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Bronx African American History Project
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Interview with Elias Karman

Mark Naison: This is the fifty-seventh interview of the Bronx African American History Project and we are interviewing Elias Karman who is a business person a philanthropist, a leader of community organizations in the Bronx for the last seventy years. I would like to begin by asking how you first got involved in owning a store in Morrisania. Had you any contact with the community there before you opened the clothing store?

Elias Karman: I did not. I was in the wholesale clothing business and I had an account who wanted to go into business in the Bronx and I took him around to several places and we decided to go in on Prospect Ave. I got the landlord to prepare the lease and we were supposed to meet at that time in the landlord's office. I was there and the man did not show up. So the landlord said why do you have to worry about somebody else why do you go into this retail business? So I was saying to myself that if I go into the retail business, I had a lot of time to read the New York Times and I would be the best prepared pricer with a lot of knowledge. When I would look at the Times, I had been traveling around like I would see other clients of mine who did read the Times; I thought I'd do the same. I have been in business there on Prospect Ave since 1939, up to 1970 something and I did not buy the Times once. [Laughter] I was very busy all the way through.

(MN): Had you gone to college before you went into this?

(EK): Yes I graduated from New York University's school of commerce and accounts finance. I graduated in 1932 and conditions were very bad but I was more or less

forced into wholesale clothing. I had only one boss in my lifetime and he passed away and the family said you take over the business and you can pay us off, which I did, but I merged it with somebody else who was not a good business man and he ran us to the ground. I was working in a very poor way with very limited capital as an entrepreneur wholesaler in the wholesale business. When the man said why you don't take it for yourself then I went into the retail business, I thought it would be easier. I wanted to enjoy life at the same time.

(MN): When you first moved to that location on Prospect Ave., were there any African American families living in that neighborhood at that time?

(EK): When I first got my business really approximately 1939 to 1940, there were mostly Jewish names. A lot of Jewish names and Italian names, gradually the names disappeared and they changed to Brown and Green you know to the blacks. We had a lot of Greeks there at the time, Italians and Greeks. Slowly it filtered out and the blacks came in and the blacks began to go north and the Hispanics came in mostly from Puerto Rico.

(MN): Now you eventually became very involved in the community activities and the Urban League, when you opened your store did you have a background that made you believe to be fair to all people and being receptive to an integrated society?

(EK): I would agree yes. In high school I was like President of a general organization I helped then publish a paper, and I college the same. I was in charge of the history of the class. I was always in that realm, but the thing in the retail business and you have an open door and people come in to ask you questions they get you involved. That's if you

have the inclination to get involved and I guess I had the inclination.

(MN): When did people start encouraging you to get involved in the community activities after opening the store?

(EK): I did not require much encouragement, but having an open door, I remember a lady a politician, and she was a councilman Bertha Schwartz I remember another woman Mildred McCarthy.

(Harriet McDougal): Yes my mother worked with her.

(EK): Mildred McCarthy was politically connected with the Jackson Democratic Club, they sought me out but they did not have to do much sneaking because I was always available. We got ourselves involved, Bertha Schwartz came into the store to tell me that they would like to bring the Urban League into the Bronx and they would like to have a meeting and would I attend it on Third Ave. I joined them and the Urban League came to the Bronx in 1950.

(MN): Now you owned your store for about ten years, during those years did you start to develop a significant African American client base of people coming into your store?

(EK): Yes and I can tell you of an excellent relationship, there was one Mrs. Kate Brown her son was a fifteen year old boy, he liked styles and he traded with me and all the young people came to me and those who wanted to be young came to me because we had the styles.

(MN) : You had the new styles of clothing.

(EK): Yes and you would find that the people in general and I have a good relationship with the blacks, a very good relationship they would come to me and they would have troubles and Kate Brown in 1943 and came to me and said that her son was apprehended

by the police in Carolina and he was being held in jail here and they were going to try to extradite him to Carolina. What can I do? This is 1943 and I was a young man and I did not have that kind of experience but I knew that there was something wrong and we had to fight. I did get the Amsterdam news at that time; Amsterdam News has a man by the name of Pete Richardson who saved the Bronx. I contacted him; I did contact Isabel Dalenger who later became a congressman and also a district attorney, the congressman and Lois Pick and a fellow by the name of Leo Isaacson

(MN): He works for the American Labor Party?

(EK): Leo Isaacson I think was a Liberal Party, the others were democrats and I got them all together and they fought. Governor Dooly at that time appointed a judge Leavy to as a referee and these people when before Judge Leavy in a Bronx court and they won. And that boy we saved them from going back to Carolina because they would have made mince meat out of him in 1943. And he got married and had five sons and the sons had children and all and he passed on, he had an auto accident, but his mother Kate Brown is still around and she calls me regularly.

(Mark Smith): What was her son accused of?

(EK): He went into some general store and in Dillon City Carolina and the old lad had words with him and the owner came around the counter with some sort of a stick to hit him the boy grabbed the stick and hit the owner on the arm and fractured the man's arm but he ran off.

(MN): What was the name of the reporter from the Amsterdam News, the first name?

(EK): Pete Richardson.

(MN): Pete Richardson was the Bronx correspondent for the Amsterdam News?

(EK): Well we were selling advertising and this was incidental I did give them advertising too so I was an account.

(MN): Oh you were one of his accounts selling advertising. Did you have contact with local ministers in the forties or is that something that came later?

(EK): That came slowly. These ministers were finding their way to the store. We were well known, we were like a style outfit.

(MN): Did you sell Zoot-suits at all?

(EK): That was the style outfit.

(MN): Oh so you sold Zoot-suits.

(EK): No but we started originally when the Prince of Wales, Edward the Prince of Wales, wore an English Drape. An English drape at that time meant that the knee would be about twenty-three inches and the bottoms would be about eighteen inches. That was a drape. The skirts got excited and they took the twenty inches and spread it this way and they took the bottom of the skirt this way that became a Zoot-suit. But we had cutters I had a whole floor devoted for cutting and we cut to order and for three dollars I made a pair of pants to order. Nobody could do it, but I came from the wholesale business and I knew what to do. I had these people who did the cutting, the marking, I got them out of the schools it was wartime and you could not get employees. They came and they cut and we manufactured on the premises.

(MN): So you got kids out of the local schools.

(EK): Yes so it was a dollar for the cloth, a dollar was the labor, and the third dollar was the administration and profit.

(MN): Did any entertainers or musicians come to your store?

(EK): Yes I made the outfits for this fellow by the name of Carter, who I saw in the paper he died recently, Benny Carter. I used to ship like eighteen suits to Detroit

[Laughter] Yeah he would be there. I went down to the Renaissance Place.

(HM): Renaissance Ballroom.

(EK): Yes I measured everybody, one, two, three, boom, boom, boom measured and got orders and so on and I shipped and I was naive. You don't go down by yourself and do all these but I did and I survived and the checks would be forth coming from Moe Gale Agency. I had another group even bigger than that and his name slips me but some of these people were my customers and one became a dentist, a young boy who grew up to become a dentist. I had other groups yes I did work for musicians. Oh there is a fellow still around, he is a drummer he is a famous drummer and I see his name once and a while his name is listed as an entertainer, so he is still around. I am the type to be a little bit forgetful [Laughter] up until last week I was all right but after you pass a nine-forth birthday you are allowed to forget.

