I understand, he died when he was only six months old. Then my father was born on February 11th, 1895. Then there was another brother [inaudible]. My grandfather got ill and he decided to go back to Norway. And he went back to Norway, my father was a baby then and he went back to Norway. He was born in Yonkers, but raised in Lirvack, Norway. And then in 1916, when the United States went to war, he felt he was an American so he came back here. In World War I, they didn't put you in by your color or your degree, they did just by your name

and they put you wherever they needed you. They put him in the Navy and as a navigator. But they put him down to take care of the mules, pulling the cavalry.

MN: So he was a mule driver for the cavalry?

RP: [laughs] He had no talent so that was where he was. He got to go overseas during the war and then it ended.

MN: Right.

RP: He came back here and then in Brooklyn, along the shore there, all the ships use to come in and all the bars were along there. At the end, he was no need and he used to always go down and see the sailors that came in from Norway and talk Norwegian with them in the bars. Then, of course, he would never come home!

MN: There was a whole culture of Norwegians who worked in the boats and in the docks?

RP: Right. And those ships came into New York in Brooklyn. Anyway, my mother's sister, Aunt Delia – so I'm at the end of the story – my mother came from Ireland—West Metch. She was born on May 18th 1887. And her sister said to her, "Would you like to come to America?" And my mother said, "Yeah, sure." But she didn't want to come with her [sister]. In their next letter, there was a ticket to come to America and she didn't want to come. My mother said to her "You have to come. Your sister spent all that money for the ticket." So they arrived here in 1913 and went to 86th street –

MN: Hold on one second.

Part II

MN: Okay. We are now talking about your mother.

RP: Right. My mother came from Ireland and she was – 1913 she arrived – and she worked for a

Jewish doctor on 70th street off Broadway. When she first came here, she didn't even know what a telephone was. [Inaudible] Every time the doorbell would ring—I mean the phone would ring—she would go to the door.

MN: Did she work as a housekeeper?

RP: Yes.

MN: Was she live-in or did she have her own apartment?

RP: I don't really know that.

MN: Okay.

RP: Anyway, her sister Didi got married and wanted my mother to be her maid of honor. That's the whole deal – that's how my mother arrived here. While she was working for the doctor, she answered the door. My father then got a job as a milkman. Could you imagine? After World War II, he was delivering milk and he had a black eye. My mother thought what happened to you. His forehead turned around and it hit her—he had a black eye. She said, "Well why don't you come in and I'll give you another one." My mother had a sense of humor. Anyway, I don't know how they understood each other because he had Norwegian accent and my mother had an Irish brogue. When I went to high school—Morris High School—the teachers there – I could always tell where people come from by their accents but I don't know where you came from. I said I didn't know I had an accent. But we did – we picked up some of my mother's words and some of my father's words.

MN: They each had a different accent, your mother and father.

RP: Right.

MN: They met – this was like the 1920s?

RP: Right because my oldest brother married – born in 1920. My mother had six children within ten years and she started late because she was thirty three years old when she had my brother and forty three when she had my sister. She had five boys and she is the youngest—Kathy's mother.

MN: And they were living in Brooklyn at first when they got married.

RP: Right. In order to get my father away from going to the bars – to talk with his Norwegian friends, my sister Didi got my mother an apartment up here in the Bronx. Jackson Avenue.

MN: Right. The idea was to get your father away from the bars—the temptation.

RP: The temptation, right. But it didn't work out because they couldn't get an apartment because she had five children and she was expecting another baby. How does he get to his job, up on Jackson Avenue? –

MN: This was Jackson Avenue. What was the cross street?

RP: Right on 163rd street.

MN: Wow. I know exactly where that is.

RP: That building is gone now. Now it's the project, you know.

MN: Right.

RP: I think I showed you, with the baby?

MN: Yeah. That is the McKinley Houses.

RP: Right. Anyway, it didn't work out because my father would just take the subway back out to Brooklyn. Now we wouldn't see him for three weeks. [Laughs].

MN: He would go on a binge for three weeks?

RP: Well he would just stay there and get drunk. Of course, then he would lose his job. In the meantime, my mother had six children here. Very tough – being that he was able to do janitor

work, they had to move out. We moved to 163rd and Tinton Avenue for awhile and then from there –

MN: So you moved from Jackson Avenue to Tinton Avenue.

RP: And then we moved to 867 Elton Avenue with a cold water flat room railroad room.

MN: When you talk about coldwater flat, explain to people what a coldwater flat is?

RP: There was only one stove in the kitchen, a coal stove. There was no other heat in the other room.

MN: Okay, so you had to depend on the stove in the kitchen to heat the apartment.

RP: Right, but it really didn't because all the heat was in the kitchen. The bathroom was next to the kitchen so we always left that door open and all the other rooms became bedrooms so you were closed off. In winters, in the 1930s – remember, you see the records. We had beautiful windows from the frost from our breath.

MN: You were cold all the time?

RP: Frozen. – We didn't even have sheets and blankets at the time. It sounds terrible when you think about it now.

MN: You slept without sheets and blankets?

RP: We had coats. If we had overcoat or a short suit coat, we would put that on.

MN: Now, did more than one kid sleep in a bed?

