



## City of Port Phillip Living Heritage Project

Edited transcript – Roger Backway

Interviewee: Roger Backway [RB]

Interviewer: Sarah Rood, Way Back When Consulting Historians [SR]

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## Working life

**SR: One more thing I want to talk to you about before we get onto work very briefly. I know you had quite a good time ice skating, speaking of St Moritz. Tell me where you used to ice skate and how that led to you meeting your -**

**RB:** We used to visit our family farm in Maryborough in Victoria and I used to have to help with the harvest of the oats; it was a dairy farm and they had horses. I fell off the back of the wagon which was probably about 12 or 13 foot high and hurt my ankle. It was all black and blue and when we came back my father took me to the doctor and he said, yeah it's a sprain, it's not broken, blah, blah, blah, wear a pair of boots as much as you can and try and strengthen it up, you might try ice skating. So that was my introduction to go to St Moritz down in St Kilda. I would probably have been about 14 or so, 15 maybe. I skated for numbers of years there.

**18:23**

We had a group there - I didn't play hockey or anything like that, did a little bit of dancing but not much - we had a group that used to skate together, and talk together, and go out to the coffee lounges in Fitzroy Street; everything closed down at ten o'clock. One time there was a new young lady came along, one of the girls brought her along from their work, and she was introduced to me and I was coerced into driving her home in my newfound VW beetle. She lived at Mount Waverley which at the time was almost a dirt track to get out to there, but we did it and never stopped doing it for a lot of years. That's how I was introduced to Maxine, courted for three or four years, and then married. We're still married after 54 years three months and 12 days.

**SR: The culture of ice skating, was it a local thing or did people come from all over?**

**RB:** St Moritz was a famous place. It was run by two guys, Gordon and - I forget. There were six or so hockey teams there, there were speed-skating teams, or clubs, and dance clubs. They used to go to competitions in Sydney, there were some ice rinks up there, so there was interstate competitions. It was a pretty popular thing. There had been another ice rink in Melbourne called the Glaciarium in City Road but that had closed down some years back. It was a social thing. It was just the same as being in a dance club or a car club or what have you, and everybody with a similar interest went there. It was busier at weekends. I never belonged to any of those clubs but I was in all of the supporting groups.

**SR: So you never belonged to the speed-skating or the dancing or - ?**

**RB:** No. Probably lack of money more than anything because when I became an apprentice the wages weren't really good.

**SR:** That's a brilliant segue, let's start talking about work. You had a friend in your street who worked for Middendorp?

**RB:** Yes.

**SR:** And slowly, slowly you got in too?

**RB:** Well I left school without any qualifications, I was a poor student. By this friend I was introduced to a man called Mr Richard Farr that lived down in Wordsworth Street, St Kilda, and he was an electrician. It was agreed that I should --- my friend asked whether there was room for me to come and work with him. Mr Farr was a Polish man who had gone through pretty traumatic experiences during the Second World War and then emigrated to Australia.

**22:30**

**SR:** So he was Polish Jewish?

**RB:** A Polish Jew, yes. He had been married before I met him and he was divorced and living by himself. He had also been in partnership with another man but that had broken up. You'd think under those circumstances maybe he was not easy to get along with but he and I clicked together. He had learnt most of his electrical skills in Russia because he'd been captured at some stage and sent to Russia during the war, and then he got to Australia.

Not only was he a very good electrician but he had the ability to teach, and he taught me. There's not a real lot of people can do this. There's a lot of employers that go out and just say do this and do that and they don't give them - they don't know how to teach properly. We got along pretty well together. So I joined up as an apprentice in 1955.

**SR:** Did you have to do studies as well, was it a similar system to now?

**RB:** Yes. I had to go to school one day a week for the first couple of years at Collingwood Technical College. We did both theory and practical work there. I think I went to school for three years and then the fourth and fifth years it might have been once a month or something like that. Which was a drain, he had to pay for that virtually, so I had to earn my keep. I worked eight 'til five and sometimes weekends when the workload got heavier.

