INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Joseph Svehlak

© 2021 New York Preservation Archive Project

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Joseph Svehlak conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on February 1, 2021. 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, with minor editing by Joseph Svehlak, 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.

Joseph Svehlak was born in Sunset Park, Brooklyn—or Old Bay Ridge—to immigrant parents of Moravian-Czech descent, who initially resided on the Lower West Side of Manhattan before relocating to Brooklyn. Svehlak is a founding member of the Friends of the Lower West Side, and has worked to bring recognition to the diverse history of the neighborhood and to secure Landmark status for the area's three remaining buildings.

Purchasing his "first old house" in Sunset Park in 1970, Svehlak became involved with community activism to address a lack of city services and languishing of community activities the neighborhood. With a few neighbors, he established a block association in 1971, and was a founding member in the mid-'70s of the neighborhood-wide Sunset Park Restoration Committee, which organized house tours and coordinated resources for homeowners to restore their old homes, among other community activities. He eventually got his real estate license to help recruit homebuyers to Sunset Park, and started doing walking tours of the neighborhood—in part because he didn't own a car. Later, he would become a licensed tour guide, winning the Our Guiding Spirit Award of the Guides Association of New York City in 2020.

In 1988, the Restoration Committee coordinated National Register listing for 3,300 buildings, the largest district in the Northeast. Much later, in 2012, the Restoration Committee served as a model for the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee, which was formed in response to development pressures in Sunset Park that were changing the architecture and character of the neighborhood. Following guidance from Svehlak, the Landmarks Committee organized the neighborhood homeowners, gaining support from residents and elected officials for landmarking, which they secured in 2019.

In this interview, Svehlak details the ethnic history of numerous neighborhoods, describing the changes that he was witnessed during a lifetime of living and working in New York City, as well as historical information uncovered through research undertaken for walking tours and community organizations that he has led.

Transcriptionist: Matthew Geesey Session: 1

Interviewees: Joseph Svehlak Location: remote via phone

Interviewer: Sarah Dziedzic Date: February 1, 2021

Q: So today is February 1, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Joe Svehlak for the New York Preservation Archive Project and we're doing this interview remotely via phone during the COVID-19 pandemic. And Joe, because I don't have your signed release form yet, I'd like to ask you on the recording, do I have your consent to record this interview and deposit in the NYPAP Oral History Archive after you've been provided an opportunity to review it?

Svehlak: Yes, indeed. I'm very happy and pleased to be able to do this for you, Sarah, and to give you the perspective on how I've seen preservation over fifty years. It's my pleasure. You have the release to do whatever you need to do with it. It's my pleasure to be able to do this with you.

Q: Great, thank you. And can you start, before we get into questions, by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Svehlak: Okay. My name is Joe. That's my nickname. My real name is Joseph. But everybody mostly calls me Joe Svehlak [spells name]. It's a good Moravian-Czech name. It's hard to put together those seven letters in the English language to pronounce it. And it's Švehlák in Czech. So we say Svehlak. Anyway, I am a native New Yorker, born of immigrant parents and that's part of the story too, I guess. I was born in 1940 in an old Brooklyn neighborhood, which was

Bay Ridge, the Sunset Park neighborhood of Bay Ridge. I grew up there for the first sixteen years of my life. I lived in Queens for a couple of years and then came back to Brooklyn, lived in various neighborhoods in Brooklyn, and by 1970, I bought my first solo house back in the old Sunset Park neighborhood, which had changed a lot. So that's basically what I had been doing in terms of where I had lived.

I have worked in various fields. I worked for about thirty years in finance with back-office procedure in banks and brokerage houses. And I also had a real estate license, which is part of what I got involved with due to my community activism in the Sunset Park neighborhood. So that's part of my career before I got to be a tour guide, a licensed tour guide in the 1990s.

Q: Okay. And when we spoke earlier, you said that you began your preservation work in the 1970s. So I wanted to ask you if you can start to tell your story from that point, when you first became involved in preservation.

Svehlak: Okay. Well, I didn't know I was going to become a preservationist, or a real estate person, or a tour guide when I bought that first old house in 1970. I bought it in my old neighborhood, which had changed a lot because the neighborhood originally was a very safe, mostly Norwegian, Irish, and a few other minorities like us. We were people from Middle Europe, what's now the Czech Republic. I grew up in a neighborhood that was very safe and very calm. You could leave the doors open at night and not worry. But when I came back to the neighborhood, when I was thirty years old, in 1970, to purchase the house—because it was the only place we could afford to live. We couldn't afford a $45,000 house in Park Slope at the time.

But we could afford a $31,000, three-family house in my old neighborhood, Sunset Park.

And that was the beginning of my getting involved in understanding what it was to be part of a community because when you move into a community, you don't necessarily know everything that's going on. So it wasn't only taking care of the old house, it was all the social problems that had evolved in the years of change in the 1960s and '70s, when the city was practically bankrupt and a lot of people were fleeing the city if they could and moving to the suburbs. But we couldn't afford, like I said, other places, so we bought back in the old neighborhood and then got involved with helping to restructure some of the community activities because what we needed to do was organize, because it wasn't just taking care of the old house, which had a lot of problems—the plumbing, the roof, whatever—but also the social ills in the neighborhood, the crime and the drugs that were really taking over the city in these old neighborhoods. The city services weren't there to give us all that we needed in terms of sanitation and protection and then the school systems. Everything was quite neglected at the time.

So what I did with my neighbors, a few of us decided we better start a block association because if I call the police about the drugs on the corner, they're not going to come. But if several of my neighbors call the police, they will come. So we organized a block association back in 1971. In 1972, we even had a tree planting program on the block and those trees are big, magnificent trees now, fifty years later almost. We started to get to know each other on the block, all the various ethnic groups. There were the old Irish—remnants of the old Irish, Polish and Italian communities that were still there, and the newer Hispanic community, mostly the Puerto Rican community that started, in the 1940s, to move into the Sunset Park neighborhood because of all

the war industries and such. They were the majority of the neighborhood now and the older European ethnic groups were sort of the minorities. But we all got to know each other. We all had a wonderful time with each other as far as the block association. We would meet in the Polish tailor's shop once a month and discuss what was going on in the neighborhood, what we could do to help the neighborhood, and we helped our block by organizing block parties and things for the kids to do. And it was wonderful because we had a table of food from every ethnic group from the Polish to the Italians to the Hispanic. It was really a remarkable, nice time for me to see, to really get to know the neighbors on the whole block.

Then we realized that we were part of the community, so we wanted to be more involved with what was going on in the community. There was an organization already started with the outreach from Lutheran Medical Center, the Sunset Park Civic Association. So a couple of us, we go to those meetings and go to the various community board or police precinct council meetings and report back about what was going on in the neighborhood. And we discovered other blocks were doing the same thing. Through the Brooklyn Union Gas [Cinderella Project] and projects about renovating old neighborhoods, which was really getting started back in the 1960s, I had met a wonderful couple named Bob and Alice Walsh. And Alice Walsh from 54th Street had been involved with her neighbor, Melba Barbuscia across the street, about getting their block organized and doing things about reading programs and library programs for the kids and such like that.

So we got together with them and a few other people from other blocks got together, and eventually, thanks more or less to Alice and Melba, the Sunset Park Restoration Committee was

formed back in the mid-1970s. And they became a larger neighborhood group. We were able to, thanks to Alice, make contact with the pastor of the German Lutheran church, St. Jacobi Lutheran Church on 4th Avenue, that we could meet in their basement, and once a month we started to have meetings. From these meetings, a lot more people would understand about the community and what we could do. So eventually the block associations became the Sunset Park Restoration Committee and had had a voice in the neighborhood to do things that would help the neighborhood to have a better feeling about where we were.

We would do things like have the neighborhood house tour, and I was the chairman of the house tour for several years, starting in 1977. I had bought my second house on 50th Street by then because it had all the original 1898 woodwork inside—besides all the mechanical problems that were problematic. But anyway, we were able to put several houses on a house tour. And putting a house tour together, we got to learn what other neighborhoods were doing because we were starting to go to other neighborhoods and see they were doing house tours. And belonging to different community organizations and such was a way of understanding what was going on in different neighborhoods.

Through all that, we were attracting people, who couldn't afford Park Slope and other Brooklyn neighborhoods, to come to Sunset Park and buy a house and become part of the solution to the community by being involved in our various activities. And the activities were numerous. We did flea markets. We did dances. We did harvest festivals in Sunset Park, which meant we had to go into the park to clean it up first because the city wasn't taking care of it, but eventually, there were a bunch of people who would form the Sunset Park Committee, or the Parks Committee.

There was also Friends of the Library that was formed. There was a music school, the Sunset Park School of Music—it was an outgrowth of a group from Brooklyn Heights, the Roosa's Music School—that relocated to Sunset Park.

So all sorts of community activities were based on people getting together, what started out basically as just block association people. So it kind of grew and we all got to be very neighborly and very friendly, and we got a sense of the neighborhood being a larger neighborhood by knowing people throughout the neighborhood and always having something fun to do. We had our monthly meetings. We also had fundraisers. We would have concerts in the church. We would do—like I said, a flea market or a dance or something, raising funds and such. And through all of this, we were understanding what a community was about. It was about self-help. And we had many different ethnic groups that would come to the Sunset Park Restoration Committee meetings, and we did house workshop tours where the local electrician would talk about your electric system in the house. We got the Weisslite paint store on 5th Avenue to talk about painting your house. We got the wonderful Mrs. [M. M.] Graff who was the spearhead about saving the trees in Prospect and Central Park before the parks' conservancies would start. She would talk to us about making a beautiful garden out of your backyard and such.

So we did all kinds of things that, I think, promoted the community, gave us a sense of where we were and made a lot of long-term friendships of which I still have today. So I think I said a lot already about what went on in Sunset Park but if you have anything in particular you'd like to talk about—or I can digress more on house tours or activities and so forth, what it means to be part of a community.

Q: Yes, let me ask a few questions. First off, I'd like to know, when you formed that block association, what block was it on?

Svehlak: Yes, 45th Street, between 5th and 6th Avenues, the 500 block of 45th Street. It's right on a hill. As a matter of fact, from the second floor of my bay window in the house, I can see the Statue of Liberty down the street, looking down the street because we're on a hill. Sunset Park is one of the few neighborhoods that has this dramatic hill that goes down to the waterfront. So many of our streets would have unobstructed views right down to the water and from the upper stories, you can even see—like I said, even from my street in particular—the Statue of Liberty out in the harbor.

It was a very kind of Democratic neighborhood. We were a working class neighborhood that had these wonderful perspectives of the harbor because our neighborhood had this high hill, which was part of the terminal moraine, which is where the park, Sunset Park itself is located on one of the highest points in Brooklyn just south of Green-Wood Cemetery.

Q: And can you tell me about—you mentioned that you were working with a lot of people from different ethnic backgrounds and I wonder if you can recall what some of them did for work, because a big part of the neighborhood is its working class history, its middle class history. So what were some of the jobs that they did?

Svehlak: Well, I know some of them worked down on the waterfront. There was still a lot of

activity down there with Bush Terminal before the 1970s and such. Industry was leaving but there was a lot of waterfront activity in the different supplies, food supplies and such. People worked in the hospital. The old Norwegian Hospital was on 4th Avenue and 46th Street before it became Lutheran Medical in the 1970s that would go into the old AMF, American Machine and Foundry factory building down on 2nd Avenue in the 50's, I think around 54th Street.

So people worked in service and supply industry mostly and people also, like myself, commuted to jobs on Wall Street. We were clerks and people who worked in businesses, for big corporations and such because taking the subway was only about a twenty, twenty-five minute ride to downtown New York, or about an half hour to Midtown. So we were basically a lot of the office supply workers and people involved, I guess, in private businesses. There were local businesses in the neighborhood and such. I think a lot of that was just regular middle class, working class type of jobs. I know my one neighbor was a painter. Another was an electrician. Another was a tailor. So those were basically the service industries of people and also working, like I said, in offices as well, and some factory work.

Q: Okay, thanks. That's very helpful. And can you tell me a little bit more about some of the folks that you mentioned, Melba Barbuscia and Bob and Alice Walsh. Can you tell me a little bit about them?