RP: Yes! All of us. I only found out this year from my sister, Agnes – I don't remember [inaudible] with my older brothers. Where were John and Billy and Paul? I don't remember seeing them. Later on I did, with the war came. My Aunt Delia took my three older brothers.

MN: Oh your Aunt took in the three older kids.

RP: My older brothers and she had her own three children and her husband was John Collin. He had seven cousins. Anyway, that's where they were until the war time came and then they all came back because my mother had no money.

MN: Right. You grew up and there was no money around. How did your mother put food on the table?

RP: It was a depression also at the time. We, over here, used to eat wonder bread. We used to go there for day old wonder bread. Day old bread worth three cents a loaf.

Part III

MN: Okay. We are now talking about how your family managed to get food during the depression. You mentioned that there was a Wonder Bread factory.

RP: A loaf of bread was three cents. For ten cents, you got like three loaves of bread and for the other penny I used to get two cupcakes.

MN: Right. Was there home relief also? Did your mother get home relief?

RP: We had difficulty getting it because my father was capable of working. When he went to work, we were not eligible. He didn't come home with the money because they either robbed him in the bar and then he had nothing.

MN: Sometimes he would get so drunk he would get robbed?

RP: All the time, yes. [Inaudible] He used to take his pay and role it up in his shirt sleeve – like that – so they wouldn't find the money the day he came home. But my Aunt Delia used to meet my mother and give her a couple dollars. I think my Aunt Delia must be giving us for somehow –

MN: Right. Did your mother ever work?

RP: Only during the war and the only reason she went was to take her mind off my two brothers overseas fighting in the war. She worked from four o'clock until midnight in the Chrysler building, cleaning the offices.

Part IV

MN: Your mother was a cleaner in the Chrysler building during the war?

RP: She worked cleaning offices during the war. Now she was about forty – she was in her fifties then and she worked from four o'clock until midnight. She never told us. She [cannot understand] down and get off at 42nd street. But the minute the war ended, she heard all of the noise and celebration. She went home and then went back to work. [Laughs].

MN: I want to ask you, what was it like growing up on Elton Avenue in terms of the atmosphere with the other kids in the neighborhood?

RP: Well across the street was the YMCA. In the winter time, they used to put freeze in the park like they do now and we used to go ice skating there for ten cents. Mrs. Butterelli(sp) had a shop that you'd sharpen knives and swords with and he used to lend me skates to have sharpened. He used to lend me the skates to go skating as long as I brought them back. [Laughs]

MN: What different nationalities were the kids that were living on your block when you were growing up?

RP: Well in that house, we had Jacklets(sp). They were from Austria. Then we had Sophie and Elizabeth Tutorordes (sp). They were a mother and father. They were very nice. The mother was always very jolly. Next door is Mrs. Waldi. They had two Italian girls. They made the best spaghetti and meatballs you'd ever want to taste. I never had them again. Then we had a German

downstairs. Then we had Mrs. Coleman. Then [we had] the Irish people. It was basically Italian, German, Polish, and Irish.

MN: What elementary school did you go to?

RP: Saint Peter and Paul ("SPP").

MN: Oh, so you went to Catholic school.

RP: Because thank God we had the Sisters of Charity, Mother Seaton and we never paid tuition. Every year, in October, two weeks, they would collect stuff from the stores on 3rd Avenue and they had a big jar. And the money they got from the big jar paid for the student's tuition.

MN: The tuition for the kids that couldn't afford tuition –

RP: There wasn't any tuition.

MN: There was no tuition at the school?

RP: No.

MN: What street was SPP on?

RP: I think 159th Street and Brook Avenue.

MN: Wow.

Kathleen Palmer (KP): And I went there too.

MN: You went there without paying tuition?

RP: All of us did. We all graduated from there thanks to Mother Seton and the Sister's charity.

MN: Wow. Where was this – does the sisters of charity have their own house near there?

RP: Originally, it was Ebling's Brewery, which was 156th street. His daughter got married and he gave his daughter's husband a beautiful big house up on Eagle Avenue. The daughter, I understand, died on her honeymoon from some accident or something so the Ebling's gave the

building to the Church. The Church didn't want it. They didn't know what to do with it so the sisters took it. Every year, the nuns got pneumonia in that house [laughs]. In 1960-something, we built them a convent behind the school on Saint Ann's Avenue. There now, behind the rectory, it is still there.

MN: Right. And the rectory is it still there?

RP: Yes, the rectory, yes. It's still there.

MN: What sort of games did you play in the street when you were growing up?

RP: We played – it was mostly I Declare War.

MN: I Declare War, what is that?

RP: You made it searching the streets and then you name all the countries and then you put the balls in the middle and then we would say, "I declare war on Germany." Then whoever was Germany had to grab the ball and then we would run. They'd stop, but you'd have to have the ball first. Then he would throw it at you. If it hit you, you were the next guy.

MN: You became it if you were hit by the ball and then you had to declare which country and throw the ball.