(MN): In the nineteen forties there is a significant migration into Morrisania from people from Harlem. Did you hear people in the community grumble about this? Were there people who lived in the neighborhood who said oh my god the neighborhood is becoming integrated, what are we going to do?

(EK): Oh everybody was grumbling, things were happening and you say the nineteen forties but in the nineteen forties, but in the nineteen fifties we tried to establish a balanced community people were moving and we said we would like to have forty percent white, forty percent black and the other twenty percent other and they were

putting up the forest neighborhood house, a lot of units there and that's something you would like to see. The Urban League was very active with it and we have a Union, the Meat Cutters Union I have to mention to you, Leroy Fade from the Meat Cutters Union was very active with the Urban League and active in general. If you wanted support you would call him and he or his organization would back you with money or time, they were behind it but it was a failure. If they had a waiting list for people these people demanded to get apartments. They were not going to wait for anybody, they broke up the scheme.

HM: So the Forest Houses became predominately black.

(EK): I think so, yes.

(MN): The only development I know of in New York that followed that model was Starrot City, when they built it in Brooklyn in the late sixties.

(EK): Perhaps they had stronger support.

(HM): But over my Forest House there was a co-op the Woodstock Terrace

(EK): Yes that came at the same time.

(HM): Yes it was middle class but I think it also was mostly black though.

(EK): It became mostly back. It started on the same theory; it was adjacent to Forrest Neighborhood.

(MN): Now when you were in the Urban League did your organization try to do something about housing discrimination? A number of people I have spoken to have said in the 1950s it was almost impossible for somebody African American to rent on the Grand Concourse. Was that an issue that came up?

(EK): Well the Urban League was looking to place people wherever they wanted. I don't

recall of anybody raising an issue that they wanted to get on the Grand Concourse and they were dissuaded failed to get in there. I don't remember that at all. I remember that the all of us were pushing for equal opportunity and this was part of it and where we were on Prospect Ave. was the Bronx, Southern Blvd was the Bronx. Prospect Ave. you could not get an inch of space for any of your businesses men at that time. They came before Southern Blvd. and anybody who lived over there on the side streets or what have you was a big deal. So I did not hear any issues.

(MN): So in those days, the forties and fifties this was a very nice community to live in.

(EK): Yes I would agree.

(HM): It had the trees on both sides of the streets remember?

(EK): Yes then we had the center, prior to nineteen forty in the center they had like a demarcation as you could go north and then you could go south on the other side. That was removed, there is a plant there. And one of my customers was Colin Powel, he lived on Kelly St. and Colin Powel used to come to see me like once a week. He was a tall fellow in terms of looking over my cash register. He was tall and we spoke and we enjoyed each other and I enjoyed him a lot because he was the only college man I knew from among my customers who went to college. In fact the only one I knew to go to college was this man. He was in the ROTC at that time and that is how he worked his way up; through the ROTC and it was great. Whoever would have thought he would go that far but he did.

(MN): You also mentioned to me that one of the things that the Urban League did was tried to open up jobs for blacks and Puerto Ricans at that time? How did you go about trying to do that?

(EK): Well I remember being chairman of a committee for equal opportunity jobs and I was after banks and I finally got the Dollar Savings Bank on the Grand Concourse to open up and we did get a job for a young man an accountant who studied accountancy and he got a job there.

(MN): Now did you do this by persuasion or were there picket lines?

(EK): No picket lines, all talk a lot of talk. You would call and they would say that they do not want to talk to you, but you see them and you would meet them outside at a meeting or someplace and we talked and talk and he gives you a try. Remember we placed a young person as an accountant, we placed another man there but he was not really an accountant, but he had a job there.

(MN): Now you had also mentioned some of the department stores that your organization worked with, where there any other employers that you approached about employment?

(EK): Well remember I only represented one store, Hollywood Clothing Store but that's a big street and we had a lot of stores and then on the cross street we had Westchester Ave., Longwood Ave. so in 1949 we formed a corporation Prospect Ave and neighborhood businessmen association. We got a charter and we met at regular meetings a bunch of meetings and we would meet at Club 845. We would have a place for ourselves and we would carry out. At the Club 845 we would have fashion shows which went on and we had a group from the Urban League the Boosters. Did you ever know the Boosters? Madeline, Mary Rogers, well they had a group of about a dozen ladies who promoted the Urban League different ways ad this was one way of

doing it. We got their support to have a fashion show and we did that. A meeting we did that. And we began to utilize the Club 845 because when I am around there they had meetings. And we got together and I remember sometimes once we called a meeting and nobody showed up except myself because the retailers were doing such a tremendous business they did not want to leave their registers. [Laughter] I was young enough then so I left the register and I went to the meeting and believe me I had a good lunch.

(HM): Were you across the street from Morris Ice Cream Parlor that was a favorite place.

(MS): What was your relationship to William Jackson who was the first Head of the Year?

(EK): Well William Jackson was the first Executive Director of the Urban League, he was very well trained scholastically, but from a personal view point he was a real person. There was a lot of life in him. And I in my own way learned how to deal with people, learned more than I had before, I can tell you that I have always been involved with people and learned a lot of ways of approaching things, as a social worker. It was really remarkable and if you say that I am persistent and I have been persistent, I learned from others and the one who seceded him was a fellow Philip Wary. Philip Wary came from a different school and he was more a public relations man. Jackson came out and become a dean at Georgia College. So I learnt from him Public Relations.

(MN): In the 1950s what were the big issues the Urban League was dealing with other than employment?

(EK): Well it was mostly employment and housing

(MN): The hope was that the Forest Houses would be an integrated development.

(EK): Yes that was a failure but we also had the Forest Neighborhood House that

George Gregory there who was the Executive Director

(HM): And later Joyce Philaparts

(EK): Yes well with George Gregory he was a well know figure, he was a Colombia basketball champ. George Gregory is well known as an athlete, and he had a very big reputation. He joined the group. He was working to try to balance the community. It never worked out.

(MN): Were there gang issues in the neighborhood in the forties and fifties that you were aware of or was that not a big deal?

(EK): No that came, that came but we did not have the issue of the gangs on Prospect we get it on Longwood Ave. which is a cross Street maybe on Union Ave. or on 160th St. Westchester Ave. area but we did not have much. The gang\situation did grow.

(MN): Did you feel threatened by crime in the forties and fifties?

(EK): I never did. I always had a lot of cash on my person, my clients would get off he train to come to cash their checks we had a charge account they would pay five dollars or eight dollars or whatever and I would cash their checks and they were not afraid to walk home with money in those years.

(MN): When did you start getting involved with the schools in the neighborhood? Did that come much later?

(EK): No that was also the 1950s. I became a member of, well first of all I was appointed by Jim (my Lions as a member of the local school board. About six or seven

of us were appointed at one time.

(HM): Later they had the elections.

(EK): This is before all of that.

(MN): Now what was the area of this particular school board?

(EK): Well I worked for Dr. Benjamin Strought and his line when south to about Longwood Ave. maybe a street or two below, and then North up to Parkchester, that's Northeast so we took along P .8.99, P .8.23 was part of it P.8.39, P.8. 50, 52, 62, 75 and then the one up

(HM): 48

(EK): 48 and the Hunts Point Yes.

(MN): Now when you were on this local school board did you actually visit schools?

