

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of
Robert Kornfeld Sr.

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Kornfeld Sr. conducted by Interviewer Shannon Haltiwanger on October 19, 2007. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

A noted playwright, photographer and journalist, Robert Kornfeld, Sr., spearheaded a decades-long effort to designate his corner of Riverdale in the Bronx as a historic district. In this 2007 interview, Kornfeld reviews his archives of the preservation battle and reminisces about the lengthy process of winning the district's designation. He describes the challenge of building support for landmarking suburban residences in the Bronx at a time when many people did not recognize the historic value of the area. The neighborhood, which includes several estates dating to the 1850s along with their carriage houses and stables, was finally designated as the Riverdale Historic District in 1990.

Robert Kornfeld called the neighborhood of Riverdale in the Bronx home for fifty-six years, inspiring his personal campaign to designate a portion of Riverdale as a historic district. His efforts of almost twenty years were successful, as the Riverdale Historic District was designated in 1990 as the earliest known railroad suburb within New York City—a rare, surviving landmark. As accomplished in the arts as he was in the world of preservation, Kornfeld was also known for his striking photographs and as a noted playwright and journalist. He co-authored the book *Landmarks of the Bronx* and served as chairman of the Bronx Landmarks Task Force.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Robert Kornfeld Sr

Location: Manhattan, New York, NY

Interviewer: Shannon Haltiwanger (Q1), Celia Kornfeld (Q2), Vanessa Norton McKuin (Q3)

Date: October 19, 2007

Kornfeld: Now I'll tell you first, so you'll see what I have been doing. I was standing out in the street, and we loved our new house—we'd been living in it for a few years, and we were getting the acquisition of a child even and—

Q2: Wow *[laughs]*.

Kornfeld: Not by error, actually, and I was standing with my back to two neighbors who, one neighbor and his friend, and they were walking along behind us. This street that became the historic district, is quite narrow and we have no side walks and no gutters and no nothing—a very ancient property sort of thing. I was standing there with my back to these two people, and one of them said, "This place is so beautiful I'd be willing to tell everybody that this is in England far away from London, that it's just such a great place." The man who lives there very near us, and whom I never mentioned or looked at or anything, I pretended he didn't exist, but he said, "Don't pay any attention because this street is very narrow, and besides there's no sidewalks, and there's no nothing. These houses are very close to the street, and what's going to happen is this is going to become a sixty feet wide street."

Q2: Oh.

Kornfeld: “And every house is going to be torn down.”

Q2: Oh, no.

Kornfeld: I just stood there saying quietly, “That ain’t going to happen.” *[laughs]*.

Q2: *[laughs]* If you could have anything to do with it, right?

Kornfeld: I never said it out loud to anybody. I just knew that was going to happen, but it didn’t happen as quickly as I thought, because that had never been done before. They were all downtown in these magnificent old houses in Manhattan and I was the first person who ever tried to get a country house on the river in one of the—our house is a hundred and seventy five years old, and well, it’s older than that now. I can’t even remember how old, but it’s getting on to two hundred probably.

Q2: *[laughs]*.

Kornfeld: We have another one in New Orleans. We have—we live in two ancient houses, and I was just sure that that wasn’t going to happen on that street, and it never did. But it only took twenty years.

Q2: Oh.

Q1: Oh, that's funny.

Q2: Only—

Q1: Only twenty—

Q2: Only.

Kornfeld: That's not very long.

Q1: Only twenty, that's not bad.

Kornfeld: That's nothing, but I had to fight for twenty years, and it took three people running the place. A third person running the place finally agreed to let me do it. The first two—

Q2: To get the district?

Kornfeld: Wouldn't touch me, I wasn't worth touching. Not yet.

Q1: So, did anyone else help you with the district, with creating it?

Kornfeld: We had everything. There's never been a new house put up in there. The house—some of the houses—have been changed a little bit, but we have even talked them into not allowing the

houses to be torn down and rebuilt. We've let people add on a little bit, but it was always in the same style as what was already there. We were very, very lucky. We had an enemy.

Q3: Who was your enemy?

Kornfeld: This might be interesting to you.

Q3: Do you want to have a seat? We could all sit down a little bit.

Kornfeld: In a minute.

Q3: Okay.

Kornfeld: I'm not up to sitting down yet.

Q3: Ok, you do what you need to do *[laughs]*.

Kornfeld: The, where were we?

Q2: You had an enemy.

Kornfeld: Oh, oh. We had a tremendous enemy who was on the board, in that part of Riverdale, and every few weeks he'd make me get everybody there to swear that they were still all—every

single one of them had agreed to this. If anyone didn't agree, the whole thing would fall apart. Just one person. That, I know, is total viciousness, because in other places like downtown they let people come in—like two thirds will be in favor, that are even up to one person, they let you do it. With me, they wanted to shoot me.