RP: Right. We also played 'Hide and Seek'. There weren't many cars in the street in those days. I'm talking about the 1930s now. There weren't many cars in the street. Also, one of the funniest things was my mother used to take Agnes, Trashious(sp), my youngest brother and I over to Macomb's Dam Park here, which is now the new Yankee Stadium. Right next to there, they had the water shower there. My mother would take us there and meet her sister Delia. Then she would bring over little tanks of beer in a cardboard container because they didn't have beer back then like they do now. And they would, the two of them, would sit there and have the beer while

we were running around the park. Meanwhile all the kids at the block knew they wanted to come with us. My mother would tell two kids, you stand on this corner and two kids, you stay on this corner and when we walked by, they would [inaudible] two kids fallen behind us. By the time they got to the park, my mother said, "Where did all of these kids come from?" I said, "I don't know, Ma." But the kids told their mothers that Mrs. Peterson was taking them to the park. They would never let them go and my mother never knew and they would thank my mother for taking them to the park when she had nothing to do with it.

MN: And what was that, about a ten block walk?

RP: Yes. [Inaudible] – We walked anywhere. No one had cars.

MN: What was your school experience? Did you learn much in school?

RP: Yes. We were made to learn at SPP because in seventh – eighth grade, you had to take the Reagents Exams for New York State. Every day we had to stay afterschool to do a reading from 1932 or we had a book of old reagents questions.

MN: Right.

RP: That's how Sister found out what we didn't know. Whatever we didn't know, our teacher would teach it. Everybody that I knew – I don't think anyone ever failed taking the Reagents.

MN: Right. When you were in SPP, were there any black kids in the school?

RP: One – One boy.

MN: And where was he from? What area?

RP: I think he lived right under – right across from the school by 3rd Avenue.

MN: Right. Now what about when you went to Morris High School? Were there more black kids in the school then?

RP: No. It was mostly Jewish – Jewish children and gentiles also. A few coloreds – but see this is the beginning of 1941, September. Most of the colored people didn't come from the south until the war came because they came up here for jobs. And that's how we [inaudible].

MN: Right. Did you play any organized sports? Were you on any teams when you were growing up?

RP: No. We didn't have any facilities, no.

MN: It was mainly street – whatever you played in school and the street and you also organized it yourself?

RP: There was no organization. It was just whatever we had in the YMCA. It was just local stuff.

KP: I have a question for Robert. When I was a kid, we played a lot of kickball.

RP: Kickball we had too, yes.

KP: And on 160th and the older people played it on Elton Avenue except there was more traffic there.

RP: I forgot kickball, yes.

KP: Okay and what about curveball? The one with the four corners thing–

RP: Curveball – it was also stoopball.

KP: You would pitch them pennies and then –

RP: You hit the ball and then run for the bases.

MN: Right. Was there any visible, organized crime in your neighborhood when you were growing up?

RP: No. No one had anything to steal.

MN: Was there a neighborhood bookie?

RP: I don't know. I was a kid so I wouldn't know. There may have been, I don't know.

MN: But there wasn't a visible, underworld presence in your neighborhood?

RP: Not that I know of, no. We had none of that.

MN: Now, were there a lot of fathers around? Was there a lot of authority around?

RP: Yes, there were. No – we had good family life. All of the fathers were home.

MN: Tell me a little bit about the wartime experience because before we started the formal interview, you showed me ration books, stamps and pictures of war parades in the neighborhood.

RP: Scrap Metal Drives.

MN: Right. Tell me about the war experience on Elton Avenue in the Bronx.

RP: Well the saddest part was that one by one all the men and young boys, just about eighteen, you didn't see them anymore. They were all gone. They wouldn't come home, or maybe for a furlough, they would be in uniform, be it the Navy, the Army –

MN: So the entire neighborhood went to war—the boys?

RP: Even some of the women. The Knight's family had both daughters overseas. And then if you had a son or a daughter, you had a little flags in the window with a little star on it. If you had two people, you had two stars. And how many you had on there –

MN: Okay, so this is the window of your house, you put a star for each child.

RP: Yes, and a little flag. And on the flag had either one star or however many were in the service, you had on your window.

MN: So you could tell by looking at the window how –

RP: They had three people serving in the service. Now if one got killed, then it was a gold star.

MN: What color – a gold star mother would be those people who –

RP: – who lost their son or daughter or husband or whatever the situation was. And one of the saddest things that my mother ever had to go through I think was when the telegram came that one of my brothers – I can't remember if it was my brother John or brother Paul – and she was home alone and she wouldn't open the telegram. She left it on the table until I came home from high school and she says, "There is a telegram there from the war department about one of your brothers." She wanted me to open it up so I opened it up and it just said "John S. Peterson, wounded in action, letter to follow." That is all it said in the telegram. My mother said, "Oh, poor Johnny has no legs, no arms, he's blind, he's this." I wanted her to feel better so I said, "No, Mama. He is only wounded." Anyway, it turned out first time he got wounded – the first time he got wounded in his hands. I found a letter in there that said he was much better. We thought he would get a furlough, but he didn't. He got better and he goes back into the service. The second time, he was a radio operator – in the cavalry with tanks and his driver had his head blown off right beside him. He got out and ran down the road – I think this is in Austria – and the Germans machine-gunned him in the leg so he couldn't zigzag. He got machine-gunned in his leg. After the war, he never went swimming. We never saw my brother's leg and he never spoke about it. Anyway, that's where he got his second purple heart.

MN: You had Scrap Metal Drive. Describe what a scrap metal drive is.

