Oral History Interview with

Seymour H. Persky

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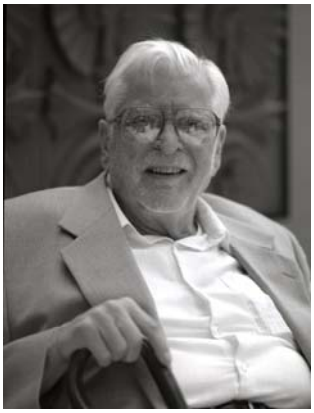
In 1995 Seymour H. Persky, then a Board member of the Society of Architectural Historians, made a major gift to the Society to enable the organization to purchase the James Charnley House (Adler and Sullivan, 1891-1892) on Astor Street in Chicago.



Seymour H. Persky, 2004
Photo: John Gronkowski Photography

Persky thought the 6,000-square-foot house would provide the ideal headquarters for the Society, which in 1995 had a full-time staff of three. The leadership of the Society had always wanted the organization to be headquartered in a building of national, or international, significance so Persky's offer enabled the Society to fulfill a long-held dream. In April 1995, SAH purchased the James Charnley House with funds donated by Persky and in July of the same year the Society moved its international headquarters from Philadelphia to Chicago. To recognize Persky's efforts to preserve the James Charnley House as an educational resource that would forever be open to the public, the Society's Board decided to honor Persky by renaming the house.

In 2004, I interviewed Seymour Persky to learn more about him and the role that architecture played in his life as a real estate developer, collector of architectural fragments, and a philanthropist who supports architectural research, exhibitions and projects.

Saliga: **Today is Wednesday, September 22nd, 2004 and I'm interviewing Seymour Persky for the Charnley-Persky House Museum archive.** One of the things that I've always wondered about, Seymour, is what was it that initially sparked your interest in architecture?

Persky: I think that I was always an avid history student. I wanted to be a history professor; I never wanted to be a lawyer. But you can't feed yourself or children being a history professor, so I took a lot of courses in English history ostensibly – to prepare me for my study of law, because so much of American law is based on English law, and so much of English law is based on land. Everything connected with English law had to do with the land. Because that's how material success and wealth was measured. So how far is it from being an interested English History student to the study of real estate? And how far is it from the study of real estate to structures? The story of Greek temples and Roman structures – they were the greatest builders in the world, you know, and so consequently I became interested in architecture. And really, to sum it all up, if you take the word "archeology" it's the study of arches, and the study of history is always based on structures that the societies have left behind them. The Romans left the aqueducts and the temples, and the only thing that's left – the only thing that's enduring – unfortunately for me, being Jewish, there's no remains of Solomon's Temple. The Dome of the Rock is built on the site where Solomon's Temple was. And the Western Wall – also referred to as the Wailing Wall – where Jews come to pray, is the only remaining wall, which was a retaining wall of the Temple Mount.

SALIGA: You're saying that through architecture we can learn about cultures, we can learn about religions, histories…

PERSKY: It's all that remains…

SALIGA: It's all that remains at a certain point. Well, how did you get interested in American architecture then?

PERSKY: I lived in America and I'm an American.

SALIGA: That's why your collection pretty much revolves around Chicago architecture?

PERSKY: Yes is does, and I'm fascinated by things historical. My hobby is collecting antique automobiles. And it's not that they built them better than they build now, but there was a certain amount of history connected with the automobile, and I collect classic cars from the 20s and 30s.

SALIGA: Well what interested you about Chicago architecture, initially, or still?

PERSKY: I think the thing that fascinated me about Chicago architecture was the fact that I remember as a little guy – I'm talking about 6 or 7 – hearing my people talk about skyscrapers.

SALIGA: Really? So this would have been in the 1920s?

PERSKY: Yes. 1920s, 1930s. I remember my brother, Sam, may his soul rest in peace, talking about the fact that Chicago invented the skyscraper and seemed… You know the very term – to an impressionable kid – "skyscraper" – you mean it scrapes the sky?

SALIGA: Was your brother, Sam, a lot older than you?

PERSKY: My brother Sam was 10 years older than I was.

SALIGA: He might have learned about this in high school or…

PERSKY: Yes. And my very unusual background – I was born here in Chicago, but my brother and sister were born in Toronto. The immigrants – which my father and mother both were – couldn't get into the United States, so…

SALIGA: When would that have been?

PERSKY: 1905 or thereabouts. They came from …. There was a revolution in Russia. There was no shortage of revolutions. You're Russian, aren't you?

SALIGA: Polish and Czech.

PERSKY: And so my folks came into Canada instead, both my mother and father. And, my father's people were running a settlement house for a Jewish charity, and a family came over by the name of Solomon – my mother's family – and my father met my mother, and…

SALIGA: Oh, so they actually met in Canada?

PERSKY: Yes, and married in Canada, and they then emigrated to the United States.

SALIGA: When was that?

PERSKY: After 1917. After World War I, because my sister was born in Canada. I was born here in 1922.

SALIGA: Your brother and your sister were born in Canada.

PERSKY: Yes. They were American citizens through my father becoming a citizen.

SALIGA: Ah, I see, I see. So after the First World War is when they were able to come to the United States. And they settled right in Chicago?

PERSKY: They settled in Chicago. My father's sister came here, and she said, "You can make a living here", and they could.

SALIGA: What did he do to make a living?

PERSKY: My father was a very, very learned man – in Hebrew – but to earn a livelihood he worked in a sweat shop as a tailor.

SALIGA: This isn't his sewing machine, is it?

PERSKY: It's my mother's and that's my mother's iron. My mother particularly used to buy second-hand pants and wash them, and repair them, and then take them to Maxwell Street on Sundays to sell them. That's what she'd press the pants with.

SALIGA: I see, so your mother had her own little cottage industry going –

PERSKY: My father deserted my mother, and in about 1927 he ran into problems. He'd been involved in some "deals," and there was a federal investigation. My father eventually ran off to England.

SALIGA: Did you ever see him after that?

PERSKY: Oh yeah, he came back. He lived to see me become a lawyer. He knew I had rights to go to school under the G.I. Bill, and so consequently he said, “What do you want to be?” I said, I want to be a lawyer. He says, pointing to his palm, “You, a lawyer? When I have to shave here.”

SALIGA: Did you live with an extended family, with aunts and uncles and grandparents, or…

PERSKY: No, my mother’s family was all in Canada; my father’s family was here in Chicago, but we didn’t have too much to do with them because they were very angry at my father. He had caused them to lose money in some business venture.

SALIGA: But that wasn’t fair for them to not… [accept you children].

PERSKY: Well they couldn’t be angry at him, so they were angry at me. And I was raised on the old, old West Side of Chicago.

SALIGA: Whereabouts?

PERSKY: Six blocks from Maxwell Street. And it was not until about 1938, ’39 that we moved to the West Side of Chicago, which was then a Jewish neighborhood too. Lawndale. Lawndale was a Jewish area, and we moved there, and I was the only white kid in the whole black school.

SALIGA: In the 30s?

PERSKY: In the 30s. We were the last Jewish family to move out of that area, so all the people living there were Blacks. And I came from there to the West Side of Chicago with a bunch of aggressive Jewish kids who… I could barely read and write, and they had skipped me a couple of times, so I was twelve years old and I was in high school, but I was barely literate.

SALIGA: Now, wait, so you first grew up six blocks west of Maxwell Street?

PERSKY: Yeah.

SALIGA: Then you moved to Lawndale, and that's where you were twelve years old in high school?

PERSKY: Yes, Marshall kids there were so prodigiously ahead of me. I was barely literate. Barely.

SALIGA: So how did you make it through high school? You struggled, or -

PERSKY: It took me five years to get through four years… I took the four-year course on the five-year plan.

SALIGA: Well, you know, if that's what you needed in order to get up to speed…

PERSKY: So fortunately for one thing, I could sing. And I joined the Glee Club, which consisted of highly aggressive Jewish kids who were interested in music, and so was I, and I got the lead in an operetta, of all things – me.

SALIGA: Which operetta?

PERSKY: It was called “An Old Spanish Custom.”

SALIGA: [laughing] Right out of your experience, of course, right?

PERSKY: It was very much based on “The Mark of Zorro.” The leading man’s a guy by the name of Don Jose, and I was an Irish cook. Since there was a boys’ glee club, we took all the parts of the females, and I got the part of a fat old Irish cook by the name of Maggie Murphy. I still remember the songs.

[Singing with an Irish brogue]:

My name is Maggie Murphy
Perhaps you may have guessed
Of all the husbands I have had
Sure I like Pat Murphy best.

Oh, they say he is so handsome
And educated, my
But all the sense Pat Murphy’s got
He could put into me eye.

Now that goes back, that’s 60 years ago.

SALIGA: You have that kind of memory, I guess. You do have a good memory, that’s for sure. Well then when you got out of high school after the five-year plan, what did you do?

PERSKY: I went to work. I was a strong kid looking for a job and I got a job working on the docks at Horder's; I was a receiving clerk, unloading all the heavy boxes of paper, rolls of paper, etcetera, etcetera.

SALIGA: How long did you do that?

PERSKY: I did that for about a year and a half until I enlisted in the Army. World War II.

SALIGA: Right. I want to finish up a little bit more about your family. So you didn't have a big family network here that you were in touch with. Did your religion kind of take that place? I mean, did you have a strong religious community?

PERSKY: My mother was a very strong Jewess. We lived on the old West Side around Ashland Avenue and she made me go to Hebrew school on the West Side. She gave me a dime a day. That was three cents car fare going, three cents car fare coming back, and four cents for lunch.

SALIGA: And that was through grade school?

PERSKY: That was all through grade school. And I was a charity student at the Hebrew school, and the teachers there – one of the teachers in particular – made my life hell because I was a charity student, but I transferred to another school and I did very well.