Q3: You mean people wanted everybody to be in favor of designation?

Kornfeld: This man wanted every single person to be in favor, and it's the only one in New York that was like that. I was the victim.

Q3: That was the community board, the board you were talking about?

Q2: Yes.

Kornfeld: Oh, the community board, yes, yes. I had to fight just to be alive. It was very frugal and vicious, and also they made me give up one part of it.

Q3: Oh really?

Q1: What part did they make you give up?

Kornfeld: Where we are is the Riverdale Historic District—goes down to 252nd Street, and we could've gone down about another three or four—it would have been twenty-six acres, Wave

Hill. Wave Hill was on the edge of being made public, and the man who hated me wouldn't talk them into not allowing me to get that into it, which was a tremendous shame because it would have added twenty-six acres to what was less than that. That's only one of many lovely things that happened.

Q3: *[laughs]* Well, I think, Shannon has some specific questions about different things that have happened, and I'm actually going to leave you guys to talk.

Kornfeld: There are endless things. This is the historic district, and I can hand you where—oh, here's Wave Hill. This is Wave Hill, that's what we lost. It was right there.

Q1: Is much of Wave Hill changed since then, do you think that they could do an expansion of the district now? Maybe or no?

Kornfeld: This became public property, and it looked like it was going to, and actually it did. Everybody wanted it to be part of the historic district, and I did too, but the person who finally gave in, the third person, my third person, gave in, and we lost. Well, while that was being broken in over here, we were fighting just to keep this, so we finally had to do that.

Q1: What was Riverdale like back then?

Kornfeld: What was that? I'm sorry.

Q1: What was Riverdale like back then? The neighborhood? The people that lived there?

Kornfeld: Oh, the Riverdale Yacht Club?

Q1: No, the neighborhood.

Kornfeld: Oh, that's right in front of us.

Q1: The neighborhood, your neighborhood. What was it like back then? Is it still the same?

Does it still look the same today as it did?

Kornfeld: I just wanted to see what—whoops, I needed this, whatever it is. Landmarks. [*looking at map*] This is Sycamore Avenue. This is where we live, and oh, this is fifty-two eighty-seven, fifty-two eighty-six is our house. It's not here, it's somewhere on. There, it's on the street above here. We're down here at fifty-two eighty-six Sycamore.

Q1: What do you think it was that finally made the preservation commission [Landmarks Preservation Commission] agree to make this a historic district?

Kornfeld: I don't think anybody was going to do anything for almost twenty years. It was lying there, and I was going to meetings at least every month begging for help.

Q1: Was it just you that worked on it, or did you have anybody else that helped you?

Kornfeld: Well over twenty years, you can imagine how things change. We had a newborn son, who was not a newborn son by the end of twenty years, and he was knocking himself out to help us. He was a big help. He became an architect and went to—because he was already a few years along the path when he became part of that twenty. So, he was up in his—in Columbia, and in fact, we're going to have dinner with him and his children tonight because of his birthday.

Q1: Nice.

Kornfeld: You can see endless things here, and we've got them all over the world you know. This is just to show you what one batch, what one batch of people were like.

Q1: Then you had everyone in the neighborhood wanting to keep the historic district or wanted to have it?

Kornfeld: Yes, yes, and we were the last street before the river. There were people across the street from us, but there was no street beyond there. There were just woods beyond those houses. Well, here it is, "Proposed Historic District," shaded and crosshatched, and that's us.

Q1: So how are you able to get the commission to look at Riverdale and to start considering it? Was this the cause? Was Riverdale the first historic district proposed?

Kornfeld: I'm the only person in that part of the world who had any intention to bring that about. Nobody even knew what it was.

Q1: So how did you get them to notice Riverdale then? Did you use—

Kornfeld: To go to Riverdale?

Q1: How did you get them to decide that it needed to be a historic district?

Kornfeld: Oh, oh, oh. Well the historic district was already known downtown. It was just that they didn't touch anything like this. It was out of the question. I kept heckling them for twenty years, I fought for twenty years and that's all there is to it.

Q1: Tell me about those twenty years about the—did you go down to the commission, did—

Kornfeld: Oh, well, I like—

Q1: Do you make newspaper clippings? Did you talk to the press?

Kornfeld: I went to all of their monthly meetings and told everybody what I thought they should do. I just fought for twenty years. Did I not, Madame [to Celia Kornfeld]?

Q2: Absolutely [*laughs*].

Kornfeld: Here's the sort of thing that you will have seen.

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Q1: So these are some of the newspaper articles?