**SR:** What was his main business?

**RB:** The main business at that time was in the building industry, a local builder in St Kilda called Kalish Constructions who was another Polish Jew. And as I learnt there was a whole society, they all used to bunch together. That was the main business but just occasionally when we were up to date on the building site we'd go and do domestic work. We worked around St Kilda mainly for Jewish people.

We worked in Acland Street and learnt how to make lamingtons, all the big cake shops that were going and the coffee lounges that were just starting up in that late '50s and early '60s period. I got to know a few Polish words but never went on, I wasn't a good learner for languages. He lived in Wordsworth Street by himself in the house, he rented the house. The house was owned by a man called Don Osborne who was a real estate agent in Fitzroy Street. Mr Osborne went on in later life to become a mayor of Melbourne for a number of years, and his most famous quote

was, "Get that Yellow Peril out of Melbourne." I don't know whether you know what the Yellow Peril is - it's still around. Mr Osborne would employ us to go and work in some of the places that he had on his rent roll which were mainly down Fitzroy Street, and they were the cafes and the sleazy boarding houses, they were mainly very unpleasant places to work in.

**27:07**

**SR: Do you remember any in particular?**

**RB:** I don't think I really should mention them, no.

**SR: What sort of things were you seeing, without mentioning?**

**RB:** You'd go into these boarding houses - hang on, that's gone, Victory Mansion was down on the beach overlooking the St Kilda Yacht Club. They were set up to sleep unemployed people, and homeless people, and all this sort of thing. They smelt dreadful, it was very, very unpleasant. The cafes and some of the shops in Fitzroy Street, the hygiene wasn't quite what you'd expect today. Quite often you'd be taking a power point off the wall that didn't work and you'd be armed with a spray can to keep the cockroaches off you and things like that. It was pretty sleazy, yeah. I think it's improved - I hope it's improved a little now.

Through the building firm we also were working in bigger houses; as a lot of this Polish Jewish community grew up and became wealthy they were building bigger and better houses. Kalish Constructions was doing some of the bigger houses over in Toorak and what have you so I got to work in those and that opened my eyes up to what I should be expecting and how I wanted to live. *[laughs]* Because my wage at the start of being an apprentice was five pound a week, just ten dollars, this is in the '50s and that was considered pretty low then. It wasn't a good thing but we got through it one way and another.

**SR: Tell me a little more about the sorts of things you learned from your boss. You talked a little bit about that before.**

**RB:** Concentration; to do the job properly the first time because you don't get paid for doing it the second time, and that's pretty important in the scheme of things. If you put a power point on crookedly you had to take it off and fix it and you didn't get paid the second time. I think that's probably the main thing. We got along famously well. What else did I learn from him? I don't think I ever heard him swear although he may have sworn in Polish. His English was pretty good but Polish was spoken a fair bit.

**SR: What was his work ethic like?**

**RB:** He lived for his work, he didn't seem to have much of a social life other than knocking off - we always knocked off about five, half past five, in the afternoon - I don't think he did a terrible lot of cooking at home, I think he ate in the cafes around. But he lived for his work. He was a good worker, yes.

**31:04**

**RB:** The sad part about it was that he got crook and one day I turned up for work and he wasn't there. We were in the middle of a fairly large block of flats, and we had one other apprentice and one other man helping us who lived next door; he wasn't an electrician he was a labourer. I took upon myself, I said, "Okay the boss isn't here, I

don't know what's going on, we'll still go to work," so we went to work and did the job. It wasn't until I think the next day, or later that afternoon, I found out that he'd gone to hospital with cancer and wasn't coming back for a month or so, and I was just to carry on the best that I could. So I went to the builder, Rudolph Kalish and told him and he said to continue on until he comes back so we did just that. Mr Farr came back a month or six weeks later, came back to work, and then once again after about a month or two he disappeared again, went back into hospital.

Then I got a phone call saying that he'd passed away and we want to meet with you the next day. He was mixed up very closely with a Polish lady called Dr Golab who he used to call Aunty - I don't think he was related - that's a Polish terminology for a relation. I think she handled some of the money because I used to go to her place every Friday to pick up my five pound pay.

