

089 William Wright

Please note that any items that were difficult to transcribe are marked with an [indiscernible] tag.

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: The date today is the 21st of January, and I am in the home of William Wright who lived at 165 Robert Street from 1974 to 1994.

Respondent: Right.

Interviewer: So the first thing I want to say is thank you...

Respondent: Oh, you're most welcome.

Interviewer: ...to meet...

Respondent: It's my delight.

Interviewer: And I had to stop you from speaking because you were just starting to talk about how much you enjoyed living there, and I want it on [0:00:30] the tape. So please, start with that and then I'll ask the rest of the questions...

Respondent: It started when we came back. I had an apartment in Forest Hill. When we came back from Germany I had studied in Germany, and I came back with my first wife. And when we were expecting our child, we decided we need to be in a house for a variety of reasons, and we looked at many different houses, and this was on the market. And since we had lived north of St. Clair, of course coming down the hill into the [0:01:00] Bloor Street area was naturally somewhat suspect. And the street was just beginning to be renovated. I think the house across from us – I can't tell you the number, but it was the first one to be renovated and it was written up in "Home and Garden."

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: It was a grey house with a big tree out front, which has since been cut down. Now it's not nearly as nice as it was. Anyway, we sit somewhat. Well, this was the house we finally settled on buying and it was basically a ruin. [0:01:30] The front porch had been torn off, the steps were falling down, the basement was totally full of junk. The backyard, the fence had been torn on the backyard, the garage had been torn down. We found out later there were liens against the house, which you know, they had not got permission to tear down the garage. And so the backyard had been used as a dump by people, so there were toilets, and [0:02:00] there were broken records, and broken glass, and it took us years and years to get all the glass out of the garden. And we had to get a dumpster and it cost us at that time three hundred dollars, and the whole – to clean out the basement and clean out the backyard had filled completely this dumpster. The house itself was a skeleton. Somebody had torn out all the walls, the original framing, everything had gone except the front door, and the stained glass window. [0:02:30] And when I had the stained glass window rebuilt, I was told by the stained glass people – I've forgotten. That was somebody down on Sussex Street down in that area – that it was the best stained glass in that whole area.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: But somebody had obviously put their fist through it and so on and so forth, so it needed very careful replacement. [0:03:00] Excuse me. Patricia? Oh, she's – Cleo, in the bedroom. Go on, in the bedroom. [Laughter] Anyway, we decided we'd buy it, and the first thing we did was we had to put in a kitchen. And then we had to put in a bathroom. So we took a small room, and I think it had been intended as a little dressing room, but we used that as the bathroom, and there was [0:03:30] a small bedroom at the back, a very big open space, a loft above with no railing or wall whatsoever, and no railing beside the staircase except ascending from the main floor to the first floor. And so we had to put in a railing beside the staircase and a railing on the loft so nobody would fall over, and that was about it, and then we put down – as I said, [0:04:00] all the floors had been torn up, and there was nothing but subflooring. So we put down quarter-inch plywood on all the floors and my sister-in-law paid to have hardwood put down on the living room,

dining room. So that was finished, but no baseboards. The windows were all a mess. You could feel every draft between here and the moon that first Christmas coming through that house, so what we did was bit by bit, we'd replace one or two windows. We replaced two windows [0:04:30] on the ground floor. In the second floor, they had put drywall over one window, but not replaced the window. So that was terrible. I mean totally illegal, so we had to fix that and put in a real window. And we put a turner on the stairs instead of the staircase going up to the third floor, it was very awkwardly built because it did not replace the original staircase. [0:05:00] And so one little room at the back at the third floor had been removed, and that was – then that space remained open to the floor below. On the back of the kitchen was a shed, and it stank of cat poo and whatever. I don't know.

Interviewer: So a part of the – just adjacent to the kitchen was part of the house.

Respondent: It was a built-on. It was a built-on. A lien...

Interviewer: Yes. Part of the house.

Respondent: Yeah. Still part of the house.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: And that first couple of years, we could smell cat [0:05:30] in that back part of the house forever and ever, until we got that torn down, which we did eventually and had a little sundeck replacing it. And the basement then just stayed unfinished, and it was perfectly dry until after a couple of years we had a very, very cold February, and the foundation of the house was made of fieldstone mortared together. And because this guy that [0:06:00] had the house ahead of us decided to get rid of the inside stair and put an outside stair going down beside the foundation of the house to go into the basement, that exposed the fieldstone foundation to the frost, and so at one point it started to crumble and the back corner of the house started to sag. So we got it propped up, a very dear friend of ours had a son who was an architect here, and [0:06:30] he knew a Greek carpenter who was the greatest guy. He could do everything. And so they worked away, they propped it up, and then in the

summer they came and replaced the foundation. And that basement had always been dry, and then the inspector came and said, "Oh, you have to tear up all that ceramic tile that's there and put down accordion tile," which was A, smaller, and B, collected dirt. And from then on, we always had water in the basement.

Interviewer: Oh. Oh my god.

Respondent: And it was so annoying, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: It [0:07:00] was very smooth and he said, "That tile is terrible. It'll crack, and you know, then it'll get stopped up." Well you know, I think we had that dug up three or four times from the time we were there because it got stopped up, and then the basement would back up, it would back up in the basement.

Interviewer: Oh. So you had a lot of difficult times with that.

Respondent: Oh, we certainly did.

Interviewer: What I find amazing is you found this place, you described it as practically a disaster zone...

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...and you bought it.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: What made you buy it? What was it? Was it the neighbourhood? Was it...

Respondent: No, no. [0:07:30] I didn't know anything about the neighbourhood.

Interviewer: So what was it that attracted you?

Respondent: But it was near the university, and I was teaching in the university, and I taught there for thirty-seven years.