(EK): Oh yes with Dr. Strought we did a lot of work. He created a council, East Bronx Community Council and his secretary Beatrice Ball was assigned to work in, Beatrice Ball Tanzer she was a real fireball everybody worked and caught meetings, we went to the meetings and the parents were sometimes members of different schools, they would come to the same place and they would have complaints and we would take care of it and we would work with the parents. We would work with everybody. We also worked with the communities, that was the main focus of the East Bronx Community Council.

(HM): That is when I got involved. I was involved with Tanzer. I was the delegate from the Central Board of Education to district seven when Dr. Bernard Frameman became the superintendent there and Pete Tanzer and I worked closely together with the parents

and the community organization.

(MN): Now was this in the fifties or the sixties?

(HM): I think this was in the late fifties, early sixties. They decentralized the school system in the late sixties.

(MN): There was community participation through these intuitions.

(HM): Yes through the parent associations and also the city agencies like the police department and the sanitation. Those people used to come to some of the meetings if they were asked to come with the issues the issues that related to them.

(MS): What kind of programs did you run at the schools that were not there later on?

(EK): Well I can tell you one thing, the city woke up to the fact that the streets were dirty, they created on a city wide basis a citizens committee to keep New York City clean and then they divided it. So we had George Bishop who was a very well know, big realtor and owned a lot of property and man with a lot of influence. He was in charge of the Bronx. He divided the responsibility into the neighborhoods, areas and I became the chairman of district twenty-two of the sanitation department, and we organized the people there for cleanliness. We taught them how to use the garbage cans and so on. We had a lot of different things going on like on Becks St. We got landlords to contribute something like five thousand dollars so that we could make operations on there fronts, paint the rooms, the ledgers, the doors, the windows, clean the sidewalk and a lot of work when on there and we had to wait. As soon as this committee to keep New York City clean, the cops helped, and the health department helped.

(HM): Who was the Mayor around that time? Was that LaGuardia or Wagner?

(EK): No I think it was Wagner right in the fifties.

(MN): When you had parades who marched in the parades?

(EK): We had all the school people march. We had at least ten or fifteen schools and we would ask communities.

(MN): Were there cadets [INTURUPTION BY CELL PHONE]

(EK): We had boy scouts march.

(HM): The City Missions Society had their corp. would march too.

(EK): The other thing I can say that I can back up is I have tons of files, but you will need another fifty years to go through all the files.

(MN): That's what the Bronx Historical Society is here for.

(EK): They have files?

(MN): Well one of the things we want is for people to donate their old files to the Bronx Historical Society so they can be used by future historians. And we are trying to raise money to get help for Peter to go through them because it is a big job to make sense of this.

(HM): Are your files all organized? Could you put your finger on what you are looking for?

(EK): My files are semi-organized. I had everything organized. I had the best system, but for years????

(MN): Do you have files from the Urban League?

(EK): Yes

(MN): And the East Bronx Community Council?

(EK): Yes

(MN): Those are priceless documents.

(HM): What about the Bronx Council on the Arts?

(EK): I have that too.

(MS): You were very involved in the Jackson Democratic Club, why don't you tell us a little bit about that? What they were trying to do in the community?

(MN): What year was the Jackson Club founded?

(EK): I do not remember when the Jackson Club was founded, but I know that in 1940 it existed.

(MN): It existed in 1940 when you came to the neighborhood.

(EK): Yes and the Jackson Club was on McKinley Square and Boston Rd.

(HM): Boston Rd. and 169th S1.

(EK): 169th S1. one flight up. They would take care of their constituents like Mondays and Thursdays the constituents would come with their complaints. They wanted the referrals. They wanted help and so on. There were two people, Mildred McCarthy was the leader of the lady's section, and Harry Cook was the leader of the men's section. They assigned other people to take the referrals. Before the night was over they had a lot of referrals and they called me at my store and they said Elias there is a man who is in jail and we went to get him out, he needs to be promoted, he gets a job and so on. After you get him out his traded calls for him to be a plasterer or a concrete man and in a week he will be working elsewhere. I did that maybe eight times, ten times.

(HM): This was when McCarthy's husband was a judge, wasn't he?

(EK): Yes McCarthy's husband became a judge.

(MN): Did the people in the neighborhood know that you could go tot the club to get things done.

(HM): I do not know. My mother was very active with Mrs. McCarthy but my mother was a republican. I think in a sense they worked together as community people.

(EK): Mildred McCarthy also was involved in organizations that were outside of the political realm and she worked for the community. Her forte was the March of Dimes, and women were on the council to donate money for the March of Dimes. (HM): The Jackson Democratic Club I think was the first very important club in the Bronx where the black political leaders were born.

(MS): Elias you helped Walter Gladwin get elected.

(EK): Yes

(MN): Who was the first African American elected official from the Bronx?

(EK): Walter Gladwin

(MN): What year was that?

(EK): He was elected to the assembly in 1952 because he dropped out of the 1951.

(MN): He was the first African American from the Bronx Elected official.

(EK): Yes for public office.

(MN): was he from the Jackson Club?

(EK& HM): Yes

(MN): And you helped manage his campaign did you?

(EK): Yes my store we managed his campaign. I called myself the coordinator and I was all over the place, calling and going.

(HM): No wonder you did not have time for the New York Times. [Laughter] you were too busy when things happened.

(MN): Who was his competition? Was the big competition the Democratic Primary?

(EK): Not the Primary.

(MN): The general election.

(EK): Yes

(MN): A Republican had a chance against him?

(EK): Yes.

(MN): Do you remember the name of the person who ran against him? (EK): I do not.

(HM): Then there was the woman who became a judge too from that area; a black female.

(EK): Would it be Anne Withey?

(HM): Anne Withey. She was not a judge. She was the corporation council.

(MN): How do you spell her name?

(EK): Withey

(MN): When does Ivan Warner come in?

(EK): Oh Ivan comes in after Walter Gladwin. Walter Gladwin became a judge; Ivan was running for the senatorial job.

(MN): State Senator?

(EK): State Senator and he was elected.

(MN): In the fifties or the sixties?

(EK): All in the fifties.

(MN): So you were involved in the Jackson Democratic ...

(EK): I really was not involved. It was not in my proprietary interest but a friend, as a matter of fact I voted in that district because I did a lot of my work there.

(MN): At your peek how many employees did you employ in Hollywood?

(EK): In Hollywood I had about fourteen, fifteen employees.

(MN): At that time a local store could hold its own relative to what you know the departments' stores and all that?

(EK): Yes we advertised.

(HM): At that time I remember the community on Prospect Ave. was a very vital commercial place. The Five and Ten was across the street from his store and we had the three movie houses. It was easy to get to. Everything you needed was right there on Prospect Ave. A little further was 3rd Ave., but Prospect was very important and the businesses were very I would say upscale businesses.

(MN): This was a pretty classy street?

(HM): It was a very classy street.

(EK): To stay straight in the South Bronx where people were going to Fordham Rd. Fordham was being built up.

(MN): So this was the classy street and the hub was something a little more.

(EK): No the Hub was down there on 3rd Ave and 149th St. There was a lot of activity there.

(HM): It was a larger area.

(EK): They did their job. [INTERRUPTION BY PHONE]

(HM): There had the Perns Department Store and Alexander's.

(MN): Let me just turn it off.

[TAPE TURNED OFF]

(MN): Now it sounds like the forties and fifties are an absolute wonderful time to be a part of. Did you see warning signs in those years that things were going to get difficult or were you basically very optimistic?

