VILLAGE PRESERVATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Tony Hiss

Conducted and transcribed by Josie Naron

New York, New York

December 5, 2025

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation. The Village Preservation 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 Greenwich 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.

THANK YOU

Summary of oral history with Tony Hiss:

Tony Hiss is the author of 15 books, most recently *Rescuing the Planet: Protecting Half the Land to Heal the Earth,* now in paperback, and the award-winning *The Experience of Place: A New Way of Looking at and Dealing With our Radically Changing Cities and Countryside*. He was a staff writer at *The New Yorker* magazine for 30 years and since then has been a visiting scholar at New York University for over 25 years. Hiss has lectured around the world; is a consultant on planning, place, biodiversity, and conservation issues; and is now at work on a new book, *The Biosphere: A Biography*. He lives with his wife, the writer Lois Metzger, in the Greenwich Village apartment he's called home since 1947. Highlights from Hiss's oral history include memories of corresponding with his father, Alger Hiss, during Alger's incarceration; reflections on watching the Village change from the window of his apartment; and thoughts on how to tell the story of a neighborhood while looking both to the future and to the past.

Excerpts from oral history with Tony Hiss:

“A place like the Village helps you think back seven generations. This apartment -- it took me a while to figure this out, of course -- is part of a piece of land that has had a very interesting history. There was a farm called the Minto Farm. About 200 years ago, it was bought by a Captain Randall, a seafaring man whose father had made a lot of money plundering English ships, and decided on his death to -- at the advice supposedly of Alexander Hamilton -- he said, "I don't know where my money should go." He said, "Well, it came from the sea. It should go back to the sea." So he decided to set up a home for elderly sailors, indigent sailors, and they set up something called Sailors Snug Harbor. These old, washed up sailors would -- they were called snugs -- would have a lifetime of ease. Before any kind of benefits were available.

Now in those days, things were back to front, as we would say. This was still countryside north of New York. And the main road north was the Bowery coming up the east side, which then funneled into Fourth Avenue. So, this farm insofar as it had a direction, faced east towards the Bowery… And in fact, the back of the farm in what is now Fifth Avenue, was defined by a meandering stream called Minetta Brook, whose name we still have with Minetta Lane…So, we're at the back end of this old farm, which was, some say, a quaint little farm. Some say it was an orchard and just because of the accidents of the way the property was later developed. I like to think it may not be true, but I'd like to think that the backyard to this apartment, which is actually stretches up and down the block, is perhaps the one piece of the Minto farm that never got built on, so that we can through it, look back through all these generations and feel connected to.” (p. 7-8)

“There was a French hotel on University Place called The Lafayette. The Irish shop boys in the Peter Reeves supermarket actually had to speak a few words of French, making deliveries. Around on Fifth Avenue, there was another old-time hotel called The Brevoort, which was beloved. And the neighborhood really had a kind of strength that few neighborhoods had achieved. I mean, it wasn't just Bohemian. We had our own department store, John Wanamaker, over at Broadway. An enormous building connecting via skybridge to the block next door where this gorgeous, older department store, former A.T. Stewart building, was built around a central courtyard. It had pipe organ recitals during the day. …And we had a famous art museum. We had the Whitney Museum on West 8th Street,

because Gertrude Whitney had lived and worked down there. So this was pretty solid." (p. 13-14)

"I don't see much continuity in the way of things that you feel like you still have with you. I've always thought that what is important about preservation is you're not trying to preserve the past. You're trying to preserve the present. You are trying to make sure that something that has made its way from the past into our lives continues to be part of the lives of people who will come hereafter. But on the other hand, it transformed this apartment into what I started thinking of as a time funnel. You look out the front and you see a highrise across the street. You look out the back, you see the exact view they were seeing a hundred years ago when these buildings were converted. You see what Edward Hopper saw when he looked out his window. Because his studio was on Washington Square. You see chimney pots and you see birds wheeling through the sky. And we are awakened in the morning by birdsong, here, in New York." (p. 15)

"Well, if change means we're always on the move, then it's a question of what do we carry with us? And what do we abandon and leave behind? And I think we need to -- it's useful for us to carry with us a sense of where we've come from. Because that gives us more of a context for being intelligent about what the next step is gonna be…You know, it seems to me that every generation secretly thinks that history began when they were born. And everything before then was pre-history. But that's just an illusion. So I think we have a chance now -- we have to face up to the fact that we've been better at doing things that make problems than we have been at doing things that solve problems." (p. 28)

JOSIE NARON: So it is December 5th, 2025 and I'm here with Tony Hiss to conduct an oral history for Village Preservation's oral history project. And I am Josie Naron, the oral historian at Village Preservation, and I'm very happy to be here today, Tony.

TONY HISS: I'm glad you're here, Josie, and delighted to meet you.

JN: Yeah. I always struggle to do a summary of your life's work in two sentences. Could you introduce yourself?

TH: Well, sure. I'm a writer, and I've lived in the Village most of my life. Lived in this apartment most of my life. And I'm very glad to have been part of this community. I think it has helped me understand quite a few things about how people get along with each other. And that's informed my work, which has all been all over the map in terms of subjects, but keeps coming back to sort of how we are nourished by -- or not by -- where we are.

JN: Yeah.

TH: So that's more than two sentences, but --

JN: Yeah. But that adds some detail.

TH: Yeah.

JN: So I know you did not move into this apartment that we're recording from right now until you were six or seven. But where were you born before then?

TH: Born in Washington, DC.

JN: Okay.

