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Sokolowski15102003A-B
Tremont Oral History Project

Interview with Bernard Sokolowski
Interviewed by Mark Laurenzi
October 15, 2003
3:00 PM
Sokolowski's University Inn

Sokolowski: My name is Bernard Sokolowski. B-e-r-n-a-r-d, last name S-o-k-o-l-o-w-s-k-i.

Laurenzi: Uh, are you a current resident or have you ever been a resident of Tremont?

Sokolowski: I have been a resident of Tremont for approximately twenty-four years. Uh, I am not a resident of Tremont now.

Laurenzi: All right. Do you work in Tremont, and if you do what do you do?

Sokolowski: I work in Tremont, I own and operate Sokolowski's University Inn restaurant. . . and I am the president of a university inn, rather university inn, uh, uh, Sokolowski's University Inn restaurant and it's a corporation and I'm the president of it.

Laurenzi: Tell me a little bit about the history of the inn.

Sokolowski: The restaurant started in 1923, uh, owned and, first owned and operated by my grandparents, at which time there was a uh, predominantly a bar. My parents were married in the early fifties. At that time uh, it switched over to a, from a bar to a, a bar slash restaurant when they were building the interbelt bridge. Uh, since that time its grown, we've uh, knocked down three separate parcels, building a surrounding the init-, the original restaurant, the original bar and we have three brand new dinning rooms, new dinning rooms. Uh, it is now third generation, my brother, sister, and myself are, uh, owners and operators of the restaurant right now.

Laurenzi: How's business doin' so far?

Sokolowski: Business has always been pretty good. Um, like the economy it, it, we feel the economy sometimes when the economy is down. But overall we're doin' probably better than most restaurants are because of our price structure is very reasonable and we do a high volume business.

Laurenzi: Uh, what kind of people frequent this establishment?

Sokolowski: We have all kinda people. We have blue-collar types, white-collar, um, everywhere from President Clinton to ah, I don't know to Lecwalenza, from Lecwalenza to

rock stars. From Nine Inch Nails to ah, Bruce Springstein band members; so we've got quite a variety of people over the years.

Laurenzi: Wow!

Sokolowski: Yeah.

Laurenzi: Um, what makes the neighborhood of Tremont unique in your eyes?

Sokolowski: Ah, well, the neighborhood has always been unique to me uh, long before it became popular, popular, which that has happened recently with the influx of new people moving into the neighborhood. But I've always loved the whole area. It's almost as if you're on an island surrounded by bridges. Ah, it's got a great location to downtown, and uh, that's what makes it actually it unique, it's proximity to downtown. And ah, it's always, it's probably nicest, the neighborhood now is a lot nicer than it ever was because in the early sixties and seventies it was a, although there a quite a few families that lived out here, ah, the neighborhood was a little bit, little rougher edge to it and there was a little bit more trouble down here years ago. Tough neighborhood to grow up in.

Laurenzi: So it's improved over the past few years?

Sokolowski: It's improved in one sense that, that it's a lot safer now than it ever was. But on the other hand uh, the people that live here now are mostly single. Uh, there are, there's not many families down here like there used to be. So as far as raising family, kids, children and all that, uh, I don't see really that happening because most people are single or married without any really children, and that's what's happening down here now.

Laurenzi: All right, well let's--

Sokolowski: Last ten years, fifteen years has been like that.

Laurenzi: The people that are moving in you said they were single. Are they coming in and rebuilding the homes, refurbishing them?

Sokolowski: A, most, lot of them are, yeah. Uh, there you know, ten, fifteen years ago, whatever it was I'm not sure exactly, there was a few people that took a chance and, you know, came down here and started, uh you know, renovating homes. And, lot of em' became landlords and you know built homes and resold them and so forth. Uh, and uh, you know, actually, it improved the neighborhood like it I said it improved. But as far as the complete neighborhood being like, where there's a, where you can go down the street and your children can talk to some other children down the street, you don't see that down here. You see mostly professional types, single, uh, young married couples, and you see a handful of the old um, um, the original people that were down here from the early forties and so on.

Laurenzi: So the community life that used to happen here is kinda died down?