RP: A scrap metal drive was any metal you had that you had – old pots and pans. We had a tiny flat iron. We never had an electric iron. A matter of fact, the tiny flat iron – people used to heat them up cold stove at night. You put them in the bed to warm you up. You put them in the bedroom to warm you up. That was what you used to warm them bed, the hot iron. Anyway, they

would collect the metal to use for the war efforts. Also, save all of your fat – the bacon fat, whatever it is and brings it to the butcher and it was a big joke. They would say, "The war is over. Bring your fat can to the butcher."

MN: Bring your fat can to the butcher [Laughter]. Was there rationing of food?

RP: Yes.

MN: And how did the rationing work?

RP: You had to have so many coins – for sugar or for pork or meat – whatever it was. You had to have so many coins. My mother had six for the children – we had eight ration booklets through the years. And every feeding was in the school. SPP gave out the rations. I remember, you see on here, the Sister signed their name. You had to sign the book in here presence, you know. See it?

MN: Wow.

RP: Anyway, here are some of the points. My Aunt Edith of Tarrytown who worked for the Rockefeller family up there, she's dead now though. She loved coffee and we didn't drink coffee, we drank tea. Because my mother had no milk, so we always had tea. She traded my mother to give me your coffee coupon and I'll give you the sugar one. We got all the sugar and she got all the coffee [Laughs].

MN: Wow. When all this was going on, you are going to high school. What did you think you were going to do with your life? Did you have a plan?

RP: I did but I don't think – I didn't have all the help I had today. I think of it – before I forget –on D-day, June 1944, Morris High School, they called us down in the morning and they had an assembly and they announced that the invasion had begun over in Europe. That it is how we

found out the invasion. In the public schools, we all said a prayer [laughs], which is now against the law. But at that time, you always said a prayer, whatever religion you were.

MN: Did you ever, in the Bronx, run into tensions between different groups?

RP: No.

MN: Everybody got along?

RP: Yeah. Nobody had anything. When we went to bed at night, we never even closed our doors and we had to live on the top floor and we left our door open.

MN: People slept with their doors open.

RP: We would also take a mattress and go up on the roof. If it was a hot night, we would sleep out on the roof. It was cooler.

MN: What sort of – did you have electricity in your apartment?

RP: Yes.

MN: Did you listen to any sort of music?

RP: Only on the radio. Everything was radio. There was no television then.

MN: Right.

RP: But Sunday – as a matter of fact, [inaudible] gave me fifty programs from the 1930s. Anyway, Jack Penny and Bob Hope. No it was mostly the radio and fifteen minute stories. The Lone Ranger, the Shadow, or the –

MN: Did you go to the movies at all when you were growing up?

RP: Sunday afternoon – the main meal on Sunday – the [inaudible] from Ireland. A t one o'clock we had our main dinner. We had no supper. If you wanted supper at night, you had to make a sandwich or something else. So after lunch, we went out to the RKO Royal –

MN: What street was that on?

RP: 149th street. We had five rooms – the RKO Royal, the [inaudible] National, the Bronx Opera house, the Rec and Lowes [inaudible].

MN: What would be a typical Sunday meal in your house?

RP: My mother would make leg of lamb – this is when we had a little money before – we had leg of lamb or chicken or pot roast basically because it was a big family. She had to make enough to feed everybody.

MN: Right. Now going back to what you wanted to do for a living, you were saying you did not have to –

RP: Yeah. They gave us an aptitude test in Morris High School and they said I should have qualified for a lawyer because I was very good in logic, subject fact and presenting them in a very good way and that was that.

MN: College?

RP: They never gave us a follow up from that. They never told me about grants that were available or how I could get financial aid or anything like that.

MN: But why?

RP: So I – graduated. Because we had no money; I couldn't go to college.

MN: Right. Were you in the academic track at Morris? How did they divide the kids? Were there different tracks or everybody was in the same track?

RP: There were different periods, different classrooms. I wasn't used to that. Elementary school you are in one classroom all day. When you went to high school, you went from classroom to classroom, period to period.

MN: Right. What year did you graduate from Morris?

RP: 1945, in June.

MN: And, were you ever working when you were in high school? Did you have a job?

Part V

MN: Before you graduated from high school you really never –

RP: I went to high school and I came home to do homework and played with the kids on the block.

MN: When you graduate from high school, how did you go about looking for work?

RP: I went to the employment office. Now I was all dressed up in a suit and I went down to the bookkeeping – studying to be an accounting and for some reason she gives me the same address of some cut glass place on 30th street, where they cut glass. They made crystal lamps. This was the factory part. The man was from Italy. It was very good – the training experience. I liked it though. I worked there for two years and then in the summer they laid us off. They didn't have unemployment insurance. They didn't have any of the benefits you have today. Helen Booth who is in my building, a neighbor, she worked for Republic Pictures at Columbus Circle. She said, "Come on down, Bob" on Monday to see if she couldn't put my name down and I got a job there. I made twenty five dollars a week for Mr. Yates working there and that started me off with my career – my future.

MN: Right. So you were doing accounting at Republic Pictures?

RP: Correct. For five years.

MN: Were you still living in same apartment?

RP: We lived on Elton Avenue for thirty four years until 1965 and then we moved here. And thank God I moved because then it started to go down –

KP: When did they put the boiler in?

RP: Only about two to three years after. When you first moved in, you didn't have heat, right? Do you remember?

KP: I don't remember.