SALIGA: So that was for Jewish studies, really, that was to learn Hebrew and to learn about your religion traditions and…

PERSKY: We studied some of the classic books; we studied Genesis and I studied some of the other things, but most of course I learned how to read Hebrew.

SALIGA: Where was your synagogue? Was there a synagogue?

PERSKY: It wasn't a synagogue, it was a Hebrew school. It was on Grenshaw and Homan.

SALIGA: But where would you practice your religion? Where would your family practice?

PERSKY: You couldn't afford to belong to a synagogue. That was for the rich people. My father and my mother… My grandmother died and left a three-hundred-dollar insurance policy and with that father and my mother bought a candy store at 1611 S. Spaulding and we lived in the back of the candy store. That was Lawndale. It was two blocks west of Kedzie Avenue and three blocks south of Roosevelt.

SALIGA: It wasn't until later that you became active in a synagogue?

PERSKY: That's right, when I could afford to.

SALIGA: Is it safe to say when the great economic boom was going on in the 1920s? Your family didn't experience the wealth that ordinary people did…

PERSKY: Well, my father was doing very well. He had a Packard automobile and a driver, and he was doing extremely well, in the finance business. And he was in the importing and exporting of second-hand clothing. He was doing extremely well until the bottom fell out. He

had some money coming to him from some people in England, so he ran off to England – to London, got there and he was terrorized to come back because of the federal investigation of the bank that he had been doing business with. It was the West-Central State Bank on Ogden and Roosevelt. I still remember. And the man in charge of the bank was a guy by the name of Dressell.

SALIGA: And Dressell had some illegal doings…

PERSKY: That has yet to be proven. It's only 70 years ago.

SALIGA: That in 1929?

PERSKY: My father was ahead of everything. All his troubles started in 1927, and so my mother moved back to the old West Side on 14th Street. That's when I was going to school with all the Black kids. Some of them were very nice to me.

SALIGA: Do you remember when the stock market crash occurred in '29? I mean, did it affect your family?

PERSKY: No, we had no stocks. We weren't in trouble because when it struck we didn't have any money to lose.

SALIGA: How did your mother support you then?

PERSKY: With the sewing machine. And the pants, and taking them to Maxwell Street on Sundays.

SALIGA: That really was enough to keep your family going.

PERSKY: And she had a little place called Bertha's Rummage Shop at 1432 W. 14th Street, about a block and a half east of Ashland where she sold second-hand clothes.

SALIGA: I see, so that was her business. That's pretty resourceful of her to set that up. I mean, think about making a business out of nothing.

PERSKY: My mother was one tough old lady. She wasn't an old lady then; she was a younger woman then, but she was very determined to keep the family together.

SALIGA: To keep her three kids.

PERSKY: My brother Sam worked for L. Kleins as a delivery boy.

SALIGA: Was that a store?

PERSKY: It was a department store on Halsted and 14th Street.

SALIGA: So right near Maxwell Street.

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: And then your sister?

PERSKY: My sister was five years older than me. She was a student. Can you imagine? She got a scholarship to the University of Chicago and my father made her quit to work in the candy store. Wasn't that a shame?

SALIGA: Yeah, that is a shame.

PERSKY: I take care of my sister now. She lives down in Florida.

SALIGA: You'll see her when you go to Boca Raton?

PERSKY: Always do.

SALIGA: She's five years older than you. I'm a little confused about when they owned the candy store.

PERSKY: They owned the candy store from about 1935 to about 1938.

SALIGA: So was that your father and your mother? He did come back to the family?

PERSKY: He did come back.

SALIGA: I thought maybe he came back to the United States but not to the family.

PERSKY: He was living in Canada and then he came back to Chicago when he felt all was clear.

SALIGA: Oh, I see. So you were reunited as a family eventually. That is a shame that your sister couldn't finish University of Chicago.

PERSKY: Yes, I still take care of her.

SALIGA: Did she ever marry?

PERSKY: She married, she had two children – Betsy and Harvey – and she married a chiropodist, who told everybody he was a physician.

SALIGA: And what about your brother, Sam, did he marry?

PERSKY: My brother, Sam, married and had two boys – Bernie and Norman. I taught Bernie a trade of being a skip tracer when I was in the collection business. He still does skip tracing down in Florida.

SALIGA: What's skip tracing?

PERSKY: Following up on deadbeats. Finding out where they're at, where they're working.

SALIGA: Deadbeats who owe their families money?

PERSKY: Deadbeats who owe creditors money, the finance companies.

SALIGA: There's always a demand for that. So are all those nieces and nephews still living?

PERSKY: Thank God, yes.

SALIGA: But they don't all live in Chicago, they're spread out?

PERSKY: Norman lives here in Morton Grove, Bernie lives in Florida, and Harvey and Betsy live in Florida.

SALIGA: You were relatively young during the Great Depression. Did you notice that the Great Depression was going on? Do you have memories of that?

PERSKY: Yes. My family was on relief and we had the humiliation of a case worker coming over to visit our house.

SALIGA: And that was when you were on the West Side?

PERSKY: On the old East Side, over on Hastings Street.

SALIGA: Was that because your mother's business…

PERSKY: There was no business – we were on relief.

SALIGA: Well, like a lot of other people.

PERSKY: With God's help we starved regularly. You can put that down.

SALIGA: [Chuckling. Persky excuses himself to put up a book.]

PERSKY: [Returns] … In here is an essay called *Bertha's Boy*.

SALIGA: *Bertha's Boy*.

PERSKY: My mother was Bertha.

SALIGA: Who wrote the book? [*Jewish Maxwell Street Stories*]

PERSKY: Shuli Eshel, a Jewish sociologist.

SALIGA: And it's about Maxwell Street. It's about your family?

PERSKY: It's about a dozen different Jewish families.

SALIGA: And your family is one of the ones profiled. I'd love to read it. Since your family was in rough shape…

PERSKY: To say that they were poverty-stricken is to elevate their position.

SALIGA: I was going to say they were in rough shape during the Depression, like many families were. Both my parents had to quit high school in order to work and support their brothers and sisters during the Depression. So chances are you didn't go to the Century of Progress Exposition…

PERSKY: Oh, I did. Yes, my mother sent me there with a next door neighbor, a Black lady by the name of Gertrude Mitchell. And she took me there, and she gave her a half a dollar to take me through.

SALIGA: Ooh, that's a lot of money.

PERSKY: It was.

SALIGA: What do you remember?

PERSKY: I remember a great deal. I was eleven years old – ten and eleven.

SALIGA: You went both years?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: What did you think of all the modern buildings?

PERSKY: I still remember the Keck's building… I remember a glass house.

SALIGA: The House of Tomorrow.

PERSKY: And the House of Tomorrow. And later on I lived in a Keck house. And Bill Keck, Fred Keck's brother, was a good friend of mine. As a matter of fact I delivered a memorial for him at his funeral.

SALIGA: Do you remember the sky ride at the exposition?

PERSKY: Oh, sure I do. Of course, the Skyride? I remember all those things. I had a young, impressionable mind. I remember the Transportation Building.

SALIGA: Weren't a lot of the buildings white one year and the next year they were colored, or vice versa?

PERSKY: I don't remember that.

SALIGA: You don't remember that? I know they changed the colors to make it look like a new fair. But did you think it was forward-looking, I mean as a kid?

PERSKY: Everybody regarded everything as magical.

SALIGA: Magical? So it really did have that kind of appeal? That it was unlike anything in the city itself really… Do you remember any of the exhibits?

PERSKY: I remember the sky ride. They had two towers, and they had little cars that went from one side to the other and you could get an overview of everything.

SALIGA: Did you take the sky ride?

PERSKY: It was a quarter.

SALIGA: Oh, a quarter! Really? That's a lot of money. So you didn't do that. Seems like it would be terrifying anyway, to be up so high suspended between two towers. Did you remember any of the exhibits within the buildings?

PERSKY: I remember the Streets of Paris; I didn't go in there.

SALIGA: Not as an eleven-year-old…

PERSKY: But they had some almost naked women standing in front, which to an eleven-year-old kid were very, very shall we say, inspiring? I remember one of the songs.

SALIGA: What's that?

PERSKY: Sally Rand lost her fan/Give it back, you nasty man.

SALIGA: So you didn't see her either?

PERSKY: Oh no…

SALIGA: No, of course not. Do you remember any of the exhibits from the countries, like the Italian exhibit or the Japanese exhibit?

PERSKY: You had to pay money to get in.

SALIGA: So you just went to see the fair in general.

PERSKY: I remember they had one particular thing where you could get in for a dime for two people, in which they had an exhibition on sponge gathering. How people put on divers' clothing and went in and picked up…

SALIGA: That was interesting?

PERSKY: Yeah.

SALIGA: Must be, if you remember it after all this time.

SALIGA: When the second World War broke out, you were out of high school, were you working by then?

PERSKY: Yes, and I enlisted.

SALIGA: As a patriotic act, or you wanted to see the world, or…

PERSKY: I wanted to be an airplane mechanic, and if you enlisted you could say where you wanted to go.

SALIGA: I see, so what year did you enlist, do you remember?

PERSKY: I enlisted in 1942.

SALIGA: And where did you end up going?

PERSKY: I ended up going through a bunch of schools, and I ended up doing patrol duty. I was fortunate.

SALIGA: Patrol duty, meaning what?

PERSKY: Guatemala.

SALIGA: In Guatemala? There was no war in Guatemala.

PERSKY: Looking for subs.

SALIGA: Oh, I see. So you were patrolling for subs. So that was fairly safe.

PERSKY: Yes it was, fairly.

SALIGA: I would think. So you never made it to Europe or Japan or…

PERSKY: No, thank God.

SALIGA: Only later you went to Europe I'm sure.

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: How long were you in the service?

PERSKY: About two and a half years.

SALIGA: And then when you got out you decided to take advantage of the…

PERSKY: I went to work as a bartender. And then as a liquor clerk. And then I had forty-eight months of college coming to me, so my brother and I had a bar on 63rd Street, between Sacramento and Whipple called the Bamboo Inn. And I gave my brother the bar for the value of the booze on the counter and I went off to junior college.

