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Father Joseph Hilinski interview, 08 March 2003

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Hilinski03082003
Tremont Oral History Project

Interview with Father Joseph Hilinski
Interviewed by Tamara Bivins
March 8, 2003
11:00 AM
Our Lady of Mercy, Catholic Church

Categories
Labor, Outward Migration, Neighborhood, Family

Tamara Bivins:
OK, first, for the record, can you state your name and spell it for me?

Father Joseph Hilinski:
Father Joseph Hilinski, H-I-L-I-N-S-K-I.

Bivins:
OK, basically what this is just about is me asking you about your experience and life in Tremont, ok--. So, first off, let me ask you how long have you lived in Tremont?

Hilinski:
I have lived here for ten years as a pastor of this church. Previously, I did not live here, but both of, many of my relatives lived in the neighborhood and I stayed with them from time to time when I was a little boy. Probably, from the age of, I have some memories between age five () fourteen and then I would come and go from the community, visiting my aunt. Sometimes I'd stay with her for the day while my mom had something to do and, she'd take care of me. So, that might be the other. It's like two sets of experiences I have.

Bivins:
OK. So what part of Cleveland did you live in when you were younger?

Hilinski:
I lived in the old Brooklyn neighborhood and then we moved to what's today called West Park, around the airport, Puritas and Rocky River Drive. So, at first we didn't live very far. Actually, my first few months as a baby was on Denison Avenue just to the south of, further south of Tremont. As you know, Denison Avenue is right there. The little-- A little neighborhood we lived above a grocery store. I don't remember that [Laughter]. That was when I was a baby, so.

Bivins:
Let's talk about your family that you visited when you were younger. Do you know when they moved to Tremont?

Hilinski:
When they moved to Tremont--. I--. You know, I don't know that. I, I, I--. That's interesting you say that. I know my mother's family have lived here, I'm presuming, really, from very early on. So, they--. When they got married, my grandmother and grandfather, when they got married they moved into that house. That would have been in the early twenties. And they lived there and raised their children. There were nine children. One of them, of which, was my mother.

Bivins:
OK. Where did your family come from? Basically like, were they immigrants? Or--.

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Hilinski:

Yes, my, all of my grandparents were born in different sections of Poland. And immigrated here to the United States in the, as I said, the early twenties, the late teens, 19, you know 15, to 19, probably 1925. They came over to this country.

Bivins:

Was English spoke at home or was it your native language?

Hilinski:

In my own home, my parents already first generation. So, mostly it was English. However, when we visited my grandmother, she only spoke in Polish. And we generally did not communicate with her directly except through my mother or my father. Maybe a few words, you know, and she knew a little bit of English. I think she understood more than she was able to speak. But generally she communicated and lived in a Polish world where she spoke Polish only. And like my aunt too, at my aunt's house they spoke mostly English, but they had a little bit () Polish.

Bivins:

Why did your family move to Tremont? Why did they choose Tremont instead of any other place or area in Cleveland?

Hilinski:

I--. From what I gather, there were at that time, a number of job opportunities. The steel mills were nearby. I know of my uncle worked in a dairy: Fairmont Dairy. Which was--. It's just down the street from where we are. And they earned their livelihood in the neighborhood. Actually, my other aunt worked out of Fisher Foods that was on the corner of Literary and Professor. So, they found job opportunities. And there's another, certainly a big factor, has to be that this was a place where a special church that reached out to Polish people, St. John Cansius existed where they could have services and a priest with their own language, and of course, assistants. The immigrant--. The churches that reached out to the immigrants would provide different kinds of services for people. For example, I know that in the rural areas, the churches would have, conduct sessions on how to farm. And the priests would translate everything. A farm agent from the government would come to the church and he would explain to them in their language. So, the same thing here. They would receive explanations of things in their own language. So that was another drawing point: the jobs and the security of a church where their home language was spoken.

Bivins:

Speaking of the church, as you are a priest now, how did religion play a role in your life growing up, growing up?

Hilinski:

Very strong role. The Polish Catholics have a long tradition of dedication to the church. I mean my grandmother--. My grandmother worked as a, they called them washerwomen, they didn't call them maintenance women, washerwomen, in the terminal tower. But, she would, coming back from her night job, would stop at the first mass at St. John's Cansius like at 6:45, 5:45 AM, before she would come home to do the laundry. She was, they didn't call them those days, but she was a single parent. I've never been sure about what happened early on, but something happened to my grandfather. I'm not really sure what it was that happened, whether it was maybe suicide, maybe alcohol. It's never been clearly said so it's one of those things that I don't know. But all I know is that she was left with

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almost raising her children on her own. But her dedication, that's what I'm getting back to, is her strong faith that was even to us as grandchildren very real. And my parents' faith was very real. They were very dedicated to the church. And that even when we went to the westside, we still belonged to a Catholic Church out there.

Bivins:

How big was your family?

Hilinski:

My () family, I have three brothers and two sisters. So there were six of us children, and my mom and my dad.

Bivins:

OK. Besides your family, because you () that your family lived in Tremont and your family lived where it's called West Park. Did you have any other family that lived in other parts of Cleveland?

