

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
EAST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

TOM BIRCHARD

By Rosamund Johnston

New York, NY

February 24, 2014

Oral History Interview with Tom Birchard, February 24, 2014

Narrator	Tom Birchard
Birthdate	7/12/1946
Birthplace	n/a
Age	67
Interviewer	Rosamund Johnston
Place of Interview	Tom Birchard's Home in NYC
Date of Interview	2/24/2014
Duration of Interview	1h 45mins
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Interviewer Notes:

In Tom Birchard 1, the interviewee introduced himself and then the interviewer realized her microphone wasn't attached.

Interviewer's Glossary:

Kielbasy = sausages

Pierogies = stuffed dumplings

David Margolis = a painter who became Tom's friend

Mykola Darmochwal = the son of Wolodymyr Darmochwal, the founder of Veselka

Olha Darmochwal = Tom's mother-in-law

L'viv = a town in Western Ukraine

Ballantine Brewery, NJ = the first place that Tom's father-in-law worked in the U.S.

Plast = A Ukrainian scouting organization

Svoboda = a Ukrainian-American newspaper

Borscht = Beetroot soup

Blintzes = pancakes

Penny Arcade = an actress

Jeff Weiss = a journalist for the Village Voice who reviewed Veselka

Dinosaur Hill = a shop next door to Veselka

McSorley's = a bar where Tom used to go

Orchidea (sp.?) = a restaurant which used to be in the neighborhood

Baczynsky's = a butcher's shop across from Veselka

Lanza's = a restaurant in the East Village

De Robertis = an Italian Cafe

Mort Zachter = wrote about Ninth Street Bakery
West Pawlet, VT = a place that Tom goes on holiday
Angela Miller = a producer of cookbooks



Tom Birchard at Veselka, October 7, 2015. Photograph by Liza Zapol

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Tom Birchard

“Back in those days, there was no American menu, if you were English speaking. Veselka, especially when it came to the food, it was really intimidating to come, virtually impossible to come in and order something and get your food delivered to you accurately. I came in [19]66; the place had been there for twelve years before I got there, but even when I arrived in [19]66 there was really no written menu. There was a thing up on the wall, like a plastic Pepsi thing with the little letters that you stuck in the rails. But again, it was really tough if you were English-speaking

The core of his business, obviously, was Ukrainians. They were coming in to get their newspapers. It was like a little social center, to get the news. There was a Ukrainian daily newspaper back in those days called *Svoboda* and you know like the other people coming for the *Daily News* and the *New York Times*, there was a big Ukrainian population coming to get the news. And really, when it came to Ukrainian news, that was the only source. It wasn't on TV, it wasn't on the radio. Typically those people would come, and some of them would get something to drink or have a coffee or a milkshake and hang around and talk. Slowly, over time, he started preparing food and selling it—in the beginning it was, I remember, cabbage soup, which was really sauerkraut soup, and borscht, and pierogies, and stuffed cabbage, and maybe blintzes.” (Birchard p. 9)

“When I first came there, there were five telephone booths across the back wall. Veselka was less than half the size that it is now. When you walked in, one of the first things you saw was five old, wooden telephone booths across the back wall, and those phone booths were busy all the time, with everybody from bookies calling in bets on horse races, then as time went on it was more like people calling their drug dealer to rendezvous somewhere. There's an actress in the neighborhood, her name's Penny Arcade, she knew my father-in-law well. She set her office up there, because there was a phone. Somehow she would let it be known, “Okay, I'll be at Veselka tonight,” and people that needed to call her, called her on the pay phone. And she would make her outgoing calls....

My father-in-law passed away in 1974. I struggled with Veselka. I almost went out of business because the neighborhood was changing....

So 1979, 1980, we started doing better, and at that point I took the phone booths out. By taking the phone booths out, I think I was able to add two more or three more tables. As time went on, I could see we were starting to build up a busy breakfast, brunch business, to the point where we didn't have enough seats at a time...At this point more and more people had phones in their homes, so we weren't getting as much income from the phones. So I took the phones out.

Right at that time, a kind of itinerant, interesting, hippie mural artist named Arnie approached me and said he was always hustling around the neighborhood, trying to paint signs and murals and things. He said, “Ah, I have an idea. Everybody misses the phones. Why don't I paint the phones on the wall?” I said okay. And that became kind of an attraction in Veselka. It was kind of a clever joke kind of thing. So for a good while, where the phones used to be, we had a pictorial representation of five telephone booths. [laughing] And it was funny, because people would come in to use the phone, and they'd look at it, and they'd go back there and try to figure— [laughs].”

(Birchard p. 11-12)

“Yeah, it’s interesting. It’s a mystery to me, and an interesting question, why these things happen, that the neighborhood got really depressed—largely because of drugs in the neighborhood. Second Avenue, a section of Second Avenue from 10th Street to Houston was a construction zone. It was early, early construction for the Second Avenue subway, which they worked on for a year and made a mess, and then ran out of money and just left everything. So there were rats running up and down the street. It was dusty. There was basically no sidewalk in front of Veselka. You stepped out of Veselka’s door, and they erected a pole there with a traffic light on it. You took two steps and you were in the street. There was no sidewalk. So it made it really hard to do business. At the low point, half the shops, half the stores from 10th Street to Houston, were empty, were vacant. Literally fifty percent were vacant.

So there were a lot of things that you could point to and say, “This is why the neighborhood got—” But even when you look at all those things, it doesn’t explain the depths that that neighborhood went into. A lot of the buildings from First Avenue, Avenue A east were being set on fire and burned. Landlords were burning their buildings to get the insurance, because they were going bankrupt and they couldn’t sell the buildings. Nobody would buy them. There were some Ukrainians in the neighborhood that had invested in real estate in the neighborhood, and I remember one gentleman in particular coming to my father-in-law in tears, begging him to buy his building, like an eighteen, twenty-unit tenement building, for \$25,000. Because that’s basically what he’d get for setting it on fire. And my father-in-law said, “No, I don’t want—I’m not a real-estate person.”

There did come a point around 1979, 1980, that the decline stopped. And slowly, slowly, it happens very imperceptibly, day-to-day, but the burning stopped eventually, and there was more and more neighborhood pressure to clean things up.”

(Birchard p. 19)

“I have mixed feelings about how sanitized it is. In the worst of times, I remember many times, employees coming to work, and they had gotten mugged on the way in. Or late at night, I had to take a lot of waitresses home, because it was just too dangerous to walk the streets. I had a car, so I could drive them. I drove them, and at that time, they all lived in the neighborhood. That’s not the case anymore. I certainly don’t miss that part of it, but I do miss the people coming on their lawn chairs. There was more socializing, and everybody knew each other. There was a lot of diversity. There was a little bit of tension that comes from different—there was tension and tolerance. It was this kind of juxtaposition between this tension between the Poles and the Ukrainians—the Poles, Ukrainians and Jews, the Puerto Ricans, they would bad-mouth each other, but they loved each other at the same time.”

(Birchard p. 25)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Tom Birchard

Tom Birchard was raised by, “a very kind of homogenous, middle-class family,” so much so that, “we never had garlic in our house.” In 1964 he went to college, where he met and started dating a Ukrainian woman from a nearby school, whose father owned Veselka. He dropped out of school, and they got married and had a son. His father-in-law encouraged him to return to school, and “in exchange for me working at Veselka on weekends, he helped me with my college education.” Veselka was a neighborhood hub to the working-class Eastern Europeans who lived in the East Village. Birchard’s first job was to assemble the newspapers they sold.

In addition to newspapers and cigarettes, his father-in-law sold, “anything that he thought or had learned that somebody in the neighborhood could use, particularly late at night, when the other stores were closed,” from little toys for kids to lighter fluid. The East Village at that time was a mix of different populations, with Jews and Puerto Ricans and Eastern Europeans. In addition to his stable of regular customers, many of whom were hippies because, “it was the Haight-Ashbury of the East,” Birchard met W.H. Auden once, and Allen Ginsberg would come by occasionally.

Birchard’s father-in-law was resettled in America from a displaced persons’ camp in Germany in 1950, and was part of a wave of Ukrainian immigrants to the East Village, “where they felt they would be at home,” as the community already had a Ukrainian church and credit union. Despite his education, he worked menial jobs, but through the Ukrainian patriotic organization Plast heard about a little store, “right in the middle of this growing Ukrainian community, so he bought it.” He sold Ukrainian candies and newspapers, and eventually, “slowly, over time, he started preparing food and selling it—in the beginning it was, I remember, cabbage soup, which was really sauerkraut soup, and borscht, and pierogies, and stuffed cabbage, and maybe blintzes. From early on, he had hamburgers, I think, but they were these frozen—I mean, they weren’t very good.” The neighborhood was dangerous so he, “had this big German Shepherd that he’d bring down there, like at eleven or twelve o’clock at night,” and he would sell items through the window, until he unlocked the door in the morning.

