105 Mario Porretta

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: The date today is the 18th of April, and I'm sitting in my kitchen with Mario Porretta. [Laughter] And Mario started to tell me so many wonderful stories, I made him stop because I need to have these on the tape.

Respondent: Okay.

Interviewer: So Mario, would you just start by talking to me about where your family lived and when, all in what we now call Harbord Village?

Respondent: Okay. So essentially, **[0:00:30]** 1957 is clearly when my parents arrived in Toronto, at least in this neighbourhood. But my uncle Giorgio Giannone had arrived earlier, and in his entrepreneurial exactness, or at least strength that he had as a woodworker, managed to buy up an enormous number of properties, of which we decided – we **[0:01:00]** ended up living in one of them on the main floor only though, because he had now given the second floor to another one of his siblings, his sister, which was fine, but it was a little complicated. But that's just the way life was in those days.

Interviewer: How was it complicated?

Respondent: Well, complicated because I think my uncle wasn't terribly close to his sister and/or his sister's husband, and he tended to be a little bit more of what they **[0:01:30]** call the Mafioso type. So he came from Sicily, of course, and felt that the world owed him enormous amounts, and the world, of course, owed him nothing. And he was a very abusive man, and we didn't like him very much. And it didn't take very long before my uncle ousted him out of there, and he went to live…

Interviewer: So George, Giorgio…

Respondent: Giorgio.

Interviewer: …ousted this…

Respondent: Ousted him and his sister out. And at that point, we **[0:02:00]** – a number of years ago by now, and my dad had decided to buy some real estate. And it just so happened that Giorgio, my uncle of course, had 93 Harbord Street, which of course – it was an interesting building because we had a grocery store on the main floor, of which my dad could work in.

Interviewer: 93 Harbord.

Respondent: Which was owned by Giorgio. And we started to live on the second floor of 93 Harbord Street. **[0:02:30]** And which was rather convenient because, of course, we didn't have to go very far. But everything was actually very tight in those days because imagine your typical Victorian row house and/or your typical Victorian building never encompassed more than three bedrooms. So of course, my mom and dad would live in one, that occupied one. There were now two left. We were four boys, and my brothers and I shared beds. So namely I slept with my brother, Nick, who is now passed away, as you know, **[0:03:00]** and my brother Pat and Sal slept in another bed. And that was the arrangement. At that point, my dad had now decided that he kind of wanted to venture out on his own, didn't really want to work for my uncle. My uncle was kind of a tough man, very hard to deal with, very exacting personality, incredible craftsman, great woodworker, but my dad went basically out to work in construction and worked in the **[0:03:30]** brick laying and concrete, slash, mortar business and hooked up with a whole bunch of other Italians, of course, who were also working and managed to, you know, scrape up whatever monies he needed. And at that point, we bought 97 Harbord Street.

Interviewer: Now at that point, what year are you talking about?

Respondent: 97 Harbord Street would now have been probably in the late '60s, late, late, late '60s. '67, '68 **[0:04:00]** roughly. So from '57 to '68, ten years had gone by, so we had started living on Robert Street. From Robert Street we went to 93 Harbord Street. Dad worked with my uncle at that point as well also, and my uncle had a shop.

Interviewer: This is Giorgio.

Respondent: Giorgio had a woodworking shop and he – Giorgio was responsible, for example, for a lot of the woodworking that went into the Calderone shoe shops, that went into the Eaton Centre, all the fine woodworking that took place in their floor **[0:04:30]** exhibits or whatever it was.

Interviewer: So this was fine – he was commissioned to do all this.

Respondent: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Very successful.

Respondent: And he had met a very interesting Jewish man called Mr. Appleby, who I'll never forget. He was a very short man, somewhat overweight, but he seemed to be a maverick. He was connected with everybody and anything, and he knew how to do business. And he connected my uncle with all the right people, and they just somehow made it all happen and they made it all work. My dad didn't want anything to do with him anymore because he had a hard time working with my uncle. **[0:05:00]** He admired him and respected him, but my dad was a very simple man, and he was a bit more of an artsy kind of more laid back kind of man. He wasn't terribly opinionated, he wasn't loud, he wasn't – he was never in your face. He didn't have an inflated ego, where my uncle was absolutely the opposite. He was Valentino being reborn [laughter] essentially, really.

Interviewer: So it was hard for your father to work with him.

Respondent: It was very hard for him. In fact, they just never really got along.

Interviewer: So that was his brother-in-law.

Respondent: His brother-in-law.

Interviewer: **[0:05:30]** Mm-hm.

Respondent: But my Uncle George was also somebody who loved everybody and he wanted the best for everybody, so you know, all of his

benessere, meaning all of his goodness, was always respected. So he was never somebody who ever lacked any kind of respect. But he did so much for everybody.

Interviewer: But his style was so different from your father.

Respondent: But he was totally different. My dad was just not as anal-retentive, he wasn't as obsessive about things.

Interviewer: More lower key.

Respondent: **[0:06:00]** Much – my dad was a farmer. My dad grew vegetables. My dad grew grains. They did crop rotation. He would tell me all about it.

Interviewer: And your uncle was an entrepreneur.

Respondent: My uncle was an entrepreneur at a very, very young age. We were in a small town in Sicily. Before you could say boo, my Uncle George was in Palermo, big city, working for a fine woodworker, cabinetmaker, making French provincial furniture, for crying out loud. I mean there was no end what he was **[0:06:30]** capable of doing, but he had an ego that was the size of the Grand Canyon.

Interviewer: Yes. So it was hard for your father to be working with him.

Respondent: Yeah. My father was just not that type of man and didn't like the feeling of competition and felt it was competitiveness, and moved into his own circles, and ended up making his own way in construction, of course. Because what else is new? Because Italians – [laughter] I mean what am I doing? I'm in construction as we speak. So, you know…

Interviewer: But you've done woodwork too.

Respondent: Well I got the woodworking from my uncle because as a child, **[0:07:00]** I would walk into the woodworking shop, and so did my brothers, and we would watch him running lathes and building furniture, and he housed, my God, I don't know how many lawyers' offices. We used to go in – he used to gather – because he never

had kids. My uncle and his aunt – my aunt – my mother's sister had a hysterectomy at a very young age. She had a tumor and it was removed, and she couldn't have kids. They adopted a child many years afterwards, but in essence, they adopted us because we were, **[0:07:30]** you know, my – her – my aunt and my mother were sisters, of course, and we were kind of like kids for them.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. So you had extra parents.

Respondent: Exactly. And so, you know, my Uncle George was an incredibly powerful influence for us, so it's not by any fluke that I happen to be a woodworker.

Interviewer: Well I know that. When you shut the restaurant, you were doing that.

Respondent: I mean I did all the work for Messis. I mean everything.

Interviewer: Oh. I didn't know that. It's beautiful.

Respondent: Oh yeah. The bar, the ceilings, the walls. **[0:08:00]** I did all of that work.

Interviewer: Gorgeous. Yeah.

Respondent: But that was all me.

Interviewer: So you're not doing that anymore.

Respondent: Oh no, I still am.

Interviewer: Oh, you were doing that and.

Respondent: But now what I'm doing is essentially I'm working for high-end architects that do custom design homes in Forest Hill and Rosedale.

Interviewer: Oh, so you are doing exactly that.

Respondent: Oh yeah, I'm still doing it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Look at these hands.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Working man's hands.

Respondent: Yeah. And I love it.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Yeah.

Respondent: And I would never think twice.

Interviewer: Yeah. I bet you love the work.

Respondent: Oh, I love it.

Interviewer: Well you have your Uncle George to thank for that.

Respondent: Who on earth could this possibly be? **[0:08:30]** So back to Giorgio. Wow, what a guy. So love him to tears. He did pass away recently, and much to his dream, he passed away with no pain because he had a massive heart attack in Sicily, and he had moved back. He could not handle the cultural diversity of Toronto and needed to be in a very, very intense Italian environment, and he had...

Interviewer: **[0:09:00]** How many years was he here?

Respondent: George left in 1980 and '81, and he had gone – he had come in the early '50s, '54, '55, in that area.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: He was here about two to three years earlier than we arrived, but he mentally couldn't take it anymore and needed to walk out into streets and communicate with the world at large, which is something he could never do here.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And he felt very isolated, **[0:09:30]** very depressed.