Hilinski:

Oh, yes. My other grandparents, my dad's parents lived in the area around, at least as a child I remember this, Fulton, we called it Blessed Sacrament area. They lived there. And before that, my father grew up on the near east side in many of the old Polish areas still to this day, off of Fleet Avenue, they called Radbin Avenue. These were all Pole sections of again, Polish Churches where the Polish people would live. My father's family, I know moved around a awful lot. It's interesting that the reason my mother and father met each other is that my father's family had lost their home and were looking for a rental. And they moved into the upper part of a store right next door to my mother's home. And, so, actually, literally after the World War Two when my father came back from the war, he tells the story, that he actually came back to Cleveland and he didn't know where his family was. Because they had lost their home and it was during the war time and the communication didn't come back to him. So, he had to search around. And when he found his home, which was on Therman Avenue, in a few days, he met some of the Patock girls, which, among which, was my mother. And so they met across the fence. As you know, the streets here in Tremont are very, very close together. Everything's very close together. It's almost as though you're living in a big apartment building. In some ways, I think the side streets of Tremont, especially the smaller ones, are almost like old European apartment areas or other areas of the city where people live close by. And it created a very interesting sense of neighborhood that, it wasn't even existing--. It was interesting, because when I would go visit with my grandmother or my aunt and stay on Therman over night, and I would be by myself. I would get a feel for the neighborhood and it was just so different from West Park. Even though that's both the city of Cleveland. It was a very different sense of neighborhood. You know, there was more communication. I mean, literally, your houses are so close, you could talk from the window of the second story to the window of the second story across. And I remember there was a woman next door to my grandmother and her name was Veronica Martin. I remember her name to this day. Sometimes I remember her in my prayers. She would lean out the window, especially in the summertime, in the springtime, and literally, I never saw her walk. I mean to this day, I've always wondered, isn't that strange? I never saw her other than that window. I never saw her in the street. But when you would be out there in the summertime sometimes with my grandmother and my mom, standing by that, you know they had those gates. Every yard has a gate around it, a fence around it. That was another thing that was very different than West Park because in West Park and Brooklyn, even Brooklyn Avenue, there were no

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fences around each property. But everything was a little fence. And we'd stand there by the fence and Veronica would talk from her second floor balcony, right, right, jokingly, say balcony, her window, and chit-chat back and forth about different things in the neighborhood, so it was very different in that sense.

Bivins:

OK. Let me ask you what does your father do for a living, work, and the same for your mother?

Hilinski:

My mother was a full-time homemaker. She never worked outside the house. My father worked probably most of his life for the post office. After he came back from the war, he--. Yes, I think he had a little time in the steel mill and he finally got a job in the post office, so from which he retired, you know, over the years. My, as I said, my grandmother was a washerwoman and I don't know what trade my grandfather was (.). There's very little knowledge of him. So early on, I get the idea he died early on. So he died. So, from what I'm not even sure. Of course, there was the many things that happened many years ago, flu, and people died from them. So, who knows what epidemic he got caught up in?

Bivins:

What other childhood memories can you think of--?

Hilinski:

Well, you know there's--. Tremont brings back a number of different memories. I think one of them, in particular, is that it was a neighborhood, of a multitude of little stores. [Recorder is turned off and then back on] street from Therman is Jefferson. And there used to be the Jefferson Bakery. And it was odd because it wasn't a bakery as most people imagine with a big wide window. And, you know you see little cakes and pastries in it like sometimes we still have in our bakeries. It was sort of a narrow little building and you'd go up the steps and you would go right into the counter. And they had the most delicious bakery and in the morning, when I would stay overnight, my grandmother would give me money and she would say, "Go buy bakery". And I could buy anything I want. As a eight or nine year old kid, ten year old kid, I would buy these ladylocks, and they were big with, filled with--. You probably still have those. I know you still have those and that was very beautiful. And next door to the bakery was a candy store. Really it was like a, what do they call it today? Notions. I mean they had a candy counter and they had pop, and they'd have like, we'd call it, the drug store items that they would have. But I remember this store. It was an old-fashioned store. It had big, four big globes in each corner, like hanging on a chain. And only one of them was usually on. Not all the lights were ever on in that store, I don't remember in the day. They were never all on. And there was a big candy counter as you came in and her name was Mrs. Baluschka. I remember this: a big heavyset woman would sit behind the candy counter. And they were all penny candies. And you--. She had little brown bags and you would point to the candy you wanted. And we would get all penny candies. And we'd get our candy. She'd fill the little bag up and then give it to us and down the street we'd go back to my grandmother or my aunt. Both lived on Therman. I remember that. I also remember there was a little store. As I said, the Fishers Foods and it was unlike any Fisher Foods or Kroegger's, or any of those stores I remember from my being out in West Park because it was the smallest, little store I've ever seen in my whole life of a Fisher Foods. And at the doorway, you just walked in, and there was two cash registers. They were right next to each other and little counters. They were no conveyor belts or anything like that. And it was almost like--. We call it a Convenient Mart today. The way it looked--. You would get your stuff and you would go in and my