Svehlak: Yes. They lived on 54th Street and Melba and Alice were neighbors and mothers of children. Of course, they wanted something better for their children as well too. So they would start, like they had a reading program for children on the block, and they got involved with the

library. And they were involved also with the Sunset Park Civic Association. So they had—thanks to one of the brownstone conferences or something, they had some activities that they were doing already on their own. But they were the spearheads to start the Sunset Park Restoration Committee. They were there—I think Alice bought her in house in 1972. I don't know how long Melba and family were there before that or whatever but people who come into the neighborhood and realize that, like myself, that it's your neighbors, it's your sense of community, and you do what you can to help yourself have a better life because—I keep saying––my role in preservation was not just to save the house but to have a better place for my family to live, which meant the neighborhood. So I'm doing self-preservation in a way. I think a lot of people involved in preservation, we're really preserving our quality of life. We're improving our quality of life.

Q: Yes, certainly. And you also mentioned a few different churches that seem to be integral as meeting spaces. It strikes me as somewhat similar to what we'll talk about later, which is where your family first lived in the U.S., where the church was a big part of the community. So I wondered if you could say a little bit more about those churches and any other meeting places that were meaningful in those early days in Sunset Park.

Svehlak: Well, in Sunset Park, our major focus and where we did most of our activities was the old German Lutheran church, St. Jacobi Evangelische Lutherische Kirche. It says it right in stone over the main entrance. They had a wonderful meeting hall downstairs and we met there once a month. In the upstairs, we had concerts that the Sunset Park Music School would sponsor to raise funds and such. We had people from the neighborhood who would perform there for free, just so

that we could raise some funds and such for the community, and for our involvement with the activities we were doing. In particular, trying to get our neighborhood designated as a National Register district. St. Jacobi was the main focal point of our Sunset Park Restoration Committee meetings.

But there were other community facilities, like we used for a couple of our dances, was the old Finnish Imatra Hall because the neighborhood was very multi-ethnic in terms of the Scandinavian community. It was also the largest Finnish community in New York at that time in the 1930s and ‘40s. And they had two churches that I know of but this one particular place was there meeting hall, Imatra Hall, and I believe it was down on 40th or 41st Street between, I think, 7th and 8th Avenue or 8th and 9th, in the neighborhood sort of northeast of Sunset Park. That was the whole, what was called Finntown up there. We had a few of our affairs there, at Imatra Hall.

Also, the Anchor Savings Bank, which was the continuum of the old Bay Ridge Savings Bank, which is a big old classical building up on the corner of 54th Street and 5th Avenue. In the parking lot of the bank, we used to have our flea markets. The bank would allow us to use that and that’s what we did. We did it once or twice a year. We did flea markets to raise money for our community activities.

Those were three places that I know the Sunset Park Restoration Committee would use for activities. Of course, we would have activities and things in people’s homes, when we did concerts in people’s parlors and such, with the Sunset Park Music School, when we were raising

funds for them.

But there were a lot of churches. And a lot of the churches had their own outreach, and there were ethnic churches still left—several old Norwegian churches, like Trinity Lutheran on 46th Street and 4th Avenue, and then there was St. Michael's Roman Catholic on 42nd and 4th Avenue. But we weren't involved much with them or Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the big church, which is where I had attended. When I was in grammar school, I went to Our Lady of Perpetual Help or as we said, OLPH. My parents were actually married in that church. It's the largest church building on all of Long Island! It's a big church sitting right on top of a hill, on 5th Avenue between 59th and 60th Streets. But we didn't do anything in any of their community facilities. But from our various backgrounds, we were all members of different churches or such if we were religious-going people.

There were major churches of the different religious denominations throughout the Sunset Park area.

Q: And can you also give me some details about the house tours. How did those come about? And you mentioned that you were the head of the house tours? So if you could explain how you—

Svehlak: Yes, I was the chairman because I was very impressed—since I got involved with the block association back in the 1970s, I would go to different neighborhoods and see their house tours. I was always interested in architecture and old houses. I had a love of old houses having

sort of grown up in one as well too. I appreciated the beauty of the building and the wonderful woodwork. You see the fireplaces and the parquet floors and such. It's really very nice rather than just a plain dwelling. So I grew up in that kind of an environment. I was always interested in seeing more of those buildings when they were open to people on neighborhood house tours. And neighborhood house tours were a very big thing back in the 1970s and '80s to encourage people to come into the neighborhood, just like we would do later, to make people understand what the neighborhood was about and meet the people living there, to see the problems of what it is to have a house, and what it is to take care of a house, and what you can do with the house and so on. That sense of community was very much what I was learning about by going to different neighborhoods and seeing their house tours.

When I met up with Alice and Bob Walsh, we decided that, by 1977, we would have a much larger house tour than a small house tour. I think there had been sponsors earlier, by Melba and Alice, and we had several houses on the tour, which meant talking to people already—which is what I did—about encouraging them, saying "I'm putting my house on the tour. Would you put your house on the tour?" People said, well, are they going to be safe or whatever? I said, "Look, we're going to have a docent in each room. We have a pattern of how to walk through the house to see it as best as possible. We have somebody at the door to take the tickets."

So this organizational thing, I had kind of learned from going to other people's house tours, so I brought that over to our neighborhood and with enough connections and people, we were able to get several houses, and probably we had a church and another civic building or such that would be on the tour. We would end up at St. Jacobi, the German Lutheran Church, with a reception

afterwards, for coffee and cake. And the local ladies including my stepmother and her friends on the street, the neighbors and such, they'd all be baking things to bring to the church and serve. They were known as the Coffee Ladies. Michael Janove was a wonderful member of our group. He would always volunteer to make the spaghetti supper for all the volunteers. And when you had several houses, and you had people working on all these different aspects of publicity and making the brochure and so forth, you had maybe a hundred people that you would feed. Well, he and his helpers would have a big spaghetti supper for us that night after the house tour was over. And then we would tell all our house tour stories, about how it went and how people felt about having their houses open, and the community outreach, that they got to meet other people. And from those house tours, other people liked the neighborhood and they knew about us, and they had a sense that if they came into the neighborhood, even though there were still drug problems and crime and lacking schools and so forth—things that we needed to do—they could be able to have a sense of not being alone in the neighborhood.

So we did all these community things, which were a lot of fun. And what I was struck by was when I did organize the house tour, people were saying, "Well, I'm not going to be able to see my other neighbors' house. I'm going to have my house on the tour." I said, "Wait, you will," because the day before the house, we had a pre-tour for all the people who would be on the house tour, who had their houses on the house tour, for all their volunteer docents. So when we got to their house, they would show us their house. So we did a little preview run-through. I don't know if other neighborhoods did that kind of thing but everybody thought that was wonderful because they didn't miss out on anything. And they got to meet the people who would be having their other houses on the tour as well.

So these were fun things and I think that what I really enjoyed about it was meeting so many people, having fun doing all this. It was a lot of work, a lot of organizing and seeing that things were in order—all the publicity we needed to do, the selling of the tickets ahead of time, and the selling of the tickets on the day of the tour, and the house tour brochure. I had committees. Thanks to Noel Fuestel—he was in real estate also in the neighborhood eventually—he would get the brochures printed and organized. We would do the write-ups for the different houses and the map and the planning and so on. This was kind of a project we would be working on for like—after the house tour, usually it was a fall house tour, September or October, we would already be planning for the one for the next year. Maybe you can put your house on tour? Or you just bought in the neighborhood; you're still working on the house? Okay, well, we'll do that as kind of a house-in-progress, which is what people like to see as well too. It doesn't have to be a finished house. I remember people telling stories, "I just finished painting the ceiling in my bathroom, which I finally got to do because of the house tour," that kind of thing. I remember doing trim or something on one of my doorways that didn't look too good when I had the house on tour.

So it was kind of a fun thing, the motivation to be part of this group effort, I think. It gave us all a sense of place and a sense of neighborhood. Those are great days for me. I have wonderful memories as you can tell by my [laughs] talking about it now.

Q: It does sound a lot of fun and I'm salivating at the idea of getting together with neighbors in a church and eating spaghetti and going into people's houses and seeing all these details! So it's

great to hear. I wondered if you could, for the sake of the recording, explain the architecture of Sunset Park and what you were seeing inside some of the different house tours.

Svehlak: Yes, okay, well, Sunset Park was basically plotted out in the 1880s and 1890s under the old City of Brooklyn. It was mostly all farm land belonging to basically Dutch and Hugenot farmers, the Schermerhorns, the Bergens, the Delaplanes, and the Bennetts and so on. Eventually as the City of Brooklyn was moving, Flatbush was on the other side. That was another town. It would be absorbed eventually into the City of Brooklyn but the City of Brooklyn, moving south, developed in the 1880s and '90s, and they did a very smart thing: they actually planned a park rather than trying to put a park in later. The park was already planned by 1892 and was more or less completed by the early 1900s. So the land around the park was very valuable to plot out basically twenty by hundred foot lots, twenty-foot-wide lots with the basic design of Sunset Park houses, although some were eighteen and seventeen when the building row would try to squeeze in another house or two. Instead of twenty-foot, twenty-foot, twenty-foot—you would maybe have five twenty-foot houses—you could have six seventeen- or eighteen-foot houses or something. They basically were twenty feet wide.

And they were mostly two-story, called parlor floor and basement houses because they had a high stoop—the Dutch word for step is stoop—a high stoop outside and the floor under that you would walk in, the ground floor level, it would actually be like a step down. So that was a basement floor, which was not a cellar. There was a full cellar underneath that basement. So it looks more like a three story house where the first floor was just a little bit below grade. So they were called parlor floor and basement houses.

That was the beginning of the neighborhood when it was supposed to be kind of a middle class neighborhood that was an outgrowth of Park Slope and some of the same type of houses around 9th Street and 10th Street and so on. You'll see Thomas Bennett, the same architect of hundreds of houses in Sunset Park, did some in Park Slope too, two-story houses, basement level. The earlier ones, like on 50th Street and on one side of 47th Street, and also older blocks like 54th Street, before around 1900, they were built for one family. Then with the waterfront turning industrial, moving south from Red Hook with the Bush Terminal and the Brooklyn army base [Brooklyn Army Terminal] all coming in in the early 1900s, the neighborhood definitely became working class.

So even as they were building these two-story parlor floor and basement houses—like you will see today, on 44th Street between 4th and 5th Avenue, beautiful basement floor, brownstone, upper two floors of limestone, built in 1908—they actually were built as a two-family house even though they look like the one-family that were there originally for a middle class because the neighborhood only had aspirations to be middle class when it was first developed in the 1890s. But then because of the working class people moving in, because of the waterfront industries, the middle class had left already for better neighborhoods. The neighborhood definitely turned into working class, and working class architecture would then take over in the early 1900s with the building of what were two-family houses.

That's what I grew up in. I grew up in a two-family house between 7th and 8th Avenues on 57th Street. I grew up in a two-family brick with a rounded bay, three-windowed bay. There was a smaller high stoop going up but it wasn't a parlor floor and basement; there were just a few steps

up. Then you had a five-room apartment, four rooms through, kitchen on the side of the back and the bathroom would be in the middle with a storage room with a skylight. And there would be another apartment on top of that (a six-room apartment) with an extra bedroom, over the main entrance hallway. So these two-family brick houses were really the first of the working class neighborhood, whereas some of these other houses that had pretended to be one-family were built as two-family even though they looked like the one-family original brownstones of which there were only a few streets constructed like that. These two-family brick houses also had a half basement. They didn't have a cellar. They had a half basement where windows were in the upper half of that basement floor where the heating system would be also, but you would have light and air coming into that basement.

That's the kind of house I grew up in. We had a porch and we had a backyard and the property was twenty-foot in the frontage. As I mentioned, most of the frontages are twenty-foot and the house properties were one hundred feet deep. And these hundred-feet-deep houses would be back-to-back from the rows of houses from the neighboring street behind you, and that meant that between your house—the back of your house and the back of the house from the other street—you could have as much as eighty or one hundred feet of space, where you had about thirty to forty feet of garden. So would your neighbor on the other side. So this allowed for a lot of light and air and trees and rosebushes, tomato plants and grass, whatever you wanted to do in the backyard. You could have a little farm back there, which we did during the Second World War. We had taken up the grass and planted potatoes and string beans and squash and everything else, just to have some fresh vegetables, a victory garden kind of thing. I'm talking 1943-1944. I was born in 1940. So these are my earlier memories as a kid growing up in one of these two-

family brick houses.

