Reta McGovern Interview #1 – Feb 13, 2009

HR – Helen Raptis (interviewer)
RM – Reta McGovern (interviewee)

HR: It's February 13 and I am phoning Reta McGovern one more time to see if she is available to talk to me.

RM: You'll have to ask me questions.

HR: Okay, I will ask you questions and, and at any time you can say, "That's enough I'd like to stop."

RM: Okay.

HR: Okay? Okay so the first thing I'd just—maybe you could talk a little bit about where you grew up and, you know, what your mom and dad did. What—a little bit about your family life.

RM: Okay, I grew up in Nelson, British Columbia. Actually, I was born in Ladysmith.

HR: Oh?

RM: And I left there maybe when I was maybe 2 years old. My brother and my sister and I were born in Ladysmith, and we lived very close to the ocean and I learned to swim before I learned to walk.

HR: Oh goodness!

RM: Used take us in the water because we were right close to the ocean. You know, Ladysmith we were just near, well we were within walking distance to the water.

HR: And how did you get over to Nelson from Ladysmith? What took you over there?

RM: My dad had, had an uncle that wanted to start a grocery store in Nelson, he needed a partner. So he asked my dad if he'd be a partner.

HR: Okay.

RM: Oh, by the way, when I was in Ladysmith there was an old sea captain that used to sit me on his knee and tell me stories of the sea.

HR: Ah!

RM: And I can still remember him, me sitting there on his knee and and telling me all these old weathered sea captain. But any rate, so my dad moved to Nelson the three of us then, my brother and sister and I were all a year apart, I was the youngest, to actually open this grocery store.

HR: Okay, and so you stayed in Nelson ‘til you, ‘til you left for normal school?

RM: I (inaudible), I stayed there until I went to normal school. I went on holidays to different areas but I mean I was there ‘til, I think I was 18 or 19, because I did, I did Grade 7 because I was sick and I hate—couldn’t stand the teacher and I wouldn’t study! [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: And then I realized that I had to have her the next year and she became a very nice person. The first year she was really mean because I wasn’t studying.

HR: [laughter]

RM: And so I start smartened up and I started studying and I was competing with my best friend for first and second all the way through high school.

HR: Oh wow!

RM: And I still contact her too she’s married to a fellow that wrote for the TV Guide, in Hollywood.

HR: So when, when you when you went to school, do you remember what your own schooling was like in Nelson? Was it a one room school or did you...

RM: Oh no it was a boarding school that took day students and they took boarders from out of town. It was Catholic school that was a convent.

HR: Do you remember the name of it?

RM: Saint Joseph’s Academy.

HR: So you were a day student?

RM: Yes, and my mother went there, by the way. She she was born in 1900. Just shortly after it opened, my mother went to that school.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: 1906 I guess.

HR: How, how many grades were in that school?

RM: There were 12.

HR: So all the way from 1 to 12.

RM: Yes.

HR: So after you—when you were at Saint Joseph's Academy it was a Catholic school, were you taught by nuns?

RM: Yes, and some of them were nice and some were not.

HR: Do you, do you remember any of them?

RM: Oh yes I do! Sister—you want some of their names?

HR: Well d—what can you remember about them, was there?

RM: I shouldn't tell you about one but I was Grade 3 or 4 and I don't know what happened, I—they were very, very strict and I remember his—now I don't think you want to put that in, she had half a hose and she'd hit me and hit me and hit me on the vein of my wrist and it almost burst.

HR: Oh my God!

RM: Most of them were—they were pretty good, but this sister Linda, she was cri—a lot of them didn't want to be nuns, but parents got them in, you know, they wanted the daughters to be nun and some of them didn't wanna be there. And I'll never forget I didn't tell my parents because years ago we were told, "If we should got strapped at school you got another one at home."

HR: Oh wow.

RM: I used my right arm or left, didn't want them to see it. But most of them were, were, you know, really good.

HR: Do you remember any that really stood out as being...

RM: Oh yes, Sister Baptist, I just loved her! Beautiful sister, she—and I—it became—I, I was going to become a nun. She was small like me and I tried to her habit on and I really wanted to go to be a nun because I just—she was the nicest, the sweetest person I ever met.

HR: Did—was she one of your teachers?

RM: Yes, she taught me in Grade, I think, 9, 10, and 11 I believe. She taught me in in high school anyway. And, you know, she was so sweet.

HR: Did she teach—what subjects did she teach you?

RM: Oh we taught all subjects. We taught all—there, it wasn't—every every teacher taught all subjects except music and, and dance because I took ballet as well as piano.

HR: Oh and those were taught by other specialists?

RM: No they were the sisters the—in the school. One of them was actually became a principal but another one just taught dance as I recall and that's doc—Sister Scholastica. She had a da—a ballet school across the line, and she used to see the sisters go by and they seemed so happy and all she had was a dog and she was quite well to do and wondered why they were so happy, so she investigated and became a nun.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: And she taught music, piano, and ballet.

HR: Oh, I see.

RM: And I loved her too, I took ballet from her. Imagine me taking ballet dancing [laughter]. Always did entertain around, around the little country places and we did a lot of entertaining in the school. And my brother and I took music. My brother, my sister, and I took music.