When Birchard’s father-in-law died in 1974, Birchard took over Veselka. At that time, the Ukrainian community was diminishing as many moved to the suburbs, and he knew he had to adapt to a changing neighborhood. After studying a successful coffee shop near Veselka, and shifting the offerings at the restaurant, “it slowly started to catch on.” They also began to make money off of lottery sales. Veselka had phone booths in the back, and people like Penny Arcade would come in and use it as her office, but as time passed they began to attract drug dealers, and eventually he took them out to make space for more tables. He hired an artist to paint the phone booths on the back wall, “and it was funny, because people would come in to use the phone, and they’d look at it, and they’d go back there and try” to use the phones. In 1980, the *Village Voice* gave the blintzes a positive review, and that’s when it started getting busy. The restaurant became so popular, Birchard convinced Dinosaur Hill, the toy store next door, to relocate to the farther part of the building so Veselka could expand.

Tom finally moved to the East Village in 1980, partially so he could check up on the

Birchard-vi

store whenever he wanted, but also because, “if you wanted that charm and tolerance, you came to the East Village.” Though he is not Ukrainian, the community considers him Ukrainian. After the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, the media flocked to the restaurant because, “when you say ‘trouble in Ukraine,’ people come to Veselka.” He is involved in the Board of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, since he sees preserving the architecture as preserving the good history of the neighborhood, and, “the architecture, in its own right, has a lot of meaning to me.” After many years in the neighborhood, the restaurant remains a part of it, still buying meat from the Ukrainian butcher shop across the street, but also bringing the food to a wider audience by publishing a cookbook.

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the Greenwich Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP Greenwich Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Johnston: Press record, and we are now recording. So I guess I should start this by saying I'm Rosie Johnston. I'm recording for the Greenwich Village Historic Preservation Society Oral History Project. It's the 24th of February, 2014.

Birchard: Right. Yes.

Johnston: And we are at 221 17th Street.

Birchard: East 17th Street, correct.

Johnston: East 17th Street. So, yeah, first of all, could you please introduce yourself.

Birchard: Yeah, I'm Tom Birchard, the occupant of this house and owner of Veselka Restaurant for the past many years, and also a trustee of the Greenwich Village Society for Historical Preservation.

Johnston: All right, I noticed I have not plugged myself in, so if we can pause for one second.

[00:00:45]

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF SECOND]

Johnston: All right, so we are recording again. Tom Birchard, can you tell me first of all, it's a very big question, but how was it ever that you came to be involved in Veselka?

Birchard: Oh, it's kind of an interesting story, I guess you would say non-traditional story. I went to an all-male college and joined a fraternity when I was starting my second year, my sophomore year. As fraternities are, often do, we had a fraternity party. Since there were no females on our campus, we actually bussed in some ladies from Seton Hall University, a Catholic School in South Orange, New Jersey. So I met a nice young lady at this party, and we started dating, and it turned out that her father owned Veselka. She was Ukrainian. Her parents and her brother and her had immigrated in 1950, so romance commenced, and I learned a lot about Ukrainian culture and food.

Johnston: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what you learned?

Birchard: Yeah. I grew up in a very kind of homogenous, middle-class family, so my parents didn't—I didn't really know much about different ethnic groups other than mine, you know, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. WASPs, as we call them here. So we never had garlic in our house. Our cuisine was very bland. I did have one Polish friend in high school, whose mom used to boil kielbasy, and I remember going to the house and smelling garlic, and it was kind of overwhelming but kind of interesting at the same time. I never got to try any, but when I met my wife and started visiting her and her mom, I got a quick course in Ukrainian food.

My mother-in-law was a really good cook, so I learned about kielbasy, and just all kinds of things—pierogies, dumplings—and I fell in love with it. I love food. I love different kinds of food. I love ethnic food. I really hadn't been exposed to it, until I went away to college. But once I was in college, I discovered Chinese food, and, you know, all kinds of things, but Eastern European food in general, and Ukrainian food specifically.

Johnston: So which sort of year was this? Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.

Birchard: [19]65, [19]66. I started college in 1964, and this was my second year of college that I met my wife, so as we were dating, she brought me to the East Village. I met her father, I experienced the East Village of the mid-to-late Sixties, which was an incredibly interesting place, especially compared to the kind of boring suburb where I grew up. So I fell in love with her, I fell in love with my father-in-law and his stories, even though his English wasn't very good, and I particularly fell in love with the neighborhood. It was colorful. There were a lot of characters, a lot of hustle-bustle. There was street life after dark that was really interesting.

As time went on, my wife and I got married, I think, approximately a year after we met. After my sophomore year, I actually dropped out of school, and we went away to Lake George, New York, and we lived together and worked in this resort town. We got married that summer, and then later, in the fall, winter, she had our first son, Jason. He was born in December. My father-in-law, much to his credit, god bless him, pressured me—pushed me—to go back to college, and he, in exchange for me working at Veselka on weekends, he helped me with my college education. So I owe a lot to him, I owe a lot to the East Village. So I'm getting off track. Get me back on track.

Johnston: One of the things that you've said that I thought was really interesting was in the mid-to-late Sixties, the East Village was very interesting. It had lots of characters and lots of nightlife.

Can you tell me a bit about what it was like at that time? [00:04:47]

Birchard: Yeah, it was a long time ago, and my memory's a little bit hazy. One of my big regrets is that I didn't take pictures or keep a diary. But it was so different from what I was used to, living in a suburb. In that time I would describe it as a lower-middle-class/working-class Eastern European ethnic neighborhood, so most of the men in the neighborhood worked in construction, or they were bus drivers, or—they were mainly working-class people. And the wives, many of the wives were actually office building cleaners, so the men would be away in the daytime, and a lot of the women actually would be away in the afternoon and evening.

But there was a street social life. On weekends in particular, on summer weekends, people would put lawn chairs out in front of their building and sit and read the newspaper, and we had newspapers delivered at Veselka. The *Daily News* came at seven [o'clock at night], or actually a little before, so people would actually line up, because part of their evening entertainment was reading the newspaper. And a popular form of recreation in the neighborhood was playing the numbers, it was a three-digit number; it was before lotteries were legal. That was a very common—just about everybody in the neighborhood played the numbers. The number was published in the newspaper. In the back, where they had the horseracing results, there was a number embedded in there somewhere that was the number for the day. So everybody would run down there, wait in line, and spend a nickel for a newspaper, and they'd immediately turn to the last page and see, you know, did they win. Of course most of the time they didn't, and they'd go back to their lawn chair and read. But there was a lot of discussion among the people in the neighborhood, you know, the number was a big topic of conversation, and lucky numbers and unlucky numbers. Actually, some of my employees played religiously. And you could play for, like, 5¢ or 10¢. There were numbers runners in the neighborhood, and they'd write on a piece of paper the number you played and give you a receipt. It was a major form of distraction, entertainment.

Johnston: Sorry, I was going to ask—

Birchard: I'll say then, later, the *New York Times* would come around ten thirty, quarter to eleven, so there was another kind of demographic that would come and get the *Times*. We had some doctors in [the] neighborhood, and more educated people. It was interesting to see the difference, the people that came to buy the *New York Times* later in the evening and the people

that were buying the *Daily News*. The neighborhood was densely populated, and like I said, especially when the weather was nice, people were out. They weren't watching TV, it was certainly pre-computer days, so a lot of life was in the street. And shopping, and coming to places like Veselka where you could get an egg cream, soda, buy a pack of cigarettes, get a candy bar, and a lot of people would just stand there and talk. Socialize about this and that. So to me, it was a lot of fun, it was great. It was much different than suburban life where everybody sort of stayed in their house and kept to themselves.

Johnston: Do you remember your first impressions of Veselka? I mean, do you remember how it struck you?

Birchard: I do. Before I saw it for the first time, my girlfriend, later my wife, kind of described it to me, so I formulated a picture. When I saw it, it was kind of more disheveled and run down than what I expected. There was an asphalt tile floor, those square tiles, and a lot of them had come up, or worn out, so the floor was in bad shape. And the front looked kind of not well-maintained. My father-in-law had this old wooden news stand that he had had a local carpenter build, and it had posters tacked all over for Ukrainian events in the neighborhood. Of course I didn't speak Ukrainian, so it seemed kind of chaotic and nonsensical and run-down. But after I was there a short time, I kind of turned a blind eye to that. Because most of the places in the neighborhood kind of looked that way, and I came to, I guess, appreciate the value that it had. But coming from the suburbs, where everything was a little more slick and clean, it looked worn. Like it had seen better days. [00:09:54]

Johnston: So can you tell me a little bit more about your experiences of working there? Like when you decided to get involved, and how you gradually, I guess, became a fixture there, a big part of it.

Birchard: Yeah, yeah, I started, after my wife and I—we were living in Lake George, New York. My father-in-law convinced me to come back, and live with his wife, well, they had a big house in West Orange, New Jersey. He lived in a little apartment right there, across the street from Veselka, and he would go home on weekends occasionally. But he convinced us to go live with my wife's mom, and I could work in Veselka on weekends, and during the week I was commuting to school—I was going to school Monday through Friday. On weekends I would

come and, back at that time, the *New York Times* was a really, really popular publication. We would sell, on a weekend, 500-600 copies. It was delivered to us in separate sections, so we had to assemble it. So that was my job. Me and an assistant, we spent all of Saturday night and part of Sunday morning putting together the *New York Times*. And when it came, when the final section was delivered, we had a big rush of customers. And it wasn't only Veselka. There were a lot of newsstands around. Greenwich Village and East Village were—this was going on. *New York Times* was really popular. It was kind of the weekend bible.