TH: Because my dad was working in the State Department. So, yes. Got to New York at six. And at first -- well, housing was hard to come by then as it is now. That's 1946, '47, after the war. And a cousin, my uncle's wife's or something, kindly found this flat. But it turned out to be pretty much the perfect place, although my parents might have considered it a starter

apartment. Two bedroom apartment. And then, largely because of the troubles that began for my dad, it just became the place. And has continued that. And now my wife and I live here and raised our son here. Lucky, lucky, lucky to have been able to hang onto this place. Wow, so many directions I could go from here, but --

JN: Yeah, I mean, I think we will come back probably again and again to the idea of you consistently being in this home and in this neighborhood over the decades as kind of an anchor for everything happening around. But I'm both interested in your memories of your youth in the Village, but I think that is also inseparable from obviously the conversation about your experience of your father's experience.

TH: Well, one of the things that always interested him -- you know, there's a lot of talk among conservationists and preservationists of this Iroquois idea of thinking ahead, trying to think ahead seven generations.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: A place like the Village helps you think back seven generations. This apartment -- it took me a while to figure this out, of course -- is part of a piece of land that has had a very interesting history. There was a farm called the Minto Farm. About 200 years ago, it was bought by a Captain Randall, a seafaring man whose father had made a lot of money plundering English ships, and decided on his death to -- at the advice supposedly of Alexander Hamilton -- he said, "I don't know where my money should go." He said, "Well, it came from the sea. It should go back to the sea." So he decided to set up a home for elderly sailors, indigent sailors, and they set up something called Sailors Snug Harbor. These old, washed up sailors would -- they were called snugs -- would have a lifetime of ease. Before any kind of benefits were available. Now in those days, things were back to front, as we would say. This was still countryside north of New York. And the main road north was the Bowery coming up the east side, which then funneled into Fourth Avenue. So, this farm insofar as it had a direction, faced east towards the Bowery.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: There was no Fifth Avenue, which is now sort of the --

JN: Yeah.

TH: -- anchor. Yeah. And in fact, the back of the farm in what is now Fifth Avenue, was defined by a meandering stream called Minetta Brook, whose name we still have with Minetta Lane and --

JN: Yeah.

TH: So, we're at the back end of this old farm, which was, some say, a quaint little farm. Some say it was an orchard and just because of the accidents of the way the property was later developed. I like to think it may not be true, but I'd like to think that the backyard to this apartment, which is actually stretches up and down the block, is perhaps the one piece of the Minto farm that never got built on, so that we can through it, look back through all these generations and feel connected to.

JN: Yeah. So it's a courtyard garden down the middle, or --

TH: So, now the story keeps getting more complicated. Well, I think in a nice way -- it tends to be non-linear in a nice way. So, here was this institution, Sailor's Snug Harbor.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: The family contested this outrageous will for years, but Hamilton had it drawn up, so it was airtight. And eventually, they decided now the city was beginning to grow northward that rather than build a hospital here, they would build a more elaborate hospital in Staten Island.

JN: Oh. And that's Snug Harbor out there now. Okay.

TH: And use the money raised from this property development to fund that.

JN: Okay.

TH: Which they did and with sort of -- they made a lot of money, but in terms of the neighborhood, they weren't really thinking too clearly about that. And 8th Street had then come into being and there were 19th-century rowhouses along here. Somehow they got the idea about a century ago to spruce up the place. So they took this whole block and sort of, from scratch, reconstituted all these rowhouses as apartment houses with stucco fronts, which were then the new Spanish styles.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Elegant places, and even with some artist studios. And as a result, what had been just backyards, separate backyards, were combined into a long garden or courtyard between these buildings and what had been the stables on the other side. Which are now part of the Washington Mews alleyway. So, these were sort of their idea of what a model, modest, middle-class apartment should be.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And I think it's still a higher standard than we've approached since. The ceilings are nice and high. The proportions are generous. You don't ever feel squished. There are actual real wood-burning fireplaces. I showed you our famous dumbwaiter.

JN: Yeah. [laughs]

TH: The “modern convenience” where, even to this day, all we have to do is haul it up. Put on the --

JN: No, they were onto something with that.

TH: -- garbage. The staff hauls it out. Takes it away. Now when we got here, Sailors' Snug Harbor was still the landlord.

JN: Okay.

TH: But, gradually, as happens all over the Village, NYU took it over and eventually it was sold to NYU. But I've gotta say, they've been in many ways model landlords. Because one of the things that makes -- one of the reasons why this is still extant is that we have a incredibly good staff, super, and people who are as fond of the place as we are. We're probably now, by now, the last non-NYU, or next-to-last non-NYU tenant. But that's just because we keep living. So, this has been home base for a long time.

JN: A long time.

TH: Since I'm now 84.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

TH: Then, my dad's troubles, he was one of the first celebrity victims of the Cold War. He had been the Secretary General of the very first organizing conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. We've got the gavel he had. In 1948, he was accused, when I was seven, of having been a communist. By a strange man who swore that they had just been fellow communists, until my dad sued him for libel. And he then said, "Oh, well, actually, we were spies together." And produced some strange papers that seemed to have come from the State Department and said, "Alger Hiss gave them to me."

It became the Page One story in this country for years. There were two trials. He was indicted, my dad, for perjury. It was too late under the law to accuse him of espionage. But he was indicted for so-called lying when he said he hadn't been a spy. First trial, hung jury. Second trial, conviction. He was sentenced to five years in prison. Served 44 months in a federal prison from '51 to '54, something like that.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: When I was nine until I was 13. And [pauses] as these convulsive events were happening in the family's life, that was when the Village began to change. So they're linked together in my mind.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Because that was when Sailors' Snug Harbor really decided not to be the model landlord, but just to build. And this is the part of the Village that got hit hardest by development. And of course, at this point, things had turned around and Fifth Avenue was the center of the place, and not the Bowery way over there to the east.