Sokolowski: The community life is like, it's different than what it was you know, you had, you had quite a few churches down here. I would, I would bet ah, nine outta, and I would bet like one out of every ten people go to church in this neighborhood. You know we've got, we've got probably more churches than any neighborhood around here. Uh, but anybody that lives down here, none of them, you know, you'll seldom see any of them in any those churches. So the community structures different whereas, the church years ago was the main, was the main focal point of the neighborhood. Depending on what nationality you were, you went to that particular church. Now a lot of the churches are just surviving by people that live out in the suburbs that continue to come in and support the church. So, anyway, in one sense the neighborhood has made a great comeback. It's safer, the houses are a lot nicer, they're a lot more expensive, you better, you gotta have money to live down here. Uh, which you know, and, and, which brings, which upgrades everything and makes it safer. Whereas years ago . . . uh, there wasn't, you know, homes were cheaper, uh granted there was like I said it was rougher, but there was more of a, there was more of a community feel down here then. Right now you do have that as far as like activism, activists go. Uh, you know you do have your monthly meetings with like Tremont West and everything else but ah, like I said its all, its more or less geared towards business, and, and even, even people that live down here but it's like . . . like I said its not the family structure that was once down here and you don't see that.

Laurenzi: Which did you prefer, the fam--, the community that used to be here or the, what's going on now with the safety?

Sokolowski: Well, if there was a family structure down here and all that I wouldn't have been one of the, one of them that . . . kinda moved out because unfortunately after college I got married and we lived here for about two years, and then had children, and there were no children here for us, you know children love kids, kids love kids and uh, we ended up movin', you know, out of the neighborhood. Probably, bas--, basically for schooling out of Cleveland ever since bussing, I think, ruined Cleveland period. You know whenever that Judge Battisti or whatever his name was, he should be like hung in public square for causing all that because he, he ended up by my, my books ruining all the neighborhoods the way they were. From the east side neighborhoods, cause even when I was a kid we played baseball, we'd go to the east side and play a lot of the, the ah black schools, we all got along. You know, they had their sections and, you know, even though we were somewhat segregated there, there was some integration, but everybody got along. And then when the bussing came in, it just, it just scared everybody away. And ah, you know, obviously it didn't work so, but as a result of it we still carry scars down here and everywhere else in the city. That's my opinion on that.

Laurenzi: That's fine, a lot of people feel that way. Ah, is Tremont, has it gone through a process of urban renewal? Has the city tried bringing businesses back, and beautifying--?

Sokolowski: Well that's one thing their good about in Tremont is um, they, they do seem to be, uh, caring about business whereas years ago, ah really there wasn't that much and, the reason is . . . people like, our restaurant always we've always maintained our

property. We've always kept it up, ah, whereas years ago, ah, while we were doin', keeping up our property a lot of other businesses didn't. They didn't put, reinvest any money into their places, they just ran it down. Now, you find a lot of ah, different grants out there, different types of, ways of, uh, helping your business out and that's a lot of places like Tremont West and different community organizations offer those type of ah, different kind of loans, interest loans and so forth. And there seems to be more interest in focusing on business here, which is good. You know, there are more restaurants down here now than there ever were and there is more business now than there ever was, you know as far as retail goes.

Laurenzi: So, then, all this business and renewal, that's good, the community's getting better from it?

Sokolowski: Yeah, sure.

Laurenzi: Alright.

Sokolowski: Like I said, I mean it's got, the neighborhoods got its good points and there, are you know, there are, I guess you could call it it's bad points to, you know I think, you know like, like as far as like I said the family structures not there but on the other hand, you know, you do have the businesses down here and people coming in, spending money, and so forth.

Laurenzi: How would you rate the quality of civil services such as police and fire departments in Tremont?

