

## Oral History Interview

Ralph Kushinsky

WH016

(written transcript and digital audio)

On August 29, 2008, Ralph Kushinsky was interviewed at his home on Chain O'Hills Road in the Colonia section of Woodbridge at 2:45 P.M. by Brenda Velasco. Because of the time constraints, the interview was not concluded.

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

I'm Ralph Kushinsky. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. My grandparents lived there, in upper New York State, and my mother went there to give birth and two weeks later went back home. I was born on November 9<sup>th</sup>. I guess being born in Brooklyn is a designation that's an oddity, an honor and it was very different because I went back and lived there two years during my lifetime. I was born on November 9, 1927. I've lived in Woodbridge since 1941.

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

*Brenda Velasco:* Where did you live in Woodbridge, Woodbridge Proper then?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Yes, yes, the first year we lived here we lived on Crampton Avenue, 54 Crampton Avenue. I remember the number. It was a duplex and we had applied for an apartment at, I think it was called, Woodbrook Village, on the lake or the little pond that we have over there, South Park Drive. A year later we moved to South Park Drive where we lived until 1955 and we moved into a housing development, that we had something to do with, right behind the garden apartments there called Park Lake Gardens. There were 50 some houses that were built there. We were the brokers, I guess, from a real estate standpoint, had a developer build the houses where my father bought one, obviously, and I guess it was '55, right. I personally lived there until 1962 when I bought this house in Colonia when I got married and have lived here ever since. So now you know it.

*Brenda Velasco:* Now I know. You lived a long time in Woodbridge Proper, though.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* From '41 to '55, I guess. No, no, '41 to '62, right, right, right.

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

*Brenda Velasco:* Why did your family come to Woodbridge if they lived in New York State?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* No, we lived in Jersey. My familiarity with New York State was purely, what I was told as a child, and little I remembered after that, but we've lived mostly in New Jersey. The two weeks when I was born in Brooklyn was because, as I had mentioned, my mother went, I guess it was common place in those days, to her parents home to give birth and then went back to either **Middletown**, New York, Port Jervis, Woodburn, one of those towns, I remember, is where I lived when I was a child. Then I moved to, except for two years, I remember this, it was two years before we moved to Woodbridge that I lived in Brooklyn again. My father was transferred there, I don't know what he did at the time, but we lived in New Jersey most of our lives. **I lived** either in Woodbridge since '41, which is the bigger part of it, and Atlantic City for a couple of years, Perth Amboy for a year or two, I don't remember the exact **time**. **Lakewood**. I spent a few years in Lakewood, but it was mostly in New Jersey and mostly in Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so what brought your family to Woodbridge then?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I think it was economics, if I remember correctly. My father got a job in the area, this was post-depression, and I think, in fact, he went to work for Flagstaff Foods. Did you ever hear of that?

*Brenda Velasco:* No.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* That was a large wholesale grocer for the time and it sold to stores. There were no supermarkets. There was the corner grocery store and we looked for a place to live. We had lived in Perth Amboy many, many years before, for a year or so, for what reason again I don't remember, but I remember this reason that we moved to Woodbridge. It was just a location near the office and the warehouse was in Perth Amboy and we stayed here. Then in 1948 we, well I graduated from Woodbridge High School in 1946, and spent two years trying to get a higher education, I remember that. I went to Mexico City College and transferred to Rutgers and after approximately two years I decided that I had enough of higher education. I didn't get along with it.

**4. What physical changes have occurred over the years in the area you lived?  
-houses, streets, services, stores, houses of worship, school etc.**

After operating an insurance agency out of our home on South Park Drive, my father and I opened the David R. Martin Agency at 115 Main Street, the old **Makaroy Building**. **Do you know that one?**

*Brenda Velasco:* No, I don't.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Do you know where Elek has his **office? That** used to be an ACME store.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Did you know that?

*Brenda Velasco:* I heard that there was an ACME, **yeah**.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* And the corner was empty and there was a gas station and **then it became** a bank, which has been ever since. Next to the ACME was an old, really colonial, really, I wouldn't imagine that the town has a record of it, going back to the Colonial days owned by a gentleman by the name of Leon **Makaroy, who** was an old Woodbridge family; he was an attorney, and we rented space there and opened up what, was then, one of the many small businesses that people went **into- real** estate and insurance. We were there for a number of years. Then in 1962, we bought the building we're in now which used to be one of the first post offices in town, at 94 Main Street. Did you know that?