Kornfeld: This is one of the articles in the local newspaper in Riverdale, and I was selling them this. Every time I got anything into the newspaper, it was for my good looks. Here's another one—"Burrowort [ph] Celebrates Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, A City Protection Law." We got into this down on the riverfront here. We fought for all this stuff here.

Q1: What were some of the things that you did to get the commission to make it a historic district? Other than just going to the commission every meeting and telling them to make Riverdale a historic district?

Kornfeld: Well, I, what I did was constantly getting more and more done. I got everything to do with the whole area—was in books and in meetings and everything, and we got people to come over there. We just fought in every possible way. A view from the landmark, here's another one. This is also a different one, but very near us on the other end of the street.

Q1: So, was there any conflict that you guys had when trying to determine the boundary lines other than—

Kornfeld: Well, here, this will give you the picture of what's going on in, let's see, this is *Landmark News* from down, this is from downtown Broad—225 Broadway downtown, now in Manhattan. Time to fix up and all that. This is what I got them to do. I got them to take pictures of how this—in the area including ours, this is ours. They say this one's a hundred, only a hundred and seventy-five years old. Of course, it's much more than that. When I say a hundred and seventy-five that was probably fifteen years ago. I wouldn't be surprised at how old it is. I sort of let go of it, this is the house that—this is us and people all around. This was the first time we ever got, you know, big attention. This is big attention, since it's in the middle of the historic district, which is down—and people like to talk about that one. This one is up on top of a hill. You can see how beautiful these places are. You know people adore them, but downtown they didn't want to touch them, because they weren't, they weren't in Manhattan Center.

Q1: So did you have a lot of support for Riverdale in the City? Like for the rest of Manhattan and—

Kornfeld: I went to everything. I went to all the meetings and talked with everybody and begged everybody. This is Jackson Heights, one of America's first garden communities. It's not a historic district yet. I don't think, I don't remember, that is a long time ago. But they did put us on the front page finally.

Q1: When they put you on the front page, is that when you finally got the district?

Kornfeld: This helped us get a lot further—and this is the young lady who, Laurie Beckelman is the third person, who was in charge of the Landmarks [Preservation Commission], and she was the first one who fought in favor of it. It took three people, I didn't get any of them killed either. They just gave up. Oh, here's—this is the same thing I think.

Q1: Yes.

Kornfeld: “Years of Study Unlock Riverdale’s Secrets.” These, I’ve been through these things so long that I’d really forgotten that I was unlocking Riverdale’s secrets. All I was doing was fighting to get anything done whatsoever, in any way *[laughs]*.

Q1: Did the designation deliver what you’d hoped it would?

Kornfeld: It came out the way I wanted, except that I lost that twenty-six acre property that I told you about. That I showed you the picture of, and lost it. A man of enormous wealth was living in that, and he was going to give it to his children and let them tear it apart and make a neighborhood of it. Everybody around there fought to keep it a twenty-six acre property, and he finally did. He gave it away, it didn't turn into part of my historic district unfortunately, but at least we got something done.

Q1: How did you go from playwright to historian for landmarks?

Kornfeld: I didn't call myself a playwright because I was trying to do this, you know, do this sort of thing, but I was a playwright at the time. A playwright and also a photographer. I'm a photographer as of this moment. I've got twenty-two photographs that are going to be taken to the museum. It will be my third time around.

Q1: Which museum?

Kornfeld: On, 53rd Street, the museum.

“This is Robert Kornfeld on Sycamore in the Riverdale section of the Bronx compiling a list of historical homes in the area to submit to the city's Landmark Preservation Commission.”

That only took twenty years or whatever it was, or it was part of the twenty years. Who knows?
[laughs] It went on forever.

Q1: What were some of the strategies that you used to get the city—to get the historic district?

Kornfeld: I was determined to do that, even though I was a playwright and I was also a photographer. I was also determined to get—create a historic district. I'm not sure I'm up to it anymore, but I don't have to do that anymore *[laughs]*. Celia is very polite and quiet, and says that she wasn't really part of it, but she was an important part of it.

Q1: Has your attitude changed about historic districts now that you've done one?

Kornfeld: Oh yes. This is our next-door neighbor with a nice, nice house. “That worth keeping?” That’s what people—a lot of people—thought of that neighborhood. Is it worth keeping? It’s only about a hundred and eighty years old, so what’s the worth of keeping something like that?

Q1: Right.

Kornfeld: I wasn’t very fond of some of the people who were in the historic district in the district meetings. “Historic District Plan Takes Step Forward.” Ta da, that’s us.

Q1: 1985.

Kornfeld: Here we are.

Q1: What year was this in your twenty-year quest? Was this the final year, or?

Kornfeld: Well, the effort was not only trying to get the historic district approved but getting everybody in my historic district who wasn’t—you know, it wasn’t a formal district as yet. It was only “Flood of Shape of Future”—well, the future was here fortunately. I never gave up.