We didn't own the house. The house was owned by an Irish widow who lived upstairs with her two daughters who worked as secretaries on Wall Street. And my father was in building maintenance. My mother was not working since she was bringing me up at the time and fortunately, at that time, the economy was enough that my father as a maintenance person in an office building was able to make enough of a salary since salaries were equitable. Rents were—that one week salary paid for a whole month's rent. My father made just about forty-some dollars a week then, a dollar an hour or whatever, back in the 1940s. The rent was forty-five dollars, plus we had to pay our own electricity, but the heat was included in the rent as well too. So it was very equitable. So a mother could stay home and raise the children, which was a good way of a family life back then because the economy was proportionate to what a family could afford to rent, or to buy a house.

So I grew up in those circumstances in a wonderful 1909 row house with parquet floors and nice woodwork trim, and leaded glass transom windows, a nice oak paneled hallway and such. So I had a sense of a nice old house as a kid. As I kept growing up and understanding, I liked good buildings. I got involved when I bought my first house, which had really no detail in it, until I got the second house, which had ninety-five percent of the original 1898 woodwork in it. I was able to enjoy all of that and that was part of the beauty of the neighborhood, that the architecture was very practical, whether you were working class or you were that aspiring middle class to start with.

And then after that, by 1912, 1914, they were building four-story walkup apartment buildings, beautiful brick pattern, brickwork. Not just plain red brick buildings like you see today, but really nice architectural details and patterns in the various brickworks of these apartment houses. They were built with nice two-bedrooms, depending upon the size of the buildings, and marble in the hallways and stained glass on the windows. But as a working class neighborhood, it was built as a very well-established working class neighborhood, which is the aspiration of many people coming out of the tenements, out of the older parts of Brooklyn and the old tenements of Lower Manhattan or the Upper East Side of Manhattan, people coming to Brooklyn to live in one of these two-family houses is what happened with my family, my mother's family. They lived downtown—and I'll get to their story later—and by 1927, they had bought this old 1909 two-family house where they had an apartment for themselves and they had an extra rental to help them pay the mortgage.

So basically, the structure of the neighborhood was this working class, low-rise building of the neighborhood, and mostly owner-occupied because the two-family or even the six-family houses and such, or eight-family, would be bought basically by one family group and then they would rent to more or less their own family or friends or associates. So it was a very stable neighborhood as it started out until the flight to the suburbs in the 1960s. All the social ills and the lack of city services and such would bring in a lot of poorer economic people who didn't have the sense of place that we already had established because they were coming from poor economic circumstances and they were newer immigrants. They weren't established immigrants, until they got established eventually—and that's another whole progression of how immigration grows, as far as people starting out in poorer circumstances and then making it up economically

into a little better way of living. Sunset Park has provided that all the time for all the various immigrant groups that have come through there.

I was happy to be a part of all that as I was growing up. I understood, when I was a kid, that I was the minority. Who are these Czech people when half the block was Norwegian? Most of my friends were Norwegian, a few Irish. There was one German family that I knew. There was one Greek family, and that's about it. Everybody else was either—like I said, more than half of them were Norwegian and then at least another thirty percent of them or so were Irish. So growing up with different people made me understand about different people having different ways of listening to music, eating food, celebrating the holidays and such. So as a kid, I got this absorption of being a multi-ethnic kind of community.

That would change when I came back in 1970 to the other different ethnic groups that started to move in, but I was very much engaged with all these differences because that was the story of how people make a better life for themselves. Sunset Park was the kind of neighborhood, because of the architecture and the lower density, that provided the ability to do that. It wasn't just very big high-rises, very impersonal. It was very much oriented towards human scale of building and the architecture that started in the 1880s-1890s, with these kinds of houses that I described to you: the parlor floor and basement style, then the two-family brick, and then the four-story or three-story walkup apartments.

And that comprised at least about eighty or ninety percent of the built environment, of the housing stock of the neighborhood. The neighborhood was basically built up between the late

1880s and by the time of the First World War, 1917-1918. The neighborhood was practically all filled in, just a few occasional. empty lots in places.

Q: Would you also agree that it was a human scale of ownership too? If the buildings are owner-occupied, you have a different relationship with the concept of the landlord. You know them! They're your neighbor.

Svehlak: Oh yes. That was it. And that was part of our argument, when people were saying, "Oh, you're becoming elitist. You're going for landmark status." Yes, but we are individual homeowners. We take pride in our tenancies and we had, in advance, spoken to many of my neighbors. We would keep a tenant even at a lower market rent just because we knew they were a good tenant. That was a stability in our home. And a lot of our apartments—we were only two- or three- family in most cases—we didn't even lock our doors, even though we had different people living in the building. So it was a sense of place in the homeownership.

It was a sense that it kept the community stable even during the—we had the 1977 blackout, when there was looting and everything on the avenues. There were the drug problems, where a lot of the buildings had problems because people were leaving, and the absentee landlords in the multi-dwellings, in the eight-, twelve- family, they were taking in people who had drug issues and those people of course would make it difficult for the other people who were living in the building. You didn't want to live next to a drug problem, so you'd move out if you can and the landlord is not caring. They're just getting the rent and they're not fixing up the building and eventually there would be fires.

There was so much abandonment on the multi-family dwellings on 6th Avenue and 4th Avenue, and a couple of the side streets that had these four-story walkups, that it would have been like Bushwick or the South Bronx if the whole neighborhood had been built up with multi-family apartments. But thank God, three quarters or more of the neighborhood were these two- or three-story houses, and in most cases, no matter what the ethnicity was, they were homeowners. And the homeowners living next to an abandoned building, but they would stay, because where else are they going to go? This is their home. So that stability, because of the lower density, kept the neighborhood intact even with the burnt-out buildings and such.

Eventually, thanks to the different programs, we were declared a poverty area in the 1960s and able to get different federal funds and programs. And the Sunset Park Redevelopment Corporation was formed, and through the processes of all of their ability to renovate these abandoned buildings, or to build on lots where these buildings had to be torn down, about five hundred some apartments—new apartments—were created for income guidelines, for Section 8 tenancies, that would stabilize the neighborhood because they would now be tenanted by people who would have an organization that ran the buildings for the benefit of the community. It was hard to get one of these Section 8 apartments because you had to show that you could qualify and maintain it. But Section 8 was very equitable for the working class people, and a lot of them were from the neighborhood itself. That stabilized the neighborhood, the Redevelopment Committee, what they had done in the 1970s and '80s. That healed the neighborhood a lot. That was the multi-families.

Q: The Section 8 housing, were those larger-scale buildings?

Svehlak: Yes, they were the larger-scale. They were mostly the four-story walkups that had experienced the burnouts, yes. Basically, they were not owner-occupied anymore. A lot of them had gone into the families of the original owners and such and they were absentee landlords. They weren't there to watch and maintain. All you need to do is get one drug problem in one building and that could wreck the whole building. Or it would start a chain of events that things would be neglected.

Also, I have to stick up for the landlords. I was a landlord of two three-family houses at one point, and when I bought my first house, heating oil was twenty cents a gallon. In two years, I was now paying $1.20 a gallon for heating oil and I could not raise the rent of my tenants, not to have increases because my fuel was increased. So if I'm a very working class person, I'm paying more out of my pocket to now subsidize the building that I'm in, that I should be getting more fair share to handle the expense of the building, and I'm not. And if I'm poor and I can't afford to properly fix the door or maintain the roof or neglect some of the problems—it was the heating costs that drove up the economy of some of the owners that they couldn't afford to take care of their buildings in some cases. So there was a problem there too.

Q: Interesting. And that was in the 1970s, when the price of fuel—

Svehlak: Yes, fuel oil jumped in the early 1970s and you couldn't raise the rents because of it. You had rent controlled, rent stabilized tenants in multiple dwellings. So absentee owners would

neglect to fix things, and as you deteriorate a building, people who were living there wouldn't like it and they'd leave. You'd get tenants who couldn't afford anything else, or had drug money or something who would come into the buildings. It was a problem. But today, unfortunately, the problem is the other way. Nobody can afford anything anymore because we don't have good affordable housing like we had with the housing authority back in the 1940s and '50s and such like that. We don't have good housing programs.

Q: That's right.

Svehlak: Section 8 doesn't work all that well all the time, unfortunately, depending upon the landlords and so forth.

Q: Well, I wanted to ask you about writing a nomination for the National Register, how that came about in Sunset Park.

Svehlak: Well, what happened is, we were all conscious of the fact that we had a good old historic neighborhood. As I described, the architecture and the streetscape, and many of us were house-proud already. We wanted to preserve all of this, but at the time—I mentioned all the social-economic problems we had and drugs had climbed—so nobody wanted to. We needed to get the Community Board and the city council person involved with helping us, to be espoused to become a landmark. You needed to get people to support you. Of course, they thought this was not a priority, which was right. It wasn't a priority. The priority was the schools, the sanitation, the library, the park, fixing up things in the neighborhood. That was the priority. So

what we decided to do, okay, we can't get landmarks because we don't have the local powers that be and politicians and such to back us but we can certainly try for National Register because we have this wonderful streetscape, contiguous streetscape, of mostly these two-, three- story, four-story buildings built with good integrity, good brickwork, good facades, and kind of a contiguous, one block after another of these houses. Because fortunately then it was pure, nobody is adding additions to them inappropriately which would become a problem later on, about getting landmarked.

This is why landmarks are very important, but back then, if we got National Register, we figured at least we could get recognition for the fact that we did have valuable streetscapes. And from National Register, you do have certain advantages. According to the guidelines, if you do your Department of Interior façade work in the approved historic way, you can get a tax credit. I don't know the particulars of it but it was that kind of an advantage. It was more about: let's recognize the neighborhood for really what it was.

So we had raised money thanks to the house tours, the flea markets, the dances and so on—I think it was several thousand dollars—and we hired Andrew Dolkart. He's the most wonderful person to do all the research and restoration, and has done so many reports and so many wonderful books on the history of New York. He's an icon. I was teasing Andrew and I said to him one time he should become the Landmarks Commissioner. But I think his focus is other ways of making everybody understand what the city is about, and all the wonderful research he's done.

So we hired him and I walked the streets with him, looking at the different streets, and he did a lot of the historic research and the write-up. And ultimately, we had to do a lot of prep work ourselves too. We had committees of people who would go and look up the ownership of each house, the architect of each house, write up a basic thing about the block, and Andrew did the scholarly work on all of this. But we would go to the Department of Buildings and look up the ownership and the architect, the date of the building. Then we also had a photography committee that would photograph each house on all the blocks.

So this would be a couple of years project, and to organize this all to make all of this come together—thanks to some people in our organization who did work hard on it. I was just part of the planning for the photography for the program to get the buildings all photographed. I forget who was working on all the other projects but there were several people that were involved in all of that, getting the research done and so forth. And then it was presented. Like I said, we had a professional, Andrew Dolkart, do the write-up for us.

By 1988, we did get National Register. We got National Register for over 3,300 buildings. We were the largest National Registered district in the Northeast. That's mostly all the buildings from about 40th Street all the way to 62nd Street, from 4th Avenue up to 7th Avenue. That whole area was considered a National Register, even though some of the buildings were not particularly attractive and had been added in, or a garage here or there. But the totality of the way everything was put together, the integrity, that original architecture that was there from the 1880s through the First World War, 1916-1918, that was still intact. So that gave us this National Register prestige. And there it would sit.