*Brenda Velasco:* No, I knew the post office, at one time, was by the fire house.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* When I remember the post office it was down the street, down Main Street.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* It was always there in that area in that building, I think. No, no, the post office was the corner of Pearl Street, where the water company is located and the Woodbridge Chamber of **Commerce**. **Well the** next building was where the post office used to be originally. It was an old Victorian type building which a lot of buildings were on Main Street. Then they had a building built where they are now.

*Brenda Velasco:* Right.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Which has been the post office since but before that there were three or four other locations and one of them was 94 Main Street which is the building I'm in and have been for four million years.

*Brenda Velasco:* So you shared the building with the post office then?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* No, when my dad and I bought the building it was owned by the Minsky family. Max Minsky and his father ended up owning a liquor store on Amboy Avenue, all the way down towards Perth Amboy near the Provident Bank then there's a liquor store there.

*Brenda Velasco:* By Al Chars or?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Yes, they eventually owned that but before, I don't know whether they had opened it or not already but we bought the building from them. The previous occupant was Martin Lawrence Jewelers. Do you remember that?

*Brenda Velasco:* No, that one I don't.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Martin Lawrence Jewelers and Minskys were in partnership. The son was a guy by the name of Ben Martin and it was called Martin Lawrence Jewelers. Next to that, in the same building, there was a fruit and vegetable store with an open front. Remember when the stores used to be.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Shorter?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Just opened. You're not that old.

*Brenda Velasco:* Oh, I am. I am. I am.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Anyway, I'm confusing you?

*Brenda Velasco:* No, no.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* You know exactly where I am geographically speaking?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yep.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Because some of these are bringing back some memories. I could probably tell you almost every, who was, and well, the time Main Street was a very busy, economically speaking, street.

*Brenda Velasco:* You had a lot of Mom and Pop stores there.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* There was every conceivable type of merchant there. From shoes to woman's clothing, to Christensen's Department Store which was the mainstay of the street. They had two or three pharmacies, two or three hardware stores, shoe stores, jewelry stores, which are still there. They had the Woolworths, the A&P, ACME, Coppola's Cleaners. Coppola's Cleaners are, starting on my side of Main Street, the corner of Amboy Avenue, are you getting something in this rambling, I mean, that's your interest in knowing what was.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yep, right was.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Okay, the corner of Main Street and Amboy Avenue was the Middlesex Hotel.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Do you remember that?

*Brenda Velasco:* That I don't remember, but other people have spoken about it.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Where there are three or four stores, presently owned by, still owned by Nick, he's dead, Nick Bachless owned that corner and owned the Reo Diner at the time. The Reo Diner was in the same location but a real old fashioned diner. Can you envision that? It looked, not like a diner but an old railroad car; it was shaped, designed and looked like it was a railroad car.

*Brenda Velasco:* It changed since then.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* It's had, I guess, two or three evolutions. One as a result of a fire, in fact we insured it when we had that fire, and of course the corner, as I mentioned before, was a hotel. (Fire occurred in 1957/1958.) It had a bar and I guess it had rooms and it was a hotel. Then going down the street, there was a period where there were vacancies as far as open lots that were built eventually next to, well the hotel was knocked down and I guess Nick must have built,

if I remember, built those stores. His family still owns it. He has a nephew. Mrs. Bachless died not too many years ago and the nephew, I can't think of his name now, in fact we still insure the building, they still own it. There used to be a restaurant on the corner run by one of Nick's nieces and, what else was there, I forgot what was there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Across from St. James, what was there at that time?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* The corner?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yes, the corner of Main Street and Amboy Avenue?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I just tried to think of that before. I think of a gas station for some reason or other and it may be a complete figment of my imagination because it just seemed like such a nice corner for a gas station. I don't remember where there actually was one. I can't think of any retail endeavor or a commercial endeavor that was there. I can't. I mean, actually when you go down from that corner down the next building would be **where** the ACME was and the A&P and Woolworths and then there was an empty space. Those five stores were built by the Toker brothers from Elizabeth. There was an oil company, Toker Oil, and I guess they looked for an investment and they bought the five stores which now include the jewelry store.