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aunt was a clerk at that little Fisher Foods store. And, so there were bakeries--. The other thing about Tremont at that time is very different from today is that people usually think of Tremont as a place of very big restaurants, you know famous restaurants. I don't know if you're aware of that. All these restaurants--. But they were more bars than you could ever imagine. It was like a place I never, ever thought of as a kid because no other place--. It seemed like every time you'd walk in a different direction, there'd be a little bar. You know, and they always would be going--. You'd here not ruckuses or noise. They're people talking. You know, and you'd walk by anytime of the day. So those stars, I should say, have a very special place in my memory. They're just very beautiful. The other thing about Tremont is smell. And that's something that might seem funny. But, when I was a boy, there was a--. Today you would call it a industrial smell. And I would especially remember at night when we'd come to visit my grandmother, the contrast between now and then--. Because today in Tremont you could--. There are starry nights and everything is clear. But it always seemed, and we went to Tremont at night to visit my grandmother. It was like there was a fog. And it really was. It was the industrial pollution. It was almost like it--. It was very haunting in a way, because I remember, when I would read books, like, the guy's name is Dickens, () about England and the smog, and the heavy smog in England. I knew exactly what he was talking about. I remember from Tremont. It was just a sort of cloudy--. It almost had like a cloudy darkness. And of course the steel mills are right behind us. At night, when we would be out there in my grandmother's backyard, the streetlights weren't very powerful. And the glow of the chimneys; you still see it. The chimneys of the fires coming out where they're releasing the gasses at night--. If you ever go around the steel mills at night, there's big chimneys. You're familiar with that. And I would just--. It's haunting in a way to think about it because there's these globes of fire would be off in the distance. And you would think like you're in a different land. You know, because when you would go out to West Park, you didn't have foundries and chimneys and you didn't have--. There was a grit, literally a grit, on the house you noticed a grit. Everything had a grittiness to it. The fence always had a film on it from this soot that was around. And I remember, in particular, one of the strange things about my grandmother's house during the summertime is that the windows were rarely opened. There would be a little crack open in some of the windows, just a little, an inch. You'd know they'd lift it up an inch. And I remember asking my mother many times as a little boy, "Why doesn't grandma open up the front door, and the windows, and everything else?" And she'd go, "All this pollution would get in the house." And even then, she would go, "Now look!" And she would go by the furniture and she'd, "See all that dust?" And she'd take a cloth. "Grandma does everyday, she dusts. But there's all this dust from the steel mills that's around." At that's one of those things I remember so vividly as a child. It was just sort of eerie kind of effect that they lived with, which is totally different from now. Of course with the mills closed and some pollution controls on many of the industries you don't have that anymore. It's a very, very strong impression that I have of Tremont, you know. It's not a bad impression. It's just how different it was in those days.

Bivins:

Do you know about any health conditions that came about because of the steel mills?

Hilinski:

No, I don't. I really can't. My mother died--. I mean, my mother died many years ago, but it was of breast cancer, so certainly that's no more connected than other people was, especially, in the case of women. So, and every one else in the family, we don't have any--. To tell you the truth, there's no asthma or anything like that, which would seem to be connected. So, I really can't say other--. You know as far as personal family recollection,

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no, no one really died from anything really like of lung disease or anything like that. So, actually, most of my relatives lived pretty long into their eighties, and eighties, usually into their eighties. My aunts, all my aunts lived into their eighties before they died. So, another recollection of Tremont, and maybe this is more particular, well not particular, is how we got here, how we drove here from Brooklyn and the west side. We would go through the area called the Stockyards. And, I mean, literally, they were stockyards in Cleveland where they butchered animals. And they would be big pens where the animals were kept. And the stench-- Oh, I remember this as we were approaching, we would say to my dad, oh, close the windows. It would be so hot. But, no, no, close the windows, because (). Kids love to, little kids () it stinks, stinks. But it was really one of those things that they don't exist, again. But it connects it to Tremont because that's how we got here. You know we'd always drive through the stockyard areas. That would be-- Actually, it's interesting that, as a Catholic, my introduction to churches that were not Catholic comes through Tremont. One of the first things I remember as a child was the-- There's a church on Scranton, Scranton and Clark. And it has a Jesus Saves cross on it: a cross with the word "Jesus Saves" on it. And that cross and that church has been there-- Well, I'm almost fifty-- I'm fifty-five. Probably the first time, I could say, I could remember I was six or seven. So it's close to fort-five years that building has been there. And I knew it wasn't a Catholic Church. It was some other kind of church. And the other experience of Tremont I have that is very, very interesting: there's a church, historic church, St. Theodosus. You know there's a church-- OK. St. Theodosus is on Starkweather, which is at the end of Therman. So my grandmother lived on Therman. My aunt lived on Therman. Is Starkweather-- And right at the end of Therman and Starkweather is a church called St. Theodosus. It's a Russian Orthodox Church. And this church was built with monies. Part of the sum of monies came from the czar of Russia: Czar Nicholas. This is remember, 1890. So Russia still had a czar. And in order to provide for the Russian immigrants who came-- Because Tremont has a strong presence of Russian, Ukranian, Polish, and Slovak, and of course the Irish groupings. These are the major ethnic groupings. So they built this church. What does this have to do with us Roman Catholics? Well, that church had a wonderful priest by the name of father Capinazzi. Father Cappinazzi and his wife both died in a tragic car accident. And I remember being at my grandmother's one afternoon towards the evening. We were at the fence-- We're always at the fence with grandma. I remember grandma, my mother, myself, and she had a collie, like Lassie, a collie. And we were standing there. It seemed as though the street was picking up. And you know Therman-- You have to take a look at that street Therman. Therman, the physically, Therman-- We used to call it Therman alley. Now, technically, I think it's called Therman Avenue according, Therman Street, according to, the city records. But everybody called it Therman alley because it was such a narrow, little brick street. And the only thing that separates the sidewalks from the street is the gutter, a little bit of a gutter. And when we would drive, my dad had an old, what was it, a forty-eight Dodge, big, black Dodge car. When we would drive down that street, if another car was coming, you had to literally ride up onto the sidewalk and the other car would ride up onto the sidewalk and pass each other. And so it's a real narrow street. So there were lots of people going down the street. And my mother said to the people, "What's, why, where are you all going?" And I remember this day. As a woman turning with tears in her eyes, she says, "Father Capanazzi is dead." And my mother goes, "Mat Kabulscha", which means in Polish, Mother of God, which is an expression Catholics would use when they're in trouble, calling out to Mary for her help. "Mat Kabulscha," she said, "Father Capanazzi is dead." She said, "Joey, we're going--" (). The woman said, "His wake has begun at the church." You know his body is laid out, as is tradition with Orthodox and Catholic priests. You're laid out. They call it in-state in the church building for people to come and see you and pray for you and your family. So, my mother grabbed