So that was my initial job, for a while, just standing outside and putting this paper together, and getting to know people, and talking to them a little bit. I don't remember, but at some point, I moved inside as well and started working at the cash register. We had a cash register right there in the front. We sold cigarettes, and the newspapers and sodas, and my father-in-law had these two display cabinets. Anything that he thought or had learned that somebody in the neighborhood could use, particularly late at night, when the other stores were closed, were in those cabinets. So we had envelopes and little rubber balls that kids played with, and jacks, and a mish-mash of late night sundry things—lighter fluid. When I moved inside, I got to know people more, and it was a very social neighborhood. People went out of their way to find out, 'Oh, who's this kid now working at Veselka?' You know, they would talk to me, "Where are you from," and they could kind of tell I wasn't from the neighborhood, because I had that suburban, Midwestern—even though I'm not really from the Midwest, everybody could tell I was different. They knew I was from out of town. I didn't have a New York accent, kind of fascinating to a lot of people. So I got to know a lot of really interesting characters, from rock musicians to old Ukrainian workmen.

At one point, I met W.H. Auden, the poet—[he] came in and bought something and he left. And somebody said to me, "That's W.H. Auden," which I had been studying, I had heard about in college. I was like, "Wow." Also saw Allen Ginsberg, Allen Ginsberg lived in the neighborhood, I met him a few times, just in passing. So it was just a lot of fun. Being at Veselka was a lot of fun. And, back in those days, in the late Sixties, early Seventies, it was kind of the hippie capital of the East Coast. It was the Haight-Ashbury of the East. So we had a lot of, for lack of a better description, hippies in the neighborhood. And there were a bunch of shops on 9th Street and other places where people were making leather goods. There was one shop in particular where they made hand-carved chess sets. So really interesting mix of hippies,

established artists, a lot of Eastern Europeans. There were some Puerto Ricans starting to come into the neighborhood. There were the remnants of the old, old Jewish population. There were a few of those around. But there was just this incredible mix of people. Different people. And over time the mix kind of shifted a little bit, but it was always a mix.

Johnston: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the sort of regular clientele. Were there old regulars and any sort of people remarkable, not necessarily because they're famous, but because they were important to you? And has this shifted over time? [00:14:55]

Birchard: Well, the important people to me—the people that became important to me—were the regular customers, because they were really the backbone of the business, and they were the ones I got to know the best. In a lot of cases it took a while for me to figure out who they were and what they did, but with time I did. We had a group of artists who would come in, and sit in the back, and just drink coffee, and hang out, and discuss art by the hour. I didn't know at first that they were artists, but over time I got to know who they were. I wasn't, in some ways, a particularly big fan of theirs, because they would sit and drink coffee for three or four hours.

But I got friendly with a few of them, and actually one fella, his name's David Margolis, he and I got to be friends. His brother was a well-known artist up in Provincetown, so he invited me up to Provincetown to visit. His brother had built a shack in the dunes in Provincetown, along with a lot of other artists, so, you know, I got to go there and visit. That's just one example of an interesting person that I met casually, or acquaintanceship turned into a friendship, a fascinating friendship. I mean, I learned a lot from him. He was a Russian, he and his brother escaped from Russia. I think in 1918, when the Russians came in and started killing all the Jewish people—the people in our neighborhood, a lot of them have just incredible stories. Again, not like anything that I experienced growing up in southern New Jersey. Many of them came to America literally running for their lives, and arriving with no money in their pocket and no place to live. They were sleeping on the floor of a friend. To hear how they fought to survive, and in many, many cases eventually thrived, in America, it's really interesting to me.

Johnston: Can you tell me a little bit more about your father-in-law, who himself sounds a really interesting man?

Birchard: Yeah. Over the years I learned his history, and I'm still really close to his son,

Mykola. Mykola's seventy or seventy-two now. My father-in-law didn't speak great English, but we communicated as best we could. I learned about his history not only from him, but from other people in the neighborhood that knew him, in particular, my brother-in-law. He still fills in details of his growing up and being in Ukraine. So my father-in-law came—

Well, take a step back: my father-in-law came from a little village in western Ukraine, near Lviv. Grew up there, I don't know what year he was born. But his profession, after going through, graduating from school, he was an agronomist. He was a trained agronomist, and became the head of an agricultural cooperative in a little village in Ukraine in an agricultural area.

At that time, Ukraine was actually Poland. Poland was governing Ukraine. My father-in-law was such a staunch Ukrainian advocate that he never acknowledged the fact that he lived and grew up in Poland. He'd always say Ukraine. I don't know the details, but I know he was a Ukrainian patriot, so he was involved with some kind of subversive organizations, trying to get Poland out. And I know that he got in trouble. Various times, he was arrested. I don't know the details of the story—I should really ask my brother-in-law—but he was arrested and sentenced to death, and he was actually put in front of a firing squad. At the last, they raised the rifles, and then put them down and said, "No, you're spared." But he told the story that his hair turned white overnight. He had very distinctive white hair.

So I think the point of that story is he had a really rough life, but came a time in the Second World War, when the Germans, I don't really know the story in detail, but the Germans came in and pushed Poland out, and the Germans kind of presented themselves to the Ukrainians as, 'We're going to liberate Ukraine and make Ukraine free.' So of course that's something that my father-in-law and a lot of Ukrainians were very attracted to. But I guess came a time when the Russians came through, you know, pushed the Germans back. So there was a lot of turmoil. And I have a feeling, I'm pretty sure at that point my father-in-law was working very subversively against the Russians—like in the underground. [00:20:14]

But came a time, again, when the Germans came back. This was towards the end of the war, and I'm not really sure what happened, but I think the Russians came through. They'd heard that the Russians were coming back, that the front was moving. My father-in-law knew that he was on a list to be executed if the Russians came back and governed their territory. So he and a lot of Ukrainians retreated with the Germans back to Germany. And shortly after they got there,

the war was ended, and they were put in a displaced persons' camp along with hundreds of thousands of other people in the American sector in Germany. They lived there for a few years, and eventually the Americans resettled all these people in America, Canada, Argentina, all around the world.

Johnston: And he came to New York.

Birchard: And he came to New York. They sailed to Baltimore, and then there was already a Ukrainian community here. There was a Ukrainian community established, I think, after the First World War. People talk about four waves of immigration. I think the first wave was around the turn of the century—or 1918, maybe—so when this big wave came, those people came to the East Village because a lot of them had contacts here. Or they had friends who had contacts. So my impression is the Ukrainian population in the East Village really grew then, but there was already a church, a credit union, some organizations. So obviously went where they felt they would be at home.

Johnston: And Veselka? This did not exist before your father-in-law.

Birchard: No. So he immigrated in 1950. Like many, many immigrants, and many Ukrainians, in order to survive, he and his wife had to do—without knowing English—menial things. So he actually worked at the Ballantine Brewery in Newark, New Jersey, sweeping floors and doing maintenance stuff. And of course, like a lot of people, this really killed him, because he was a trained, he was an educated, he was a person of respect in Ukraine. And my mother-in-law, also, being his wife, was a respected middle-class, I guess you would say wife of an entrepreneur or civil servant. So I think it was really, really hard for them.

I think it was actually harder for her. She worked in a hospital as an orderly. She used to talk about cleaning bedpans and doing not very pleasant work. And my father-in-law was a member of a Ukrainian patriotic organization called Plast. It's kind of like Boy Scouts but it goes through your entire adult life, if you want it to. And he was a big supporter of them.

Plast is broken up into groups, almost like in the Boy Scouts. I forget what they call that—den, whatever. So somehow through that, his connection with Plast, he heard about a little newspaper luncheonette candy store for sale. I think an Italian couple owned it and they were retiring. He had an entrepreneurial spirit, and that place was right in the middle of this growing

Ukrainian community, so he bought it. Started running it.

It became a place, early on, where you could buy Ukrainian newspapers, periodicals. He got hold of some candies that were popular in Ukraine. And early, early on, he found one or two Ukrainian ladies in the neighborhood to come in the evening and cook some simple dishes from back home. I'm convinced that it was as much for him to have something to eat as for him to sell. I think in the beginning these ladies would come and cook a little bit of borscht, or make pierogies or whatever. He had a lot of friends who came in there, and they socialized and talked politics, and I think he would share the food with them—not necessarily charging them, it was just kind of a social thing, 'Here, you want some pierogies? You want some borscht?' [00:25:02]

And I think fairly early on, he learned that he could sell that, as well, so it grew into a very small, specific little niche business. Back in those days, there was no American menu, if you were English speaking. Veselka, especially when it came to the food, it was really intimidating to come, virtually impossible to come in and order something and get your food delivered to you accurately. I came in [19]66; the place had been there for twelve years before I got there, but even when I arrived in [19]66 there was really no written menu. There was a thing up on the wall, like a plastic Pepsi thing with the little letters that you stuck in the rails. But again, it was really tough if you were English-speaking.