SALIGA: Where did you go?

PERSKY: Herschel Junior College, which was Junior College of Chicago then, on the old West Side.

SALIGA: You went there for two years?

PERSKY: I made it in a year and a half and then I started law school.

SALIGA: You could start law school after a couple years of college?

PERSKY: You could start law school then with two years…

SALIGA: Without a four-year degree?

PERSKY: Without a degree. I was all ready to go to the University of Chicago, but they changed their requirements from two years of pre-legal to a degree, and I just was not going to go back and get a degree. So I went to DePaul, and I was admitted on the basis that I get some more credit hours before I could graduate and get my law degree. So I was going to Roosevelt and DePaul at the same time. So I managed to get my BA in ’52 and my JD in ’52.

SALIGA: So you were going through two programs at the same time?

PERSKY: Damn near.

SALIGA: And you were working?

PERSKY: Only summers.

SALIGA: You weren't married at the time, you didn't have a family?

PERSKY: I was married to my first wife.

SALIGA: Did you have kids by then?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: So you could devote the time to studies.

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: When you graduated with a law degree in '52, did you open your own practice or did you…

PERSKY: No, I went and took the Bar and fortunately I think they felt sorry for me and let me pass.

SALIGA: [chuckling] Well I doubt that was the case. I'm sure you passed with flying colors.

PERSKY: Well, I made it the first time. And I wandered around, seeing everybody's posterior, trying to get a job, and I finally got a job, through a Republican Precinct Captain of all people, working for a lawyer by the

name of Ray Sukhof for twenty-five dollars a week. And I'd been making big money in the bar business, and here I started a job for twenty-five dollars a week – working for the firm of Sukhof, Frost, and Spiegel at 11 S. LaSalle Street, running and getting coffee for the secretaries at the age of 29, 30. It was very demeaning.

SALIGA: You weren't doing legal work for them?

PERSKY: Some of that, serving motions, running errands.

SALIGA: You were just doing real entry-level work.

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: That didn't last long I take it.

PERSKY: No, I left and went to work for a guy by the name of Ray Himmelhoch at $37.50 a week. And then I left him and went to work for a lawyer by the name of Milton Schafner for $50 a week.

SALIGA: This is all within the space of a couple of years, or…

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: Did you stay with him for awhile?

PERSKY: I stayed with him for awhile, and it was a very interesting situation.

SALIGA: How so?

PERSKY: He had a secretary that liked to yell at people, and I yelled back. That was fatal. He was a collection lawyer. With what I learned there about collection law, I went to work for a finance company for $75 a week. And I had learned some pretty aggressive collection law, and I started bringing in big lines, big money, for this finance company.

SALIGA: From deadbeats?

PERSKY: From people who owed money and who had defaulted. And I said to the owner, I'll make ya a deal you can't turn down. I'll work for 10% of what I collect. It sounded like a bargain to him. Well I started collecting $3000 a week and I was making $300 a week. I decided to go into private practice.

SALIGA: To go into your own practice?

PERSKY: And I left them in 1958, and moved to 105 W. Madison Street.

SALIGA: And opened your own little firm?

PERSKY: I opened my own little office doing collection work, personal injury work, criminal cases, and I set up a finance company of my own, to finance the fees that people owed me.

SALIGA: Oh, I never heard of that. Were you the only lawyer who did that, or…

PERSKY: Yes, I was the only lawyer that did that, because that meant I could get other people to co-sign for them.

SALIGA: And that worked out okay?

PERSKY: Beautifully. It was innovative.

SALIGA: Yeah, I think that was innovative. So did your law firm then turn into a criminal practice?

PERSKY: Yes, I practiced criminal law, and I had two junior partners, and I went to Florida on vacation, and when I came back, they weren't talking. One's name was Milton and one's name was Art. And I said "Art, you've told me things about Milt. And Milt, you've told me things about Art. You're both right. Now what are we going to do about it?" Well, Milt says, "I'm leaving, I've got another job." And at that particular point Art says to me, "Well, I want to buy Milt's share." I said, "You didn't give it to him." He said, "Yeah, but I want to buy it." I gave Art 25% of my practice when he came in and I gave Milt 22%, and now he wanted to buy the other portion of it. I says, "I'm bringing in all the business and I'm bringing in all the money. You can't buy half of me." So he says, "Well I'm leaving." So they left, so I went into private practice. I hired people as I needed them.

SALIGA: As you needed additional help… And how did that work out?

PERSKY: Beautifully.

SALIGA: Are there such things as temporary lawyers or freelance lawyers?

PERSKY: Well, one of the guys I hired, I caught stealing so I threw him away, but in the meantime I had discovered real estate, which I needed for tax shelter. So I bought an apartment building, and I found that I could buy apartment buildings and rehabilitate them and raise the rents,

and make a free mortgage, and make a lot of money. And so I did that a few dozen times.

SALIGA: That's how you eventually got started in real estate. It was an investment.

PERSKY: It started as a means of sheltering the money I was earning as a lawyer. All Jewish engineering, Dear.

SALIGA: But eventually your interest in real estate really took over.

PERSKY: Yes. I now own thirty-two apartment buildings and six Walgreen's.

SALIGA: Six Walgreen's? You mean you own the buildings and lease them to Walgreen's? Some of the new ones that were built?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: Were you the one who commissioned the construction of the buildings or…

PERSKY: No, I bought them from the guy that built them.

SALIGA: I see, so he built them on spec…

PERSKY: And then sold them.

SALIGA: And he sold them to you, and you leased them to Walgreen's.

PERSKY: They were already leased. Poverty made me a pretty good businessman.

SALIGA: I would say. Well, because you don't want to be in that position again, right? You don't want to be poor again, so you do everything you can to make sure you're not.

PERSKY: Particularly true.

Saliga: Today is Wednesday, September 29th, 2004 and I'm speaking with Seymour Persky about his collection and about Charnley-Persky House. Why don't we talk about Charnley-Persky House for a minute. What was your relationship to SAH when you decided to make the donation?

Charnley-Persky House, 1365 N. Astor Street, Chicago
Designed by Adler and Sullivan, 1891-1892 at the time that Frank Lloyd Wright was a draftsman in their office.
Photo: Pauline Saliga, 2008

Persky: I was a member of the SAH Board.

SALIGA: And as I heard the story, the SAH Board had a meeting here in Chicago, and did you invite them to see your collection, or you invited them to Charnley House, or do you remember how that worked?

PERSKY: Well, I can give you the following as I remember it sequentially. I always admired the beauty of Charnley House and I remember years ago, maybe 50 years ago, I was dating a young lady who was living at 1400 Lake Shore Drive. And I parked my car, and I passed that house, and I said to her something about how beautiful it was. And she said, "Oh yes, it's a very historically important house." Now that was ever so many, many years ago. Then, as you know, John Eiffler restored it, and I was taken there for dinner by Stanley Tigerman, and at that time, that place --there was a young English architect [Ben Nicholson] living there as a postgraduate student. He ended up teaching over at IIT. I have a couple pieces of his work here… And Stanley Tigerman introduced me to him, who was living there at the time, and a woman who had an art gallery. And I liked the house, of course, and then I became interested in the house when I heard that it was available.

SALIGA: When Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill decided to sell it?

PERSKY: Yes. And I was taken to dinner over at the Racquet Club by Bruce Graham. And I broached the subject of purchasing it – Charnley House – and he said "Yes, he would take Robie House and six million dollars." Well, I realized that his erstwhile partner, who thought that he was crazy, was right. What was his partner's name again? His wife ran for governor?

SALIGA: Walter Netsch.

PERSKY: Walter Netsch. I realized that I couldn't do anything about it, but I realized that he [Graham] was completely and totally out of the market, and I became friendly with two of the seniors over at Skidmore, Owings. One of them was a Jewish gentleman.

SALIGA: Tom Eyerman, Adrian Smith? Myron Goldsmith?

PERSKY: No, he was the one in charge of their business-getting and such.

SALIGA: I'll have to look that up to see who that was.

PERSKY: So I made a couple of overtures to them, and he told me that it was 1 million 600,000. Well that was "do-able," and so I became interested, and decided that I would buy an option for a certain period of time and see what I could do. And so I did. And I had the option, and I did a little work around there that it needed so very badly. And I got a hold of John Eifler, and I said, "Could you put in an elevator for me? Because I realized my age, and all those steps…" So he said he'd look into it, and he did, and then I saw what he had to do. It seemed that if they put in an elevator, it would be architectural vandalism.

SALIGA: Because they'd have to destroy so much of the original building?

PERSKY: Yeah.

SALIGA: Do you recall where he was going to put the elevator?

PERSKY: No, but John will know; he has the drawings. He put a lady on it – a lady architect – and I didn't have the heart to do it. And then, who becomes involved in it? Mrs. Weisberg and Christian Laine. And I was invited to a meeting at the Cultural Center with Christian Laine, Albert Friedman – who had been serving on the Landmarks Commission that I serve on – and Mrs. Weisberg, who kept on referring to Christian Laine as a "free spirit." I knew that he wasn't going to be a free "spirit" or corpse, or any of that for too very long because I had received news about his litigations. He was telling everybody that since I was interested in architectural fragments, and I was a developer, I was going to buy the Charnley House, demolish it, and build condominiums on that site. Now the site is something like 60 x 90? How big is…?

SALIGA: It's a little bigger than that. It's about 40 x 125. It's a very narrow site.

PERSKY: Yes. Now how you could build condos on that I don't know, even if you acquired the piece to the immediate east, which was once part of the site I understand.

SALIGA: The apartment building, the Binderton next door? And that's already condos.