Anyway, there was a meeting with Dr Golab and she told me that Mr Farr had passed away and he had willed me the business, which included a worn out Holden and some tools and a debt of one thousand - I was to find out later a debt of one thousand four hundred and sixty pounds owed to the suppliers. So I went to Kalish Constructions, told them, and he said to carry on, keep going.

So there was no money, the money situation was diabolical until I went to Kalish and said I needed a progress payment or something, and that I've got to buy more equipment, and he's left me with no money. So I got a progress payment off the building and away we went. I had to let the labourer man go and I kept the apprentice on for a year or two but he eventually went, we didn't get along all that well together. But the thing that he left me were the contacts.

Maxine and I had only been married a year or so and we were living up in Hotham Street so we cancelled out of that and moved down to Wordsworth Street into Mr Farr's house, and then we still had to go and pay Mr Osborne. Mr Osborne would ring up occasionally and say, "Come and do some work for me." Not 'would you' or 'if you can', 'come and do some work for me.'

That introduced me into the world of business outside of the building industry. Of course, the big Jewish people saying 'my light globe's not working' and 'this doesn't happen.' These were customers that I sort of knew that we'd previously worked for so I started doing some domestic work in conjunction with - kept the building industry going. When we finished that job that we were on Mr Kalish came to me and said this is the next job, do you want to take it on, and I tentatively put my hand up.

### 35:34

In the meantime, the end of the financial year had come and I didn't know what to do. I was only using the knowledge that I could glean out of past paperwork that Farr had, and I knew a little bit about tax stamps and blah, blah, blah, but I could see I was going to get into a mess. I found the paperwork where the will had been drawn up from a firm of accountants in town called Pearson and Tatnell so I rang them up and asked them if I could have an appointment with them, and went in and met Mr Pearson who was a very elderly gentleman.

I explained the situation, I said, "I'm an electrician, I think I'm reasonable at my job, but I don't know anything about all this paperwork. Look, I've got all these bills." I took in a pile of them. He said, "Okay, all under control, we'll fix all that up for you." He set up what in those days was called a double entry ledger system of bookkeeping, Maxine was a bookkeeper, and it went from there, it was all under

control. He did our tax work for a number of years. At the end of one year I had a little bit left over and I said, "Do you think I should pay down my mortgage on the house, or what?" He said, "No, we'll buy you some shares," so he bought me some BHP shares and some NBA shares which is now NAB, which in the long run has proved to be the best advice I've ever had financially because it led on to other things.

It's very lucky that it worked out that way, it could have quite well worked out entirely differently. Lucky in the fact that I was able to get a man that was a gentleman; and Rudolph Kalish was also a gentleman. Some of the other Polish people were tarred with the same brush but these two guys were very nice people to work with.

**SR: So Kalish's work, was it mostly in St Kilda and Elwood?**

**RB:** Yes a lot of flats, but then we did some of the bigger houses in Toorak.

**SR: The flats, was he buying them and developing the properties?**

**RB:** Both. He built a couple of blocks for himself, he built a couple of blocks in conjunction with a painter who had done pretty well over the years, another Polish man. Then he also did jobs for other people, other developers; the developers would own a block of land and ask him to come and build a house.

**SR: Who was moving into these flats?**

**RB:** Depending on the area. The ones that we did in Elwood were for rental and we didn't have much to do with them. We did a couple of larger units over in Toorak and they were sold off individually, they were sold off as complete units so as an electrician I didn't have much ongoing with them. With the bigger houses we had ongoing connection with those people. I don't think you need to know who they were but they were very well-to-do people in the community. They either wanted additions, or things stopped working, and I kept on that relationship with a few of them.

**35:34**

**SR: These are the bigger ones up in Toorak?**

**RB:** Bigger in Toorak and bigger in Brighton, I mean big houses. I also worked for a very famous man, and I'm not quite sure how we did it, in Toorak; Lex Davidson, racing car driver. I was getting involved in the VW car club and I was competition secretary for a number of years there, and we used to do a bit of small time racing around the place. Somehow we went into Lex Davidson's place to work with Mr Farr, and I'm not quite sure what the connection was, but there we were and we talked about cars and what have you. I said, "Would you like to come down to our VW car club and give us a talk one night?" which he did, which was pretty fantastic. This was a man that was at the top, and here he is talking to all these blokes. He was a gentleman, he was another gentleman. That was a fabulous night.