JN: How built up is the park at this point?

TH: Washington Square?

JN: Yeah.

TH: Well, the Square still had traffic running through the middle of it.

JN: Right. I've seen the photos of that. It is quite wild to try to conceptualize now. [laughs]

TH: And it was a bus turnaround.

JN: Yeah.

TH: At the foot of Fifth Avenue.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And then they found an ally, the developers, in Robert Moses, who was going to turn West Broadway, south of Washington Square, into "Lower Fifth Avenue," as he called it. Upgrading it.

JN: A charming name.

TH: Yes.

JN: Really had a way with words.

TH: Real smart guy. And that was when Jane Jacobs suddenly became a force, and the first task was to close the Square, Washington Park, to traffic. So that there would be no direct access from Fifth Avenue to "Lower Fifth Avenue."

JN: Yeah. Just so I can kind of ground myself -- we don't need specific years, but when is this kind of happening?

TH: Fifties.

JN: Fifties.

TH: Beginning -- early '50s up until, say, mid-'60s. Because when my family moved in, this had actually been a rather tight-knit little old-time neighborhood.

JN: Yeah.

TH: There was a French hotel on University Place called The Lafayette. And the Irish shop boys in the Peter Reeves supermarket actually had to speak a few words of French, making deliveries. Around on Fifth Avenue, there was another old-time hotel called The Brevoort, which was beloved. And the neighborhood really had a kind of strength that few neighborhoods had achieved. I mean, it wasn't just Bohemian. We had our own department store, John Wanamaker, over at Broadway. An enormous building connecting via skybridge to the block next door where this gorgeous, older department store, former A.T. Stewart building, was built around a central courtyard. And had pipe organ recitals during the day. That building, unfortunately, later caught on fire.

JN: Oh, wow.

TH: And because of that courtyard, flames shot up --

JN: Oh my god.

TH: -- hundreds of feet in the air.

JN: Wow.

TH: And we had a famous art museum. We had the Whitney Museum on West 8th Street, because Gertrude Whitney had lived and worked down there. So this was pretty solid.

JN: Yeah. That's a whole self-contained universe over here.

TH: And that's what got eaten away.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Because suddenly they were building at a different scale. We only had one tall building in the '40s. Sailors' Snug Harbor had put up 1 Fifth Avenue. But it had a certain elegance to it. And Sailors' Snug Harbor before the war had -- well, back in the 19th century, they were responsible for the wonderful rowhouses along the Washington Square North.

JN: Right.

TH: Elegant brick mansions. And they had allowed NYU to convert them into apartments, but maintaining the facade. This is all pre-preservation days. So, first, and I may have the sequence wrong, but as I remember at first, on the other side of Fifth Avenue, west of 8th Street, beautiful old mansions there were torn down to build 2 Fifth Avenue, a big modern white brick building. But that was one of the first sort of preservation-like fusses. Because they were going to bring that white brick right up to the corner of the park. And people said, no, the rowhouses were what made the place. And they reluctantly agreed to build along the park a five-story extension, red brick extension, of what they were building behind it. Twenty stories of white brick highrise. Does it balance? No, but something happened, and I remember, somehow after I became a reporter, I was in the company of the elder statesman of the developing family. And he said to me, "I told them, if you can show me one person who ever did anything for anybody who lived in those old mansions, I'll walk away from the project. And they couldn't do it." So suddenly, we had a big highrise there. Then The Brevoort Hotel got torn down in the block north of this apartment, replaced by a highrise called The Brevoort. Eventually supplemented right across the street by another highrise called The Brevoort East. The Lafayette Hotel on the other side of University Place got torn

down [for] a huge mega-block development, with lower apartments on Broadway and on University Place and a highrise in the middle.

JN: What do you make of that kind of recycling of the names?

TH: Well, of course, this end [of the new superblock] was now The Lafayette, and the other end is The Hamilton.

JN: Right.

TH: And across the street [from it], another highrise was The Randall, which -- for Captain Randall, of course, of Snug Harbor fame. Recycling. Well, how much of what has been comes through? I don't see much continuity in the way of things that you feel like you still have with you. I've always thought that what is important about preservation is you're not trying to preserve the past. You're trying to preserve the present. You are trying to make sure that something that has made its way from the past into our lives continues to be part of the lives of people who will come hereafter.

But on the other hand, it transformed this apartment into what I started thinking of as a time funnel. You look out the front and you see a highrise across the street. You look out the back, you see the exact view they were seeing a hundred years ago when these buildings were converted. You see what Edward Hopper saw when he looked out his window. Because his studio was on Washington Square. You see chimney pots and you see birds wheeling through the sky. And we are awakened in the morning by birdsong, here, in New York.

JN: Yeah.

TH: In Manhattan. Blue jays. Mourning doves. Because the other thing that anchored it to me, to my life, or seemed to -- I mean, you take these accidents and incorporate them into something that's a pattern which other people wouldn't notice. There had been, in that common courtyard, some old summer houses. And just at the time my dad went to prison, they took out the old summer houses and they planted some ornamental crabapple trees. So reconstituted the Minto Farm Orchard, at least in my fancy, but also that was now day one of a new scale of things that started with my dad's imprisonment. But these trees, which are now

75 years old -- and we're at the treetop level. So we're lucky to have such an -- anyways. It was a time funnel that you could look one way, see one era, look another way, see another. But actually, the north view [onto 8th Street] has improved because we got our Business Improvement District.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: And the founding director of that, the Village Alliance, Honi Klein, just died this week. And she, very courageously as it seemed at the time, got permission to widen the sidewalks on 8th Street and narrow the driving lines and plant some trees. And that's made a big difference. So now, at least in the summer, when we look out our front windows, what we see is a tangle of tree leaves.