(EK): No you began to loose your optimism because it began to weigh and everything began to go down. Southern Blvd. picked up. All the black outs really caused a lot of trouble.

(MN): That is in the sixties

(EK): Yes.

(MN): In the fifties you were still optimistic:

(EK): In the fifties everybody was sturdy and everybody kept their jobs. We carried on like we would live forever.

(HM): When Parkchester, I forget now exactly when Parkchester was developed. (MS): In the early forties.

(EK): the 1940s

(HM): Was that in the forties, because that is where some of the people that lived in the Morrisania area moved over to Parkchester and when Co-op City blew up they went there too. But many of those people started out in the Prospect Longwood area and many of the black people started out in the Prospect Longwood area.

(MN): You mentioned that gangs were an issues but not a big issue in the fifties.

(EK): That's right

(MN): What about drugs, the same thing?

(EK): We would never see it, we would hear about it but yes they had drugs.

(MN): There was a heroine problem?

(EK): Yes because even on Westchester Ave. they had a drug rehabilitation center.

(MN): This is in the fifties?

(EK): No the sixties.

(MN): It was not like you were worried in the fifties ticking off your customers?

(EK): No, no, no.

(MS): What did you see people, I don't know if you asked them or if you heard, what did people usually do, the minorities usually do that when to your store. What were their occupations? What kind of work could you classify most of the people in?

(EK): Not professionals, but they had job. They ladies would get desk jobs, very nice. And they began to go into the teaching profession, a lot of the ladies and the men followed.

(MN): What kind of blue-collared jobs did the men do who were in your store?

(EK): I know a lot of the men worked for the railroad and in the Post Office, we had a lot of Post Office people and the railroad. A lot of people worked in buildings, custodians, and maintenance people, a lot of maintenance. I found a lot of the customers would pull out an instrument to help me, a screwdriver, a hammer, you know climb up a ladder to do this. They were always available.

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(MS): There were a lot of factories in the Bronx. What about factory workers?

(EK): A lot of ladies worked in factories; over on Westchester Ave they had many factories.

(MN): What sort of manufacturing was going on?

(EK): Dresses, ladies dresses.

(MN): They had a garment trade in there.

(HM): Was that going down toward 3rd Ave. on Westchester?

(EK): Well mostly on Westchester Ave. near Longwood and down towards Jackson Ave. The factory buildings, I had one, as a matter of fact they had one hundred and fifty machines, doing the machines, and all the ladies were making dresses. That entire industry faltered and tens of thousands moved elsewhere.

(MS): Were these men the janitors and maintenance getting living wages where their wives could be able to stay home, or were the wives doing desk jobs or working in factories or whatever?

(EK): Well the men who worked I think were comparable to everybody else. The salary was x number of dollars and it would be the same for everybody. I never heard any complaints that blacks were paid less or any minority. I never heard that kind of complaint, all they wanted was to get productivity and you had a lot of people who were very good producers, but you would have a lot of people who would not. Who would

carry the emblem but they cannot produce. I even see it even lately, with your mouth you cannot get worked up. They say man is the only animal that consumes but does not produce.

(MS): You were also involved in housing in the South Bronx, including St. Mary's houses and stuff like that and trying to get community service in the housing projects.

(EK): Yes I was involved with the Bronx welfare and health council. Elizabeth Sphere was the executive director and one day the city decided to put up the St. Mary's Housing Project which was near St. Mary's near the Jackson Ave. Middle Income Housing, and Middle Income Housing does not get the facilities that the lower income housing would get, and there was a big uproar. They wanted the middle income to get the same facilities.

(MS): What do you mean by facilities?

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO]

(EK): You could play basketball where the seniors could play cards and where they could assemble and listen to a good word. It was a show so these things were missing and Elizabeth Sphere asked if I would head a committee that would get the facilities for the St. Mary's Housing Project. I at that time I was representing the Prospect Ave. Businessman's Association at the Chamber of Commerce and I asked them if they would also help me. I didn't not think that they would respond that way they did, they said we cannot help you on middle income. Next thing you know the middle income will

become welfare and you will be in trouble. They had enough with the low income and they were against the middle income getting the facilities. I could not get the support of the Chamber. We did get the support of many organizations in the area????? Associations and we had a lot of school people and the ministers.

(HM): What about the bank?

(EK): The banks would not be in favor.

(MN): What year was this?

(EK): This in 1956

(MN): When you say the ministers, by this time was Reverend Hawkins working on this?

(EK): Reverend Hawkins yes I do not remember him working on this project.

(MN): Who were some of the other ministers?

(EK): There was a fellow in 156th St. a Hispanic and he had a chase there in the middle of what we were doing. We called on him and he supported us and we used the church for meeting, like every week. I lost track of him and I do not remember the name of the church but all these things come out.

(HM): Is the church still there on Prospect and 156th St.?

(EK): Oh no I am not talking about Prospect and 156th that is St. Augustine's.

(MN): That's the Lutheran Church.

(EK): No I am not familiar with that, 156.

(HM): Across from the school, there is a school on Prospect Ave. and about 156th

(EK): Oh you mean 130, P.S. 130?

(HM): Yes there is a church near the fire station.

(MS): Elias going back to St. Mary's, you had the community organization working to get the community facilities in the housings projects.

(EK): We did succeed.

(MS): How did you succeed?

(EK): We went downtown to the housing authority maybe a half a dozen times, and we finally got the lady in charge of the program to see it our way. She did see it our way from the very beginning, but to try to implement and she did work out a scheme of things where we would get the facilities and they would have it. To this day when I drive by I see an awful lot of activity there.

(MN): When St. Mary's opened was it a racially integrated project or was it the same thing as Forest?

(EK): It was not intended to be inhabited by quotas. That theory was at the other housing, people who filed to get in and had the requirements made the grade.

(MN): Did you have any relation with Morris High School in those years?

(EK): Yes they cooperated very much so in those years. There was a principal by the name of Dr. Bernstein.

(HM): Was it Dr. Shiftster? Paul Schiftster.

(EK): But Dr. Bernstein was a man I worked with and it goes back in the fifties and they honored me at that time at that high school.

(HM): They were active with the East Bronx Community Council too.

(EK): Yes with the East Bronx Community Council you had the churches like St.

Anthony of Padua, Father Gerald Ryan. Did you know him?

(HM): No

(EK): He was the on the East Bronx Community Council.

(MN): What color hair did he have?

(HM): Red

(EK): Father Ryan is now and has been for sometime the pastor of St. Luke's on 138th St. and he bothers me a lot with his mail, every two months there is a raffle. [Laughter]

(MS): You were also very involved with health services, specifically Lincoln Hospital and trying to get the new Lincoln Hospital built. Can you tell us about that?

(EK): I was on the Board of Lay Revisory Committee of the Lincoln Hospital and I was there nineteen years. I was also a chairman for about nine years, and during that course we were trying to gain a new building and we had one commissioner say it is granted but his time over there was short lived and the man coming in said we can not give it to you. So we would yo-yo, are we getting it or not getting it. We mobilized the community and we succeeded in getting it. But we had the help of the Hunts Point Multi-Service Ramón Velez. At that time if you had his help you had dynamite. We got it and we have the new Lincoln.

(MS): a lot of people have a negative view of Ramón Velez, but you I think have a different point of view.