Sokolowski: I think they overreact a lot of times, um, in my opinion, ah, you know, the police down here, you know you could call them for something . . . I mean, well first of all I never really had a problem with the police as far as response time goes because, ah, we've been fortunate never to have really an incident happen down here. But I do know that, ah, from my own experience and seeing other customers come out here that some, you know, customers will get pulled over for some reason or someone will get a ticket for illegal parking when really its, its a, its, its, its done, it seems like its not done the right way, you know like somebody's parking over someone's, uh, driveway, which is, their not even parked, their still two feet away from and a lot of people have gotten tickets. Um, police in general I can say are fine, there's no problem that I know of, but I've heard stories about overreacting on, police coming to parties where there's been noise and sort of overreacting and, and ah, but personally nothing worth, worth really me that I can say anything bad or anything really good other than the fact that, I know that, if we had a problem here, I'm sure that the police would be here. You know, we have an alarm system and all that and anytime it ever went off in the evening, ah, the police have responded to it, so, I guess I would say that's been good. I do know from other friends and other people that, that said that they felt the police down here sometimes were overreacting and you know pullin' people over just because. A lot of people in the neighborhood might be complaining about the fact that there are more people now in this, in this neighborhood than there ever were. Years ago, you know, the people that moved down here, you know, wanted this neighborhood, the business

has really has picked up the neighborhood. Without the restaurants in this neighborhood, without the, people wouldn't move into the neighborhood. So people move down here because of the location number one, and because of the fact that all these businesses and these cool places to go to so they come in here. But, then when they get in here, the same places that brought them in, that enticed them to come in, well, they don't like the fact that all these other people are comin' in, so they may complain to the police that hey, "summons parkin' down here," or "can you please patrol this area better, I think there are people that are comin' out of this bar intoxicated," when in fact they may not even be intoxicated but they might get pulled over and checked. So there's a little bit of that goin' around right now. Overall, I would have to say on a one to ten scale if I was to rate the police as far as my, my experience with them, I would just give em' an eight.

Laurenzi: How bout' things like road repair, do they repair the roads pretty well, like keep em' maintained?

Sokolowski: Roads seem to be fine, um, ah, I can't, I think the worst they ever were, were like in the seventies when there potholes all around. Now after seeing Joe Cimperman, he was councilman here, he was a go-getter, he stayed on top of things and the roads have been in pretty good shape.

Laurenzi: Hm, other things- -

Sokolowski: services like garbage- -

Laurenzi: Hmhm, yeah.

Sokolowski: Everything else, like uh, yeah, I know that if ah . . . city services seem to be doing fine. I don't know how they are now, I haven't really had a chance to, when Jane Campell got into the office I don't, I don't know how they are now but I know that right before her election, there were never any problems really with city service. I can call anybody in the city and uh, within a couple days get, you know, get a response, which is pretty good for a city worker.

Laurenzi: Has, uh, in your eyes, do these services have any connection to the change in the neighborhood being good or bad? I mean, were they worse in the past as compared to today?

Sokolowski: Uh, I think the services were worse in the past in the seventies. [pause] Like when Dennis Kucinich might have been mayor. Those times, you know, there wasn't as much money or I don't even know now, there's not probably as much money as there was then, but services seem to be, snow plowing then was bad. I'd have to say it's pretty good down here and everything.

Laurenzi: And that's making the neighborhood a lot better?

Sokolowski: Yeah, cause there's more people down here that are like I said are either lawyers, musicians, uh, professional types, that ah, you know, are gonna call, are gonna complain and your gonna get more action. Whereas years ago you might have people that would just be apathetic and say well, whatever happens, happens; but here you have more active people that are calling in all that.

Laurenzi: Now, you mentioned that all the, ah, you know, you have more professionals moving in, housing is getting rebuilt, property values are going up. Do you know anybody that's had to leave because they couldn't pay for rent or anything here?

Sokolowski: Yeah, you know, I do know a few people that had to leave the neighborhood, because um, you know, the certain type of leases they had and, and, the rents were raised and, uh, just to give you an example like I remember when I, in 1978, 79, I could've bought a house down here for 10,000 dollars. That same house now is worth a, you know, 250,000 so, that's how prices have changed. And a lot of these people that lived down here, that rented, ended up moving out. You know, for years, a lot of these, you know, what baffled me is why they'd you'd wanna invest that rent into, into buying a house when you could have really, price markets, values went up, a funds, uh, they ended up staying there, renting, and the, the rents shot up and a lot of them left, yeah.