The core of his business, obviously, was Ukrainians. They were coming in to get their newspapers. It was like a little social center, to get the news. There was a Ukrainian daily newspaper back in those days called *Svoboda* and you know like the other people coming for the *Daily News* and the *New York Times*, there was a big Ukrainian population coming to get the news. And really, when it came to Ukrainian news, that was the only source. It wasn't on TV, it wasn't on the radio. Typically those people would come, and some of them would get something to drink or have a coffee or a milkshake and hang around and talk. Slowly, over time, he started preparing food and selling it—in the beginning it was, I remember, cabbage soup, which was really sauerkraut soup, and borscht, and pierogies, and stuffed cabbage, and maybe blintzes. From early on, he had hamburgers, I think, but they were these frozen—I mean, they weren't very good.

But he was smart, he caught on pretty early to what Americans wanted, and he tried to offer that. And he had a little bit of success. But the food really wasn't very good, and all the employees, nobody spoke English, really, other than when I got there, I did. He had a Ukrainian

man and woman who were at the cash register, who spoke broken—I mean, they could understand if you said, “Give me a pack of Marlboro,” or “Give me a newspaper.” They understood that, but anything beyond the very, very basic didn’t work. And the crux of his business, again, was cigarettes, newspapers, Cokes, candy, and a little bit the lunch counter. And coffee and pastry.

Johnston: Was it twenty-four hours back then?

Birchard: No, no. Even when I came, I think we typically closed like eleven or twelve [o’clock] on weeknights, and we stayed open on Saturday until one or two. Cause people were coming and buying the *New York Times*. We’d actually close the inside and keep the window—we had a window that we could keep open and sell. It was dangerous, you know, it was hard to stay open late at night. There came a time at the evening where it was smarter to lock the door. My father-in-law had this big German Shepherd that he’d bring down there, like at eleven or twelve o’clock at night. And he’d lock the door, and he had this big dog in there to intimidate people and protect him. If somebody came by and said, “Could I have a quart of milk,” or something that we couldn’t pass through the window, he would unlock the door and pass it through. But he kept the door locked from roughly eleven, midnight, till six, seven [o’clock] in the morning.

Johnston: Did you ever have any problems?

Birchard: Um, I’m trying to remember. After he passed away and I took over, we did have a few robberies, but they were kind of silly robberies, with young people in the neighborhood that were heroin addicts; they were not really very accomplished thieves. One guy in particular came and held—I wasn’t there—held me up twice, and it scared everybody. He showed something that looked like a gun. But after it happened a second time, from a description, from my employees, I knew who he was. So the third time he came, I was there, and I chased him down the street, screaming for the police, and the police came and arrested him, and he was a heroin addict. It was sad. Heroin was prolific in the neighborhood in the 1970’s and early 1980’s. A lot of young people in the neighborhood died of heroin abuse or overdose. And this kid who was robbing us, I don’t know what, he went to jail for four years, cause he was robbing other people as well. But even though it was dangerous, and I felt a little threatened, to me the place was so great that I think a lot of people would say we overlooked the danger. The danger was part of the romance, I

guess I would say, in a funny way. [00:30:30]

Johnston: So you've mentioned a couple of things about the appearance, about the interior when you first went, the asphalt floor, the Pepsi board or whatever.

Birchard: Right.

Johnston: It looks very different today. Can you tell me about the decisions you've made to change the interior, and who has done it, and why you've wanted it to look this way?

Birchard: Well, it was a slow process. When I first came there, there were five telephone booths across the back wall. Veselka was less than half the size that it is now. When you walked in, one of the first things you saw was five old, wooden telephone booths across the back wall, and those phone booths were busy all the time, with everybody from bookies calling in bets on horse races, then as time went on it was more like people calling their drug dealer to rendezvous somewhere. There's an actress in the neighborhood, her name's Penny Arcade, she knew my father-in-law well. She set her office up there, because there was a phone. Somehow she would let it be known, "Okay, I'll be at Veselka tonight," and people that needed to call her, called her on the pay phone. And she would make her outgoing calls. And that was a source of income for us, actually. We got a percentage of what those phones collected, and that was not an unsubstantial addition to our income. And it created traffic in the place. But those things got very beat-up looking after a while and I eventually made a decision. As time went on, it brought—well as I said, it became more drug dealers coming in there, and kind of unsavory people.

My father-in-law passed away in 1974. I struggled with Veselka. I almost went out of business because the neighborhood was changing. We're losing our Ukrainian clientele, and the neighborhood was so dangerous, and I was slow to switch it from a Ukrainian-centric business into a more, I guess, welcoming, or more—I don't know what the right word is, more accessible to the general public. So we lost our Ukrainian—they were dying off. The neighborhood got so busy they moved to the suburbs. We lost that customer base, but we weren't getting, for lack of a better description, New Yorkers, Americans. So about 1979, or 1980, I recognized pretty early on that if the business was going to succeed it was going to succeed with the food. And the food basically appealing to a coffee-shop crowd. And there was a very busy coffee shop on 10th Street and Second Avenue called L&M. I watched them, tried to model myself after them, and it took

me a while. But eventually I did order some good short-order cooks, and luckily at literally the eleventh hour, or the eleventh hour and fifty-nine minutes, I kind of figured out what I needed to do to start getting people to come.

So 1979, 1980, we started doing better, and at that point I took the phone booths out. By taking the phone booths out, I think I was able to add two more or three more tables. As time went on, I could see we were starting to build up a busy breakfast, brunch business, to the point where we didn't have enough seats at a time. I just made the decision, it makes more economic sense. At this point more and more people had phones in their homes, so we weren't getting as much income from the phones. So I took the phones out.

Right at that time, a kind of itinerant, interesting, hippie mural artist named Arnie approached me and said he was always hustling around the neighborhood, trying to paint signs and murals and things. He said, "Ah, I have an idea. Everybody misses the phones. Why don't I paint the phones on the wall?" I said okay. And that became kind of an attraction in Veselka. It was kind of a clever joke kind of thing. So for a good while, where the phones used to be, we had a pictorial representation of five telephone booths. [laughing] And it was funny, because people would come in to use the phone, and they'd look at it, and they'd go back there and try to figure— [laughs] [00:35:29]

Johnston: Alright, so you've mentioned now a couple of times that menu development and change in the food was really important. Can you tell me about how you changed it?

Birchard: Yeah. So I inherited this old business model. Even before my father-in-law died, we were starting to have some success with the food. The food was good. And the hippies knew they could come to Veselka and get really good food for cheap. And they kind of overlooked the communication problems, and the fact that you could come in and order a cheeseburger and you'd probably get cheese blintzes. Or you could get cheese pierogies. The staff, once they heard 'cheese,' they just assumed that it was something that maybe it wasn't. So we did start building up a decent business with food before my father-in-law passed away.

But again, after he passed away, the neighborhood got dangerous. The hippies left. The neighborhood got flooded with heroin. They started construction on the Second Avenue subway in 1976, roughly, so Second Avenue was a mess, and the low point of my time in the East Village was 1976 to 1979, I would say. So I had this model across the street, this other coffee

shop that was doing a decent business, especially with bacon and eggs and breakfast and lunch. Which we really did not do well. We were a pierogi and soup and blintz and stuffed cabbage kind of place, so in the daytime, we had nobody.

I struggled, tried to figure out what to do. And I was running out of money. I was getting desperate. I was already looking at other careers, like computer programming. I was pretty much resigned to the fact that Veselka was going to close. And somebody said to me—I wish I could remember who, somebody who had worked for me, or knew the place and loved it—said, “You know, Tom, if you’re going to fail, you have to fail doing what you want to do, and not what your father-in-law did.” So I decided to take a big risk. I hired two professional short-order cooks and we started serving breakfast specials. And we had some missteps along the way, but our business started rolling in the late Seventies. There were shopkeepers on the block who would come, who were looking for places to eat cheaply at breakfast time and lunch time, and they weren’t coming to Veselka, because we weren’t offering anything, really, that they wanted. But once I hired these short-order cooks and we tried to figure out what people in the neighborhood wanted, it slowly started to catch on. And luckily, it was also the time when the state started selling lottery tickets.

They chose Veselka to be one of the very early lottery ticket agents. When we first started doing some business with breakfast and lunch, and particularly with weekend brunch, which was really just the basic breakfast, I was still way behind in my financial obligations. But luckily, I think somebody was smiling at me. We started selling lottery tickets, and that was really, really popular, and it started generating enough extra income that I could start paying off the obligations and keep the tax people away from my door with their padlocks and stickers.

In 1980, we got our first good review in the *Village Voice* for our blintzes. A fella named Jeff Weiss wrote a nice review in the *Village Voice*. That’s kind of my benchmark, that’s when we really started—I mean, it wasn’t anywhere nearly as busy as it is now, but it started getting busy enough that I could see the day when we’d break even, or at least start making a profit.

[00:39:58]

Take a step back for a second. Right before my father-in-law passed away, or shortly before, Veselka was just a small room on Second Avenue. I think we had probably twenty or twenty-five seats. There was an ice cream freezer there, and big racks with candy, and these display cases with all this junk in it. At some point, I’ll say seventy-one, seventy-two, the store

next to Veselka on Ninth Street became available. So my father-in-law rented it and made a narrow little passageway to go from the main room back in there. He called it the blue room because it had a big, heavy, blue curtain. It was really hard to get into, and especially in the beginning. If you weren't invited, you didn't know it was there. So my father-in-law would invite his Ukrainian friends to go back there. It was like a private dining room. When he passed away, I opened it up more, especially on weekends. We were starting to develop an overflow crowd, so I opened that up. It was funky, you had to walk past—it was a tiny little passageway, and in that passageway, the bathroom was on the right, so if you were walking through there and somebody came out of the bathroom, they hit you right in the side of the head with the door. But still, that's kind of the way the East Village was. People didn't mind those funky setups.

