

**Oral History Interview  
Margaret and Helen Elek  
WH106**

(Written transcript and digital audio)

On August 8, 2012, Margaret and Helen Elek were interviewed by Brenda Velasco at their shared residency at 609 S. Lincoln Avenue, Woodbridge at 10:30 A.M.

*Brenda Velasco:* I am here with two lovely young ladies and they are the Eleks and the Eleks is a very important name isn't Woodbridge. Margaret is the older sister at 100 plus years old and Helen, her kid sister, is 94 years. And thank goodness for their niece, Gerry Fee, because she helped arrange this interview.

**1. Identify individual-name, section date of birth.**

*Brenda Velasco:* So Margaret I want to introduce you.

*Margaret Elek:* My name is Margaret Elek. I was born in Walton, New York. That is as much as I can remember about Walton.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well that was over a hundred years ago.

*Margaret Elek:* That's a hundred years ago.

*Brenda Velasco:* Let's get your date of birth.

*Margaret Elek:* July 23, 1912. I was the fifth child. My parents had eight children and I was the fifth.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay and Helen introduce yourself to our audience.

*Helen Elek:* My name is Helen Elek and I was the seventh child in the family of eight. I was born in Flemington, New Jersey.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what was your birth date?

*Helen Elek:* November 5, 1918.

*Brenda Velasco:* Just before World War I ended then.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

**2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?**

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so you guys had been born in different locations. How long have you lived in Woodbridge though? We'll go to Margaret first because she's your elder sister and age takes precedence. But wait a minute, we forgot to introduce Gerry.

*Margaret Elek:* I was just going to say how about Gerry.

*Brenda Velasco:* Gerry, introduce yourself, maiden name as well.

*Gerry Fee:* I'm Gerry Krisak Fee. My mother was Julia Elek. She was the eldest sister in the Elek family. Do you want my birth date?

*Brenda Velasco:* No, we're going to skip that.

*Gerry Fee:* Good.

*Brenda Velasco:* We don't need that but you were the one who is responsible for getting us all together so I'm very grateful for that.

*Gerry Fee:* Thank you.

*Brenda Velasco:* So Margaret how long have you lived in Woodbridge?

*Margaret Elek:* I've lived in Woodbridge.....I think I must have been about three or four years old when.....well I started school in Woodbridge when we moved here.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you were about five years old then?

*Margaret Elek:* About five, yes.

*Gerry Fee:* Aunt Helen, you were born somewhere other than Woodbridge. You were in Flemington?

*Helen Elek:* Flemington.

*Gerry Fee:* Okay.

*Brenda Velasco:* And how old were you when you moved to Woodbridge?

*Helen Elek:* Just a little girl.

*Margaret Elek:* She was still a little girl in my mother's lap.

*Gerry Fee:* As close as we could figure it, they've been in Woodbridge about ninety years.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay about ninety years, thank you Gerry.

*Gerry Fee:* Yes, because Aunt Helen was not born in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Neither of you were born in Woodbridge.

*Gerry Fee:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* So if it was ninety years you came in about 1920 or so because Helen was born in 1918 and then you started going to school Margaret in Woodbridge. So you had to be about five or six years old.

*Margaret Elek:* Had to be, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* So about 1919 or 1920 that you moved here. That's a long time. You saw a lot of changes.

*Margaret Elek:* A lot.

*Brenda Velasco:* But before we get to some of the changes let's go to Question 3.

### **3. What did you or your family move to Woodbridge?**

*Margaret Elek:* Well we lived on a farm.....I don't know why they really moved to Woodbridge.

*Gerry Fee:* One of the things that you had said when I was asking you the questions is you think that maybe they moved here because there was some family here: the Bakas and the Pinters.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Gerry Fee:* Okay, they were already here.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* So this was the attraction.

*Margaret Elek:* I guess it had to be because I don't know why else. I guess I was too little.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh yeah, you were interested in dolls or just running around.

*Margaret Elek:* And we lived there.....why they wanted to come.....probably the attraction was the other families that lived here.

*Brenda Velasco:* And they were Hungarian, too.

*Margaret Elek:* They were Hungarian, too.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because we have this large Hungarian community in Woodbridge Proper and in Keasbey and Fords. Okay, so we got your parents coming here and we have other family. Do you recall Helen or Margaret where they lived?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, we lived right on Fulton Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* You lived on Fulton Street by the railroad then.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Margaret Elek:* By the railroad tracks. First of all, we lived in this one place and then it was too small because we were a large family so they bought the store.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you lived upstairs from the store?

*Margaret Elek:* No, because they operated the store and there were two rooms downstairs as I recall and the rest of it was all upstairs.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what kind of store did they operate?

*Margaret Elek:* Grocer and butcher.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do remember what they.....they had to chop and cut the meats and everything.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes. I helped cut meats too after a while when my mother was sick because my mother mostly operated the store.

*Brenda Velasco:* And your father.....

*Margaret Elek:* He would deliver the orders and whatnot. Maybe once in a while he would work in the store.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, but it was your mother.

*Margaret Elek:* Mostly my mother.

*Brenda Velasco:* So what kind of meats did you have there?

*Margaret Elek:* All kinds: steaks, beef, pork, cold cuts.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you had pigs around here? You didn't raise the pigs though.

*Margaret Elek:* No, they bought them in from the wholesaler, Perth Amboy Beef Company.