PERSKY: So, in sum, I didn't disclose anything to them. I didn't feel that it was incumbent upon me to tell them about what I was up to, but at any rate, I told Mrs. Weisberg that I felt I was there purely because Christian Laine wanted the house for himself. For what purpose I know not. Maybe a shrine to his former freedom?

SALIGA: Was he trying to get the city to buy it for him or something?

PERSKY: I don't know. So I left, and that was that. And I was pondering, and so I blow the option money, but it's a shame because it would have such a great usage, and I don't know – like somebody turning on a light bulb – the fact that it had been converted to office usage by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, and it had been wired for office equipment, and all of a sudden – Bing! – as if somebody had reached in and pulled a switch, I thought of the Society of Architectural Historians being there.

SALIGA: And this is just from your membership in the Society and your involvement in the Board?

PERSKY: And my appreciation for what they did. And so that same afternoon I reached for the phone and called somebody at the SAH, and made them the offer.

SALIGA: It was that immediate?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: And the offer you made was what?

PERSKY: That I would give them the money to exercise the option, if they would move to Chicago.

SALIGA: And why was that an important part of it to you?

PERSKY: Well, who was going to use the building? Was the building just supposed to be a temple, a shrine to a former Chicago family? Or was it going to be used? And so the parts fit; everything seemed to come into juxtaposition. The rest you know all about.

SALIGA: Well you know the cultural community and the arts community here in Chicago felt that that was a real coup on your part, and my having been part of that community I know everyone couldn't believe that you convinced a national organization to move its headquarters here to Chicago. And for the City of Chicago, that was a real coup; that was an important feather in the cultural cap of Chicago.

PERSKY: Well, it may have been all of those things, but it was just a great use for a structure that had been augmented to be used by an architectural organization, namely Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill's. What did they call their…?

SALIGA: It was called the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, so they had a lot of architects working on projects there. It was kind of a think tank, I guess, and they published papers about architecture and urbanism. But ultimately they weren't able to continue to support that organization. When Skidmore pulled their funding they weren't able to raise money to continue.

PERSKY: And I was there to buy it. Steal it.

SALIGA: We won't say that… But you think that was a fair price for the house?

PERSKY: I think it was remarkably reasonable.

SALIGA: Especially considering that Skidmore put about a million dollars' worth of renovation into the house…

PERSKY: At their cost.

SALIGA: Had you considered offering it to any other Chicago organizations or any other groups?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: You know it was very difficult for SAH's Board to decide to move. They were situated in Philadelphia for so many years.

PERSKY: Sure, the big concern was, How much money will we have to spend to make it useable? And I said, Nothing.

SALIGA: And you were right. Subsequently we did raise about $400,000 to do work below grade on the house because we learned that it developed a flooding problem. Did it have that problem when you owned it?

PERSKY: Not that I knew of.

SALIGA: Maybe it was a dry summer, because it only appeared after we moved in. [Chuckling] Not that I'm suspicious or anything…

PERSKY: [Kidding] That's why I gave it to you, because it had problems. I wanted to unload it.

SALIGA: No, it's been a wonderful house for SAH because it's really raised SAH's profile nationally, and it's important for SAH to be identified with a National Historic Landmark; it's such an important building. When you gave it to SAH, what were you hoping that they would do with it besides use it for offices?

PERSKY: To make that their national headquarters.

SALIGA: And it's worked very well.

PERSKY: And you coming into the scene, that was Carter Manny's idea. Wasn't he with the Art Institute?

SALIGA: The Graham Foundation. I owe a lot to Carter. He's been a great supporter.

PERSKY: He married Maya Moran.

SALIGA: Do you have any idea what you would've done if SAH wasn't able to accept your gift?

PERSKY: I would have abandoned it.

SALIGA: You would've just let Skidmore sell it to someone else?

PERSKY: I would've lost my dough and taken a hike.

SALIGA: You didn't have another organization in mind. I know from reading the deed and transfer papers that one of the things you stipulated is that the house always remain in the hands of a not-for-profit organization. That if SAH decided to leave the house, they couldn't sell it.

PERSKY: No. I got called immediately, by Carol Wyant and she asked me to make sure that the LPCI [Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois] got the façade. Well, I gave away the whole building, including the façade. And I said when I had a chance to buy the second historical

society building, now presently the Excalibur building, I had an opportunity to buy that building and make it the home of the National Trust, and the LPCI, and your organization. It would have been large enough for all of those. She shot it down.

SALIGA: Why?

PERSKY: Because she was trying to convert the Reliance Building into an office facility for all those…

SALIGA: I never heard that plan. Well that obviously didn't work because it's a hotel now.

PERSKY: Right.

SALIGA: So they were hoping to have some office building downtown?

PERSKY: A series of office buildings…

SALIGA: For use by groups that support the arts and preservation. But was it your idea to stipulate that the house could never be sold; that it would have to be transferred to another not-for profit organization?

PERSKY: Yes, if I was going to keep it as a "shrine" if you please. It's a good word.

SALIGA: A shrine… So that was your intention, that it always be open to the public, accessible?

PERSKY: That too.

SALIGA: Well you've succeeded in doing that because it will never be turned back into a private residence. It'll always be a public institution.

PERSKY: After I acquired it I did some small minor things to it. I tore three tons of ivy off the back.

SALIGA: And there was another three tons left by the time we got there.

PERSKY: And I had a craftsman who I know, Mike Grucia do some of the work on the exterior ornamentation.

SALIGA: I didn't know you had Mike work on the cornice, right? Did he work on the cornice?

PERSKY: No, the iron work.

SALIGA: The iron work on the front door? Because you were worried that someone might try to steal it, right?

PERSKY: Guys like me.

SALIGA: What do you hope, that SAH will do anything more with the house in the future, in addition to using it as their headquarters?

PERSKY: No, it's a very lofty aspiration.

SALIGA: And it's worked incredibly well.

PERSKY: Well, my father was a tailor, and the pants fit.

SALIGA: [Chuckling] Yes, it is a good fit. Can we talk a little bit about your collection? About your vast collection, which…

Selections from Seymour Persky's collection of architectural fragments, drawings and decorative arts, 2004
Photos: John Gronkowski Photography

PERSKY: May I ask you a question? I have a rendering of the Charnley House. Since Frank Lloyd Wright did the design, did he also do that rendering?

SALIGA: No, as a matter of fact we've looked into this. I know which rendering you mean, and we believe it was a draftsman in Sullivan's office, but it wasn't Wright. In fact there are initials on it, I believe, aren't there?

PERSKY: You know I have these pieces here from the original.

SALIGA: From Charnley House you have a piece of the balcony face, a bracket…

PERSKY: There it is – the green thing.

SALIGA: You have a piece of the copper cornice and a frieze, a little wooden frieze. So these are from the 1970s renovation of the house?

PERSKY: Yes, I think the work was done by John Vinci.

SALIGA: I think so. Because in the 70s they had to rebuild the entire balcony. It was completely rotted.

PERSKY: What attracted me, initially, to the building – when I was seeing that young lady 50 years ago – when I would walk past the building, was the – what do you call it? It's not a porch –

SALIGA: The loggia, the balcony…

PERSKY: The loggia reminded me so much of the Auditorium Building.

SALIGA: Of the projection on the Auditorium. You're right.

PERSKY: And I had gone to Roosevelt, and I had always admired the architecture there.

SALIGA: When you were going to Roosevelt, did you know that the building was designed by a famous architect?

PERSKY: I knew one of them was Jewish.

SALIGA: Adler.

PERSKY: Yes. And as a matter of fact I have a couple of pieces of the synagogue that they did for his father.

SALIGA: The KAM.

PERSKY: Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv. Translated from the Hebrew meaning "Men of the West." And there's also a six-pointed star in zinc.

SALIGA: From the same synagogue. Well, let's back up about your collection for a minute. What originally made you start collecting architectural fragments?

PERSKY: Well, I was always a history buff, particularly English history. What fascinated me was that fragments, in essence, are tangible history. And I was attracted, of course, by my love of history to the Tribune where they allegedly have fragments of other buildings from the entire world. I don't know how much of that is honest.

SALIGA: I think it's honest. I think they really are fragments from all those places they claim.

PERSKY: Gee whiz, fragments of the pyramids, fragments of Westminster Abbey – all of this was so very awesome.

SALIGA: Did you see that as an adult or as a child?

PERSKY: As an adult.

SALIGA: So the idea of collecting fragments of buildings came from the Tribune's collection?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: Then what was the first fragment you were able to collect?

Selections from Seymour Persky's collection of architectural fragments, 2004
Photo: John Gronkowski Photography

PERSKY: I was practicing criminal law, and I walked past 30 N. LaSalle.

SALIGA: The Chicago Stock Exchange.

PERSKY: The Chicago Stock Exchange Building, and in the lobby they were converting to automated elevators. And they had the archaic elevators…

SALIGA: Which we see so many of here.

PERSKY: … and the other ones from the first floor. The ones from the lobby were different than the ones in the entire building, and I remember seeing a guy in bib overalls, and my saying to him, “What are you doing with this?” And he said to me that they were waiting for the junk man to pick it up. Well, I practiced criminal law in those days, and when you practice criminal law you always carry a couple hundred dollars with you. You know the story.

SALIGA: Go ahead, we want to get it on tape.

PERSKY: You always carry a couple hundred, three hundred dollars because you don’t know when you’re going to need money for a bond, when you’re going to need money to see a witness, give some money to the defendant to tide him over for a bit. Give him a fifty or a hundred. And so I took out two 100-dollar bills and tore them in half, which is an old criminal lawyers’ trick, and I said, “Here’s these halves and you’ll get another one when you deliver them to my house.” So he said, “No

problem.” It was windfall day for him. At that time I lived at 4100 Marine Drive. I was in Chicago, so it wasn’t a long haul for him. And I’ll never forget my then father-in-law – he was a nice old gentleman – and he

said to his daughter when the stuff was being delivered, “You married a lawyer, turns out he’s a junk man.”