You asked me about the floor. For a long time, it maintained its tattered appearance. Mainly because I didn't have the money to fix it up. And I didn't really know how to go about doing a proper renovation. We put Band-Aids on it. We'd glue new tiles down and do things, but it never really looked all that great. But that in itself had a certain charm, I think—up to a point. But it got to a point where it was more filthy than charming. [laughs] Not so much filthy, but you couldn't clean it. You couldn't make the place look clean.

So, going to jump ahead now, but in 1995, 1996, there was a toy store next to me called Dinosaur Hill. There was Veselka, Dinosaur Hill, a Ukrainian credit union, and a little scouting store. By this time I needed more space—luckily, the food part of the business just started growing. Once I got the hang of it, and we started getting reviews, and nice mentions here and there. I've had a really good relationship with my landlord over time. The building's owned by that organization Plast that I mentioned to you. My father-in-law was instrumental in them eventually buying the building, so I have a good relationship with them. So that was our biggest expansion. We convinced Dinosaur Hill to move down 9th Street into the spaces that were empty, and we took over the space that Dinosaur Hill, the toy store, occupied, and we almost doubled in size. At that point, we basically gutted the whole thing. Built a new kitchen, a new floor, and put in those big windows. Before that, the windows were low, and it was dark in there, and dingy. But we kept the old tin ceiling. There's paneling in there that goes back to 1954. We have an old clock, a Coca-Cola clock, that dates from the beginning. There's actually a funny little horseshoe on the wall that my father-in-law put there for good luck, and we were very careful through the whole renovation not to turn it upside down, because there's a suspicion that if you dump out the

luck, you know— [laughter] So I'm pleased with the fact that even though it is newer, slicker, it's still got a lot of the old. We kept as much of the old stuff as we could.

Johnston: You mentioned, in passing, Dinosaur Hill, and that got me thinking about your relationships with local businesses. It sounds like you do, to this day, have business relationships with people in the surrounding area. Can you just tell me a little bit about, like, who you cooperate with, and how that cooperation is, and things like that.

Birchard: Well, yeah, I would say Dinosaur Hill would be probably the number one case in point, because they'd been our neighbor, and she's been in business almost—she's been there almost as long as I can remember. When I first came here there was another lady named Judy, and I think she sold it at some point to Pam, who's there now. But Pam's been there for a long, long time. [00:45:10.00]

I think honestly Pam and I have always had a pretty good relationship, but especially in the beginning, I think she looked at me with suspicion. When I say 'me,' I mean Veselka in general and me in particular. She saw our business was growing, and she knew that I had kind of a special relationship with the landlord, because my father was instrumental in them buying the building. And even though I'm not Ukrainian, they welcomed me into the Ukrainian community. They're very suspicious of outsiders, but once I established my relationship with them, I think they felt comfortable with me, I think more so than with Pam. So I think she lived in fear for a long, long time that eventually she would lose her lease and Veselka would totally take over.

When we did this move, it took a lot of diplomacy on my part to assure her. She had to close for three, four months. So we helped her out with lost income, and we worked really hard to build her a really nice space and keep her space as much like her old space as we could. And I think coming out of that she really, since that happened in [19]96, she's been a lot more comfortable. We're better friends now than we were. We were always friends, but she was always looking at me out of the corner of her eye. [laughs] I'm glad to say it's worked out really well for both of us, and I wouldn't be surprised if at some point—I mean, she's getting up close to retirement age. I would predict that, maybe not in my time, but my son is actually slowly taking over Veselka. If things continue as they are, I would expect that we would take over, because we're bursting at the seams again now. But I mean, that's not going to happen as long as she wants to stay there and stay in business.

Johnston: Okay, which does raise another important point, which is what are your hopes for Veselka? I mean, have you—

Birchard: I hope it continues on as it is. I'm surprised it's still there after sixty years, but I think one thing I have learned, over the years, is that there's a big portion of the population that feels an emotional attachment to this kind of food. Anybody that can trace their roots directly or vaguely to Eastern Europe, they remember this, you know, their grandparents cooking this food, or maybe a friend's grandparent. The food has a lot of emotional meaning to a lot of people, not to mention the fact that even if you had no emotional attachment, it's good, interesting food. But I would say most people that do come to Veselka are familiar with what we're serving, what we're doing and what we're about. For a long time I thought that would eventually end, or that would dwindle, but it doesn't, it gets stronger, actually, with time, maybe because fewer and fewer people are serving this kind of thing.

There were, at one time, a lot of places like Veselka in the neighborhood. And now there are still a few, but it's really tough to make a go of it with the rents in the East Village, serving pierogies. I try never to fail to acknowledge my landlord for being reasonable with the rent and other demands he puts on me, allowing me to stay there, I think we have a really good partnership. I think it's important to them, being a Ukrainian patriotic organization, that there's a Ukrainian place there for the community, as long as there is a community. And the community's still pretty strong. There's a church, there's banks. In the early Nineties, mid Nineties, there was another wave, a fourth wave, of Ukrainian immigration, and that's really helped, if not rejuvenate our population, at least stabilize it somewhat. I mean, there are danger signs—St. George Ukrainian Church on 6th Street, after struggling for a number of years, is going to close now, so there are some danger signs. But I don't know, we'll see. [00:50:16]

You asked me what my hope is. My hope is we can keep going, and so far, looks like we certainly will. We're starting to do delivery now more. We've gotten into catering. So we have aspects of the business that are growing. Our basic business continues to grow.

Johnston: You were just talking there about the changing shape of the Ukrainian community, which I find particularly fascinating. Can you just tell me a little bit about what you have witnessed over the years, and maybe what you think some of the reasons for the changes are?

Birchard: Well, when I first came there was a really vibrant—there were a lot of Ukrainians.

There was a large Ukrainian community, and they were mostly the people that had immigrated, there were displaced persons who had come to the East Village in the Fifties. With a lot of energy, they had set up cultural institutions, like dance schools, music schools, choruses, financial institutions, restaurants. And again, that was Veselka's niche market for twenty years. But when the neighborhood started getting really dangerous and crime-ridden and heroin-infested, a lot of those people got scared and went to the suburbs. My father-in-law, in 1974, when he passed away, he was getting up in years. So the original generation was passing away. The kids had grown up and gone to college and moved, mostly. Some of them stayed in the neighborhood, but not a lot, so the resident Ukrainian population really dwindled in the Seventies, Eighties. But even so, the people who lived in the outlying areas, like Queens or up in Westchester County, they would always come back to the neighborhood for their Boy Scouts, for the dancing, to go to the butcher shops, you know, there were a lot of Ukrainian butcher shops in the neighborhood. Now there's only a few left. So even though it wasn't a resident Ukrainian community, it was a commuter community. But it hurt Veselka, because Monday through Friday, they weren't around. And as I said before, it was a business built around Ukrainian and Polish-speaking people, and they had pretty much either passed away or left. So that's when I just had to scramble and make it more inclusive.

Now, there has been another wave. There are probably more Ukrainians now than there were back then. There's not anything like there were in the Sixties, and early Seventies when I first came, but it seems to be pretty stable. And when the Iron Curtain came down in [19]92, you can now travel back and forth to Ukraine. A lot of the people in our neighborhood—it was my father-in-law's dream to go back to a liberated Ukraine. Unfortunately he never got to see that, but now there are people going back and forth. And people immigrating. It's not so much economic immigration anymore. I mean, it's partially economic, but it's kind of cultural. It just seems that there are a lot of people going back and forth, and more like middle-class or upper-class, professors, doctors, who want to come to the States and take advantage of what we have to offer, go to school, take a course. Those people are coming to Veselka, along with the kids of the old immigrants. Now the vast majority of our customers are American.

Johnston: Just as a very quick question, I'd be very interested to know, over the past few days it's been a very dramatic time in Ukraine—has this resonated in Veselka? [00:54:41]

Birchard: It has, it's really interesting. It's been kind of gratifying to me, because—excuse the expression, when the shit hit the fan last Thursday, we got inundated with news media. It was a little bit surprising to me that people in the news media, who had pretty much ignored the—you know, it was kind of a second-page issue for the most part, what was going on there in Kiev. But when killing, when the shooting started, all of a sudden the news media woke up, and they wanted to come to the East Village and do a story. Talk to people and get reactions. So they all came to Veselka. Which was surprising to me, because I didn't think the news media looked at Veselka as the hub of Ukrainian community. But they do. So, Thursday and Friday, it was just one news truck after the other, and we were on a lot of news channels and they were asking me to get in touch with prominent Ukrainians and people who were prominent in supporting the movement in Ukraine. So I was spending a lot of time on the phone, on Twitter, on Facebook, on email, trying to get everybody together, and luckily they responded. And especially on Thursday, it was kind of a marathon interview, TV interview day. Thursday and Friday, which is good for me, because I was getting publicity. I hate to get publicity because people are getting shot, but it was gratifying for me to know that in the general media, when you say 'trouble in Ukraine,' people come to Veselka.