Because then it just seemed we weren't going any further with landmarking until 2012. This was a very nice experience for me because I had always been doing walking tours of the neighborhood. I got a real estate license back in the 1970s, when the local broker didn't even know what fretwork was. When I came to him to buy my second house, which was advertised for $31,000, he said to me, "What do you want with that old house? It has all that dark, dirty old woodwork and all those old hanging lamps?" I said, "That's what I want to look at!" It was an original 1898 designed by Henry Spicer, on 50th Street, 465 50th Street with all the pocket doors, the marble sinks, the pier mirrors, the fireplaces, everything. It even had its original pull chain john in it. It was a magnificent house that needed a lot of plumbing and a lot of other structural work. I didn't have it for that long but I was able to pass it on to somebody who could do a proper renovation of it. That was the house that I had on tour in 1977.

So I said to him, "People are interested in these kinds of houses now. This is what they're looking at in Park Slope." If you can't afford a $50,000 or $60,000 house in Park Slope, but you can afford a $30,000 or $40,000 house in Sunset Park. And that's when we had started to do the house tours, when I got that house. Eventually, I would get a real estate license for the local broker in the neighborhood and he would become the brownstone agent of the neighborhood because now we were pulling people in from other places who wanted these kinds of houses. We were being discovered because of the house tours and the publicity that we were getting. And I was working on Wall Street as a research consultant then, and I was putting in hours, but I was losing hours because I was working so much on house tours. People came to me because they knew about me and house tours. And the neighbors, "Well, my mother's house is for sale, my

aunt's house is for sale. Do you know anybody who's interested in buying it?" And I would have people coming to me, "Do you know of a house that anybody is selling?" And I would be matching up houses at the rate of one a month, not as a real estate agent. So I said to the local real estate agent, "I'm losing money for you and me. I'm not working on my Wall Street job. I'm cutting less hours there because I'm doing all my community work." I said, "I think I should get a real estate license." And I did.

So I had one for about fifteen years and that's how I got started doing walking tours. I remember one of the big walking tours I did back in the 1970s, even before I had the license, was for the Friends of the Parks. The Friends of the Parks was an organization run by Bob Makla, a wonderful lawyer from Park Slope, who had wonderful people like Dickey Graff, M.M. Graff, who would later become my tenant, and she wrote the definitive book that it wasn't Olmstead. It was Vaux's design for Central Park; Olmstead was really the one who was out there getting the work done but it was Vaux's design and planning. That's really why we have the genius of Central Park and that's how Olmstead learned: from Vaux. Well, she was known as the Tree Lady, and she would go in the back of trucks with the guys who were pruning the trees and stuff, and she said, "Take out this branch. Trim the tree here," and so on. This was before the Parks Conservancy. This was back in the 1970s. The Central Park and Prospect Park conservancies weren't founded until like 1980.

So in the 1970s, the Friends of the Parks, thanks to Dickey Graff, would try to save all the trees they could. She was a self-taught horticulturist and she's written books and articles on gardening and horticulture. So I got involved with the Friends of the Parks as well, and I did my first big

walking tour with about forty people through Sunset Park in the 1970s. And this would give me a sense of the whole neighborhood.

Then when I was doing my real estate, I was a person without a car. Imagine a real estate person without a car! What do you do? You walk people from one block to another to show them the different houses or co-op apartments or whatever. So as I'm walking people, of course, I'm giving them a tour of the neighborhood. "This is this church over here. This ethnic group would go to that church. This was what the neighborhood was about," the whole story. They get the Sunset Park story from me, and that way, I was doing walking tours as I'm trying to sell a house. I'm selling a community is what I'm doing. I'm bringing them into the community.

So [laughs] I guess I'm a preservationist and activist and I'm doing it practically too for myself because it gave me employment as well. So I was quite successful. But I never made money on houses. These houses were selling for $60,000-$70,000, maybe $200,000 at most, not like they are today, $1 million and a half. I was active with that in part of the community, and I was bringing people into the community and was very happy to do it. Some of those same people I know today and I'm friends with today as well. So it was a whole progression of my getting involved from buying a house, getting involved in the block association, getting involved with the neighborhood association and all the things we did, and the other groups because of it: I joined the Municipal Arts Society [MAS], and then I would get to be a tour guide for the Municipal Arts Society. That's how I got started with downtown New York. So if we want to get into that, I don't know. Are you ready to get into that or not yet?

Q: I think I would actually like to make that connection to the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee.

Svehlak: Oh, I'm sorry. I digress already. I didn't finish with that, thank you. I keep going on in all these stories here and there and all over the place. Thank you for pulling it together for me.

So what happened is, I'm doing tours of the neighborhood and one of my tours that I was doing for the Municipal Arts Society was Sunset Park. And I'm standing on the steps of the third house I had bought in Sunset Park. I only owned two houses concurrently at any one time because I had to sell the second house because of a bad tenancy in the first house, and the destruction that they did, and the inability to take care of all the physical problems of the beautiful house that had all the original 1898 woodwork in it. But a couple years later, I was able to buy the house that had half its original woodwork on a very fine street, 526 47th Street, the 500 block of 47th Street between 5th and 6th Avenue. It was a beautiful limestone 1898 house, knew the history of it. The history was interesting because, like I said, we had done the research for the National Register. So I knew, okay, the architect was Thomas Bennett. He did that whole line of houses. Each house had an individual different look to it. Some were flat-bayed, some were angle-bayed, some were rounded-bayed, some were limestone, some were brownstone, some were different, exotic. Mine was a La Brea stone from Indiana. It was a very, very beautiful line. It was one of the finest rows of Victorian architecture, 1898-1900, this whole row done by Thomas Bennett. There's twenty-five houses, the even side number of the 500 block on 47th Street. So I had 526.

So I'm standing on the steps of the house giving my tour and the owners, wonderful ladies, Lynn

Massimo and Lynn Tondrick, came out and wondered, what is all this noise? I said, "Stay. And I hope you don't mind but you'll hear the history of your house." I said, I had owned this house, but I owned it two owners prior to them. So I never knew that they were the owners until about 2001. I sold the house because of family difficulties and things. I sold the house, I think, around 1990, before I would come back to live in Brooklyn and Park Slope, in co-op apartments, now, rather than in individual houses as I got older. So I'm giving the history of the house, and they thought it was very interesting because of the first owner of the house was a Rose Douras, and I knew nothing about Rose Douras but one of my buddies was a librarian and very well-read. "Oh, Rose Douras was Marion Davies's mother." I said, "What?" Yeah, Marion Davies, the actress, the mistress of William Randolph Hearst. Her mother was the first owner of the house. I said, "This is interesting."

This is that middle class that I was telling you about that would first move into the neighborhood, but by the early 1900s, these houses would be converted to two- or three- family or rooming houses, from one family. Well, her mother owned the house. It seemed at that time a lot of people dealing in various businesses, the husbands, maybe they're doing something that they don't want—if they're having legal problems, the family home would be repossessed. So the house would be registered in the woman's name. So that way they couldn't take the house away from the family.

So we found that there were quite a few women that were the first owners of a lot of these houses because I guess that was the way of protecting it from the husband's shady dealings or whatever might have been. So Rose Douras was the first owner, Marion Davies' mother, and we thought

maybe, I guess she is. And sure enough, up the block, one of the houses that I had sold to one of the people who had become a very active member in the community, he interviewed the lady who was the first owner of that house, who was in her nineties at that time, and she told us the story. She had moved out to the suburbs. She said, "Well, I left in the early 1900s. All those riff raff, Norwegians and Irish working class people, were moving into the neighborhood." But she said, "I remember playing with Marion Davies who lived in 526 when I was a young girl." So there was the oral history going back, authenticating what we had found on the records of Rose Douras and Marion Davies. Marion Davies would never admit—she'd say, "I was born in Brooklyn but woke up in Manhattan." She said lived by a park. It wasn't really Sunset Park. It was Prospect Park. It was in a better neighborhood. [Laughs] So there we have it, the stories of people who lived on the block.

I'd find out these things. I think they were actually wonderful. Still living across the street—well, she's living in Bay Ridge now—is Rita Wade, who was the last secretary to Lillian Hellman. And the first house, the Marsh family, the granddaughter told me—and this is hearsay again—that her grandmother was a nanny for one of Theodore Roosevelt's children. So you get an idea of the different kinds of people that lived here in different periods.

So these wonderful ladies heard me, and I said, "I can tell you more." We became friends. So every time I would do a walking tour, I would call the Lynns and say, "I'm going to be yelling outside your window at such and such a time." And they would come down. This was very good because by the time we would be talking; now developers are coming into the neighborhood. People are buying the houses for several hundred thousand now, not for $200,000 but $500,000-

$600,000. But they were taking some of these houses and as of right, stripping the façade, putting in different window patterns, adding another floor to it or something, putting illegally sometimes a sixth family into what they claimed was going to be a three-, which was originally a one- or a two- family house. So all these things were going on now to kind of—this was bringing down the quality of life in the neighborhood because it was now bringing in a lot more people but at market rate. This was not affordable housing. And it was also destroying the character of the neighborhood, and the light and the air, the sewage and the drainage was all being taxed by all this. Lack of city services again, for sanitation, schools or whatever.

So this was very inappropriate development that was going on and there was no way really to stop it, outside of getting landmarking, which was unfortunate. Landmarking is a defacto way of city planning. City planning, I think, should be working with landmarks right away—before they allow zoning and things to happen in neighborhoods—that could keep the quality of life because the quality of life on these blocks was what I described to you. In the times of the burnouts and stuff, people were staying because it was owner-occupied. So that idea of owner occupancy is people who are working and struggling and striving and this is their home. They're not going to run from these problems. They couldn't.

So now people were buying these places to just develop and make as much money off as they can, and they have no interest in the community. And that sense of community is what saved the neighborhood all along. So these wonderful people like the Lynns are getting together with some of their neighbors on 47th Street and such, said we've got to do something to stop this over-development of what should be a historic area. From me already they knew about the National

Register. I said. "We've got National Register on the whole district." So that gave them the solid basis to work on that, to then make all the—they did such a wonderful job. I mean, Lynn Massimo is an architectural photographer in one of her past jobs and so of course, doing all the photography work again, and all the research work again. And I told them, "You organize by block. Just like we organized our Sunset Park Restoration Committee based on the block associations." I said, "Do the same thing. Get key people on each block who know their neighbors, and then they know other people and then you get a block association going, and then you get your blocks to support landmarks."

And this is what they did. They organized the whole neighborhood. And I brought them together in 2012 with people from the old Sunset Park Restoration Committee that were still living in the neighborhood. So they had that solid base now to work with. And God bless them, it took them five years. They were working with their committee on getting all of these houses documented again, the change that had happened since National Register, the write-up about the architecture, the building. Also, they went to the owners. On a lot of the blocks, usually you don't get the owners' support of landmarking but, because most of these were owner-occupied buildings, some blocks they got as much as seventy or eighty percent, or even more, of the ownership of the block that said they wanted their building to be landmarked. And that was very unusual because it's usually that the Landmarks Commission, after you've been nominated and they're doing the research, they go to the owners to find out if the owners are going to back the landmarking or not.

So in this case, the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee that was formed in 2012 with the help of

the Historic Districts Council [HDC], which was very important to all our work—the Historic Districts Council was there for so many neighborhoods—they got the Six to Celebrate designation, which meant that they got a lot of publicity, funding for brochures. I did walking tours for them. They went to different community groups to get the support because Sara Gonzalez was the city councilperson who had approached one of the neighbors of the Lynns to talk about making the neighborhood a landmark since there were so many defacings of these historic streetscapes that was going on, and that was the only way to save it. Then Sara Gonzalez [laughs] winds up losing to Carlos Menchaca as the city councilperson. So now we had Carlos on the tour. Eventually, he gave his support for the landmarks designation, showing that the landmarks of the neighborhood was a way of saving the quality of life in the neighborhood for everybody. It wasn't just about an elitism of saying I've got a beautiful house and this is what we should keep. The reasons why we keep it is because of light and air and density and decent housing for the tenants that are there already. They are not going to be displaced. That was all part of making the community strong now to get outside support, and we were able to persuade our city councilperson, Carlos Menchaca, to back us for landmarking as well.