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my hand and Buscha. We called her Buscha, grandmother. Her nickname was Buscha in Polish. And Buscha and we walked down the street. It was just, it's a memory. The street was flooded and we went down Therman. We came to Starkweather. And Starkweather runs perpendicular to Therman. There were people coming from either end to the church. The church was like three ways. Everybody was coming into the church. And there were people that were from all the other churches in Tremont. My mother would tell me, "Oh, there's so and so from Pilgrim." Because Pilgrim--. We knew some of the people from Pilgrim, the church up on the corner there. And all the people from the different churches--. This is nineteen, late 1959, fifty-eight, I'm not even sure if it's sixty what it was. This was a time when people did not do a lot of this, going to different churches. And so went into the church, and of course, this Orthodox priests; they dress, they dress so elaborately. I don't if you've ever seen. They wear lots of elaborate vestments. I remember saying, I know, "Is that the Pope?" because this guy was really decked out. You know, in robes and there were incense going. And it was just one of those special moments I recollect this. It was as though we weren't in the United States. We were back in a European village. And all the village people were coming to pay their respects to the great clergyman, to the great priest. And he was from his reputation--. It's interesting. Years later, this is years later, this is probably in nineteen eighty something. I was in New York City for a meeting and I do a lot of ecumenical work. And I was having dinner with a group of people. And this is close to twenty-five years later. And I said--. We started talking about things as children. I started recollecting this event and somebody at the table said, "You were at Father Capanazzi's funeral." And I said, "Yes, I was." He said,--. I said, "You're from New Jersey." I knew that. I knew from introductions. He said, "Oh yes, I know. But he is widely known in the Russian Orthodox community. He was truly a great priest of our church. And his death was so tragic." It was just sort of unreal to realize that as a child I was part of something much bigger than I ever realized. Since I was a witness to a segment of the Orthodox Church's history in America because of his well-knowing greatness as a Orthodox priest. So it's fascinating: the connections: the connections you have from this little community. But as I said, it was an experience that I don't think goes on anymore. It was, like--. As a child, I experienced, I think, to a degree, what it was like to live in a European village in America. It was a very, very, different experience.

Bivins:

One thing as you were speaking, I thought about was, you keep saying like a European village and different ethnicities: Russian, Ukrainian. But one thing that I noticed about the west side is that it's very diverse. Hispanics, African-Americans, Whites, Chinese, the rest of the west. But as I look at Tremont itself, I don't see much of that. Can you tell me about the different--(Speaker breaks off because another speaker breaks in).

Hilinski:

Well, the Tremont of that time and day [pause]. Today, of course, there are a number of African-Americans and Hispanics here, in Tremont. There is a housing development at the end of Starkweather. I'm trying to think. What is the name of it? River--. That's not the name of it. That's the other one. It's interesting that that housing development was started right after the war, I think. Or--. Yes. I think it was right after the war, right before the war. And actually, one of the priests at Lady of Mercy was very much involved in being on the board of trustees. And that was not--. There were many--. At that time we'd call them--. They'd be lower-income Caucasians or whites. There were some blacks, but I don't think [doorbell] the African- American, you might say, size of population was very big, cause this was truly more an ethnic neighborhood. Although Pilgrim--. Pilgrim and Zion, there were two churches up there. Pilgrim and Zion are--. They are churches that are, were more non-European in that way. I mean they were mostly American

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background. You want to shut that off for a moment so I can—[Recorder is turned off and then back on]. So, I can't really explain that. I think it was just because the neighborhood--. There's also another element here that maybe I should mention. I would call them Appalachian--. We call them Appalachian whites from West Virginia, and, you know, from the south that came up here to work in the mills. And there is a segment here of that group of people who come from a number of different Christian churches, but are what we'd call Appalachians. And they moved into the neighborhood. So they're also another contingent. So, are you asking me, what, to explain, or why it isn't--? (Speaker breaks off because another speaker enters).