Interviewer: Oh. But he really helped a lot of people adjust when they first came, of your family, his family.

Respondent: He was the man.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: He was the man.

Interviewer: When your family lived there, you talked about your parents. You had three brothers; Nick has died unfortunately. But it was two boys in each bed.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: You lived on one floor you said,

Respondent: Only on one floor.

Interviewer: So what happened on the other floor or floors? Who was there?

Respondent: This is 206 Robert Street now.

Interviewer: **[0:10:00]** Okay.

Respondent: At 93 Harbord Street, we only had the second floor because the first floor was a supermarket. And then we moved over to Joe – my father would call him Joe Polako, and Joe was a Jewish Polish man who owned a Polish butcher shop where 97 Harbord Street is now.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: So we took over that building and made a restaurant on the main floor…

Interviewer: Called?

Respondent: …called Porretta's.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: And on the second floor, of course, it was the same **[0:10:30]** layout. There were three bedrooms. Mom and dad would sleep in one, Nick and I would sleep in one, Pat and Sal would sleep in the other, and that's just the way it was. And I did not get my own bed until I was, I think, sixteen, fifteen or sixteen. Nick and I shared that bed. In fact, interestingly, I never forget, you know, going to bed and watching "The Untouchables" with Eliot Ness at eleven o'clock at night or twelve o'clock at night. And my brother, **[0:11:00]** Nick, was so into this show. Of course, I was so much younger than he was.

Interviewer: How much younger?

Respondent: Four or five years at least.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: And I'd be like passed out for the most part.

Interviewer: But he would have – the television was in your bedroom?

Respondent: So imagine my mom's bedroom was here, and Nick and I slept adjacent to my mom and dad, and then there was a bathroom, and then in the next room, Sal and Pat slept in that. So essentially if my mom and dad had to go to the bathroom, they had to literally walk either **[0:11:30]** on top of us, or within, like, a twelve-inch space to get around this double fold-out couch bed to go to the bathroom. But nine times out of ten, because I was quite young, I would complain about sleeping and I would walk into my mom's room, of course, and I'd crawl into her side of the bed, and she would curl me up into a ball and then fall asleep. [Laughter] And then she would pick me up and throw me back in bed again, [laughter] and that was a typical – until I at least – I think, I don't know, I must have been like maybe ten or **[0:12:00]** eleven at that point where I changed that regimen. But my mother and I were very close. I was the baby of the family, and she was one of the most unbelievable women. She would do anything and everything she could to make

our lives decent and wonderful, and she did. And she did a great job.

Interviewer: Well, there were six of you. She…

Respondent: She was incredible.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: My god.

Interviewer: Was she involved with the business?

Respondent: Absolutely. So okay. So when my dad finally decided to open up the restaurant, my dad was still working **[0:12:30]** in construction.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: And so, of course, he would be out the door at six-thirty or whatever it was, or six, we never saw half of him, and he would arrive back I guess around four or so, and my mother would often arrive a little bit later because she didn't have the same early hours because she worked at King and Spadina.

Interviewer: What was she doing there?

Respondent: She actually worked for a wonderful Jewish man, and their – **[0:13:00]** what was the name of the building? I think it was called the Krangle building, if I'm not mistaken, and she was responsible for making photographic cardboard cards. In other words, you slip your photograph into the cardboard thing that flips open, that has a little backrest so you can lean it over.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And she used to often come home crying because, of course, she was in great competition with other Italian women who would steal her work and – but her **[0:13:30]** boss loved her. And in fact, oh, what are their names? In fact, I know them because the daughter is a real estate agent who works at Forest Hill Real Estate, where my

brother, Nick, worked, and I'm just – I've lost – I've just forgotten her last name. But I'll remember eventually. Anyhow, so my mom formed an amazing relationship with this man who owned this company, and so she would come home, of course from work, dad would come home from work. **[0:14:00]** We would focus on trying to get food into our bodies because we were all hungry, and then we would focus on trying to get the restaurant ready. And all of us, every day, all four of my brothers and my mom and dad, at about six o'clock in the evening would open up the restaurant.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: And we would work and run the restaurant until eleven, twelve o'clock at night every day.

Interviewer: So your mother had a full-time job, and your father had a full-time job, and he **[0:14:30]** was out at six in the morning.

Respondent: Yeah. And they didn't – my father laid my mother off, or at least told her she didn't have to work anymore after the first year or so because there was a little bit of money coming in by way of the restaurant, so that she didn't have to go and work. But my dad kept doing work because, I mean, he was making some decent money and he would also take on projects on the weekends as well. And then eventually, **[0:15:00]** I think in 1974, '75, I was probably turning about fifteen or sixteen at the time. He finally quit his job and she – he and my mom split – makes me want to cry. Anyway…

Interviewer: These are very personal stories.

Respondent: So they – **[0:15:30]** yeah. They…

Interviewer: They were hardworking people.

Respondent: They opened up without two jobs.

Interviewer: They opened up?

Respondent: They had no more two jobs. They just had…

Interviewer: Oh, they finally had the restaurant.

Respondent: They finally had the restaurant and it was amazing because they had their autonomy. They had happily had their autonomy, and so at that point, we were all entering high school. Sorry about that. **[0:16:00]** We were all entering high school, and so – and it was a tough time because, you know, we wanted to have delivery and none of us had our driver's licenses yet, so we delivered our pizza on bicycles.

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh my god.

Respondent: And I'll never forget. I was in grade nine and I was being taught by Mr. Borenshein, who was from Dresden of all places, and I made boxes out of **[0:16:30]** galvanized steel. Go ahead. No. And so we had our bicycles, and we were delivering pizza on bicycles until my brother, Sal, finally – the oldest of the family – turned sixteen, and he'd get his driver's license, and he bought our first Austin Mini, and that was our first delivery car. Sorry, I just broke down on you.

Interviewer: And what year was that?

Respondent: That would have been 1975 or '76, in that area. Early '70s. And anyhow, so yeah, **[0:17:00]** so that business started to really grow, and then eventually Pat got his license, and then eventually Nick got his license, and we could take care of that. I was a lot younger, of course, so we'd all come home from school and we all had our responsibilities. My brothers and I, we all divided our work in regards to what we were capable of doing. So we used to make dough by hand. There was no dough machine, so we were – we take turns on our hands and knees at making dough.

Interviewer: **[0:17:30]** Oh my god.

Respondent: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: In huge quantities.

Respondent: Seventy pounds each job.

Interviewer: On your hands and knees…

Respondent: On our hands and knees.

Interviewer: …right up to your elbows.

Respondent: Yeah. Physically making it. And we didn't get our dough machine on, forget it, until about five or six years later, and at that point I was coming close to finishing high school.

Interviewer: But that was a major family effort.

Respondent: Oh my god.

Interviewer: There were six of you…

Respondent: Oh my god.

Interviewer: …rolling up your sleeves…

Respondent: Unbelievable.

Interviewer: …and making this business happen.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: So you know, **[0:18:00]** everything needed to be done. The day – you come home from school and the cheese needed to be grated, and peppers needed to be cut, and mushrooms needed to be cut.

Interviewer: Wow.

Respondent: All this. My mother would make trays and trays of lasagna. We had the – the university students loved us, of course, you know because you'd have – you know, four-thirty, five o'clock in the afternoon at that point. Oh my god, she'd have trays of lasagna and meatballs and sausages, and all this stuff. And you know, everyone from St. Vladimir's Institute, everyone from Trinity College, they would all –

these kids would all line up **[0:18:30]** and they would just go completely crazy. And they ate so much of our food. It was unbelievable. So the business just grew and it grew so fast.

Interviewer: And all six of you continued to work there.

Respondent: Yeah. For a long time. And then, you know, as time went by, of course, you know, I'd finished high school, I went into university. My brother, Nick, you know, felt that he didn't really continue – he didn't want to really do it anymore. He had had **[0:19:00]** his time with it. But we still had mortgages and debts to pay off, and my oldest brother, Sal, he didn't really have much ambition, but yet he was a very passionate individual. Loved his music and is a great piano player, and the restaurant business for him was perfect because he didn't have to sell his soul to the business, and he could still pursue the love of music, and so it gave him…

Interviewer: So it worked well for him.