JN: That's nicer than the highrises.

TH: But also we've collected oddments along the way. So my mother, when the red brick buildings across the street were torn down, got one of the old cast iron bolts, star bolts that had been holding the building together. We've got that here. Then even castoffs from the newer buildings across the street. An amazing impresario named Barney Josephson had opened a thing called The Cookery, which was --

LOIS METZGER: And we have a piece of it over there.

TH: That's right, I was just about to say. And before the war, and during the war, Barney had run something called Cafe Society, which was the first nightclub that treated Blacks and whites on an equal basis. And many famous performers like Zero Mostel had their start through Barney.

JN: Yeah.

TH: So we got to know him [Barney], too. So the other thing that I guess happened was me getting deeper into what our surroundings could tell us [pauses] as a result of my dad's incarceration. Trying to be a decent dad from a distance, he was allowed to write home three letters a week. Two-page letters. They were addressed to my mom, but he would also include

-- instead of in handwriting, in print, passages for me. And he would say things like, "Well, I read in *The New York Times* that there's going to be a new exhibit at the Natural History Museum," or, "There's gonna be something happening in Central Park. I'm not gonna be able to get there, but would you please go and be my eyes and ears?" So I would think, Okay, but I have to do something more than just look around with my eyes. I have to look around with his eyes. How can I widen my perception to be worthy of that task? And --

JN: And you're like, nine or ten while you're -- yeah.

TH: Yep. [laughs]

JN: Yeah.

TH: But it worked. I mean, somehow I was able to feel more like a participant in these places. I realized much later that I was starting to use a part of our mind that is something we've inherited, but that our society hasn't ever quite come to terms with, that lets us feel all of these influences. So, when I got out of college and didn't know what I wanted to do with myself -- my dad had been a lawyer, but I didn't want to do that. I got hired by *The New Yorker* magazine as a Talk of the Town reporter, a staff writer. And I was there for 30 years. And then, became a visiting scholar at various departments at New York University for over 25 years. And I'm back in that status now.

JN: Yeah. So for Talk of the Town, were you going to exhibitions and openings?

TH: Oh, yes. Yeah. Exactly.

JN: So you were -- that's also kind of circular.

TH: I wrote hundreds of those things. And in those days, you had to do it sort of for the sake of the thing. 'Cause they were anonymous. They're signed pieces now. And the editor of *The New Yorke*r was this famous reclusive, wide-thinking editor who you sort of went out as his eyes and ears [and] reported back to him. So, I had yet another layer of responsibility.

JN: Yeah. Were you thinking about that kind of mediation between you and what you were taking in? Like were you thinking about that in those terms at the time?

TH: Oh, yeah.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Had to. I mean, when a weird catastrophe overtakes a family, parts of you grow up quick -- you have to. Other parts get retarded. So, I would say emotionally I was -- had a lot of stuff that froze in place and took a long time to work through. So, this in a way is because it was my dad's apartment. And then, it's a historic landmark all on its own. Even though there are no plaques.

JN: Well, this interview is the plaque of sorts.

TH: Yeah.

JN: Yeah.

TH: So, and as I said, there are things here that speak to us. My dad -- I like to think of continuing influences. That mirror over there is something -- when he was in law school, and he went to Harvard Law School, Professor Felix Frankfurter, who was later a Supreme Court Justice, had the honor of every year picking one student from a graduating class who would be sent to Washington and work for a year as Secretary to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. The great Supreme Court Justice, who was then 88, 89, but still functioning. Still -- mind as sharp as it had been. An elegant old guy. A tall, erect guy with a big white mustache. And my dad, fell under his -- got chosen and fell under his spell, as representing what was best about this country. And that mirror, which Holmes, when he died, left to Alger in his will, hung in his house.

And he [Holmes] told the story that -- he's now an old man, talking to a young man. When he himself had been a kid, five or six years old, about the age I was when we moved to this apartment, he had spoken to his grandmother, who was then in her late 80s. [He spoke] about how when she had been a little girl, [she] had seen in the house where that mirror hung, in

Beacon Street in Boston, the British marching up Beacon Street at the beginning of the Revolution. And that that house had been commandeered by Lord Howe, the Commandant of the British troops, as his headquarters for a while. And he would tell me -- my dad, [imitating Holmes], “Sometimes when I look in the glass, sonny, I think I see Lord Howe's bewigged face looking back at me. Can you see it?" So we've got that time funnel.

JN: A lot of little time warps to go down.

TH: And then in the hall we've got a special edition, done as an elegant home piece of printing, almost like a medieval manuscript, the preamble to the founding document of the United Nations. This special page had been presented to my dad for his work at the United Nations. So, as I said, we have the gavel, we've got this page. But we also have -- because I wrote a book about him and was able to visit the prison where he'd been held, we have merch from the prison gift shop.

JN: What a concept.

TH: Yep. Because that prison, which is in North Central Pennsylvania, in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. And where he was deliberately sent, because it was considered a tough place. By rights as a white-collar, white middle-class, nonviolent criminal, he should have been sent to Danbury, Connecticut, which was considered sort of a country house. But no, they had to send him to Lewisburg, which was in those days hard to get to because pre-interstate. And again, in a way, we don't keep up with these things. It had been built in the '30s as part of a reform effort to try and make prison into something that would help people. So, sitting in the middle of a thousand acres of federal land, which is [still] working farmland. It's beautiful. And because it's in this weird stage of being held for a different purpose, it looks the way it did in 1920.