Bivins:

Not like to explain. Just as you were speaking, I just realized--. (Speaker breaks off because another speaker enters).

Hilinski:

There was--. No, as far as a child, there was actually, to tell you the truth--. If there were any African-Americans here in Tremont at the time, I do not register thinking of them in connection.

Bivins:

What about now?

Hilinski:

Oh, now there are. Well, now there are. There are African- Americans. Actually, we've had a few families come to our church. Really they're mixed, white and African-American. Usually, one's black and the other is white. Integrated, they would call it, family. They've come here. So obviously they're very, that's more () evident. And I think part of it is simply that Tremont has, up until recently, had some very modest and very inexpensive housing. There's a lot of rental property, especially as we get to the--. The seventies were real tough on Tremont. There were fires and destruction. It was really a bad neighborhood. Even as a child, I remember, this was originally the name for this area. At least we called it--. Before we called it Tremont at home --. We called it the south side. That's how I remember it as a boy. I don't remember really remember it as Tremont. My parents would always refer to the south side. And literally, it really is to the south of downtown of Cleveland. And the south side was known for some very rough situations, and not because of other ethnic groups. It was all within the same ethnic--. There still is. There still is some characters that are really horrible robbers. They rob homes. They go off to jail ever so often and then they come back. And everyone knows when these boys are back in the neighborhood. You better watch it because something's gonna disappear. There are some, even from family recollection. Some of my uncles were pretty scrappy as boys in the neighborhood. It's a tough neighborhood to live in. It's a different atmosphere over the years. Today's Tremont, as it's called gentrification, as it gentrifies, meaning that things get really fixed up and expensive. The rents, it's interesting, that already there's been a change. We used to have a opportunity center for the poor just around the corner. And because the average income for this area has statistically increased, the federal government and other government entities are saying that center has to move somewhere else because you don't--. Your income is too high. Even though there are still people that certainly need the assistance and help, but it's one of those interesting realities of what's going on.

Bivins:

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Could you just go back to the seventies just for a second because you were saying how it was rough and you did mention just a couple of things about robberies. But what else? Robberies, there are a lot in a lot of different areas. What else?

Hilinski:

Arson is very prevalent. Arson is prevalent. Houses were being burned down. A lot of them because they were deserted. But there were a lot of just behavior that was of a real low class of people that were living here. And it was just a rough, rough time because the neighborhood was just declining so rapidly. You have to remember that in the fifties when they built what you call, not you call, but you know seventy-one. That's seventy-one that we ride on. It goes right through the neighborhood. That decimated the neighborhood. This was a highly compact--. Lots of stores--. And then in the 1950s when that was built, the sixties opened up a movement away. So all these families moved away. Actually, my grandparents and my aunt was probably one of the last to leave. Maybe, I think they stayed here until almost--. That's a good question. When did they leave Tremont? Probably the seventies, right at the beginning of the seventies. They were like the last of the people staying here. And then I think what happened is as they left their houses, and their houses were then bought by people that were looking for making money, and they just threw them open to rental. As you increase the number of renters and the less the homeowners, that can be a problem. And the balance was thrown. The people that were moving in, which were predominantly--. They were not African- American. I think they were Appalachians. People called them "hillbillies". I shouldn't use the word because, that's probably as bad as some of the other words we used to use in reference to African- Americans. That's what kind of group they were and they just didn't have the sense. The European--. These people that were coming from Europe and living here--. They would get outside with their brooms and sweep the sidewalks. I remember that as--. Sweep the sidewalks and sweep the street, their little section of the street. Again, everything's much smaller. But it was a sense of great pride of keeping--. Even though there was this grime and soot. My grandmother's house was always inside beautiful: paint. Everything was painted. Everything was fixed up. Never was anything broken. The windows were all--. Even though they weren't open, they were blinds and curtains. It was a little house, certainly smaller than I was used to living in. The bedrooms were like little closets. And we were staying in my aunt's bedroom, when she moved out of her mother's house, her bedroom was open. So when I was a boy I would stay overnight. I had my little vacation. Mom would say, "you're gonna get a vacation". I was the oldest. So it's sort of nice for the oldest to be able to get away from the little kids, my little brothers and sisters. So I had little personal freedom. I remember in the house how it would be very nice. And she had a big chime clock that would chime the night away. Every hour you'd get two, three, four, five, six. You know as a kid, it took me a while because I wasn't used to this. So, actually, I'd almost lay awake at night listening to the clock. I couldn't get to sleep. I mean it wasn't--. It was like--. I slept in between, but it was sort of a different experience from living at home. We didn't have a chime clock that would chime the hours off. So, it was a different experience. The seventies--. It was a lot of gangs, we called gangs, arson. People were moving out. Stores started leaving and closing down. Gotta remember, sixties and seventies, the beginning of malls and a whole different mentality to shopping. Stores were closing down. The street called Professor had a hardware store, department store, dime store. They were doctors in the neighborhood. Even after we moved out to Brooklyn Avenue and West Park from Denison, we would come down here. There was a doctor, Dr. Kumechich. He was a dentist right next to Pilgrim. This big mansion, I remember, and you'd go up to the second floor. It was the biggest waiting room I'd ever--. There were doors to different little offices all around this big waiting room. And this was 1950. If, the fifties, mid-fifties,