SALIGA: [Chuckling] Did you actually install them in your apartment there?

PERSKY: I kept them there. I made it into a desk – a table out of one of the plaques and four of the supporting legs.

SALIGA: So that it would have a functional life. But then at some point you started collecting fragments not to be converted into something else but to preserve them as...

PERSKY: I was “infected.”

SALIGA: So that’s what did it? That’s what infected you [with the collecting bug]? Just living with this piece and appreciating its beauty?

PERSKY: Yes, the fragments seemed to *exude* history.

Selections from Seymour Persky's collection of decorative arts, 2004
Photo: John Gronkowski Photography

SALIGA: Did you know at that point that the Stock Exchange was designed by Adler and Sullivan? It's not like the ordinary person at that point knew a lot about Chicago architecture. It's not like it is now.

PERSKY: Forgive me, but I have to say it, and it may seem self-laudatory. I didn't know; I felt [its beauty].

SALIGA: Now you see that's interesting. And you were so moved by the beauty of these pieces that you were willing to just buy them without even knowing their ultimate connection and their ultimate value?

PERSKY: That's right. And those stairs came with it.

SALIGA: From the Stock Exchange.

Selections from Seymour Persky's collection of decorative arts and architectural fragments, 2004
Photo: John Gronkowski Photography

PERSKY: Yeah, I bought various other things from him.

SALIGA: So at that point when they were changing the first floor lobby they were ripping all kinds of things out. So that must've been in the '60s?

PERSKY: And then the T-plates, they had one of them in the window in the entry way, you know the revolving door? And there was a glass panel, and then there was another revolving door. They had one of these with a little story and the beauty of that was entrapping.

SALIGA: Astounding. So did you get them to sell that to you?

PERSKY: Yes, I managed to get my hands on one T-plate.

SALIGA: So that was probably in the 1960s, or what, 1950s when they did that work?

PERSKY: Sixties.

SALIGA: So it was only later on that they started ripping out the stencils from the trading room and all of that became available. Were you really involved when the building was coming down?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: I mean involved in acquiring things?

PERSKY: Well, I felt that they had taken down the Garrick Theater but I felt, “They’ll never take down the Stock Exchange; it’s too important.” But to have made a parking lot out of the Garrick Theater, that was an act of – as was well said – an act of urban vandalism. What’s-his-name, the photographer?

SALIGA: Richard Nickel. That’s what he said about it?

PERSKY: “Urban vandalism.” I still remember the statement. I think it was he who said it.

SALIGA: It was a great act of violence against an architecturally important building.

PERSKY: Architecture was not recognized as one of the lively arts at that time.

SALIGA: In the ‘60s in Chicago, no, it really wasn’t. It was just something that was in the way of urban renewal, right? Something to be demolished, certainly not something to be preserved.

PERSKY: A statement was made by a Chicago alderman [gruffly], “Take it down before it falls down.” Remember that?

SALIGA: No I don’t remember that. About the Chicago Stock Exchange or about the Garrick Theater?

PERSKY: Stock Exchange.

SALIGA: The Stock Exchange is what really sparked the whole preservation movement in Chicago in the ‘70s. Were you aware of the picketers and the whole preservation battle that was started? Did you get involved in that at all with Landmarks Preservation Council?

PERSKY: No, I was too busy earning a livelihood. What year was that?

SALIGA: mid-sixties.

PERSKY: I was too busy being a daddy and making money to buy a home.

SALIGA: To support your family. But you did eventually get involved with Landmarks Preservation Council.

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: In the ‘80s, I guess, later on. So we know how you collected your first fragment, and you said after that you were hooked. Do you remember what else you started collecting right after that? Or did you continue to collect right after that?

PERSKY: I bought a home in Skokie and I used some of these. I used six of those from the staircase…

SALIGA: Balusters from the Stock Exchange.

PERSKY: Yes, the staircase coming to the house, and I used some other things as ornamentation.

SALIGA: Throughout the house?

PERSKY: No, particularly in the living room, and what do they call an ornamental wall?

SALIGA: A room divider or a screen?

PERSKY: As a room divider between a new addition that I had put on in Skokie.

SALIGA: So you were still trying to find uses for the fragments you had collected. You were still putting them to use. How did you continue to collect fragments? Did you find them as buildings were being renovated, or did you go to galleries, or how did you find the pieces?

PERSKY: I became involved with auctions, et cetera. Scott Elliott got me involved with that piece, this drawing here.

SALIGA: The Frank Lloyd Wright drawing of...

PERSKY: The National Insurance Building.

SALIGA: Life Insurance Building. And these you bought at auction, these two drawings.

PERSKY: And then I bought some other things, but I didn't know... He opened a gallery on Lincoln Avenue in a building that was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, I mean Louis Sullivan. There's some of it.

SALIGA: The Krause Music Store.

PERSKY: I have the façade from the hand of Louis Sullivan right behind it.

SALIGA: So you have the [Krause Music Store] working drawings. And those you bought at auction?

PERSKY: Yes, I bought those at auction. When that British nobleman put up some of his collection.

SALIGA: Lord Palumbo?

PERSKY: Yeah, Peter Palumbo.

SALIGA: So do you think that your collecting of fragments really increased when you moved to this house on 15 W. Grand, or... You didn't have this big of a collection when you first moved here, did you?

PERSKY: No, I had quite a few things, but I didn't have anything this important.

SALIGA: This extensive? What made you decide to focus your collection? It seems like it's pretty much focused on Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Prairie School.

PERSKY: Chicago architecture.

SALIGA: Chicago architecture. It's what was available I guess.

PERSKY: I'm a Chicago boy.

SALIGA: So Chicago is your inspiration? I know that Tim Samuelson has been a big help to you.

PERSKY: I was the Vice President of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois and the mayor appointed me to the Landmarks Commission.

SALIGA: Because of your interest in historic architecture.

PERSKY: Yes. I have been on their Board now for about six or seven years; I've never missed a meeting.

SALIGA: At what point did you decide to collect architectural drawings in addition to fragments? Through Scott Elliott or through Tim [Samuelson]?

PERSKY: Scott Elliott.

SALIGA: And why is that? Because he had the Iannelli collection and you were interested?

PERSKY: Yes, I bought most of it.

SALIGA: I know you have a lot of letters and papers and drawings, and sculptural maquettes, full-size sculptures. What is the part you didn't buy? Was that his industrial design work?

PERSKY: Yeah.

SALIGA: So that part you weren't interested in, but all of his architecture-related work is what you bought.

PERSKY: You know what the last thing he ever did was?

SALIGA: No.

PERSKY: The [relief sculpture of the] mountain on the Prudential Building.

SALIGA: That's right... He's done some amazing things, I mean if you really study his career he was an interesting sculptor. So has anyone ever approached you about using your papers to write a book about Iannelli?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: It seems like it needs to be done.

PERSKY: It's something that needs to be done, yes. Also, I became friendly with Michael Fitzsimmons who knew I had the appetite and who knew I had the money.

SALIGA: What would you have purchased from him, fragments or furniture?

PERSKY: Furniture.

SALIGA: That's true because your collection is not only fragments and drawings, its furniture and decorative arts.

PERSKY: Sure. And then Scott Elliott had that building on Lincoln Avenue, which was called the Kelmscott Gallery and [Bill] Hasbrouck gave him things to sell. I managed to put together the three items in that famous picture, namely the weed holders, the lamp, and the urn. And I have all three.

SALIGA: All three original...

PERSKY: Two of the original things – the weed holder and the lamp. The urn is from another house. It was a total of about twelve urns. Someday you have to do the article on all twelve.

SALIGA: Does anyone even know where all twelve are?

PERSKY: No, I think that Governor Thompson probably does.

SALIGA: Well that's true. You were up against some big competitors when you were buying your pieces. You were up against Thomas Monaghan, Lord Palumbo, Gov. Thompson. In the '80s when architecture was really popular...

PERSKY: I bought the urn in the '70s. It had been consigned to Elliott by Bill Hasbrouck. And then I called Bill Hasbrouck, and I said, "What

do you think of it?" He says, "I'd have to see it." So he went down there to look at it. It was his. And he says, "It's magnificent." Of course it was. He wanted to see it sold.

SALIGA: Did he know you knew it was his?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: So you bought it. It's a good thing you bought it when you did. Those are extremely valuable now.

PERSKY: What would you say?

SALIGA: Aren't they worth a couple hundred thousand dollars?

PERSKY: I paid about a hundred and seven for mine.

SALIGA: It's a great return on your investment. But you don't see it as an investment; I'm sure this is from your heart and soul. I know at one time you were talking with different institutions in Chicago about taking your collection or establishing an architecture museum. Wasn't that one of the uses that you thought of for the Excalibur Club at one time?

PERSKY: Yeah.

SALIGA: And as I understand it you also spoke with the Art Institute.

PERSKY: I gave the Art Institute two million dollars to build an architectural wing, and they had two years to plan and two years to build. They did no planning and they did no building, and I took my two

million back. They had no intentions of ever doing anything. It was Tigerman's engineering to stop me from buying the second historical society building.

SALIGA: Which is now the Excalibur. Well would that have been two million, to purchase that...?

PERSKY: Three million, six.

SALIGA: But then a lot more to renovate, to turn into a museum. Would you have been willing to invest all that?

PERSKY: I had the money...

SALIGA: And the interest in doing so?

PERSKY: Sure.

SALIGA: But you would've needed an institution to take it over and run it?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: And no institution stepped forward to do that?

PERSKY: I tried involving the LPCI, and the LPCI – Carol Wyant – said that no, she wanted to do the Reliance Building.

SALIGA: Okay, but would the building have been set up as an architecture museum to house your collection?

PERSKY: Yes, partially. It would have been three functions the architectural museum, the offices of the National Trust, and the offices of the Landmarks Preservation Council. It would've been a nice combined effort.