“Quiet Cool of Riverdale Belies Nearness of the City's Frenzy.”

That’s nice.

Q1: And this was fourteen years before the last article?

Kornfeld: The funny thing is that until they started writing things like that nobody wanted to touch anything that was up in Riverdale. It was not worth touching.

Q1: So did you go to the *New York Times* to get this article written?

Kornfeld: I got, I sent all of my meeting notices to everybody. I didn't fool around at all. Here's a—

Q1: Who's everybody?

Kornfeld: The people that were giving me the problem were the people downtown who had, you know, very expensive, very valuable townhouses. That was their idea of what a historic district should be. Until I fought for it, I was the only person who was fighting for a historic district. It was the only non-historic district in the city at that time. Now there are, what do you think there are now? At least a dozen from all over the city. "Architect Eyes Landmark Project Van Cortlandt Mansion." We've got, we've got endless things, but it was raining hard and we couldn't bring three of these because I wouldn't have been able to walk. I can hardly walk carrying this much. Here it is, "Landmark Panel Delays District Vote".

Q1: That was 1990?

Kornfeld: *[laughs]* “Years of Study Unlock Riverdale’s Secret,” that’s my secret. I don’t know what good that one did, I don’t even remember. “City Weighs Creating Historic District Year,” that’s nice, 1984, just yesterday.

Q2: That was just yesterday. Feels like yesterday.

Kornfeld: This one in here—

“It no reign in noble history the west side of Sycamore Avenue before the Civil War can still be seen.”

They don’t know a lot of the things that are in there that I probably told them, one of them being that Riverdale was only part of New York City after, what was it, about 1845? Wasn’t it— maybe a little later even?

Q2: Later.

Kornfeld: All these streets and all these houses were not part of New York City for hundreds of years. As a result, it might be of interest to know that the downtown, it became blocks. Square blocks all over the city, and all the way out to the part where the Riverdale Historic District is. You’ll see that the Riverdale Historic District has no layouts like downtown. Doesn’t have square blocks. A lot of the property, and where we live for instance, has only one set of blocks,

and it's only one thing that has a street that ends at either end. It looks like it's a big deal, but it's just one area of two blocks. There the two blocks are actually one block, and right here for instance, because this wasn't part of New York City until the 1840's. Its property around this house went along our street, but then it turned and went this way, and then it turned this way and, then that way and that's where I'm—

Q1: So did it zigzag?

A: That's what our neighborhood has been like and still is like. It's not like a real New York area, it's totally unusual. People never say anything about it, but I can talk about it *[laughs]*.

Q1: Well please talk about it.

Kornfeld: I'll mumble on. "A Bronx Booklet," the Bronx Zoo in 1920, that's a little bit before my time: 1920. "Touring the Riverdale Historic District."

Q1: So when did you guys move to Riverdale?

Kornfeld: This was 1990—it's when it became a proper agreed historic district. It took from 1970—it's hard to believe when I think about it. I started fighting in 1970, and finally got it in 1990, and this is obviously a couple of years later. Oh, "Photos by Robert Kornfeld," I've heard of him.

Q1: I wonder who he is.

Kornfeld: Here's some of the properties, and this is some of my old friends.

Q1: Are these the guys that helped you?

Kornfeld: Let's see who he is. Oh, the District Manager, Grace Belkin, and the Democratic District Leader, Jeffrey Dinowitz, that's who they are. They're big shots. I guess after I got the historic district created, then suddenly they began treating me like a person. Until then I was nobody. This is us again, I always tried to get myself on camera with them along with all these other *[unclear]*. This one, the man who bought this place after the historic district was created wanted to tear this down and build a bigger house, and I convinced him that he should keep this house and build another one around the side of it to look like this. He did, and it came out looking gorgeous.

Q1: What street is this, do you remember?

Kornfeld: It would have been down here and along this side of it.

Q1: So it's still Sycamore Avenue?

Kornfeld: This has, is facing sideways downtown, but the Riverdale is over this way *[sneezes]*.

Excuse me.

Q1: Bless you.

Kornfeld: I don't have a cold. I don't know what I've got, not much of anything. This was the barn of a big house that was up on the hill. Some people bought this one and wanted to tear it down because they didn't think a barn was proper. We talked them into keeping this and building something about the same size along the side, and everybody adores it. We've been lucky talking people into things. Oh, here we are, "Recognizing Riverdale," that must have been a hard thing to do *[laughs]*.

Q1: Well this was 1990, so this was in October. This is when you guys got the designation?