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early fifties. And I remember getting a dental x-ray and my impression as a child of this x-ray machine is like something out of the Wizard of Oz. I mean they were dials. I--. I'd put your face up against something. It wasn't as today. You know, they bring the little tube down. No, no, you'd stand in front of something. And he also was one of those dentists that gave you gas. It'd put you out totally. It wasn't this novocaine business today, you know. And I remember. After you'd get your tooth pulled or something, you don't remember anything. You woke up in bed. Because you were almost carried out of the office as a kid, because you couldn't walk out. That gas was so strong. And I remember that to this day going to Dr. Kumechich. And he would go,--. I remember he'd go, he says, "Now we're going off to dreamland. Let's start counting: nine, eight", and he'd put the mask on me [noisy sound]. Off you'd go. That's interesting because of right now, I think, other than the clinic--. There's a little clinic, the free clinic, city clinic, I should say. There's--. I don't think there's any doctors in the neighborhood. He was a dentist and his father, I mean his brother, was a physician, a regular doctor. And they had below the level the mansion was the doctor's office. The upper level was the dentist's office. So I remember that as a child, going to that.

Bivins:

Where'd you go to school?

Hilinski:

I went to school in West Park, St. Patrick's. You mention school. It's interesting. Tremont at what time--. Tremont had Lincoln High School, which was very famous high school. You also had at that time a parish high school. St. John Cansius was such a big parish, it could run its own high school. Now today in the Catholic Church, parishes don't usually--. They might run their grade schools, but for them to run a high school is unthinkable. But they had their own high school and I remember that was one of the things that was a peculiarity to me. Where we lived you'd have to go to St. Ed's high school or Ignatius high school or my sisters went to St. Joseph's academy. We didn't go to a high school connected right to the church. But that was here in Tremont that they had that. I went to the () high school.

Bivins:

Did you go to church in West Park or did you go to church here?

Hilinski:

Both places.

Bivins:

Both, ok. What church did you go to here?

Hilinski:

St. John Cantius. [Laughter].

Bivins:

OK. Do you know who the pastor was?

Hilinski:

Boy, I don't know. I'm trying to think of his name. He's the same one who married my mother and my father. ()--. It'll come to me. Right now I can't think --.

Bivins:

Hilinski

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Do you remember what he is like?

Hilinski:

No, no, we didn't have much contact with him. No more than I would've had contact with the pastor at there. They were distant figures. I think one of the interesting things was that they preserved here, at St. John Cantius, a lot of really, more, again, European customs that I was used to in my home church. It was very different. For example, this was the days when we had mass in Latin in the Catholic Church. But when I go to my grandmother's church, I was confused. Because the people would be singing Polish during the mass, and I kept thinking, but they're Catholic. It's a Catholic Church, but they had a different tradition than the church we would go to as a child, depending on your background. The church I went to had a strong Irish element. And it's very interesting because the Irish community does not have-- They love to sing and ballads. But they don't sing in church. They didn't sing in church in Ireland. It was always cited masses. So here in America, their churches were much more quiet and silent. But when I'd come here, the organ would be playing and the people would be singing all kinds of Polish hymns. It was a little different atmosphere and a lot more ceremony would be here. They would have processions. And I don't know if you know Catholic customs. One of them is we have a procession and we carry in a gold vessel, the host, the blessed sacrament, we'd call it around the church. And they would have it every month, every first Friday. In St. Patrick's, we'd do that once in a while, once a year. But they'd have it every first Friday. And I remember that. When I was a child, and I'd come and visit grandmother, my mom would say we're going to go to Devotions. And they would be like in the afternoon, on a Friday afternoon. And we'd come after school and then we would go for Devotions. It was a different experience of being a member of the same church, but a different experience.

Bivins:

As a kid, when you came to visit your grandmother and aunts, what did you do for fun? You know, besides going to --.

Hilinski:

Well, we had bikes. We'd bring our bikes with us often times and we'd bike around, up and down the neighborhood. We'd come over here to Lincoln Park. There were swings and other-- I think there were like teeter-totters. I can't remember what exactly was here. We'd come and play on the playground in Lincoln Park. Whatever time we'd have, we'd play. But sometimes we'd get in games with of the neighborhood kids, because they're a lot of kids at that time that lived on Therman. You know, play little games of tag. We'd play out in the street. We'd play. All these kids play games, baseball. Here we'd play baseball. We'd bring some toys with us. And then we'd bring sometimes games. If it was rainy, we'd sometimes sit in the house, watch grandma make something. Sometimes grandma would be making some kind of food, cookies, and we'd help her out. So it was a variety of things. Although, it was a attic in her house, a big long attic. And my sister and I would go up there and play sometimes, if we were-- During the winter particularly-- In the summer, it was ghastly. Couldn't go up there. It was too hot. That's what we'd do as children. I don't know if that helps.

Bivins:

[Laughter] It does. Let me ask you a question. Did you ever go downtown? As we all know, it's right next to downtown. Did you ever go downtown, or basically, did you just stay in the neighborhood?