RP: Because I have pictures. Did you see them out in the Poconos?

KP: I remember sleeping with – our blankets and our coats.

RP: Yeah we didn't have heat back then. Just to tell you everything, when she bought the house on Elton Avenue, she realized we had no heat. How can you live without any heat? [Laughs]. When you are a kid you just do what you got to do. She put a boiler in and – that was a great thing there but it was near the end of the sixties. No, that was the early sixties.

MN: You were living in a coldwater flat in the fifties?

RP: The thirties, the forties and the fifties up through the beginning of the sixties.

KP: And when we took a bath, my mother would boil water and put it in the bathtub.

MN: You didn't have hot water in the bathtub – coming out of the tub?

RP: Yeah, we had hot water. We had hot water.

KP: A lot of the times it was broken.

RP: Yeah but it was hot water.

KP: Later on –

RP: We had hot water. We had a tin bath tub. We had a painted bathtub that was tin. Could you imagine?

MN: Yes. Your mother lived in the same building?

KP: Then, she got married to our father, who also the disgrace on the same block.

RP: No, he was 400, on Corning.

KP: He was on Corning, right and he moved downstairs.

MN: And what year did they get married, Kathy?

KP: 1950

MN: Okay. Now when did you – did black families start moving into the area? When did you start noticing them?

RP: They never moved into our area. The Spanish people moved in when Mark Antonio – have you heard of Mark Antonio?

MN: Yes.

RP: He brought all of the Puerto Ricans here. They didn't even know – no place for them but they flooded everything. There were so many of them had to go back. Everybody was complaining. It was like West Side Story as to how many people were living in an apartment. Their problem was that they didn't speak any English.

MN: Okay. The first families moving onto Elton Avenue were Spanish families.

RP: Right.

MN: What years did that take place?

RP: It had to be 1960s because we were moving out then. We moved here in 1965. I would say the beginning of the sixties.

MN: In the sixties – is the first time that block? When was the first time you noticed, Kathy, that –?

KP: Probably, yeah, the sixties, later even.

MN: Right. Elton Avenue was pretty much all white when you were growing up?

KP: Yes

KP: In the later sixties, the lower part of the block [cannot understand—extensive background noise]

MN: Right. Was there tension between, let's say, the Spanish families and Irish?

KP: and the blacks –

RP: Not so much with the Irish because the Hispanics use to play Bongo drums. They were, let's just say, in that respect, they were just obnoxious. If you are trying to watch your television [starts beating against his chair]. Imagine you are in your house.

MN: Okay, so that was an issue – was the drums.

RP: And the music. I don't know whether they were all hard of hearing but they put up the highest volume. Did you ever see their cars go by, their vans, with the music playing?

MN: Well, this is interesting because the black families we interviewed had said that the memories were of the Spanish guys in the parks banging their drums and it became the soundtrack of the neighborhood.

RP: In the middle of the night –

MN: Until two or three in the morning –

RP: Yeah. What if you had to get up for work?

MN: So that became a source of tension – the noise level.

RP: I think it was more they did it on purpose so that our family would move out and their family could move in. What do you call it? Block busting?

MN: So the noise was a big source of tension.

RP: And it worked because it made us move. Otherwise, we would still be there. [Laughs]

MN: How quickly did the white families move out from the time the first Spanish families moving in?

RP: It was very gradual.

MN: Very gradual?

RP: Yes, gradually.

MN: Were there friendships that went across those lines also?

RP: Yeah, yeah – mostly because we'd met them in the church.

MN: Now at SPP, were there a lot of Puerto Rican families that also worshiped their?

RP: Yeah, they're still there. They had a special mass for them. The Spanish mass. Very nice, very devoted people –

MN: Now, was there any dating? Did people date – did Irish guys date Spanish girls?

RP: Eventually, I guess they did

MN: In the beginning, were you –

RP: By that time, we were in different age brackets. We weren't concerned with that part of it.

MN: Right. What about gangs? Were there gangs in the neighborhood when you were growing up at all?

RP: I don't know. Did you remember, because there were no gangs in my neighborhood?

KP: No – It became dangerous for my brothers. I wasn't allowed out. But when they were out walking around, if you went too far from your block, you were not recognized and then you in the other [inaudible]. There was tension that time.

MN: That was what – in the fifties or the sixties more?

KP: Sixties.

RP: But that is only when the Spanish moved in. We had none of that before. I think they had resentment. I don't know why but they had resentment towards them.

MN: Did you – did people start dancing to the Latin music? Did any of that catch on?

RP: Yeah, I would say that cha-cha. If you were to dance –

KP: If you went to their apartments, I don't know.

RP: The Holy Name society had dances at school halls. Saint Patrick's day dancing – all the Irish entertainers would be at SPP. The McNophie(sp) family, remember them? The father, mother, son and daughter used to sign songs.

MN: This was not a merging of cultures, this was a clash. It's interesting because when I speak to some of the black families; it was more of a merging. Maybe the musical traditions were a little more –

KP: What I was alluding to also is that the blacks down the block and the Hispanics did not get along.

MN: When did the first black families move onto your block? Was it the sixties or earlier?

RP: It had to be 1960s. I just know we moved in 1965 so it had to be after that.

MN: Right. You got your place here in 1965. And, who stayed on Elton?

KP: My family.