HR: Yes, yeah

RM: Piano, and they had special arrangements for us. The three of us would sit at the piano and play together.

HR: Oh, I see.

RM: And I've never seen that before.

HR: Wow.

RM: And we used to entertain like just for concerts at, at the school and sometimes at one of the BC other towns.

HR: I see.

RM: I mean, there were so many things that I did it'd take too long, but I'll answer your questions.

HR: Did—what, what made you decide to become a teacher?

RM: Ah because of Sister Baptist, beautiful little nun.

HR: What was it about her? Was it her teaching or her personality, or?

RM: Her personality, her gentleness, like I used to—we had an orchard and I used to work day and night practicing the piano, practicing the organ, working in the store. I hardly ever rested, I worked day and night and, you know, I was in school one day and I was so tired and I woke up, my head was down on the desk, and I woke up, and there's nobody in the classroom. And I said to the Sister, "Where is everybody?" She said, "Reta you looked so tired, school was out an hour or so ago. We asked the students to walk out very quietly so you could sleep." [laughter]

HR: Oh wow, that's lovely.

RM: Ah she was just the sweetest little one.

HR: Wow.

RM: I, I wore her habit even. I was going to be a nun like her. [laughter] And then I changed my mind. Went to teach and wanted to enjoy life [laughter] cause I worked all my life from the time I was little.

HR: And do you remember much about the Depression, because you were growing up during that time?

RM: Yes, yes. My dad had a grocery store and he gave more food out across the counter than he ever sold. He kept some people for years.

HR: On credit?

RM: On credit but some never paid.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: No he, he just—we had a neighbour that we had about—we were at the top of the hill and there was a little shack above us. We were right against the mountain with the CNR tracks above us and there was a man who was an (inaudible), he was an alcoholic and he had about seven, eight children or more. And they bought groceries from him and hardly ever paid. Dad carried them for years and years, and the milkman carried them too.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: My dad was the most generous person in the world. We had a beautiful flower garden. He was a great gardener. He won prizes all over, you know, at these farm fairs like, you know, like, where they sell fruit and vegetables and then judge it. He used to get prizes for his fruits, and vegetables, and his flowers.

HR: Wow.

RM: So, but he gave—and he used to make, he, he used to make wine but he didn't drink. He was an Italian but he didn't drink because of circumstances but he didn't drink, he didn't smoke he didn't gamble, but he used to make wine for customers.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: When he'd deliver, you know, some groceries he'd bring flowers and wine.

HR: And did he grow up in Italy?

RM: He grew up until he was I'm not sure the age, maybe 17, 18. His parents had died one, one very shortly, one died and the other one died of a broken heart.

HR: Oh.

RM: Dad, he went to school. He's one of the few that went to school. You know, a lot of them didn't go. Dad did go to school, and his brother, and he worked out in the fields. And his brother used to come home and he'd be wiped out from going to school, working in the fields and he'd be in bed and brother'd come home 1:00, 2:00 in the morning and he'd turn day into night. And he'd (inaudible) pull him out of bed and say, "Get out and work in the field," and it was maybe 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning he couldn't tell the difference. So he hitched a ride over to na—to work at another friend, over to Canada.

HR: Oh wow!

RM: Never went back, he went back years later and on—while he was—just before he left, but he didn't know his brother had died. Dad worked himself up to almost college. He couldn't

speak English, he worked on the section. You know, over the years had the old—putting in ties like in the railroads?

HR: Yes.

RM: And then he went to night school. And he became an interpreter as well as having a grocery store he would (inaudible) he could interpret for us.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: I mean I—so I'm sure you don't want to hear all of this, but...

HR: That's a lovely story, it's a lovely story of how he had the the the wherewithal to to get himself out.

RM: Right, right, he just, he worked day and night even at home and we moved into a house it was all around was just solid big huge rocks. I can still see him out there with a chisel and a big hammer breaking up those rocks. A few years later it became a beautiful farm. He'd—I can still see him with his shirt rolled down and just hitting with this great big sledge hammer. And I mean all rocks.

HR: Wow.

RM: And we ended up with a beautiful orchard.

HR: What, what part of Italy was he from?

RM: He was from Antrodoco, he was north of Rome.

HR: Ah.

RM: I think it was 70 miles, if I'm not mistaken, north of Rome.

HR: I see. Okay. And did you speak any Italian, Reta?

RM: I did when I was little in Van—in Ladysmith he taught us. But we didn't live around Italian people. We went to Nelson and they used to play with other children and I'd use Italian terms in Nelson, and they say, "What did you say?"

HR: [laughter]

RM: I'd say, "You know, you know (inaudible)" or whatever it is and they'd laugh at me, so I lost it.

HR: I see, and was your mother also Italian?

RM: My mother came out here when she was very young too, she was maybe 5 or 6 years old so she actually spoke Italian, but didn't speak as well as others.

HR: Okay.

RM: But, her mother couldn't speak English so, you know, she had to—she spoke it but not fluently like a lot of the others that came from Italy.

HR: Right.