SALIGA: Such a beautiful building too, so appropriate since it was a museum to begin with. But that didn't work. I know you also spoke with the city about setting up a gallery in the Cultural Center, didn't you?

PERSKY: Right. And what's-his-name shot that down. Christian Laine.

SALIGA: Do you know for what reason?

PERSKY: Of course. He told the powers-that-be that if I set up my museum, it would put him out of his museum and put him out of business.

SALIGA: He's out of business anyway. And I know that you talked with Roosevelt University too. I mean, I think you talked with Roosevelt University about creating an architectural history position there?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: And did you want them to take your collection too?

PERSKY: The problems is, with the students there, you would have to have a lot of security. Students have "taking ways."

SALIGA: Well, everybody does, and I think it's one of the problems they experienced at Southern Illinois University, because they have the

Richard Nickel collection and it's scattered all over the campus. So it's difficult to keep tabs on it. Are you talking with any other institutions?

PERSKY: I'm talking to the Cultural Center now, and through Tim Samuelson who's there.

SALIGA: Fingers crossed. I won't ask any details because I don't want to jinx the deal.

PERSKY: Thank you.

SALIGA: That's good news. So what else are you interested in collecting?

PERSKY: I collect antique automobiles. You know that.

SALIGA: I know that. Do you have your sights set on any particular architectural fragments, or drawings or anything for your collection?

PERSKY: I have everything that's good. That's fine.

PERSKY: Oh, I can tell you something interesting. You see those two bas reliefs – one of Adler and one of Sullivan – I had duplicates made of those and I gave them to Roosevelt University, and they put them in the lobby of the Auditorium Theater.

SALIGA: That's very nice. That's such an incredible theater. Well, is there anything else you want to tell me about your collection? Of course we would need to go through in a little bit more detail, but generally you're...

PERSKY: There's those two pieces there that are by Frank Lloyd Wright that Mike just made copies of.

SALIGA: These? Weed holders, or?

SALIGA: So you have a couple of reproductions mixed in with...

PERSKY: Very few.

SALIGA: Your desk I guess – the Coonley desk...

PERSKY: That's a reproduction.

SALIGA: But everything pretty much is original.

Saliga: Today is Wednesday, October 27th, 2004 and I'm taping my third interview with Seymour Persky, probably our final interview, to talk about his collection and his life.

Last time we talked about your collection, and one thing that I forgot to ask you is, has your collection been exhibited and published?

Persky: There was a show of Art Nouveau, I believe it was in Washington, DC, at the National Gallery.

SALIGA: So which pieces went? Sullivan pieces?

PERSKY: The entire first floor elevator bank from the Stock Exchange building went there, and Mike Grucia took it. It was sent to Washington,

and he reassembled it there, then took it down and brought it back, and reassembled it.

SALIGA: It was nice work for Mike. But I know you had an exhibition at the Arts Club too, where a lot of your Iannelli and Wright material was shown? Is anyone asking to exhibit the collection right now?

PERSKY: No, but I'm thinking of bringing some of it over to the Cultural Center, because the Museum of Broadcast Communications moved out. So that space is available and they're thinking of bringing my collection over there, which would be a nice place for it.

SALIGA: It would be great. Are they thinking about setting up a permanent architecture exhibition?

PERSKY: Yes, under Tim's [Samuelson] aegis.

SALIGA: So this is what Tim Samuelson is pushing for?

PERSKY: Yes. She's not an easy lady to get along with.

SALIGA: Lois Weisberg. Well, it's good you have Tim as a bridge or a buffer.

PERSKY: His wife works there too.

SALIGA: Right, Barbara Koenen.

PERSKY: I hope so too. Because at the age of 82, it's not that I can see the end of the tunnel of my life, but if I value my collection, I think I should make some plans for it.

SALIGA: Are you in a position to say whether you would make a gift to the city of the collection, or...?

PERSKY: I might. Who else? The Art Institute?

SALIGA: They don't have space for it or the interest in it.

PERSKY: Not only that, I tried that. I tried giving them two million dollars and all I got was, Yeah, yeah, yeah and some cockamamie exhibitions that they made with the money that the two million threw off.

SALIGA: So you weren't happy with the way that worked out.

PERSKY: It was John Zukowsky and Tigerman, collaborated in the hoax. The whole idea of building a wing onto the Art Institute was just so much of an impossible legend because I had what is now the Excalibur Club. I think I told you this story.

SALIGA: Right, we talked about this and you were persuaded not to buy it.

PERSKY: Well yes, I was going to give a third of it to the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, something to the National Trust, and then have an exhibition of fragments. Nothing happened. And along came Tigerman and said, "You don't have to do that. If you give two million dollars to the Art Institute, they can get two million dollars from the city – from the Park District – to build a wing."

SALIGA: Well four million dollars wouldn't build a wing...

PERSKY: In those days, ten years ago, it might have.

SALIGA: So the whole thing didn't work out.

PERSKY: It never even got off the ground.

SALIGA: Well I hope your plans with the city work out because this is just too important of a collection to be broken up.

PERSKY: Thank you. It's primarily Sullivanesque.

SALIGA: Primarily Sullivan and Wright. But you have such important pieces, and any one of the pieces is important individually, but it's really the whole ensemble, the whole collection that says so much. One thing that you mentioned when we talked awhile ago is that when you went to the Century of Progress Exposition you saw George Fred Keck's House of Tomorrow, and that you eventually ended up living in a Keck and Keck house.

PERSKY: Yes. There was also what they called a Glass House...

SALIGA: The Glass House, yes. There were important modern houses at that...

PERSKY: They were taken down and transported across the lake, where they still are.

SALIGA: In Indiana, near the Dunes. But what I wanted to ask you about Keck and Keck is, did you commission Keck and Keck to build that house?

PERSKY: No, in Highland Park – it's an interesting story. The house that was located at 65 Prospect was the Milton Hirsch house. I worked for Milton Hirsch when he was a partner at a finance company called Winter & Hirsch. And then Winter & Hirsch got into trouble, and I left the company about a year before that, because I saw what was coming. Milt Hirsch was an intellectual kind of guy and very gullible. And a guy by the name of Yale Izaks came along, and convinced him [Hirsch] that he had a plan to make a tremendous sum of money by loaning money to a particular developer – Kenroy was the name of the developer – to build a development on a piece of property on Pratt near Western. It's a park. And everything was going along, and they put phony loans on the books, and then with that money bought the land. Well the community went up in arms when they heard about it. The alderman got into trouble and went to jail, and the plan blew up. Yale Izaks, the architect of the crime, went to a very competent lawyer, and he turned state's evidence and testified against Milt Hirsch. And Milt Hirsch went to jail. His house was forfeited, so it went up for sale, and then two owners later I bought it.

SALIGA: Because you knew it was his house, is that why...?

PERSKY: No, I bought it because it was a house on the lake, and it was a lunar-shaped house.

SALIGA: Kind of a crescent-shaped house?

PERSKY: Exactly.

SALIGA: When you bought it, did you know it was his house, Hirsch's house?

PERSKY: Yes, I had been there.

SALIGA: And had admired it when he owned it?

PERSKY: Well who couldn't? It was right on the lake, you could walk right down to the beach, and it had an attached three-car garage. It was very nice, nice piece of real estate for a boy from the West Side.

SALIGA: Did you have either of the Kecks come up and look at it?

PERSKY: I had [Bill] Keck put an addition onto it. There was a room at the end of the house – I believe the south end of the house – that was a bedroom, but the bedroom was small so I had him put an addition on to the crescent. He just extended the wall and built another room on there. I had Keck do it, and he thought that it was a good idea, and then the house was put on the National Register.

SALIGA: After you put the addition on?

PERSKY: [agreeing]

SALIGA: And what was the addition? You said it was the den?

PERSKY: No, the addition became the bedroom and the bedroom became a den.

SALIGA: I see. Did you have a lot of your collection when you lived there?

PERSKY: No, I had some of it; mostly in the garage.

SALIGA: And did you have other pieces that were in storage?

PERSKY: Oh sure.

SALIGA: Where did you store them?

PERSKY: In the garage, in the basement. I had them here and there.

SALIGA: Why was that? I mean, did your family not care for the collection?

PERSKY: Well my ex-wife felt that it was very artistic but inappropriate, and my then-father-in-law said, “Beverly married a lawyer who turns out to be a junk man.” I told you that before.

SALIGA: Yeah, you did, and I could see how in the 60s maybe these pieces wouldn’t have been so appreciated.

PERSKY: That’s why I got them so cheap.

SALIGA: You were a man ahead of your time certainly. You started collecting so early. So when you bought that house, did you make the connection that this was a Keck house, and you had seen Keck’s modern architecture at the Century of Progress.

PERSKY: Yes, and Bill Keck and I became good friends. And by that time the elder Keck brother, George Fred Keck, had passed away or was on the verge of passing away. And I became a good friend of William Keck; as a matter of fact I delivered an oration at his funeral.

SALIGA: How did you and Keck connect? I mean, what things were you both interested in?

PERSKY: Well he knew I admired his work, and liked the house.

SALIGA: So just from working together on the addition and all...

PERSKY: And my overall interest in architecture.

SALIGA: Now one of the things, in addition to being an attorney for many years, eventually you got into real estate...

PERSKY: I got into real estate purely for financial reasons. I was making a great deal of money practicing law, and I became involved in looking for tax shelter. And you know the myth of real estate depreciating; as a matter of fact, economically it appreciates – not depreciates – because of inflation. But I became involved in the acquisition of real estate, and then the tail began wagging the dog.

SALIGA: Eventually that became more interesting to you than law?

PERSKY: Well not only that, but I practiced criminal law. You do meet a better class of people in architecture.

SALIGA: [Chuckling]. Well okay, what was the most rewarding aspect of getting into real estate then would you say?

PERSKY: The satisfaction of transformation. Taking older buildings and restoring them. At this particular point I own thirty-two buildings and six Walgreens.