Kornfeld: That's the end, that was the end of that one. Let me see, what year this is? Riverdale Historic District. I guess it was up in—this is a nice way of saying what I was just talking about. This is down on the river. This is where the yacht club is right in here. Let's see, there's almost nothing in the historic district that shows there. Oh, this is Sycamore Avenue, I'm sorry I wasn't thinking properly, but this is down along the river. Actually, they put this square on top of it—which has, you know, fooled me. But this is the historic district. This is Sycamore Avenue, and the houses on the top of it are all part of it. The houses over here are not part of it.

Q1: So it's just Sycamore?

Kornfeld: This is the house that I was showing you that had been made—given a corner. You know, made a new house. It looked like a new house, but it was, it looked like an old, old home which was very nice. That's not a great picture of anything there, but there it is. I never fought against anything. Here we are, "City Weighs Creating Historic District." "Years of study," it says, "unlocks secret". It wasn't years of study anymore, it was years of fighting. "Street signs marking historic district unveiled," well that's us, we were being unveiled, that's nice. I think we may have seen this one again, this is our house.

Q1: These are your photographs that you took of the neighborhood?

Kornfeld: I took that photograph, I think, but it's not really a grand one since I have had many photographs shown in museums and everything. I don't think that's one of them *[laughs]*.

Q1: Well, it made the paper.

Kornfeld: Well this is our house. I don't know how it got on the top here, *Riverdale Press*.

Q1: '94.

Kornfeld: 1995 we were still part of the deal. I don't know why they bothered with us anymore, that was sort of over, although I was part of it from 1970 to about 19-about-2005 or something. It was many, many, many years, and I turned it over to my son who's now—here we are, historic recognition Riverdale, wonderful, wonderful what ever it is. Here we are.

Q1: So how has your attitude changed towards historic districts?

Kornfeld: Oh look that is the high. This is Eye. I don't know where all these pictures came from. I don't remember them. I have no memory of many things. This one is somebody that's quite active in Riverdale, and she was trying to help a lot. This is someone who refused to help, that's one of my buddies *[laughs]*. I won't say what I really think. He was the chairman of the Historic District Council of the whole city, and he very—with great joy told me that he wasn't going to be in favor of it.

Q1: Gene Norman? Was that his name?

Kornfeld: This gentleman here. He threw me out. He looks like he's polite and nice and everything, but he would never touch it really.

Q1: Why do you think that is?

Kornfeld: I couldn't tell you. I don't know what. I'm not quite sure. Here we are, they finally consider Landmark District. "The city finally considers it," let's see when that was, '86.

Q1: '86.

Kornfeld: Well, that was only four years from when it really happened. That's pretty good stuff.

Q1: That's an excellent start.

Kornfeld: I don't remember this at all, but it's there. We've got another—

Q2: So when did you write the book *Landmarks of the Bronx*?

Kornfeld: Landmarks of—

Q1: Did you write it during your fight for—

Kornfeld: Well, I told the people in—what's the one that was created just recently, the historic district in Riverdale? You know the one—

Q2: Oh, Fieldston.

Q1: Fieldston, yes.

Kornfeld: Fieldston, I told the people in Fieldston, or they asked me if I'd like to be in charge of it. I said no, that I didn't want another twenty years of, I'd had twenty years of it, and I thought that was really enough. I told them that I'd help them, but they didn't take that well. They wanted someone to come over and be a big shot, and all I wanted to do was walk the streets and

laugh [*laughs*]. I mean, that's enough for someone who's trying to live a life of photographs and plays and everything. Twenty years are a lot. Season's greetings.

Q1: So do you think it's changed? Do you think it's harder now?

Kornfeld: Oh, oh yes.

Q1: Do you think it's easier now?

Kornfeld: 1984 Review—that means that they hadn't come anywhere near it for another six years, but they knew somebody was alive. Oh, here's my friend, the one who didn't want to have the historic district. Here he is, "For the dream and in between Riverdale District makes history," when was that? 1990.

Q1: 1990, so that was shortly before you guys—no, this would be when you guys got the district.

Kornfeld: "Riverdale District makes history," ta da. Only twenty years, that's kids stuff.

"Riverdale Historic District set up in 1852," set up in 1852, I can tell you why that was. Because that was when it became part of New York City. It became much more interesting to the world.

Here's another, "Historic Sycamore Avenue proposed historic district," this one was all the way up to 1987. You see how exciting things could get?

Q1: Yes. So this looks like it was an article or a flyer to ask for help for the historic district.

Kornfeld: '82 was probably the year when it was being turned over from Westchester to New York City. That's why all these old mansions became part of New York City, and why I fought to keep them like that.

Q1: So did you guys, I mean—did you guys pass these flyers out?

Kornfeld: “Please help us,” obviously, we hadn't accomplished my intention. One of the interesting things that happened was that the railroad went through in 1849 and that was when that part of— the—of New York became interesting to the world.