Respondent: It worked really well for him. And my brother, Pat, of course, really had a tough **[0:19:30]** time with it too because he didn't – you know, he just thought it was time for him to branch off as well. Now, in my situation what happened, was I was now in first-year engineering school, and my dad approached me and said, "You know, your brother Nick has left, your brother, Pat, wants nothing to do with it. Your brother Sal is fine, except your brother Sal is not going to run this business and I'm getting close to retirement. I want to know if you would be interested in taking over the restaurant." And I said, **[0:20:00]** "Dad, you know, I'd like to really finish my degree." But I also recognized that we still have debts to pay. Because our last big renovation in 1979, 1980, if you could imagine in those days, was over three hundred thousand dollars. It was a lot of money.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And we still hadn't paid it all off, and my dad really – he was not – and my mother's varicose veins had gotten out of hand, and she couldn't work in the restaurant, and so I said, "Okay, well I guess

I'm not going to finish **[0:20:30]** my degree," and I took over the business.

Interviewer: So you sacrificed your university education at that time.

Respondent: I sacrificed my – yeah. Totally. And…

Interviewer: Was that a hard decision?

Respondent: Yeah. I'm a little pissed at it, you know, to this day because I thought, you know, my dad – I thought he had made a mistake. I think he – at that point, he should have, you know, moved forward in a different kind of way and Sal should have just, you know, done his thing.

Interviewer: Because he **[0:21:00]** wasn't interested in going to university? Sal?

Respondent: No. Not in the least. But, you know, at the same time I felt a very strong responsibility because it's not like Nick or Pat asked for a way out. They just basically said, "We're out of here," and they left. So my dad was caught kind of between a rock and a hard place. The business needed to continue, money still needed to come in the door, Sal was willing to do it, and I was basically the last vestige left. So **[0:21:30]** I felt a strong obligation.

Interviewer: Yeah. It sounds as if you felt you didn't have a choice.

Respondent: I didn't have a choice.

Interviewer: That's my take on it. Yeah.

Respondent: So I took it over back in 1986, '85, '86 roughly, so I finished grade thirteen, I remember, in 1982.

Interviewer: Wow. You were young when you took over.

Respondent: Yeah. I was very young.

Interviewer: Woo.

Respondent: Yeah. Huge responsibility at a very young age, and it was tough because some of the employees at the time were **[0:22:00]** almost twice my age, and so the pecking order, at least the whole power circle was quite tough. But I was a tough kid, and we came from hard times and we weren't afraid. I mean you've got to bear in mind when we grew up in this neighbourhood, you know, it wasn't that uncommon to be having fistfights. I mean it just was the way it was.

Interviewer: Let's move onto that, okay?

Respondent: It was a tough period.

Interviewer: So who was fighting with whom?

Respondent: **[0:22:30]** Well okay. It was all – it was actually a really interesting time because I think that because we were all immigrants, there were territorial stakes that everybody was taking out, whether you were Italian, or Jewish, or Portuguese, or Canadian, or whatever the case may be. So everybody was trying to make their mark. And interestingly enough, we kind of all came together by the end of it all. We didn't – you know, we all lived to tell the tale, but **[0:23:00]** we were all looking to find some level of validation because we didn't have any identity. We were all immigrants. So – but it was tough. It was tough because I can remember, you know, for example bands of kids getting together and going stealing, and going stealing meant, you know, there were going to be three or four of us, or five of us. My dad, of course, would never condone this. He would never, ever, ever. If he had ever found out that we did anything like this, he would freak out. **[0:23:30]** So we tended not to fall into that trap because of the fright of my father and my mother would have been way, way more intense.

Interviewer: So they were formidable when they chose to be.

Respondent: Yeah. And much more severe.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: But it wasn't uncommon to see, you know, a bunch of guys going out and ripping people off. And whether it was stealing car radios

out of cars, or whether it was breaking into homes, or – and **[0:24:00]** that was just the type of neighbourhood that it was. It was rough.

Interviewer: So you're talking about the '70s and the '80s.

Respondent: Yeah. I'm talking about the…

Interviewer: And that's what the adolescents were doing.

Respondent: Yeah. Late '60s, early '70s.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Respondent: So it was tough. Imagine the character make-up of a child who's out there and the amount of fear involved in going out and stealing, and having people staking out a house, or staking out a car and making sure no one's watching, and the police, and the da, da, da. So they were fairly ferocious young kids, which also, of course, meant that they're not **[0:24:30]** necessarily alpha males, but there was a hell of a lot more testosterone than you could swing a stick at. So that if you were not careful, you know, you were going to get beaten up.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: So I – my brother, Nick, for example, his first day at Central Tech back in the early '70s, '72, '73, came back with two black eyes.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: Wasn't uncommon at all.

Interviewer: So you're saying…

Respondent: It was tough.

Interviewer: So you're saying you took over the restaurant, you were very young, but you had grown up in **[0:25:00]** circumstances where you had to be tough.

Respondent: Oh god yeah.

Interviewer: So when you were the youngest kind on the block, so to speak, in the store and you were the boss, you rose to the occasion because…

Respondent: Oh absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: Absolutely. I mean we had – god, we had learned so early on, just so early on not to be afraid and to fight, and to stand up on your own two feet. I mean you were not an Italian. You were a WOP, and that's just the way it was. It's no different if you were a Jew.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: I mean I **[0:25:30]** remember, you know, Johnny Fuda and I. Like I told you before, we'd go into the Harbord Bakery and Goldie would give us donuts and stuff, but you know, the number of times the Harbord Bakery got broken into, you have no idea. Oh my…

Interviewer: By these groups that you just described?

Respondent: Oh, not just them, but god knows what. And they were also persecuted because they were Jewish. It was horrible. It was horrible. But it was also – there was enough – there was still enough community. I mean, otherwise, I mean I'm sure that Albert and Goldie would have left, **[0:26:00]** but they didn't because they realized that there was enough goodness still in the neighbourhood.

Interviewer: It's Harbord Bakery, for the sake of the tape. Albert and Goldie mean Harbord Bakery. Okay.

Respondent: Yeah. Albert and Goldie. Anyway, that's how I know them.

Interviewer: Of course. Yeah.

Respondent: I was just a child, you know, when they were there.

Interviewer: So you're saying that there were a lot of gangs. You were Italian, the Italian kids, adolescents hung out with each other, and the Jewish ones did the same.

Respondent: But the Italians and the Jews got along. It was kind of a really strong family kind of feeling, and that is that **[0:26:30]** our parents kind of created the viaducts for us so that – for example, on our streets, on Robert Street for example, there was Joe Stein. Of course, you've heard of Joe Stein because you lived in Johnny Fuda's house.

Interviewer: Yes. Yes.

Respondent: Okay. So Joe Stein lived in that house, and he was a tailor. And of course, Joe Stein would come every day to the restaurant and he would have a soup or a minestrone or a coffee or whatever it was, and loved to chain smoke, and – but in those days, you know, my dad would **[0:27:00]** hire him to make his clothes. He would come in and say, "You need anything from me?" [Laughter] So he's like, "What do you got?" You know? It's like – so, "You need some slacks? Okay." He'd have his tape measure on him, he'd measure me…

Interviewer: Right in the restaurant?

Respondent: Oh yeah. He would walk in, measure my dad's waist. So he made pants for my dad, he made us pants, he made us shirts, whatever we wanted. So…

Interviewer: So you're saying the Jewish people and the Italian people, for the most part, did get along.

Respondent: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. There was no question.

Interviewer: **[0:27:30]** The children and the parents?

Respondent: Yes. Yeah. There was no question. There was never going to be animosity ever, ever. I think it was really the – the problems took place with the English-Canadians.

Interviewer: Ah.

Respondent: That's where the true problems took place, but most of the Italians, and even to some degree the Portuguese or the Jews, we didn't – you know, we didn't really have to fight for each other that much. I think we had enough of our own hardships. But I think a lot of the Canadians that had already been here and **[0:28:00]** had grown up in these neighbourhoods, but didn't really have very much, they were really struggling to protect their stake.

Interviewer: But you just touched on something that's important. Because this neighbourhood at that time, people as you say, didn't have very much.

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Right now, it's a very different situation.

Respondent: Oh god, yeah.

Interviewer: People are buying these houses for a lot of money. So different kinds of people are moving in.