That wasn't always the case. I actually tried to get them to go to the Ukrainian museum, and the Ukrainian church, but they wanted like immediate, man-on-the-street reaction. They interviewed a lot of my employees—I actually had two young men in Ukraine this past week. Two of my really favorite employees, and they were due to come back and go back to work and they couldn't because the airports were closed. Actually, one came back yesterday, and I haven't had a chance to talk to him. But he was in the Square [Euromaidan protests, Independence Square, Kiev]. I don't know if he was there when the shooting took place, but he was there before and after. So it's very real to us. Our employees are really involved. We've been helping with fundraisers. Yesterday, Congresswoman Carol Maloney came and did a news conference right in front of Veselka. They asked me to introduce her to the news media, which I did, which was nice. So there's been a lot going on.

Johnston: So several things. You mentioned that roundabout the late Seventies, it was kind of a hard time. You were having some difficulties, and the neighborhood, you felt, was too. What happened next? You've said things got better for Veselka, but what happened to the neighborhood?

Birchard: Yeah, it's interesting. It's a mystery to me, and an interesting question, why these things happen, that the neighborhood got really depressed—largely because of drugs in the neighborhood. Second Avenue, a section of Second Avenue from 10th Street to Houston was a construction zone. It was early, early construction for the Second Avenue subway, which they worked on for a year and made a mess, and then ran out of money and just left everything. So there were rats running up and down the street. It was dusty. There was basically no sidewalk in front of Veselka. You stepped out of Veselka's door, and they erected a pole there with a traffic light on it. You took two steps and you were in the street. There was no sidewalk. So it made it really hard to do business. At the low point, half the shops, half the stores from 10th Street to Houston, were empty, were vacant. Literally fifty percent were vacant.

So there were a lot of things that you could point to and say, "This is why the neighborhood got—" But even when you look at all those things, it doesn't explain the depths that that neighborhood went into. A lot of the buildings from First Avenue, Avenue A east were being set on fire and burned. Landlords were burning their buildings to get the insurance, because they were going bankrupt and they couldn't sell the buildings. Nobody would buy them. There were some Ukrainians in the neighborhood that had invested in real estate in the neighborhood, and I remember one gentleman in particular coming to my father-in-law in tears, begging him to buy his building, like an eighteen, twenty-unit tenement building, for \$25,000. Because that's basically what he'd get for setting it on fire. And my father-in-law said, "No, I don't want—I'm not a real-estate person." [00:59:54] But why that happens, it's kind of like the South Bronx and other neighborhoods, they were just allowed or purposefully driven into worthlessness.

There did come a point around 1979, 1980, that the decline stopped. And slowly, slowly, it happens very imperceptibly, day-to-day, but the burning stopped eventually, and there was more and more neighborhood pressure to clean things up. Eventually, obviously things did get better. Now the Lower East Side's one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Manhattan. But I remember at the low point, walking on some of the blocks, east of Avenue A, and literally half the block was empty lots, garbage, or abandoned buildings. The city, to its credit, did start a kind of a squatter program, where people who had stayed in their buildings could keep their apartments if they repaired the buildings. And there are a lot of people in the neighborhood that own apartments now because they weathered that horrible storm that happened in the late

Seventies and Eighties.

Johnston: Now you yourself—sorry.

Birchard: No, that's okay.

Johnston: You yourself live in the East Village, so can you tell me why you live here and why you would want to live here [laughs], and when you made that decision to stay here?

Birchard: Well, I worked in Veselka, so it made perfect sense. I actually did live on the Upper West Side for a while, from 1975 to 1980, and that was problematic. It was a tough commute, and my employees knew that when I went home, I wasn't coming back, so it made it hard to supervise, keep an eye on things. I like to think the best of people, but they are on their best behavior when they never know when the boss is going to show up. They nicknamed me the White—one of my employees called me the White Wizard. Because he never knows when I'm going to come sweeping in there. And I do live close, so it's not unknown for me to come in there in the middle of the night, or the middle of the day on a Sunday. So I think that helps a lot for managing a business, especially a twenty-four hour business.

My first chance I got, I found a place in the East Village, I found a spot on Second Avenue and 7th Street, starting in about 1980, because I wanted to be close to Veselka. I wanted to go in and out, and I didn't want a long commute, obviously, and there's a certain charm to eating for free [laughs]. But more than anything, I just loved the East Village. Working there, I got to know all the good places to shop. I know so many people down there, and I've always loved the neighborhood. From those early days, the East Village was a place where the rejects, or the non-conforming members of society, let's say, gathered. So, especially in the earliest years, we had a lot of mixed-race couples in the neighborhood. We had gay couples when to be a gay couple was not really accepted, or not accepted in America at large, but I think of all the places in America, where you could go and be comfortable, it was Greenwich Village, obviously, which fairly early on got very expensive. But if you wanted that charm and tolerance, you came to the East Village.

When I grew up, I had a very protected childhood. So I started meeting gay people, and there were several lesbian ladies, older lesbian ladies on the block, who immediately befriended me. Because they somehow had the impression that my father-in-law abused the female staff,

and they didn't like him for that. So when I came, I remember one of them, Pearl, saying to me, "Oh, we're so glad you're here, now your father-in-law can go home and go to sleep. And we're hoping you'll be nice to all the female—" I didn't really know exactly what they were talking about, but they befriended me early on and made me feel welcome there. I just found all these different people just incredibly interesting. I guess in high school I didn't run with the popular kids. I was a little bit on the fringe. I was a little bit shy. I was a little bit out of the mainstream. When I came to the East Village, I was like, oh, this is home. This is where all the weirdos gather. [01:05:19]

Johnston: So you've said a couple of times that your upbringing was very, very different from the sorts of experiences you've had here. How has your adult life in the East Village, essentially, shaped you? Like, you found a home, but we've talked about the way that you've kind of shaped Veselka, etcetera. What do you think that involvement in Veselka has done—

Birchard: To me? For me?

Johnston: —to you, yeah. [laughs]

Birchard: Well, I learned to speak Ukrainian and Polish. And that community welcomed me, which I'm very, very appreciative. A lot of people think I'm Ukrainian, because now I speak Ukrainian. A prime example of that was yesterday, they asked me to introduce—our congresswoman came down to express her concern about what's going on in Ukraine. And they asked me to introduce her. So I made it very clear I'm not Ukrainian. They said, "Oh, no, you're part of the Ukrainian community, we know who you are. We want you to introduce her." So it's made me a fan, I guess, for lack of a better, of the Ukrainian community. A member. I found a home there. And I learned a lot about the food, and the culture, and I made a lot, I have a lot of Ukrainian friends. How else has it changed, or shaped me—you know, when I finished college I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I discovered, after some time, that I really did have a passion for food, and running a restaurant, and nourishing people, and talking to them, and creating a homey comfortable place with good food. Some people know at a very young age what their purpose in life is. I didn't. I struggled with it for a long time, and especially when Veselka was failing, I didn't know what I wanted to do. But once I decided to be more proactive and change the restaurant, I did discover, yeah, this is for me, I love this.

Johnston: So, you're involved on the Board of Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. Why would you want to do that? And what do you want to preserve about Greenwich Village?

Birchard: Yeah, well, my particular area of interest is the East Village. Even though it's called Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, they cover the East Village. So all these things that I've tried to describe about the East Village that I initially knew and fell in love with, I'd like to preserve as much of the good part of that as I can. And I think one little way to do that is to preserve the architecture. I know that doesn't preserve the culture and the atmosphere, but I think it is a step in the right—the architecture, in its own right, has a lot of meaning to me. Most of the East Village, especially around Veselka, the tenement buildings that were built when there was that first huge rush of immigration, at the turn of the century, they had to build these buildings quickly to house these immigrants—you know, my indirect immigrant experience. I think that's a very important part of history. And I think all those buildings should be preserved.

Also because of the nature of the apartments, they're small, because of the housing stock in the East Village. I think that kind of encourages a particular kind of lifestyle. It has gotten expensive, but it still tends to be less expensive than the rest of Manhattan. So if you're a struggling—to an extent this is not true anymore, but certainly in the early days—if you're a struggling artist, if you were just out of college, if you wanted your first apartment, people came to the East Village. That's where you found your starter home. That's not as true anymore, but there is still some truth to it. A lot of people there are either college students, grad students, or people right out of college. In order to pay the rent now, they have to double and triple up, but that in a way gives the neighborhood a certain feel. **[01:10:00]**

Johnston: Yeah. Are there several hidden gems or favorite places in the East Village that you have? Apart from Veselka, of course.

Birchard: As far as eating goes?