Laurenzi: But- -

Sokolowski: They had no problem re-renting these houses, so there was no real concern about the poor people leaving and they don't wanna keep, you know, there's no big major attempt to keep em' in the, in the neighborhood.

Laurenzi: There's not too many people leaving there, are there or- -?

Sokolowski: No, I think there, I think its hard to get an apartment down here, you know I think its hard to get housing, you really have to look close.

Laurenzi: Because there's more people living here now than there used to be?

Sokolowski: Umhm. Well, I don't know if there is or not before, uh, but there are more, its harder to get like ah, rent houses, you know. Many years ago, people, a lot of people owned their own houses. And what happened was a lot of em' sold em', and when they sold em' a lot of these people that bought em', uh, might have lived somewhere else and turned it around and rented em' out. You know, in the seventies and the sixties you had, like I said, a lot of slum landlords here to . . . and they were burnin' a lot of houses down and it was really bad down here. Every ten minutes you'd see firetrucks goin' down here to the hills. It was really bad, it was a bad neighborhood, tough neighborhood. You know, ah, but you know it had good points to, you know, so- -

Laurenzi: Burning houses down? Deliberately or just- -

Sokolowski: For insurance purposes, you know. Somebody, you know, there was one guy in particular, I think he might even still be in jail. He was a big slum landlord, he, uh, was burnin' one his houses down once a week and they finally, uh, convicted him in federal court and he went, the neighborhood got together and prosecuted him, and, he ended up going to prison. Yeah, there was a lot of that going on. You didn't know, you know, there was a big fear of fire back then. Still is you know, but uh, more so then cause its actually, where the restaurant is we're surrounded by a few houses that did in fact have uh, were burnt down, you know. The house across the street from the restaurant here, there was a big tenement building and one night somebody set that on fire and almost caught our place on fire. So there's always been that trouble.

Laurenzi: Uh, how would you rate the leadership over the years? It's, you obviously, you mentioned it got better. In what ways?

Sokolowski: As far as services go, uh, you know, more things were done within, you know, the city like the streets like I said. Uh, there was probably more, uh, the cops were watched more they were made to, you know, really do their job properly down here, things like that. So when you have a good councilman down here and you have someone that cares, those things are reflected, you know, through your councilman and that's, that's why I have good things to say about Joe Cimperman when he came down here, he was ah, very good councilman for this area.

Laurenzi: Uh, what was it like when, um, Mayor Stokes was elected in 1967, I believe it was?

Sokolowski: Hmhm

Laurenzi: What was the reaction from Tremont?

Sokolowski: First of all, Tremont is, it started being called Tremont ten years ago by somebody who decided to call it Tremont. I don't call it Tremont; I call it Tremont for business reasons, you know, just to tell people. It's always been called the south side, and, years ago the south side was mostly made up of Polish, Ukrainian, Greek, there was a lot of ethnic people down here and everybody kinda stuck together with your own, with your own ah, you know, your own, your own types and, but you could be anywhere in the city of Cleveland and if you were from the south side, you call it the south side. These old timers that come in none of them say you know, these guys that went to Lincoln High School, Cantius High School, you know, they still call it the south side. This is a name, Tremont, that was given to us by somebody. Back then when Stokes got elected it was kinda like, you know, well, you know, whatta gonna do? He's elected. And as it turned out, I don't think he did such a great job as everyone claims he did, or, a lot of people, you know, certain people said he did, you know there was a scandal with Cleveland Now, with the money that he collected. A lot of the guys that were involved in the Glennville riots, uh, were receiving tons of money from Glenn- - uh, from a Cleveland Now. Um, you know there was a fear down here, um, during the riots, that the riots would spread down here. I can remember as a kid sitting, you know, out and, watching our front door. And my dad had a gun ready, you

know, just in case something happened, protected the business. So, um, you know, as far as that goes, I don't recall the politics too much because I was too young then. But I do know that when the riots were goin' on, and even though it wasn't down here, there was a fear that something like that could, you know, come down here, but nothing ever did.

Laurenzi: You mentioned Kucinich, what, what was the general, how did people feel about him around here?