*Brenda Velasco:* How about chickens?

*Margaret Elek:* Once in a while they would sell chicken but not as a whole. I think the people raised them from their own chickens.

*Brenda Velasco:* But there were a lot of people that had their own chickens and even some of the cows.

*Margaret Elek:* Well, we did and after a while Mrs. Ruskie, her son, opened up a place and on weekends he would sell chicken in the store but he did it on his own.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what do you remember about the store, Helen?

*Helen Elek:* Not too much. I didn't, of course, work in the store either because I was more of a hindrance than anything.

*Brenda Velasco:* You were a little girl.

*Helen Elek:* I was mostly in the background in the kitchen than in the store.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so you were in the kitchen. Now did your mother make food to sell in the store too?

*Margaret Elek:* No.

*Helen Elek:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* So it was cold cuts and milk products.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a mom and pop store then.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Margaret Elek:* And the beef, you know, big pieces, I can still see my mother carrying out these big pieces of beef from the freezer/refrigerator. And when Helen was a little girl what she was doing and how she did it she fell in the well that was behind the house.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh my goodness! And how did you get Helen out?

*Margaret Elek:* All I can remember was seeing my father and grandfather, now I don't know which was which, one was reaching into the well trying to pull her out and the other one was holding the feet of the one that was in the well pulling her out.

*Brenda Velasco:* And obviously they got you out, Helen.

*Helen Elek:* Again I know nothing.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you don't remember anything.

*Helen Elek:* Not a thing.

*Margaret Elek:* They did get her out and after they got her out they gave her a shot of whiskey.

*Helen Elek:* To cure everything.

*Margaret Elek:* I remember that and my mother crying of course.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you got into trouble Helen.

*Helen Elek:* Yes, why or how I guess being inquisitive or maybe just walking in the area where I shouldn't have been,

*Margaret Elek:* There wasn't much water fortunately in the well at the time but I guess years before that people must have used it.

*Brenda Velasco:* But you didn't have well water in the store.

*Margaret Elek:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* You had city water by that time.

*Margaret Elek:* We had city water by then, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, so you grew up on Fulton Street both of you.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, and went to school.

*Brenda Velasco:* What school did you go to Margaret?

*Margaret Elek:* I went to School #1 up until the seventh grade and the eighth grade at that time was in the high school.

*Brenda Velasco:* On Barron Avenue?

*Margaret Elek:* On Barron Avenue but I didn't get much of a chance to go there because I had to go to work. I went to work at fourteen.

*Brenda Velasco:* And where did you work, Margaret?

*Margaret Elek:* I think it was the nightgown factory (Nightcraft). That was the first job I had but I only lasted a week because I was too slow.

*Brenda Velasco:* And where was this nightgown factory, do you remember?

*Helen Elek:* Sure.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you remember Helen?

*Helen Elek:* Green Street.

*Margaret Elek:* Back in there some place.

*Helen Elek:* It was a factory, a sewing factory.

*Margaret Elek:* And the girl next door....the people that lived there took me there for the job but I didn't, as I say, last.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was very short. Did they pay you?

*Margaret Elek:* They paid us seven dollars a week if you were fourteen and then if you were sixteen you got eight dollars a week. Ten hours a day and half a day Saturday.

*Brenda Velasco:* This was before we had the legislation of the Fair Laborers Standards Act in the 1930s so you were working way before that. (1938)

*Margaret Elek:* I guess I didn't work for a while and then after that my older sister worked in the cigar factory, **General Cigar**, in Perth Amboy.

*Brenda Velasco:* And she pulled you into it, too?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* How long did you work there?

*Margaret Elek:* Until World War II.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow, until 1941.

*Margaret Elek:* When World War II started and these places were hiring more people. I worked there until then.

*Brenda Velasco:* So how much were you paid there?

*Margaret Elek:* The same but they passed me for sixteen because I was big for my age.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so you looked like you were sixteen years old. So that was a long time to work from eighth grade until 1941. Helen, how about you?

*Margaret Elek:* She was going to school.

*Helen Elek:* I went to school.

*Brenda Velasco:* You went to school, okay, because you were the seventh.

*Helen Elek:* I would come home and then I would help clean up dishes.

*Margaret Elek:* She was the only one out of the eight of us that went to high school.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were you able to graduate from high school, Helen?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what year?

*Helen Elek:* 1936.

*Brenda Velasco:* 1936, right in the Depression then.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* You were very fortunate to be able to finish high school, Helen.

*Helen Elek:* High school and I was able, because of church and friends, to go on and get a diploma.

*Brenda Velasco:* And where did you work?

*Helen Elek:* I worked for Frank Van Sickle who owned the Dodge and Plymouth dealership.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was that located?

*Helen Elek:* In Perth Amboy. It was the office and they were located on New Brunswick Avenue and Jefferson Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow, you've got a good memory and how long did you work there?

*Helen Elek:* Until the war came along.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, until 1941 then approximately.

*Helen Elek:* And then, of course, cars were hard to come by because they were in the dealership and no cars to sell so what do you do with excess help. Mr. Frank Van Sickle was the president and owner of the business. His brother Harold ran the automobile business and Mr. Frank Van Sickle ran the banking business. Between the two brothers there I was and they said I don't want to let her go....well what are we going to do with her. So Mr. Frank Van Sickle said I'll take her over to the bank and he said we'll make an agreement...it'll be on a temporary basis which worked out to be forty-two years.