RM: But she had to because your mother and dad. Her mother never did speak English just a few words. Her dad did though.

HR: Okay, I see. So you, you decided to become a teacher and was it be—did your parents encourage you or was it...

RM: Ah, my parents were very good about anything I wanted to do. And we would—I just said, "I wanted to be a teacher," that's fine with them. And my sister became a teacher and a nun.

HR: Ah.

RM: And we had five in our family.

HR: I see.

RM: One daugh—my one sister's a nurse, my brother he's manager of a store in Nelson, he's a millionaire he's got loads of property.

HR: [laughter]

RM: I'm not a millionaire but he is. And my older sister was, she was a secretary but she worked in a—she cooked in the bishop's house where all the priests would come and then she got Alzheimer's and she died.

HR: Ah.

RM: She was very close to me.

HR: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

RM: I sc—still got one sister down in Guelph, Ontario but she doesn't travel much, she's not been well.

HR: So you're the youngest?

RM: No, I was the youngest of three. And then my mom—I begged mom to have another baby because I love babies.

HR: Ah.

RM: They had another one, Loretta, I'm sorry, Marie, and she's 9 years older than me, I mean younger.

HR: Okay.

RM: And I just said, "I want another baby, I love babies," and we had another sister Loretta she's 14 years younger than me.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: That's the one who's in Guelph, Ontario.

HR: I see, so off you went to normal school, and which normal school did you chose?

RM: Well you're supposed to go to Vancouver but I didn't want to go to Vancouver I wanted to go to Victoria and usually they only took students from Vancouver Island. But the normal school, by the way, was closed. I think I told you, not closed—the army hospital, they converted it into an army hospital. So we went to school at Christ Church Cathedral, and quite a few from the interior came, they allowed us to come.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Didn't wanna go to Vancouver. And there was only 28, I believe, in normal school. Two boys, the rest were girls.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: Anyways, you know where Christ Church Cathedral is, your from Victoria.

HR: Yes, yes I do!

RM: We had a couple rooms in there we lived right across from the normal school, now it was became a convent, the house we were in.

HR: Oh now it's a convent, so which, which street was that do you remember?

RM: Burdette I believe.

HR: Burdette street?

RM: Burdette.

HR: And what year was that, Reta? Was it '39-'40?

RM: '42-'43 I believe.

HR: Okay.

RM: Yes.

HR: What do you remember about normal school?

RM: Oh, I loved it. [laughter] I think I told you that, [cough] excuse me, that, well, I, I studied but we had a good time too. We went to navy hospital, I mean the navy dances and we'd go to Beacon Hill Park and go to all the concerts in Beacon Hill Park, we'd go swimming there, we just had a great time. I remember having a great time more than normal school. [laugh] There was and all the navy personnel were there and the army and, and Gordon Head and these places. We all went to different dances, we got to know a lot of people. But normal school, I loved the principal he was a dear old soul Dr. Denton, I'm sure you've heard of him.

HR: Yes, oh yes.

RM: He wrote the old Denton and Lord geography book. And Dr. Lord, you know, he was the principal at the, at Vancouver Normal School.

HR: Right.

RM: Guess you knew this, did you?

HR: Yes, yeah.

RM: And have you seen the old geography books?

HR: I haven't, no.

RM: I don't think I—any way Dr. Denton, he was our principal. But the there was very dry geography books, believe me.

HR: [laughter]

RM: Not like today. He was a dear old soul. Have you heard of him, have you ever seen?

HR: Yes, yes I have. A lot of people have mentioned him.

RM: And I can't remember the vice-principal, he was a beautiful man but I can't remember his name. But Dr. Denton used to spit out the window and the window would be shut. [laughter]

HR: Oh! [laughter]

RM: So there'd be spit coming down the window. Oh, I loved normal school. I loved Victoria, being on the island.

HR: Were your, were your instructors a lot of fun?

RM: Oh yeah, they were very good . We had another one, taught us English. She, she lived right next door to us across from the normal school but you know I can't remember her name. Just a lovely lady, they were all wonderful teachers. And we had one that used to come in, an older gal, that showed us how to, to, you know, what colours to wear and what kind of clothes to wear and she'd show us, like, what your wearing now and what you should be wearing. And she had makeup and she was an older lady and was so, so professional, so beautiful.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: And we had a psychology teacher that used to come in.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: I'm not sure if she was she was there or not and she said she had two children. She'd brought up both of them the same yet one became very bright and the other one wasn't. So she said, "You know, you can't—they don't all talk at the same time, they don't all walk at the same time, so you cannot expect them to all learn at the same time." That's one thing I got from her.

HR: So that idea of individual differences.

RM: Yes, yes cause she proved it by having two different ones in two different families, brought up the same way. She adopted them, I don't think she was married as I recall. But delightful.

HR: What, what other things did—do you remember any other bits of information that they gave you that, that made sense or that you used when you were teaching?

RM: Be honest with you, psychology is common sense. [laughter] That's what I thought, I really didn't feel I learned that much, I'll be honest with you. I guess I did, but maybe I've forgot it and and—oh yes, and I did tell you I was chosen to teach a model class.