JN: Yeah.

TH: The land, it was gorgeous. And the visiting room was a big, convivial place. It wasn't -- telephone on one side of a piece of glass, like in a Jimmy Cagney movie. And my dad was fortunate enough to sort of be befriended when he was there by the group of wise guys, the organized crime families who were the -- sort of ran the joint. And they protected him, and --

and they would come, their families would come visit. And they were the only guys not going stir-crazy, because it was just an occupational hazard to them. It wasn't a disgrace. They had jobs to come home to. They had families who loved them.

JN: Yeah.

TH: So, that had a convivial side.

JN: Yeah. Was it just you and your mom?

TH: Basically, me and my mom, because I have a brother, my half-brother, Tim Hobson, who's 15 years older than I am. By that time, he was in medical school in Switzerland. In Geneva, Switzerland. Had to take a degree in medicine in French. Had always -- had never been able to get through high school French. But this was him making something [out] of the Hiss case, because it was clear that American medical schools weren't going to accept him because he was part of this conspiracy. So, he did it. He put himself through. I think my mom had the tougher time of it than anybody, because --

JN: Yeah.

TH: She was the notorious Mrs. Alger Hiss. Oh, I meant to say, when we first got here --

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: I was not so much a Villager. I didn't go to the Village schools. I didn't go to either PS 3 or the private Little Red School House. I went to Dalton School up on 89th Street. And there were in my class, maybe four or five kids who were from this far south. So, I was in a way, sort of an outlier of the Upper East Side.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And Dalton, which of course was a so-called progressive school, was also the bastion of a lot of liberal thinking among people who had money, but had values that tried to think on behalf of the city. So we had Herbert Lehman, who had been Franklin Roosevelt's successor

as governor. His grandchildren were there. We had the grandson of Averell Harriman, who was then the governor of New York State, a Democrat. We had the granddaughter of Stanley Isaacs, who was this noble Republican, the one Republican on the City Council. People who were supposedly, you know, civic-minded. And a nice bunch of kids. And even one day when there was a political assembly and a local Republican congressman came, and started as part of his stump speech, making cracks about Alger Hiss, he was suddenly booed to his astonishment.

But as I say, I was an outlier of uptown as much as I was a Villager at first. And in first grade, before troubles began, I was there as a student and my mom was the seventh- and eighth-grade English teacher. A beloved English teacher. For years, I ran into people who said, oh, I never had such a teacher as Mrs. Hiss! Once trouble began, the weird way things happened was: I was allowed to stay on as a student. She could no longer be there as a faculty member.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: [pauses] Because she was the notorious Mrs. Hiss.

JN: And is that simply on behalf of the last name, or is it because of the advocacy she was doing?

TH: Unh-unh.

JN: Just the last name alone.

TH: She wasn't indoctrinating the kids with evil ideas. No, she was --

JN: [laughs] Well, that's not what I'm asking.

TH: She was Mrs. Alger Hiss.

JN: Yeah. Yeah.

TH: Could not get a job for years because of that. So, finally got a job at a Doubleday bookshop. There was a chain of [Doubleday] bookstores. But [she] couldn't be seen on the selling floor. Had to work in the basement.

JN: Wow.

TH: Where her face would never be seen. For $37 take-home pay a week. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen a silly Tracy-Hepburn movie called *Desk Set* that --

JN: Of course.

TH: Well, what's true about that movie is the kind of spirit that offices generated. Like-minded people, working in offices. In that case, it was a version of *Time* magazine, in the fact-checking department --

JN: With a supercomputer in the middle.

TH: Right. But [with people] who were there because they had to be, but who were making the best of it. So the same kind of spirit was there in the Doubleday bookshops, and that helped us a lot.

JN: Yeah.

TH: [loud fire siren] But as I say, my mom in a way took the brunt of it.

JN: Let me stop you for a second.

TH: Well, that's 8th Street.

JN: Yeah.

TH: People used to ask, are you calling from a payphone?

JN: It's just the ambiance.

TH: Well, so I sort of became a writer just because I had this skill. And then I began writing longer pieces, not just Talk of the Town stories. And --

JN: Where did you end up for college?

TH: Oh, well, I went to Harvard, too, but -- by the time I got to college, I think I was beginning to unravel in some ways. [pauses] My parents' marriage was really, after he got back from prison, not working out. So again, I sort of kept my sanity in college by working at the college paper. And it turned out to be extracurricular, but [also] the one trade school experience offered by Harvard. And again, the mysterious Mr. [William] Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker*, had children who happened to have gone to both Dalton and Putney School in Vermont, a progressive boarding school I was sent to.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

It's a wonderful school. But again, what was I doing there? You know? So he [Mr. Shawn] hired me out of college, and as my dad liked to say, [pauses] three years in prison is a good corrective to three years at Harvard. But at least it got me a job.

JN: Yeah. And what was your relationship like with your father after he got back?

TH: Well, it was always [pauses] a little formal. When I finally got to writing about him, I realized that in many ways, he -- I guess partly by training and partly because it felt safer, he was very formal with his relationships with most people. And an inner playfulness rarely was allowed to surface. It did in these wonderful letters that he wrote home. But of course I always admired him. And he lasted a long time too, fortunately, because it wasn't until 1980 that I met Lois and then another few years before our son Jacob came along. But at least Alger got to meet him. Oh yes, and even growing up on 8th Street, it wasn't 8th Street that seemed to me -- even though this apartment was amazing, it wasn't 8th Street that seemed to me of vital importance. Somehow, as a kid, it was always my yearning that if I made it big, I would live on 10th Street. 'Cause that was row houses and it felt a little -- it felt more like Georgetown and Washington, DC, where I'd been a tiny kid. And I made it. I first moved to Waverly Place over near Sheridan Square, and I was actually there in that apartment the night

of the famous Stonewall Riot. And a year later, I guess it was, as a reporter, covered the first Gay Pride March.