*Brenda Velasco:* What bank was that that you worked?

*Helen Elek:* Perth Amboy National Bank.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you retired then from the bank in the 1980s.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* You worked a long time there. You could have run the whole bank.

*Gerry Fee:* She did.

*Brenda Velasco:* Helen, you knew everybody.

*Helen Elek:* Just about.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow, what an experience!

*Helen Elek:* When I retired, I was senior vice-president and comptroller.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's terrific.

*Helen Elek:* And as far as they knew I was the only second girl in the area or anywhere that held that title.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was quite a privilege; that was quite an honor that they gave you. Were the Van Sickles still involved with the bank by the time you left?

*Helen Elek:* No.

*Brenda Velasco:* You were. You outlasted them, Helen.

*Helen Elek:* Yeah I sure did but he had new ownership and of course they had acquired other banks in between so they were moving people around.

*Brenda Velasco:* So by the time you left, in the 1980s when you retired, what was the name of the bank because sometimes the banks change names?

*Helen Elek:* Yes, it did.

*Brenda Velasco:* But originally it was the Perth Amboy National Bank.....

*Helen Elek:* Oh yeah, that was owned by Mr. Van Sickle.

*Gerry Fee:* It was on the five corners in Perth Amboy.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, on the five corners.

*Helen Elek:* The building is still there. I understand there is a bank there but I don't....that's all behind me.

*Brenda Velasco:* They've all gone through changes.

#### ***4. What physical changes have occurred over the years in the area you lived –houses, streets, stores, houses of worship, schools, etc.***

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so let's get back to Fulton Street now growing up because that's basically where you lived for a long, long time.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yeah.

*Helen Elek:* Sure.

*Brenda Velasco:* Let's look at some of the houses. Do you remember your address of that store that you owned?

*Margaret Elek:* 238 Fulton Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, now were there a lot of houses at that time around you?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, almost all.

*Helen Elek:* It was all built up.

*Brenda Velasco:* You had the railroad there.

*Margaret Elek:* I remember the railroad.

*Gerry Fee:* Behind the house and next door to grandma's butcher shop was a candy store. Mrs. Pushkas but we called her Pushkas lady. We'd go in the candy store.

*Brenda Velasco:* So there were a lot of mom and pop stores around there.

*Margaret Elek:* A lot.

*Helen Elek:* Including taverns.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, including taverns, that's what I want to hear about. Thank you because you are right. There were a lot of taverns there right Margaret and Helen?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, plenty of them.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you remember any of them?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh sure we do. **Meyer's**.....

*Brenda Velasco:* And this is all on Fulton Street?

*Margaret Elek:* On Fulton Street and there was **Cerko's**, and **Hegedus** was at the end of Fulton Street

*Brenda Velasco:* How about Main Street? What were some of the stores on Main Street?

*Margaret Elek:* **Christensen's** and **Choper's**, those were the two we remembered.

*Helen Elek:* Cleaners.

*Brenda Velasco:* You even had a cleaner there?

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you need a car growing up?

*Margaret Elek:* Pop had a truck to deliver orders and I used to help with that, too.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you had other brothers and sisters then too, right?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes because of course there was Jim, he left early; Al, then he married Joan, Joe, that's Jim dad, Joe was Jim's dad and Johnny and then Lewis. He was the one born in Woodbridge. My older brothers were born in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* So he was the first one born in Woodbridge and where was Julia born?

*Margaret Elek:* Walton, New York; Julia, Joe and I. I know one was born in Europe.

*Helen Elek:* Was it Jim who was born in Europe?

*Margaret Elek:* I can't remember was it Jim or which one it was.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, well we're interviewing you so we're going to concentrate just on you two but that was a big family so there are five boys and three girls. That's a lot of children and your mom had the store during the Depression then, too.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes.

*Gerry Fee:* Now I remember stories, Margaret doesn't remember this, but I remember stories about my grandmother cooking chicken soup in the store. And people in Woodbridge when they were hungry used to come and she'd give out the chicken soup.

*Helen Elek:* I don't remember that either.

*Gerry Fee:* I remember a little

*Brenda Velasco:* It was tough times there.

*Gerry Fee:* Right.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, very tough but nobody ever left without something to eat.

*Gerry Fee:* She used to feed people that didn't have money and stuff. In fact I remember stories about when she died, people came walking from Rahway because she had given them food and they wanted to pay tribute to her.

*Brenda Velasco:* You had a very special mother (Gerry's grandmother).

*Gerry Fee:* She was.

*Helen Elek:* Oh yes, she was.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, very exceptional and I know the one doctor, when she was sick and he was visiting her, he called her granny. He said, granny how much money did you lose in that store? She said, oh a couple of hundred. He said how about a couple of thousand. She said what was I going to do? Just like Gerry said, nobody ever left being hungry. Never. They always, no matter what, got something to eat.

*Brenda Velasco:* So this was a popular place for people to go your grandmother's butcher store.

*Gerry Fee:* Their mother.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Your grandmother and your mother. Sorry we've got two generations here. Okay, how about houses of worship?

*Margaret Elek:* What?

*Gerry Fee:* Churches, Aunt Margaret.

*Margaret Elek:* Churches.

*Gerry Fee:* Yes, churches in Woodbridge.