**SR: I'm interested in some of the insights that you got into the local area by going in and fixing things being an electrician, sort of being a fly on the wall almost. What sort of things were you seeing in and around Elwood/St Kilda?**

**RB:** How the other people lived. You'd come away from some houses saying what a terrible place that is to live in. Not only because they didn't have money but they didn't have any skills in hygiene. And sadly, to say nurses aren't terribly clever at home we found.

After a number of years the building industry changed and the day came when Mr Kalish said for the very first time, "Roger, I've got somebody else interested in doing this electrical job and they've offered me a price, can you match it?" I looked at it and I said, "No way," and that was the end of our relationship, although we used to meet in other places, but as far as being an electrician.

**41:57**

In the meantime, Maxine and I were looking for a house to buy, we were looking around all the estate agents. One man over in what then was High Street, St Kilda, which is now St Kilda Road, called Mark Kausman who ran Kausman & Co, we went into his shop looking at a particular house - as it turned out it was totally unsuitable - he saw our truck out the front with a couple of bits of conduit on it. He said, "Are you electricians?" and I said, "Yes," and he said, "Will you fix something here for me?"

I was then introduced to his rental manager and we came quite good friends and did a lot of business together, they used to ring up regularly. From there somehow the name got around to a couple of other estate agents and I had a circle of about six of them, so then I redesigned my truck and did things a little bit differently.

I equipped my truck with just about everything that you could think of so I could go and do any job on the spot without having to go away to buy any other goods, which made me cheaper than everybody else. So, I got this ring of estate agents, a couple in Elwood, one in Cheltenham, a couple in Elsternwick, South Yarra. Mr Osborne had since sold out and gone away thank heavens and I didn't get too much work down that end of St Kilda any more. That kept us going. That was in the later 1960s into the '70s and kept us going past the year 2000, just working for estate agents.

**SR: Did you notice any changes in the area of who was living now?**

**RB:** Yes. Some of the units in Elwood that had been built as - we used to call them six packs or twelve packs which were a block of six units, just a square box with six units or a square box with twelve units in them - they were only built to make money out of, no care for how the people had to live in them. Like there were no exhaust fans in the bathrooms, and no exhaust fans in the kitchens, heating was electrical which was terribly expensive for people to run, and the hot water services were electric and terribly expensive to run; they were only ever built to make money out of. There was a time in Elwood where a lot of those were redeveloped into own your owns, sold off as individual units; in some cases two flats joined together to make a bigger flat. So, Elwood then started to change from a rental area - it's still a rental area but not as heavy - it started to drag in other people. And there was a little bit of a problem there that you got people that were own your owns, had better cars, but there was still the lower class of rental people there, and there was a bit of angst amongst the two groups. It was a noticeable change through Elwood. And now you see what it is today, it's gone exactly the opposite to what it was 50 years ago.

**45:33**

**SR: In the sense that - ?**

**RB:** In the sense that people are better educated, got more money and flasher cars, more time on their hands, drink more coffee. *[laughs]*

**SR: So you had more people buying homes and moving into the area?**

**RB:** Yes.

**SR:** **And then you had sort of a class difference coming through around the '60s and '70s do you think?**

**RB:** '70s and '80s.

**SR:** **What about the businesses that you're servicing and working at? You've mentioned cafes.**

**RB:** Elwood when I was a boy was a family area. In Ormond Road we had two shopping centres, and we had a grocer, and a milk bar, and a haberdashery, and a library, and all those things where people could walk to. When everybody started getting motor vehicles a lot of those businesses started to suffer and Ormond Road started to close down, there were lots of empty shops through the '60s and '70s. Some of them then got rented out as office space, and the windows painted over, and it became a terrible area.