Respondent: We bought 97 Harbord Street from Joe Polako, and in those days, didn't have to take a mortgage out. **[0:28:30]** Took a vendor take-back, and if, you know, depending on whether we had a great month or a bad month, you know, Joe was like, "Well, if you can't pay me this month, don't worry about it. You pay me next month." You know?

Interviewer: And what kinds of prices? Do you have any idea?

Respondent: Oh yeah. We bought 97 Harbord Street for twenty-one thousand dollars.

Interviewer: [Laughs] What year was that?

Respondent: 1968.

Interviewer: Oh my god. [Laughs]

Respondent: Twenty-one thousand dollars. Anyhow, so it was a vendor take-back, and he was fine with it, and my dad was fine with it, **[0:29:00]** and it was fine. It was just the way it was. But generally, the neighbourhood at that point was still, you know, it was about fifty-fifty. It was about fifty percent Italian and fifty percent Jewish. There weren't that many Canadians at that point. Most of the Canadians had moved out. And the Jewish community was also moving out, but they were moving out a little slower. They weren't in such a hurry, so there were a number of families on this street, and the Steins were still on this street, and **[0:29:30]** just I can remember all these wonderful people. There was another Jewish family at the corner of Willcocks and Robert, and I'm just trying to remember their last name. It was Cain. Cain. That doesn't sound Jewish, but she was Jewish. C-A-I-N.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: But you know, it was about, I would say about fifty-fifty.

Interviewer: So you're saying from what you remember, it was the Jewish people and the Italian people in the **[0:30:00]** '70s were the…

Respondent: Early '70s.

Interviewer: Early '70s.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: What changes happened after that in terms of ethnicity?

Respondent: Well most of the Jews at that point had moved out. I mean post-1975, '76, '77, they were slowly making their way out, and they made way for the Portuguese community that started to come in. A lot of the Portuguese had settled, I guess, on Dundas Street, Dundas and Ossington, but they were a number of families that moved into **[0:30:30]** Robert Street, and at that point, most of the Jewish community was already gone. That would have been late '70s, early '80s, so the last vestiges of the Jewish community were at that point were completely gone.

Interviewer: So Portuguese people moved in and Italian people, were they moving too, or were they staying?

Respondent: And the Italian people were also moving too.

Interviewer: Leaving.

Respondent: Leaving. And they were leaving to either go to St. Clair, or to the beginnings of Woodbridge as we know it today.

Interviewer: So what was that about? This…

Respondent: The movement, you mean?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: Ah. The movement was **[0:31:00]** simple. The movement was that all of those houses represented their beginning. Their future lay beyond that. They wanted to make their way away. And my dad, interestingly enough, though we had the restaurant, we were pretty settled. We weren't going to go anywhere. Said to me, "It's so funny that, you know, I left the farming community and to be going north again, like everyone" – because at the time, when all the Italians were moving to Woodbridge, there wasn't very much development still up there. It was quite open.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: **[0:31:30]** Because dad, of course, when he first arrived early on with a lot of his Italian buddies would go hunting, and they would hunt for all kinds of things in southern Ontario. But yeah, no. Most of the Italians had – back in the mid-'80s at this point, they pretty much left. There weren't many left.

Interviewer: But your family stayed.

Respondent: We stayed.

Interviewer: What was that about? The restaurant?

Respondent: The restaurant.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: The restaurant. The restaurant was our stable. But our father at the same time realized **[0:32:00]** that he had made the best choice of all time because he didn't need a car.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: He could walk out his door, he could still go down to the Market. At the time, of course, it was still the Jewish Market. I remember it as a child as the Jewish Market. This Kensington Market stuff is still kind of freaky for me.

Interviewer: Tell me. Talk about Kensington Market.

Respondent: I still see the Zimmerman family where Zimmerman's still is and the son's there. The father comes by every once in a while, and I'll say, you know, "What the hell happened?" He says, "Ah, Mario, I don't know what to tell you. **[0:32:30]** These times have changed." But yeah.

Interviewer: Now what store is Zimmerman's store?

Respondent: It's where – it's right across the street from – it's on Augusta. It's right where Augusta meets Baldwin. There's a coffee place. Across the street from the coffee place on Augusta are the Zimmermans.

Interviewer: And what kind of store is that?

Respondent: They sell everything in there.

Interviewer: Okay. I know that store. Yeah.

Respondent: He's got groceries, clothes, underwear, you name it. [Laughter] Whatever you need. [Laughter] In fact…

Interviewer: **[0:33:00]** Yeah. Yeah. From Zimmerman's?

Respondent: Made in Italy.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: He imports them. They're called Moretti and they're ten bucks a pop, and I buy boxes of them. [Laughter] And he's the only guy that'll buy them or that gets them for me. He's an amazing guy. Him and his father. Incredible. We go in there all the time.

Interviewer: Did your family use the Market much?

Respondent: Oh, all the time. Everything we bought for the restaurant…

Interviewer: Oh really?

Respondent: …was from the Jewish Market. Mr. Produce. **[0:33:30]** Mr. Produce was otherwise known as something else in the Market, and then later, he ended up buying a larger warehouse and they were purveying food directly from the Market to the warehouse, and they started dealing with restaurants and other supermarkets and things, but they were initially a Jewish family that started off just selling fruits and vegetables in the Market that grew.

Interviewer: Wow.

Respondent: And he came to be known as Mr. **[0:34:00]** Produce.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And now I think they're still in business, if I'm not mistaken. But we – my dad had developed a relationship with them when they were just a little store on Kensington, and we continued to deal with them for years, and years, and years afterwards.

Interviewer: But you did your shopping in the Market…

Respondent: Yeah, in the Market.

Interviewer: So you must have had some vendors that were your regulars.

Respondent: My dad would go in there, and you know, next thing you know we'd have bushels of peppers, we'd have bushels of this and bushels of that, and it was like, "Oh my god, dad, **[0:34:30]** you're buying so much." "But I got a good price on everything." [Laughter] I said, "Okay. Good." Okay, so, you know, but we have to consume this product because, you know, often you'd get a good price, but you know, "I'll give you a good price." You know, "I've got to get rid of it," whatever. So but anyway, he ended up developing all these relationships with everybody in the bloody Market. Everybody. And at the time, you know, of course, it was predominately Jewish. It wasn't, you know, what it is today. So, you know, in a way, and it got to a point where they started to come **[0:35:00]** to us, and you know, they were delivering product to us so our father could talk to them and say, "Can you get me this? Can you get me that?" So it was really easy. It was just so easy to get everything. And imagine, Ideal Foods that was right at the corner of College and Bathurst was a Jewish-owned restaurant supplier, and the last name **[0:35:30]** of the family, if I'm not mistaken, was Weber. And I'll never forget. They had an Italian man working for them called Mr. Tadesco who actually helped us build our restaurant. And it's amazing how he put it all together. I mean we were – what did my dad know about restaurants? Right? So this Italian man who worked for a Jewish company that was a restaurant supplier helped us to set up our **[0:36:00]** restaurant. And they – I mean you remember Ideal Foods? They were at Bathurst and College for so many years, so many years.

Interviewer: I'm not sure that I do.

Respondent: And the two brothers, Mark – oh god, Mark and what was – oh, what was his name? I can't forget. I'm sure they've passed away at this point.

Interviewer: But they were the Ideal Food owners?

Respondent: Yes. They were the owners.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Respondent: Mark and – I can see his face in my head because I'd go there **[0:36:30]** all the time. And anyway, so they were it. They were the supplier. They were the best of the best. These guys were setting up restaurants everywhere, and just – you know, where Kromer Radio is now, just south, just actually just north of Kromer Radio, Ideal Foods had another kind of a building there where they actually manufactured canopy hoods for restaurants and all kinds of other things. They were really quite – they were growing. But eventually, you know, I guess they all **[0:37:00]** got kind of old and said the hell with it.

Interviewer: And what are the changes that you see in our neighbourhood, Harbord Village? What are the big changes that you see?