(EK): Well when one gets something done you can not sit around and talk for four years to get something done that you could do in almost one. You are going to lose friends; you are going to make enemies. Most of the people you lose are people who are jealous

of your accomplishments and Ramon Velez established himself wonderfully. He came to me, as a matter of fact in 1962 and he came from New Jersey, he told me he was a colored man and he was a social worker and he would like to get involved in the community and I took him to Lincoln Hospital and I took him to other organizations and he was on the Board. I had turned my back and he had already organized the South Bronx Orientation Center at 1029 E. 153rd St. on the corner of Southern Blvd. He already had an office and was working in the community. From there he went places, but he was smart and he knew what he was doing he built the city. He started a village down on Jackson Ave. all because he had dreams and he was successful. And the people who were jealous of him were still working there. He is a very sick man now, but he they all lived off him. He made enemies but he could not help it. I have been in the community for ninety years and there are people who do not like me. I cannot find them, maybe you can. [Laughter]

(HM): They did not like his style but they liked what he did.

(EK): Yes they came to eat at his table

(HM): But he was very sort of insular in maintaining his own power, he was not one who shared it. That was where the problem was.

(EK): He was very smart; he would not talk with any of his power unless he was sure the place would look good. He was always jealous that nobody should take it away from Hunt's Place Multi-service. It was always there. I remember sitting in this place of business and talking to him and he says oh I am going to; he had a dream of having a museum in the South Bronx. I figured dream on, I come back a little later and he says

they are building it. So dreamed but he made the means. He asked the city and they all supported him. You have a city that now and a lot of people are thankful that they had Ramon Velez. Medical Center and all kinds of centers there in the midst of it they all have jobs.

(HM): What is he doing now?

(EK): Oh he is very sick, very, very sick. He will not survive.

(MS): From the late sixties on there was a lot of burnouts in the South Bronx, people abandoning their buildings and at one hand the landlords refused to burning buildings and on the other hand the tenants refused to burning the building down. What do you think was going on there? Was there a chicken and egg type of thing?

(EK): I think so yes because I did see people burning the apartments so they could go into the housing projects. I did see that and not once, but many times.

(MS): I do not understand you would burn your house down so you could move into housing.

(EK): They did not have a house, they had an apartment. They started fires so they were in the street, so the Red Cross puts them someplace for a night or two and then they made an application for the housing which they may have made a like a year before. They had to wait tow or three years, housing would put them into the apartment right away.

(MS): Ok they do not have anywhere to stay.

(EK): That was a gimmick that was used.

(HM): Did you know a Mr. Klein a realtor who had a lot of housing on Prospect Ave.?

(EK): Ruben Klein?

(HM): I am not sure what his first name was because we lived in his building on Prospect Ave. when he first came. On 1322 Prospect Ave. He was very selective about the people he allowed or that he rented to.

(EK): Yes he would check their.

(HM): Financial situation. And as result I would say as I am a product of his sensitivity it was very nice for those of us who made it because he had screened the families and those families became very friendly. I am in touch with quite a few of them and a lot of the children became professionals and business people coming from that area of the Bronx. They were buying cloths at your store, the men went there.

(EK): What did I do with all the money! [Laughter]

(HM): Well I do not know what you did with the money but you were like an intuition before they build the buildings. Everyone in the South Bronx or the East Bronx knew about Elias Garments.

(EK): I would agree because if anybody had a problem they were sent to me. I was a referral agency. I would sit in the back like you are sitting now and I had a mirror and I could see from the mirror what was going on there, but I had other people take care of the store. I had chairs where people were waiting there next; I was like a social worker.

(HM): Exactly. Where did you live?

(EK): Here the Pelham Parkway, across the street I lived for twenty-five years and here for forty years.

(MS): A lot of people, just to continue on the housing, in fact somebody wrote a PHD thesis about it at Harvard, say that the problem with the Bronx real-estate was that the landlords could not get mortgages from the banks from the sixties on. And that the

inability to get mortgages was a major problem. Did you see that as a problem?

(EK): Yes I did. If you lived in the South Bronx, lived in the redlined areas you would never get a mortgage on anything.

(MN): When did that start do you think the red lining?

(EK): The red lining must have been going on in the forties.

(MN): Even in the forties.

(EK): Yes the banks may have sensed something happening, they saw trends and they did not give loans.

(MN): Did you hear people complaining about this?

(EK): Oh yes.

(MN): That they were having trouble getting loans.

(EK): Yes many people.

(MN): That included business people as well.

(EK): Yes it included anybody. In was to go for a loan I would have gone through the same experience. Perhaps in signed this way and then that way I would be eligible for a "loan. I did get loans when I needed money but I t was not easy. But forgetting loans, getting mortgages on houses that was impossible. So there was a creation of the concept of the lay owned federal bank was created to grant loans to people in the red lined district.

(MN): When was this done in the fifties or the sixties?

(EK): 1959, the concept of the lay owned bank was formed.

(MN): And this was specifically for New York or the whole country?

(EK): Well they had the right to make those anyplace. But it was done to assist the area in loans and the headquarters was on Prospect Ave.

(MN): Why do you think this did not work? Ultimately why do you think this did not work?

(EK): The red lining?

(MN): No I mean in other words you have this Federal response in the neighborhood to try to help with the loan problem.

(EK): Well one small bank, well you know one swallow does not make a summer, if a bank takes its capital and ties it up it can not move it could be in trouble. But you keep talking you can make loans and you make friends and making deposits and you carry on an intuition. The Bank actually did make a lot of loans in the area where people never got loans from any other bank.

(MS): The Dollar Savings Bank for example, which was a major bank, was notorious for not loaning money, giving mortgages and such.

(EK): And you had the Bronx Savings Bank and the Dollar Saving Bank and the Lower Side Bank and they had institutions that had branches in the area but they would not give a loan.

(MN): When did you start hearing business people in your area saying this area is done; I am getting out?

(EK): Oh the fifties.

(MN): Already in the fifties?

(EK): Certainly in the sixties, but you being to hear the mumbling yes and we who have

courage remains.

(MN): Did you ever start to feel it is dangerous to run a business I this neighborhood?

(EK): I never felt that way. I personally never felt that way.

(MN): What about your customers? When did customers start to say you know I am starting to get scared?

(EK): In the sixties.

(MN): In the sixties.

(EK): I could tell you that in the fifties a lot of my customers carried money in their pockets, but everything changed in the sixties.

(HM): I remember walking trough the neighborhood you know down to Prospect Station from where we lived, I went to Hunter College so I had to get on the subway at Prospect and come home very last at night. I always felt safe, and I graduated in 1948. I later worked up at Fordham Hospital but I jut never felt unsafe, until after the period of the fires. Around the time that the fires happened I would say that significant changes happened in the Bronx at about the same time or right afterwards. Wouldn't you?

(EK): You used the Prospect Station?

(HM): Yes

(EK): That was a long walk home.

(HM): It was a straight shot you know.

(MN): In the sixties what were the warning signs for you as somebody involved in so many different levels that things were, you know?

(EK): Well if you have a change of customers, for example you had affluent people working people who had money then you wind up with people who do not work or get

marginal salaries.

(MN): You saw a difference in the class of customers.

(EK): You being to see that you are going to start to loose. In my situation it was different because I was already in real estate as I was looking to get out, I was not looking to get out but I tried to expand my business my retail business.

(MN): Where was most of your real estate located?