So it was a process. And the Lynns were incredible, holding meetings. One of the meetings they had at the Community Board—the land use committee was talking about what's going on in the neighborhood and developments. They had a meeting and they had over 120 people that turned up at this committee meeting. This was not a regular monthly meeting of the whole Sunset Park Community Board. It was just of the landmarks use. The Community Board chair said he had never had such a large meeting for a subcommittee. So many people were there, and they got Landmarks to come at one point and to explain to the community, and there were only a couple

of naysayers amongst the people who came there. These were basically people who had bought for development, that were saying we don't want Landmarks to tell us we can't change the window structure or whatever.

So they were very successful. And I believe the Landmarks Commission was very impressed. And thanks to the wonderful direction of Sarah Carroll, who is, in my estimation, this super person coming right from the Landmarks Preservation Commission itself, and now is the commissioner. She can see the whole understanding of landmarks from the inside, that it happened in 2019, that four separate districts of Sunset Park were declared landmarks. So about over 600 of the original National Register district now are landmarked blocks, about one dozen blocks in four different segments, since all four couldn't be contiguous together because of the multi-family dwellings or the non-contiguous architecture that were on the streets between these different groupings. We have four Sunset Park landmark districts and there should still be a fifth one yet from 43rd to 40th between 4th and 5th, that contains some unusual working class housing as well as rows of these parlor floor and basement and two-family houses as well too. But that's something else that they have to keep working on.

But we were successful thanks to the really hard work of the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee, and I was just kind of an advisor to that, the connector to the old Sunset Park Restoration Committee, and still the walking tour guide through all of this—through my walks with the Sunset Park Restoration Committee, through my walks at the Municipal Arts Society, through my walks with the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee, Historic Districts Council, on and on, until eventually I became a registered New York City tour guide in the 1990s. There we are.

Q: Now, you mentioned a few things that were aligned in order to help put together a good request for evaluation and to ultimately get parts of the neighborhood landmarked. You mentioned HDC. You mentioned the political will that was there, through local council people, the commissioner, and then of course, the Lynns. I wondered if there was anything else that was also an important factor there that you wanted to mention.

Svehlak: Yes, I think it was wonderful, again, the outreach, that the blocks and the people were contacted and personally so. This is all volunteer. They had no paid director or anything, no outside funding for this. They were even supported by members of the Chinese community because this became the third Chinatown of New York in the late 1980s, early 1990s, when most of the Scandinavian people had moved out. So they even had brochures in Chinese, and of course in Spanish as well too. So they were trying to get support from the whole community, as well as the other social betterments organizations in the community, to show that they weren't elitist, that they were just part of stabilizing the neighborhood for everybody. I think that was what I was very impressed with: the human factor of everybody counts, everybody belongs. Let's give them all information and a base of understanding of how we all can work together.

I was so joyful to see all this happening again. That was my feeling because, like I said, I had started with the small group back in the 1970s, when landmarks was out of reach. And now, thanks to this regeneration that happened with the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee, starting in 2012, it was like the culmination of about almost forty years of community activism to make the neighborhood recognized for what it is and to stabilize it with its wonderful sense of place. So

that made me feel very good [laughs].

And I'm very friendly with the Lynns and some other people who were involved in the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee, as well as still with the Walshes. I'm friends with them from way back when. And it's been part of my life, that I've just developed into this kind of outreach person, to see what we could do and working with so many people, and learning so much from all of them along the way. It was all wonderful. It was just all good stuff. It was all about neighborhood and family and stability and sense of place. I guess I feel—well, I belong [laughs]. I belong to that neighborhood. That was the neighborhood that I lived in for half my life almost, in two different phases of my life. I lived there from 1940 to 1956. My mother died and then we had to leave for other family reasons, and then from 1970 to 1990 when I lived there and had the three houses over that period with the Sunset Park Restoration Committee. And we did wonderful things. They even did a movie about the neighborhood then. A lot of things went on in that Sunset Park Restoration Committee, thanks to all the outreach that different organizations and such had come to us and worked with us.

Alice and Bob Walsh wrote a wonderful book, *Sunset Park: A Time Remembered* with the Brooklyn Educational and Cultural Alliance. *Sunset Park, Sunset Park*, the movie, was done with Pratt Institute and a grant from Anchor Bank. It was a wonderful documentary on the neighborhood. I've even been involved with people who come to me now about the neighborhood to talk about it since I lived so much of it. I've been the person who's remembered the neighborhood with one group that was doing a documentary on the Chinatown. I was giving them a guided tour on what the neighborhood was like before it was Chinatown. So I'm in that

documentary too. [Laughs] It's fun, it's fun. And here I am talking to you about all this now too, reliving it. [Laughs] So help me out, where am I going now, Sarah? [Laughs]

Q: Well, what I'd like to ask next is for you to talk about your family's history with—I guess since we've been talking about Sunset Park, let's stick with that. So if you can talk about your family's move to Sunset Park, when they did and why.

Svehlak: They were living in downtown New York. They were living in tenements on the Lower West Side. I'll get into, later on, about what's now termed the Little Syria neighborhood. They had lived on Washington Street and Greenwich Street, but they also lived where the Brooklyn Bridge—where the South Street Seaport is. They lived in Peck Slip on Pearl Street and on Dover Street until 1927, when they bought the old two-family 1909 row house in what was the Sunset Park neighborhood of Bay Ridge. It was called Bay Ridge back then, and then it became Sunset Park after the community boards and such, as a separate identity from Bay Ridge, but it was really Old Bay Ridge as far as any of the old-timers know it. Old Bay Ridge started at 39th Street, not at 65th Street. Anyhow, they bought the house in 1927, moved from downtown New York there, had the two-family.

My mother was the youngest of four immigrant children that came with my grandmother and my grandfather from Moravia in Austria-Hungary. They came in 1912. They arrived just before the [RMS] *Titanic* sank. They were on the [SS] *Noordam*. In the movie, it's the boat that sent the teletype to the operator. There's a scene in the *Titanic* movie, where the teletype operator is telling the captain, "We've just been wired by the *Noordam* that there are icebergs ahead." Well,

my mother and family were on the *Noordam*.

Anyway, so they came in 1912, and they came to the lower part of Manhattan, which is where they lived until 1927. And then they moved to Brooklyn, and me and my cousins and such were born in Brooklyn. My grandmother was there with us. My grandfather had died back in 1920 but my grandmother was still there. So we were a multi-generational family living in two side-by-side houses on 57th Street. Working class. My mother, before she got married and would move next door, she and my aunt were seamstresses working in the sweatshops around 14th Street, around Union Square in the Garment District down there. And they did piece work, got paid by the piece, whatever they could sew. They worked sometimes six days a week, eight, ten hours a day. Sometimes they would walk over the Brooklyn Bridge before they'd take the subway the rest of the way home, just to get some fresh air, they said.

When they came home, Grandma would be watching the kids during the day and then she would go to clean the buildings at night. She was a cleaning lady. She's the one that brought them from Europe actually. So it was quite a story with the family and how they just worked at whatever they could to help the family work together. So they bought that old house in 1927 and then we, the next generation, were all able to get educations so we wouldn't have to work in the factories like they did.

The reason they got to Sunset Park was because my uncle was smart—my mother's brother-in-law, my Aunt Elizabeth's husband—he studied to become an electrician. So he was very smart. He could fix anything, build anything, like most of these old Europeans could, and he worked for

the BRT, Brooklyn Rapid Transit, which would become the BMT [Brooklyn–Manhattan Transit Corporation]. And he worked as a switch maintainer in the yards on 9th Avenue, around 37th Street or so. So I think he got to see what the neighborhood was like, and that's why he bought the house in the neighborhood, whereas most of the cousins who had left Lower Manhattan were living up in the old Czech neighborhood up in Yorkville, up on the Upper East Side. Or else they had moved to Woodside or Astoria, or out in Queens, or up into the north Bronx and such when they made it out of the tenements. But we went to Brooklyn. [Laughs] We were a real minority.

Q: And you said that it was your uncle who bought the house—

Svehlak: Well, he found the house. But it was thanks to my mother and my aunt and my grandmother working that all that money was able to come together, that they were able to buy the house.

Q: Okay. So they were able to buy basically a two-family home. And then, did they all live together in one apartment or did they live in separate—

Svehlak: They lived in one apartment. They rented the upper apartment. When my mother married, my mother was the youngest of the family but she didn't marry until she was thirty-three years old. So she was the old maid. She never considered herself an old maid because she was a fashionable dresser and everything, and she was just waiting for the right guy, who was my father. Then they lived on 8th Avenue around the corner until the apartment in the next house became available, which was owned by this Irish widow and her two daughters. So they moved

back to live next to where my mother had lived before she got married. And in that other house next to us was my three cousins, my aunt, my uncle, and my grandmother. But we were all back and forth between both houses all the time, and over the backyard fence and such like that.

Q: I see. And when did that home that your grandmother and your aunt were able to buy, when did that leave the family?

Svehlak: That left the family in 1956 when my mother died. They went to New Jersey and my father and I went to his brother's out in Queens. That was a very sad leaving of the neighborhood at that time for us because I left reluctantly. I didn't want to go. They all did. It was not a happy time. It was not a happy time, yes. So that's my life, my first growing up with all the multi-ethnicities and playing on the street with all these different kids, and understanding the different cultures was a wealth of understanding of what New York City and various ethnic groups are about, and getting along with each other as well.

Q: Yes. I think that's an interesting connection to the Lower West Side because, as you mentioned, when your family lived there, they were Moravian and came from Austria-Hungary. But now as you called it: "Little Syria." So there's obviously a lot of change there. So can you talk about your work with the Friends of the Lower West Side and the work that you've done in preservation efforts in that area?

Svehlak: Well, what happened is, eventually, like I said, I stopped working on Wall Street. When I got into real estate, I was trying to handle both jobs at once, and that didn't work out too well.

So I eventually just got more into real estate as I got more connected with people and built up a reputation. But then about fifteen years or so into the real estate market, real estate starts to change and gets all very computer-oriented and such, and the little neighborhood real estate agent that I had been working for retires. And I have a salesperson's license. I don't want to become the broker and be involved in all the politics and the forms and legality of all the restrictions and stuff. I just want to be out there, taking people around and showing them houses and such, and selling them the neighborhood. So I kind of didn't have much of a job economically anymore.

I had been doing other various things: painting apartments and renting out my spare room and so on. I had been doing volunteer work for the Municipal Arts Society, and the Municipal Arts Society was one of the many organizations, like the Victorian Society, the National Trust, and so on, that I had joined because of all my community involvement, to get to understand what was going on around the city and around the country. I had gone to conferences of the Victorian Society. Also the Back to the City movement, which was a wonderful thing that was started by Evelyn and Everett Ortner, and they had meetings in different cities all around the country.

With friends of mine, we traveled to these different places and learned about different neighborhoods in parts of the country. So I felt I knew a lot about development and city planning already. And doing volunteer work with the Municipal Arts Society, I could volunteer beyond their tour bus, or take attendance or something like that, and I wouldn't have to pay to take the tour, since I didn't have that much economic ability at the time. I'm doing everything in my life out of necessity. Whatever I needed to do I did. I didn't think I needed to become a homeowner.

I never thought I'd become a community activist. [Laughs] I never thought I'd become a real estate agent. I never thought I'd become a tour guide. It just all happened. And I still don't know what I'm going to be when I grow up and I'm eighty years old already. [Laughs]

Life just happens and you take the opportunity and you go with it. And I think that's been my blessing. I've always been a survivor. I've been part of a community, a family of community. These were peasant farmers from Europe who worked together to bring in the harvest, originally. So when they came to America, they worked together to help each other, to start each other out, to buy a building together. I saw community. Everybody took care of each other. Absolutely amazing, the wonderful sense of caring that I had in my upbringing, a wonderful upbringing until Mother gets cancer and dies, and that was the end of everything. But it was a wonderful sense of working with people, I think, that I had. I had seen how people just extended themselves to each other. So I had that kind of instinct in myself. I guess that's why I keep on doing things the way I keep doing things, and organizing stuff.

But I was very happy that I was able to work with the Municipal Arts Society because I really respected what they were doing as far as promoting the city. And I got to meet such wonderful people like Francis Morrone and Matt Postal and Tony [Anthony W.] Robins who gave wonderful tours. So I would learn from all of them and I would go—at that time, they would have somebody take attendance, or be the person to help people through a bus tour or whatever. So I would do that as a volunteer. And then Justin Ferate, who was the head of the tour program at MAS, a wonderful mentor to so many of us tour guides. He took us on walks all over the city. I would go on everybody's walk, which is how I learned so many things from everybody else.

