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Ray Matyshyn interview, 04 November 2003

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Matyshyn 11042003 A
Tremont Oral History Project
Interviewed by Dan Madigan
Interview with Ray Matyshyn
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Madigan: Could you state your name for me and spell your last name for me?

Matyshyn: Sure my name is Ray M-a-t-y-s-h-y-n

DM: Umm What are some of you r fonder, fondest childhood memories?

RM: A some of my fondest, I guess playing outdoors, I was into fishing and hunting as much as I could be given where I was brought up. We used to play outside a lot we use to play football and baseball during the seasons and games at night and kick the can. Things like that I think I remember.

DM: What brought you down to Tremont? Were you born there?

RM: I was born in the Tremont area. Right on West 7th Street.

DM: How long have you been out of Tremont?

RM: Oh gosh, out of Tremont? We left he Tremont area when I was about twelve or fourteen years old.

DM: Ok, Did you or your family speak any other languages?

RM: Ukrainian that was pretty much what was only spoken in the house. Except I understand it fluently and I speak it some-what but my mother and my sisters all pretty much spoke it and in addition to English a course.

DM: Do remember what the Ethnic makeup of Tremont was say thirty years ago?

RM: I'll have to go back a farther then that. There were a lot of Ukrainians, Slavics, a few Italians, Germans, a lot of Polish people, and not many blacks at all hardly ant mostly Eastern European.

DM: What time frame roughly would that be? Nineteen---

RM: 1940s early fifties

DM: How has Tremont evolved now? Would you know what the Ethnic makeup of it is now?

RM: Ah, it has changed considerably. We still go down there to the restaurants and stuff and we still go down there to look at the neighborhood. I see a lot of Hispanic, blacks I don't see to many of the people that I mentioned earlier, it's not apparent to me. Some of the restaurants are still utilized by people I even grew up with down there and they still go back there.

DM: That is nice that you still keep in contact with the people down there.

RM: We have no people down there Dan, per say but it's just the places and the memories and the stuff like that, that keep us coming down there. Every once and a while we'll take a run back down there and have a lunch or something and drive through the old neighborhoods.

DM: Did you come from a particularly large family?

RM: No I wouldn't call it large. Three sisters and myself.

DM: Were other relatives like aunts and uncles and grandparents a round you?

RM: No, both of my parents are foreign born, their parents stayed there. So I don't remember any grandparents. I'll tell you what Dan, the way it was back then, is close friends to my mom we used to consider them relatives and we would see them a lot.

DM: I have a lot of similar cases like you just stated, and they really help out the families. And they act like a blood family.

RM: Family was very important and close back then.

DM: Aaaaa What different kinds of churches were in the area?

RM: Oh God, there were all different kinds, but predominantly Catholic and Orthodox.

DM: Could you describe the type of neighbor hood you lived in?

RM: Where I was born was very small, close together houses that were very well kept up by the people that owned them. When I was five or six we moved into the Valleyview Project and it was a housing project and the type of people that I mentioned earlier lived there. The one thing I distinctly remember is that the people lived down there really took care of their properties. And those are things that I don't see today, Dan, that I wish I did.

DM: So people took a lot of pride in their appearance of their yards.

RM: Yes, All of the families were like that.

DM: Were these type of houses, were they built on lots tthat had uh, a good amount of area so you could play outside on?

RM: Not really. No. Uh, we had uh, well of course, the house I was born in was tiny, I'm going to guess that it was probably 40 feet by 70 or 80 deep, I'm guessing at that. The houses are still there. Uh, the projects had no lots to speak of. It was a housing project, but we did have a community center that we were allowed to go off to and play, and there were these sprinkling things instead of, uh, uh, swimming pools, we had these sprinkling units that we used to cool off in, in the summer. And Tremont Park had the pool, of course. Are you familiar with Tremont Park?

DM: Not too much.

RM: Well, there used to be a swimming pool there, not a deep one, but I guess you could call it a wading pool and we used to go there in the summer, too.

DM: Uh, what was the trend in populations when you were in Tremont? I mean, was it, overly crowded?