- Interviewer:** What did you teach there?
- Respondent:** Music. There were ten different subjects I taught over a period of time.
- Interviewer:** All in music.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Harmony and counterpoint, ear training, keyboard harmony, choral techniques, organ performance, organ pedagogy, organ improvisation, and organ literature.
- Interviewer:** Okay. So that was one of the major **[0:08:00]** attractions for you.
- Respondent:** Yes, yes. Uh-huh.
- Interviewer:** To be close to the university.
- Respondent:** But the main thing was it was the only thing that would take our grand piano, our seven-foot harpsichord, the big furniture we brought with us from Germany which belonged to my wife. We had a big Biedermeier secretary, we had a large antique armoire that we had in the dining room, which we still have, a large – and we had a baroquial cabinet. Various other things **[0:08:30]** that we had.
- Interviewer:** But you know, most of us when we think of those homes, we think of them as small homes, and you wanted to be near the university, but you also wanted a home that could hold your large furniture, so...
- Respondent:** Well it held our furniture because the walls had all been taken out.
- Interviewer:** Oh, so somebody had opened up the space.
- Respondent:** Yeah. So it's a thirty-foot living room/dining room.
- Interviewer:** I see. Okay. So it went from the front to the back.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Yeah. And...

- Interviewer:** I'm going to make some copies of those pictures.
- Respondent:** Okay. That's [0:09:00] fine.
- Interviewer:** Okay. Oh okay, so it turned out to be a long space that you had.
- Respondent:** Yes, yes.
- Interviewer:** And it held your grand piano and your large furniture from Germany.
- Respondent:** Yeah. Mm-hm. Mm-hm.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh.
- Respondent:** So the second-floor hall, that became sort of – that was where we had a sitting area. We have all our books up there, and we had the big harpsichord up there. And the third floor was my study, and so I had bookcases, and whatnot up there.
- Interviewer:** So it turned out to be a good size home [0:09:30] for you because the walls had been opened and because you had the third floor.
- Respondent:** And it turned out once we got everything fixed up more or less, it turned out to be quite elegant and we had a lovely garden at the back because the property was long.
- Interviewer:** Yes.
- Respondent:** It was a twenty-foot-wide lot by a hundred and seventy-five feet deep, so you can see that you know, we had space, and we had gardens at the side, and before that window, we had a vegetable garden in the back. And then after I bought a car, we had a garage put there.
- Interviewer:** [0:10:00] And you still had a good size garden.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.

- Respondent:** We still did.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So the location was good and after you put in a ton of work, the home was a good home to...
- Respondent:** Mm-hm. Mm-hm.
- Interviewer:** Okay.
- Respondent:** No, I figured that over the years we spent at least ninety thousand dollars fixing up the house bit, by bit, by bit, by bit, and then of course when my first wife died and five years later my present wife and I married, we completely remodeled the basement so that it would be [0:10:30] bedrooms for her two boys and a bathroom down there.
- Interviewer:** So how many of you were living in the house at that point with you, and your second wife, and her two sons...
- Respondent:** Yes. And my daughter.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh.
- Respondent:** From the first marriage.
- Interviewer:** Right. Right. Yeah. So you all fit in there quite comfortably.
- Respondent:** Oh yes. Uh-huh. Mm-hm.
- Interviewer:** I'm wondering if you could talk about – you began to live there in 1974 for the next twenty years until '94. Who made up that neighbourhood beginning in '74, and how did [0:11:00] it change through that twenty years?
- Respondent:** Well I think earlier it had been more Jewish, but south of us, Mr. And Mrs. Nido lived there, they were Portuguese. South of them lived the Girusis, Mario and Maria was the – my first wife said she was a mother of the street. She sat out on her front porch and she knew everything that was going on. And across from us lived Bruno

and Marion Dressler, and they were very, very sweet. They were from Germany and they had run a dry-cleaning [0:11:30] business, and had retired. And for their amusement and income, they worked as stand-ins in movies. [Laughter] So you'd see them going down the street at five in the morning dressed in all kinds of clothes, going down to be extras in a movie shoot. But they were very sweet, and up to just a year ago, Marion and I – I didn't send her a Christmas card this year. I should have done that, but she used to send us a Christmas card and [0:12:00] greetings and so on, but I think she's pretty frail now. And across from lived Vince and oh, what's his wife's name? And he was from Italy and...

Interviewer: So people came from a lot of different places, the neighbours that you're...

Respondent: Yeah. And next door to us was a man who originally was Indian but had lived in Canada for quite some time, and his wife taught at Central Tech. I think she taught English. He taught in the university, but I can't remember what he taught. [0:12:30] And he died shortly after we had moved in. We knew them fairly well, but not intimately, so his name escapes me because it's so long ago.

Interviewer: But what I'm picking up is that you knew your neighbours, is what I'm picking up.

Respondent: And what we always said was that the first destruction of a community is the car because once young people started to move into that area with cars, they parked behind the house and we never saw them, but all the people we [0:13:00] knew, we didn't have a car. I didn't buy one until after my first wife died. All the people we knew, because we walked up and down the street and they sat out on the front porch and we talked to them, and that's what makes a community.

Interviewer: Did you sit out on the front porch?

Respondent: We didn't because we didn't have a big enough porch to sit on.

Interviewer: Oh, it's one of those little ones. Yeah.

- Respondent:** Yeah. You can see here there was just – they built that on. Just have a shelter for the door.
- Interviewer:** Right, right.
- Respondent:** But we talked, and I used to [0:13:30] bike around and I got hit by a car, and Vince came rushing over when he saw that, you know, a police car brought me home and so on and so forth, and anything he could do they were ready to do. At one point we felt our three-year-old daughter had gone missing, and she was up on the third floor playing and we didn't realize that. We thought she had gone outside to play in the garden. And we were running all over trying to find her, and the neighbourhood was all energized, you know? We just felt so protected there because we had connections with our neighbours. [0:14:00] It was lovely. And then north of Judy and John Fielder were the – was a Greek lady and her husband, and his name I can easily look up, but they were very sweet. And she had brought us things that she had made, and you know, I mean people were just very kind to us, that's all.
- Interviewer:** So you had a nice little community.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.
- Interviewer:** There's a real sense of community.
- Respondent:** Lovely. Lovely.
- Interviewer:** You knew each other, you looked out for each other, and you helped each other.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. Mm-hm. In fact, my daughter still keeps in touch [0:14:30] with Judy and John Fielder.
- Interviewer:** So that's kind of chosen family, is how I like to describe that.
- Respondent:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. So it was a mixed neighbourhood, you're saying.