*Margaret Elek:* Well as children we went to the Hungarian Reformed, Sunday school and whatnot. Then after a while we changed and went to the First Congregation Hall. From the time we went to the First Congregation I always remember every Christmas, every child and there were about a hundred children in the Sunday school or more, always got a gift, a box of candy and an orange. During the summer it was some other churches, I don't know from where, but there were two other churches and our church would have an excursion by train to Asbury Park.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow, and you would take the train ride from.....

*Margaret Elek:* Well, we didn't take it too often. We couldn't. My mother just didn't let us go but maybe once or twice. But the children were always free. I know there were two other, but I can't remember, churches and ours.

*Gerry Fee:* There was the Hungarian Catholic Church.

*Brenda Velasco:* Our Lady of Mount Caramel?

*Margaret Elek:* No, it wasn't the local church, Gerry. It was from some other place. I don't really remember just where but it was from out of town I know.

*Brenda Velasco:* We discussed the school that you attended and we discussed that you went to School 1. Did you both go to kindergarten at School 1?

*Margaret Elek:* No, I didn't.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay Margaret.

*Helen Elek:* I guess I did.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, I went to first grade.

*Gerry Fee:* And Aunt Margaret's first grade teacher, as she remembered, was Miss Huber.

*Margaret Elek:* Miss Huber.

*Helen Elek:* Yes, Grace Huber.

*Brenda Velasco:* And did you have Grace Huber too, Helen?

*Helen Elek:* I don't really recall.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's phenomenal that you can remember your first grade teacher.

*Margaret Elek:* I don't know for some reason some things just stick.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright, well that stuck.

*Margaret Elek:* And I can still see her.

*Gerry Fee:* Just a couple of other things. She had mentioned that most of the roads in Woodbridge were dirt roads at that time.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, thanks Gerry.

*Gerry Fee:* And then we had carts that came around down the street and you bought merchandise off the carts. My grandmother used to buy the material to make our clothes from what we called the peddlers. According to Aunt Margaret, the fellow that bought the cart to my grandmother was a Mr. Vise.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, I still remember him.

*Gerry Fee:* And sometimes they would trade the food for the clothing.

*Brenda Velasco:* Right, they bartered.

*Gerry Fee:* Then they had a milkman that delivered milk to the house and then to the store and it was **Paulus Dairy** and they used to deliver milk.

*Brenda Velasco:* Times have changed.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Gerry Fee:* Oh, yes.

*Margaret Elek:* And who had the scarlet fever?



*Helen Elek:* Margie.

*Gerry Fee:* Marge.

*Helen Elek:* Margie, oh that's right. Her sister had scarlet fever.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, Gerry's sister had scarlet fever.

*Margaret Elek:* And you had to put the milk bottles all out separate. I remember your mother doing that. You couldn't have the milkman pick them up because the children had scarlet fever. You couldn't go to school either.

*Brenda Velasco:* Right, you had the quarantine sign out.

*Margaret Elek:* Quarantine sign on the door. Oh yes, don't forget that.

*Brenda Velasco:* Gerry, you lived on Fulton Street too?

*Margaret Elek:* Right across the street from us.

*Gerry Fee:* No, no Aunt Margaret. I was born in Perth Amboy and when we moved to Woodbridge we moved to Columbus Avenue. But we went to Strawberry Hill School and Aunt Margaret had a rumble seat chair and they didn't want us crossing Amboy Avenue so Aunt Margaret used to pick us up in the rumble seat car so we could sleep at my grandmother's house and go to school without crossing a major road. I remember that so we were on Columbus Avenue. The house is still there.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you remember the number?

*Gerry Fee:* 304.

*Helen Elek:* Even I remember that.

*Gerry Fee:* I go past it every once in a while. My mom and dad were the first owners of the house. They bought it brand new and I think they paid something like three thousand dollars for it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh my goodness!

*Gerry Fee:* They had the three of us and they were the only owners until after my mom died. She was 86 when she died and then we sold the house. They had been the original owners of the house.

*Brenda Velasco:* You've got good genes: 100, 94 and your mother was 86. Okay, let's go to Question 5 then.

**5. What public buildings/property were there? Post office, library, parks, firehouse, schools, etc.?**

*Brenda Velasco:* What public buildings were there like the post office?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, it was there.

*Brenda Velasco:* On Main Street?

*Margaret Elek:* Right on Main Street there. I guess it was right in that area on the corner of Main and Pearl like.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, okay. How about the library?

*Margaret Elek:* The library was there; we used to go.

*Brenda Velasco:* Where was the library for you?

*Margaret Elek:* Right where it is now.

*Gerry Fee:* No Aunt Margaret it's by the high school now.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, I'm sorry. It was on the corner of Barron.....where the White Church is across the street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so the Barron Arts Center was your library.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And Gerry is associated with the Barron Arts Center.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes, but that was the library then.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you used the library then too, Helen.

*Helen Elek:* I used it, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, how about parks, did you have any parks in Woodbridge that you used?

*Helen Elek:* I guess we used the field when we played baseball.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, where was the field Helen?

*Helen Elek:* Well, Fulton Street and Mrs. Postor owned the property.

*Margaret Elek:* Between Amboy Avenue and Fulton Street.

*Helen Elek:* And we used to play baseball with the boys.

*Brenda Velasco:* How did you do, Helen?

*Helen Elek:* Fair I would say. I struck out a lot but I would say the boys were never mean to us. They would pitch to us and.....