(EK): At that time it was all in the Bronx. No it was ninety percent in the Bronx.

(MN): Was it in different parts of the Bronx?

(EK): Yes, mostly in the South Bronx.

(MN): Were you reaching a point where you started to worry about your South Bronx properties?

(EK): I never worried. I had to work on properties yes but I never had to worry about anything. If you have to improve property you have to do it, you get a contractor to do it. You make a sale and get somebody in there.

(MN): How did you make sure that you had tenants who paid their rent and did not destroy the property?

(EK): You could never make sure enough because your tenants generally come through recommendations. If tenant is a good person and you like him, they say my cousin or my primo wants an apartment so you give it to them. You carryon and that's it. That's the extent of the credit check. Sometimes we would make a real credit check on people.

(MN): Where you fairly successful I having buildings that were able to maintain their

profitability.

(EK): I think so.

(MN): Why were you able to do it and other people were not?

(EK): I think that they all were in that same position. If they wanted to do other things, they were greedy.

(MN): See the thing is you are a person and you are in the middle of this community where buildings are burning and it does not happen to you. What is the difference between you and the other people?

(EK): Are you trying to say that landlord burned the buildings?

(MN): No I am just trying to say why were you able to be successful as a landlord or an owner where other people were not?

(EK): I worked hard. I was there during the day or I had a manager. I was always at the property, the different property. I always covered ground. If it is a small house, two or three family house you were dealing with somebody who was the custodian of the house. So he reports to you and you call and so on. All I know is that I had rapport with everybody and just carried on. There is no magic, only hard work and perseverance.

(MN): I guess then the question is, if most landlords were like you could this whole tragedy have been avoided?

(EK): I think so. The thing is how do you hear things about fires set by people. I heard it but, I did not believe what I just said to you. I could see, the fire gets out to control and the whole building goes up.

(HM): Did you get pressure from the other landlords to try to

(EK): No, no

(HM): They left you alone.

(EK): But you say pressure and you mentioned Ruben Klein, Klein was the chairman of all the landlords in the Bronx.

(MN): What was his first name?

(EK): Ruben.

(MN): Ruben Klein.

(EK): Ruben Klein, he was chairman of the association of landlord or association of realtors.

(MS): But Elias you also said it was very difficult for landlords to get mortgages, how did they deal with that problem?

(EK): Well they had to go to second raters if they needed money they had to pay through the nose.

(MN): What is the difference between a bank mortgage and a second rate mortgage?

(EK): Well the bank mortgage if they give you the mortgage they will charge you the bank rate, 6% at that time was a high rate. If you go to somebody who was not a banker, a private person he is not a banker and his money is working so he has to earn more than the 6%. So he would charge you about 9% or 10% and the building could not carry that.

(HM): They used to have what they called finance companies on 149th St. I remember and I guess that is where some of the borrowing of money.

(MN): So that was where some of these finance companies were?

(EK): No they are all over.

(MS): Did any of the political leadership like volunteers or people like that try to do

anything about the mortgage problem at that time? It was dealt with later in the eighties and the nineties, but in the sixties where the political leaders trying to do anything?

(EK): I do not remember that at all. I do not remember anybody coming to the aid of the industry. I really do not. It just worked out by itself.

(MS): Did yourself or other landlords go to City Hall or talk to politicians in you county or about what was going on in the Bronx? Like you guys probably had the most influence because you owned property there, you had more wealth and people were renting from you, did you as a landowner and as a businessman talk to politicians about why the burning of the Bronx was being allowed by people in politics in New York City and why they were not doing more to stop it or prevent it?

(EK): Well we talked to anybody we come in contact with.

(MS): And they just did not want to

(EK): Their hands were tied. Politician at that time was not as noisy as you have a politician today, to make a bank surrender. They would ask a bank to give a loan or to go to nearest ????? but today a bank is a little more scared. They would listen and they would do whatever they had. As a matter of fact today the law requires the bank to do that under CRE.

(MS): Right that is what I meant the changes in the eighties and nineties.

(MN): What about things like closing the fire houses, was that a factor?

(EK): No I do not recall that at all.

(MN): When you finally decided to close the store, was it because the business was becoming unsuccessful, or because you were just tired and had enough other things you

were doing?

(EK): Well I think it was a little bit of everything. I was very heavily involved in real estate. Heavily involved with the community and the business was not giving me any benefit and having me write down the hours I always worked. So I figured I might as well give it up. When I went out of business, a lot of people who owed me money on charge accounts I never sent statements, I just wrote it off.

(MN): Did you maintain an office in that area after you?

(EK): Yes I had a two story building. So I moved up stairs.

(MN): Where was that building?

(EK): 904 Prospect Ave.

(MN): Between where and where?

(EK): Between 162nd and Westchester Ave.

(MN): Ok and your office was on the second floor. Did people still come to you like they did before?

(EK): Yes

(MS): 904 Prospect Ave was where Hollywood Closers is right?

(EK): Hollywood Closers was in 904.

(MN): So basically you closed the store ...

(EK): I moved upstairs.

(MN): Now did another store move into the?

(EK): A furniture man. He was in the building and I sold him the building.

(MN): Is that building still there?

(EK): the building is there.

(MN): Is there a store there now?

(EK): I am sure there is, but I have not been there in some time. I heard that he went out and he had trouble. But I also heard that he sold the building for a big profit. The value went up in that area. I gave him a bargain and I heard that he sold it for a quarter of a million dollars.

(MN): When did you think was the worst time for the Bronx; the time that seemed most hopeless and pessimistic during what years?

(EK): Well I think when we had that blackout.

(MN): 1977

(EK): There were two blackouts.

(MN): 1965 was the first.

MS): 1966 I think was the first.

(EK): Well whenever the first blackout was I think is the writings on the wall.

(MN): Was there any looting during the first blackout?

(EK): Yes

(MN): That is something that is not known; along Prospect was there looting?

(EK): All over.

(MN): Really?

(EK): Prospect not too much. The second one Prospect burned.

(MN): In 1977.

(HM): It was a city wide blackout?

ALL: Yes it was city wide.

(MN): In 1965 people talk about like it was a celebration and in 1977 it was very

frightening. I came under fire actually. People were shooting and 106th St. and

Broadway. I had to dive under a car.

(HM): Really I remember I was at a Community meeting when the lights went out and the police captain for the forty second precinct happened to be at the meeting and he drove me home, I remember that. But you say it was 1965 because the meeting was over on Turnbell Ave. in that shopping area. That is where I was at that time.

(MS): I think it was 1966. It was my second year at Columbia that is why. (HM): It did not last all night did it?

(EK): I was a long session.

(MN): The 1977 was terrible because Tremont Ave. burned, Burnside burned it was rough.

(EK): I drove down to Prospect Ave the second time; I drove down the following morning. First somebody ran to me and said oh Elias 'your place intact'. My place was intact but five and ten went, Roloids went the financial building went and all that.

(HM): That changed the completion of Prospects Ave.

(EK): It ruined Prospect Ave. because at that time it was a well off business area. From that time area it

(HM): It has never been the same.

(MN): So that was the 1977.

(EK): Was it that late?

(MN): After that did you get involved with some of the groups that were building because there was so much new construction that was going up. Like the Bronx Desperados and people like that?

(EK): I know them, no I did not.

(HM): A lot of that was Federal money.

(EK): Yes.