Respondent: Mm-hm. That's right.

Interviewer: And were a lot of people doing what you did? I'm referring to all the renovations. Was there a lot of renovating happening?

Respondent: That came later, I think. More at the time of my second wife and I – say, in the last twenty, twenty-five years, then people started to move in and renovate [0:15:00] houses, and that sort of thing. But there wasn't a great deal before that.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: And the people that – immigrant population renovated sort of quietly. They would just kind of rebuild their room to make an apartment on the second floor or an apartment in the basement, and it wasn't what you'd call – it was increasing the density of the house so they could accommodate more, make it into an income property, but it wasn't renovating it to make it [0:15:30] beautiful, as went on – it goes on now in Cabbagetown.

Interviewer: And in this neighbourhood too.

Respondent: Yeah. Uh-huh. Okay. Yeah.

Interviewer: In terms of socioeconomics, how would you describe in 1974, and then you left in '94. Did it change during those years?

Respondent: I didn't feel it did because we never had a large income. I was working at two jobs, but I never had a [0:16:00] full-time professorship at the university. It was all contractual work. And so basically, we were scraping along. We didn't save much money, and I think that a lot of the people on the street really didn't have a lot more money than we did. I didn't feel there was a great disparity at that time.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: Now there may have been, but I didn't notice it. And it wasn't very important. [Laughs]

Interviewer: What about the languages? Were there a lot of languages at that time?

Respondent: [0:16:30] Oh, I'm sure, but one of our greatest amusements were the Dresslers who came from south Germany, and my first wife – I studied in north Germany, and my first wife was very north German, and they would speak with a mixture of German and English, and it was the funniest thing. We would just be so amused because we'd be trying so hard to understand this mixture of German and English, and we weren't getting either one or the other. [Laughs] It was a delight, [0:17:00] actually. We were very fond of them. And when we – the front of our house needed some painting or something, so Mr. Dressler said, oh, he would do it. He was seventy-five or something. Got up on a high ladder and painted the front, and it was – the whole brickwork was all sort of painted white and it was peeling off, so we had that taken off and it was repaired, but he painted the gable and the window frames.

Interviewer: Looks very nice. But that's more of a neighbourliness.

Respondent: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: That you're describing.

Respondent: It was just [0:17:30] wonderful.

Interviewer: Yeah. Were there some difficult neighbours?

Respondent: Yes. [Laughs] Mr. Nido was very difficult. Mrs. Nido was very nice, but he would throw out garbage behind our house and if you tried to put it back in front of his place he got really annoyed.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Oh god.

Respondent: And he would go back and forth to his property and I'd better watch out, or I might get sued for libel. Anyway, you don't have to put this in.

Interviewer: Well I can't see that it would be useful to put in. [Laughs]

Respondent: No, but I mean it gives you [0:18:00] a picture. Mrs. Nido was very, very warm-hearted and generous. And their daughter, their younger daughter was deaf, and we were invited to the wedding of the daughter. And it was all done both in English and in...

Interviewer: In sign?

Respondent: ...in sign language, and the daughter was Portuguese, married a man who was Italian, and the mother was very upset.

Interviewer: Both mothers? Or...

Respondent: Well I didn't know the other, the groom's mother, but at the reception, you could just see that it was the parting of the ways, [0:18:30] you know? There was one group and there was another group, and we said, "Which group shall – well I guess we'll speak to the bride's family because we know a bit about them, but we don't know anything about the other side." But for us, as in-betweeners, we were interested in this bringing over this hostility between various countries in Europe into Canada. And of course it exists today, but anyway, but poor Mrs. Nido. She was upset, and we tried [0:19:00] to cheer her up. Mr. Nido, as I said, he was rather difficult, doing things – he renovated his house illegally, emptied out his basement, and put all that stuff he put up in his backyard, which meant that it wound up being a foot higher than our backyard, and that meant we couldn't grade it properly. It all goes south. All the land there goes south, of course. So he was to the south of us and so, you know, rather than engage in a huge war, we put in [0:19:30] three dry wells in the back of our property, which costs, again, money. But what it meant was he dug a big hole down to below the frost line, filled it with coarse stone and gravel, up until about six inches, filled it in with top soil, and then he kind of wanted to gather but sink down and drain away even in the wintertime. But because he made it into a lake basically, you'd go out there and if there was a thaw, you'd just have to wear your puddle [0:20:00] jumpers to get to the back of the house. Anyway, when – let's see now. What else was it? Oh yeah, we had a lot of trouble with squirrels in the roof, but that was one of those things.

Interviewer: Well you lived in a neighbourhood so close to the university. Were there some homes that were rented out to half a dozen students?

Respondent: Interestingly, I think those students live more south of Harbord, or maybe a little more west.

Interviewer: So the [0:20:30] answer's no.

Respondent: Some of the students I taught lived on streets between Yonge and Church, or Church and Jarvis in some of the east-west streets there. I can't think of the names of any of them. McGill, I think, was one, or anyway, those houses had been turned into sort of rooming houses. After Jarvis Street collapsed and became sort of the red light district, then [0:21:00] all that area became more rooming houses and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: So it wasn't an issue where you were living then, on Robert Street.

Respondent: No. I'm sure there were students who lived somewhere or other around there, but they didn't seem to live – they'd be more likely to live south of Harbord.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. Well I live south of Harbord and yes, [laughs] we did have some. What about the traffic? Were there...