MN: How long did they live on Elton Avenue?

RP: When I went to Fordham – I started in September 1969 and they were still living there. They left around 1970, 1971. They became [superintendents]. They finally got a job as supers.

RP: They had to take a super job for the same reason. They couldn't get an apartment with their children.

MN: This is your brothers?

RP: No. This is her mother and father.

KP: My mother and father.

MN: Oh so your mother and father. Where did they move from Elton? How far?

KP: 234th street.

MN: Okay, so what's that—Woodlawn?

RP: Woodlawn, yes.

MN: How did they feel about leaving the neighborhood at that point?

KP: My mother was desperate. My father, he did not like leaving the old – neighborhood.

RP: The old neighborhood was already gone, but he had that in his mind.

KP: And they were at that point, they were responsible for the building that they were living in – for cleaning it, [inaudible]. It was going to [cannot understand].

MN: Did you have the sense that, when you were leaving, that the buildings were deteriorating?

KP: Oh, yes. The boiler had blown up twice. But my father was maintaining as much as he could. The walls were – they were all newspaper in the home.

RP: Yeah, those buildings were built just after about 1900 or so. There were five of them on the block and they were all the same.

MN: Were you surprised when buildings started burning in the seventies?

KP: Yes. It was terrible. They were pretty sudden that started. That was what was very scary. We had a lot of – I remember our kids had a lot of nightmares.

MN: Were you still there when there were some fires?

KP: Oh we used to watch.

MN: So there was – the fires started in the sixties when you were still there?

KP: Yeah, oh yeah.

RP: And you know why they had the fires?

MN: The landlords wanted the insurance.

RP: No, no, no. The people didn't like the apartments. They were put in there and they didn't like it. They couldn't move out because you had to stay there so they set fire to it. Now they had to take them and put them in another place. They didn't like where they were living and the housing didn't put them in the right place, so they set fire to them. It wasn't the landlords.

MN: Do you think it was more the tenants than the landlords?

RP: Yes, absolutely. I know that. They didn't like the apartments.

KP: Well our block, it wasn't the landlords. Eventually, then after, we moved, before it burned downed but there was no landlord.

RP: It was abandon.

MN: If you go back to the block now, what percentage of the buildings were there –

RP: One building, there. The whole block, there is just one building. Eleven stories. It goes from 161st to 160th and halfway down the block.

MN: It’s a new building that replaced all the tenements that were there before?

RP: Let me just say it was very nice. Even though there were all poor people, they had the few clean homes around the nicest parts of the holidays. Christmas, you go to all the Germans – all the German houses are decorated. Italians had it decorated different. We had an all different meals with him. That was very nice. We shared their culture and also our culture. It’s nice.

MN: The sixties was a tough time for people who were –

RP: That was the change, yes. In a way it was good, because it made people move, go and get on with their life.

KP: Yeah. In some ways, it was really unfathomable what was going on. To know who was doing it – it was totally unclear. The burning – there were places that would be on fire.

RP: I think it was just a situation that developed because everybody was involved in it, depending on where you were. That’s where you were.

MN: Now, but it’s interesting. Do you think that when people left the neighborhood, they did better economically than when they stayed there?

RP: Yes.

KP: Yes.

MN: And that’s an interesting question.

RP: And that’s why I say it’s a good thing it happened; that made us do it. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have done it.

MN: Do you think the neighborhood was like a crut? Everybody kind of stayed at the same level, but as long as they were comfortable. But once they were out, they –

RP: They were comfortable. They knew everybody. It was like a little town. They knew everybody at the candy store.

MN: You didn't feel like you had to make a lot of money to get a lot of education?

RP: Then all the kids had to go off and get jobs because you had to pick up the house and you know, spend it all –

MN: How important were the priests and nuns as individuals helping families? Are there any particular people that stood out in your experience – teachers or coaches or just people who were important in your life?

RP: Teachers were very nice. Nuns, we had some lay teachers, very nice. We had a lot of priests at the parish. We had about six priests at the parish at that time. Father Bill Martin was the one who built the church, SPP. Before that was a little wooden church, SPP.

MN: Wow.

RP: I was the first class to make first communion in the lower church at SPP and the first class to make confirmation in the upper church three years later. And what do you know there were no seats in the church at that time, only folding chairs. I've been at SPP now since 1933.

MN: And you are still involved in the parish?

RP: Yes, I do the readings.

MN: Wow.

RP: From 1927 to 1965, I was an ecumenical [inaudible]. I thought at that time, a member of the congregation would volunteer every Sunday and she would come up and do the readings. I said alright, I'll start it off. How many years now? [Laughter] Forty-five. There is only one English mass. That was 10 o'clock and the 11:15 is the Spanish mass. We use to have three masses, the

high mass, where all the boys and men choirs. It was really nice. In that poor neighborhood, we had a beautiful choir – really nice. The men from the neighborhood and the boys – the high school, the young boys were the sopranos. They really were nice. We had missions over there. One was that the married men, one was for the single men and one was for the women.

MN: How far is the parish church from here?

RP: Four blocks.

MN: Four blocks?

RP: Yeah, we should walk over. Did you ever hear of SPP?

MN: I think I passed it.

RP: It's a beautiful church in there.

MN: When we bring Dawn, we'll do the walk around with the camera so we can point out all that.