(MS): You have been very supportive Elias of different political leaders in the South Bronx, who were trying to help the situation.

(EK): Well the leaders, I began to emphasize that the time of the Jackson Democratic Club we had Pontiac Democratic Club also.

(MN): Where was that located?

(EK): On Union Ave. I think it was 809 Union Ave. We had the Star Democratic Club on 1029 East 163rd St. Harry Steinberg, who was a commissioner for the city, was the Executive member of the Star Democratic Club. Holy was the Pontiac Club leader. They all had city jobs. But Harry Cook was the only Jackson Democratic Club that worked for the judge. They all had jobs, but they were all interested in the community; things that you do not hear today. They all worked with committees. They all worked with organizations and so on. You need to help a respondent.

(MN): You think that the political leadership is not as responsive as it was back then?

(EK): I do not think so. Not the way it used to be. They used to work with organizations that is hard top say

(HM): Was it Deon who was president when that second blackout went.

(MS): No Abrams was for President. Abrams was there from 1972 to 1980. Dean was before Abrams. After that was Staley?

(EK): After Pedio?

A MAN: No after Abrams.

(MN): Now I have run out of questions, so Harriet do you have any?

(HM): Well I would like to know what your message would be to young people coming along now, like my friend over there? What do you think, you know people talk about this generation that is just getting out of college or are in college as being the new generation, I heard that I do not know if it is true or not, I do not see them really being interested or being involved in community organizations like my mother was and like I was.

(EK): Like I was.

(HM): Yes what should be done to inspire them?

(EK): Well things are different today. We have computers, we touch a button and things happen and so on so we will have to look at the entire story. All children who has youth are going to school and learning, if you take a look at a class for example his class there are more people there. Out of forty ten would stand out. Those ten people are going to make America, and in every class you will have five stand out; they are the leaders. And there has never been any difference. When I went to school it was the same thing, some people stood out. They were the leaders. They got involved in different types of things and so on. The others were in the background and they also got involved. But with education they are taught not to steal, they are taught to be straight, they are taught nice

things, but we still have a bunch of them come up as leaders. So from every class you have the girls the same way, some of them will shine out more than the others. So could sit back and.

(HM): We have to shift them around; for us who are among the old-timers who are here.

(EK): I am not an old-timer. [Laughter] I have one year to go then I will become an old-timer.

Harriet: Well I have at least ten years to go then.

(EK): No a friend of mine is in the insurance business, and he called me up they had a new policy. You pay a premium every year and when you get old you just walk in and you get what do they call that assisted living? So he said it was a good policy. So I said I will take it, when do you think I will get old? [Laughter] Another five years I will be ninety-nine. So I walk in there.

(HM): I was just going to say that I was among the people, my family came to the Bronx in 1932. And of the members in the family and friends I still live in the same area on 168t St. While other people moved to the suburbs and to other parts of the country I always felt that my work or my life was where I grew up. I feel very strongly about, I mean even if my sister were to pass on, she and I live together in this big house, I would still want to stay there even though it is very lonely. Now the community has changed and many of the people in the community they do not speak English, but we still have a block association. Their interest in it is very different from mine, and I kind of feel a little lonely in the sense of not having other people around me who are not interested in community involvement.

(EK): I will tell you, I lost my wife in 1998 and we talked to each other and we enjoyed each other and many times I am here and I am also lonely. But how can you be lonely when you have all this happen? You have to answer letters, and keep going and you have to write. I have a lot of paragraphs written in these portfolios that will turn up; Peter is going to be the beneficiary of a lot of stuff. But he says he can intercept the garbage.

(MS): I am not going to throw out anything.

(EK): Now some of the name came to the floor, so I wrote down names so in overlook I can talk about it. But this is not a situation in one hearing you can solve anything. I could sit back and I could give myself an assignment and put everything in some order, it could be chronological order or it could be in any kind of an order. And back up everything I say with a ton of paper like East Bronx Community Council. I would back it up with minutes and other things that I did not throw out. If I threw them out some remain, and a similar pride with another corporation that we did not mention; Longwood Prospect Neighborhood Association. Longwood Prospect Neighborhood Association was also an outgrowth of what do you call the city workers? The city supplied the.

(MN): Was this under Lindsay or was it earlier?

(EK): No not earlier. When was Lindsay here?

(MS): 1965

(EK): No it was much before. We had a low accustomed neighborhood council the problems of the community center there.

(HM): The planning goods are you talking about?

(EK): No this was separate. We had councils throughout the Bronx and the heads of the councils would meet once a month and a central place and the one who was the chairman

of all these councils was Bob Morganthaw our DA today. It was Elias and Bob, now it is Bob and no Elias, it is too long to remember me, but we met every month and I did a lot. Of course I was putty; I would cover ground for him or anybody. If they asked a question I would do it. So he ran the Bronx and I was the Head of the low accustomed neighborhood council, but the rules came down from the council we had the leaders from before. One day Robert Morganthaw came to me in Hollywood Comers and he said Elias, I am trying to run a campaign for Robert Kennedy, sorry it was John Kennedy and I would like to get him as President and see what we can do for him. Could you do anything in your store? Could you do anything on the block? And before you knew it I arranged a big meeting in my store. We moved the racks away and we had people on the sidewalks and all over the place. He came down with Ethel Kennedy in the store, and we took pictures and we have pictures to back it up.

(MN): So you had John Kennedy in your store?

(EK): No, no, not John, Ethel Kennedy. Then we had speeches all the gang came down and then we walked across the street to the President Theatre and we had three thousand people assembled there and set up the stage for the President. Now Bob Morganthaw came to me and normally you know he asked and I did it. All I ask is that you come to my birthday party or just say you know me. I did not say that but at any rate he is a busy man you know he really is busy but he should not forget. Powell did not forget, we invited him but he is busy, he says I am sorry I cannot go. Powell does not forget. He is a younger member

(HM): Much younger

(MS): Can I ask one more question? We have all the records as you know of the Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Trade and you were involved in the Chamber of Commerce from some point on. Can you give us your involvement with the Chamber of Commerce and what happened to it and where do you think it is going in the future?

(EK): I could say that in 1952 I was the president of the Prospect Ave. Neighborhood Business Association and at that capacity I represented this organization at the Chamber of Commerce, so the local organizations were like an arm at the Chamber of Commerce and over there if I would reorganize the organization in the Bronx to become members. So I did. I brought in the 3rd Ave. Hub, 3rd Ave. Merchants, I brought in Southern Blvd. Merchants, Fordham Rd. 170th St. about two or three others, about six or eight organizations and in 1959 they voted me onto the Board, which was a big feat because to get on the Board at that time and in those years you had to amount to something. They would really check you out before they would put you on. But you would sit on the Board, you now Albert Goldman the Post Master was on the bottom row and everyone standing up. You got about sixty people standing up to be called on. Today if you have the picture of an organization you have them hide behind one person and that was the organization. So It was big and I, as a member of the Board I went to Chairs, I was a Secretary, I was a Treasurer, mostly Treasurer and then Vice President and I became President in 1978 and served four terms, 1978, 1979, 1980, and 1981. Koch became Mayor when I became President, we shook hands. He had a four year term and I had a one year term. My fourth term I was elected an then I turned it over to succeeding administrations and they had big money and they dissipated the funds and I do not know

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Elias Karman

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what happened but the chairman was dormant and has been dormant for about tenor fifteen years. People are trying to revive it but they never succeeded. The main reason is in trying to revive it they had soft reasons and they called on me and I had no other reason other than the Bronx and I revived it like two years ago. We have right here, this is the charter of the Chamber of Commerce but this is called the New Chamber of Commerce.