Hilinski:

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No, no, no, no. Because that was a big part of my childhood, was going downtown. That would be--. That was a regular routine to go visit downtown, especially Christmas time or other times of the year. My aunts would take me down there for lunch. My aunt, Auntie Anne, always liked to go down there for lunch. She would take me to the Mill Restaurant. It's part of history. It's called the Mill's Restaurant. It's like a cafeteria, beautiful. It was art-decorated. It had two levels. And we would go down there for lunch. And I'd remember she would take me down there and take me to a movie or something. It was like a little treat. I remember going downtown an awful lot. That was the big place to go. We didn't go out to the malls or anything. There weren't any malls. Especially the people down here in Tremont were often going downtown because downtown was like the shopping center. It was nothing for people to get on the buses from Tremont. I'm trying to remember where--. You have to remember there were trolleys. I don't think the trolleys came through Tremont. It came just to Twenty-Fifth Street, the trolleys. I don't think there are any trolleys through Tremont. So, but they'd always go downtown. ()--. Even actually, years--. My mother always went to doctors downtown.

“END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A”

“START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B”

Hilinski

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But maybe--. It should be interesting. I was talking about the uniqueness of the neighborhood and the closeness of the stores. I think what's also interesting is that the people who worked in the stores lived right in the neighborhood. Take for example: I've already mentioned my aunt who worked at Fisher Foods. But the manager at Fisher Foods, at that time, lived across the street from my aunt, from my grandmother's house. And we--. It's interesting. I was just talking to my dad this morning and I was telling him about this interview. He goes, "Oh, yeah". He said, "You remember Mrs. Sabarro. She lived across the street. She was the manager for Aunt Helen's Fisher Foods. And I thought--. It's interesting. The kind of contact that exists in the neighborhood today between the storeowners or the store workers in the neighborhood is non-existent. But it's like, everybody really did know everybody. So if she was working in the store, she knew everybody who was working in that store. Rarely would there be a person she probably wouldn't know in the neighborhood. I just thought that's a very different atmosphere. And I think it created a certain kind of stability even though it wasn't a wealthy neighborhood by any means of imagination. It was a stable neighborhood, I think, because of those contributing forces. The contributing forces of the church's presence, the schools--. I mean, you have a public school, Tremont, right in the middle of the neighborhood. I mean, that it is fabulous. To me, it's just wonderful, because kids just come from all directions in the neighborhood. It sits, literally--. Tremont grade school sits right in the middle of--. That was also another playground area. We'd play in the schoolyard there in Tremont. That creates such an interesting atmosphere for the neighborhood to have a school--. It's not on a main street either. It's on a Thoroughfare. It's almost like its own little island surrounded by homes. What better place for a school than that, especially for a grade school?

Bivins:

You mention your grandmother and your aunt a lot. Does your aunt have any children? Did you play with--?

Hilinski:

Oh, yeah. My aunt had two cousins. Their names were Terry and Marcia. And we actually--. That's right. You asked me what did we do as kids. Marcia was a few years younger than me, but especially if my brothers and sisters were over, we'd all play together. And Terry--. Terry would've been like--. I would've been like ten. Terry was about--. Fifty-five--. She was close to--. She was like five, six years different. She was a little older, but she would take me here and there and sometimes I'd go over to the house. It was summertime. And she would be on the chair sunbathing. And I'd come sit at another chair and then her mom, Auntie Mary, was such a nice lady. She would make the most delicious tuna salad sandwiches. No one made tuna salad sandwiches like Aunt Mary. And even--. I never said this to my mother. Even my mother's never tasted like Aunt Mary's. They were the best. And literally, I remember when she served it, it was kool-aid. A glass of kool-aid and this tuna salad sandwich on white bread, just plain old white bread. But it was the best. I didn't know what she made with it, but I'll never will taste that good. My Aunt Mary's tuna salad and my grandmother's chicken. I don't know how my grandmother roasted chicken. But her chicken was absolutely the best. I don't know what--. I think what she did with it, now that I'm older--. I know a little about what people do. I think she bathed in butter. I think it was bathed in butter, things that we would never do today, cholesterol conscious. She would make that and she would make perogies. But my mother was a pretty good perogie maker. I don't know if you know what that is, the little pouches. You like those? That was another interesting experience. We would go

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on Fridays when we'd come down here. And we would go and get our--. What would you call it? We'd buy our quantities of perogies to take back home with us to West Park. And there was a church, St. Peter and St. Paul on West Second Street. And like today, the ladies would be making perogies for the church to make money. Like chicken, dinners, all sorts of other things churches do. But the interesting thing is it was the day in age that you had to bring your own pot to carry it home. There were no cartons. There were no bags. There were no plastic things. You brought your own pots and pans. Whatever you wanted your perogies in, you brought it. You'd put a lid on the top and you'd walk back with it. So we'd get a pot. We'd go there and they'd just fill them up, how many you'd buy, two dozen, three dozen. They'd fill the pot up and you'd walk away. It's almost unbelievable. People would never imagine. Of course, they had now stores that you could bring your own bags to and save on ecology. But in those days--. I remember that. They were so funny to think about that. You brought your own pot and pan. It wasn't like all nice and plastic little cartons. People today would--. I couldn't imagine any person, anybody under the age of forty. They would just go, "What! When did you live? How ancient of days is this"? And this is just relatively--. It's already close to forty, fifty years ago. But that's the way they did it and nobody batted an eyelash. Everybody went and bought their perogies. The people would come with big steel pans. Sometimes--. They looked like--. What were they called? When you wash dishes, those little plastic--?