HR: Ah.

RM: At James Douglas school.

RM: Oh Sir James Douglas was a model school?

RM: They had a class, one or two classes and they were model classes.

HR: Okay.

RM: And the teachers, there were two teachers that as I recall and they brought them into normal school to show us how a class reacts and show us how to teach.

HR: I see.

RM: And when they went away at a conference in Kelowna or somewhere they chose, as I recall, two of us, can't remember the other girl, Audrey Tippet maybe, I've forgotten, but to teach the classes. I think I told you, I had a class that would—they were so well behaved, beautifully dressed, you could tell they came from maybe the higher classes.

HR: Ah.

RM: Because I taught in a—did practice teaching down in Esquimalt, and that was a disaster.

HR: Oh wow!

RM: Now go back to the other, and I was really nervous. I think I told you, I said to one girl they were very—some of them were very upset, do you know what I mean, they thought they were really something 'cause they knew they were smart? But they were very easy to teach.

HR: Ah.

RM: One girl I said to, “You’re one—you’re a beautiful artist.” She said, “I know I am.” [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: I’ll never forget, “I knew I am.” I have pictures, if I’m not mistaken, of that class.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: Yeah I, I’ve taken pictures of it.

HR: I would love to see them if you’d like to share them.

RM: Yes, and I’ve taken pictures of some of the other schools. I, I was going through albums here just before I went to hospital now, but pretty much I’ve managed to to get pictures from two or three different schools.

HR: Oh that’s wonderful.

RM: So got some, Ootishania—this is taking a lot of your time.

HR: I don’t, I don’t mind at all.

RM: Okay.

HR: I love listening. I can’t tell you how enjoyable it’s been to listen to all of the stories that people have told.

RM: Oh yeah.

HR: It’s fantastic.

RM: I’ve taught in different schools because I used to go work at my dad’s store because he needed me. Teachers were frozen so every time they needed me out in the country route, in a school they would contact me. So I only taught 3 months in some schools that the teachers had terrorized their—the the children had terrorized two teachers out of one school, they didn’t tell me.

HR: [laughter]

RM: And also the Doukhobor school they terrorized one or two other out of there, the children had done it.

HR: Well, so that, that's, that's an interesting story that you started to tell me a bit about the last time. It was was, was it doctor Denton that asked you to go?

RM: Yes.

HR: To the Doukhobor...

RM: Yes.

HR: ...school, and where was that ?

RM: At Ootishania, but I wanted to finish the story on the model class.

HR: Oh sure.

RM: Remember—I didn't know that the principal an, and the vice principal were gonna, were gonna come in and observe.

HR: Yes?

RM: And they walked in and sat in the back, and I was so nervous. I thought, "Oh my gosh." I, I thought I'd done lousy job but the very next day, I think I told you, he called me into his office and Dr. Denton, with these glasses that went down over his nose, and his bulgy eyes. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: They'd already conta—talked to the other girl and it didn't sound too flattering. But she was a, she was a good teacher and she was a good person, I know her personally. Of course we were just like family the 28 of us there or 30. And he called me in, [cough] sitting in a chair shaking like a leaf, and he looked over his glasses and he he just looked at me. (inaudible) "Oh my god! They're gonna fire me, kick me out."

HR: [laughter]

RM: [cough]. And he said, "Miss Colletti," "Yes Dr. Denton." [laughter] "Of all the students that we watched teaching these cl—these model classes we have never ever," and I was expecting him to say, him to say I'm such a terrible (inaudible). He said, "We have never ever seen anyone that can handle children like you did."

HR: Oh my goodness.

RM: “All the years,” he said and he knows, he died I think last summer. And the vice principal said the same thing.

HR: Oh, that’s fantastic you must’ve been thrilled.

RM: He said, “We’ve given you the best report we’ve ever given anyone”. Now I didn’t tell the other girls that because I didn’t want them to know that that, you know, I was sort of bragging.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: I never said anything. I was thrilled in a way but because they got me out teaching early and the last thing I wanted to do, that’s why I went to Ootishania and another girl came with me. She wasn’t—but she was from Nelson so they had her staying with me, but I—the last thing I wanted to do was leave Victoria because I had to leave three—before Easter to take over the classes, at Ootishania. I wanted to stay, I loved Victoria. [laughter]

HR: Ah.

RM: After graduation, and Dr. Denton wrote a lovely letter saying, “We ate under candle light, and I think they had champagne,” and bla bla bla! And I was just about—she blew it up. [laughter]

HR: Oh no!

RM: Because he made it sound so nice and we weren’t there, and we missed you.[laughter]

HR: Oh.

RM: I laugh now but I was very saddened at the time.

HR: Aw, that’s too bad.

RM: Oh boy, staying right at the naval base there, and it was terrible, terrible class. Terrible, I mean it was just practise teaching,

HR: Yes.

RM: Oh! It was Esquimalt. The kids were so unruly. They were sassy, they were terrible compared to the model class.

HR: Hmm.

RM: But anyway, so I won't go anymore about Victoria I could go on and on but I—that's enough.

HR: When, when you were in Victoria at normal school do you remember anything else related to the war? In addition—you mentioned the selling of the war bonds but.

