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Fantini, Fred, Oral history interview conducted by **Michelle Freitas, Spring, 2009**,
2009 East Cambridge Childhoods Oral History Project, Cambridge Historical Society



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Oral History Interview with **Fred Fantini**

2009 East Cambridge Childhoods Oral History Project

Interview conducted by Michelle Freitas in **Spring, 2009**

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You were born here?

Yes, I was born in Cambridge. June 8, 1949. I have a twin brother, Allan. A lot of people don't know that.

Who was the first to come to this country?

I think my grandmother was pregnant with my father when she came over from Italy. Both of my parents were born in the United States. My mother is Polish and my father is Italian. We lived in East Cambridge right across the street from my grandmother and grandfather on Otis St. When I was about 9 we moved to mid-Cambridge on Leonard Ave right between the City Hospital and Youville Hospital. My father owned a garage on Prospect St called J&F Motors, which still exists today, but it's under another name. I have three brothers and a sister: George, Donald, my twin brother Allan, and Irene.

What is the name of the garage now?

It was J&F Motors on Prospect Street. They broke it down into two Foreign Auto garages. My father never wanted us to become mechanics so we never learned how to fix cars. My job and my twin brother's job were to go down there after school and clean the cars off and shovel the sidewalks. We never learned anything about mechanics or painting. That's the way my father wanted it. He wanted us to go to college. I remember one day I put anti-freeze in all his thirty or forty cars at once. Not a good idea. I got in trouble that day. My father told me that's not the way you do it. We learned a little bit there. The good news about it is when we went to college, we all had access to cars because my father had so many of them. So that was pretty good.

How long did he work there as a mechanic?

My father owned the place. My father came down with Parkinson's disease in his late fifties which change his life immeasurability. He owned the garage for over 30 years. Beside the garage was Costa Ambulance. We got to know those people really well.

In those days you had Legal Seafood up the street and the S&S we used to go to regularly. It was a pretty busy place. My dad served as campaign manager for Al Vellucci. He would be spray-painting Al's campaign signs in the garage. Our families were very close.

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Did your mother work at all?

No my mother never worked. She had five kids and she was a stay-home mom. She ruled the house. We had to do our homework. If we weren't doing our homework she would yank our hair. My mother was Polish. The big thing about Polish people in East Cambridge was that they took great pride in cleanliness. We had to sweep the sidewalks and the gutter on a regular basis. Everything had to be perfectly clean. Cleanliness was important. She would never let us sleep in the morning, like on Saturday I would try to extra sleep and she would come in and wake us. She would open the windows in the winter time to get us going and it worked. It really wasn't a place where you could sit and listen to music and stuff like that. To her it was just being lazy. You had to get up at 7am every morning and go to work or do your chores. No matter how late I was up the night before, she would come into our rooms, open the windows, and freeze us out. That was the culture in those days. Supper was at 5pm every day. She would come out onto the front porch and yell out, Supper's ready! We were expected to be home at 5pm. When I went to the Longfellow elementary school, I would come home for lunch. We would actually walk home at 11:30am, have lunch, and then go back to school. That's how it was in those days.

You said your grandparents were across the street.

When we lived in East Cambridge. It was my mother's family. My father's family lived in Tewksbury. There was a Polish church St. Hedwig right up the street. It's been converted into condos. I was born at Otis General Hospital, which I think is now East Cambridge Savings Bank. When we were born, the doctor told my mother she was just going to have one child. My mother said, no I'm having twins. The doctor said, no you're only having one. She said, no I'm having two. And she ended up with two of us. We only lived two blocks away from the hospital so my mother just picked up the two of us and walked home.

Have you always lived in Cambridge?

Yes my whole life. Lived in East Cambridge, then moved to Leonard Ave in mid Cambridge. I also lived in an apartment on Porter Rd for awhile and then on Lakeview Ave. Also lived on Plymouth St. I bounced around but I always stayed in Cambridge. I hardly leave Cambridge. When I do leave

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Cambridge, it's like going on vacation. My father had a chance to own a house when we moved from East Cambridge. I think we were the first Italian family to move to that neighborhood; it was mostly Irish. It took us a couple of years before the neighborhood accepted us. When I campaign, I go down Leonard Ave and there are still a few families left when we grew up there. The McCarthys were on one side and the Morrisseys on the other. Great families. We got to be long-time friends. In the wintertime, my father would keep the driveway plowed when it snowed. We used to build huge forts in the backyard. My twin brother and I jump off the 2nd floor porch into the snow. The snow was deep in those days. You would land and the snow would be up to your chest. Those were fun times. We would make a few dollars in the winter. We had our clients and we would shovel their sidewalks and driveways. I mean we would work several hours and make like two bucks. It was money in the pocket.