RP: There are also two Protestant churches, from the 1700s or 1800 down there. I am not sure if those are relevant. I don't know but there still there. And also, down the block, was the home for homeless boys. That is still there but now it is part of the –

KP: One thing we also didn't talk about was drugs. That came big into the neighborhood because I remember you talking about SPP and the church railing. Talk about fraternizing.

RP: That was later – that's when it started.

MN: Ok, yeah. When did the heroin start coming in?

RP: There were no drugs in our time, in the thirties and forties. There were no drugs in our neighborhood then.

MN: Now what about by the –

RP: Nobody had any money anyways to buy drugs.

MN: It was the sixties that the drugs came in Europe.

RP: Yes, they came and all these new people came to the neighborhood.

MN: Because like in the Patterson Houses people said that drugs started coming in – in like 1962, 1963 down there. Was it later?

RP: It started moving in here. When they started moving into the neighborhood, they brought all that with them.

KP: That's when robberies started – on the streets – started to pick up too.

MN: In the early sixties or mid sixties or late sixties?

KP: I think 1965, around there.

MN: When did you start hearing that it was getting unsafe when people were talking?

KP: Around 1965 – around the time that Kennedy was assassinated.

MN: How old were you? Was this when you were eight or nine or older than that?

KP: Older than that.

MN: Yes, because again the people – some neighborhoods talk about heroin hitting in the 1950s. In the housing projects, they talked about the 1960s. The housing projects were very nice initially. So, it's about the same time, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965?

KP: And in preceded the fires.

MN: Yes. The drugs came first and then the robberies. Were you worried – so that's when people stopped having –

KP: That's when we started having a fear for walking around. Even for us to walk to school, my mother would always – she was always with us as a family.

MN: So your mother walked you to school?

KP: And she was terrified about us –

RP: That they would rob their children's lunch money or anything.

KP: Yeah, they robbed my brothers – and right in front of the police station.

MN: Now where did you go – where did you go to high school, Kathy?

KP: I went to Saint Thomas, on 182nd and Grand Concourse.

MN: And your brothers, where did they go?

KP: Cardinal Hayes. Cardinal Spellman. But by then, they all went to Cardinal Spellman – but by then, my family had moved up to Woodlawn. They – one of my brothers, Oreo, couldn't get into the grammar school up there, so he went to Saint Ann's on Gun Hill Road. Him and Mary –

MN: Did your brothers have any Spanish friends growing up?

KP: As a matter of fact, when we first moved up to Woodlawn, [cannot understand] and a few other of their friends and their stickball friends came up to visit and the neighborhood did not like it. It was bad enough that they thought we were too many of us – well I wasn't living there at that point -- too many kids in my apartment. But that they also had the bus – my brother would convince them to visit, but by then they had started to play in the streets, which over there, you just didn't do.

MN: They had an adjustment to moving into Woodlawn?

KP: Yes.

MN: They had trouble – they were bringing some of the South Bronx with them. Right. Did your family mostly feel upset about the South Bronx or are they a little nostalgic?

KP: Well, they have had their weddings down there so [laughter] I don't know. I don't think they would ever want to go back though.

MN: Were the weddings – you mean the church weddings down here at SPP?

KP: Yes.

RP: Right – at SPP. Of course, my mother and father got married there – a couple of others. The church was like the foundation for the neighborhood.

KP: My brother Oreo became a fireman. His first firehouse has been there for a long time. They put it at the Cross-Bronx Expressway, but what happened is that you can't build state aid in kind of like a firewall. That was extremely busy and when the fires eventually happened –

RP: And all of that just happened. Nobody planned it.

MN: Now you have been here ever since?

RP: I'm here forty four years since October.

MN: And you are still involved in the church?

RP: Yes.

MN: And you are still comfortable in the neighborhood?

RP: And this neighborhood is primarily all black Americans – African Americans – and we get along very well. No one has problems here.

KP: And he attended his first Yankees game.

RP: Yes, I have the original ticket to the new stadium.

KP: First Yankee game ever. [Laughter]

RP: That wasn't a game, it was a workout.

KP: Oh, it wasn't even a game [Laughter]

RP: It was the first day they opened the new stadium and the team came out for a workout to check out the place.

MN: What is your feeling about what is going on in the neighborhood today? Do you see any –people talk about gentrification. That's where rich people—rich young people—start coming into what were once poor neighborhoods. Do you see any signs of that around here? You know the term 'yuppie'—young urban professionals?

RP: Yeah, I think that is further down though. 138th street.

MN: Right, down by there. But you don't see [background noise] the concourse village – young, whites coming in here or in your church?

RP: No. No. It's opened but it's --

MN: No, but it isn't about discrimination. It's about people starting to see can I get a bargain here.

KP: But you see the rent now is more than three thousand dollars –

RP: It's more than that now. The problem is – you see if you moved here, your friend wouldn't even want to come here because it's black. That's the thing.

MN: No, but see this is the thing. The thing is a lot of these young people – like Harlem now is being gentrified. They're all – the younger people don't care about that sort of stuff.

RP: But they want to fix it up and you can't fix it up unless you – have it. You have to eat it before you grind it.

MN: But it usually starts in the apartment buildings –

RP: The older houses, right.