*Brenda Velasco:* They included you.

*Helen Elek:* It was fun.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, don't forget you had five brothers. Yeah, but they weren't all home at the time.

*Margaret Elek:* Some were married already and some had moved away.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, and the firehouse.

*Margaret Elek:* Well there was a firehouse where.....because our home burned at one time completely.

*Brenda Velasco:* Your home on Fulton Street?

*Margaret Elek:* On Fulton Street.

*Helen Elek:* Yeah, but I can't remember where the firehouse was.

*Margaret Elek:* Was it someplace right on School Street there?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yeah, probably that's where it was on School Street. Do you remember the year that your house burned? How old you were?

*Helen Elek:* You were working, right?

*Margaret Elek:* I think I was working already so I had to be at least fourteen or fifteen.

*Brenda Velasco:* And do you remember the fire, too?

*Helen Elek:* Yeah, I do.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was anybody home?

*Helen Elek:* Yeah, we were home.

*Margaret Elek:* The house next door caught on fire and when the firemen came they were having trouble getting the water going because the story that I heard- how true it was I don't know- they said they were all drunk. I don't know. I can't say that but that's the story I heard. All but the store.....

*Gerry Fee:* The stories don't change, do they?

*Brenda Velasco:* So the store didn't burn then.

*Margaret Elek:* The store didn't burn.

*Gerry Fee:* The back of the house.

*Margaret Elek:* The whole back of the house burned, clothes and all.

*Brenda Velasco:* So what did you do?

*Margaret Elek:* Well people collected clothes and brought us some and different people took us in. The Bakas took us in. We stayed with my mother and a couple of us stayed with the Bakas and somebody with the Pinters. I know we were all over.

*Brenda Velasco:* So the family was split for how long?

*Margaret Elek:* Until there were a couple of rooms that were livable and then somehow we just came back in and moved in slowly, those that could.

*Brenda Velasco:* If you were fourteen that would make it about the 1920s, just before the Depression, correct?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes and I know work. But I do know that a lot of people bought us clothes and bedding and things. Pop stayed with somebody and I think Grand Pop stayed with the Pinters and then the Orlechs from Milltown took the kid. My youngest brother we always referred to him as the kid. He was the youngest.

*Brenda Velasco:* So the family was split for a while.

*Margaret Elek:* Quite a while.

*Brenda Velasco:* But then you got back together.

*Margaret Elek:* We did as soon as rooms were built enough to be livable.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay Margaret, so you were working though at this time you were fourteen and Helen you were still going to school. So you were going to School 1 at this time then.

*Helen Elek:* Yes, at the time.

*Brenda Velasco:* That must have been a frightening experience though.

*Margaret Elek:* It was.

*Helen Elek:* Oh yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* But nobody was hurt.

*Margaret Elek:* Nobody was hurt. It was early evening.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you had the firemen help you and we've gone over schools. You went to School 1. And you went to School 1, Helen, and then you were able to graduate in 1936 from the high school on Barron Avenue.

*Helen Elek:* Right.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you remember some of the courses you took Helen?

*Helen Elek:* It was secretarial.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, you took secretarial and that's what prepared you for the job.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And they had to fight over you.

*Margaret Elek:* Your mom stayed with Lizzie Hango I remember because they were friendly.

*Brenda Velasco:* How old was your mother then Gerry when the fire occurred?

*Gerry Fee:* She was the oldest sister.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, she was Julia.

*Gerry Fee:* Right. How much older than you Aunt Margaret was my mom?

*Margaret Elek:* I never knew.

*Gerry Fee:* Okay, Aunt Helen do you remember how much older than Aunt Margaret my mom was?

*Helen Elek:* Oh, she was born in 1910 so she was two years older, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1910. Wow, what's the date today?

*Brenda Velasco:* Today is August 8<sup>th</sup>. Two more days would be your mother's birthday.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, your mother was born August 10<sup>th</sup>. I remember that now.

*Gerry Fee:* Yes, she would have been 102.

*Brenda Velasco:* And Margaret is over 100 right now. Okay, we're going to go to Question #6.

**6. What did you do for recreation?**

*Margaret Elek:* Played hide and seek.

*Helen Elek:* Played cards.

*Margaret Elek:* Played cards.

*Brenda Velasco:* What games of cards did you play?

*Helen Elek:* Played pinochle a lot.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, we played pinochle and then there was some other.....you turn them over or something. I don't know but pinochle was the big thing.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you have bikes to ride?

*Margaret Elek:* Well, the boys did.

*Helen Elek:* Maybe once in a while they'd let you ride it.

*Margaret Elek:* Yeah, well the girls in those days didn't have bicycles. After a while you had them.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yeah, Gerry had them but that's a different generation. Anything else you could remember when you were young?

*Gerry Fee:* Remember the Hungarian Grape Festivals that used to be held at the churches?

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, the churches.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Margaret Elek:* They would have dances and these grape festivals.

*Brenda Velasco:* Grapes?

*Gerry Fee:* Yeah, grapes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, for the wine.

*Margaret Elek:* You know they hang the grapes and then dancing. You would have to prior (to dancing) snitch them or something.

*Gerry Fee:* Exactly and if you got caught you had to pay some sort of penalty and I don't remember what the penalty was-like a penny or something.

*Brenda Velasco:* This was at the Hungarian Reformed Church?