Was your father always a mechanic?

Yes, he was very handy. He could anything. He could fix cars. When we got the house on Leonard Ave he renovated the third floor. For someone who had a 6th grade education he was extraordinarily talented as far as the trades were concerned. It never rubbed off on me but I was amazed at the stuff he could do. In many ways, I think an education could limit you. He had a family to take care of. He could do anything. It was amazing actually.

What do you remember about East Cambridge when you were a little kid?

East Cambridge had a lot of Polish folks at the time. I only lived there until I was 9 years old. I went to St Hedwig School where kindergarten was the first two rows, 1st grade was the next two, and then the 2nd grade was the next row. So it was all in the same classroom. It was very religious. We had two churches right there. My mother was in the choir at St Hedwig. My uncle and aunt lived across the street and my uncle Charlie was the maintenance man at St Hedwig. Dalton Jones when he played for the Red Sox married my cousin, Joanne. He lived in East Cambridge while he was on the Red Sox team. That was an experience for the neighborhood. When I moved to mid-Cambridge, for years we would take the bus and go down to St Hedwig. We stayed really involved in the church community for a long time. East Cambridge was a close-knit neighborhood. My brother George was very close with Joe Szulewski whose family owned the Szulewski Funeral Home. There's a cleaners my brother Donald worked at that still exists on the corner of Sixth and Cambridge St- must have been there about 50

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years now. There was a furniture place on Cambridge St that my father knew very well. Fred Salineri owned that. That's where I got my furniture for my first apartment.

So you said you went to the Longfellow school. Do you remember any favorite teachers...?

The Staceys who lived across the street from me on Leonard Ave, the two sisters. I can remember that at 35 I remember thinking how old they were. I have a different view on that today. I remember Jean Zabinski and when I was campaigning for the school committee, he was still teaching at the Longfellow. One of my favorite teachers Mr. Carribeano who taught science would open up a cup of coffee in science class and you had to tell him whether the air was going in or out. If you guessed right then you pass science for the year. He ran a grocery store in Inman Sq and sold fruits and vegetables out on the sidewalk. I would run into him for years. It's funny when I go to St Mary's Church I still see him. He looks pretty good. At the Longfellow I got to make a lot of friends. It was a good school.

What other schools did you go to?

I went to Cambridge High and Latin. After that I went to Bentley College. Then after that I went to Cambridge College, which I got a masters degree in management. I attended Cambridge College after I had lost reelection to the School Committee and at the time I was devastated. But in a week or so I knew I had to move on and so I got accepted into Cambridge College had a great experience for two years and ran again for the School Committee and won my seat back.

Your mother made you clean a lot. Did you have a set of chores you had to do?

Yeah we had tons of chores. The big chore was going down to my father's garage and making sure all the cars were clean so he could sell them. In the wintertime we were expected to do all the shoveling and take out the garbage. If my father was renovating something, we had to be there and help out. In those days like I said my mother would wake us up at 7am and we would be gone for the day. Our street was loaded with kids. I would go up to the Cambridge Common and play baseball from 8am till suppertime. In those days you weren't really worried about being kidnapped or anything like that. You knew everyone and everyone knew the "twins". We had a whole wide city that was our family. People kept an eye on us and reported back regularly to my mother and father. We had to be pretty good growing up. We couldn't get away with much. If I had chores I did it but other than that we stayed busy.

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We played baseball a lot on the Cambridge Common. In the wintertime they would flood the common and you could ice skate. I would go down to Lincoln Park in Somerville a lot-that was walking distance from our house. We would play football in parking lots. We didn't have the facilities that people have today. We would play stickball for hours. We were very content and happy to do all that. We have one sister Irene and she would take good care of us. My brother and I were the youngest.

Do you remember any other areas you played in?

We always played on the street Leonard Ave. We played touch football all the time. I remember telling someone go out five yards and cut in front of the Mustang. That's what we did in those days. We had May Fairs in the neighborhood. It was good.

Do you remember any other celebrations or fairs?