Respondent: There's certainly a lot of new blood that's in the neighbourhood, but it doesn't feel as community-like. It doesn't feel as tight. It doesn't feel the way it felt when I was a child. As much as we had, you know, it was a tough time, you know, **[0:37:30]** families were genuinely genuine. So much more genuine. There just wasn't any money. When you don't have wealth, what else have you got? What do you turn to? You turn to someone's smile because they're inviting you because they want to make contact. You invite the world inside your life because the world is so tough, I suppose. But as it became gentrified, I think that's the better word, or yuppified or whatever you want to call it, it became a little bit more distant and **[0:38:00]** a little bit more isolated. It's not quite as tight as it used to be. You got to bear in mind, I walk up my bloody door and across the street there is an Italian tailor. I'd walk up my door, I'd go left, and I'd see the Harbord Bakery with Albert and Goldie. I'd go further and it was the Harbord Street Fish Market. I'd go further and there was Greenspan who was smoking the best turkey in the city of Toronto.

Interviewer: It's all on the south side of Harbord?

Respondent: All on the south side. So, you know, **[0:38:30]** it was just a number of shoemakers.

Interviewer: On Harbord. Shoemakers?

Respondent: On Harbord. Yeah. Right across the street from us. There was a shoemaker.

Interviewer: And the Fish Market?

Respondent: The Harbord Fish Co, two Jewish brothers. They hated each other, [laughter] but they used to come in. You know, I'll never forget this as a child. An enormous tractor-trailer, like the vessel would look like, you know, the milk vessels that they used to fill milk?

Interviewer: Yes. Yeah.

Respondent: Full of whitefish.

Interviewer: Whoa.

Respondent: And this entire thing, **[0:39:00]** I don't know where they found the room, it would be dumped into the basement of the Harbord Fish Co, which was right next door to the Harbord Bakery, and they would smoke it. And I don't know how much fish they smoked, but they smoked a lot of fish.

Interviewer: And then they sold all that fish.

Respondent: And they sold all that fish. Yeah.

Interviewer: So that was part of your growing up, that…

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: …fish store.

Respondent: Yeah. And unloading, like, these enormous vessels of, like, fresh, live fish.

Interviewer: Was that part of the entertainment for **[0:39:30]** the kids?

Respondent: Oh, the entertainment was watching the – oh god, what were their names?

Interviewer: What?

Respondent: David, I think. David and Harry, or something like that.

Interviewer: The two brothers who hated each other?

Respondent: The two brothers. Oh man, they fought like cats and dogs. [Laughter] It was unbelievable.

Interviewer: So that was the entertainment.

Respondent: I mean, you know, but the thing is they were busy. They had an incredibly busy place. I mean it was really important.

Interviewer: So nobody ate there. It was just…

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: …to come and take away.

Respondent: It was just to come and take – all the gefilte fish they had. All, like, the really, really…

Interviewer: The Jewish fish.

Respondent: Yeah. Real Jewish fish.

Interviewer: **[0:40:00]** Yeah.

Respondent: And so that's – yeah. They were amazing.

Interviewer: Okay. So what other stores were there on Harbord, now that you're talking about it?

Respondent: Well Greenspan and Son that were at the corner of Brunswick and Harbord on the northwest corner, which is…

Interviewer: So that's clay…

Respondent: …where Clay Design is. And if you look at the building, it's kind of funny because you'll see that it's like a building at the back that used to be Michael's Mussels years ago.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: Michael's was the first guy to bring in **[0:40:30]** real PEI mussels to the city of Toronto. Anyway, but our Thanksgiving at the Porretta family…

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: …was one of Greenspan and Son's smoked turkey, and I will never forget it. It was the tastiest, tastiest turkey you will ever have in your entire life. And then right next door going north on Harbord, there was a very small Jewish pharmacy. Very, very small, and I'll never forget being very young **[0:41:00]** and going in there with my dad or my mom to pick up prescription drugs or whatever they were. But it was like – and if you worked your way up north along Brunswick, there was a very small synagogue that I remember clearly as a child, and…

Interviewer: Is that the one that's there now? There's one just north of Harbord.

Respondent: Yeah. That's the one.

Interviewer: That's it?

Respondent: That's right. And then across the street on the other side was a house that had a front part where they just sold chickens and eggs. Just chickens and eggs. **[0:41:30]** That's all they sold. And because…

Interviewer: Did they kill the chickens on the spot?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Respondent: Because the reason why I know this is because we all went to St. Peter's, which used to be at the corner of Bathurst and Bloor. So part of our walk was along Harbord. We'd walk up Brunswick and across Sussex, and then up Lippincott, and off to St. Peter's.

Interviewer: Same route every day.

Respondent: Same route every day.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: So there were all **[0:42:00]** these stores.

Interviewer: So you knew those stores very well.

Respondent: Oh yeah. Saw them every single day. Every single day. It's amazing.

Interviewer: Those have changed because now it's lots of restaurants.

Respondent: You know what's really funny? I mean I think we've regressed. Honestly. When you think about it, you walk out the door, there's all the food in the world. I mean everybody was making food. It was just different. It was just different. It was just different. And everything was wholesome. I mean there were people, there were shoemakers and people smoking fish, and **[0:42:30]** people smoking chickens, and turkeys, and the Harbord Bakery baking bread.

Interviewer: So a big variety of stuff.

Respondent: Oh my god, there was so much. And there was even a music shop across the street from where Porretta's is now, just slightly east, and it was a music shop. And I forget the name of it now, and the – a European man, I forget his background, but he sold everything from harmonicas, to accordions, to **[0:43:00]** guitars. And my uncle loved that store. He would go in there and he just loved it. He just sold all these incredible musical instruments. That was the thing.

Interviewer: Now you were – I know your family worked hard and the children worked too, but when you did occasionally play, where did you play as children?

Respondent: Well that's a really good question. Well there's lots of things that we did. We'd go to Central Tech. They had the big oval courts at Central Tech.

Interviewer: Yeah. Uh-huh.

Respondent: **[0:43:30]** And just after the buildings all got knocked down north of Sussex on Robert Street, which is now behind what used to be Dominion or Metro, is that big square – because that was right by the University of Toronto. We would play there. Or the other thing we would do is we'd go to Queen's Park. And Queen's Park you got to bear in mind, in the winter months, they used to flood all, like three or four little areas, and we could go skating inside Queen's Park. **[0:44:00]** Lots of areas to go and skate. But we would climb trees at Queen's Park. Of course we got reprimanded by the police, and who knows what. But we'd play ball hockey on the street.

Interviewer: Right on Harbord? On Robert?

Respondent: Right on Robert.

Interviewer: On Robert Street.

Respondent: Oh yeah. Right on Robert.

Interviewer: What about the lane? Did you use the lane at all?

Respondent: Oh yeah. We used the lane all the time.

Interviewer: Playing in the lane.

Respondent: Yeah. We played. We played.

Interviewer: What did you play?

Respondent: Often it was hockey or soccer.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: What else did we do? We were **[0:44:30]** mischievous too. My brothers and I all got into machines and cars and motorcycles, and we would build go-karts, and did all kinds of things.

Interviewer: You built them yourselves?

Respondent: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Interviewer: And did your parents or your uncle Giorgio help you with that?

Respondent: No, but they assisted us insofar as – I'll never forget. My dad actually salvaged an old coal-burning stove, which he put in **[0:45:00]** our garage to keep us warm because he would say, "My kids are always working in that garage. They're making things." So he found this thing and…

Interviewer: So he saw that there was value in that.

Respondent: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Creating things.

Respondent: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So we were – I mean for example, I love motorcycles, of which the story is, as I told you, my dad promised me he would buy me one. And of course, you know, we all worked, we didn't get paid, and I said to my dad, **[0:45:30]** "Dad, you know, I really want a motorcycle." And he'd say, "Your next birthday," you know, "on that day, I'll buy you a motorcycle." And he's bang on the money, you know? On that day, he took me out to McBride Cycle, he said, "Point at which one you want, and I will buy it for you." And I did. And I bought my first RM Suzuki 125 and I was in heaven because I didn't have a driver's license. I was too young for that. And of course, I would terrorize the neighbourhood with it. [Laughter] And it was really loud.

Interviewer: With no license.

Respondent: With no license. But then, I **[0:46:00]** ended up going to Etobicoke, Centennial Park at the time, and they had an off-road course for kids that wanted to ride, so it was like seventy-five bucks. I forget what it was for the whole weekend. So my brother, Pat, had bought one and I had one, and we would go there and motorbike for hours and hours and hours. It was great fun. So…

Interviewer: So you worked hard, but you also knew how to play.