Respondent: Well before we moved in there was one kid a week getting hit on the streets between [0:21:30] Spadina and Bathurst because one was south from Bloor to College, and one was north. Major would be north, and the next one would be all south. So they used them as speed things, and they just gunned it, and so the residents got together and got the city to make them alternating one-way streets, so they changed direction every block. And every time, if we ordered a taxi, we tried to explain, "Be sure to tell me he has to [0:22:00] come west on Sussex and south on Harbord." "Oh, no. Our taxi drivers know how to get there and so on." So half an hour later, the guy would be out in front and he'd say, "Oh, he had the hardest time finding you," and we'd say, "Well we told you people explicitly." "Oh, they never tell us that." [Laughs] And we laugh about that, so.

- Interviewer:** But when do – do you have some recollection of when that happened?
- Respondent:** It was before. Just before we moved in. It was pretty new because people were complaining about taxi drivers. They'd say they didn't know why that had to be changed. [0:22:30] So '72, '73, something in there.
- Interviewer:** Right. So you were saved that terrible trauma of kids getting hurt because of people speeding through.
- Respondent:** Yeah, yeah. So it was always, you know – north of Sussex, the street we have north, Sussex and Robert went south, and south of Harbord it changed directions again.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah. I know that area very, very well. Yeah, yeah. So that was the good news for you.
- Respondent:** And there was still a couple of old shops there.
- Interviewer:** Oh, tell me about that.
- Respondent:** There was a shoemaker at the corner [0:23:00] of – what's the one over from Major? Borden, is it?
- Interviewer:** Major, Brunswick.
- Respondent:** Brunswick. There was a shoemaker there.
- Interviewer:** On Brunswick?
- Respondent:** Brunswick on the north. The southeast corner, Brunswick.
- Interviewer:** And Sussex?
- Respondent:** Yeah. And there were a couple of other stores that were sort of just fading out, and you can see in the architecture at the northwest corner of Sussex was originally a [0:23:30] shop, and then there was a shop, an architect bought the house on the – Sussex and

Major, the northeast corner, and on the south corner there was the shop in there too. You can see where there were shops.

Interviewer: Oh, you can see exactly where there were shops.

Respondent: Yeah. And so all those people – I mean there was no Dominion in the old days. All those people had local stores. They did all their stuff along Sussex and they'd develop.

Interviewer: So one was a shoemaker. What other – little grocery stores?

Respondent: Yeah. The shoemaker I used, [0:24:00] but he moved out, oh, I would say about four years after. I think he was the last holdout.

Interviewer: So he survived beyond the little corner stores on Sussex.

Respondent: Yeah. And some of the stores were just their bacon when they moved in. We could see they had been something or other. Maybe it could be maybe a drycleaner or something like that. I don't know.

Interviewer: But they hadn't been transformed into people living in them as their homes yet.

Respondent: No, no. The people that lived upstairs always above the shop.

Interviewer: [0:24:30] Right. So the – right. And now those are all homes and you can see the windows that were the store windows before.

Respondent: Yeah. And there was – I think there was a synagogue there. It had been a Baptist church, and then it became a Jewish synagogue. I think that would be on Brunswick somewhere south of...

Interviewer: Well there is a synagogue on...

Respondent: Still? Yeah, okay.

Interviewer: ...there's a synagogue on Brunswick, but that is just north of Harbord.

Respondent: [0:25:00] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's right.

- Interviewer:** So that's a very, very...
- Respondent:** There's an old building because it was a Baptist church.
- Interviewer:** In there.
- Respondent:** Mm-hm.
- Interviewer:** My grandson is going to have his bar mitzvah there in a month.
[Laughs]
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. I think it was a very conservative synagogue, if I'm not mistaken. Some Jewish person told me, but maybe it's different now. I don't know.
- Interviewer:** Now it's a more egalitarian...
- Respondent:** Yeah, yeah. Anyway...
- Interviewer:** So you remember that.
- Respondent:** And then of course there was Kensington Market, and my wife used to shop there until the Chinese moved in, and [0:25:30] she felt the quality of material, it was always top-notch quality with the Jewish community. And I'm not being racist; it's just when the Chinese moved in, everything seemed to be not as particular, so you'd get more second-class vegetables and, you know, oranges and so on, so gradually we'd shop more and more at Dominion rather than at the Kensington Market.
- Interviewer:** But it's such a different atmosphere. What did that change feel like to your wife and to you?
- Respondent:** We felt sad. [0:26:00] [Laughs] Because we liked shopping in the sort of local market and so on, yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. But you did use it a lot initially until that transition.

- Respondent:** In initially. Yeah. Mm-hm. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then Poretta's Pizza. Once my daughter got a bit older, maybe five, every Friday night we'd go to Poretta's Pizza [laughter] which was sort of considered one of the best pizza places in Toronto. Do you remember that?
- Interviewer:** Oh yes, I do.
- Respondent:** And then, of course, he gave it to his brothers, or two his two sons.
- Interviewer:** [0:26:30] Mario ran it for a long time.
- Respondent:** And then the sons didn't want children in there, so that stopped being a family-oriented restaurant.
- Interviewer:** So they actually stopped children from coming in?
- Respondent:** Yeah. They made it obvious they didn't want families coming. They wanted to cater more to the school crowd and the university crowd, and so on and so forth. And then gradually, just stopped – people stopped going there and it stopped being a pizza place. And then it was sold as another kind of restaurant, you know? Changed hands and so on. But [0:27:00] from – I didn't know the owner personally, but at one point I gather from gossip, he felt very, very badly. He wanted it to continue as a family restaurant, you know? And it was excellent. The pizzas are great. So that was our big outing. Every Friday night we'd go down there and we'd order a pizza, and we played Uno with our little girl, and you know, it was all very friendly, and comfortable, and we thought it was great.
- Interviewer:** Do you remember any other stores on Harbord?
- Respondent:** [0:27:30] Not really because we didn't do much. I mean as I – I didn't – no, we didn't shop. There was sort of a grocery store, but we never bought there.
- Interviewer:** So you used the corner stores, you used Kensington Market.
- Respondent:** Yeah. And then we used the Dominion more, more, and more, and more.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: And I basically just simply walked to the university by the bookstores. Every once in a while [0:28:00] I would go in, and if I'm ever getting too many books, I just bring them over and sell them second-hand there for what little I got. But basically we didn't shop much around Harbord Street. No.