JN: Mm-hm. What was that like?

TH: Well, it was very dignified and restrained and it wasn't huge, but it was just people, calmly walking, and not a -- didn't fill the entire width of the street or the length of more than a couple of blocks. But it was definitely an occasion.

JN: Yeah. And did you absorb anything from Stonewall happening out your window, basically?

TH: At the time, it just seemed -- well, it was -- because for years, the cops and the mob had sort of a business of running bars. And sort of if everyone pretended nothing was happening, then they wouldn't get involved. So then I was a reporter and I was living through all kinds of convulsions in New York's history.

JN: Any that are markers in time for you in a particular way?

TH: Well, yes. The first blackout was in 1965. And was sort of "a good time was had by all" event. It just seemed like, well, what do you know? And no one felt threatened.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And at that time, a man who I think of as one of the still-underappreciated leaders of the city, Robert F. Wagner, was mayor. And I got to know him because his son happened to have gone to Harvard, too. Bob Jr., wonderful guy.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

Then there was the 1977 blackout, where there were riots and tension. But as things officially seemed to be deteriorating in the city, there was also a lot of -- this was a time of a lot of welling up from below of new initiatives. The whole community garden movement got started there as a response to the city not investing in parks. And the whole preservation

movement got started in a big way. And I found it really a very exhilarating time. It was -- things began to -- sort of a balance of things began to shift. After Giuliani became mayor, and developers played a much more prominent role.

And then 9/11. One of the most, I think, damaging effects of 9/11 was that Mike Bloomberg became mayor unexpectedly. Not that he was not in many ways a person with good values, but that he opened the doors to the developers, and managed to get three terms out of it. So that Manhattan feels unbalanced in a way that it didn't, before things like Hudson Yards came along. But again, even though the Village is now a high-rent rent district, I think there's a lot of pent-up urge to function as more of a community. And that explains, you know, the landslide victory of Mamdani just a month ago. And that we're actually looking forward to an interesting and creative period ahead.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Which I hope to stick around for.

JN: Yeah, of course.

TH: Now, what haven't we covered?

JN: Well, I am curious. So, you know, Landmarks Law officially is on the books in 1965, I think. And I know that's not really what you're writing about when you're at *The New Yorker* at this point, but how much of preservation, as a distinct movement that people are participating in and identifying sites, how much of that kind of seeps into what you're writing and thinking about?

TH: Well, the Landmarks Commission -- setting up the Landmarks Commission as an official agency is one of the accomplishments of the Wagner administration. And at first, they were tentative and careful. But they did designate something like the Public Theater.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: And again, that whole question of adaptive reuse. You don't have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. That elegant little library could become an elegant theater. And it's had a sensational presence in the city ever since. And then the whole historic district concept. Which meant you could think of Greenwich Village as a whole, even despite the post-war highrises that had taken such a bite out of this part of the Village.

JN: Yeah.

TH: So, another great -- the other great landmarking event of the early period was the Jefferson Market Library.

JN: Of course.

TH: Again, reuse of a spectacular --

JN: Yeah. I was lucky enough to do one of my last interviews for this in one of the upstairs spaces in there, which is also really a time capsule.

TH: Yes.

JN: Speaking of those.

TH: And the architect of that, [sic] Joe Raposo, who also rebuilt one of the Mews houses, which I see out the back window as the Deutsches Haus, which is now the German classroom for NYU.[1] He's most famous for having helped rescue the Old Merchant's House over on 4th Street. Which talk about time capsules, my god.

[1]A note from Hiss following our interview: Why the [sic]? This paragraph of the transcript of my conversation with Josie Naron corresponds to the one place on the tape where I made a truly elementary mistake, jumbling together Giorgio Cavaglieri (1911-2007) and Joseph J. Roberto (1909-1988), the two amazingly talented architects who in the 1960s and 1970s, working separately but together in intent, rescued three of the Village's greatest treasures (the Jefferson Market Library and the Public Theater were both Cavaglieri projects, and the Old Merchant's House was Roberto's doing). All three restorations were so spectacular – vivid, joyful, soulful – that preservation, until then something of an oddity, almost overnight became a hot ticket citywide and an indelible Greenwich Village bulwark. So the amended paragraph and the appended footnote are both a correction and an apology to the lasting presence of two notable, or in this case foot-notable, Village benefactors.

JN: Well, the first person I interviewed for this project was Pi [Gardiner] over at Merchant's House.

TH: Ah.

JN: And I actually spent a long time with her talking about the row houses over here, and the garden in the middle, and the kind of communal elements of that. So, there's some overlap.

TH: Well, that is just astonishing to be able to enter the 1830s.

JN: Yeah. It is.

TH: And again, that to me is the value of this. You're bringing something along and letting it continue. You're not just freezing in place something. It's the opposite of that. Because now, I know there's hostility to historic preservation as one of those pesky things that's keeping us from building the kind of housing we need.

JN: Well, I wonder -- so I, in reading some of your *New Yorker* pieces before this, and I think we actually touched on this a little earlier, but I think you talk about, you know, preservation as protecting the experience of place rather than place itself. And so I wonder how that complicates some of the critiques of historic preservation as, you know, being too attached to the color of the bricks or the cast iron or -- and instead thinking of it as more of a sensory historical experience.