*Brenda Velasco:* Neves Jewelers?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Yea, yea, Lee Neves place, which were two stores. There was a shoe store there and, in fact, Milt Goldsmith was the merchant who ran the shoe store. I think it was called the Boot Shop and one of the smaller stores was the Modern Men's Shop, which was a men's store, which moved from a smaller store to a bigger store three doors away, which was the larger of the five stores. But years later, Mrs. Platt, opened up across the street, she opened her newspaper place, Notions and Things Like, not notions, what the hell was it, it was a .....

*Brenda Velasco:* Stationery store?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Stationery store, that's the word, thank you. And it's there again. It's peculiar how times go round and round. Of course, where Christensen's was, you have a dance studio and, I don't know who owns the building, and the dollar store, which is a tremendous inclusion of Main Street. I say that laughingly.

*Brenda Velasco:* Because this is was pretty upscale.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* You know, Main Street was, like on a Saturday night or Friday night, we had crowds, not millions, but you know what I'm talking about.

*Brenda Velasco:* Aha.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* There were problems with parking, real problems with parking, not the imaginary ones there now. I think that the street would be more parked on now than it is and that the new sidewalks would be walked on. I remember the first thought I had when the new sidewalks were put on, "why would they do it and who's going to walk on it". They're probably as new as they were when they were installed because there is very little traffic. I feel so sorry for the merchants on Main Street, I really do.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, we're trying to open up more business there as you know. With the Farmer's Market we're trying to get people to come there. It's a nice area.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Woodbridge, I'm going to go on a tangent now, has been neglected, with all due respect to the people who govern this town. Both parties, Democrats and Republicans, I'm neutralizing the statement, have neglected Woodbridge tremendously, in my opinion. You may not like to hear it and I **think of many** conversations I've had over the **years. I was** very active at one time in the Republican Party going back to the days of Freddie Adams (**Mayor: 1960-1961**). I remember conversations with all kinds of politicians about what they wanted to do for Woodbridge and it was always, well we need parking, and we need this and we need that.

Nothing was ever, ever done. When there was a possibility of maybe acquiring an anchor store or two and giving them the parking to enhance the desirability, “why go to Main Street, what are you going to find on Main Street”. With all due respect, I mean I’m there a couple of hours a day. Other than that, there’s nothing very important. I mean, you will admit that, wouldn’t you?  
*Brenda Velasco:* I tend to go elsewhere shopping since I live in Colonia. I know the Mayor is trying with the Main Street Improvement District. They’re buying more parking lots. Right now it’s more commuter people going in there and taking the train and down the road, hopefully, with some of the restaurants, that’s where I’ll go.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Well, I’ve lived here since ’62, was it, and my wife, may she rest in peace, gravitated towards Woodbridge and Edison and other areas other than, where people in Colonia it’s true, mostly shopped in Rahway or Elizabeth. Why I don’t know, I never understood that.

*Brenda Velasco:* A lot people who moved to Colonia came from Union County. In fact, they didn’t come from Perth Amboy or Woodbridge, they came from Union County. That may be one of the explanations at that time. But when did you note that Main Street in Woodbridge, cause you said it was busy Friday and Saturday nights? And then when did you start noticing the decline?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* It’s difficult to pinpoint it really.

*Brenda Velasco:* In the ’50s, because Woodbridge Center opened in the ’60s?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Main Street, I remember, in the ’50s we were already at 115 Main Street, I think, and I was more aware of Main Street than I was from a residential point at the time. And it was still pretty busy. I think the Woodbridge Center plans in fact I have, if you want it I’ll give it to you, a booklet that I was given by the administration at the time, of the Woodbridge Redevelopment Agency and its plans.