RM: I'm not tracking your question, Dan. Be a little more explicit. Are you saying was it overly populated?

DM: Mm-hmm.

RM: I don't know if it was overly populated. It didn't seem so to me. Uh, no, I couldn't say that.

DM: Uh, today, would you consider that uh, Tremont is now welcoming more younger people into the neighborhood?

RM: I think they're trying. I think with the building that they're doing and with the renovations that they're uh, undergoing, they're trying to attract younger uh people there. I don't know how successful they are. I guess it's working to a degree and some of the restaurants there, I keep referring to the restaurants there, most of them are trendy, what I call trendy, yuppie-type places. Those are not the restaurants that I'm drawing back to! Okay, I'm drawn back to the old, uh typical ones that got a couple of...Dempsy's comes to mind. Dempsy's Oasis. It was there when I was growing up down there. It's a bar restaurant and those are the kind of restaurants that I'm referring to. Not that we haven't gone to some of those other trendy types, but, that's not my environment; I'm not comfortable there. [pause]

DM: How would you, how would you say that the [pause]. Has there been a big difference in the change of population since you last resided there?

RM: Oh God, yes. It's entirely different. It's entirely different, Dan. It's uh, like I said, the younger crowds that reside there are upper-scale kinds of people. They aren't typical, young, married couples, I don't believe there. If they are, they're probably earning, they're both probably working and earning a good dollar. It's not the kind of place where, not the typical place where an average, married couple would go and start their housekeeping.

DM: Uh, what type of schools were in the area?

RM: Well, there were...one, two, three Catholic schools. And there was one, huge, public elementary school, Tremont. And in that area, that was about it that I can think of. Yeah, St. John's, St. Michael's, another one, a name of which I can't think that were Catholic schools and then there was Tremont and that was about it back then.

DM: What type of school did you attend?

RM: I went to Tremont Elementary.

DM: What were your classes like?

RM: Well that's when I was very young, so it was a typical kindergarten class where there wasn't a whole lot of, well there was training going on, but it seems like to me, from what I've read, it was a lot different than how it is today. I do remember that we used to take a break and get cup of milk and take a nap during school [chuckle] and everybody I talk to remembers the same kind of thing. Uh, and the classes were, typical classes; well structured, the one thing I remember, the teachers commanded a great deal of respect and they got it from us. I don't hear that that's going on today. That's one of the things that changes too, of course.

DM: Would you say that the teachers were overly strict?

RM: No, no, God no. We might have thought so at the time but looking back at it [chuckling], Dan, thank God they were. We got whacked a couple times. There was no question about it. I got whacked in school two or three times and, you know, whacked pretty fair but uh, tell you a fact: if it happened today, dear God the place would fall apart. But, I deserved it, I might add, when I did get it. So I don't know if I agree with corporal punishment. I never gave it a lot of thought but I do know that they kept us in line and it worked and I'm glad that it worked that way back then.

DM: Do you know if there is still a lot of Catholic schools in Tremont?

RM: Aww, St. John's is still there and St. Michael's...uh, I don't know if it's still there. I think it is; I think they're still a practicing school. And Tremont is still

there. The same schools are still there that were there when I was a kid, come to think of it.

DM: Do you remember the physical shape and layout of the school at all?

RM: A big, huge stone, brick building. Classrooms were typical size, by that I mean, 30 by 40 or 50 feet. Class size wasn't very large, I don't remember many more than 20 kids in class. Till I got to high school, junior high and high school, then they were a little bigger. But that's what I remember. Old structures, big structures.

DM: You moved out of the area, but did you still go to school around there?

RM: No, no. When we moved I went to a different school. I went to uh, we moved to the near West Side, as I call it. We moved over, if you know West 25th Street uh, Scranton Road area, where the hospital is, it's called Metro General Hospital? Right next to the hospital. As a matter of fact, they took our street with the expansion of the hospital. That's where we moved to, right after I moved out of Tremont.

DM: Uhm, where did most of the people work, what were the typical jobs of the families that were in Tremont?