Sokolowski: Kucinich, ah, Dennis Kucinich would've gone to the same the high school that I would have gone to if it didn't merge with Central Catholi-, we called it Central Catholic. Dennis Kucinich was ah, always a go-getter, he was a hard-working guy. He ah, he was always, we knew he was going to be successful. Ah, my father, ah, ah, donated money to the first, donated money to his campaign when he ran for council. Ah, when he um, when he won, he beat John Belinski for, ah, city councilman. That was his first, you know, taste of politics. He was always, you know, he was sorta like a Joe Simperman type, you know, where he would respond to your calls and be good as far as that goes and, ah, everybody down here you know, you know, liked him because he was a likeable guy. And I think that's still today in Cleveland and all even though he's runnin' for um, ah, president now; but ah, you have a l-large, large, large people in Cleveland supporting him, you know, he's a good politician. And the ou-, actually, you know, he's a good, he, ah, I can call him up today and . . . you know I, I am sure, you know if I needed, had a problem or anything like that he would help me.

Laurenzi: Really, he's that e-effective? He'll help you out right away?

Sokolowski: Well, I mean, he a, yeah, if, you know we've been friends for years. You know and, uh, he's been here to eat, you know, he's been over and he's been a friend of the family for years and, I don't agree with a lot of his policies, you know, and ah, I haven't decided whether I'll ever vote for him but you know, ah, as far as ah, bein' ah, a good politician and, and also, ah, sort of an honest guy, a guy that would, you know, help you when you need a, have a problem and you're a friend, he's a, that type a guy.

Laurenzi: Now in, when he was, when the city went into default, w-, what was the general impression from this city? Were people blaming Kucinich for that or--?

Sokolowski: Well, everybody blames, ev--, you know, it wasn't his fault. Everybody blames, ah, you know, unfortunately has to blame somebody else you know. But ah, on the other hand, you know, he did do a lot of good things that, during his ah, tenure here, he, number one a lot of, you know, he fought big business, and big business wanted to eat up the whole city to and he wouldn't allow it and the example is Cleveland Public Power. We still have that today, which our, all our electricity is powered by Cleveland Public Power and, and I save on my bill 400 dollars a month. You have Cleveland Public Power, instead of Illuminating Company, so, to me that's the best, you know.

[Interruption]

Sokolowski: Alright?

Laurenzi: Hmhm, um . . . what, what kind of people have moved in as far as ethnic or racial in the past few years?

Sokolowski: Ah, I don't know by, ah, as, you know as far as ethnic people go, movin' in, I only see a variety of people now and then . . . I even wonder if any of that means anything to them so you know, ah, as far as their heritage goes so, I-I really, I don't see anybody like, you know, with, with the different flag on their side, on the side of their house or anything. I think it's just a mish mesh of people down here now. You know.

Laurenzi: Diff- are there more, ah, racially different groups here now?

Sokolowski: Ah, I don't know, I don' know if, ah like, well, I mean there's always been Puerto Rican and there's always been blacks uh, mostly the blacks are down by the project area. I don't see too many blacks, ah, movin' into the newer homes but I think there are a couple. You know, I think it's probably just the same ratio as it is to, anything else in the United States, you know, very small percentage of em' there still, there still the minor-, their the minority down here. So ah, as far as like ah, other ethnic groups, uh, this is really a mish mesh of people here now and that, what I mean by that is that it's no longer, just certain groups, it's just ah, you know, a bunch of people that are, are those type of things that I don't think mean that much to em' anymore as far as traditions and heritage goes, as it means to us and the, the other people down here.

Laurenzi: So the younger people are just, caught in this mish mesh, they don't--?

Sokolowski: Yeah, the young people, like a lot of em' are, you know a lot of em' are lost, you know, as far as that goes, not important to em'. The passin' on of traditions and things like that.

Laurenzi: Has this mis, this mesh of people, improved the neighborhood at all or does it make it more . . . attractive?