TH: Well, there is that disconnect.

JN: Yeah.

TH: If you wall yourself off from these influences, then it seems arbitrary. Oh, you want red brick and it could be brown brick or white brick. It's arbitrary. But it isn't arbitrary. These things have a direct influence on us.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Which if we open ourselves up to it, we see them at work. High ceilings are not just there to be -- use up more space. They're there because we expand within them. Our minds work in a more comfortable way, and that's one of the things that's quote, "wrong," unquote about these modern luxury flats. Because they're air conditioned, they squash 'em down.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Eight-foot ceilings. We are caging ourselves and pretending we're not. So, I think, and this whole -- that is something, I guess, I was in on the early-ish days of the whole so-called "place" movement. That the difference between just a location and a place is that a place means you're open to the way people interact as a result of the construction and structure of what their surroundings are.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And then that goes back to evolutionary times, because we had to respond to natural landscapes to see whether we were in trouble or not. And once we became bipeds [and stood upright], we had this overview that could take in larger places. So, and that these are built into what makes a city a good place, what makes a town a good place, a community. But if you resist opening yourself up to that, then it does just seem like a hindrance to doing what will make more money.

JN: Or to progress.

TH: Which then becomes progress.

JN: Yes.

TH: Change is change. Progress is progress. They're not synonyms, necessarily.

JN: Yeah.

TH: They're not antonyms, necessarily.

JN: Yeah, I mean, I think something that stands out to me in all of these conversations I have for this project is people are not necessarily, you know, antithetically opposed to change. Change happens. You know, it's gonna happen no matter what. But I think there's a sense of something disappearing over the decades, particularly in this neighborhood, which is maybe more of an intangible thing than any one location, that, you know, their rent went too high and they had to close. And so I don't know if you feel that or experience that.

TH: Well, if change means we're always on the move, then it's a question of what do we carry with us? And what do we abandon and leave behind? And I think we need to -- it's useful for us to carry with us a sense of where we've come from. Because that gives us more of a context for being intelligent about what the next step is gonna be.

JN: Yeah.

TH: You know, it seems to me that every generation secretly thinks that history began when they were born. And everything before then was pre-history. But that's just an illusion. So I think we have a chance now -- we have to face up to the fact that we've been better at doing things that make problems than we have been at doing things that solve problems.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And it is a novel situation. It is. Well, there's never been eight and a quarter billion people before. With tremendous technological capabilities. [pauses] It is a novel situation. It is. One writer said, it's like living in the eighth day of a week. We don't have landmarks we could always count on. But we've gotta do something. And I think that that's why I'm starting to write a book about the biosphere, because I think if we can keep a sense of the whole in mind, that gives us a new touchstone. A new context. And we can begin to think of -- well, just as 20 years ago, the new field of so-called universal design came into being, which was to help people with disabilities feel equal and not discriminated against.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: By making it easier to move around and to place appliances at lap height and that kind of thing. Now, we have to move that beyond universal design to sort of all-species design.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: We know that there's no such thing as a vacant lot. It may not have human purposes, but it's got a lot of life in it. So if we're gonna add our purposes to it, how do we do that in a way that doesn't eliminate the needs of other species? So, there's no empty land.

JN: No. Yeah.

TH: It's full. Now, it doesn't mean we can't make changes, but it does mean we have a different context in which to think about those changes. And it's the people who deny that, who are kidding themselves. And so, they need our help. We have to work twice as hard.

JN: Yeah. So how do you see some of those changes coming to be just in -- truly in the world around?

TH: Well, I see a lot of good things happening. For instance, the realization that suburbia, where the primary surface is lawn, is in fact an anti-environmental situation. And it's being remedied by this brilliant idea of a guy named Doug Tallamy of the so-called Homegrown National Park, which is that everyone takes a tiny bit of their lawn space and replants it with native plants. Then pollinators like bees and butterflies can do their work and not be eliminated. And that's sparking a lot of people. And reclaiming something that we didn't -- that inadvertently, we made a much more barren place. So, or a group that I just ran into a couple years ago up in Buffalo, New York, where they realized that south of them is -- largely thanks to the Iroquois -- an intact 1.1 million acre forest that could become sort of the go-to resource, outdoor resource for Buffalo. If you can think at that scale. So we are trying to scale up our thinking. And here in the city, there's all kinds of, you know, the nature-in-the-cities movement is making headway.

JN: Yeah.

TH: So partly, it's happening 'cause it has to happen.

JN: Sure.

TH: But obviously it -- [crosstalk] people find it fulfilling and rewarding. Huh?

LM: Just doing another check. Wellness check. Everybody all right?

JN: I think all good. [laughs]

LM: Okay.

TH: Yeah, we're winding down.

JN: Yeah.

TH: I'm just wandering on.

JN: Maybe 10 more minutes?

TH: Yeah. Okay. Let's do that.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Anything from your point of view that I'm leaving out?

JN: No, I mean, in both direct and kind of oblique ways, we've covered a lot of the things I wanted to talk about. I am curious just because it is kind of your second backyard. Like, Washington Square Park is one of the -- I don't know, you talk a lot about kinds of people and other species and buildings and environment all coexisting. And in this neighborhood at least, there's no other public space that encapsulates that quite as well as the park.

TH: The park is a very important place because statistics seem to show that it is the most used park per square foot.

JN: Yeah. The eyeball test would also seem to say that. [laughs]

TH: Anywhere. An awful lot of activity is concentrated in that park. I think that the recent redesign of it is on the whole remarkably successful.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: And sensitive to the fact that there are sort of bulb-outs in the middle of -- avenues of benches, specifically there so that musicians can congregate there.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: And it's great. Because that's always been an important thing going on, live music in the park.