He said, “Joe, you know so much. Why don’t you give a tour?” I said, “Well, okay, what am I going to do?” [Laughs] I said I’ll maybe do tours of downtown New York because I worked downtown New York. I worked after school. At sixteen, I had a job as a messenger for an engraver in the printing district. The printing district was all over Lower Manhattan, what we know as Tribeca today, and the South Street Seaport. There was a lot of printing areas down there and I used to be the messenger for him. I got to walk through all the old buildings and lobbies and so on, buildings that are not there anymore, and streets that had been closed off. I knew it all in my young days, in 1956, after high school. We went to high school eight in the morning until one in the afternoon. They had to do double shifts. We were in a small private Catholic boy’s high school, St. Michael’s Diocesan, down on 42nd and 4th Avenue. So we had the morning shift. That meant I could work from two to six, five days a week. I had my own little job since I was sixteen. I paid my own way and everything.

As a messenger, I got to see all of Lower Manhattan, plus I had walked with my mother in the 1940s when we were going to downtown New York during the rationing to get butter from the old butter and egg market down on Fulton Street. And when we would walk through downtown, Mother would say, “Well, we lived here, we went to church here. I went to school there.” And she would show me these places, which of course were: “Okay.” As a kid, I got that sense of being downtown, and then in 1956, I start working downtown as a messenger, which meant I walked all over. I mean, I knew what all the buildings were, before the World Trade Center was even thought of, before Water Street was widened, it was a narrow street like Pearl Street. Before all these plazas were built, I knew all the other streets that were there.

I saw, in my lifetime, one third of Lower Manhattan disappear. Below Chamber Street—gone—with all these major developments, the Battery Tunnel, and then the World Trade Center and Water Street, and then the development of the South Bridge Towers. What now is the South Street Seaport used to be ten times more of that, if you can imagine. That's what I remember. I remember the stepping blocks for stepping up into a carriage. They had these granite stepping blocks that were still there. They had cast iron horse posts to hitch your horse and such on some of those streets in the South Street Seaport. It was incredible.

So as a kid, as a young man, I was taking recognition of this and I'm seeing all these great buildings go down! I see the Produce Exchange down at 2 Broadway replaced by one of the ugliest skyscrapers, which I would eventually work in. Irony. I'd see the Singer [Building] tower go down, see all the Newspaper Row buildings be destroyed, a lot of them. It's like incredible. Why is all this happening? I think that was the making of my preservation, or the sense of history. The places that I knew and my family knew were now being threatened. So I became aware of what was there.

With all the background and such, I said I think I can do a tour of downtown New York! My family lived here in the 1900s. So it was very generous and kind, whenever Matt Postal and Francis Morrone had set tours of downtown New York that they did with the Municipal Arts Society—I'm talking about in the mid-1990s, and I got my license around 1995-1996 thanks, to a wonderful colleague and now friend of mine, Eliot Niles. He has his own tour company called Brooklyn Attitude. He does multi-language, French- and Italian- speaking tours, in-depth tours of Brooklyn neighborhoods. He got me my first licensed tour guide job because he was looking

for a second person to take a double decker bus around Brooklyn, not just the brownstone neighborhoods, but out to Sunset Park, to Coney Island, to Flatbush, and on and on. And Justin Ferate recommended me and said, "Joe knows a lot about Brooklyn."

So Eliot came over to my place. I was living on Sterling Place in a co-op near 7th Avenue in Park Slope before I moved to where I am now, and he liked what I knew, and what I said about all these different neighborhoods. They were arranging to do an overview of Brooklyn as a promotional to bring the double decker buses to Brooklyn as well, what Marty Markowitz, who would eventually become the Brooklyn borough president, was wanting to do back in the mid-1990s. So I said, well, gee, I've got to get a license because I don't want to be on a bus and something happens to somebody, and they find out the assemblyman had an unlicensed guide. So I went and took the license test which was nothing back then. I got the license and all.

So now that I had the license, and Francis and Matt—and I had been working with the Municipal Arts Society with Justin as a volunteer on their tours—and when they would do downtown tours that they scheduled and they couldn't do them, they'd say, "Joe, can you do the tour for me?" So I would. I got their itinerary and so on, and by 1997, Jill Anson was running the Municipal Arts Society tour guide program. She said, "Give me some themes of tours you would like to do." I said, "Well, I'd like to do an I Remember tour," since I knew so much about what had happened. So in '97, I did a tour and I included the Lower West Side. That was the first time that the mention of the Lower West Side, as an immigrant neighborhood, I believe, was ever publicized on a tour.

It was part of my walk through Lower Manhattan because I remember what was there before the World Trade Center was ever even thought of, never mind when they started destroying the neighborhood in the 1960s. I had walked the neighborhood with my mother in the 1940s and I had walked it as a messenger in the 1950s, 1956-1957. And then remember, I worked downtown for about thirty years. So still, on lunch hours and stuff, I was still walking through Lower Manhattan any time from the 1940s all the way up until the late 1980s, when I was still working downtown. So I had this constant forty-some years of seeing, almost daily, what was going on and the changes of Lower Manhattan. So I thought, I can do this tour.

I gave the walking tour and I pointed out the three buildings, the three buildings that were still there that were significant to the immigrant community that were miraculously saved because the destruction for the Battery Tunnel took place a block below it, and then for the World Trade Center, it was two blocks above it. So everything else was obliterated, but in between Rector Street and Carlisle Street—this is two blocks behind Trinity Church, right behind Trinity Church yard—stood the wonderful old [St. George's] Syrian [Catholic] Church building, the Downtown Community House, which is a settlement house, and the one remaining tenement, 109 Washington Street, which happened to be one of the buildings my mother and family lived in in 1912 when they came from Europe. So I said okay, I'm going to talk about these three buildings [laughs] because this represents the area that I knew as a multi-ethnic immigrant neighborhood. I knew nothing much about the Syrians or Arabic people that live there. That would come a few years later.

This was 1997 and I'm doing walking tours, and I'm talking about how the Irish and Germans

lived here, and I knew there were Syrian people here. As a matter of fact, one of my mother's old cousins, I said, "What was the neighborhood like?" He said, "Oh, ty Syriane!" All those Syrians! [Laughs] They were there but these were the old ethnic people keeping to themselves even though they were living side by side with each other. So I kind of knew it was multi-ethnic and all, but I did a little more research, and saw this is a Syrian church. I went into the Syrian church, and I went into the Greek church, St. Nicholas [Greek Orthodox Church], which was imploded by the South Tower falling in 9/11—beautiful little churches, both of them. And also the Maronite St. Joseph's [Chapel], which had moved uptown to Cedar and West Street when the original building was destroyed for the Battery [Parking] Garage in the 1940s.

So I was in those three churches and I said this is quite an interesting community. The Syrians, the Lebanese, the Greeks, we were Slavic people, and then of course I knew there were Irish people there because one of my friends from Our Lady of Perpetual Help school, there were a lot of Irish living in the neighborhood. Well, his family, his mother, was from an Irish father and a Slovak mother. They had mixed because they grew up together in the old Lower West Side. So I knew there were Irish there. And I found out, when I was working with somebody—her name was Zahar, and she was German but her husband was Syrian. I said okay, this is interesting. But here these three buildings still showed there was a community. Almost everything else was gone outside of a couple occasional tenements or a couple of smaller factory buildings that were there, some of the old Federal townhouses that were there that were turned into rooming houses or apartments. There was nothing else left. So I mentioned those three buildings and it got a little bit of a write-up in one of the local papers.

But it would become part of my regular—when I did downtown walks, when I did different walks, I would emphasize the multi-ethnicity there. By 2003, I wrote letters to the landmarks committee and I proposed those three buildings for landmarking. Of course, without much documentation, what did I know about the landmarking process? Nothing, as far as the official way of doing it. I didn't realize requests for evaluation and all of this. I just wrote them letters and they said well, the tenement, it's a ubiquitous tenement. The settlement house is really not of that much importance. The church, maybe. Well, okay, maybe.

So we kept getting support for the neighborhood because I started to find other people who were also doing things about the neighborhood. I met a wonderful woman, Esther Regelson, who lived in 109. One day, I was down there looking at the buildings, she's coming out of the doorway with a bicycle, "Can I talk to you?" "What?" "My mother lived there in 1912." So we started talking and became friends ever since. So she was part of the community activism, a photo journalists who moved into the neighborhood over maybe thirty-five, forty years ago when nobody else was living down there. It was kind of a no man's land. Then what happened, 9/11 and so on, she documented all of that. So she and I became friends.

Also, other people were living in the neighborhood, a wonderful preservation consultant Mary Dierickx, who's done a lot of professional work espousing landmarking for downtown. She would also be very supportive. Kathleen Moore, who lives in one of the buildings on Cedar Street. People were working individually on espousing that these buildings should be landmarked. In particular, it took six years of getting people conscious about the building that was the Syrian church, which was the most unusual of the three buildings because it was a Syrian

church and it was a beautiful terra cotta façade with a great terra cotta piece of St. George slaying the dragon and such. It was quite a piece of history.

Well, at the Landmarks hearing, finally, in 2009, they voted to make it a landmark. It took all that campaigning and even the owner, Brian Lydon, he was a little reluctant but he realized the historic value. Brian and Abby Lydon were the ones who took the building that they bought from a guy who had bought it from the church when the church deconsecrated in the 1970s—somebody bought it and neglected it and the roof was practically caving in—and Brian and Abby bought the building and renovated it into a wonderful pub-type restaurant [Moran's] with an upstairs dining room. So they had saved the church and they were amenable to having it landmarked even though they were kind of hesitant about what it was going to cost them, the restoration of the façade or whatever. But they were amenable.

It was so wonderful that when we had this hearing and I met another gem of a human being, a wonderful, wonderful lady, Mary Ann DiNapoli, Mary Ann Haick DiNapoli, Syrian, from downtown Brooklyn, whose family had come from Syria. She was a genealogist and she was also the historian of the South Ferry community, of the Arabic community that, in the 1890s already, was moving to south Brooklyn. They were taking the South Ferry going to Atlantic Avenue, which is why you have all the Arabic stores on Atlantic Avenue still today, as the Middle Eastern shopping center. They were all coming out of Washington Street and Greenwich Street in Lower Manhattan. So she had documented all of this. She had written about it. She's in the book about Arab Americans in New York. She's also part of—the Museum of the City of New York presented an exhibition on Arab Americans in New York, the Syrian community and

such. So we met, and all of us who had been working on this as individuals said, wonderful, it took six years of all our campaigning individually or whatever to get the former Syrian church landmarked. So this was 2009.

So 2009, I said, I'm inviting everybody to Moran's. We're going to have a nice celebratory lunch. So all the people who were supportive of this, like Joyce Mendelsohn from the Lower East Side and all the historic preservation, the wonderful things that Joyce has done. She's somebody you really want to interview if you haven't gotten her history of preservation. She was one of the people that I had gone on her tour many years ago and had inspired me, Joyce Mendelsohn. She's living now in Connecticut. And Susan Tunick, of course, who you probably know, from the Friends of Terra Cotta. It has one of the most gorgeous terra cotta facades you'll find on a church. So I invited them all.

Q: I interviewed her over the summer, Susan Tunick.

Svehlak: Wonderful. All these wonderful people that have been giving us support, I invited them all to have lunch with us.

And in particular, a few years prior to the landmarking of the Syrian church, I met a wonderful couple, Martin and Barbara Rizek. The Rizeks were born downtown and they lived downtown until the 1960s with the redevelopment of the World Trade Center. By that time, they left for Staten Island. Like a lot of other families, they went to Staten Island or Brooklyn because of the ferries. But they had written a book called *The Financial District's Lost Neighborhood, 1900-*

1970. And I met them at a lecture they had given thanks to John Herzog who founded the financial museum [Museum of American Finance] downtown. I had worked for John Herzog in one of the brokerage houses. I worked for Herzog Heine Geduld [Inc.] for many years, and I got to know John Herzog, a wonderful humanitarian also. And his organization had sponsored this talk about Marty and Barbara's book, along with also a wonderful journalist, community activist, Joanne Medvecky whose mother and family lived downtown, still lived in Battery Park City. So the three of them wrote the book.