Sokolowski: Well like I said earlier, I said that, you know, with the properties, and ah, the low crime rate, everything's nicer now than it ever was; my business is worth now more money than it ever was, ah, because of this. So, yeah, they have improved it, sure. Ah, it, you know, you know, I, do I like it now? Yeah, its safer now, its nice now. Ah, but my heart is always gonna be were it was, like, years ago. Cause that's where I grew up in, that's where, you know, it was a different living altogether it's-. It'd take a couple hours to describe it back then.

Laurenzi: When uh, did people start just leaving Tremont and going to suburbs or--?

Sokolowski: Ah, around the sixties, 1960s. A lot of my relatives left here and went to Parma, and a you know, in uh, in the late 50s, 60s, 70s, big influx outta here in the 70s. And in fact, when, one of em', my dad would never move. He said they could all leave, we're

stayin' here because uh, this is where, this is, my dad predicted a long time ago this neighborhood would come back, to where it is today and he always said its a great location. And I said "dad, let's go move, let's go the suburbs like everybody else" and he goes "no, we're stayin' here and they'll be movin' back before you know it", and sure enough a lot of em' like to come back now and live here. And a lot of em' can't find housing and they can't afford it now so, so, yeah, it ah, it is better now probably than it ever was.

Laurenzi: That's good.

Sokolowski: Yeah.

Laurenzi: Um, what type of businesses are, prevalent in this area and how are they doing?

Sokolowski: Most of em' are restaurant businesses and ah, retail. And I guess everybody's doing good it's like, it's like anything with ec-ec-economics is that there's one restaurant in one areas that's gonna help another one out. So, its just like anything. Mostly that I can think of is ah, restaurants and ah, food service, down here now.

Laurenzi: Now are, is your restaurant the oldest one in the area or--?

Sokolowski: Uh, yes it is. We've been in business since 1923. So that's third generation.

Laurenzi: Hm, 1923?

Sokolowski: Yeah.

Laurenzi: So what was it like when they started building the interbelt through here?

Sokolowski: Well, I was young then, when they were building the interbelt bridge and--. Um, yeah, it took a lot of houses away from here, houses, homes. You know, they were torn down and um--. You know, there was a lot people that had to move, you know, they got paid, you know, their houses were paid, you know, by the city and they moved, relocated out. I didn't know any of the people cause I was two months, I was too young. People that was working on the bridge ah, would come here to eat and drink so that's how it kinda turned more into a restaurant.

Laurenzi: So, the interbelt bridge sort of, helped business here?

Sokolowski: Yeah, it sort of made us into a restaurant.

Laurenzi: Hmhm.

Sokolowski: The building of it—

Laurenzi: So, d- you don't remember, how those houses were that they had to tear down?

Sokolowski: Vaguely. They were, they were typical houses that were down, they were wood-fr--, wood-frame houses.

Laurenzi: They were--

Sokolowski: That probably should've been torn down, you know, fifty years before they were torn down.

Laurenzi: Oh, they were in bad shape?

Sokolowski: Yeah, all the houses down here were in bad shape until, ah, maybe ten, fifteen years ago.

Laurenzi: So it's not like they just picked a nice area and plowed through it?

Sokolowski: No.

Laurenzi: They just—

Sokolowski: I don't know, I mean, I don't know what, what they--. You know, they scared the houses on Fourteenth Street, but a lot of em' were lost too, you know, so. Uh, I don't know, I don't know what their thinking was behind it, I don't remember any of those houses.

Laurenzi: Hmhm. You mentioned before that a lot of famous people like the pre-, Bill Clinton and uh, Nine, Trent Rezner, Nine Inch Nails came in here. How oft-, obviously Bill probably only came once, but someone like Trent Rezner, how often do they frequent here?

Sokolowski: I don't know. They, they, they have a studio down here and they'd come over here a couple times. I mean, I've, you know, this, you know I, I can't, I really, the long list of, kind of, kind of stars that came here, movie stars and rock stars. Uh, couple of em', baseball players you see repeatedly come down here, football players, you know from visiting teams and all that come down. So ah, there's nobody that comes down here every week or anything like that. We do have customers, we've had customers that, been eating here for thirty-five years, forty years to. So, as far as everyday customers, you know, you don't know whose comin' in, everyday is someone else different. Last week Stevie, Stevenson from ah, Bruce Springstein's band was here, Sopranos. You know, he was here, for three hours. Nice guy.