RM: Factory jobs, and uh, my mom cleaned offices, my dad worked in a factory his whole life, the steel mills, and that was a large part of what the kinds of jobs that were available back then. Most of them were uh, factory jobs, manufacturing kinds of jobs and as I say, they were the typical service jobs, of course. My mom used to clean office buildings for years and she worked as a cook's helper in some restaurants downtown as well.

DM: Would you say that most of the families there were a real hardworking, people, strong work ethic?

RM: Yeah, I'd say that's a very fair statement.

DM: Uh, where do most of the people work now, you think?

RM: The ones that live there now?

DM: Yes.

RM: [chuckle] Probably half of them don't work. I'm not being facetious. I'm saying that my figures are wrong, but I'm sure a lot of them are on welfare. And the others don't choose to work so they don't, and I'm not sure how they get along.

DM: Did you follow in your father's footsteps? Did you work in a factory?

RM: No. I worked... well I had a number of jobs when I was a kid. And then I ended up, my first real, permanent job was with the telephone company. I used to install and repair phones. And then when I graduated, I stayed with the phone company for over 30 years and graduated over there to the marketing department and ended up over there. [pause] Tried a couple of factory jobs, didn't like them at all when I was younger.

DM: Do you know how other people fared? I mean, do you still keep in contact with some of the people, did they do similar jobs like what their parents did?

RM: Well that's a good question. As a matter of fact, we just had our 50th high school class reunion here a couple of months ago, and so I did get an opportunity to see a lot of the people from down in that area. And uh, I would say they followed pretty much the same kind of uh transition as I did. By that I mean, obviously, they all didn't go and work for the phone company but they all went to jobs that were probably a little better than the ones that their parents had. Some of them went to factory jobs, no question about it. I have two to three friends right now I know who retired from the steel mills. But most of them got jobs that were a little easier, paid a little more money and pretty much went along that way.

DM: How would you describe the economic status of most of the people when you lived in Tremont?

RM: We were poor but we didn't know it, Dan. And that's the truth. We were poor but everybody else was in the same structure as we were, the same financial strata we were, so we didn't know we were poor. We didn't have much of anything but we sure got along well.

DM: When you just described that, not knowing it, what made you say that, just because you guys were really close with each other?

RM: Well I'm looking back on it now, with all the experience I have in the years, since that time. I know darn well we didn't have as much money as some of the other people that were being brought up in different parts of the city. And that's why I am saying we were poor. But, we didn't know it though because everyone else was just as poor as we were. So, we didn't start to realize that we were poor until we started moving up in high school and seeing some people that had some money. Really.

DM: When you were in Tremont were there enough convenient places to shop?

RM: I didn't do the shopping because I was just a kid. But it seemed to me yeah, I remember a grocery store very well, there were two or three drugstores within walking distance. Yeah I would say that shopping was adequate.

DM: What, you kinda discussed over some of the activities you did in your spare time when you were a child down there. And that was the fishing and the hunting to the extent that you could because of the area.

RM: Umm huh, yep, well the Cuyahoga Valley, which is where the steel mills are back then part of that was a swamp area it wasn't developed so we actually used to go down there and hunt and fish and we used to get stuff, we used to catch fish, spear frogs and shoot rabbits and stuff but then a course it developed as the factories got bigger and bigger.

DM: Where were you when you got the news that Pearl Harbor just got attacked?

RM: That would make me about six years old. I don't remember much of any thing do be honest Dan. A, I do remember guys going off to war, some uncles, the ones I call loosely, and stuff but I don't remember the exact start of it, the Pearl harbor thing much at all.

DM: Do remember any of the neighbors' types of reactions after this?

RM: No it was after Pearl harbor and the war got well under way I do remember people feeling quite patriotic, and doing things to support the war effort.

DM: When you say support the war effort, do mean women were starting to do jobs that men were typically known for doing?

RM: I don't know, any that did that but I am sure that it did go on but I'm talking about we used to save grease drippings and take them in somewhere and get stuff, things were rationed, certain foods were rationed, and they passed out rationing tokens and nobody griped or complained about that. I guess that's what I mean when I said supporting the war effort.