(MN): So you revived the Chamber of Commerce two years ago?

(EK): The new, I say 2002, now we are 2004 so it is a little less than two years. But the other chamber has leans so to get around it we have the new Chamber of Commerce. And there was a former judge of the Supreme Court judge, Judge Franklyn and he got the charter and he when through the ropes in Albany because you just can not get it like that. You have to know your way around. Then I was successful in getting a man to give us free rent for a year on the 1029 East 163 rd St. and it is a famous address.

(MN): Now that is between where and where?

(EK): That is on Southern Blvd. 163rd and Southern Blvd. And the Chamber is still there, but of course people keep fighting for themselves ...

[END OF SIDE TWO]

[END OF TAPE ONE]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO]

... Albert Einstein, I wrote a letter to the Dean, Dominique Quaker. Dear Dean we are organizing again two paragraphs and I said I would like you to pay five hundred dollars so he writes back Elias Karman if you ate behind it I know it will be successful in closed is my check for five hundred dollars. Fordham, O'Hare used to come to these meetings

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and we have Bronx Community College and Newman College and a few other colleges and we have businesses and health divisions. We had about one hundred and fifty members. But I am not active now because they keep fighting among themselves. They keep scheming; they haven't got the program that they should have. Go into the field and do things, work for youth, get them jobs. You have water along the Hunt's Point Peninsula, deep water boats can come in. Do something with the water. The Yankees Stadium, make sure you retain the stadium and help to see that it is retained and that it should be modernized. There are also free trade zones which we could do at Hunt's Point there are a lot of things to be done if you have a good staff. They hired a lady who did not know anything, she was

Harriet: The have to have people with a vision like you did.

(MN): When Mark comes back from his Fulbright, this guy has got vision.

Harriet: Why can't we keep him in the Bronx?

(EK): I would not let him go. No Fulbright. [LAUGHTER]

(MN): No I am telling you this guy is the best organizer on the Fordham Campus. The best; in a year when he comes back.

(EK): Do not forget!

(MN): I am not going to let him forget.

(EK): No but do it soon. How long is the Fulbright?

(MS) Nine months.

(EK): And then you come back to the Bronx?

(MS) Yes I will be going to Law School in Manhattan.

(HM) Do you live in the Bronx?

(MS) Yes I on Author Ave. now.

(MN): Elias you should consider doing that; having some Fordham students move into your house. You know rent out an apartment or something.

(EK): Is there a need for that? Are the Fordham students looking for spaces?

(HM) I think that there are some Fordham students that are in your class for example if they could hear a person like this you know he is really an inspiration. I think that young people there are some that we can touch.

(EK): I do not mind it coming from her but I wish it would come from some of my good friends! [LAUGHTER]

(HARRIET) You see I am not that far away from you, but I fell young because I like to be around young people.

(EK): You now Maxine Sullivan?

(HM): Yes she used to live two blocks away from us. She died though didn't she?

(EK): She died. Maxine Sullivan the famous singer. Did you ever hear her?

(HM): Yes she was the Jazz singer. Do you know Valerie ?

(EK): Kapers?

(HARRIET) Yes

(EK): She is around.

(HM): In fact she is still playing her jazz actually.

(EK): Maxine Sullivan was a singer, mostly Jazz and in the old time oh she was great.

(MN): I am trying to convince my students that the Bronx is the future now and this may

be were it is going to come back.

(EK): I would agree with you.

(HARRIET): Well I think there are people, some of these new people who have moved into the new housing that are run by the, what is that group of the ministers?

(MS): South Bronx Churches.

(HARRIET): The shepherds and some people who live in those buildings, I do not know them unfortunately, but I think that there are people that have put down roots in the Bronx that we need to try to inspire in terms of community outreach and vision and I know somebody that maybe we should work with. Do you know Paula Jenkins?

(MN): No

(HARRIET) Well she used to be a teacher in the neighborhood and her husband had a store on 163rd St. and Tinson Ave.

(EK): I think I know who you mean.

(HARRIET) It was an interracial marriage, and she was a teacher up at John Kennedy High School and she works with the shepherds. [INTERRUPTION BY PHONE] and she is now helping the former minister of St. Augustines. And she came to that meeting that day.

(MN): Right yes

(HARRIET): I have a vision and I have not talked to her that much, but she is a person that knows a lot about the Bronx too.

(MN): I have a lot of students who are very interested in the kind of things you are talking about and they are very talented and they are very dedicated and Daniel and Patricia are both on call anytime you are ready.

(HARRIET): Well an idea I had and I have been

(EK): Do you know Alpima Tyson?

(HM): Oh yes Mrs. Tyson and her daughter.

(MN): Her daughter Monique.

(HM): and her brother the planetarium man.

(EK): They have a lot of information the Tyson Family. We were all together. I could tell you things, like you have St. Augustine's, Reverend Hawkins and we had a lot of activity.

Then a block away you had the Roman Catholics, St. Anthony of Padua. Fr. Russell, Mont Senior Russell, he was on the board of Lincoln Hospital and we fought like hell to get the new Hospital and we got it. He was with us, but Paine the red head

(MN): Ryan

(EK): Yes Fr. Ryan is now the pastor at St. Luke's 138t St. and he came out of that church but he was also with the East Bronx Community Council. He succeeded me, not immediately, but he succeeded me as president and he was also very active in the community. We keep it up, he is running a church and he always needs money and he always has the letter to accompany and I always send him a check. On 138th St. you had another fellow, The Bible Church of Christ, Bishop Roy Bryant, he started in a small place and I built it for him 1034 Prospect Ave. Reverend Floats was 1036 next door. As it was building the place he out grew it. I got him a place for like three hundred members on Morris Ave. Since that time I got guff on a few places but he is all over the world. He's in Maryland and North Carolina and Africa and Asia he has a few churches. He is a Bishop and he calls as we are friends and I help start him. If you cal him now and ask

about me, oh he will think the world of me. So I have that from others also that I like. It is almost free but we worked our way up because we have been very considerate and we persevere in anything we do. To persevere you have to make sacrifices. You see it as a problem that you tell somebody that you are going to do it. And you sit down and oh my god it is so much work, I can not do it. You said it. You are going to do it. You are going to work it out. And in the end you will be complimented. Furthermore after you finish it they like it you are going to get more jobs that will all come to you. That you do not want! [LAUGHTER] but you see I worked my way up because of that. We had Target Tuberculosis in the South Bronx the Health Department promoted free chest x-rays there were mobile units going around. We were behind it; we lined up people to take them.

(MN): This was the East Bronx Community Council, or the Merchants?

(EK): No it was not the Merchants, it was a separate committee but it came out of all of the councils, we all acted together. McCarthy was active with it, from the Political Club. We all acted together, we did not give it a name, we just did a job. We called it Target Tuberculosis.

(MS): When was this?

(EK): This would be maybe 1958.

(HM): Well you know there are good things happening.

(EK): Yes as I remember I write down and if I look at a word I can tell you a story.

(HM): Well we need a documentary about him and some of the people you worked with.

(MN): Well let's wind this up because we might want to come back again.

[END OF TAPE TWO]

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