Johnston: I just mean in terms of being. [laughs]

Birchard: Before I even knew my wife, I used to come with my buddies, when I was a freshman, to McSorley's [Old Ale House]. Even though that's become very touristy, you can still go there on a cold weekday afternoon and relax with some guys. I don't get to do that very often,

but it is one of my favorite places, and it's basically unchanged from when I was in—when I was in college, it was men only. They didn't allow women. So it was kind of ironic, my buddies and I would come into the city to meet girls, and then we'd go to McSorley's, [laughs] because we were way too shy and scared to really meet girls, so we'd go to McSorley's and hang out and drink beer. There was a place across the street from Veselka called Orchidea which closed when rents started going up. I used to like to go there, but that's ancient history now. [laughs]

I mean, there's places. There's a grocery store across the street from me that's owned by an Indian gentleman that's fastidiously maintained, and they have a lot of products from England. So for shopping I like to go there sometimes. There's some interesting, quirky stuff in there that you don't find anywhere else. I like to go to the Ukrainian butcher shop across the street. We get a lot of our meat products for Veselka from them. Some of the Japanese places on 9th Street I know the owners of. There's two competing Japanese guys that own all those places. And it's one of the things that I love about New York: authentic ethnic food is available and usually pretty cheap. But unfortunately I don't go out much, so—

Johnston: I just mean, in terms of being. [laughs]

Birchard: I like Hearth on First Avenue. It's really good Tuscan food, and I've gotten to know the chef. He's a really good cook. That's a special occasion place.

Johnston: Okay. I'll keep it in mind. [laughs] I really think that I have asked most of the questions I had, but one thing I did want to ask you was what else do you think is important for the record about your relationship here, or just anything?

Birchard: Let me think about that for a second.

Johnston: Sure.

Birchard: I really can't think of anything else.

Johnston: Well, I'm going to press stop in that case, have a sip of coffee, but this is not emphatically over.

Birchard: Oh, okay.

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF THIRD]

Birchard: One thing I remember that was strange, and outside my experience: there was a clubhouse down on 9th Street. I don't know, maybe you want to record this.

Johnston: It's recording. If you just think it's awful at the end, we can take it away, but—

Birchard: No, I don't think it will be awful.

Johnston: I'm sure it won't be.

Birchard: Anyway, it was interesting to me—it might not be interesting to anybody else—but there was a clubhouse down the street on 9th Street where, when I first came, there were just a bunch of guys that hung out there. And they were kind of like the bad kids in school that were always getting in trouble. And they would come and go, and there'd be sometimes a lot of guys and sometimes not many, and sometimes the place would be closed, but my father-in-law told me pretty early on that that was the local Mafia hangout. These were affectionately called wise guys back in those days. It was kind of like a loose group, reminded me of the misbehaved kids in school. But I remember one time they liked to play practical jokes, and they were just mischievous guys in the neighborhood. So one time they came and they kidnapped my father-in-law's dog, just to play a joke on him. And I remember him being really upset. They eventually returned him, but I figured out early on that there was a lead guy, his name was Charlie. People in the neighborhood told me that if you had a problem, like with your landlord, or with a shopkeeper, or a dispute with somebody else, you went and talked to Charlie, and Charlie would fix it. Would take care of it. And there was some truth to that.

Now, [there] came a time when those guys disappeared. But they would go around the neighborhood selling pornography. They didn't sell drugs, but anything that was kind of contraband, they really filled—like if you wanted a Cuban cigar, they could get you a Cuban cigar. That was another aspect of the color of the neighborhood. There was a restaurant on First Avenue called Lanza's, which is actually still there, but the word in the neighborhood was that the owner of Lanza's was a big shot in the Mafia. And nobody ever went to Lanza's. It was always empty—except occasionally there would be a lot of these wise guys there, which was his gang. He'd invite them over there and feed them. But the general public never went there. And there was a little enclave on 11th Street, where Veniero's is, De Roberti's. I remember at one point the FBI bugged De Roberti's, and they actually caught some of the local Mafioso guys

talking in there about something, conspiring to kill somebody. But that's all gone now. It's a part of New York that doesn't exist anymore. I think that the government did finally really crack down on them. But it was very open. Everybody knew that Charlie was like our neighborhood Mafia gang leader.

Johnston: So would you say that this neighborhood is now sanitized, or would you not go quite that far?

Birchard: I have mixed feelings about how sanitized it is. In the worst of times, I remember many times, employees coming to work, and they had gotten mugged on the way in. Or late at night, I had to take a lot of waitresses home, because it was just too dangerous to walk the streets. I had a car, so I could drive them. I drove them, and at that time, they all lived in the neighborhood. That's not the case anymore. I certainly don't miss that part of it, but I do miss the people coming on their lawn chairs. There was more socializing, and everybody knew each other. There was a lot of diversity. There was a little bit of tension that comes from different—there was tension and tolerance. It was this kind of juxtaposition between this tension between the Poles and the Ukrainians—the Poles, Ukrainians and Jews, the Puerto Ricans, they would bad-mouth each other, but they loved each other at the same time. [00:05:04]

It's really interesting. When we'd have a blackout, everybody cooperated. But then you'd hear insults, either under the breath or spoken out loud. You know, "Those goddamn Puerto Ricans." But I miss—the neighborhood's not as colorful as it was. There's a lot of young people now, and it bothers me sometimes that they don't know the history of where they live. And sometimes I hear comments about the older people in the neighborhood. I can't think of anything right now that specifically bothers me. But there's really a lack of appreciation for the place where these young people live.

Johnston: What do you think young people should appreciate about this part of town?

Birchard: Well, it's a very culturally rich neighborhood, with a lot of history, and a lot of history of people coming here and working really hard and struggling, and getting their feet on the ground, and making a life for themselves with hard work.

Johnston: So you said that there used to be this kind of tension, and this kind of electricity, maybe, about this part of town. What sort of feeling do you get from this part of town now? If

not tension, I mean, what?

Birchard: See, I have my memories, so that colors my experience. I guess that's what I'm saying, a lot of the younger people don't have that early experience, so to them it's a neighborhood of bars and restaurants and fun, which is fine. But there's so much more to it than that. But that's life, you know. One thing about New York that always stays the same is it's always changing at a very fast rate. I have to remind myself that that's why I love it, because it is changing. But we're losing some of the things that we love.

Johnston: You mentioned that the real low point was the building of the Second Avenue subway and the lack of progress on that building, etcetera. To what extent do you feel like the fate of this part of town has been dictated by municipal authorities and to what extent is it the inhabitants of this part of town who've shaped it? Can you talk a little bit about—

Birchard: Yeah, I often wonder about what is the shaping force. As much as I ask myself that question, I don't know. I don't know why the neighborhood got flooded with really nasty, hard drugs. The heroin morphed into crack, and it got really nasty. And there was open drug dealing on the streets. Needles in the gutter everywhere, and little crack vials. Tompkins Square Park got so bad that nobody with children could go in there. Why does that happen? What happens to law enforcement? I don't know. There's kind of bigger forces than—or maybe there aren't. Maybe it just happens for whatever reason. But happily, of course things turn around and the few people that had the foresight to buy property and open businesses, they become millionaires, billionaires. Because they buy property for nothing and then the value goes through the roof. And I don't know why that happens. Certainly, obviously some people make a lot of money. People lose money and make money. I don't know, hopefully some scholar somewhere will study that and come up with the answer. I don't know if there is an answer; I just scratch my head.

You know, now the neighborhood is so, so affluent. That's why I think GVSHP [Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation] is important, because there's development pressure all the time. And if it was allowed to proceed uncontrolled, we'd lose the remnants of the neighborhood that I remember, and the home of all these memories that I'm describing.

Johnston: Are there any other particular memories that you'd want to share, like the one about

[crosstalk] [00:10:00]

Birchard: Yeah, well I was thinking about this clubhouse with the Mafia guys. Next to that there were two brothers that had a little—it wasn't a bakery, it was a bread store. They would go to really good bakeries, mainly Jewish bakeries, in Brooklyn, and buy their, I guess you would call it leftover bread. And they'd bring it to their shop. Their place was incredibly popular. Their names were Harry and Joe, and we got our bread there. They had not only bread but pastries and cakes, and these two guys were comedians, they were like classic, homespun, Borscht Belt comedians. Well, Joe was the comedian, and Harry was kind of the straight guy. But they were always entertaining. And they were always there. They were there for years, and then just recent—well, quite a while ago, they died, and somebody bought that place and continued to run it as a bread and pastry store. It just recently closed. But that was a really colorful place that added a lot to the neighborhood. They had a little Ukrainian woman named Mary who would shuffle around the neighborhood and deliver. If we needed bread, we'd call up, and she'd shuffle down with like five loaves of rye bread if we needed it. Now, on weekends they were incredibly busy—people would line up. It was just really good bread, the likes of which you don't see so much anymore.

But they had this whole shtick. There was a banter—this is also something that's kind of missing now. You would go to a shop and you would banter. So you go in there and say, "I want pumpernickel. Is it fresh?" And Joe would go, "Is it fresh? It's hot! It's out of the oven!" He'd hand it to you, he'd say, "Feel it, it's hot!" It would be ice cold. [laughing] Right? And maybe even a little bit stale. "It's hot!" That's kind of what builds a community, your little two, three-minute interaction with the bread guy, with the shoe guy, with the Mafia guys at the clubhouse, with the customers at Veselka, with the people on the street. It's your home. Even though New York's a big, busy city, there's a little community right there on 9th Street in the East Village, 9th Street and Second Avenue and the few blocks around that. A big part of that's disappeared now. Not all of it, but a lot of it.

And actually, the two guys that ran the bread store, their nephew recently, within the past four or five years, he wrote their biography. The book's called *Dough*. His name's Mort Zachter—it's really interesting. It's interesting to me because I knew them, but it turned out—I mean, you kind of had to know them to appreciate this, but Joe was always there, always. He had a gray shopkeeper's coat, it was kind of dirty, the place was run down, there were bread crumbs

everywhere. And when it got quiet, there was a bread-slicing machine, he would sit in the chair and he'd put his head on the machine and he'd go to sleep. And then if Harry was there he'd put a loaf of bread in the machine, and it would go 'Eee-ee-ee,' and Joe's head would bounce. But he was still asleep.