DM: How did, or did the World War II affect you in any personal way?

RM: Yeah, A my Mom and dad split up when I was very young. And my mother remarried. I had a stepfather in the war and he was fighting over in the Philippines. And when he came back he didn't talk to much about, but I heard stories and he came with quite a bad case of malaria and I saw first hand some the things that took place there so I guess I can say. I lost a cousin to the Second World War, yeah but he wasn't really my cousin, but just like my cousin. Yeah I was affected in that manner and I'd say indirectly affected I must say.

DM: Do remember the political makeup of Tremont when you were residing there?

RM: Yeah I really didn't even know that there were two political parties that existed back then. Because it seemed to me that FDR was a very popular president and it just seemed to me that everybody was Democratic. But obviously that was not the case but that's how it seemed to me back then.

DM: would you remember the feeling of the Community when Carl Stokes was elected a mayor of Cleveland in 1967?

RM: I was long gone from Tremont then, But, I will say this Dan, and what I think you are driving at here is the racial aspect of it. I'll say this speaking from my own personal experience, I honestly don't think we were as prejudice as most of the people I know were back then. I really don't think the degree of difference wasn't great and that's the way I grew up and it didn't bother me that Stokes became mayor, it was when I started to understand politics a little more that they got some jerk in there whether he is black or white and did some stupid things. You know.

DM: Do know of any programs that he may of set up? I am not really familiar with what he really did.

RM: I am honestly not very much myself.

DM: The perspective that I got from his election either people loved him or hated him.

RM: Really.

DM: Yeah, either he did something for you or he didn't do anything for you. And I guess there was resentment from half the people and others were happy.

RM: I really didn't sense that, truthfully.

DM: Really

RM: Yeah

DM: Were any of your loose relatives still residing in Tremont when Stokes was elected?

RM: A couple were there.

DM: Were the majority of the people in the area Democratic in the neighborhood?

RM: Yeah, I would say so. At least that's how I remember it.

DM: Do you think the people left the political party because of the election of Stokes.

RM: I dunno if it happened firsthand. I may have. I didn't see Stokes tenure of mayor as a big deal.

DM: Was your family really religious, strict?

RM: Yes, my mother and my father before they split, but my mother was especially extremely religious and she tried to instill this into their children. Two varying degrees of success, by that we went to church every Sunday and during holidays. And my sister, younger sister went to a Ukrainian speaking school for a time I wish that I had continued and learned to speak it well. So yeah that was big part of our life.

DM: So your parents still influenced your life with the culture they had lived with. They made sure you were made aware of it.

RM: Let me see if I can help you out. The younger we were, it was my mother who was raising us by herself she had more control when we went to church and the things we were expected to be doing. The older we got, we became Americanized we didn't speak in Ukrainian, I never spoke it fluently, but it was being spoken less in the house. We started speaking more English. We started drifting a way from the Church a little bit, I remember most of my sisters did at least. I remember the control/influence my mom had kinda faded with the years, but, I will say there was always a strong bond with my mom and dad. And part of that I believe I was because of the ethnic bringing up I think. And also the religious bringing up.

DM: I don't want to sound weird, but they were very proud, they instilled a cultural beliefs on you that you still hold today?

RM: Yes for the most part. My wife and I still have the big Christmas thing celebration and Thanksgiving. Those are the things we picked up from my side of the family that was always a big thing around the holidays and we will do that and we'll pass it down to my son and those are things that we are kind hanging onto and that I think is very important.

DM: Do you have any memories of the construction of the inner belt?

RM: Yeah that was long after the time I left Tremont but we still lived in the Greater Cleveland area. Yeah the inner belt I-71, the Turnpike, I remember all those roads being started. I had some friends that worked on them.

DM: Didn't that inner belt go right through the middle the heart of it?

RM: Yep

DM: It must have affected a lot of people kind of drastically?

RM: A I don't know if geographically affected them in that sense. It is actually above the streets and elevated I don't think it was affected in that sense. I don't know if people, or I'm sure there were some but I don't think anyone was displaced from there homes because of that. I do remember it did allow for faster access to Downtown Cleveland.

