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Oral History Interview with Nick Perez

Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1976.001.049

Interview conducted by John D. Vazquez on November 5, 1974 in Brooklyn, New York

VAZQUEZ: Mr. Perez I understand that in 1930 you came to live in New York City, in Manhattan. You came from Puerto Rico. You came by boat?

PEREZ: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: Que barco se acuerda del nombre?

PEREZ: El Coamo.

VAZQUEZ: El Coamo, a very famous boat. And five years later you came to live to Brooklyn, in 1934, '35?

PEREZ: I came in 1934.

VAZQUEZ: Where in Brooklyn did you come to live?

PEREZ: I came to live in Williamsburg.

VAZQUEZ: Whereabouts? South 8th?

PEREZ: About 8th Street. Yes. We had a little apartment with three other young fellows. We used to work in the same place. That's my--They're only roommates. That's what everybody tells me. I came to live in South 8th Street in the Williamsburg section of--.

VAZQUEZ: How long did you live in South 8th Street in Brooklyn?

PEREZ: I lived there for about six or seven months. Then I moved to Heyward Street, in Williamsburg--

VAZQUEZ: Still in Williamsburg? That's between Harrison and what other street; Marcy, Bedford, Lee Avenue?

PEREZ: It was near Broadway. That I remember and the other avenue I don't remember; it was about 4 houses from Broadway.

VAZQUEZ: You went to live there alone?

PEREZ: I had a few fellows with me, three or four.

VAZQUEZ: What year was that? That would be about 1935, '36.

PEREZ: 1935, at the beginning of 1935.

VAZQUEZ: What was the neighborhood like then?

PEREZ: The neighborhood?

VAZQUEZ: Yes.

PEREZ: It was a Jewish neighborhood. The building in there, there wasn't any Spanish fellows. There wasn't many Spanish fellas at that time or anybody that I knew. There was a few--a couple of Mexicans. No Puerto Ricans. My company--was 2 Cubans and 2 Mexicans.

VAZQUEZ: But no Puerto Ricans. What company was this?

PEREZ: Where I was mixed with those 4, we used to work in the same place.

VAZQUEZ: Where did you work?

PEREZ: At the Hotel New Yorker.

VAZQUEZ: It--was that where you went to work in 1930 when you came?

PEREZ: Let me think. Yes, I came to work the second day. My cousin was the Foreman in the [inaudible]. And he took me to work there.

VAZQUEZ: And that was the second day after your arrival?

PEREZ: Yes, the second day. I was lucky that time.

VAZQUEZ: And how long did you work in the Hotel New Yorker?

PEREZ: The first time I work in there it was only 1 year. And I was put out.

VAZQUEZ: Why were you put out?

PEREZ: Because I was hurt. I went to the shower room 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and I grabbed the cross bar at the entrance of the shower room and my hand fall [unintelligible] the bar came over my face and it cut me here. Since that time I have worn a mustache. And the company, at that time, didn't want anybody to get hurt because their insurance goes up, and they gave me a week off, and when I came to work there the next week, I was working for a week. Then the next week, I didn't find my card there. I spent 2 years looking around, looking for work, or having the extra's--no matter what day it was; Sunday or New Year's or Christmas. Then I went back in

'33, at the end of '33, I went back to the hotel again. They took me, and I was up to that time, that I was living in Hubert Street.

VAZQUEZ: And after '33, how long were you there?

PEREZ: I worked for about another year.

VAZQUEZ: For another year? Now about 1934, where did you go to work?

PEREZ: In 1934--after 1935, I went to work in Jamaica, Long Island.

VAZQUEZ: What kind of a place was that?

PEREZ: That was a delicatessen, a store, a restaurant.

VAZQUEZ: And what did you do there?

PEREZ: I used to wash dishes, pots, did the table work.

VAZQUEZ: For how long?

PEREZ: I think I was over a year in there.

VAZQUEZ: And where did you work after that? And you worked where?

PEREZ: Then I moved to Manhattan. And I came to live in 56th Street and 10th, near 10th Avenue, near 9th Avenue. I worked in a nightclub, the Wivel's Restaurant. That's a Scandinavian restaurant; Wivel's.

VAZQUEZ: The River? Weaver? Wivel's. Yeah they had smorgasbord.

PEREZ: Yeah, smorgasbord.

VAZQUEZ: Was that 53rd or 54th? 54th Street.

PEREZ: 54th, yes.

VAZQUEZ: They had a big table with all the food around and you just picked it. I went there several times when I was younger.

PEREZ: I was a coffee man. Used to make coffee.