Being Polish we practice the tradition known as Vagila. It was on the day before Christmas and fish would be the main meal. We would always have a vacant chair at the table and be open to a hosting a stranger that might need a meal. Although I don't think anyone ever joined us. The priest would come over to the house and bless the food that we were going to eat during Easter. We would always pass out the Oplatek, which is a host. In practicing the tradition today, our family gets into a circle from the oldest to the youngest. Each would make some comments about the previous year. You could say whatever you wanted. Recently my nieces would bring their friends and join in our celebration. It was always good to see their reactions and how they handled it. Being on the school committee I enjoy participating in traditions and religious feasts that the Portuguese community has and I participate in the parades and ceremonies.

What other kinds of activities did you do? Did you go to the movies?

There was a theatre in Inman Sq that's not there anymore. They would have two shows for the price of one. You could watch two movies for like a buck. Sports was a big part of what we did.

Did you travel? You mentioned the Common.

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No my father never took a vacation. I never knew what a vacation was until I got older. We never flew anywhere until later on in life. I didn't even know people took vacations. That didn't bother us. I think my father would close the garage down for a week a year. On Sundays we would go to Canobie Lake and things like that. We did some day trips. We never did overnights. No vacations until I was older. We never experienced Cape Cod or Disney World or any of those places. We stayed rally busy though, had plenty of friends and really enjoyed ourselves.

What did you when school was out?

We would basically work in the garage half a day. I never played Little League baseball either. We would go to the Cambridge Common and just play baseball for the whole summer. It doesn't sound too exciting but it was good.

Later on did you play on any teams?

In high school I was probably about 5'9". I grew a lot after high school. Football was the only thing I played. I wasn't that good. I never made it to the varsity team. In fact my senior year you could get a sweater if you played 12 downs. I never got that. The coach never put me in for any varsity plays-that was upsetting to me.

After high school I grew several inches, put on some weight and I played for the flag football team in Arlington. Our team went like 12 years undefeated. I proved to be very good as a defensive back and an end. I think I was close to being one of the highest scorers in the league. My high school experience was now behind me.

My brother and I both ended up being 365 in the lottery for the military. We were the very last number drawn because of our birthday. I saw a lot of my friends go to Vietnam. We ended up being last in the lottery. As I reflect on it, I guess it was very important because I don't know how my life would have ended up. We actually didn't pay particular attention to the lottery. We saw the headlines saying if you were born June 8th then you're last in the lottery. My twin brother and I are very close today and we see each other quite a bit. My brother used to work as a lifeguard at the War Memorial. We weren't identical twins but people would sometimes think I was him. I would tell them they could swim in the pool for free and just give my name at the door. I would get him in a lot of trouble.

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Does he still live in Cambridge?

He lives in Bedford.

Do you remember any of the stores in your neighborhood?

Lima's was on the corner. They also owned the theatre in Inman Square. That was good. There was a store on Roberts Rd as well but I don't remember the name of it. It was there for a long time. When we went to St Hedwig's, there was an apple pie store. They would sell these small pies for 30 cents. Sometimes we would walk back and stop at the pie place. I forget the name of it though. I haven't reflected on my youth in a long time.

Did you ever go into the other neighborhoods like Harvard Sq or Central Sq?

I mostly stayed in Inman Sq. In high school we would hang out in Harvard Sq. In those days there weren't commercial establishments. It was all these small mama and papa stores. I think it was really great in those days. I remember Brigham's and Bailey's. Sometimes we would bike up to Fresh Pond to Friendly's serving the "Awful Waffle". It was amazing. You could take the frappe glass, turn it upside down and nothing would come out. There were no gears on the bike. So my brother would be on the handlebars and we would bike up there. It was a good 45-minute ride.

You said you went to St Hedwig's and your mother was part of the choir.

Yes she was. She had a good voice. She was involved. That was important to her. My grandfather and grandmother were involved as well.

Your father didn't mind going to a Polish church?

My dad didn't really go to church that much. My mother made him go during Christmas and Easter. He really wasn't a churchgoer.

Having lived in Cambridge your whole life, how has the neighborhood changed?

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The city changes and in East Cambridge it became more diverse with Portuguese and Brazilian. It's a lot more diverse than when I grew up. I think Cambridge has changed in a positive way. I see our school population changing. Our kindergarten enrollment this year and last year increased with more kids on paid lunch rather than free and reduced lunch. Housing prices are causing a change. I see that happening. East Cambridge is more diverse than any other part of the city. East Cambridge is a place to experience a lot of diversity. I go to Atasca, Portuguese restaurant, and MidWest, a Brazilian restaurant. I know those people really well. You get that flavor of diversity, which I really like. I think even Brattle St has changed. There used to be a lot of Harvard professors that lived there but they left and now a lot of business people are coming into those neighborhoods. It's not a faculty place like it used to be. It's changed a lot. The neighborhoods are coming back with more kids. More families seem to be moving back.