Meeting Barbara and Marty so inspired me: wow, there's a book about the neighborhood. So they were very happy to know my family background, a generation there earlier than they were, but their generation earlier probably knew mine because they were all Slavic people or whatever, although different religions. Some were Eastern Rite and some were Lutheran. My mother and family were Roman Catholic. The connection was there that we loved the neighborhood, and they were the ones that really represented the neighborhood to me because they lived there. And reading their book, there were so many community activities. They did dances where they would get a hundred or more people every year until the 1990s as a reunion for the neighborhood, even though most of them had been forced out because they were redeveloped out by the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel in the 1940s, and then twenty years later, the development of the World Trade Center, to the north. It totally wiped out the neighborhood except for this little pocket in between.

So I got to meet them and I was really excited. And we all had a wonderful lunch, and then we decided: let's keep this going. So once a month, we would meet in Moran's, and Abby and Brian

were very happy to have us there. Some of us would continue and some of would leave and so on. But basically, that's how it all got started, the Friends of the Lower West Side. We decided to call ourselves the Friends because we were all friends. We were all happy to get the Syrian church. Now we must get the Downtown Community House and the one remaining tenement landmarked to really show what the neighborhood represented. It was the religious, the social, and the residential side by side. That's all that's left, of the hundreds of buildings that people used to live and work in.

So we were striving together and we were doing that now for over ten years. Because of that, other people would come to us, and through knowing about or understanding what the neighborhood was, through Mary Ann DiNapoli, through her connection with the Syrian community, she brought us Inea Engler who was a member of the Arab American [National] Museum from Michigan where the Arab American population has really increased there. She's a cultural liaison and brought us some more information and knowledge and cultural things into our group. Also, a fellow named Todd Fine, who starts the Washington Street Historical Society based on the premise that this was the first Arab American neighborhood in the United States, starting in 1880. And then we also got Linda Jacobs, a wonderful doctor, an anthropologist, who did definitive studies of all the Syrian-Arabic immigrants that came between 1880 and 1900. It's a very big, thick book. It's called *Strangers in the West*.

All of these things are documented on our website. We have a website now, the Friends of the Lower West Side. Thanks to the Historic Districts Council and the Six to Celebrate that we got about three years ago from them, we were able to get funding, and with Linda's technology and

Esther's technology, able to get the website put together which has the documentaries that were made about us and the CBS program we were on called, *How We Remember*. We have a segment about how do we remember a neighborhood that doesn't exist anymore. All of these things are documented along with our oral histories and other photographs and information about the neighborhood.

So that was all the ways of developing the story of the neighborhood and keeping the story alive. I was just happy to be kind of a facilitator, to say well, let's talk about this, or let's do a tour, or how about we close the street and have a street fair—which is the first and only time, I think, they had a street fair on Washington Street in front of the buildings. We got local community support for that, including the Metropolitan College of New York and its past president, Vinton Thompson, and so on. It was absolutely wonderful. So the members that we got, that came to us, were all involved in one way or another with preserving the history of the neighborhood. So it kind of grew—we grew as this organization, with all our multi aspects of why we were involved in all of this. So I'm very happy to have met these people. And unfortunately, Mary Ann passed away last October, very sadly. We miss her so much.

But we're saying now, with all the hard work that everybody did, and with their dedication, hopefully we're going to get that Downtown Community House and the one remaining tenement landmarked. I believe it's being looked at by the research department, thanks to Sarah Carroll, our request for evaluation is being resubmitted and reevaluated again. So I'm very hopeful at the moment, hoping that the other two buildings will join with the success that we struggled for the former Syrian church, as an understanding that this was the most multi-ethnic immigrant

community of over one hundred years ago that was very well-integrated. And it was very well-integrated because of the geography, of the buildings themselves—this was a mostly low-density building, mostly four-story walkups, five-story walkups—tenements that had multi-ethnicities living in them. Although, the communities maintained their separate identities.

And it was known as the Little Syria area because of the Syrians that came into the Irish and German area that was Irish and German immigrants from the 1840s. Just like the Lower East Side, it was German and Irish, that was all Kleindeutschland [Little Germany] and such but the Germans were down on the Lower West Side too. They had a religious facility there. The Leo House was there before it moved up to 23rd Street in the 1920s. And the Irish Catholics had the Our Lady of the Rosary, which is now the Mother Seton Shrine [National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton]. That was for the Irish immigrant working class and immigrant people back in the 1880s and so on. So these Irish and German immigrants that were there were integrated by the 1880s by this influx of people coming from greater Syria, which today is Syria and Lebanon and Jordan and parts of Palestine and Israel, and so on, and Iraq.

It was a neighborhood that became predominantly known as this Middle Eastern neighborhood because of all the shops and businesses, importers, and lingerie places and so on, that would be there. Although, most of the Arabic community, by the early 1900s, had moved to Brooklyn and were replaced by the Slavic people that were coming from all over the Slavic, Austro-Hungarian Empire mostly. Like I said, my family of Moravians—the Moravians that were there, they were not the larger of the Slavic groups. The larger of the Slavic groups were the Slovaks mostly, or the Rusyns, who were in eastern Slovakia, parts of lower Poland, and northeast Ukraine now,

Rusyn people. There were a lot of Rusyns. Joanne Medvecky was of Rusyn descent, one of the writers of that book, *The Financial District's Lost Neighborhood*. Barbara was Ukrainian and her husband, Marty, was Slovak.

So you had Poles, Slovaks, Moravians, Rusyns, Ukrainians, all living together—different Slavic nationalities that back home might be fighting with each other. It was interesting. These immigrant people have that Slavic culture as a connection. But there they were with the Irish and the Germans, leftover from the old Irish-German community, amidst all the people that came from the Middle East. And there weren't only Syrians—the Lebanese are really Syrians from the Mount Lebanon part of Syria that would later on become designated Lebanese, when Lebanon would become a country in its own right. But you had Greeks and you had Turks and you had Armenians amongst the Middle Eastern community. As I mentioned, you had the Greek Church of St. Nicholas. That was there on Cedar Street, which is now going to become the big shrine, Calatrava's [St. Nicholas National] Shrine up there on Liberty Plaza, south of the World Trade Center site.

So you have this multi-ethnicity and I found out about a lot of the Slavic—I knew about the Slavic people, especially meeting Barbara and Marty and learning more about what they had been doing—but from my own family background, I knew a lot about the Slavic culture in downtown New York. I had not much of an idea at all about the Middle Eastern culture except to know about the Greek church that was there, and the Syrian church, and then found out a lot more thanks to Mary Ann Haick DiNapoli, and then to Linda Jacobs, and to Inea Engler.

And Todd Fine, who was a scholar for the Ameen Rihani family. Ameen Rihani was the Arab American writer that wrote the first definitive Arabic story in English and it was the hundredth anniversary of his book, *The Book of Khalid*, which was a story about two boys growing up on Washington Street and understanding the difference of the cultures from the East to the West. Ameen Rihani was very instrumental in trying to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western culture. There were a lot of other Syrian writers and such that would come together. Just like Harlem had a renaissance of writers and people in the arts and such, well, the Syrian community did too by the 1920s. Khalil Gibran had illustrated Ameen Rihani's book, *The Book of Khalid*. So everybody knows the name Gibran.

There were several other famous Arabic writers that would be then taught about what they did, taking American ways and making the bridge between the East and the West in terms of their writings, that it would develop into a different style of Arabic style of writing from what it was in the Middle East. And then we go back to the Middle East and some of the writers from this Little Syria group in downtown New York would be influential, like I said, in the way literature would be written and still taught today in the Middle East. And the formation of the different Arab states that had happened too, like Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and so on, when they were breaking up the colonial Middle East, was influenced by these people from the Little Syria area of downtown New York.

So it was a very important cultural thing in Arab American history. There was the first Arab American settlement, known as the Mother Colony, because the people from here would go to all different places around the country peddling, and then would set up a little store and start a

family and start a community, so that they were represented in all fifty states—there were some Syrians back in the early 1900s. It was amazing. So this cultural group has all its supplies and things coming through all the exporters/importers that are in this area of downtown Manhattan—between the Battery and Liberty Street and west of Broadway—that it would become the Mother Colony of the Arab Americans in the United States, and very influential culturally with what was going on in the Middle East in the early 1900s. As a matter of fact, the Arabic linotype was first used in America before it went to the Middle East. So they had publications of dozens of journals and newspapers and so on.

So I got to learn all this thanks to Todd Fine, who was a scholar of Ameen Rihani, and he came to us in 2010 and became part of our organization. Then he starts off with his own Washington Street Historical Society, and then that's blossomed on its own. And now he's with Washington Street Advocacy [Group]. So we have a few advocacy groups that start all with our grassroots efforts back in the Lower Manhattan region, where my mother and family first came as immigrants and learned what it was like to be in a multi-ethnic neighborhood.

In the building where my mother lived—they were out of there by the 1910s, at some point, living in 66 Greenwich, and then in places around the South Street Seaport, after—but in that building in 1920, there were about a different dozen ethnic groups living in 109 Washington Street. And the remnants of one of those intermarriages is still living on the top floor of the apartment, where his mother was Slovak and his father was Greek. So you had all these intermarriages happening one hundred years ago! Amidst not only differences in ethnic villages and the same nationality, but amongst all these different strange ethnic groups because they were

living side by side! The kids went to school together.

My mother remembers the first day in school, only speaking her Moravian dialect. She only recognized her name. She was seven years old when she came. She had already started school in Europe, and she recognized her name. She was in school with Polish and with Greeks and Syrians. She said the Irish kids made fun of us because we couldn't speak English. [Laughs] But she spoke perfect English because, by the time she was thirteen, she had an education, whereas the older members of her family, my older aunts and uncles, spoke broken English because they never had a chance. At thirteen, they had to work right away in the factories. Mother and my aunt were seven and nine and they went to school. By the time they went to work in the factories, they had perfect English command, wrote with that perfect Palmer Method. But they were able to understand that there were different ethnicities.

And I remember, when I spoke with my mother as a kid—this was a woman that was born in the medieval village in Middle Europe. She comes to this country with no knowledge of any differences outside of their own little culture, and gets awash in all this sea of internationalism where she was living in downtown New York. And now we're living in a Norwegian-Irish neighborhood, and most of my Norwegian friends are all Lutheran. I said to my mother, "You know, they don't go to the same church." They have same God, they're good people. She was already a simple woman but understanding that people had differences and that was okay. And that's what we grew up with and that's the great thing about this Lower West Side neighborhood, was it had such diversity one hundred years ago.

It should teach us that when we see diversity today so much, that we hadn't seen for quite a while—until the opening of immigration laws in the 1960s changed things, we were mostly European immigrants. But we must remember that all of these multi-ethnic immigrant interrelationships are not happening on the Lower East Side—where you had a Chinatown, a Little Italy, the Romanians here, the Polish there and whatever. You had them all living in the same buildings, walking the same streets, going to the same schools together in this Lower West Side area because it was a small contained area between, like I said, Liberty Street and Battery Park and west of Broadway. So that taught them all how to be American-integrated right away, that they all became friends.

You read Barbara and Marty's book and they have illustrations of all these different ethnic peoples and what they did to have community and celebrate together. That was kind of a wonderful awakening to me to see, again, what my childhood had been. My mother's childhood was like that too, to grow up in a multi-ethnic integrated neighborhood. And I think that's why that story of the Lower West Side was mostly forgotten because most people don't relate to it, because people have to be eighty or older like me to even know that there were buildings there that were different from what's there now, let alone if they don't have family history. My family history goes back there.

And we've got some nice interviews from people, and we also have Marian Sahadi—no relation to the Sahadi's [Fine Foods] on Atlantic Avenue—who has given us her oral history of what she remembered of the Lebanese community when she was a young girl growing up in downtown New York. And we have also an oral history of a Mary Seewald, who came after 1948 because

her father was here, and the war came and he couldn't bring his wife and his other children. So she came to that neighborhood as a refugee child in the 1940s, and would meet all these other ethnic people even then, that were still from the old Syrian and Slavic communities as well. So it's a wonderful story of immigration that happened, basically, multi-ethnic from the 1880s through the 1940s already.