Q1: So did you give these to every—

Kornfeld: I gave away so many things to so many groups of people I can't—there are hundreds of them. You have seen, you have seen this one, but there are lots of them that—“Utopia Still Riverdale Enclave,” what year was this? '84, oh my goodness. It had six years to go, but we were fighting, this is when I was begging people to fight and these are some of the houses that were, and some of the people and some of the interesting things. This is not part of the historic district. Everett is an author in the historic district. That doesn't keep me from writing [*laughs*]. That was a big property, they had carriages with horses and everything it was a big deal. This one is still there. We don't have a cow at the moment [*laughs*].

Q1: No cows?

Kornfeld: It seems that we got much more attention than I realized. Guess seemed to see things wouldn't be coming on and on. *[looking at newspapers]* I don't know what this is, "Utopia still." These oh well, "Bullwood picks new school chief," there's got to be something here somewhere. Here we are: "Landmark District gets council OK," Ha that was good, that must have been near 1990.

Q1: '91.

Kornfeld: Oh that was '90. There it is, so we were sitting next to him at dinner last night, Copell [ph], he's now one of the big shots in town.

Q1: Did he help you?

Kornfeld: Oh yes, he's helped me in many things even to get out of things, like people trying to make trouble for me. He's a very kind, nice person. He even was last night. I'm very lucky there are people like that. He doesn't show up much anymore, he's one of the two owners of the *Riverdale Press*. Historic District, here we are again.

Q1: Did you have many meetings with him?

Kornfeld: With my friend?

Q1: Yes

Kornfeld: Well, he's the one who put a lot of these pictures in the paper, and that's how I got in there. He was a very good friend. Here I am here, "Landmark Battles," that's one of them. I don't know if you want to keep on doing this for the rest of your life. It's a whole ton of—would you like me to leave this here?

Q1: Yes, that's fine. I'm sure that they're going to go through it and make copies of it, of everything.

Kornfeld: Anything you want.

Q1: So they can have a digital record of it.

Kornfeld: All this stuff goes on and on and on. I think we ought to leave you alone, you've suffered enough.

Q1: Well I just had a couple more questions that I'd like to ask if you have time or—

Kornfeld: You'd like to do it now?

Q1: If we can, now?

Kornfeld: Let's see what time it is, its three o'clock, we'll be able to make it work, yes?

Q2: Yes.

Kornfeld: We have to get down to have dinner with my son.

Q1: Okay, well then it will just be short. It's just a few more.

Kornfeld: You want to come over and join? She's always anxious to seem like she's nobody, but she's everybody, she's a great person. Aah, I sat down. Why didn't I sit down before? I don't know. First, I'd like to know what kind of a place this is here, what kind of an—

Q1: This is the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Kornfeld: Is this a private home?

Q1: This is the Kress Foundation, this is their office, and then they let the New York Preservation Archive Project have their offices upstairs.

Kornfeld: Oh.

Q1: So, yes.

Kornfeld: Do you want some water?

Q1: I'm good, do you want some water?

Kornfeld: I'll hand you this, but do you want—it's a beautiful table. I admired it when I walked in.

Q1: It is. So—

Kornfeld: If we had one like this, I don't think we'd be able to do much of anything but crawl around it *[laughs]*.

Q1 *[laughs]* So how do you feel the role of preservationists have changed over the last few years?

Kornfeld: Why don't you come up and help me cause her hearing aid's better than mine.

Q2: I know, thanks. It's your interview, it was.

Kornfeld: I can tell you the beauty of my hearing problem. When I went to camp for two or three years, and the people there thought that I was the best sharp shooter. They use to tell me to go out with all the kids and show them how to do sharp shooting. After every time that I did that, I couldn't hear anything for fifteen minutes, and I always felt, "Well that's fun!" Little by little it

has caught up with me. Someone told me years later that I should have been told to use earplugs, but the man who owned this camp never bothered to tell me that. I didn't know it, and my ears have never been the same since. I've been suffering for that just a little worse every day. At this point it's gotten to where I need help, and I'm ashamed really, but I can't change what hit me.

Q1: No. So what lessons did you learn during the time that you were working on Riverdale that have stuck with you throughout the years?

Kornfeld: What did I?

Q2: What lessons?

Kornfeld: Did I learn?

Q2: Yes, in your work.

Kornfeld: Well the first thing I learned, well no, something I learned later was that I couldn't accomplish anything very quickly. Also I had to learn how, what was absolutely necessary to know completely for every one of these twenty-two houses. I happen to know the number. It was twenty-two houses had all kinds of things. If they were very old, it went back a hundred, a hundred and fifty years I guess at that time. Now it's probably over two hundred. We went back, we had to back over one family after another. Years and years back. All the things that had been changed over the years because of—when this started, it only had carriages and horses. Now you

can see when something has been there for, since 1850 or whenever it was. What it was historic district in the beginning, it was right after 1849 because in 1849 [Cornelius] Vanderbilt put the railroad along the river. So after 1849, I haven't lost my brains completely, it's just a couple of them.