RM: Well they did have a black out that I'd forgotten about it, maybe more than one or two because I saw it in the letter that I wrote to my mom. And yes they were selling war bonds and well there were sailors everywhere, I could—what else can you say there wasn't—of course you're watching the news and it was sort of scary. You know, when you had to open up the newspapers and saw what's happening all over and these young boys that went over. In fact the boy I gotten a piano in Saint Joseph's in Nelson, he had a beautiful tenor voice, in fact I was on the radio with him we took—we were on the radio maybe once or twice, I can't remember, and entertained at different areas because I played the piano and he sang. Beautiful tenor voice but very poor and his mother was in a mental institute. His father I think committed suicide and there was a big family of five children, and he was one of the first to go overseas, he was only 19. And you know, you stu—you studied the war about the Normandy when all the Canadians come off the ship and there were hundreds shot down, the Germans were waiting for them?

HR: Yes.

RM: He was one of the first ones shot down.

HR: Oh no!

RM: Yup, and many of my classmates, quite a few that were—one they never ever found, John Cuban. And some of them, well—I have a book on all the casualties that a girl form Nelson, I picked up at reunion not too long ago, has written about all the different casualties and the story of the war and covering the Nelson area. And there were boys in there I didn't even know had died.

HR: Oh gosh.

RM: I left Nelson, you see, the wartime—so I hadn't seen them again and I read this book, I read about 10 pages I started to cry. Took me months to read it. Some just got shot—just had accidents one over Vancouver Island another one of ours over in England. It, you know, was just the airplane that crashed. And the others were lost, it was terrible, terrible to read it.

HR: So that—when you mentioned the blackout in Victoria, was it a regular occurrence, or did it just happen once?

RM: Oh they just—it was just a practice blackout.

HR: Okay.

RM: But we didn't know that. You know, I guess in case something happened just to let us know what a blackout was gonna like. I couldn't even remember it. It must have been a couple of times because I had written it in my letters to my mom. See I can remember a lot of detail but some I can't.

HR: Right, yeah oh yeah well it's been a long long time and...

RM: Well normal school students, we all got along with so well. We had picnics, I have pictures on the beach with Dr. Denton and the group at the normal school.

HR: Was it Willows Beach do you think, or...

RM: I don't remember the beach. All I know it was in Victoria. Oh and of course there's so many beaches, I love Victoria. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: I love it!

HR: It is beautiful.

RM: I used to take my mom over there. Say to mom, we'd drive along, you know, but I had my car and before she died. She died at almost 99. I took her everywhere. I said, "Mom, who wants to go to heaven when they can live here?"

HR: [laughter] That's great.

RM: Yeah I just loved it. Anyway I won't go on, there were a lot of things hap—but I just tell you, we did we did get along really well all of us. And we had picnics together, we did things together just like a family.

HR: That's great.

RM: And there were a few things that happened that I don't wanna put in the book, so...

HR: Okay.

RM: So I just don't—not happy about couple of things, but not with the students at all. It was at the University of Victoria.

HR: After, afterwards?

RM: Well it was in university, cause that university was built later wasn't it?

HR: Yes, in the '60s.

RM: Yes, but there was another university there.

HR: You mean Victoria College?

RM: Yes.

HR: Vic College?

RM: Maybe it was, maybe it was the college, I don't remember. Anyway, they had a dance there and of course there was only two boys and like in our class and there was 28 girls, or I'm not sure 28 or 26. And they had a dance at this, maybe it was Victoria college, I don't know. And the boys, there were lots—there were boys there and the girls had their own boyfriends.

HR: Oh yeah.

RM: And they—but they wouldn't let us dance with them. And do you know what they did? In fact the principal had to apologize to our principal. They pulled all of our coats, the girls did this, pulled all of our coats down in the cloakroom and stepped on them.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: And they were very rude to us. And they, they—and actually the both (inaudible) had arranged this dance for both the, you know, the Victoria College whatever it was and normal school and they had to apologize.

HR: I, I have heard in the past that when the two groups came together, when the normal school and the Vic College ama—amalgamated, there was a lot of tension.

RM: Yeah, we only went to a dance and it was terrible. These girls didn't want us to dance with their boyfriends, they held on to them tight. I was lucky because Dante and I danced together. We were, we were both Italian, we were both Catholics, and we chummed around together. So I did have a partner. [laughter] and Helen Booth her—she had, she—you heard of Helen Booth?

HR: No.

RM: Her—but they taught before they came to normal school. And they were older, like, she's in her 90s now. I talked to her last year.

HR: No, no I don't know her.

RM: Oh well they were going together and then they got married, so they were Seventh Day Adventists. He became a pastor.

HR: Ah.

RM: And I mean I, I won't go any further because there so much to tell, but we had a—I just loved normal school.

HR: Okay, all right and would you like—how are you feeling?

RM: I'm still doing good.

HR: Your still doing fine? Okay, do you want to talk a bit then about your, your departure from normal school and out. Was it to Proctor, you said?

RM: No, I taught first in Ootishania, it's a Doukhobor community which I called little Russia, cause it was just like Russia.