*Margaret Elek:* All churches.

*Gerry Fee:* No, this was at the Catholic Church, the Hungarian Catholic Church because they lived near them.

*Brenda Velasco:* Right, because you lived near Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Amboy Avenue and then the Hungarian Reformed Church was just over Main Street.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, School Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* School Street, okay.

*Gerry Fee:* But at that time, I mean, if you went to a church you went to all the churches.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Gerry Fee:* There was no segregation. And if you were Hungarian you went to any Hungarian church, it didn't matter the religious denomination. But they were fun; I remember them.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* So that sounded like a good time.

*Margaret Elek:* Yeah, they were; they were good times. I mean we didn't have much but they were good times.

*Gerry Fee:* Exactly.

*Brenda Velasco:* You didn't need to have a lot of money to have a good time.

*Margaret Elek:* You didn't.

*Brenda Velasco:* You made your own good time.

*Margaret Elek:* That's right and we used to play on the streets and whatnot.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you play hopscotch or anything.

*Helen Elek:* Oh, yeah a number of times.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes we did. Rope, jumped rope.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, let's get to Question #7 then.

### **7. What was the focal point of your community?**

*Gerry Fee:* Where did everybody go to socialize?

*Margaret Elek:* I don't know where they would go other than they would have the dances.

*Brenda Velasco:* So the church events a lot.

*Margaret Elek:* And then sometimes they would have these grape festivals or whatever.

*Gerry Fee:* She had said that the churches were the focal point rather quick where people would get together and the taverns and saloons where all the men got together.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes.

*Helen Elek:* Oh, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, that's true. We had a lot more taverns back then and you gave us a list of them. Now how about your mom's store? You had a lot of people coming into the store, too.

*Margaret Elek:* Different ones.

*Helen Elek:* All on credit. They had the books that they would bring with them, never cash.

*Margaret Elek:* It was never cash and every Monday morning, well the older ones did, we had to go visit all the customers to get their orders, what they wanted. At the end of the month we collected the books and mom would add them up.

*Helen Elek:* She was terrific in adding. Zip, zip, zip she would add and never made a mistake.

*Margaret Elek:* Never in all the years did I ever, and I did for a long time do the delivering and what not, did anybody complain that the book was wrong or mom didn't add anything right. Never, never did I hear a complaint.

*Brenda Velasco:* They just accepted she was honest which she was.

*Margaret Elek:* She was and she was good and I think she takes after her in the adding.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yeah, well you worked for the bank (Helen).

*Gerry Fee:* I think Jim has a picture of my grandmother in his office and she's got on a babushka and the hatchet that she used to use.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, they came around and took pictures and she took that picture.

*Brenda Velasco:* Going to Question #8.

### **8. What did you like about living in your section of Woodbridge?**

*Helen Elek:* I think the people were really concerned about their neighbor or friend or whomever.

*Margaret Elek:* That's right. You know if anything.....

*Helen Elek:* But there was a concern if they didn't see you or if so and so were sick they would prepare a nice dish or meal of some sort.....

*Margaret Elek:* For the families.

*Helen Elek:* Yes, they really cared.

*Margaret Elek:* They cared about one another.

*Helen Elek:* If they didn't see you, they had to know why.

*Margaret Elek:* Whether there was a sickness or..... people were always preparing meals and bringing them to you.

*Gerry Fee:* Then you mentioned that Dr. Rothfus was the doctor in town and he took care of all the people and it was just kind of a friendly thing.

*Brenda Velasco:* Was he Hungarian, too?

*Margaret Elek:* No, he wasn't Hungarian.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was a nice community to grow up in.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes.

*Gerry Fee:* Yup.

*Margaret Elek:* My one brother, when my mother was sick, was taking care of the store. I was working then already, and I guess they were throwing snowballs out there and somebody came and he was serving them. And I guess Mrs. Dolliber she wanted chopped meat and he was putting it in the machine to chop it and chopped part of his finger off, his hand was so cold. She said to him, was that your finger? He didn't even realize it.

*Helen Elek:* We, John and I, walked up to the doctor's office to have the finger....

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, she had wrapped it in a big towel.

*Helen Elek:* Dad's towel but it was so numb and pressed.

*Brenda Velasco:* And was it ever.....it wasn't attached though.

*Margaret Elek:* No, never. I don't think they even found it or did they find it?

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, we're going to go on so you liked your section in Woodbridge and you're still here but then we'll get down to....that's Question #11. Okay, let's go to Question #9

**9. Did either of you experience any significant happenings in Woodbridge-construction, accidents, sports events, riots, discrimination, etc.**

*Helen Elek:* Train wreck.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes. I was working and I know I was on the second shift and everybody coming in was talking about the train wreck. But you and Johnny, my brother John, worked all night there.

*Brenda Velasco:* So Helen you were home for that train wreck. What do you remember?

*Helen Elek:* All the concaving of people and back and forth, back and forth. You know running and helping in whatever way they could.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were you able to see it from your house?

*Helen Elek:* Yes, the cars were over on the side of the tracks. We had to see everything.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you saw the bodies, too.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yeah. I remember when we moved there and the railroad tracks were right behind this house that they bought and my mother often saying that one o'clock in the morning a train would come through whistling like crazy. She said all these kids would wake up and say mom take us home. I remember when World War I ended. We were still in Flemington and we remember being outside and everybody is crying and all this noise the church bells ringing and whistles blowing and everything. And I said to my mother, what is going on? And she said well thank God your father doesn't have to go to war that the war was over. That I still remember.