Respondent: Oh yeah. We knew how to play.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: But we weren't – I mean thankfully, oh my god, thankfully we never got involved in drugs. Oh Jesus, because I saw lots **[0:46:30]** of kids pass away, overdoses, you name it. It was awful. It was a really tough time. And there was all kinds of weird drugs that were going around in those days. It wasn't just marijuana. It was all kinds. And it wasn't just heroin, and cocaine was impossible in those days because nobody could ever afford it, but there were weird drugs like MDA. There was one called MDA and there was a – oh god. People were just – I mean, I think **[0:47:00]** it was again, you know, the immigrant community was just really having a hard time, and there's no question that drugs were there to kind of, you know, bridge some gap to deal with their realities, and maybe…

Interviewer: Are you talking about the adolescents or the parents?

Respondent: The adolescents.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: Maybe the parents were hard on them or something. I think some of the – I know some of the Portuguese parents were very physically abusive with their kids and I certainly thank God that never happened with my mom and dad. My mother and father would never touch us. They were **[0:47:30]** so calm.

Interviewer: So they were modern in that respect.

Respondent: My mother had a father who was horrible, who was violent and vicious, and would beat up her mother. And I think she swore that she would never lay a finger on her children. And my father never came from that. My father's family were so completely decent. Nobody screamed, nobody yelled.

Interviewer: So your family really was an active family with four boys, but no violence.

Respondent: No violence.

Interviewer: **[0:48:00]** No abuse.

Respondent: No, no, no, no, no.

Interviewer: I remember your father on his big tricycle.

Respondent: Oh wow.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Up and down the street. He was just on Robert Street, of course.

Respondent: He was just the softest, quietest man. He would never raise his voice, never lifted his fingers on us. He was never loud, he was never – oh, he was just such a good man.

Interviewer: Yeah. A gentle person.

Respondent: Very gentle. Very quiet. Not physically aggressive. Like he wouldn't, you know, need to hug you and shake you or any of that stuff at all. He was – **[0:48:30]** and in fact, I think sometimes I kind of felt sorry for my mom because I thought maybe he's just not that affectionate, because he wasn't. You know? But he kept to himself and he didn't say very much, and he was very quiet, which was his fine.

Interviewer: That was his nature. Yeah.

Respondent: That was his nature.

Interviewer: Did you have a back garden, a back lawn at all where you lived?

Respondent: Before we had the addition on the restaurant, we did have a backyard, and of course, we always had parsley, basil, the odd tomato or two because the gardens weren't terribly big, but my father was always so happy about, **[0:49:00]** "Look at this soil. It's so black. It's so healthy."

Interviewer: Because he was a farmer and he appreciated that.

Respondent: Exactly. And you imagine, in Sicily it was a breadbasket. So all of the nutrients were raked up during the times of the Romans, right? So the soil was dead. There was nothing.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: Yeah. So of course, he comes to Canada and he sees this black soil and he's like, "Wow, look at this soil. It's black." [Laughter] So yeah. He was a farmer.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: He really was.

Interviewer: **[0:49:30]** What about heating of your homes? Do you remember changes in the years that you were there, or is that not significant?

Respondent: No, I mean it's significant. We had a time when we had a boiler. You know, it was a boiler. It was an oil-fed boiler. Never forget it. Always stunk every time the oil truck came by [laughter] to fill up oil in our house. You probably remember that. That's the way it was in those days.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: There was no natural gas. It was all oil.

Interviewer: But it wasn't coal. The coal was already gone at that time.

Respondent: The coal was gone at that point, but the chutes were still there.

Interviewer: **[0:50:00]** Uh-huh.

Respondent: All the chutes. In fact, 97 Harbord Street, imagine when we took over the restaurant or the building that Joe Polako had, the patio was – boulevards in the city of Toronto were allowed to have livestock. So if you had a building like the Boulevard Café, or Porretta's, or the convenience store that used to be Fuda's, for example…

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: …all of those were often operated by supermarkets and butchers because you were allowed to have livestock out there, which was one of the **[0:50:30]** things that we had to fight for when we got our patio license because that law was still in effect. And as my lawyer at the time said, "Well then, what we should do is go out and rent a couple of cows, a couple of sheep, and a couple of goats, put them on the patio and it'll show the city of Toronto how draconian their laws are and they need to be changed."

Interviewer: [Laughs] Yeah.

Respondent: It's a true story. It's just crazy. But that's what was going on. It was **[0:51:00]** a very interesting period of time. I just lost my train of thought. What am I thinking about?

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: But College Street, you see, was also interesting too in the sense that, you know, again, if I would – my mother would take us shopping to buy clothes on College, and College at the time was again a mixture of Jewish and Italian shopkeepers, and so there was a lot **[0:51:30]** of variety. I mean a lot of the clothes that were being imported at the time were also of Italian background, and so – and most of the purveyors who had only been here, you know, for, you know, under ten years, for example, when we were kids growing up, didn't speak very much English. But boy, could they speak a lot of Italian. So we had our own community. We really did.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Who learned Italian? From what you remember, did the mothers of **[0:52:00]** your families speak English better? Or the fathers speak English better?

Respondent: Oh, the fathers, of course.

Interviewer: The fathers learned English.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: And the mothers didn't.

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Because they were at home more?

Respondent: In fact, my first language was Italian, not English.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: In fact, I couldn't figure out why I had such a tough time in grades one, two, and three. It's because I didn't know how to speak English.

Interviewer: So you spoke Italian with your family and your community.

Respondent: Yeah. I was growing up, and my mom's – or mom and dad, **[0:52:30]** and they only – they really only spoke Italian.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: They spoke very, at the time, they spoke awful English.

Interviewer: Oh. [Laughs]

Respondent: If anything, right? So yeah, my first language is not English. It was Italian, even though I was born and raised here.

Interviewer: Oh. Yeah. [Laughs]

Respondent: It was crazy, but that's the way it was. But I do have to say though, as tough as it may have been in those days, there was a lot more community. But I mean community **[0:53:00]** that meant something. It was just different. It was so – it was warming, it was warm, it was genuine, and you got to know these people because these people were in your face and you saw them every day, and they had big, bad personalities because they needed to have big, bad personalities to survive. They couldn't hide in their homes. To survive meant you had to go out into the streets and you had to go out there and open up your shop, and you had to be the good Jewish butcher or the good Italian butcher, or whatever the – you **[0:53:30]** needed to go out and face the world; you couldn't hide. So money, you know, was so scarce that people were out. They were out there, and you got to know everybody very, very quickly, and it was in your face. The world was happening beautifully and it felt very much – in fact, my Uncle George, before he went back to Italy, you know, because he retired there and didn't want to live here anymore, he said, "You know, you remember those days? It was beautiful."

Interviewer: So he liked it. It was intense…

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: …it was difficult…

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: …but he liked it.

Respondent: Yeah. Because it was, you know, a strong Italian community, it was a strong **[0:54:00]** Jewish community, you know? And you could do real business, you know? You could really talk to these people and they weren't going to screw you over because, you know, you live right down the street and he knows him and she knows that guy, and everybody knows everybody, you know? It wasn't this – you weren't isolated. You weren't doing business because you were just a number; you were doing business with Mr. and Mrs. Porretta and they know Mr. and Mrs. Giannone who knows Mr. and Mrs.

Schwartz, [laughter] who know Mr. and Mrs. Zimmerman, who know…

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: So everything was like – **[0:54:30]** the credibility…

Interviewer: It was close, it was intense, it was vibrant.

Respondent: Yeah. It was alive. It was alive. And that doesn't exist today. It's gone.

Interviewer: Well you used the word "gentrified."

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: So people have kind of come back into their…

Respondent: Which is what money does. I'm working in Rosedale. My god, people don't even say hello. They're walking their dogs, they're looking up at the sky, or they're looking down at the ground. No one faces anybody and says, "Buongiorno."

Interviewer: Yeah. Well I know when I moved **[0:55:00]** to Robert Street about twenty-five years ago when I was a neighbour we sat out on our front porches a lot until eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, one o'clock in the morning. Yeah. A lot of front porch sitting.