VAZQUEZ: And how long did you work there?

PEREZ: About a year. I already had my wife, then. During that time, I decided to go to Roberts' Trade School to learn auto body work and I went in there--I didn't finish. I found myself a helper's job, and I did like to get in that line, and I make some kind of [unintelligible] out of the nightclub, so I could get Social Security and get a job in the training, body work.

VAZQUEZ: Did you find any discrimination when you first came from Puerto Rico?

PEREZ: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: You were discriminated against because you were puertorriqueño?

PEREZ: If I what?

VAZQUEZ: You were discriminated against?

PEREZ: Well, I saw, I saw that. It happened to me but I didn't put attention to that, you know. Many times, you know, 6th Avenue; I don't know how old are you but 6th Avenue was only 2 story buildings from 28 Street to 54. In there, there was an agency to sell jobs in the upper floor and a restaurant in the ground floor who use to sell hamburgers for 5 cents; sandwich for 5 cents and coffee for 3 cents.

VAZQUEZ: What year was this?

PEREZ: During the '30s. That--I thought about that--those 2 years that I was without work. That I used to roam around that section, you know. Your neck could of have been turned over because we only looked that way, and that way, and then everything was based around selling; coffee was 3 cents and sandwich, all kinds of sandwich; 5 cents. Well, that nightclub, I went off and I took the--they gave me my Social Security unemployment and I used to make \$11 off work from the Social Security, and I used to work as a helper under the table for \$12. So I used to make, very good, \$23. Because already I had a wife. And from there; after I learned the trade, after I learned a little more, I--My brother-in-law at, who used to live in Brooklyn, found a little apartment for us, and we came to live in Brighton. [unintelligible]

VAZQUEZ: When did you come to live in Brighton? What year?

PEREZ: About '37. At the end of '36 or '37.

VAZQUEZ: How was that community?

PEREZ: Brighton?

VAZQUEZ: Yes. Jewish?

PEREZ: Like--not today--but it was a Jewish section, a very nice section. And from there, I came there because I had a job for Flatbush Pontiac, and I started there as a helper

there. But how my life from a boy was to be independent and have my own business or so, because I had it in there before I came here.

VAZQUEZ: Where?

PEREZ: In Puerto Rico.

VAZQUEZ: Where did you have your own business in Puerto Rico? From Mayaguez?

PEREZ: In Mayaguez. Yes. I had 2 new cars there that I never had any place, and I worked in the automobile business. I used to go around the island; dry goods, I had candy stores, and I had all that, and that was--all of the sudden, I felt like going away. There was something in the way; a brother of mine that didn't behave good, and that is the reason to come here. But I would say that when I came here it was like changing goal for [unintelligible] but I took it; income. I went to wash my dishes, I burned my fingers, and there wasn't any help at all, I didn't know. There was, there was, I remember 1935 or so, my cousin went to sell apples in the street because things were bad.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever hear of Carlos Tapia?

PEREZ: Carlos Tapia. I think I hear mention that name but I have no knowledge of remembering--

VAZQUEZ: Louis Weber?

PEREZ: Louis Weber, yes, I heard very much.

VAZQUEZ: What did you hear about him?

PEREZ: That is when I came to live in Manhattan and then thereafter living in Brooklyn.

When I used to meet Spanish people and they used to talk about him. He was, I think, in the number business.

VAZQUEZ: Yes he was the first Puerto Rican millionaire. Who else? Did you hear of anybody else? Who contributed to the Puerto Rican community at that time?

Ayudaba puertorriqueño [unintelligible]?

PEREZ: Talk to me in English because I understand more. I don't remember any contribution. Unless that--I know there was night schools for some people who wanted to go. Because I know, my cousin I used to live in my aunt's house when I

came, my cousin was going to school at night. Like now, they have school, all filled up with students, that is now high school doing that today. But at that time there were only a few. I didn't have that opportunity because I worked nights and I used to sleep during the day, and the time flew, and then, talking plainly, I realize now that education is very important for anything, because I didn't think of that. I could've starved, could have starved. If I'd known up to today how good it is at my age to go to school and have a little education.

VAZQUEZ: Was there anyone getting an education at that time that you knew, Puerto Ricans?

PEREZ: Well, my cousins who, the small ones, from my aunt; there were 2 of them that were going to school. They always were working in the needle trade.

VAZQUEZ: What was your cousins' names? Were they from Brooklyn?