There was nothing there to hold the people there because they were all getting in their cars and going away to the supermarkets and all this sort of thing. At our end of Ormond Road there was an empty shop directly opposite our house, it had been a milk bar and it had closed down and nobody ever opened it. Then all of a sudden two young blokes got in there and they opened up what they called a grocery shop which were just wooden boxes standing against the wall with a few different grocery lines. Mainly olive oil, imported things, a few different cheeses - you weren't seeing this sort of stuff in the supermarkets.

They were gay people, two gay guys, and they were really the instrument that fired up Elwood Ormond Road shopping centre again. From there on it just started to grow. The little old ladies loved them, the little old ladies that didn't have a car or had to get in a taxi to go to the supermarket; all of a sudden they had this little grocery shop where they could get a few odd things, a bit of bread and a bit of milk and all this sort of thing. That was what fired up Elwood again, it was quite an amazing change to see all that.

**SR:** **When was that approximately?**

**RB:** In the early '90s.

**48:40**

**SR:** **Do you remember any of the other businesses that followed?**

**RB:** Yes, these same two guys opened up the first ice-cream shop, purely ice-cream, which wasn't successful, it only ran for a couple of years. Then a supermarket opened up, a man called Billy Kaye opened up the first supermarket in our immediate Elwood area, Elwood Village it was called. There'd always been an estate agent there. A few of the milk bars had closed down, Horrie Peacock's shop was still there.

There was the main garage in the middle that had remained opened. It used to be a garage where you could buy petrol but now it was just a garage for fixing up broken cars, and that had always been there. The haberdashery closed down. There'd been a NAB bank there and a Commonwealth Bank, they eventually closed, and that was the beginning of the Bendigo Bank. We had a famous picture theatre in Ormond

Road called the Broadway Theatre. Its main claim to fame was that it was six months behind everything else, but it had double seats in the back of the theatre. Lovers' seats where you could sit with your girlfriend and put your arm around her. And that didn't happen in many other theatres that I knew of. That was always good fun.  
*[laughs]*

**SR:** You talk about two different kinds of work, setting up the places when they're being built, then you talk about servicing rental properties. You also mention that you did a little bit of work for individuals that you met over the years and being called out to people. You mentioned bumping into the principal at school. What sort of things were you seeing in terms of the average person? Were people calling you because you were a local and they knew you? How was your relationship building with people in the area?

**RB:** I did put a little sign outside our front door on our property in Ormond Road saying that we were electricians so people walking by would have seen that, but it was mainly word of mouth. In those days people would be at parties and say 'I need an electrical job done, who do I get?' or they'd just come into the area, so the name went around that way. I maintained Mr Farr's name, he called his business Farr Electrics, and I maintained that name through. For a lot of years it was well known. Just being out in the front yard at weekends tending the flowers - which was fairly rare I must admit - there'd be people walking by and you'd get asked to do a job over the front fence. It was mainly word of mouth. I did hardly any advertising, always had enough work.

52:13

**SR:** Were there many changes that you observed about the people living in your area over time via going into their houses basically?

**RB:** Yes. It was a natural attrition. Older people, like in Tiuna Grove, all the people on the south side of Tiuna Grove where they were all larger houses, which we've talked about before, some of those people passed on and the houses were sold. Some of them were sold to developers and pulled down. There was one very large house there that I think I mentioned before, it had a large garden behind a high brick wall and with its own Second World War bomb shelter, that was pulled down and a large block of 20 flats were built on that, so that changed the whole character of the street. And, of course, the big change was the motor cars coming into the area. I grew up with hardly any cars in the street, now there's nowhere to park after five. Some of the town planning wasn't terribly good but I don't think we should go into that. *[laughs]*

...

**SR:** Do you think there was ever anything that you saw that you weren't supposed to see through your work?

**RB:** No - oh yeah, there were a few shady deals. One estate agent in Elsternwick had some properties out in Collingwood - strangely enough in a street called Easey Street - and I could see that he wasn't doing the right thing by this little old lady, and it was a little old lady, and she was being ripped off. I took the view it's none of my business but I don't want to be mixed up in these sorts of dealings so I decided not to work for him again.