Respondent: That's the way it was.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: It was fine. People were outside. I mean we'd be running the restaurant and we had the back area, of course, which is where you cooked, and the front was a restaurant. And you know, it'd be like eight-thirty, nine o'clock. You know, Joe Stein would walk in the door, "Hey. How **[0:55:30]** you guys doing? Is everything okay?" "Joe, you want something?" "Could you make me a black coffee?" "Sure. I'll bring you a black coffee. Hold on." I'd bring him a black

coffee and he'd hang out. He'd hang out in the kitchen with us until eleven o'clock at night.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And then he'd go home.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: And that was Joe's…

Interviewer: So that was a real sense of "we."

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: And community.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: A tight one. Yeah.

Respondent: It was a different time. But people really – I really miss the personalities.

Interviewer: **[0:56:00]** Characters.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Where are you living now?

Respondent: I'm living above the restaurant. [Laughter] And I am. I am importantly because that is and was our family residence. And it's really important from the point of view of – what's the right word? Preserving the fact that that was our family home. And **[0:56:30]** I think part of the importance of it also is that if we had to, say, turn around tomorrow and rent it all out, like the base floor's rented as a restaurant, which is fine, I think the government would deem it to be a fully commercial building, and we would – once my mother passes away – inherit it. We would get nailed with capital gains.

Interviewer: Oh.

Respondent: **[0:57:00]** Which my accountant said to me, "You've got to be really careful because it's on a commercial street. I know you guys grew up there, I know you shared beds there, but when your mom's gone, they may want to come after you for taxes," which is really – I mean given what we paid for it and what it's worth today, you might as well just give it to them. Give it to the government because the difference is so ginormous, you'd almost pay more than fifty percent of it would be tax. **[0:57:30]** So I said, you know what? I'm not leaving that property. I am not leaving that property. That is our family house. That's where we were raised. And they can call this whatever the hell they want to call this. We shared bedrooms in this house for years and years and years.

Interviewer: Okay. This is 2013 and you've been living in this particular building since – and what's your address there? 90?

Respondent: 95 Harbord.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: 95 and 97.

Interviewer: Okay. And you **[0:58:00]** moved there in what year?

Respondent: Well I've been there most of my life.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: I've had, like, periods where I lived away from the house.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: But I came back to live – I bought my own house, which I lived in for about eight years with a woman that I was married to, and that unfortunately ended. And then sold the house and then lived in an apartment for a short time. And then realized that my mother and **[0:58:30]** father were getting on in years, and they needed help. And I was, of course, single. I was now in my mid- to late-thirties

and I said, you know what? The building's big enough. I'm going to make myself a nice little apartment and I'm going to live right here.

Interviewer: So you had your own separate space.

Respondent: So I had my own separate space, lived in the same building with mom and dad, and if they needed help, I was there to do it for them. If they needed groceries, I was there to buy them for them, and more often than not, **[0:59:00]** you know what, we ate together.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Respondent: You know? I'd cook, they'd cook, we'd cook. I had my autonomy, I had my independence, I had my privacy, but I didn't have to run away from my parents. I mean, you know, I think this is like this whole thing in North American thinking where, you know, you get to a certain age in life and it's important that you disconnect yourself from your family. Well that's not part of Italian culture.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: We keep each other close. You know, if in Italy, for example, it's not unusual to see grandparents living in the same house as **[0:59:30]** their daughters or sons, and whose, you know, granddaughters and grandsons are also living in the same house.

Interviewer: Well, I think what you're saying is you can be close and you can live close to each other, but still be independent.

Respondent: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Respondent: Absolutely. My mother and father would never put their nose in my business.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: They gave me autonomy, they gave me my freedom. They never made me feel like I was, you know, I wasn't doing whatever I was

supposed to do. They were wonderful. So **[1:00:00]** it was funny. It was tough as a child growing up because, you know, of course Canadian culture is like, "You're still living at home?" Not really.

Interviewer: Judgmental. Yeah.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: What's wrong with that?

Interviewer: What's your feeling about how safe the neighbourhood is now?

Respondent: I don't feel it's safe just because I don't feel I have any kind of – I have no identity in this area anymore. I don't feel like **[1:00:30]** I know enough people to make a difference anymore. In the past, I knew people from Borden Street, I knew people on Lippincott, I knew people on Major, I knew people on Brunswick, I knew people on Robert, I knew people north of Robert, I knew people south of Robert. I knew everybody and everybody knew us, and so we all kind of knew each other. I don't feel that anymore, so I would say that it was safer when I was growing up, as far as I was concerned, because everybody knew everybody.

Interviewer: Yeah. It was a real sense…

Respondent: Oh.

Interviewer: …a real **[1:01:00]** community.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: You wouldn't…

Interviewer: A neighbourhood.

Respondent: You wouldn't be screwing around in this neighbourhood if you were from another neighbourhood. We'd know it right away.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: We would know it. It's like hey, you know who I saw? I saw so and so. What are they doing here? They don't belong here. They're like College Street. They're College and Lippincott or they're College and Manning. Oh, I know those guys.

Interviewer: They don't belong here.

Respondent: They don't belong here.

Interviewer: They're into trouble.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: So but I mean we just knew because we were on the streets. We were outside. We weren't inside houses watching TV or in front of a computer. We were on the street.

Interviewer: I remember when I lived on Robert Street, **[1:01:30]** Mario was already – you remember Mario.

Respondent: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Little Mario.

Interviewer: He sat outside.

Respondent: So he would know.

Interviewer: Oh yes.

Respondent: He would watch all the stuff going by, so he would say, "Hey, you know, I saw this." Or, "Hey, I saw that." But imagine that tenfold, and that's what it was like when I was growing up. So everybody was out. Everybody.

Interviewer: So everybody watched out for each other's children.

Respondent: So yeah, I would say it was definitely safer then, and because some of the stuff that I hear about now would never in a million years ever happen. Ever. Just because kids that would be in this neighbourhood would say, you know, "We've got to really be careful. **[1:02:00]** There's, you know, there's people here that are going to really bust our balls if we don't, you know, if we don't behave." Like we just can't – you just can't go in there and do that kind of stuff. It's not going to happen. If so and so finds out, oh my god, we're finished.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So everybody was watching out for…

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: …and both generations were doing it.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have any comments about the university being our neighbour, just the other side of Spadina?

Respondent: The university? If it wasn't for the university, we would never have been able to sustain our **[1:02:30]** business. Those kids kept us alive for years and years and years. There's no questions that students of the day, when we were in business early on, were great. They were wonderful people. It was a different time. It was never loud. It was never the loud, drunken, Brunswick House kind of period where you'd see, you know, a lot of, you know, belligerent stuff taking place. That wasn't – **[1:03:00]** it wasn't like that at all. Not when I remembered it.

Interviewer: So for your family, the university was good and the students were…

Respondent: The professors ate there, the faculty, of course, ate there. The students all ate there.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And they behaved well.

Respondent: And they were all wonderful. In fact, one of the students was our architect who helped us build the restaurant, helped us get all the designs that we needed, and for years and years and years while we're still open, we'd have them all **[1:03:30]** coming in and visiting us. The Bowman family, for example, Peter, who was wonderful. I'll never forget him and his wife. I'll never forget when they first got married and, you know, they'd come into our restaurant when they were just students. And they were lovely. And they now live somewhere in the US, but still visited quite regularly and there were very strong family ties. So no, university wasn't a problem for us. It was actually a really fantastic influence, and **[1:04:00]** everybody – the faculty, the students were fantastic. No complaints. They were good.

Interviewer: Do you remember when they changed the streets, you know, going this way, that way?

Respondent: Oh, I do.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Respondent: Pandemonium. Pandemonium. Couldn't stand it. Hated it. Felt like it was shoved down our throats. Didn't really have a say in the matter.

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Respondent: Just happened. But it was, you know, typical in a European neighbourhood. You can do whatever the hell you **[1:04:30]** want. We're just a bunch of immigrants. How can we ever stand up on our own two feet and fight? So it was one of those situations where they just kind of – I just felt like we were just bulldozed. Didn't really have a choice in the matter, which I thought was just so completely unfair. You just go ahead and just decide on your own that…

Interviewer: So you didn't – you weren't consulted.

Respondent: No. Hell no.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: They just went ahead. One day it was like oh my god, directions have all changed.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So it was inconvenient for your family, I guess.