HR: What was the name of it?

RM: Ootishania.

HR: Ootishania.

RM: It's O-O-T-I-S-H-A-N-I-A.

HR: Ootishania, I've never even heard of it.

RM: Well actually it's a little community outside of Castlegar. It was set—well we used to have to go across a bridge, like, over the dam. There's a dam there that, that's close to Castlegar and then we had to walk about a mile to it wasn't a school, it was a Doukhobor home because they'd blown up all the schools.

HR: Oh yes that's right, yeah.

RM: We boarded in a Doukhobor home with a Doukhobor family living there.

HR: You boarded with them?

RM: Oh yes, we rented but we didn't pay.

HR: Okay.

RM: We—I don't think they paid, it was a, like a teacher's—well actually it was a Doukhobor home where they had one—have you ever seen a Doukhobor home? They're half—some of them like a horseshoe shape.

HR: Oh no, I haven't.

RM: Yes, and one room I taught in, like one end of the horseshoe shape and the other end, like there were two—there were a fam—a Doukhobor family living in between, like, you know, the two horses, ends of the horseshoe. And then there was at the other end, there was a cla—there was a room they'd converted into a classroom and then there was a Doukhobor family. Or maybe they lived downstairs. Yeah they lived downstairs, well yeah they lived downstairs because we were upstairs.

HR: Okay.

RM: And so I was asked because of, of they figured I was the best of handling children. Mind you I wasn't getting the best marks because I was having too good a time. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: I thought they were going to kick me out. [laughter]

RM: We were all having a good time. But anyway, so they—we went there and the principal said to us I mean the superintendent of school said to us, "Don't worry about teaching them schoolwork." Like, I had Grade 1, 2, and 3.

HR: Yes.

RM: And just teach them how to speak English.

HR: Oh, I see.

RM: Some of them couldn't speak English.

HR: So what...

RM: All—it was all a little, like, a little Russia. Wearing the babushka, the long skirts, and everyone wearing, you know, the—like Russia. Okay, so we went we went to we took this job and it was far out. I lived in Nelson on weekends and its about—you ever been to Castlegar airport?

HR: No I've not been that far.

RM: Oh you haven't?

HR: No.

RM: You know, Nelson is the Hollywood of the Kootenays, you know, they've done a lot of movies there. Kevin Costner, Steve Martin, there's lots a movie sets filmed in Nelson.

HR: Oh!

RM: Big sign says, "Hollywood of the Kootenays" as you come driving in.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: Right on the lake. But anyway so at weekends I stayed at home in Nelson. I worked I worked in dad's store, like, Friday night and I worked in part time in an office and in the store Saturday, and then I worked in the theatre Friday and Saturday nights. So I had three jobs in Nelson so I was too (inaudible).

HR: Oh my gosh, you were busy.

RM: I was always a workaholic. But anyway, so we had to drive to take a bus to, well just somewhere on the road. And we had to go walk across the bridge over a dam to Ootesahnia.

HR: Okay.

RM: And they were surveying for the airport at that time, now there's a huge airport. But it was just like Russia. The teacher that Russia—but the Doukhobors with the long skirts and the babushkas that (inaudible).

HR: Wow!

RM: That's what they were like.

HR: Did you, did you feel like you became part of the community at all or were you an outsider?

RM: No because I knew Doukhobors. They'd dealt in dad's store, they were living all around us and my dad could speak a bit of Russian because he had to because they gathered at our grocery store in Nelson which was only 20 miles away.

HR: Ah.

RM: So all my life I knew them but there weren't many living in Nelson.

HR: I see.

RM: At that time. And there were two groups: Sons of Freedom, that didn't want their children to be educated they wanted to educate them at home, they were the fanatical ones.

HR: Right.

RM: And with the Orthodox and they wanted the children to be educated here because of the job situation and that.

HR: Right.

RM: So the Sons of Freedom were terrorizing the Orthodox. Burning the barns and that.

HR: Right.

RM: Where I was teaching was an Orthodox community where there were all ones that wanted the children go to school. But the Sons of Freedom lived in different communities around and they blew up every school in the area so the kids didn't have to go to school.

HR: Wow.

RM: But the thing is, I never knew until recently—I picked up a book by the lady that was as—her parents were Sons of Freedom. And I didn't know they had actually put them in, in residential schools and taken them away from their homes. I never knew that when I was there, I just read it in a book a couple years ago.

HR: Oh you mean during the '50s?

RM: No, during the '40s.

HR: Oh during the '40s even.

RM: Yes, yes war time.

HR: I didn't realize that.

RM: And evidently, from what I can understand I don't wanna be wrong on this, but I understood when the gov—they came over here they're supposed to be peace loving. They made a deal, I guess, with Canada they wouldn't have to go to war.

HR: Right.

RM: So I know some of them went to war that lived in Nelson and went to school there but said lot of young fellas were not fighting during the war.

HR: I see.

RM: And that—oh and gas was rationed but I don't think theirs were because they were driving big cars. So it's a—I have a book called "Doukhobor Daze" and it's written about the school I was in, two teachers before us. And that's a book you should read too, gives an insight of what it was—went on in that little area.