Interviewer: What kind of bookstores were there at that time?

Respondent: Well this was a second-hand bookstore, and there was a second-hand bookstore at Sussex and Spadina. That's been going for a long time. I don't know if it still is.

Interviewer: Yes, it is.

Respondent: The post office is there, of course, which was very handy. We thought everything was very handy. One thing we really regretted [0:28:30] was the disappearance of Elizabeth Delicatessen.

Interviewer: Elizabeth Delicatessen.

Respondent: You know that?

Interviewer: On Bloor Street, you mean?

Respondent: Bloor Street. Yeah.

Interviewer: Was it Hungarian?

Respondent: Yes. They were terrific. And they had – they were on the south side, and then the woman that owned that got very nasty and upped her rent, and so they moved across to the north side. And I got to know the woman that owned it. She was a young person, very, very nice, very pleasant, and you know, if you needed a meat platter for something, she just would [0:29:00] make it up, you know, and it would be just very nicely done. Often we went there to buy things, and she had occasionally some German, oh, little pastries from Dominoes or something like that. She'd import. But

the meat was always exceptionally good. The sausages they made themselves, and everything. You'd walk in there and just smell absolutely clean, you know? It's lovely.

Interviewer: I used to sometimes buy their dobos torte.

Respondent: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: The layered cake with the wonderful **[0:29:30]** sugary toppings. Yummy. [Laughs] Yeah, I remember that store well.

Respondent: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah. But anyway, the person – they doubled her rent, and she just said, "I can't. I just can't maintain it." And she just walked out the door and locked it, and went away, and left all the meat and everything to say, "You can have it."

Interviewer: Oh. That must have been heartbreaking.

Respondent: I was so upset, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. That's a very sad story.

Respondent: Yeah. And then Gus the Other Barber was there.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Respondent: And I used to go to him for my haircut, and we had a really nice **[0:30:00]** relationship. He would talk to me and he'd tell me some personal things and he'd say to me, "You know, I haven't even told my wife this, but I feel that you are a person I can tell this to." And so I won't tell you what it was, but you know, it was very, very personal experiences that he'd had.

Interviewer: So he was – because he's still there, but he's west of Bathurst now.

Respondent: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: He wasn't west of Bathurst at that time.

Respondent: No, no. He had his shop on the south side of Bloor Street just along a bit from where the Elizabeth Deli used to be on the south side.

Interviewer: [0:30:30] Yeah.

Respondent: That was all walled up for years, and years, and years. That just stayed walled up. And then there used to be a little camera store there, and the elderly man who ran that was the father of the ex-husband of the [indiscernible 0:30:45].

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: Brownor was his name.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: So I used to get my film there.

Interviewer: Is that a picture of your daughter?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Beautiful. Beautiful. How old is she now?

Respondent: Oh, she's thirty-five, six, seven. Something like that. Yeah. How old was she when that picture was painted?

Interviewer: [0:31:00] I don't know. Four? I don't know.

Respondent: Yes, she was. Exactly. Some people – we thought it made her look older.

Interviewer: Very sweet.

Respondent: But she was always very sunny and we found it made her too serious, and Barbara said, "That is how I see her." You know, she grew into that painting when she was ten, or eleven, or twelve. That's what she looked like. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Has a very lovely feeling about it.

- Respondent:** Yeah.
- Interviewer:** That beautiful little face. Yeah, yeah.
- Respondent:** Now, what else can I tell you?
- Interviewer:** So you remember a lot of the stores. Interesting collection of **[0:31:30]** different kinds of stores and how you connected with the Hungarian restaurant, and with Gus the Barber. He must be getting quite old now.
- Respondent:** I would think so.
- Interviewer:** I just know that I see it on the other side of Bathurst.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah, yeah. Maybe I should make a pilgrimage and see him. Then we started going after – I married my present wife. She started going to Hutoshi's down at the corner, and then I started going to Cyrus down there to get my hair cut.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh. Right.
- Respondent:** **[0:32:00]** And then when we moved over here, we changed venues because it wasn't as convenient and it got to be really expensive, so – and poor Cyrus died a couple of years ago.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Any comments about the schools? Did your daughter go to a local school?
- Respondent:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. No, we had a friend who taught at the Institute of Child Study, and we sent our daughter there, and she went for several years, but when she was in about **[0:32:30]** grade four, I think maybe, we found out afterwards it wasn't the greatest place because she had fabulous concentration, and what we discovered was that because they allowed the kids to roam around so freely, it destroyed her sense of concentration. And also she was the victim of bullying, which we didn't know until we got her out of there. And the Dean of the Faculty of Music threatened me with losing my job and so we decided well, the first thing **[0:33:00]** we

had to do was stop sending her to a private school because we couldn't afford it. We immediately started to retrench, and so we investigated the school Lord Lansdowne, which is south, and the principal advised us against going there. He said, "You'll find there are very few blonde kids in the school." And he said, "It's about seventy percent Chinese."

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: "And they stick together." And then about, I don't know, twenty percent Italian. And [0:33:30] maybe about five percent, you know, European origin. And he said, "I think your daughter would have a very hard time in this school." So then we went to Hillcrest Public School and she finished up there. And then she – no, we found out – then she went to Huron Public School. Sorry. That's where she went.

Interviewer: So you could walk there.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And she was in the music...

Interviewer: Is that a good school?

Respondent: ...program there.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: It was good. [0:34:00] Yeah. I think so. And then she went up to Oakwood Collegiate, and that was not a great experience. So she wound up at Northern, but at this point in time her mother died, and various things.

Interviewer: Oh, tough times. Very tough times.

Respondent: So...