SALIGA: Now some of those are big apartment buildings, as well as what? What kind of buildings do you own? 1920s apartment buildings?

PERSKY: Quite a few of those.

SALIGA: What else?

PERSKY: One high-rise.

SALIGA: A modern high-rise?

PERSKY: Yeah. 516 Briar, forty-eight apartments, four to a floor, twelve stories high.

SALIGA: Do you own smaller houses as well with multiple units?

PERSKY: No. The smallest thing I've ever owned is a six-flat, and I sold that. It's a devil to run.

SALIGA: Now when you first started buying real estate, was it in the Lincoln Park area?

PERSKY: I'd say Lakeview.

SALIGA: And how did you get started? You started small, or...?

PERSKY: The first building I bought was a 25-apartment building.

SALIGA: That's pretty big!

PERSKY: I know, and I paid $190,000 for it. One door off Lake Shore Drive.

SALIGA: Wow. Was it considered a distressed property?

PERSKY: No, money was a lot more valuable and people didn't know. I had a historical view of the probabilities of inflation, and I knew with real estate you would have a hedge against inflation because the property would go up in value. And I knew that because of inflation the underlying mortgage would decrease in real aspect value, so a $200,000 mortgage may have been overwhelming, but it wasn't in the view of ten years later it was going to be a hundred-thousand-dollar mortgage.

SALIGA: So when did you start investing in real estate?

PERSKY: 1968.

SALIGA: And do you have any advice for people who would think about starting to invest in real estate today?

PERSKY: Whatever programs they have today – [in a huckster tone of voice] Buy real estate and you can make a fortune. It's worth 50,000 today and it'll be worth 75,000 tomorrow – and they sell you a course and a textbook; I had all that mastered in 1968, '69, '70....

SALIGA: So basically you agree with their principles.

PERSKY: Yes, but it's a little late. It's a lot late.

SALIGA: But for someone who's just starting out today, they have no choice but to buy now.

PERSKY: There are no bargains anymore. The secret is, it's no longer a secret. If you want to buy an apartment building today you'll have to pay $100,000 an apartment.

SALIGA: Minimum.

PERSKY: Yes, I know. Can I give you the anatomy of a deal?

SALIGA: I'd love it.

PERSKY: I bought an 88-flat building at Addison and Lake Shore Drive, one door off Lake Shore Drive. It's an 88-apartment building and it's got three-bedrooms, two-bedrooms, and one-bedroom apartments. I try avoiding efficiencies and studios, and I bought the building for a million dollars. I'm a calculated guy. So that was about $11,000 an apartment. I put some money into it, I improved it, and now the building's gotta be worth at least seven-and-a-half, eight million.

SALIGA: I would think, a big building like that in that area. That area is so hot. So you must have a huge staff of people who you have...

PERSKY: Thirty-six.

SALIGA: Thirty-six to run the company and do maintenance.

PERSKY: Janitors, mechanics...

SALIGA: Thirty-six, that seems kind of lean though. You must run things pretty efficiently because how many buildings did you say you have? Twenty-two, thirty-two?

PERSKY: Thirty-two apartments, and six Walgreens.

SALIGA: So you run a pretty efficient company.

PERSKY: I try. Remember, I had a big advantage over so many other people.

SALIGA: How so?

PERSKY: I had a poverty-stricken childhood.

SALIGA: And that taught you a thing or two?

PERSKY: I dare say.

SALIGA: Does your son work in the company? Are you grooming your son to take over the business?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: But your son works for Parliament Enterprises?

PERSKY: Yes, yes he does. Willy's been with me for thirty-odd years. Willy runs a building for me in addition to taking care of me.

SALIGA: I see he's here today. Well, since you've been in real estate for so long, what would you say is the most difficult part of investing in real estate?

PERSKY: Finding the deal.

SALIGA: It wouldn't be maintaining the apartments and dealing with the tenants afterwards?

PERSKY: That's a pain in the ass, but then again, dealing with the public always is.

SALIGA: And you have people to do that.

PERSKY: If you think the practice of law, criminal law, was an easy lot. Hysterical mothers...

SALIGA: Over their criminal sons, or daughters, or husbands. But you said finding the deal is the hard part.

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: Especially now.

PERSKY: There's one thing though, being a lawyer, I had found that there was a new piece of legislation passed under the Mortgage Act. And that piece of legislation stated that in the event of a foreclosure, if you brought the account up to date and paid the attorneys' fees, you could have the foreclosure dismissed. Now it was passed and nobody knew about it. I knew about it. So I went to people who were being foreclosed on and I said, I'll give you five thousand dollars for your equity.

[Imitating the party whose property is being foreclosed on]: Where you gonna get a mortgage, you can't get a mortgage on this. If I could've gotten a mortgage I would've done it. I said, I'll take care of it, and I gave 'em five thousand dollars, and they gave me a quit claim deed for their interest. I then went in to the mortgage company and said, What's the attorneys' fees and how much does it take to bring the account up to date? And they gave me the terms and I took over the mortgage. And they said, You're not gonna take over, mortgage money has gone up. I said, I know, but I'm asserting my rights under Chapter 57. [Imitating the party whose property is being foreclosed on]: Well, you can't do that shit on me. I said, Just watch.

SALIGA: Well, why wouldn't they be happy just to unload the property? Or get somebody paying off the property?

PERSKY: They would've gotten more for the property if they owned it.

SALIGA: The mortgage company would've gotten more if they'd auctioned it?

PERSKY: If they owned it.

SALIGA: But mortgage companies aren't in the business of owning buildings.

PERSKY: But their pets are.

SALIGA: You mean they have investors?

PERSKY: They have people [who] know things.

SALIGA: I see, so what you were really doing was stepping in and making sure that you were the one who intercepted the property before one of their investors could.

PERSKY: Yeah. So I took over a lot of mortgages.

SALIGA: Did you ever get burned on that, like maybe the balance on the mortgage was much higher than you expected?

PERSKY: I knew more about real estate than that.

SALIGA: So you knew how to investigate it.

PERSKY: And mortgage companies don't loan out more than the property's worth. Generally, they loan up to 75% of value. If you can buy a piece of property at 75% of value, you're doing pretty good, aren't you? Now I've just given you a whole new business to get into.

SALIGA: That's it; I can write a book now.

PERSKY: And have a course on television.

SALIGA: You said there are no more deals, at least in Chicago. Or I said in Chicago. Do you think that's true, that there are no more deals in the suburbs?

PERSKY: There are deals, sure there are deals.

SALIGA: No more good deals, the kind you can make...

PERSKY: No more steals, not deals. Anybody can make a deal, can everybody make a steal?

SALIGA: And that's what you were interested in.

PERSKY: Are you familiar with Sam Zell?

SALIGA: Yes, yes.

PERSKY: I think I told you the Zell Rule of real estate? Sam Zell's father was Bernie Zell, who was an Eastern European, who came here and had an accent on a dialect. [Imitating Bernie Zell's Yiddish dialect]: And he said that there's three kinds of real estate in the voild, real estate that will let you sleep but won't let you eat; real estate that will let you eat but won't let you sleep. When you found that you've bought a piece of real estate that won't let you sleep and won't let you eat – zell.

SALIGA: [Laughing]. That's good. Well he's certainly made such a name for himself with buying, I guess, undervalued properties. Big ones – office buildings, and putting those in his portfolio.

PERSKY: I don't do it anymore because (a) I got enough to keep me busy, and I didn't care to make my ex-wife any richer than she was, and that's that.

SALIGA: And that's that. Now, how do you think the city has changed, though, in the years from your childhood until now? I mean, the city has changed tremendously. Maxwell Street does not even exist anymore. Probably the houses where you grew up don't exist anymore.

PERSKY: Of course not. The houses that I lived in Lawndale at 1433 S. Sawyer don't exist anymore.

SALIGA: How does that make you feel, that the city has changed so dramatically?

PERSKY: Well, I feel sorry for the people who had those buildings and then saw them destroyed before their eyes and couldn't do anything about it.

SALIGA: In the name of urban renewal, or...

PERSKY: No, in the name of tenants' rights.

SALIGA: What do you mean by that? I'm not sure I understand.

PERSKY: They never lightened the burden on landlords for maintenance, but they did lighten the burden on landlords for tenants' rights.

SALIGA: They meaning the government?

PERSKY: The city.

SALIGA: The city gave tenants more rights. So the burden was on the landlord to maintain the buildings to a certain standard.

PERSKY: Yes, to maintain the buildings and fight off the destructive tenants.

SALIGA: The deadbeats you mean?

PERSKY: Deadbeats, people who are just destructive.

SALIGA: Well, beyond that though, how do you feel about...

PERSKY: And this was long before the issue of narcotics. Narcotics destroys neighborhoods.

SALIGA: What do you think about the way the core of the city has changed? The way downtown has changed? Some of the historic structures are still there, but so many have been replaced.

PERSKY: Well, I think you know that I'm essentially a preservationist. I'm on the Landmarks Commission. I was a Vice President of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois.

SALIGA: You were on the Architecture Committee at the Art Institute.

PERSKY: Yes. I was on the Advisory Committee of IIT, the Illinois Institute of Technology School of Architecture. The home of Mies van der Rohe.

SALIGA: And why have you served on all of these committees and boards?

PERSKY: God help me, I like old buildings.

SALIGA: And this was your way to support the effort to preserve them? You were there when they were fighting the battle about Tree Studios, across the street from your apartment, which certainly has had an interesting ending.

PERSKY: There's one guy there who's an art dealer, who I think you know, who wants to have it saved particularly so he can move there. The guy who took it over is an economic preservationist.

SALIGA: Freedman.

PERSKY: Yes. And he wants to restore the building, but he doesn't want to have people living there. Now personally, as a landlord and as an investor, I don't see how he's going to fill it up with people who are only going to have their studios there.

SALIGA: I thought it was going to go commercial, that he would be charging commercial rents to advertising companies at that kind of thing. Is he still going to have artists working there?