JN: Yeah, of course. And I think a very interesting example of something in design making it easier to be a human in public.

TH: Yeah. And really, by just seeing how much space a self-gathering group needs. That it's not something you made up, it's something you just can observe if you choose to. So, a lot of this goes back to the work of William H. Whyte, Holly Whyte, who realized in looking at Bryant Park, that plantings at the edge had made it hard to see in. And people who didn't want to be seen were congregating there as a result. Also, that if you make steps not as high, they pull you inward rather than seem like a barrier. So the redesign of Bryant Park and putting it under the suzerainty of a nonprofit, a public-private nonprofit, has in fact been a big success. People say, oh, well it's, you know, redesigning on behalf of middle-class whites. Well, it's -- no. Yes, they're attracted to it, but anyone who works in the area is attracted to it now because it's attractive.

JN: Yeah. I mean, I work around the corner from it.

TH: Attractive literally means that: something that pulls you. Not just something pleasant.

JN: Yeah, it's true.

TH: Again. And that's by opening yourself up to the way things -- the way we respond to places.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And it gets much heavier use. And the lawn is adored in the summer and the skating rink is adored in the winter, and the merry-go-round is --

JN: That's true. Yeah. They're getting a lot of use.

TH: Yeah.

JN: I don't know, is there anything -- not as much conceptually, but like parts of your life that we didn't touch on that you'd like to go back to, that we should --

TH: Let me think. [pauses]

JN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think I read somewhere that your mom was on -- she was on one of the community boards?

TH: Oh, yes.

JN: She did Village Democrats stuff later in life?

TH: Yes. Later in life, my mom rebounded in a lovely way.

JN: Yeah. I would love to hear about that.

TH: And got interested in local democratic politics and was a stalwart of the Village Independent Democrats. Where the young star was Ed Koch. They got to be good pals. She served on Community Planning Board No. 2. Took that very seriously, and realized that she

had a lot to contribute. So, I haven't really risen to that level, but I am a member of the board of the 8th Street BID, the Village Alliance.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Which I think again, performs a really useful service. It's not just there to make sure that businesses were gonna make a huge profit. It's there to think about the needs of a community. And it's done a lot to bring -- well, as I said, if this middle part of the Village was sort of the oddity because of the post-war development -- to reunite the sense along 8th Street of something that is a neighborhood that's larger than that and belongs to everyone.

JN: Did her involvement in kind of neighborhood issues model anything in particular to you that --

TH: Well, yes. Just again, taking change seriously.

JN: Yeah.

TH: Trying to make sure that values that we know are important are carried forward. And the Village Independent Democrats were one of the first reform political clubs that we didn't -- not just there to rubber stamp authority, but to express the community's values and needs. And to articulate them in a way that can be put into practice. So, we had a really nice, for many years, Assemblyman: Bill Passannante.

JN: Mm-hm.

TH: Who was also part of these -- I think somewhere we have a nice photo of that he inscribed to my mom. Just the two of them talking together. So yes. She was also a great birdwatcher. So a lot of what's good in me has come from her, not just from dad. [pauses] Anything else you had in mind, Josie?

JN: No, I mean, we've -- I think we've covered a lot.

TH: Yeah. [laughs] Too much?

JN: I'm sure if you kept me here for another hour and a half, we could keep going.

TH: Too much?

JN: No, not at all.

TH: Okay. Well, maybe it's a good place to stop.

JN: Yeah. I do always like to ask --

TH: Go ahead.

JN: Is there a piece of art, you know, literature, film, whatever, that you think really gets at the Village?

TH: [pauses] Well, I think some of the turn of the 20th century artists who were taking daily life seriously, in a way, like Hopper and John Sloan and expressing the vitality of the neighborhood are of particular importance, revealing the richness of the life being lived in this community? Gimme a moment to think. [pauses]

JN: It's also okay if that's Final Jeopardy.

TH: Well, there's one guidebook to New York that I think surpasses all others, and that was the so-called *AIA Guide to New York* that Norval White and Elliot Wilensky wrote together. Because I think they had a sense of how what you and I love about the Village animated so many different parts of the city.

JN: Yeah.

TH: And they -- and also particularly, of course, sensitive to how buildings affect people. And it was written with joy and just bouncy, good humor.

JN: Can never have enough fun.

TH: Nope.

JN: Thank you so much for your time.

TH: Oh, Josie --

JN: This has really been a pleasure.

TH: Thanks for, you know, being such a great conversationalist.

JN: Oh no, thank you. And I have many good reminders to look up and around and take in what's around us, I think.

TH: Well, they're not just surroundings. They're us, too.

JN: Yeah, that's true.

TH: And Village Preservation, I think, is an institution that tries to embody that. And so, long may they wave.

JN: Yeah, hear, hear. Alright, well thank you.

[END OF AUDIO RECORDING]

Oral History Interview with

Narrator(s): Tony Hiss

Address: 22 East 8th Street

Birth year: 1941

Birthplace: New York, New York

Narrator Age: 84

Interviewer: Josie Naron

Place of Interview: West Village, NY

Date of Interview: December 5, 2025

Duration of Interview: 01:09:34

Number of Sessions: 1

Waiver Signed/copy given: Yes

Photographs: Taken from narrator

Format Recorded: .wav

Archival File Names: Hiss_Tony_VillagePreservationOralHistory_archival.mp3

MP3 File Name: Hiss_Tony_VillagePreservationOralHistory_archival.mp3

Order in Oral Histories: 59 [#1 in 2026]