- Interviewer:** But she's musical like her father?
- Respondent:** She is musical, and she went to Germany eventually [0:34:30] and trained in physiotherapy, and is a fine physiotherapist, so.
- Interviewer:** She working in Toronto or Germany?
- Respondent:** No, Germany. She married a man who's a lawyer, and he's now presently a judge and, you know, they're very happy together. They have two children and she's permanently settled in Germany. So her mother came from Germany, and she's gone back there.
[Laughs]
- Interviewer:** The blonde hair comes from her mother, was it? Or?
- Respondent:** She looks very much like her mother's [0:35:00] family, yes.
- Interviewer:** Uh-huh. So I guess you do some travelling or they do some travelling.
- Respondent:** Oh yeah. They've been here for Christmas, and we go over there. And of course we go to Europe. Practically we have to zero-in on Germany, north Germany because you can't go to Europe and not visit your family, so it sort of limits our travelling. My sister would like – she lives in Vancouver – would like us to go out there more often, and we said, "Well, if we travel anywhere we're going off to see Caroline and the children."
- Interviewer:** [0:35:30] Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have children who live away, so I understand that. Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- Respondent:** A magnet.
- Interviewer:** Yeah.
- Respondent:** But I don't know if you want me to tell you about it.
- Interviewer:** Well you talked about the traffic and how you were lucky to have moved here just after that had been changed. Any comments about the sidewalks or the back lanes, use of back lanes?

Respondent: Yeah. I was just going to say the subway, Spadina subway was put in while we were there, so that was interesting. [0:36:00] But our lane was like a highway. They'd rush up and down there, and whenever it snowed, I had to get out there and shovel the snow from our part of the back lane, and I always had to shovel it in a trapezoid form because if you try – I didn't do that when we didn't have a car, but when we got a car finally, which was in 1989 or '90, right around in there, I [0:36:30] think about a year after my first wife died – because I found that getting home by bus and TTC was taking too long, and my daughter would be there, and you know, I had to get home and get supper ready and so on and so forth, so I thought okay, this is it. I've got to get a car. And actually it was very nice because I found that was the one part of my life where I was alone and not responsible for anything, and just fifteen or twenty minutes of absolute peace and quiet. It was nice. So anyway, we turned the back of our property then into a parking pad, but I found I had to [0:37:00] get out there whenever it snowed and just shovel immediately. And also the lane beside us, the Nidos didn't do much shoveling and I always had to make sure it was shoveled, and then I'd gone – so I shoveled a little bit of the Fielders and I shoveled Maria [laughter] – I'd shovel also next door, the Greek lady was not very strong and her husband eventually died. He wasn't strong, so I shoveled theirs, and I've got a bad back. So that's why we moved. I said this shoveling after our – Patricia's sons left, we can sort of [0:37:30] co-op them to do some, but after they left and I was doing it all, it was just getting too much for my back and that's...

Interviewer: So that was the determining factor.

Respondent: ...that was the real push to get out and get into someplace where we didn't have to be responsible. But I miss my garden very much.

Interviewer: Are you a gardener? Did you do some gardening?

Respondent: Not really. My first wife was a real gardener and she did a lot there. And basically I kept up the gardening in her memory, but I enjoyed doing it too, and I liked to have things nice and [0:38:00] we had a – you know, we had a lovely rose garden and various other plants around.

Interviewer: That is beautiful. Beautiful.

Respondent: And there was one picture I had here, which was – you know, I'm a United Empire Loyalist person. I don't know if that means anything to you or not.

Interviewer: I'm not – no.

Respondent: It doesn't. Okay. Well these are the people who – when the British were driven out of the United States, remained loyal to the crown and they moved up to Canada. **[0:38:30]** So my father's family in 1780, I guess, 1770, moved to Prince Edward Island. So this rosebush, if I can find a picture of it...

Interviewer: It's not this one?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: No.

Respondent: Here it is. And I have a picture of a – no, you can't quite see it. Well there's the garden. **[0:39:00]** Anyway, it was full of yellow blooms and I had got it from a friend, and it was a United Empire Loyalist rose. It was a wild, yellow rose, so it went to Niagara-on-the-Lake, and then it came up to our place and it grew up over the fence. That's not a rose. That's something else.

Interviewer: Beautiful. Beautiful.

Respondent: And I was so annoyed because the roots moved over to the other side, and somebody who – **[0:39:30]** young couple moved in there. The first thing they did was chop it all down, and that killed that rosebush, so that was gone. I thought, you know, that's a historic bush.

Interviewer: So the roots went to their side?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Wow..

Respondent: And I said, "That's typical United Empire Loyalist. Moving north of the border." [Laughter] You see?

Interviewer: Oh, what a freaky thing to have happened.

Respondent: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But anyway, that was the end of that. Now see, there's the front of the house. And there's our street. This is the Fielders. [0:40:00] That's Maria Girusi, and this is a Greek lady here just north of us. And then Vince and his wife live there, and the Dresslers lived over there. Bruno's gone, Marion's still there, but I think she has Alzheimer's.

Interviewer: Well I'm definitely going to look at it as I walk up Robert Street tomorrow morning, which I do every day.

Respondent: Then this is – so we worked, and worked, and worked. My wife and I, we walked all the way up and down. We wanted to get [0:40:30] to save the stained glass window I told you about. Is there a picture of it here? Somewhere there's a picture of it.

Interviewer: Yes, I saw it.

Respondent: Yeah. Here. We wanted to save that. Now how do you put drapes there?

Interviewer: Okay. Let's see.

Respondent: You don't want drapes at the side because it covers off this beautiful sun, this stained glass and stuff. And you know the people came, they said, "Now this is German glass, and this, this orange glass here is English glass. It's called muffle." I said, "Well if there's a word – that's the ugliest glass." [0:41:00] But then the little brown – there were French glass and German glass, and they said the finest glass was German glass. They said the German stained glass is the best in the world. Did you know that? I didn't know that.

Interviewer: I didn't.