PERSKY: That was the original Tree Studios function.

SALIGA: That was the plan. We'll see how it works out. Are there other preservation battles that really stand out in your mind from the ten years you've been on the Commission?

PERSKY: Oh, dozens. There's one that's of some interest now. There's a building that's owned by Bill Hasbrouck. It has a feline name, like The Leopard or The Lion. It's a triangular shaped building in a Polish neighborhood that's full of people in the arts.

SALIGA: Is that at North and Damen?

SALIGA: Anyway, that's a big battle because why? Why is that a big battle?

PERSKY: Because he's trying to keep that building as an arts building.

SALIGA: What other kinds of charities or not-for-profits have you been involved in besides architectural ones?

PERSKY: I gave a million dollars to the ARK. Are you familiar with the ARK?

SALIGA: Tell me what it is.

PERSKY: The ARK in an institution run by Jews for Jews, or anybody else, who's in difficulties. It's on California Avenue in the heart of the old Jewish neighborhood and they supply pharmaceuticals, legal services, psychological services. They do everything; it's a shelter care facility, in part. They needed a place to be located, and I gave them a million dollars.

SALIGA: A million dollars to buy the building for their offices?

PERSKY: Yes.

SALIGA: Are there also places for people to live in that building?

PERSKY: No, they have other places.

SALIGA: When was that? When did you do that?

PERSKY: 1990.

SALIGA: Relatively recently. So do you continue to support their efforts?

PERSKY: I support a study group of the Jewish religion called Talmud. Are you familiar with the word Talmud? And what's called the Buffet of Jewish Thought. We have meetings and luncheons, and people who come in and lecture on various aspects of the Jewish faith, and it's generally at the Hyatt Regency. That's been going on for fifteen years.

SALIGA: So you have meetings where you discuss...

PERSKY: We bring in authoritative people.

SALIGA: And they lecture to your group? And then you discuss their topic?

PERSKY: Not me, but the lecturer.

SALIGA: You don't participate?

PERSKY: I participate; I open the meeting and I close the meeting.

SALIGA: So is this an idea of yours?

PERSKY: Primarily, yes. And we also have a luncheon that goes with it. And for $20 you get a nice luncheon and a nice lecture.

SALIGA: There's a big Jewish organization that you support as well.

PERSKY: The Jewish United Fund?

SALIGA: The Jewish United Fund.

PERSKY: I don't support them anymore.

SALIGA: You did at one time though.

PERSKY: Oh yes, big time. I was one of the Vice Presidents, but...

SALIGA: Your interest isn't there anymore?

PERSKY: No, they don't need me. All they want from you is money. I also support the Spertus Institute.

SALIGA: How do you feel about their new building that they're building?

PERSKY: I haven't seen it, but I know they've got a good architect, and the guy that runs Spertus has retained the grandson of Mies van der Rohe to build a synagogue that he ran over on State Street.

SALIGA: I didn't realize that. And I know Krueck and Sexton are the architects of the Spertus Museum complex down on Michigan Avenue. And from what Blair Kamin and different critics say, it's going to be a very interesting building, not one that fits in with all those buildings on Michigan Avenue, but it's a beautiful design and it's certainly not going to detract.

SALIGA: Well, how does it work with you and the charities you've supported? Do you wait for them to come to you with a project, or do you seek them out?

PERSKY: If you're Jewish and you have money, you're gonna get nailed at least five, six times a month for everything from homes for unwed fathers to god-knows-what. Everybody's got a cause.

SALIGA: So you just kind of get on the circuit and everybody has your name?

PERSKY: God forbid people should know you're rich. Jews don't leave each other alone.

SALIGA: But you do support, I mean, you have supported a lot of organizations. The Society of Architectural Historians for one.

PERSKY: I gave them a one-million-six building...

SALIGA: Right, so you've had a lot of impact in the cultural community, the architectural, the Jewish community.

PERSKY: Would you like to know how I managed to give that one-million-six to the Society of Architectural Historians?

SALIGA: Yes.

PERSKY: I bought a block of Northern Trust stock very cheap and then I gave the stock away to the Society of Architectural Historians, and got the full deduction of the market value of the stock at that time and did not pay a capital gain. You even have to have a case of the snarks to be charitable.

SALIGA: So it seems like it's be safe to say that some of the things that have been important to you are historic architecture, Jewish causes, but I want to hear from you, what are the things in the end that are most important to you?

PERSKY: I'm sentimental; I have a sister that I take care of...

SALIGA: So family is important?

PERSKY: Oh family is... who else gives a shit?

SALIGA: Your kids, your grandkids.

PERSKY: Yes, I have two nice grandchildren.

SALIGA: Now these are your daughter's children? What are their names?

PERSKY: Connor is my little grandson and Madeline.

SALIGA: And how old are they, do you know?

PERSKY: Madeline's about twelve and Connor is two.

SALIGA: So you have a very young one and an older one.

PERSKY: My daughter took a coffee break.

SALIGA: Do you get to see them very often?

PERSKY: I saw them last Sunday.

SALIGA: How does that work? Do they come here and spend time...

PERSKY: No, I met them for breakfast over at Ina's. You ever go there?

SALIGA: No, where's that?

PERSKY: It’s about twelve-, thirteen-hundred west on Randolph. I-N-A-S.

SALIGA: Is it an old place?

PERSKY: It’s a new place.

SALIGA: Well, I know you like old places like that place west of downtown, Mitchell’s?

PERSKY: The Breakfast Club, you ever eaten there? Remember I belong to a few clubs in Chicago too.

SALIGA: Actually, I’m glad you brought that up. What clubs do you belong to?

PERSKY: Every one of them. The Cliff Dwellers, the Standard Club, the University Club...

SALIGA: The Arts Club?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: The Tavern Club?

PERSKY: No.

SALIGA: Any other clubs?

PERSKY: The best ones.

SALIGA: The Mid-America Club?

PERSKY: Yeah, I belong there on the Union League. I was chairman of the Art Committee.

SALIGA: Right, you've been very active there. And you've been very active at the Cliff Dwellers. And why is that?

PERSKY: I brought a couple of things over there on loan. A couple of Midway Garden sprites.

SALIGA: And the reason you want to help them out is they support your interest in architecture?

PERSKY: There's a great idiom in law: Peril invites rescue. They're up to their ass in alligators.

SALIGA: Still?

PERSKY: They've had their share of bad luck.

SALIGA: They really have, with the fire and everything.

PERSKY: They had a fire, and they had an unfortunate experience with a bookkeeper.

SALIGA: And before all that they were evicted from their original space.

PERSKY: They thought that they were doing the world's greatest thing by moving over, but it's a good location, and Larry Booth designed it beautifully.

SALIGA: They're lucky to have members like you who feel some loyalty.

PERSKY: Well, the Institute for Psychoanalysis is down the street, two buildings down, and I gave the idea to the Board that I belong to – I'm on the Board of the Institute – to come over and use the club. So there's an awful lot of analysts that are eating there, and wining there and dining there.

SALIGA: That's great. They need people to use the club. You know I was among the group of the first women to join the club, in 1985.

PERSKY: You got me into the club.

SALIGA: [chuckling] That's right. We have all these connections to that club. I feel so badly that I don't belong anymore, but it was just impossible for me to get down there very often. How are we doing? Five more minutes? You have five more minutes?

PERSKY: Absolutely. Take seven, they're small.

SALIGA: Seven, okay. Are there any topics we haven't covered that you wanted to talk about? Is there anything you wanted to bring up about things that are important to you, or things I've forgotten to ask about?

PERSKY: Why I'm interested in architecture.

SALIGA: Why are you interested in architecture?

PERSKY: Because I am interested in history and the historical part... One of the aspects of history is archeology. And if you take the word archeology apart, it is the study of arches. The only thing that remains

of a civilization – after the civilization has come and gone – is its architecture. The Jews, unfortunately, do not have anything architectural... Here, give me that book.

SALIGA: *Faith and Form: Synagogue Architecture in Illinois.* This is a beautiful portfolio. Who put this together?

PERSKY: Spertus [Museum]

SALIGA: So this is a portfolio documenting synagogues in Illinois?

SALIGA: A synagogue on Douglas Boulevard, the print is by A.E. Alexander. Crystal Street Gothic Synagogue by Anita Alexander, a synagogue on the Northwest Side – kind of classical – looks like a library. An unused entryway of a synagogue, view of the synagogue from Humboldt Park – no, a different synagogue viewed from Humboldt Park. Schuhl and Schieder – a very simple clapboard synagogue. Alabaster and marble on Millard Street, and the Logan Square congregation. These are beautiful little etchings done in very small editions of twenty-five, from the 1970s. The synagogues pictured are the Logan Square congregation at 3135–3137 Fullerton, 1232 S. Millard, 1515 S. Homan, California and Pierce, 3480 Lake Shore Drive, 1457 N. Leavitt, 3622 W. Douglas Boulevard, and Crystal & Hoyne Streets. It's a very beautiful portfolio.

PERSKY: Architecture is a part of history, a manifest part of history, and the remains of a culture or a civilization is its architecture. It's really retrospective history.

SALIGA: So are you saying that's important to you because of your faith?

PERSKY: No, it's important to me because I've always been fascinated by history.

SALIGA: And that's just something that was an interest of yours since the time you were young?

PERSKY: Let's talk about something that everybody knows about. A very important man historically – Napoleon – when you talk about Napoleon you automatically talk about Les Invalides.

SALIGA: So you're saying great people are remembered by their great architecture or great planning exercises, like Daniel Burnham.

PERSKY: What about Queen Hatshepsut in Egypt? Let's talk about Ramses. What are the Romans remembered for?

SALIGA: Their architecture. Well, one more question. What do you want to be remembered for? How do you want to be remembered?

PERSKY: Somebody who gave a damn.

SALIGA: About what?

PERSKY: The manifestations of these United States, which is our architecture.

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