PEREZ: My cousins' name, Rivera. They moved to South America, they moved to Columbia. Not Columbia, near Columbia; they have been there for years in the laundry business. He was a tailor. That is the one who took me to the Hotel New Yorker. He was a tailor, but he didn't have the chance. The union wouldn't take him in because that was somehow [unintelligible] with the Jewish family or so, to get in the union at that time. He didn't have that chance to get into that. He had a tailor shop and then he decided to go to South America, Caracas Venezuela.

VAZQUEZ: Did you know Jimmy Kelly?

PEREZ: No.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever hear of him?

PEREZ: No.

VAZQUEZ: What organizations were around at that time in the '30s?

PEREZ: Organizations?

VAZQUEZ: Yes, that helped Puerto Ricans.

PEREZ: That I know, there was none to help no one.

VAZQUEZ: Not even a Democratic club or a Republican club?

PEREZ: Well, there was very little, clubs, very few, unless they were organized in some kind of racket of something like that.

VAZQUEZ: There were no clubs in Williamsburg that you remember?

PEREZ: No, that I could remember. I don't think--somebody had a club; like gambling or something like that. I didn't have the knowledge to know what the--

VAZQUEZ: No political clubs? What year did you register?

PEREZ: For voting?

VAZQUEZ: For voting.

PEREZ: [inaudible] was an opportunity. I don't remember when, when was the first year.

VAZQUEZ: What kind of jobs did Puerto Ricans mainly employed in that time that you remember?

PEREZ: During that time? During that time, I could see the Frenchmen and Germans, they were employed, and many of them in restaurants. Frenchmen were cooks. Puerto Ricans; they were waiters, busboys--the young fellows--and dishwashers.

VAZQUEZ: What other area besides restaurants were they employed in?

PEREZ: Well, they worked also in factories. The girls, or ladies, they used to work in the needle trade, the same as the Italians; they were very handy with the needle trade.

VAZQUEZ: Was it easy to get a job then, in the '30s?

PEREZ: No, it was very hard. I'm telling you, that was the hardest thing.

VAZQUEZ: Why was it so hard?

PEREZ: There was no work. Too many people coming at that time from Europe. Then, after the '30s, a few more came from Puerto Rico. Not many, but once in a while a few came in. Even before I came, I know that some people, some of my family; they came around '27 and '28. But you know, when Wall Street went down in '29 that was--After that, a lot of people lost their money. They didn't have anything to--One thing I know is that the Jewish always held up in economy; trades, education and everything else. They worked hard for everything. I will say that the Jewish people work hard in every branch of anything. And education and professionals, they are still the highest today.

These things that came now, these things that we see now; this revolution is only the failure of education. This is a failure of education.

VAZQUEZ: What do you mean?

PEREZ: The people have education. If people have a little knowledge and they are--Like today; anybody wants to have... I have seen it because I went myself and I have seen hundreds of them in getting a high school diploma, an equivalent, which I have only last year. Yes, after I worked for the government, I worked as an instructor after I retired at 64 and I had a test. I was tested and I started working for an organization for youth in the Lower East Side.

VAZQUEZ: East side; East Second Street or Fourth Street?

PEREZ: The main building is East Second and the other building is in East Fourth. Between B and D, I think; I worked in there 2 and a half years.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, right, B and C. What did you do [unintelligible]?

PEREZ: I teach my trade. I was advised not to take the job, that it was too dangerous for me. But I am the guy that, I have to see things to believe, so I went to work in there and I helped 2 1/2 years. And today, I think that I made a wonderful job. I have good recommendations from there. The place wasn't as clean as I wanted at my age and my [unintelligible] would try to take more out of my life. I have four sons that--the youngest one is 6' 1" and they--nice and healthy--all went to college. To have luck, which I never expected, I was married to the daughter of a king for 28 years.

VAZQUEZ: To the daughter? Of a king? Who was that?

PEREZ: --of a king. Her father was--by the name of Cohen--

VAZQUEZ: Cohen?

PEREZ: One of the highest religious persons in the Jewish race. You know what I mean.

VAZQUEZ: What was his first name?

PEREZ: My wife?

VAZQUEZ: No, Mr. Cohen--

PEREZ: Ignatz, that was the father of my wife. The best [unintelligible], another two [unintelligible]. I never expected to save my life. To save my life, I was advised by

professionals, and my sons were all of 21. I had a nice home in the best section of Flatbush and I was under doctors' care, taking time to hold back, and my one that was taking electrical engineering finished, had about a few months to finish, 1965. So in 1965 I left, I took to Puerto Rico to get a divorce. She didn't want to sign for me to go to Mexico.

VAZQUEZ: Why?