*Gerry Fee:* Then one other thing that she had mentioned the Captain Kurt Carlsen parade.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh yes. That was right down Main Street right for you.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* And were you able to attend the parade?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, we were off.

*Brenda Velasco:* You were off from work then.

*Margaret Elek:* We had the day off.

*Gerry Fee:* And actually when I saw the video from the Historical Society, there I am and that's when I realized how old I am. I was holding the flag.

*Brenda Velasco:* So Gerry was holding the flag.

*Gerry Fee:* Yes, in front of the Town Hall, the American Flag.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, I remember that.

*Gerry Fee:* With the Woodbridge High School band. I'm like, Oh my god I'm part of history already!

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, you are.

*Gerry Fee:* I'm not ready for it yet.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you were just bystanders.

*Margaret Elek:* At that time, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* You stood on Main Street to watch the parade?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, he was a short man, he wasn't too tall.

*Brenda Velasco:* He was a very humble person.

*Margaret Elek:* Very and she was very nice, too. I remember seeing her or meeting her someplace.

*Gerry Fee:* Kurt Carlsen's wife?

*Helen Elek:* Oh, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, they lived in Woodbridge for a while.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, they lived there.

*Helen Elek:* Yes, not far from here.

*Margaret Elek:* They had several children. What was it several girls?

*Brenda Velasco:* They had at least two girls. They moved out of Woodbridge. Okay, how about construction? Now you said that the Turnpike.....

*Margaret Elek:* Came and.....

*Brenda Velasco:* They bought your mother's house?

*Margaret Elek:* They bought our home....was included in that, you know, and with that money we bought the house on Main Street.

*Helen Elek:* Right.

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you remember the address on Main Street?

*Helen Elek:* 241.

*Gerry Fee:* Century 21 is there.

*Brenda Velasco:* 241 Main Street. Yes, where Century 21 is.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, is that what it is now.

*Gerry Fee:* Yes, they joined the two houses, the one that was by us.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so how old were you Helen when you moved there?

*Helen Elek:* Oh, I was working already.

*Brenda Velasco:* So it was after 1936. Probably in the forties and how old were you Margaret, do you remember?

*Margaret Elek:* I don't remember. I know I was working but I think I was working at **Hyatt's** then already.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, you were at **Hyatt**, in Clark?

*Margaret Elek:* Clark, yes.

*Gerry Fee:* During the war that's where she worked. Right, during the Second World War you worked in **Hyatt Bearing**?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was a good job.

*Margaret Elek:* It was a good job and I'm grateful for it because at all those other jobs I had absolutely nothing, no coverage of any kind.

*Brenda Velasco:* This is when women started going into the factories at good paying jobs. So they gave you medical then.

*Margaret Elek:* That's when I got the coverage and I have it until today even though I'm retired.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you have a pension.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Were you part of the union?

*Margaret Elek:* You had to be. At first when I went there it wasn't a closed shop but after a while it had to be a closed shop.

*Brenda Velasco:* And that was the United Auto Workers?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so that's why you can live in a house and there were benefits there for you.

*Margaret Elek:* Whatever I have, it's only because I had the job there. Up until then.....never had a vacation in all the years that we worked.

*Brenda Velasco:* You were given a vacation at **Hyatt Bearing**.

*Margaret Elek:* At **Hyatt Bearing** was the first time that I.....

*Brenda Velasco:* And how many weeks vacation did you get?

*Margaret Elek:* I guess for the first five years you got one and then you got three I guess. It depended upon.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Your term (years worked).

*Margaret Elek:* But I worked there for thirty years.

*Brenda Velasco:* Wow!

*Margaret Elek:* I stayed a little longer because it meant a little more. My thirty years were up in May or July. But I stayed until the end of the year because it gave me a little more and whatnot.

*Brenda Velasco:* What year did you retire in then?

*Margaret Elek:* I was 62½ because at 62 when I wanted to retire because I was working since I was 14.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, you put a lot of time in.

*Margaret Elek:* But I stayed until the end of the year.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then by that time, you had social security coming in too because that was 1938 after you had been working for a while.

*Margaret Elek:* That's right, yes. But up until then absolutely nothing. They didn't at any of those factories.

*Brenda Velasco:* Then when did you move to this house because we're at 609 Lincoln.

*Margaret Elek:* I know I was thinking of retiring and I knew we couldn't afford the big house because we had to have the big rooms there are so many of us. So then Jim (nephew) looked for us. Jim (Elek) was already in the business and found us this one.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so you moved here with Helen.

*Margaret Elek:* It was only two of us left in a big eight room house we didn't need but we loved it.



*Brenda Velasco:* You had good memories of that house.

*Helen Elek:* Oh, yes.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, yes. So we just looked for something small.

*Brenda Velasco:* And this is perfect.

*Margaret Elek:* Enough to keep us going.

*Brenda Velasco:* It's a quiet neighborhood.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so that gets us to Question #10.

### **10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?**

*Margaret Elek:* I guess we just like it here. What are you going to do?

*Helen Elek:* Although you don't know as many people as we originally did.

*Margaret Elek:* No. When we first moved here it was much nicer. Now the people behind us Indians are there. We don't know who is there. Rose is here. But we don't know they just don't want to be bothered.