DM: Are you married now?

RM: Yes I am. I have one son that is thirty years old. Mike lives in D.C. now. But we just have the one boy and I've have been married for oh gosh, we were married in sixty five.

DM: Did you meet her in the Tremont area?

RM: Ahh yeah if you want to extend Tremont toward Lincoln High School. We went to high school together. And that's on the edge of Tremont. So Lincoln High is on Scranton Road and that's where I met my wife.

DM: What types of activities were involved in the typical date?

RM: [Laugh] Back then? I will tell you what we were big on. It was hayrides. And picnics, weener roasts, movies we didn't go to many restaurants. It was kind of simple, hay rides are real big deal, especially at this time.

DM: Did you get married in the Tremont area?

RM: No, I take that back, we were married at our old church, right on West 11th Saint Vladimirs in sixty five. The reason it slipped my mind is because the church has since moved out to Parma. The building is still there but it was taken over by some Hispanics and I don't know what they do there but it may be a church for them. I don't know.

DM: Do you know why the Parish got up and moved sounds like a big...

RM: General transition...people moved out to better areas—to the Parma area and churches off of State Rd.; people gravitating out from the inner city. The people that moved in were not the same kinds of people that we grew up with.

DM: Do you remember when that was?

RM: It had to be late 60's or early 70's when they moved the church. I remember, and this is important, my mom still lived down there in the Tremont area. She lived alone and did not drive a car, and the church used to send a small van down there to take those people who still lived in the Tremont area to take them to the church out in Parma. When I couldn't take her, the van did. I thought that was a really neat deal. That's how they kept the parish tight and closely knit.

DM: That's great.

RM: Yes, it really was something.

DM: Were the people's jobs close, like maybe walking distance...

RM: Some of them were. A lot of people worked in the steel mills, and they could certainly walk down there. Other jobs were in downtown, and for those people, it was just a short bus ride. My mom worked downtown, and for her it was a short bus ride over the Lorain-Carnegie Bridge.

DM: Did many people in the neighborhood have cars?

RM: Practically nobody had a car. I had one "uncle" who bought a car, and I remember it because it had a rumble seat. He took us for a ride in it a couple of times. You probably don't know what a rumble seat was. My godfather had a car, a Buick. He had more money than most of the folks in that area, and those Buicks he owned always looked pretty sharp. There weren't many cars around; there were a couple.

DM: Did most of the people own houses or did they rent them?

RM: The vast majority of people rented the houses they lived in. I knew a few people that owned them, but most rented. The Projects went in around there and they were of course rented. Now of course they're all run down.

DM: Did you ever go down to the West Side Market? Maybe hang out down there?

RM: Oh yeah...not hang out per se, but my mother used to go down there all the time to shop. Even my dad went there. Even after they split up, he still lived down there, and I used to take him down there to get his groceries. I shopped there a lot too. That was a streetcar ride from where we were pretty much.

DM: Would your mom bring the whole family down there?

RM: No. Maybe once in a while, she would take one or the other of us. It wasn't a family outing kind of thing. It was just a shopping trip. I take my son there now. He loves it. I take him just for old times' sake. He was just in town last week, and I took him down there last Saturday.

DM: I know your son has a job in D.C., but if he had a good job here, would you recommend that he live in Tremont?

RM: No I wouldn't. I'm not real sure why I'm saying that, but I just don't think that it's the kind of place I would want to invest any money right now. In spite of all the refurbishing and new stuff, there are still a lot of dumps down there. It's still a little too rundown for my tastes. I wouldn't dream of it, and I wouldn't advise him to.

Side B

DM: What is it that causes you to feel the way you do about living in the Tremont area?

RM: I think it was not just be my environment that impacted it but my ethnic upbringing. They kind of go hand in hand together. You can take the kid out of the South side, but you can't take the Southside out of the kid. That's still in me; it impacted my value system, my morals in a positive way. I enjoyed growing up there. This class reunion of mine brings it up. This last one was special to me, since it was my 50th. I graduated in 1953. I really enjoy getting together with some of the people that I grew up with and share memories. It means a lot.