But strangely enough the young lady in that firm who ran the rental part of the business, a young lady called Ros, she also left that business and went to another



business, and then all of a sudden she started ringing me up from that business. She was only there two or three years and then she moved again, and moved again, and she kept on using me through all of those businesses, I became all those businesses' electrician, they were all real estate agents. It grew, every time she shifted I started working in a new area. We got along famously well for probably 15 years doing that. Back to the question, did I see anything that I shouldn't have seen?

**SR:** **Or any sort of things that you remember noticing and thinking oh gosh, I didn't realise that was going on? Not so much illegal but just insights into things in the local area.**

**56:00**

**RB:** We had a couple of times where there were plants growing inside houses, inside rental houses. Not to the extent that you see them in the papers today. I remember going into one room and all the walls were dripping and I thought I really don't want to know too much about this and let it slide, not my business.

**SR:** **What about any characters, local characters? Whether they're business owners, or pubs, and restaurants and things like that? Not suggesting illegal things but just observations.**

**RB:** We had a man, Des Couch, who ran a service station down where the Garden Centre is now at the end of Ormond Esplanade. He was an Elwood identity, used to drive around in a little open MG, a sports car. He was pretty famous with the ladies for a lot of years. He used to go to Torquay, he was a member of the Torquay Life Saving Club, he had something to do with the development of that in the years. That garage eventually sold and he then shifted into Elwood on the corner of The Broadway and Glenhuntly Road where there was a garage there.

He went into that in partnership with the owner and then eventually bought him out. He was an identity there, he could fix anything, and bought and sold a few cars as well as dispense petrol and everything. He employed a lot of the local people to pump petrol so he became very friendly with their parents and what have you and socially mixed. Maxine, through the kindergarten system, met up with Adrienne Couch, his wife, so then we all became pretty friendly at parties and what have you, and being local business people in the area.

That garage was the site of the Maison de Luxe which was a very famous dance hall in its day. The Americans came to live there during the Second World War as well as across the road at St Columba's, they took over that school and used that. They also had Point Ormond all cordoned off and there was an American base with guns and all that sort of thing on Point Ormond. When the war was over they stayed on for a little while and all of the little kids - they were navy Americans, in the naval department - we all used to have their little white gob hats, they'd throw them away, and chocolate and all that sort of thing. After the war they set up a dance, there used to be a dance at the Maison de Luxe every Sunday afternoon and it was jazz and jitterbug. And little kids' first introductions to girls in skirts and all this sort of thing, which was just a bit different. *[laughs]*

Famous people around Elwood - no I didn't really come into too many of them.

**1:00:06**

**SR:** Did you have any favourite places or jobs in the area, or people, that you used to work for?

**RB:** Yes. We had one lady, Shirley - she became Shirley Ormsby, she was a piano teacher, a pianist, she used to work on the TV - Shirley Radford - in the programs where they got people to come and sing, a talent show. She was always on the piano with a big smile like that to the camera. *[laughs]* It was a joy going to her house, she was always well dressed and expecting you. You'd fix the problem and you'd get a cup of tea. I enjoy music for what it is but I can't play an instrument and I've always been a bit jealous of people that can, and she offered to teach me to play the piano. She claimed for years and years after that I was her only failure. That was a joy to go there.

There was another lady down in Brighton - I can't remember her name, I was only speaking about it the other day - I think she used to invent things just to get me down there. I employed my brother for 16 years and we used to like going there. I reckon she went out and had her hair permed the day before. Even if we'd get there at eight thirty in the morning she was always dressed up to the nines. Morning tea would come, the tray would come out and it would have fresh scones with cream and all of that, proper cups and proper saucers with floral designs on them, Royal Winton or something like that, or Royal Albert cups. It was always good fun. And she was just a charming lady. I think she was just a bit lonely and she enjoyed having the electricians there. *[laughs]* It didn't matter how much it cost just to have the electricians there for morning tea. That was always a bit of fun.

I used to work at the St Kilda Sea Baths for a while. Didn't like going there too much because everything was old and rusty and as soon as you touched it it would break, and you'd have to explain to the owner that he needs a new one and he never, ever wanted to spend any money.

**1:03:35**