- Respondent:** Everybody talks about shards from everything, you know?
- Interviewer:** So how did you solve that problem with covering the window?
- Respondent:** Well first, it was all broken and so we covered it with just a piece of Styrofoam, and then when I got money together, I got it rebuilt. And the thing we put in, that's what's coming to this, we walked all from Eglinton right down to King Street visiting every drapery shop we could, **[0:41:30]** and we finally wound up about **[indiscernible 0:41:32]**, and he made – where is it? A Roman blind for us. Here it is. And that's French chintz.
- Interviewer:** Whoa. Oh my god.
- Respondent:** And we would have liked to have taken it with us, but we didn't know what to do with it. And we barely, barely moved out of the house and my daughter said, "Oh, dad. I think I want it. Could you ask them?" And **[0:42:00]** I wrote and asked them, and they didn't say anything, so they'd obviously thrown it out.
- Interviewer:** Oh.
- Respondent:** But it was a costly thing. And see, they...
- Interviewer:** But it certainly worked.
- Respondent:** ...framed this? The whole thing is framed. That's all sewn together and there are two pieces down the centre, and when my wife and I – first wife and I were in the **[indiscernible 0:42:16]**, we went into one of the chateaus there and the whole chateau, this whole bedroom was covered with that very chintz, so we said, "Oh well, that's special."
- Interviewer:** It was meant to be.
- Respondent:** That's special. Yeah, yeah.
- Interviewer:** Yeah. And it was also meant to be. **[0:42:30]** And so you had this. It would have been an interesting picture to have that back garden

of yours with those old glass, and toilets, and all kinds of – and to see the transformation that you made.

Respondent: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Let me say about the heating system. Did you do any major changes with the heating in the house?

Respondent: We kept the furnace for quite a while until [0:43:00] we renovated the basement, and then we put in another furnace, a new furnace, and made the room smaller. But it was hot air heating.

Interviewer: You put that in? Or that had been there before?

Respondent: It would have been – originally, the house had been heated with a coal furnace, I think.

Interviewer: Oh I bet it was. Sure.

Respondent: And I'm sure that originally it was hot air, and then now it's changed [0:43:30] and hot water put in because you could see the holes in the subflooring where there had been pipes coming up. And then this guy, from whom we bought the house who started renovating, he had taken all that stuff out and put in a hot air furnace, and so we had hot water, gas heating, and then a gas furnace, and that we inherited then from the – relatively new.

Interviewer: Did your family use the JCC at all?

Respondent: No. [0:44:00] Patricia did, my present wife, but we didn't use it at all. We used the university and my wife took her daughter there. They used that on Sunday, so it was open to the public. Did a bit of swimming there. And that's about it.

Interviewer: And what about the university? Do you feel that it had some influence, or did you have some thoughts or feelings about having the university as a neighbour?

Respondent: No. I felt the university was really a very destructive force because they kept taking down more [0:44:30] and more of the housing.

You know, they really destroyed all that – Huron Street with that horrible library, and then on the other side of, you know, St. Mary Street, all of that old French type of housing, that all was torn down. It was sort of like a huge octopus just devouring all the neighbourhood. And I never felt the university was a very humanitarian institution in that way. They didn't respect the lovely properties that were there [0:45:00] that could have been. And I always felt too that they made a big mistake just trying to make it bigger, bigger, bigger. They did do – you know, that New College, and it's gone up, so I think they would have been better off to keep it split like that. And the universities that I know in Hamburg and in – they didn't try to absorb the territory around them.

Interviewer: Yeah. The octopus.

Respondent: They just stayed there and they never did their own – but I know my nieces in Germany, [0:45:30] they had to wait sometimes two or three years to get into university, so they go – they just, you know, they didn't try to get – allow more people in. They just said, "We're taking how many thousand students and that's it, and it's going to stay that way." And that's what they did.

Interviewer: What about the safety and the livability of the neighbourhood?

Respondent: Well when we went first there, we thought maybe it might be unsafe, but we got to feel it was very comfortable.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: And you know, all the time you were there, [0:46:00] they said that the Spadina and Bloor was the worst drug scene in Toronto. I never once saw a drug deal. I don't know. I might be very stupid and blind, but I never felt it was unsafe. I never felt that there was anything – well there was once when my daughter was – she was still at the Institute of Child Studies. She was maybe about six or seven. A man exposed himself and she didn't tell us. She told the teacher at the school, and so of course the police were called right away, and the police [0:46:30] phoned and said afterwards, "Boy, is your daughter a good witness." She said, "She could describe

the running shoes he was wearing exactly and so on," but she wasn't interested in much else that was going on. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Oh, that's a very good story.

Respondent: So but after my first wife died, she was assaulted by a man behind our place. She was coming up to choir practice and she went out the back gate, which I told her never to do, and it was dusk, and a man [0:47:00] attacked her with a knife, and she managed to run and get away.

Interviewer: Your daughter or your wife?

Respondent: My daughter. Yeah. And she didn't tell me at all, and she told one of the other girls, who was her friend in the choir, and then her father phoned me and said, "Did your daughter tell you?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well you better phone the police right away," and she had a cut, and the police were nasty. Basically they called my daughter a liar and she just made up this story and made a cut in her own jacket to get attention. Then she was asked to go down and identify from the mug shot, and I said [0:47:30] to the policeman at the, you know, College Street police centre, "I wanted to go in with my daughter," who was underage. She was fourteen at the time. And he said, "No, you're not allowed to do that." I wasn't very happy. And when my daughter came out I said, "How are you?" And she said, "I feel sick." She said, "I have never seen so many awful faces in my life." She was a very sensitive girl. I was so upset at the police, you know? And just – there were three came and [0:48:00] two – they just treated her badly. And the younger one stayed behind as the two went out the door and tried to say a few comforting things.

Interviewer: So first they didn't believe her, and then they made her go in by herself...

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: ...to identify...