PEREZ: Well, she didn't want the break-up. She's--

VAZQUEZ: Why? You were in love? She was in love with you?

PEREZ: Oh yes, I was married for 28 years. But there was something else; the family, her family, her mother. Her father, I came to know him. Her mother wasn't a fully normal person... very poor way of living. I never seen in my life and I was born, I was really in bad shape as a child because my father deserted my mother, but in this case I--this girl was the last one in the family. Some others, they have been taken away from the mother, because she couldn't take care of them.

VAZQUEZ: Because of her health?

PEREZ: Well, certain things--She couldn't take care of the house. She couldn't take care of their physical needs and things like that, and when a person grows that way, she seemed to be the smartest one in the whole family. She had a brother also, I [unintelligible] my house. He was living in Jersey, very nice person. But, you see, I studied that situation, I studied well that situation, for me and her. I had a \$40,000 home that was my life work, that house was in my name. In the last year, I had to take her to court to give them the house because, against my lawyer's advice, I was told that I had worked too hard, that I should take off and have a nice time. But I couldn't. I'd rather pay her for whatever she did with my sons. Even 2 of them, they don't speak to me, the two adults. She raised our sons in the Jewish race and it was a pleasure to me. I went through for everything and, now and then--My oldest, who married about six years ago, he changed his religion and he said in front of his uncle and in front of them. They asked him why and he says, "A reason of my own." The third one, the engineer who went to work in Boston, had been in there 9 years. He had become the

most religious man that I have ever seen. Why they did that, I never question, I never question. I know what they--I knew what they had in mind or what passed through their mind but I never questioned them. The only thing I do is my oldest one helped me with my health. Even I haven't got much to give and I have been happy after that. I went to Puerto Rico and I got a divorce, through the highest court, but the thing was written in--the papers was written in Spanish. After that, she knew, she knew that. I tried to let her know. She said no, she didn't get papers or anything. Then the divorce came in here in 1971 or 1970. Then I worked out that I must divorce in here because that wasn't legal to me; that divorce in Spanish papers.

VAZQUEZ: Did anybody advise you here, any Puerto Ricans?

PEREZ: No, no Puerto Ricans. I went to the rabbi and I went to the priest. I went to both of them and I went to the psychiatrist, to a doctor; a lady doctor who was in charge in Coney Island Hospital.

VAZQUEZ: What did you go to her for?

PEREZ: For advice, to see if I could save my marriage.

[Interview interrupted.]

VAZQUEZ: Talk about--The economic situation. Mostly

PEREZ: Economics. May I ask a question. What college do you work for?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, sure. New York City Community College.

PEREZ: New York City Community? Jay Street?

VAZQUEZ: Yes, 200 Jay Street, but this is for the Long Island Historical Society.

[Interview interrupted.]

PEREZ: That was really my line because my uncles--when my father desert my mother, my uncle took over and from both part; part of my mother's and part of my father's. And that is where I have respect from; as much as if I had a father or maybe more.

VAZQUEZ: Were there any bodegas when you came to live in Brooklyn in 1930?

PEREZ: There was 2 or 3.

VAZQUEZ: Where?

PEREZ: In the Spanish section.

VAZQUEZ: Where, what street?

PEREZ: In a section that they called el Barrio.

VAZQUEZ: I mean here in Brooklyn. When you came to live in Brooklyn in 1934, you came to live in South 8th Street. Were there any bodegas there?

PEREZ: Not that I remember.

VAZQUEZ: How about around Heyward Street, near Broadway?

PEREZ: Not that I remember.

VAZQUEZ: And in Brighton?

PEREZ: No.

VAZQUEZ: When you wanted to? You used to eat Spanish food?

PEREZ: I am not--you see, many of us, we don't go much for Spanish food after we have come here. After you worked in a hotel and you got meals there; at the beginning I didn't like much. But later on, I saw that vegetables and things were good for me because I was a sick boy as a child, that I came to find out not long ago by a good doctor, and by drinking the fresh milked cow, cow milk.

VAZQUEZ: That made you sick?

PEREZ: Yes. The doctor in here explained me very well about that. And I believe that was that. He told me you don't have nothing, just be careful with your diets and that's all.

VAZQUEZ: When you came to live in New York City, did you speak any English?

PEREZ: Very little.

VAZQUEZ: Was that a problem at work?

PEREZ: Not at work, because there were Spanish fellows of all kinds; from Mexico, South America. But to get around in there, to get around the hotels, that was no trouble at all. To see the steward, or to speak to the steward, or anything like that, in broken English it was, but--

VAZQUEZ: How about in the other places you worked?