Q2: 1852.

Kornfeld: 1852 was when they started running the trains?

Q2: No, that year the historic district was built.

Kornfeld: But, before that, before that time it was very hard to have a historic district, because it took people a half a day to get from downtown to Riverdale.

Q1: Wow.

Kornfeld: After, it was 1849—no, 1854 more like—when they actually finished it. Anyway, they wanted to have it start at that time and then they didn't want a number, like Station 22 or something. They wanted an elegant name. So they took the local name, which was Riverdale. That's when the word Riverdale first became anything of any interest. The railroad station became the Riverdale Railroad Station. After that, it, the neighborhood right around where the historic district is now became Riverdale. Now everybody all over the map gets, wants to be in Riverdale, because it's so elegant. Then they got all these beautiful houses, and all these funny

ways of going in and out of everywhere. It was a new world, and I did everything I could to help it. Things like that go on forever, like trying to get here. Through down the West Side Highway at, when there was a tremendous accident right in front of us, it, things like that have a lot of effect on people. That's why Celia had to call at least once. Was it twice, three times?

Q2: No, twice *[laughs]*.

Kornfeld: Just twice.

Q1: Just twice.

Kornfeld: We couldn't believe we were going down the Longneck Highway beautifully, and looking at the river, and suddenly everything stopped. You couldn't go anywhere. We were just sitting around there for what, about a couple of miles? We couldn't go anywhere. We just sat there in the middle of a heavy rainstorm, and it kept life exciting *[laughs]*.

Q1: So do you think that the Landmarks Commission has changed since your dealings with them?

Kornfeld: What am I doing?

Q2: Has the Landmarks Commission changed since you started dealing with them?

Kornfeld: Well, the Landmarks Commission don't change really, they just sit there forever. It's there. The good thing is that I fight with, I don't fight with people. I talk with them in a nice way and try to convince them that it's such a remarkable neighborhood with all these old houses and everything that they should try to keep it the way it is. Nobody has really changed it much. I'm just very, very lucky. I just talk to people and I try to be very low key. The people—oh, I wanted to tell you one thing, the one thing that changed things. You wouldn't you probably would never know it. During the—what did we call it when there was no 19—1929 and the one that?

Q2: Depression?

Kornfeld: Hm?

Q2: Depression.

Kornfeld: The Depression. When the Depression came in, there were a number of people who owned some of these magnificent houses with big properties who had to save their lives financially by selling some of the land and having another house built. This one house for instance, it's very beautiful. You wouldn't know it but on the one side there's a—it looks like a street. It actually was a round area for people's cars to go through. They can circle around. But now the one over on the left actually was sold, and they put in four houses on that one little street in 1929. Changed the neighborhood deeply.

Q1: Wow.

Kornfeld: It happened in a few other spots. But it didn't change the world the way it's happening now. Away from that neighborhood there are many neighborhoods where people are finally being talked into selling their houses so people can put up apartment buildings. That's Riverdale. So you have to keep fighting and for whatever reason. It's getting worse every day.

Q1: Would you like to see Riverdale Historic District expanded more?

Kornfeld: Well, you can't make Riverdale expand, except if people can put up apartment houses.

Q1: Well the district lines—would you like to see the district get bigger, the historic district?

Kornfeld: You can't improve things in that way. People improve things from their point of view by buying peoples' houses and putting up apartments.

Q2: This, you'd like to see the Riverdale Historic District expand, you want it bigger?

Kornfeld: Oh, oh. There are a couple places where people can expand it, and one of them is that, is what I was telling you about, what is the—was that twenty-six acres? Twenty-six acres.

Q2: Yes, it's Wave Hill.

Q1: Wave Hill?

Kornfeld: It's still open, but it's now open almost as a circus something. It's something for making people happy. They come in there, it's a public park, it's a public, but it's much better than having it made into apartments at least. Now the houses, the two houses are still there. But it's now, you know, a different world. Then there's another place that I've never, don't think I've ever mentioned to anybody 'cause I didn't really think it was my business to talk about it. But there's some property beyond that. What's the name of the place with the twenty-six acres?

Q2: Wave Hill.

Kornfeld: Wave Hill, we're on the board of Wave Hill, so don't pretend, pretend that we don't know that I forget the name. I never really liked having it made into a public thing.

Q1: Right.