HR: "Doukhobor Daze."

RM: It's called "Doukhobor Daze," D-A-Z-E. You probably can get that because I bought one here and I bought one in Nelson.

HR: Okay.

RM: And the two teachers lived a couple doors away from us in Nelson, but they were older. But they had this school before we did. I mean the house.

HR: I see, and wha—and you replaced them, or...

RM: What happened—they had actually teached in another school and I guess it was blown up.

HR: Oh I see.

RM: But they had them go in to the Ootishania and—for 1 year and then another two other couples came in after. And the, and the students told us they had terrorized the other two teachers. One was a, was a husband and wife. They played tricks on them so they quit.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: The kids told us that they went to the, the mental hospital. Whether it was true I don't know, the children told us this. They told us what they had done to the teachers they were, they were—just thought it was funny.

HR: Oh gosh.

RM: And another couple of Doukhobor—and somehow they ran them out. No they ran the Doukhobor ones out first and then there was an old lady, she was a little blind. But the brother and sister might have been the couple, I don't know, and he was a little deaf and they played every trick in the book on them. So we got the last 3 months of them. And they were really good to us, I loved them.

HR: So how did you manage that? What did you do that won them over?

RM: Oh well we didn't—I never had to win them over. They just sort of took to me and they, they wanted me to come back, and they wrote me and wanted me to come back. And I just—I can identify with children. I love children. I didn't have to win them—I don't know maybe I did, I took them swimming and, I don't know, I just treated them like family. And I'd have to—some could speak English, some could not.

HR: Yes.

RM: And they—I didn't know how to teach them English. I'd just say, "Sit," and they'd say, "Seat?" [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: You know they were so funny, I loved every minute of it. Got the biggest bang out of those kids.

HR: So on, on a given day tell me how your day would go with them.

RM: Well, I would just try to teach them some subjects and I had three grades and I would—it would just be trying to teach the little ones how, how to speak a little. And then I would try to—Grade 2 would know how to speak I'd teach the regular class, arithmetic and Grade 3, 2 and 3.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: But the little ones would just have to sit pretty well and listen.

HR: Until they got, got the hang of things.

RM: Yeah, they did, they did. One in fact wrote to me for years and years.

HR: And you, you did, you did social things with them as well?

RM: Well not too much, ‘cause you see you see every weekend I went to Nelson, I had three jobs. I had to walk to the bus and they took us in—we didn’t have a car. So it was during the week. But they did have a—oh we had a concert, and I’ll never forget it this—they loved sunflowers. They had crack—these little old, little old, they weren’t all old, Doukhobor ladies and all of them were eating sunflowers through the whole performance and the floor was littered with sunflowers. I think it was 2 inches of sunflowers on the floor. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: And they told us the, the tricks they did at Halloween. They—there was an outside toilet which I hated but it was spring, it was okay. And they moved, this Halloween, they moved the toilet over and the kids that had to go to the toilet fell in.

HR: Oh no!

RM: That was funny. I’ll tell you one other thing, I took them on a picnic one day and you knew that they, they, they—whenever they went in parades the Doukhobors would take all their clothes off you knew that didn’t you?

HR: No, I didn’t realize that.

RM: Oh you didn’t?

HR: No.

RM: Oh! Every time the Sons of Freedom wanted something from the police or from the government they would, they would (inaudible). They had a big hall and they would parade for, I don’t know for how long, maybe half a mile or more with no clothes, they took all their cloths.

HR: Oh parade! Parade, yes I’m sorry I thought you said prayed.

RM: Well they...

HR: They said their prayers with their clothes off. Yes the parades I had read about.

RM: That’s, you know it—and the, the Doukhobors were big women too.

HR: [laughter]

RM: [laughter] I didn't see it, I just saw pictures of it. And they would parade and they'd stop all the traffic for, I don't know, maybe a quarter mile, half a mile. And the only way that they could get them off the road is by bringing the fire trucks out and putting the hoses with cold water on em.

HR: [laughter]

RM: That's how they got them off the road. And this was planned, every few months they'd do it.

HR: Oh gosh.

RM: And there was one called Crazy Mary, because she used to appear in court in Nelson all the time. And she was in the news. Wish I'd kept some of those newspapers. And she used to take her clothes off in front of a judge and all the people in the courtroom every time. Crazy Mary would take her clothes off.

HR: [laughter]

RM: So there's lots of stories there. And I'll tell you just one more. Well I could tell you two. The leader of the Doukhobors, he was Verigan. He was this grandson of the one—I don't know if you heard about Verigan the Lord.

HR: The Lordly? Yes.

RM: The Lordly, Peter Verigan the Lordly and he was on a train and they blew up—the Sons of freedom blew up the train.

HR: Yes, yes.

RM: There was a big monument on the side of the road honouring him. Peter the, the Lordly.

HR: Ah.

RM: Verigan. His grandson had a grocery store in Ootishania and he had a crush on me and was always trying to pick me up. Now his grandson was educated, he educated in Grande Forks. His name was Johnny Verigan.

HR: I see.