That story is something that I think is very American and it places the Arab American community as an old ethnic group in the United States, which we need to recognize that immigration and integrate them into our regular immigrant history, which mostly we don't look at them as a great immigrant group that came to the United States—and they are.

You got part of my soap box here too now, right? [Laughs] Why I'm talking about why I like all of this. Maybe somebody's going to hear all the oral history and say ah ha! That's what Joe thought about all of this.

Q: I think you're right. It's so important, and not a very known history. And like you were saying, when I looked on a map, when you were talking about 109 Washington Street, I just couldn't figure out where it was and then when I saw the streets near it, I thought, you know, I don't think I've ever walked down that block. And I've lived in New York for twenty years. But it's just like you said, it's behind and between—

Svehlak: Two blocks behind Trinity Church.

Q: Yes, and somehow I just have never walked down that block, partly because I didn't think there would be anything interesting there, anything historical there.

Svehlak: It's just a bunch of old buildings! [Laughs] It's just a bunch of old buildings, and you walk by it quickly in a blink of an eye. But that's why these three, I contend, are a gem! A gem of history. Because I defy anybody who knows New York to show me any immigrant neighborhood that has a religious building, a social service building, and a residence side by side. Not across the street, or not around the corner, but contiguously side by side. I'm waiting for somebody—I'm challenging everybody on that one. [Laughs] All my historian friends, and nobody can tell me that. They can find a church or a synagogue next to a tenement, but you don't have the community house there, or something like that. Then also, they're done in three architecturally unique styles. You have a neo-Gothic terra cotta. You have a neo-Colonial with a mansard roof, and beautiful neo-Federal style plaques on the building. And the tenement has a very simple classic style, beautiful veneer brick and banding—not all this kind of fancy brownstone carving and whatever—very simple, classic. But what it does have, it has cast iron swag lintels and cast iron sills. I have never seen a cast iron lintel of a window anywhere in New York.

So I'm hanging my hat on these special little things, architecturally, to say nothing more than these buildings are culturally so valuable. Nothing else in this neighborhood that I have been describing to you exists to tell that story. And there's something even more powerful about why these buildings should be saved and recognized. The city government destroyed the neighborhood twice. They built the Battery Tunnel for the cars, and the Garage. They built the

World Trade Center for commercial development. And to hell with all the people that lived there, the thousands of people that were displaced, and hundreds of businesses that lost their livelihoods. Where is their justice? Where is their story being told?

Q: Yes, I'm nodding along.

Svehlak: Well, you know, we're talking now about social justice. This is was an immigrant working class, viable neighborhood that people didn't aspire necessarily to leave. They only left because they had to. They had a wonderful neighborhood. They were able to walk to work. A lot of them worked in the service industries in the buildings and such. A lot of them had little businesses down there. They had Battery Park. Before the World Trade Center, they had the Washington Market for all the produce and everything. They had all public transportation. They could walk to work. They could live in the neighborhood. They could get out to the waterfront. The neighborhood was very livable and viable even though they lived in small little tenement apartments, but those apartments were all clean and neat and fixed up nice and all, because they had already prospered by the 1920s and '30s already. So they only left because—if they had bigger families and the kids were better educated and they went to Brooklyn or Queens or whatever—but most of them left reluctantly because they were eminent-domained out. They were ordered to get out by the development for the Battery Tunnel in the 1940s, evicted. And then in the 1960s, also.

Some of the businesses and things even moved. In the 1940s, one of the Polish-Slovak restaurants, Slezak's, that was further down where the Battery Tunnel would be built, they

moved up further to Cedar Street. Well, twenty years later, along comes the World Trade Center, so bye-bye business a second time, again. They didn't even want to leave the neighborhood. And the same with the Lebanese Church. They moved from where the Battery Garage was, up to the corner of Cedar and West Street. And then by the 1970s, they were going to be developing the World Trade Center, so the congregation was gone from there already and that church was destroyed.

So people even wanted to stay in the neighborhood when they were forced out by the first eminent domain action, and still the story is not being told. Here it is: justice as a government agency, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, can at least properly document this multi-ethnic special history, which was unique to immigration history in New York and in the United States. And they have a chance to document it by saving the two buildings that remain to tell the story, that Community House and the tenement. And there has to be justice, I think, for the fact that the government displaced all these people and these businesses, and they're not telling the story properly.

So I'm saying the Landmarks Commission should really justify, now, the fact that this neighborhood was never properly identified for its cultural value. Besides, I've been pointing out the architectural merit of the other two buildings, which they have been questioning in previous Landmarks Commissioners' estimations. I think Sarah Carroll has a much bigger and better picture of all of this now and I'm being very hopeful. So we'll see, at some point, if my hopes were placed in the right place. [Laughs]

Q: Yes. Well, thank you so much for all those details, Joe. You certainly taught me a lot just on this call and I'm sure that when it's possible for me to come on one of your walking tours, I'll learn even more.

Svehlak: I would love to have you. I do small walks for two or three people for my guides association as a volunteer. I'm on the education committee of the guides association. I'll put in a little plug. They were very generous to me. I've been giving a lot of walking tours for them to teach the guides about other neighborhoods, other preservation issues, and things like that because a lot of our guides are just general guides. They may have their own specialties in theater, entertainment, or shopping, or other special things, Revolutionary War history or whatever. My thing is development, planning, and preservation and ethnic history. So I have neighborhoods all over the city that I do walks of. I have about twenty-some different neighborhoods. So I take two or three of them just to show them some of these different neighborhoods as a volunteer, just so they can expand their knowledge and maybe become walking tour guides as well as maybe just bus tour guides. So you're welcome to come on one of my tours if you'd like, at some point. I should let you know the next time I do one. [Laughs]

Q: Yep. And I want to wrap up with asking you to talk a little bit more about something that you mentioned on our phone call a few weeks ago. You said <u>who</u> we are is <u>where</u> we are. And I just wondered if you could elaborate on that a little bit.

Svehlak: Sure, okay. Well, I've been with the Municipal Arts Society several years before they did the docent program now where you have to pay for the tours. I was one of the weekly guides

for Grand Central Terminal, and to illustrate about what sense of place is, this was a palace of transportation. It made us feel very good about where we are, okay, because of the sense of space. You feel like a rat in a tunnel when you're walking to get out of the old Penn Station today. But in Grand Central, you really feel open, and identifying with the sense of place, and the outside, with the air, the light, the windows. So I said, I will paraphrase what Winston Churchill said, "We make our buildings and our buildings make us."

So in keeping with that, the sense of place of where we are is how we feel about life. Do we feel safe on the street? Is it pretty? Is it something I can enjoy looking at or is it ugly to me? That sense of place is this rhythm of the street life, of the architecture, of the buildings, the trees, and the shrubs, and the way a place is maintained, that makes us feel good. So that makes us who we are. The sense of who we are is our sense of being in a place. How is your room? Is your room a mess? Do you like it like that? Is that okay? Well, that's alright. But your sense of what you want to portray is how you want to show yourself to the world. So you present yourself with a nice way of being, a nice way of dressing. And that's what the build environment is. It's the way the city is showing itself, and how we feel about it is who we are, I think. We like it, we don't like it, we hope to change. We're inspired by it. Does that make any sense?

Q: Yes, absolutely, and I like that you add a little bit of agency in there too, that you can improve the place where you are, or you can take action to stop change if something is worth preserving. It's not just an intangible sense of place. It's a place that's—it's the built environment. There's—we have a role in that.

Svehlak: And I think I illustrated to you why the built environment is so important to preserve, in the sense that the way that these neighborhoods were built: very environmentally sound. Remember, they were built before air conditioning. So you need large windows to open. You need light to come in. You need to have ways of passing through the buildings that makes sense. On some streets, the buildings themselves were a human scale and a human design, and fit in appropriately with the built environment. They were built on streets to allow a lot of light to come in, not these high-rises where you don't see the sun for maybe only an hour or something. They allowed for a lot of light. They allowed for good drainage. Most of these rowhouses, all had front gardens. So that took away a lot of the drainage from the overflow excess of sewers now, where you paved over a lot of the front gardens. That was environmentally sound, the way they planned these rowhouse streets. And I think they're the most livable in the city.

Because, on a smaller footprint of that twenty by one hundred lot, you can have one dozen or so people living comfortably, and side by side, and still have light and air, and your own space, and a backyard for tomatoes and rose bushes. It's very livable. It doesn't have to be all high rise and non-descript. Then, you get to know your neighbors because you're all out. Outside in your backyard, you're on your front stoop. You're walking down the block and you see somebody coming out of their house and you might say hello, or you'll eventually get to say hello when you get to see them a few times. And that doesn't usually happen in big overdeveloped places.

That's why these historic areas, I think, the built environment is there. It was done with a very good idea and planning, like I said, even for the ecology for its time. It's certainly worth preserving and upgrading mechanically of course. And, as such, it can give us the best quality of

both worlds. [Pauses] Sorry for the pause. I talked too fast.

Q: That's okay.

Svehlak: I presume you can edit this whichever way you want.

Q: Well, we'll keep the transcript pretty much verbatim but we can edit out any pauses.

Svehlak: Right, right.

Q: Well, with that, I guess I would just ask if there's any other details that you would like to add that I didn't ask about, or we didn't get around to sharing—

Svehlak: Okay, maybe I emphasized this. I think I said it. But I was always thinking about what the most valuable thing of all of this was for me. It was the friendships I formed from all these various activities that I did for the communities that I was involved with. And the knowledge that I gained through everybody I interacted with has been invaluable to me as a person. I want to say that so that young people getting involved in preservation, by doing these things, you can have a very rich life. You can develop a very good perspective on different worlds by being with so many people when you're doing your like-minded projects which keeps you together because you have a common goal or a common reason for communicating. And that's a wonderful thing.

When you're in the preservation world, you are never alone. You have so many other people

involved from so many other organizations or groups that you can interact with and just enjoy. So it's been something that I encourage people to get involved in your community, to get involved with your block association—or if you don't have one, start one. Get involved with your tenants association. If you don't have one, start one. You don't know your neighbors on your floor in your big building, get them together and say hi, if you need anything, I'm here. That idea of sense of community is what will save us all through all greater challenges, I think. On a grassroots level of just the personal identity of knowing who your neighbors are, and letting them know who you are, gives us that sense of place and security.

And that's, I think, my beginning statement that preservation is self-preservation. How do I make a better life for myself? It's by interaction with the people around me for a common good. So there we are. The old man telling his philosophical look on his life that kind of just evolved! [Laughs]

Q: Well, I think it's very good advice.

Svehlak: Well, thank you. Thank you, Sarah, for facilitating this. I'm sorry if I went off-track here or there or whatever, but when you get into one story, it leads into another sometimes.

Q: Well, it was very wonderful to hear your stories as you laid them out. And I appreciate all the time that you've taken to relay this to me too. And so I guess you'll hear from me in a couple weeks with your transcript, and sooner with the consent form.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Svehlak: Sarah, thank you for being on my tour today. [Laughs]

Q: You're welcome. [Laughs]

Svehlak: Thank you for listening to me. This was fun. When you're an old person, you love to tell stories. You've been doing it wonderfully to let me do this, and this is great. I have a chance to—and this is an honor for me really. Thank Brad again. This is a honor for me to be able to present my thoughts and my history of fifty years of being involved in preservation in my two neighborhoods, my old neighborhood that I grew up with, and my mother's neighborhood, the neighborhood that I worked in and everything too, later on in downtown New York. So they were personal things. They were personal neighborhoods. And I think that's what it is about any of the preservationists. We're doing this from our own personal reasons or attachments, and I had a chance to do mine Thank you. I got to shut up. I can keep running on. [Laughs]

Q: [Laughs] Thank you so much again, Joe.

Svehlak: All right, Sarah, have a good day. We'll be in touch then, okay?

Q: All right, bye-bye.

Svehlak: Okay, thank you so much. Bye-bye, now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]