Kornfeld: Just beyond it is another area with about three beautiful properties, and one of them is the property of one of my best friends who has sworn that he'll die if I let him make that into part of the historic district. I've never done it. If he came into the neighborhood, his family owned that, he came back from having worked in that area and his family all died. He and his wife became our best friends. When I began talking to him about the historic district, it was so powerfully against me that I didn't dare say anything much more or I'd lose my best friend. What good would it do? So now you're hearing things that nobody's ever heard before.

Q2: *[laughs]*

Q1: Well that's good.

Kornfeld: That house is adorable, gorgeous. It's much bigger than most houses, and the— Young's father was famous as a—he was a sculptor, and that house is full of sculpture. It's a magnificent house, and they're our best friends. The sculpture is gorgeous, but there's no way that we can talk them into doing what I'd really like.

Q1: Why not?

Kornfeld: Because they'll hate me. He loves that property, and he wants it to be his own and be his private world, and he doesn't want anybody having any part of it. That's just his way of living. Is that not correct?

Q2: Yes.

Kornfeld: That's a bit of silence that I've never mentioned before. I don't think it's going to change the world.

Q1: So where do you see preservation going next?

Kornfeld: Where?

Q2: Where do you see preservation going next?

Kornfeld: Where are the preservations going next?

Q2: Preservation, where do you see it headed?

Kornfeld: Oh, oh. Well one came up recently about only a few miles where Riverdale is.

Q1: Fieldston?

Kornfeld: What's the name of that neighborhood?

Q2: Fieldston.

Kornfeld: Fieldston, Fieldston.

Q1: Fieldston.

Q2: Fieldston.

Kornfeld: Fieldston is a very beautiful neighborhood. It's much newer than Riverdale, because it was unknown until the twenties or something like that which was almost a hundred years later.

But the houses are lovely. Then the properties are well kept, and they wanted it, and—what was it—in about a year, a year ago, a year and a half ago or something it became it a historic district. That was only, what? Twenty-five years after mine, so. It was the only one. The only, you know, one out in the neighborhood. One of the things that I talked people into, for instance, was that for many years people had been assured that the townhouses were what they really wanted. They had them and it never stopped me from believing that when you see a house that is built on gorgeous countryside, with no gutter and no sidewalks and no anything, and then there's very narrow streets, and there were all these beautiful houses, how could anybody not like it? It took me twenty years to convince anyone of that. I probably could have done better in the world, had I not done that, but I wanted to do it. I could have done more in the world of the theater and more in the world of photography. I just got twenty-two pictures just brought into the house for me today, and taken to a museum, so that will keep my life interesting.

Q1: So now you have time to work on your photography and your plays. You could do that now.

Kornfeld: Keeps life interesting.

Q1: Which museum is the show, do you know?

Q2: The Museum of Modern Art.

Kornfeld: We're going back to Riverdale to change our clothes and then go downtown. We'll have time though?

Q2: Oh yes, we'll be fine.

Kornfeld: She has a much better sense of time.

Q2: I do.

Kornfeld: She has a better sense of everything, but she's very quiet and polite about it. She was bound to be mixed up with everything without trying to make herself look too important, which she really is. Are you willing to admit that?

Q2: No, no it's not my interview *[laughs]*.

Kornfeld: Oh okay, this isn't her interview. We've got another tub that is almost twice as heavy as this one. I couldn't possible carry it. I don't, if you need that much.

Q1: I'll have to ask Vanessa. I'm sure she'll get in contact with you guys.

Kornfeld: You've got a lot in there *[laughs]*. What do you think?

Q2: Is that all?

Q1: Yes, I think that's good.

[INTERRUPTION]

Kornfeld: We're very wealthy and they would go out there for the weekend.

Q1: Ok.

Kornfeld: And—

Q2: Well, the grand houses are all up on Independence Avenue. You know? The West Side of Independence is part of the historic district.

Kornfeld: But until 184—

Q2: And our, I'm sorry I just wanted to say.

Kornfeld: Oh, excuse me.

Q2: You know our street, we're all carriage houses.

Q1: Oh, okay.

Kornfeld: At that point in 1849 they became—that became part of New York City instead of still being part of Westchester.

Q1: In 1849?

Kornfeld: Well within, I think, was it '49? It was within a day or two.

Q1: Wow.

Kornfeld: That was when it changed.

Q1: So it was in early, okay.

Kornfeld: That's where I, the, all of this was able to happen because there were no—they're weren't—they didn't have blocks.

Q1: Okay.

Kornfeld: Down where we live, the houses go around in odd ways. They go at one end of our street, the south end of our street, it goes this way, and then that way, and then this way, and then that way, to get to the other.

Q1: No grid?

Kornfeld: People don't believe that it exists.

Q2: Yeah so but we can—

[END OF INTERVIEW]