*Brenda Velasco:* That’s great.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I’ll give it to you, I have it. In fact, I just remembered I bought it home from the office yesterday. The downtown merchants weren’t very happy about Woodbridge Center, for obvious reasons. It wasn’t supposed to be a shopping center it was supposed to be Woodbridge Center. They had grand plans of municipal buildings, residential, commercial and so forth, all in what was called the clay pits, if you remember that. The head of the Redevelopment Agency was, and still is, a good friend of mine, Buddy Harris. He’s retired. In fact, he was very active in the Republican Party and helped tremendously in getting Freddie Adams elected mayor in ’60 or ’61, something like that. Buddy was the head of the Redevelopment Agency and from his visions and activities developed this redevelopment plan. And, of course, that was a forerunner of the destruction of Main Street’s shopping center and likes. It was hard to fight him and hard to beat him but possible there. There had been towns that you know of that have overcome that, I guess you would call a shopping center a disability, from the standpoint of retail operations. I mean every town in this area, I think, has been hurt badly by these shopping centers, which is no great statement, I think everybody knows that. But yet there are some towns, I started to say, that had been able to overcome it by foresight, by controlling things that are uncontrollable.

*Brenda Velasco:* Can you think of any, off hand, though?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Well, Westfield, Cranford.

*Brenda Velasco:* Westfield doesn’t have a mall. It’s Short Halls.....

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Yea, but it’s still.....

*Brenda Velasco:* They preserve their Main Streets.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* It's connected it's next door. Hello you know it's right next door and Red Bank.....

*Brenda Velasco:* Yea, Red Bank.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* What the hell are the others, there are a couple of them? I can't think of right off hand, but you probably know better than I. You know getting, as I say it I say to myself it sounds so simple but it isn't. I know it's having been in the real estate business many, many years ago, anchor stores are available. If you can give them tax incentives, financial reasons to move to an available site, or a site to become available, to anchor a Main Street for example, they'll come. Many have gone into a small area and now, more than ever, because of the tremendously high cost of renting in shopping centers. I mean, they pay for the amount of air that's counted in a shopping center in their rents every month. What are those costs called?

*Brenda Velasco:* Not overhead costs, I know that.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* No it's, well, whatever the fact, you know that there are costs that are placed in their rental that makes their rents extremely high and, where as they could overcome that deficit by having lesser rents, on Main Street Woodbridge for example. I mean it was a shame that we let Christensen's go. You couldn't keep Christensen's because the family ran it like it was 1912. They were very nice people but they were never able to get out of that very, very small town atmosphere. The things I'm saying now, I don't mean to make it sound simple. These are gigantic projects that are probably beyond my comprehension, but Woodbridge should never have allowed them to deteriorate economically from a retail standpoint. These restaurants coming in, you know, you have some traffic, parking I'm talking about, at night on Main Street. I go down there, whenever I feel like I go to my office. I'm really sort of semi-retired. Since Joan passed away I'm getting lazier as I get older. You see some of the cars there that are parked near Il Castello's. And what's the other one up the street?

*Brenda Velasco:* Venezia.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Venezia, and Il Castello's has delicious food but you can leave your annual taxes there for one meal. It's worth it. I bought cousins up from Toms River and I think I got an attitude from them that, you're going to take us to a restaurant on Main Street Woodbridge, you know. They had pasta fagioli and a rack of lamb and he said it was the best he's ever had in his whole life.

*Brenda Velasco:* Terrific!

*Ralph Kushinsky:* They have delicious food. Well, you know, restaurants are fine to have, but can they really bring traffic for merchants, enough? I mean, Il Castello's, I'm sure, doesn't bring any walking patron on Main Street, or do you think they do? I don't know.

*Brenda Velasco:* It's noted as a high quality restaurant, so if you want to impress somebody, you bring them there.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Yea.

*Brenda Velasco:* But it's not a walkin crowd, it's not a walkin crowd.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I don't think the average person can afford it.

*Brenda Velasco:* You're right, not me.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I knew the prices were high but when he saw the bill, and he goes to, even in the Toms River area they have nice restaurants down there, he was quite surprised that it was as expensive as it was. You know there are things in Woodbridge that I can think of. Did you guys know that there was a pizzeria on, what used to be the circle, on Route 1?