Respondent: **[1:05:00]** It was horrible.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: I hated it. I couldn't go down the street. We had cars, we had motorcycles, we had – you know, what's wrong with the street being one direction? And what's wrong if the streets are being used as arteries? It's a city. You're going to create a quiet, tidy little neighbourhood in the middle of downtown Toronto? We grew up and it was wild. [Laughter] And all of a sudden you're trying to tame it?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: **[1:05:30]** Don't kill it. So I think – it was all yuppified, you know? All of a sudden there's new people, they bring in money, they have power. They're doctors, they're lawyers, they think they own the world. And…

Interviewer: So that was a change you felt was not for the better.

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: For you.

Respondent: We didn't – I mean we never had a voice.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: And never really missed having a voice. And just kind of minded our own business and just did our thing.

Interviewer: Is there **[1:06:00]** anything we haven't talked about? I mean when you and I chatted on the phone and then when you came in, I mean you have so many good stories…

Respondent: Oh my god.

Interviewer: …and so many life experiences that you cherish.

Respondent: Oh, Jesus.

Interviewer: And there were some difficult ones, but you certainly…

Respondent: The Black Sea Fish Market. Corner of Clinton and College. Bought from a Jewish man, owned now by – well at the time – owned by a Greek guy. Andreas. I'll never forget going there with my dad **[1:06:30]** to buy sardines on Fridays only because Fridays are when the sardines came in. And he would save them for us, and my dad and I would walk from Harbord and Spadina to…

Interviewer: Oh, it's a good walk.

Respondent: …College and Manning to buy fish.

Interviewer: That was for the restaurant.

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: For your home.

Respondent: For the family. Are you kidding? Can never serve sardines in a restaurant. We tried so many times. That's it. Actually introduce a typical southern Italian fare? Oh my god, nobody wanted **[1:07:00]** it. What do you do with it? [Laughter] Because our clientele wasn't Italian.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: It was a mixture of all different kinds of people, but we tried everything. We tried black ink pasta, we tried pasta with sardines, we tried, oh my god, all these crazy old Italian dishes, and the neighbourhood, or at least the clientele, which is – they just weren't going to eat it.

Interviewer: Well, you weren't going to continue to buy them if nobody was going to eat them.

Respondent: No. My father would make some pretty deadly **[1:07:30]** sweet and sour sardines.

Interviewer: For the family.

Respondent: Oh yeah. They were good. Oh.

Interviewer: So both your parents were good cooks.

Respondent: Oh yeah. Caramelized those onions, and it would be like a – oh god, they were so good. [Laughter] Because, you know, they would be in the fridge. They would always be in the fridge. They would always be cold. You would always take them out and have one or two of them, and they were so filling and so yummy. Oh my god, those days.

Interviewer: When you walked in tonight, **[1:08:00]** you were telling me this wonderful pasta dish that you made for your mother.

Respondent: Puttanesca. Puttanesca. Black olives, capers, black currants, saffron, sundried tomatoes, garlic, fresh basil, salt, pepper.

Interviewer: [Laughs] Both of us had not had dinner. I don't think you're doing us a favour. [Laughs]

Respondent: No. I'm going to go and have dinner after this. [Laughter] No, but I just would make food for my mom like once or twice **[1:08:30]** a week, just in case. And it's in the fridge, so my caregiver knows that if my mom doesn't have dinner at the nursing home, she's always got a little bit of backup.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: So.

Interviewer: But both your parents were good cooks, and you too are a fine cook.

Respondent: You know what? It's really weird because I'll never forget, my dad passed away for some strange reason. Because every fall is olive season. Not just in Canada, slash, California, which is where they come from. It's also that in Italy. So the year he passed away, **[1:09:00]** before he passed away, I don't know what I was thinking, but I went to Fiesta Farms, and I know there's a lot of Italians that go there, and they had a couple of cases of olives, and I bought olives. And I wanted to – I just – somehow I knew he was dying, and I didn't want to let go of those traditions. So I bought those green olives and I – you can make them in – two ways that we would do them. We would crush them, just crush the bone, but not **[1:09:30]** remove the bone, and soak them in water for two or three days, and then you get the bitterness out of them, and then you can add garlic, and spices, and olive oil, and all kinds of things. Or you could cure them whole with the olive pit in them in brine, and so for some bizarre reason, here he was dying, and I went out and bought two cases of green olives and prepared them all, and my apron was covered in green sludge all over me. [Laughter] Because in a way, I guess him dying was **[1:10:00]** a dying tradition because there wasn't one fall that ever went by while he was alive that I – he and my mom would sit there for hours crushing olives. And of course, Nick and Sylvia would get their jars, and Sal would get his, and my brother Pat would get his, but we would make food for everybody. And so we used to buy pork rind, like bacon, pancetta, and my dad would cure it, of course, and he'd get that – **[1:10:30]** or we'd make sausages. "Mario, I'm making sausage. You want to come over?"

Interviewer: That's your father?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Respondent: "Dad, you got everything you need?" "Yeah. I just need you and your hands. Come over."

Interviewer: Oh. [Laughs]

Respondent: So I'd go over there and we'd make I don't know how many links of sausages, of which some you could – you know, he would dry, some of which he would keep fresh, some of it he'd freeze, but that was a typical Italian tradition. I mean food was really, really, really important.

Interviewer: So you learned about food from your parents…

Respondent: Oh, totally.

Interviewer: …and you **[1:11:00]** learned about all this beautiful work you'd do with wood for your uncle George.

Respondent: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Respondent: George was amazing.

Interviewer: Yeah. I think – are there any stories that you're – that you came to think, "Oh, I'd better include that"? Maybe it's hard to think of it at the moment.

Respondent: All these great stories. There's all these wonderful individuals. You know Ziggy and his mother? Ziggy. His mother was Jewish, his father was Hungarian, and he was **[1:11:30]** Hungarian Jewish. He was – I think she wasn't Hungarian. She was Polish. She was a Polish Jewish woman, and he wasn't a very nice man. But Ziggy was a nice guy. Ziggy and Herschel – Herschel was Mr. Stein, the tailor's son, and Ziggy – I forget Ziggy's last name.

Interviewer: But that's who lived at 158 Robert before I moved in there?

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. [Laughs]

Respondent: Anyway, but no, that was the neighbourhood we grew up in. We were all, you know, **[1:12:00]** we were all, you know, we made it all happen.

Interviewer: You all felt you belonged. There was a real connectedness.

Respondent: There wasn't the feeling – you know what's really interesting, eh? Because I didn't feel or hear the terminologies of racial distinction and differences until we were like probably sixteen or seventeen. Sort of in high school. Because before that, as kids growing up, there was no – you know, you're not this, and you're not that. It was just different because everybody was – **[1:12:30]** again, we're all immigrants, right? So nobody really had – it was Canadians that were tough on us, and that's what we really fought. That's what I felt we really fought. We fought them.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: We really fought that.

Interviewer: So the immigrants were being attacked and you fought back.

Respondent: Yeah. And the immigrants stuck together, so it was no wonder that the Jewish community and the Italian community got along because we were both being kicked in the teeth.

Interviewer: Mm-hm. So you have clear memories about that.

Respondent: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. But these…

Respondent: Being beaten up was not **[1:13:00]** an easy thing to deal with.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Did it make you tougher?

Respondent: Absolutely.

Interviewer: It did.

Respondent: Yeah. Don't push me around.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Respondent: Because we're going to come back and we're going to do something to you. Don't do this to us. So we were tough. I mean you've heard of the Christie Pit riots.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: That was a perfect example of the Italian Jewish community, you know? I mean the only people that would hire Italians were Jews. Canadians weren't going to hire us. It's just the way it was. So they were in a bind, they were winning **[1:13:30]** the baseball game, you know, and the English started beating them up, and the Jewish community picked up the phone and called the Italians, their employees, and they all went to Christie Pits, and those are the Christie Pit riots.

Interviewer: You know, I knew about the riots. I didn't know what you just told me.

Respondent: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: So they phoned their Italian friends and said…

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: "Come help us."

Respondent: Yeah. And they went over and they beat the living bejeezus out of all these white trashy people that were beating up on the Jewish community that were hiring **[1:14:00]** us, and they were giving us jobs.

Interviewer: Who was giving you jobs?

Respondent: The Jewish community.

Interviewer: The Jewish people were giving you jobs.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, Mario. We're going to stop.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Mario Porretta, thank you so much. What a delight this has been. Thank you very, very much.

Respondent: My pleasure, Eleanor. My pleasure.

[1:14:19]

[End of recording]