*Brenda Velasco:* A lot of them are working, too. It's a different time. But when you moved here at 609 Lincoln you moved with your mother, too?

*Margaret Elek:* No, it was after mom passed away because mom loved the place on Main Street. She had her garden and she had a nice front porch and she could sit out and rock.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because she wasn't going to work anymore.

*Margaret Elek:* She never worked other than the butcher store. We sold that.

*Helen Elek:* Tell her about the incident when mom was on the porch when she had fallen asleep and then the doorbell rang.

*Brenda Velasco:* And what happened?

*Helen Elek:* Whoever it was, was selling something and she said I'm sorry I only work here.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yeah, they were selling dishes I think.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was a good way to get out of that.

*Margaret Elek:* That's right, yes. But she loved it there and we stayed there. But then when I was thinking of retiring we thought well do we need such a big place and whatnot.

*Brenda Velasco:* It was an eight room house.

*Margaret Elek:* Eight room houses, bath up and down. She had her garden, you know, and things that she loved doing. We had good neighbors because when her work days if they didn't see her, especially Julia on this one side from her bedroom she could see into our kitchen. And if she didn't see mom during the day, she'd come over and check on her.

*Brenda Velasco:* That's right because you worked.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, because I worked and she worked.

### **11. Do you have any family members still living in Woodbridge Township today?**

*Brenda Velasco:* Do you still have family members living in Woodbridge or are you it?

*Margaret Elek:* Well, just Jim.

*Helen Elek:* Jim.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, Jim Elek our realtor.

*Margaret Elek:* And Gerry.

*Brenda Velasco:* We can't forget Gerry. Gerry, where do you live now?

*Gerry Fee:* On Ridgedale Avenue in Woodbridge.

*Margaret Elek:* And of course her children.

*Brenda Velasco:* And your children live in Woodbridge, too?

*Gerry Fee:* Two of them. I have five boys and one of my sons is a volunteer fireman here in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, okay.

*Gerry Fee:* So the comment about the firemen when their house burned.....I got my boy.

*Margaret Elek:* Because Leta lives in Plainsboro.

*Helen Elek:* No, Kendall Park.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, going to the last question.

**12. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss that we haven't covered that pertains to Woodbridge?**

*Gerry Fee:* When the Turnpike bought their property their store was sold to the Najavitz family and it was moved but I don't know where.

*Margaret Elek:* Mrs. Najavitz.....

*Helen Elek:* The side street.

*Gerry Fee:* Oh, off the side street.

*Helen Elek:* Off of Fulton Street.

*Margaret Elek:* She had a dry goods store and she wanted to know if she could exchange her place for our place in the deal that they made there.

*Gerry Fee:* So the Turnpike took her building and my grandmother's building was put on her property. You could wheel and deal back then. It was a nicer time.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, it wasn't as regulated.

*Helen Elek:* I don't know if it's still there now.

*Gerry Fee:* I don't know either.

*Margaret Elek:* I don't know because Woodbridge is not the same now but it was a good place to live, no problems. We had colored, we had Jewish, we had Italian but we never had any problems. Not on Fulton Street anyhow we didn't.

*Brenda Velasco:* And you're right, you did have a hodge podge of people because the Bernsteins lived around there ,too. They had a grocery store.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh yes, that's a familiar name.

*Helen Elek:* What?

*Brenda Velasco:* Bernstein.

*Helen Elek:* Oh yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* They had a fruit and produce store.

*Helen Elek:* **Jasper** was there on Main Street, too.

*Brenda Velasco:* **Jasper** on Main Street and what did they sell?

*Helen Elek:* Fresh produce.

*Margaret Elek:* **Jackson's** was the druggist.

*Helen Elek:* Not **Jackson's**.

*Brenda Velasco:* **Jasper** had fresh produce on Main Street and then there was **Jackson's Pharmacy**, right?

*Margaret Elek:* Yes.

*Helen Elek:* Yes.

*Margaret Elek:* And who else.....there was somebody else who had the produce there.

*Helen Elek:* I think.

*Margaret Elek:* Mary Jasper.

*Helen Elek:* I said.

*Margaret Elek:* Oh, okay.

*Brenda Velasco:* She came through. See we needed both of you here to jog each other.

*Helen Elek:* Yeah.

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, and **Christensen's** and.....

*Brenda Velasco:* **Choper's.**

*Margaret Elek:* Yes, oh yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, I've emptied your minds. Is there anything else you can remember?

*Margaret Elek:* I'm trying to remember.

*Helen Elek:* You did a good job of listing everything.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay then we're going to call it quits. And Gerry is going to take you out to lunch, right?

*Gerry Fee:* Yup.

*Margaret Elek:* If we think of anything else that we should.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Then Gerry will contact me. Gerry has my e-mail and my phone number so I thank you, Margaret.

*Margaret Elek:* Sorry but that's as well as I can remember.

*Brenda Velasco:* You did a good job. Helen, I thank you for sitting in on the interview.

*Helen Elek:* Yes, it was interesting.

*Brenda Velasco:* Good.

*Helen Elek:* When you try to look back and picture all of this it.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, you are a very spry 94 so I expect for your hundredth birthday I want to be invited there. And Gerry you were the catalyst you got us all together so thank you, thank you, thank you.

*Gerry Fee:* You're welcome.