*Brenda Velasco:* No, okay circle on Route 1.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Yea, you know where the Lomax is now? (Loman Ford)

*Brenda Velasco:* Yea, right.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Well, looking at Lomax (Loman) going north, well there was a circle there, this is where there was a hot dog stand there at one **time. Well across** the way, on that side of **Route 1**, this was a very sparsely built up area, I'm talking about when I was in high school and our principal at the time was Dr. Fairey. I don't know if he was a PhD, was an alcoholic and besides being principal of the high school, this was in the '40s, he owned this pizzeria. We all used to go there for pizza. I mentioned that because the oddity was, I guess this was the days before people worried so much as their drinking habits or whatever it may be. But it was hilarious. You'd go there and have pizza in the evening and here he's staggering around working his pizzeria and the next day you'd see him in the high school. That **was very, very** funny.

*Brenda Velasco:* He had two careers.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Did you know that there was a synagogue on School Street?

*Brenda Velasco:* No, I didn't.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Okay.

*Brenda Velasco:* Did you tell me? Do you remember the name of that synagogue?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* **Yeah**, Adath Israel.

*Brenda Velasco:* That was where Adath Israel was originally?

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Originated, yes, across from the fire house.

*Brenda Velasco:* Alright.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* There was a small building, architecturally speaking I don't remember what it was, but it was a very small synagogue and then I guess in the evolution of the town, Abe Neiss, do you know **him? Did you ever hear of him, owned a paving company, got into trouble double billing. Do you know where the** Home Depot is?

*Brenda Velasco:* Yea, the Home Depot, yep.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Did you know that years ago there was like a horse farm, farmer's market type operation there run by Norm **Bosley**, the nicest guy in the world. It was like something out of Kansas and, I guess, you'd get the racetrack crowd there. I don't know, but that existed in town. I remember that very well.

*Brenda Velasco:* And this was on **Route 9?**

*Ralph Kushinsky:* **Yeah, Route 9, I** think where the Home Depot is, that area there.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Big track of land and, for years, people pursued him to develop it into something. Woodbridge development was not a sudden thing it was a gradual explosion that was really predominant in post-World War II when all the housing was built: Menlo Park Terrace and the like. There was always some little thing going on because of the emptiness that we had.

**We only had some 20,000 people in the whole** Township. There was certain areas that are built up now, how long have you lived in Colonia?

*Brenda Velasco:* Since 1967.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Well, you've been here a long time too and you know that there are areas on Inman Avenue that were farm country at one time.

*Brenda Velasco:* Yep.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I remember a guy by the name of **Hitzler who** had a little grocery store way out. It's still there; the building is still there, where the little shopping area is located. I forgot his first **name. But there** was always some development going on. That all added to grow that I **think. And if** I may say this, as a member of the Council you might resent it, uncontrolled,

completely uncontrolled growth. I'm not against growth, never was. I always thought that it was a necessity in life to get older and learn more and become geniuses when you get to be 80 years of age and you know everything, but it has to be controlled. The first time, in many years, I read yesterday that something is going on you wouldn't know it probably, something about height.

*Brenda Velasco:* The height of the buildings.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Right. You know **why we couldn't have a greater** control of the density of the word, by density, control of the, what do you call from the street to the house, the.....

*Brenda Velasco:* The frontage.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Side, front, size of the lot, height of the building, etc. All to keep the potential ghettos, and I don't mean that in any way other than high density, eventual, not too well cared for, housing or commercial, but controlling them with the ability of the authorities in town to prevent to what has occurred to Woodbridge.

*Brenda Velasco:* Well, the current Mayor, you would probably enjoy talking to him because we have divided so much of Woodbridge into redevelopment where we can control.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* I'll give you that booklet before you go.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, I'm going to have to go through some of these other questions with you.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Anytime, since I'm semi-retired I'm here too much and downtown not enough, but I'm either in one of the two places. Usually, I'm downtown mid to late afternoon to 7:00 or 8:00 P.M.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Here, I don't let anybody talk to me before 12 noon because I'm usually 90 percent asleep. But I'd be glad to talk to you whenever you feel like.

*Brenda Velasco:* I think we're going to do it in your office on Main Street, alright, because I did set up this interview and Friday is my only day. So we're going to conclude this interview at 3:20 P.M. and resume at a later date, that's it.

*Ralph Kushinsky:* Whatever.

*Brenda Velasco:* Okay.

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Because of time constraints, the interview was not concluded.