Laurenzi: Wow.

Sokolowski: David Burrow was here.

Laurenzi: I'm just gonna, flip the tape here.

Sokolowski: How much longer you got here? Cause I got things to do.

Laurenzi: Just, just a little bit.

End of Side A

Laurenzi: Alright. Uh, so you would say that, this area's really good for business as a restaurant?

Sokolowski: Yeah. In Cleveland, in Cleveland it is, yeah.

Laurenzi: Would there be any other type of business that would thrive down here?

Sokolowski: Mm, I don't know, maybe a drug store might work. Uh, um, drug store or some kinda hardware store. That's all I could think of.

Laurenzi: So you would say that a mall or a Wal-Mart wouldn't be so good for the area?

Sokolowski: I don't like any Wal-Mart, I don't like Wal-Mart at all, I don't go to Wal-Mart. Non-union first of all. They've been known to uh, devastate towns. They have a big hype and everyone's a fool that goes to Wal-Mart. They've, you know, proved that they'll go into a town and, take over the town, and then, all of sudden, the small businessman is lockin' up his doors, and then when the small businessman locks his door the town falls. When the town falls, Wal-Mart just packs up and goes to another town.

Laurenzi: Hmhm. So—

Sokolowski: So, as far as like a McDonald's down here and all that, they wouldn't fit in. Wal-Mart, K-Mart, there's enough of them in the suburbs.

Laurenzi: So your sayin' the smaller businesses are what would really improve this area then?

Sokolowski: Yeah, you need that, yeah.

Laurenzi: That, that's better?

Sokolowski: They fit in better.

Laurenzi: Yeah. Ah, there, I noticed there was this steel mill nearby that, now there were a lot of people who got laid off in the seventies right? Now--

Sokolowski: In the nineties.

Laurenzi: In the nineties too.

Sokolowski: 2000.

Laurenzi: Hmhm, and so, did they leave the neighborhood or--?

Sokolowski: Well a lot of em', well in the early sixties a lot of em' lived down here, a lot of my friends worked at the mill. Uh, most of em' that worked at the mill live in Cleveland but not, n- I wouldn't say, many of em' lived down here in the neighborhood anymore. Whereas years ago they did, all of them did. The pollution was worse than it ever was, it was terrible back then. You'd see a lot of pollution down here.

Laurenzi: And with the closing of the mill it's not so bad anymore?

Sokolowski: It is not, no it isn't. I mean, you know, you can't win either way, you know, you want pollu-, you want jobs well then your gonna have pollution. But, with the closing of the mill, the only good thing about it is that there's no pollution down here like there was.

Laurenzi: Um, what do you think could be done to make, if you've already said the place is better than ever, than it's ever been, is there any more improvements that could be done to make the place better or--?

Sokolowski: Hm, I don't know, um, I think get rid of the asphalt plant down below. The asphalt plant that's right directly down below, on um, over, a lot of these new houses that are built down here on West Seventh street are overlookin' an asphalt plant that's, that, well, long story, but years ago we had a problem with them. They uh, they sued me and about five other people from the neighborhood because we were, activists, we were fighting them, cause of the pollution. Make a long story short, they ended up having to move the plant, uh, 1800 feet from where it's at now and, in the meantime these houses started building up and they were right in front of a stack. Which, ah, had some bad pollution comin' out these, and these, thick piles of aggregate and all that stuff and it's to, the point, there's a problem down there right now with these people that are movin' in there now are really getting' mad. I think if you want to improve the neighborhood, they wanna build a towpath, through ZoarOhio, ZoarOhio, all the way down the towpath all the way through here all around. And that's the plans, and it's not gonna happen if that place is still down there. I think they should relocate the asphalt plant, that would beautify the whole area by the river there. That's my, that's what I'd like to see done, as far as that goes. Maybe do something with the projects cause the projects are an eyesore. You know, unfortunately I understand that people gotta live somewhere, poor people and everything else but, I don't know what, you know, I don't wanna be cold-hearted or anything like that but maybe, relocate that and do something with that property, build it up, nicer, whatever, but it is bad down there. Lot a crack dealers down there, there's still a drug problem down there, and uh,

its sorta like moved down to the bottom there where, where nobody really w-worries about it because its at the other end of the neighborhood. But there's still is a crime element that still exists, down there and it still tends to come up here once in a while.