So anyway, it turned out that Harry, who was the smarter one, had Joe and his sister convinced that they weren't making any money, and that they basically had to work for free. Well, when Harry died, he had millions put away. You should read the book. It's really interesting. It's called *Dough*, D-O-U-G-H, by Mort. So this was, I guess, like a part of the neighborhood that I never knew. When I wrote my cookbook, we interviewed Mort, and he told us a lot of stories about Harry and Joe that we never knew. Neither one of them married, neither one of them had kids, so he was like their kid. So they bought him a bicycle and taught him how to ride a bike. There were just a lot of colorful people like that in the neighborhood.

Johnston: Did you source most of your ingredients locally? I mean it sounds like you had bread deliveries, meat deliveries—

Birchard: Yeah. Well, we did get our bread from there. For as long as I can remember we've gotten our kielbasy and other meats from the Baczynsky meat market across the street. The big bulk items, produce comes from Hunt's Point, although we do buy things now from the farmer's market. [00:14:47]

That was another thing, when I first came to the neighborhood—I grew up in a supermarket environment—in the East Village. This is another thing that's disappeared that's kind of sad, but I remember on First Avenue and 9th Street, where the Bean is now, there was what everybody called a butter and eggs store. It was a dairy store, so all they had was eggs. I remember going in there and they had stacks of trays of eggs, like this high, and blocks of butter. You know, forty, fifty-pound blocks of butter. And farmer's cheese in big vats, and milk, and that's all they had was dairy products. And then you'd go to another place, a greengrocer, and it was all vegetables. Then you'd go to the butcher, and that was meat, and then there were fish markets around the neighborhood where you get your fish. That was a totally different experience for me. We went to the supermarket and it was all right there.

Johnston: Yes. I did have one question for clarification, which is, you married into the Veselka family and you're now the owner of it. And you're no longer married?

Birchard: No.

Johnston: Are you happy to talk a bit about how that all happened?

Birchard: Yeah, I'm fine talking about that. My Ukrainian wife and I were happily married. She had a very tough relationship with her parents, with her mother and father both. And when I came, my father-in-law had a really hard time dealing with the fact that his daughter was marrying an American. He was a staunch patriot, but much, much to his credit, he put that aside fairly quickly. But he did try to make me into a Ukrainian. Kind of funny, he used to send us to poetry readings and concerts, and I didn't understand a word. But I went, and he taught me about the country and what it meant to him. So I had a pretty close bond with my father-in-law.

My wife didn't. And it kind of bothered her that I—she wanted nothing to do with that store, and really Ukrainian society in general. When I first met her I remember her talking about how terrible it was being a member of a small ethnic group, and your group of friends is very small, and they were very insular—they tried to keep themselves insulated because their culture was under severe attack in Ukraine. Stalin was really trying to wipe out the language, the culture, so they reacted here by desperately trying to maintain it. So they'd have things like debutante balls, and they'd gossip about what young girls were going out with American boys. I remember my ex-wife telling me it was a very small group of Ukrainian boys that you could really date, and if there was nobody in that pool that you liked, you were kind of out of luck. Or you had to go outside the pool, in which case the old Ukrainians would gossip about you and call you nasty names.

So, long story short, I got closer to my father-in-law; my wife wanted me out of there. I mean, we had other difficulties—we got married very young. We kind of drifted apart in other ways. When my father-in-law passed away, and my mother-in-law and brother-in-law asked me to run the store, at least until they could decide what to do, and I agreed; my wife and I were having difficulties, but that was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back. So we split up, and I was a bachelor for a while. And eventually in 1982 I met my current wife, and have lived happily ever after. So I had two boys with my first wife, and I have three children with Sally, my second wife.

Johnston: So you said your father-in-law sort of wanted to turn you into a Ukrainian patriot. [laughs] Did he manage? Are you now a Ukrainian patriot?

Birchard: Well, I certainly—yeah, yeah I am. It was his dream for Ukraine to be free, and when they did gain their freedom, I really wished he had seen that. Obviously the story continues—who knows how it's going to turn out? But yeah, I hope that Ukraine stays an autonomous country and that the different interests there can find a way to reconcile and move forward. It's an incredibly rich country, you know. They were called the breadbasket of Europe for a long time, but they're caught right between the West and the East. Like other places, we fight our battle with Russia through places like that, much to their detriment, unfortunately. It's bad luck geographically and culturally, and I hope at some point we can get beyond that. [00:20:19]

Johnston: So when Ukraine was granted independence in the Nineties, did Veselka mark that with a whopping big party? [laughs] Or did anything happen?

Birchard: You know, we didn't. No, I'm not sure why. We do observe Ukrainian Independence Day. I'm not sure why we didn't. I would say as time has gone on we've become if anything more Ukrainian, for a number of reasons. My son, who's half Ukrainian, is definitely a patriot, is definitely patriotic. So he's pushed for that a little bit, and we have employees now who are patriotic. My memory is when they did gain independence it was with a lot of misgiving. It was at the same time that Czechoslovakia broke up. Yugoslavia was breaking up, I think there was a lot of fear. Even though it was a good thing, there was also a lot of, eek, what's going to happen now, you know? I think—I'm not sure. But as time goes on, it's become clearer and clearer—well, we've had kind of a resurgence in our Ukrainian identity. And again, that's reflected in what happened a few days ago when the news media came and sought us out as a cornerstone in the Ukrainian community, which is nice. I'm very happy to be seen that way.

Johnston: It was something you mentioned—and tell me if this is going on far too long—can you tell me a bit about the cookbooks you've made? Because this is actually a really nice piece of Veselka that is—

Birchard: Yeah, and it's been out now for three or four years. There's a long, interesting story related to that, but I'll give you the short version. My wife and I have a second home in Vermont, where we go occasionally. And we like to bicycle. So we were out bicycling one day, and we're riding through a tiny little town. And this little town, West Pawlet, Vermont, has a post office and a fish and game club and a little convenience store. Anyway, we're riding through, and

there's this fella standing on the porch, saw us riding by, and yelled, "Come in, we're serving coffee and pastry and we're trying to get the community tighter. Just stop in and say hello." So we stopped in. And his wife was in there. Her name is Angela Miller, and she and her husband had just bought a farm. They're living their life-long dream of making goat cheese. But her day job was she's a very famous, prominent cookbook editor. She works with Jean-Georges and Mark Bittman and some really important people. So we went in, we chatted a little bit. I don't think I even told her about Veselka. Maybe my wife did. It didn't really make a connection with her. She didn't really know Veselka or she didn't know what we were talking about.

But this became a destination on our weekend bike rides. So over time she came to appreciate that I was the owner of Veselka, and I think she came with her husband and ate a few times. So for several years, she pressured me to do a cookbook. And I'd always say, "No, no, there's not enough material there for a cookbook, and our recipes aren't written down, and nothing is documented." We had this interesting banter back and forth, teasing kind of thing. And one day I walked into Veselka and she was sitting there with her husband. And they had ordered a whole spread of food, like more than two people could possibly eat. They had it all there. She said, "Sit down. You're doing a cookbook. This food is fantastic. And I'm not taking no for an answer." I'm like, "Okay. All right." And her husband is saying, "Yeah, you could make money, you know." He's kind of winking at me and whispering, saying, "Yeah, you could make a lot of money doing this." [laughter] And I'm saying, "If I did do it, I would need a lot of help." She said, "Don't worry, I'll set you up with a cookbook writer. We'll get people to test the recipes. We're going to make this happen." [00:24:40]

So we worked on it for a couple years after that, and it was really hard getting my—I have a team of Polish and Ukrainian grandmas cooking the food, mostly. I have a pastry chef who's classically trained at the Culinary Institute of America, but everybody else, it's just homey stuff that their grandmas taught them how to cook. So we had the hardest time getting them to turn their recipes loose. And they'd say, "Why would we put the borscht recipe in a book? Then everybody will make it at home! Nobody's going to come here!" We're like, "No, don't worry, it's not going to happen." So the book came out, I think three years ago, and it's been a lot of fun. It was a bigger success than what they anticipated, certainly than what I anticipated. It has a big following in Canada. And there's a lot of Ukrainians around in America and Canada, so the book did well. And it's a little feather in my cap, I guess. [laughs]

Johnston: All right, I really have got to end my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this recording?

Birchard: I don't think so. Not right now. I can't think of anything. Plus I'm losing my voice.
[laughs]

Johnston: Well, thanks very much for all of this.

Birchard: No, I love doing this. As time goes on, I have more and more opportunity to talk about Veselka and the history to journalists, and even customers sometimes ask me. So it's really a pleasure for me to talk about it, because it's kind of my life. And my life has been good, and it continues to get better, and so, hey, what better to talk about?

Johnston: Well, perfect!

Birchard: It's a little narcissistic, but hey, there's some interesting history there, too.

Johnston: I was asking you about bricks and mortar, not just about yourself.

Birchard: [laughs] Right.

Johnston: All right, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]