What was your first paid job?

I worked for my dad but I don't know if he paid us. We had an allowance. You reminded me we used to go bowling at the Bowlhaven. It was one street away from Mass Ave in Central Sq. Across the street from there was Woolworth's. We would do a lot of bowling there and then we would go to Woolworth's. They had these big balloons and you would pick one and it would determine how much a banana split would cost. That was always a good time. We would help my dad out in the garage and we would get an allowance. I had a paper route. I did that for a number of years. I used to work at Lechmere Sales. I was in charge of all the carriages. I worked all the time doing one thing or another. My favorite job was when I worked at the Boston Garden on the "bull gang" for like 10 years. I worked with all Charlestown guys and I was the only one from Cambridge. We would switch from the basketball game to the hockey game. I really loved doing that. We worked at night and got to see all the sporting events.

When you went to the Longfellow school, it was a neighborhood school, right?

Yes. It wasn't a school by choice. That's the problem with the choice program. You go to a school not in your neighborhood and you come back where you don't really know the kids in your neighborhood. All those blocks surrounding the Longfellow school, we had a rich neighborhood. You didn't experience the diversity but you knew everybody in that whole area.

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How was it going from a small neighborhood school to Cambridge High and Latin?

I think I was scared to death when I was a freshman. I was grateful I had a twin brother. My twin brother was really a tough kid. He was a lot tougher than I was. He didn't take any crap from anybody. Being his twin brother proved to be an asset to me. I remember my first day as a freshman I was frightened. It worked out fine. Once you get involved in a sport like we did, then it worked out. When I went there, we had Rindge Tech across the street. That's how it was in those days until we combined the two programs. Rindge was across the street and library was in the middle. High school worked out okay.

Do you think the level of crime has changed?

I think it has peaks and valleys. I think Cambridge is pretty mild which is good, not like Boston. I didn't pay much attention to the crime in those days. I almost got arrested one time. We used to hop on the back of cars and hold on to the bumpers when there was snow. We would ride cars for blocks. I remember my friend Stevie hopped on the back and the lady stopped short. He went right underneath the car and came up the other side. He didn't get run over. That was unbelievable. The police caught me once and they drove me around the block a couple of times while I was crying my eyes out. They finally let me go. I got the message. In those days that's how they handled stuff.

Do you remember at school any celebrations or school projects or class field trips that you did?

I don't think we had many field trips. Not like today. Today kids can go to Europe and do so much more. No not really. We had some really good faculty. They were dedicated and they really cared about the kids. I could have done a lot better in high school. I wasn't a great student. They worked real hard with me. I enjoyed that experience. A lot of people I grew up with have stayed in the neighborhood. It's good. We made long-time friends.

You said your father worked on Al Vellucci's campaign. Growing up did you work on any of these things?

My father cared a lot about the Vellucci family. After that my brother George ran for school committee. We would help him a lot. He lost by about 20 votes. It was probably the best thing that happened to him. He went on to be a very successful businessman. Then my brother Donald ran after that and won.

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Twelve years later I ran and won. I remember the first time I was campaigning, everyone kept saying said they really like my my brother and would continue to vote for him. In fact a few folks still say that today. That whole thing about giving back to the community and working on a political campaign got me interested in politics. When my brother Donald was running, I was his treasurer. It became an opportunity for me so I ran. He ran for city council and I ran for school committee. He lost and I won.

Did you have any favorite places you liked to visit?

The Cambridge Common was probably our favorite spot. A lot of our life we lived there. Inman Sq theatre was a place we liked to go to a lot.

Do you have any other stories of growing up you would like to share?

Cambridge has been a great place to grow up. There were a lot of friends and a lot of experiences. I've been blessed to be on the school committee for 27 years. I've seen the city's ups and downs. It's good to live in a community where people care.

Do you remember getting in trouble for doing anything as a kid?

Just when I got caught hopping cars. That scared the daylights out of me. We would get in trouble all the time but nothing too big. In those days you were so active with the other kids in the neighborhood. You were busy all the time. You weren't hanging around the house to get in trouble. You were gone for most of the day.

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