PEREZ: I didn't have no troubles. In Jamaica, in that delicatessen I used to work, evenings too--and I was trusted to take--well, there was a policeman who used to go with me--to take the receipt at night to the bank at the corner.

VAZQUEZ: You were trusted with large sums of money?

PEREZ: Well, that didn't make no difference to me. It was put all in a bag. During that time, I remember also, having come to New York one morning and I found a bag from Wall Street--a salesman left the bag and suddenly when I look at it, when I looked down that I saw something drop, I tried to run after him but the door closed too fast. He was with the New York Times in his hands and I couldn't stop him, so there was no other way than to find out which way I could deliver that with the idea to get a tip. And that bag belong--I went to the 22nd floor on Wall Street--The name was Mr. Lee. I find out in the bank whose bag it belonged and I went to deliver that same day and they gave me--There were about \$36-37,000 checks and papers and all that. There was what happened that day. Mr. Lee had a company, a desk, and there was him in a private room, and I guess Mr. Lee could've--have given me a better tip if that guy was not with him, but I only got \$15. I took it and I went home to sleep.

VAZQUEZ: What year was this?

PEREZ: This was around 1935.

VAZQUEZ: \$15 was a lot of money at that time, wasn't it?

PEREZ: Well, I was making \$17.

VAZQUEZ: He almost gave you a week's salary.

PEREZ: Yes, that's what he thought. He gave me about a week's salary. What we go back to now? You see, whoever had a chance to bring children to New York, they went to school, and those children, they prepared in school whether they left or so.

VAZQUEZ: You think that the Puerto Rican today has a better chance than the Puerto Ricans in the '30s, as far as education?

PEREZ: Oh, that is everything.

VAZQUEZ: Is it progressing as fast?

PEREZ: Oh yes, many of them. The majority, big percentage progress, they want education.

VAZQUEZ: Is he as united today as he was in the '30s?

PEREZ: The Puerto Ricans?

VAZQUEZ: Yes.

PEREZ: Well, there is--What do you mean by "united?"

VAZQUEZ: I mean, are they more together? Are they helping each other more now?

PEREZ: That is regular. Because there is still people that, even they know how to speak a little English and they know how to carry on. They still like--some of them, they like to live within the community. During the 20 years that I lived in Flatbush--that is where I had my house--in the Marine Park section of Brooklyn--and that is where I raised my four sons--I didn't have no connection at all with my people, Puerto Rican people.

VAZQUEZ: You didn't have any connection with the Puerto Rican community?

PEREZ: Not much, but I knew what was going about.

VAZQUEZ: Did you read any of the Spanish newspapers?

PEREZ: No, I very seldom take a Spanish paper.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever belong to the Masons or la Logia?

PEREZ: No.

VAZQUEZ: Did you ever hear of the Vanguardia Puertorriqueña?

PEREZ: No, I don't believe in none of those things, because many of them ain't there. I came from Puerto Rico a week ago, and I spent there 3 weeks after 3 years that I didn't go in there to see the family. I went for something else, but I decided to see some of the family that I have there and this is what I found out while I was there. The federal government is giving in there, to those students in there, 10 times--well, more, much more than they give in here. Here, they get nothing. There they give 95 percent and the Puerto Rican government is only putting 5%. I was surprised to see a relative of mine, nieces and nephews, that they are going to college and they are getting their master's degree and in college. And who is paying for it? The federal government.

VAZQUEZ: So you think that the lot of the Puerto Rican is much better now than it was before? And, that he is getting a lot of benefits from the federal government?

PEREZ: Yes. And in here this--revolutionary stuff has come in here--these people come from broken homes and places like that, you know. From fathers and mothers, that the father and mother are separated, they are divorced. They have done all kinds of things and they haven't been well taken care of. Today I would say I like here--I have been

there quite a few times in the last 10 years, and I have seen doctors and lawyers that-- they have left their wives with 2 or 3 children--to take secretary or somebody from the street that is not worth what their wife is, you see, and they are educated people. That trans--[laughter]. Because I never--even though I was uneducated fellow, I don't believe in that. I believe in the good things. And--

VAZQUEZ: What do you think of the political future, of the Puerto Rican today in Brooklyn, especially?

PEREZ: In Brooklyn. See, I haven't been much--I haven't been involved much in politics, but they are not too much interested in politics and I cannot say it about that. They talk like anybody else about one thing and the other, but nobody knows what is going on until now; that the break-in of Watergate, they realized. Everybody realized that there has been, you know, funny things going around with the government. And I think that anyone will realize that.