Laurenzi: So that's the bad part of the neighborhood then?

Sokolowski: Umhm. Change that, the projects, and the asphalt plant.

Laurenzi: So what would you want to replace this projects with?

Sokolowski: Like I said, either new housing for em', fix it up, you know, better patrols, better security down there, or whatever they have to do.

Laurenzi: Police don't generally don't go down there or--?

Sokolowski: No, they have the, the CMHA has their own police force. Whether their doing their job effectively or not I don't know. But uh, obviously their not, because a lot of dealers are still on the street. I know, when you drive by you'll see em'.

Laurenzi: It's—

Sokolowski: So, that has, clean that, clean the projects up. And uh, relocate the asphalt plant.

Laurenzi: When did the projects first get built there?

Sokolowski: They were built there years ago and they were in good condition, they were nice. My relatives was born in the projects. And then, you know, just like everything else in the city, different element came down and then it just, changed. You know, third or fourth generational welfare people, fifth generation. You know, no programs down there, whatever they have to do. And as a result, it just stays the same all these years, it's bad down there. Some place you don't wanna walk there at night.

Laurenzi: That's also right next to that, uh, Russian Orthodox St. Theodo-

Sokolowski: St. Theodosius.

Laurenzi: And that's a nice church there they got, and it's kind of a strange contrast to have that there and then the projects.

Sokolowski: Yeah, well everybody that goes to St. Theodosius, not many people live in the neighborhood, like I said, like all the churches that come in from the suburbs, you know.

Laurenzi: All right, um, I already asked you what could be done. Um, what kind of, I know that, there's not a lot of manufacturing in the area anymore but do you think there should be a little more, a little less? You didn't like the asphalt plant.

Sokolowski: Well that's uh, yeah, well that's a different story. Asphalt plant should be put, like, where the steel mills are so they can all, you know, smell together there you know, which would be fine. Um, manufacturing, there was a lot, quite a bit of manufacturing, there still is some, you know, there's Schematics, there's a few places down in the flats. Yeah. Uh, manufacturing yeah, I mean I hope there is, but, you know that's more, jobs you know. Um, you know, as long as its not like a, an asphalt plant in the middle of a neighborhood. You know that's wrong, like this asphalt plant here was wrong, he knew it was wrong. He just, invested a lot of money and he didn't stop to think what he was doing and he thought none of us would fight him and we fought him and he thought it was a bunch of people here from the old days and, actually it was a lot of the new people, that are movin' in, that banded together and, you know, were activists and we got together, it was, you know, it was in the papers everyday and, you know, there was all kinda threats, law suits, and all that and, uh, finally he ended up movin' and he lost the court battle, you know he had to drop the law suits and everything. And uh but uh, as far as um, you know manufacturing goes, yeah I'm all for it. You know it's better for business, for me.

Laurenzi: Now, is there hope that the steel mill will be reopened or replaced with something?

Sokolowski: From my understanding, it is reopened, part of it, and they are producing steel and their talking about, hiring another, I don't know if I'm right or not, 500 to 1000 people. So, it is making a gradual, slow, slow comeback.

Laurenzi: Do you think that will attract more people back to the neighborhood?

Sokolowski: Well, into the neighborhood I don't know. Um, will it, you mean more business, yes it will, you know.

Laurenzi: More business is better for the community, yeah.

Sokolowski: Right, well, more business is better from the businessman. Uh, I don't know if the person that, the resident might like more business, you know.

[Interruption]

Laurenzi: Well, um, I'm really out of question here, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Sokolowski: No, no, but if you got any more questions or you think of something to ask call me up, alright.

Laurenzi: Thank you very much.

Sokolowski: Alrighty Mark, take care of yourself.

Laurenzi: You too.

End of Interview