Bivins:
Colanders.

Hilinski:

Colanders. That's another thing they would use, those big colanders. They would put them in and carry them. So, they were fabulous. That's an experience. That's something I never thought of until you, until we started talking. When you think about it. You'd bring your own pots and pans and you'd line up. And those ladies--. That was interesting. They'd all have on like white--. Oh, and the other thing is Babuschkas! Scarves. You know, today, people make a big thing about the muslims' women wearing headdress all the time. Well, you never saw a woman in this neighborhood that didn't have a babuschka on. You know, the little tied--. You know--. My mother had a white silk one and a red one with this--. And she wore it--. My mom died in 1975. In the wintertime, many times would wear a scarf, a babuschka, tied around her without any thought to it. And in this neighborhood, most of the women would wear--. Especially in church, every woman would have this babuschka on, this scarf on. Of course they don't now, but in those days, it was just part of a woman's dress, especially in this neighborhood. They were used to wearing--. We'd call them headscarves. Muslims would call them headscarves. Women in this part of America wore them for a while too. It's just interesting. So I'd sometimes--. People make a big deal about this. What's the big deal? Grandma used to wear a babuschka so if these ladies want to wear a--. They feel it's important to wear a headscarf, don't get all bent out of shape, like it's some kind of oddity. Women had been wearing all sorts of things on their heads. Men too. Priests used to wear--. You probably have never seen them. They were little box like hats with pom-poms on the top of them. They called them baretas. You see them in the movies sometimes. They still wear them. And when you'd see a priest walking around, John Cantius, or St. Patricks, as a little boy, they'd have the little baretas on top of their heads. That's what the priests wore. No big deal.

Bivins:

OK. I guess now it's about time for us to wrap it up. The last question I just want to ask you is since you know about then and now. Tell me now, how do you see tremont, in your own words?

Hilinski

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Hilinski:

In my own words, I see Tremont as a lovely neighborhood that's in transition. It has moved from being a dilapidated place, as I said in the seventies, to fixed up homes. It's nice to see new buildings being built for housing. There is a vitality and liveliness. There's a youthfulness, that's for sure, that is going on. So I see Tremont as something, rather than finished, its future to me is still a question. What it will develop into? I think there's a lot of questions. There are factors outside of Tremont's control that will in the end set the development tone. I think there's one more transition that will be very critical. And that would be the departure of the last of what I would call the senior citizens that remember the days that I have told you about. They are the last remnant of those days in that atmosphere. And I think they've created-- This is their home. This is where they live. And though we have a lot of younger people here in Tremont, I don't know if they sense the same commitment of this being their home. I get the impression, as I've had a number of couples that were married here, that after a while they go and they move out with the children. So it's not a place where you think of immediately as families, even though there are some young families that are making a commitment. I think that's a real critical issue, if the community will really stabilize itself into a residential community. Otherwise, it will turn into sort of a bedroom community for the upwardly mobile for downtown. And it would constantly be influx. And I don't know if without some type of stabilizing force it can be as good as it is now. I think there's a rare combination that the new is still living off the old and the new doesn't realize that as the old base deteriorates, something else has to replace it in order to stabilize the whole community. And I'm not sure of that. I'm certainly very positive. I think it's certainly a very positive place, enjoyable. I like living here. It's convenient. It's one of the most convenient places to get to other places in northeast Ohio. I have highways at my fingertips. I can access seventy-seven, seventy-one. I can be in Akron, literally, in a half-hour to thirty-five minutes because I live right around a highway system. I have accessibility to different parts of northeast Ohio. And as a Diocesan priest, because my work extends beyond the city of Cleveland, and I have another job as an ecumenical advisor to Bishop Pilla, I move around a lot. So it's tremendous access. The same highways that in a sense, killed Tremont at one time, at least people thought it would kill it totally, are now in a sense, one of its assets. The change has to be built into an asset. And that's what Tremont is trying to do.

"END OF INTERVIEW."

Hilinski

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This was a very informative and enjoyable interview. I was really nervous at the beginning, but Hilinski made it very easy for me. He was well prepared, including notes. He had an answer for each of my questions. He did not hold back. I can honestly say that I could picture his Tremont through his descriptive words. He was so eager to share his experiences and tales with me. You could see how his face and eyes would light up whenever he thought of an old memory.

I got the feeling that Tremont was a very special place to him. It was his home away from home. It was like his own little Walt Disney World. He loved his family very much. He loved to spend time with them. He had a great childhood.

I wish that I could have asked him more about his grandfather. It's weird that no one knows about his death. It was just so easy for him to think that suicide could have been the reason. Also, I wondered if he spent any time at all with his father's parents. It also seems as if his father did not spend time with them in Tremont, even though that's where his parents met. I could not have asked for a better interview.