Respondent: Isn't that awful? I really don't have any respect for the police. But it was interesting. When we – somebody came and parked behind our – well it wasn't a garage then. We had a parking pad first, and then when I married Patricia we had a garage [0:48:30] there. And this person kept parking there, couldn't get my car out. So I phoned the police and the police was related somehow to the Nidos. He said, "Oh yes, well that's just my niece or something and she has a boyfriend in the house," and yadda, yadda, yadda. My daughter said, "Dad, what was the policeman's number?" I said, "I don't know." "Dad," she said, "You never talk to a policeman without memorizing the number first, then you talk to him." And I thought, "Gosh you know, these kids are so street smart." Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Respondent: [0:49:00] So anyway, that's sort of the story of our life there.

Interviewer: But generally, so I mean you had that very bad experience with your daughter, but generally speaking...

Respondent: I would say it became less safe as time went on maybe, although we didn't have any bad experiences. But when we first moved in there in '75 to '80, let's say '75 to '85, never had a problem really, outside of, you know, a flasher or somebody like that. [0:49:30] That's – but it didn't feel unsafe.

Interviewer: But I've asked you a lot of questions. I appreciate that – your time, and your interesting answers.

Respondent: Oh I love it. I love it. I just love Toronto history. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I'm wondering when you knew that I would be coming and you agreed to speak to me, whether there were some incidents or stories, memories that you wanted to share that I didn't touch at all?

Respondent: Well I don't know. [0:50:00] I was hit twice by a car when I was on my bicycle, and then I gave up then. One was on Bloor Street just outside the museum. And the thing that stays in my mind was how helpful – people say people are not friendly. The people in Toronto

are friendly. I had at least six or eight people come rushing out, and one person went to put ice on my leg, rushed into a restaurant and got ice to put on my leg, and then the ambulance came, and so on and so forth. And I thought [0:50:30] people were in the – the policeman said, you know, "What were the people doing?" I said, "Oh, they were very helpful." He said, "Oh, that's very unusual for Toronto." I said, "No, it's always" – and then another time, I actually broke my foot.

Interviewer: Again another bike accident?

Respondent: No, no. It was totally, totally different. I slipped on a step and broke my foot, and I had to run around on crutches for three weeks, and the streetcar drivers and people were – everybody was helpful. I really thought they were really gracious, you know? And so I don't have so many [0:51:00] – I have a little more negative feelings about people now who are pushy and shovey on the subway and all that kind of thing and never – I'm annoyed by people who immediately stand in the doorways and don't move in so people can get in and out.

Interviewer: Right. Yeah.

Respondent: But I have had people stand and give me a seat. I don't expect it. I'm perfectly capable of standing, but I don't know. I think that...

Interviewer: We've covered most of that. [0:51:30] You talked about the subway and people blocking the doors, and you didn't get a car for many years, so you used public transportation a lot.

Respondent: All the time. Mm-hm.

Interviewer: What did you use most coming from Robert Street?

Respondent: Well I walked to the university always, back and forth. I used to take the Avenue Road bus up to the church, and it was – it used to be absolutely punctual. It would come to Avenue Road and St. Clair at about – always on the hour, quarter-after and the [0:52:00] half-hour, every fifteen minutes. You could almost set your clock by it. Latterly, it got a little more unpredictable and sometimes a bus

would be missing and so on, but generally I counted on getting up to the church pretty easily, then I found that the buses became more and more unreliable and I used to take the subway and go up to St. Clair West and then the streetcar across, and I found that was more reliable because I didn't have to stand out in the cold for half an hour. So that was a disappointment. [0:52:30] You know? But when we lived on Lonsdale Road, I used the Avenue Road bus all the time, and it was very predictable. It was great. So that's – I suppose that's about – and if we had to go east-west, use the Bloor Street subway, we were very handy there. I mean you couldn't be more centrally located.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I feel that way about that neighbourhood too, using public transportation.

Respondent: Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: So what else can I tell you about that?

Interviewer: [0:53:00] Well I think we've certainly covered a lot of different topics, and...

Respondent: You know, I wish I could give you more, but as I said, our house was built in 1880 and as far as I know, it was the first house on the street.

Interviewer: Well you can be sure tomorrow morning when I'm walking up Robert...

Respondent: There are three brick houses just down there. It's the Fielders are in one, talk to Judy Fielder, and those were – actually I researched this when our taxes were going up because, you know, we were told to do this. [0:53:30] They were built in 1903, and there's a historic thing on their house, which is incorrect. It's built in 1880-something, and that's not correct. Those were three houses built in 1903. And it's interesting because our house had a carpenter, but there was a doctor and I think a professor lived in those houses north of us. The three brick houses. And it was a mix – originally

quite mixed. I think probably more poorly paid professionals, [0:54:00] like teachers, doctors, and so on.

Interviewer: Music professors at the university? [Laughs]

Respondent: Yeah. Or a lot of the professors at the universities had homes on Spadina because those were quite elegant in the old days. And see, I have a lot of connection with the U of T because my grandmother and grandfather graduated from there in '96.

Interviewer: Whoa.

Respondent: And Victoria College was – north of that was pasture-land. [0:54:30] North of Bloor Street.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, that's a little before our time.

Respondent: You know, well then my mother went to university and she graduated '25 in the north – the city limits were St. Clair, and Davisville was still a village, Eglinton was still a village, and her class occasionally took a streetcar, would rent a streetcar. We'd drive out to the Humber to park on the siding while they had a picnic on a Sunday afternoon. Imagine. [Laughs] So as I said, I've got a long connection with the university, but [0:55:00] the university has not been very gracious about preserving a lot of the neighbourhood, I think.

Interviewer: Well we can talk about this a little more when I turn this off.

Respondent: Okay. Mm-hm.

Interviewer: But before I turn it off, I do want to say thank you very, very much...

Respondent: Oh, you're very welcome. I just love talking about these things, and as I say, the history of any place I'm in always fascinates me. I studied [indiscernible 0:55:20] for two years, and I used to walk around taking pictures, and I'd show the other students my slides and they said, "I never noticed that. [0:55:30] It takes a stranger to tell us what we've got here." [Laughs]

Interviewer: Okay. Thanks.

Respondent: That's my piqued curiosity.

[00:55:36]

[End of recording]