MN: Right, down by the concourse. Do you see –

RP: Like Co-Ops and –

MN: No – but you don't see the signs young people – white people with tattoos walking around here?

RP: Not here, no. Only if they were like visiting someone to start off.

MN: No, but – When it's gentrifying, it suddenly starts and they are all over the place and you start seeing health food stores and Starbucks and they have their little designer dogs.

RP: You have to go down around 138th street. Have you been down to 138th street?

MN: Oh yeah, yeah. I have.

RP: Well you see empty buildings all up and down

MN: No, no. You know, the Bruckner Bar and Grill. I have some students who live there.

RP: Alexandria Avenue down there and there are cheese steaks up and down the whole block.

MN: Oh, yeah. Someone told me one time they used to call that the Irish Riviera down there.

RP: Yeah, they have some beautiful homes down there.

MN: Yeah, I know Saint Jerome's. What a beautiful church that is.

RP: I heard they restored it. I can't remember but Cardinal Cook was there.

MN: I met the priest, a guy named John Grange.

RP: That was all Irish.

MN: And now it's becoming heavily Mexican – the big Mexican population down by Saint Jerome's.

RP: Right.

MN: So your church is mostly the Spanish people who are Puerto Rican or there are Mexican families moving in also?

RP: Everything. Dominican – Spanish people who are originally from Puerto Rico. They seem to be a little resentful of the other Spanish people.

MN: Yes, absolutely.

RP: I think mostly because it's just different cultures, not even the same language.

MN: Are you seeing any immigrants from Africa?

RP: Yeah, I think right across the way, Henry. I think him and his wife are. You can tell the difference in that – and African American.

MN: Yes, because there are a lot of African immigrants moving into the Bronx.

RP: Even from Liberia because we even have it in our church. The special mass they have.

MN: Oh. There is a mass for Liberians?

RP: Well, I from what understand because once I saw a bunch of them hanging out and I thought they were drug addicts or something so I called the rector. I said to him and I didn't know they were waiting to get into the church and have a special service. I didn't know that.

MN: For a special service?

RP: Now, here is the weird thing. They were being quiet for some reason. I don't know.

MN: Yeah, because they are a lot of churches – Catholic – along the concourse area, Catholic churches that are saying Ghanaian masses and they speak a language called T'wi

RP: You see, a lot of people want to stay together in their own –

MN: —In their own little group, yes.

RP: That's what I'm saying. Maybe they feel more comfortable with speaking the same language.

MN: Yes, absolutely.

RP: They are beautifully dressed, these women from Liberia. They have the big beautiful clothes that they wear—very colorful. I mean to tell you one thing. These people really Catholic. They are really religious. They are really reverent and sincere in their beliefs. No matter where they come from.

MN: Well, it sounds like you have a great situation here.

RP: Thank God. I didn't plan it. It just developed.

MN: I mean, the beautiful apartments, you've got the church that still very important in your life, and you have a nice pension with Social Security now.

RP: Thank God for Roosevelt and Social Security. I have no more pension. That's all gone.

MN: Wow.

RP: I had an annuity and that said when I was seventy five – I figured I wouldn't live that long. And now I am eighty-two [laughter]. But I can survive on my social security.

MN: Wow. Well, we have two things I suggest we do. One is the next time I am going to arrange for my videographer to come and we are going to walk around Elton Avenue and the Church –

RP: Do you want to see any of it now? I'm free. It's up to you.

MN: It's kind of hot. But why don't we walk over, if it is okay with you just to Elton and SPP

RP: Okay, just straight across.

MN: And then we'll get ourselves a little lunch.

KP: Okay.

MN: Again, it is my treat. I always treat people to lunch.

RP: We could go next door to the food market on the way back.

MN: Okay.

KP: Where are you parked?

MN: Well I am parked. First we will walk over and then we will go to the food store.

RP: Do you want anything else before we go?

MN: Absolutely not. It is alright if I tell this woman, Kathleen Hosler, about all the World War II material because she is going to be –

RP: Thirty years from now, I won't be here.

KP: The thing is he is still very involved in the Armory. He is still in the National Guard.

RP: I still belong to the Old Guard of the City of New York.

MN: And where is that located?

RP: West 90th Street off of West End Avenue.

MN: Okay. What is it called?

RP: The Old Guard to the City of New York. You never heard of that?

MN: Old Guard –

RP: of the City of New York. It is one hundred and eighty two years old. It was founded in 1826.

MN: And it's on –

RP: It's 307 West 90th Street. No, no. West 91st Street –

MN: West 91st Street and West End Avenue. What's the exact address?

RP: It's between West End –

MN: West End and Broadway or Riverside

RP: It's between there.

MN: That would be Riverside Drive.

RP: I have the key to that million dollar home – I am vice Colonel there.

MN: Oh my God. Okay.

RP: I am also a member of the Seventh Regimen. That's on 67th and Park

MN: Yes that I know.

RP: That's the one where the state stole our property.

MN: Well, now, do you do email?

RP: I have an email, yes.

MN: Okay. What is your email address?

RP: robert77516@aol.com.

MN: Okay, because when I email Mrs. Holster about this I am going to copy both of you so you'll know exactly what I am doing.

RP: Okay, no problem.

MN: Okay. Kathy, do you have anything else you want to say before we walk?

KP: No, that's fine.

[End]