RM: He's been on television. I only seen him once he was, he was older and he was fat and he was, he was de—not like the young man I knew. He was educated in Grand Forks but he had a

store there and he was always trying to take me out. But you didn't go out with Doukhobors. We didn't realize it was prejudice but you just didn't go out with them because, you know, that—because you didn't know who was the Sons of Freedom, you didn't know who was the other but if they're educated you knew they were orthodox. But anyway, candy and that was rationed. See dad, my dad had a grocery store and quite a few things were rationed: sugar, coffee, candy. And when I went to take the children on picnic one day he gave me—he'd go down under the counter and got all these chocolate bars, gave me any amount I wanted. But wait'll I tell you, Dorothy, my friend, had Grades 5 ,6, 7 I think and 8, and some of the older boys were old because they spent 2 or 3 years in Grade 1.

HR: Yes.

RM: So she—well we decided to take them to a creek and go swimming. So Dorothy took her group first, the older ones, and I took mine later. And we get down there and these kids are running around with no clothes on.

HR: [laughter]

RM: (inaudible) All became nudists. And I said, "Where are your bathing suits?" "Oh we never have bathing suits."

HR: [laughter]

RM: Oh no, and the water was cold, it was a creek. And they said, "You come swimming," and we said, "We don't have a bathing suit." "So you don't need bathing suit," and they try to take our clothes off.

HR: [laughter]

RM: They were fun, God I'll never forget it. So and there—and the little kids I don't know if they had—'cause you know we sat behind a tree watching the mountains and we didn't. If they drowned they drowned.

HR: [laughter]

RM: And they'd roll around with no clothes at all, "Oh come on Miss Turner." Dorothy Turner, she's dead now. But she was the other teacher and they'd say, "Miss Turner, Coletti," my name was Coletti, "come swimming." And they would get us to—well it was a very short picnic.

HR: [laughter]

RM: That is not in the book "Doukhobor Daze." The other teacher never took on a picnic.

HR: [laughter]

RM: But I don't think they, they, they drowned because I think they were together.

HR: [laughter]

RM: [laughter] Anyway, and I'll tell you one other incident. They were so poor. I have pictures, I didn't realize how poor they were, of four little boys and they're all called Peter. Peter is a common name because of Peter Verigan the Lordly.

HR: Yes.

RM: And the—I had four pictures of little boys called Peter Verigan, there was Peter Picton, there was Peter Kazicoff, and I can't remember the—I have all their names though, I have all their names on the back of my pictures. And they had just this straggly looking pants and old shoes, they were really, really poor and I really never knew that, never realized while I was teaching. And then I have some pictures—I'm pretty sure I have a picture of all the class or two classes, you know, in one of my albums here. I spent months looking for these for you, you know. Trying, because I have hundreds and hundreds, boxes full of p—so, you know, snap shots and before I went to hospital I spent 3 months going through and I've got about six albums made up.

HR: Oh wow, goodness.

RM: And I did manage to find quite a few of the, the different schools I taught in. And I got a few at, at Ootishania.

HR: That's great!

RM: So what...

HR: Thank you, thank you very much for that.

RM: Yeah and your welcome, and another thing, one other thing they, they said you know the, the kids said that somebody just died, some Kazikoff or something died and the their gonna put him on a chair cause he's stiff mind you. And they're gonna try to pop him in a chair, and they're gonna put him in the back of a truck and they're gonna go off to school to scare the teachers. [laughter] Can you imagine?

HR [laughter]

RM: I don't remember whether they did or not, if they did I didn't look. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: And one little boy was—anyway these were certain things that happened. One little boy was late nearly every morning. His name was Hatican, Alex Hatican, and he was a big clumsy looking kid. And his sister was Anna, she was in Grade 3 and I think Peter was in Grade 2 or Grade 1, I mean Alex. And I'd say to Anna, "Where is Alex?" She said "He's a comin, he's a comin" So, he c—I look out there he's coming down, plodding down the road after school start. I'd say, "Alex, why are you late?" He would say "Have to white m—help mother white wash walls." They white washed walls everyday! [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: But the end of that story, my daughter was still at that—a gal here at, in Sidney, the name was Beaches. And I said to her one day, "Beaches what?" And she said, "Hatican." Now this is in Surrey years later. And I said, "Look, I taught a Hatican," now that's a common name by the way, "I taught a, taught a, I taught a Hatican in, in the interior." And she said "Where?" I said, "Ootishania," she said, "What was his name?" I said, "Alex," she said, "that's my dad, he's the one that you (inaudible)."

HR: He's the one that what? Sorry I missed that.

RM: He's the little boy that used to come down late every morning, used to have to whitewash his mother's house.

HR: [laughter]

RM: Here is her daughter—his daughter. My daughter's best friend is his daughter.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: They moved to the coast and this is in high school.

HR: Wow.

RM: He became a principal of the school.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: At Royal Brook like I used to sell. But when she found out I knew him she just jumped for joy, joy. Told them, they invited me down to their house and had all the friends come in. And he had some kind of a disease, his face was twitching. They couldn't believe I was his teacher because he looked old.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: They introduced me, “This is my teacher.”

HR: [laughter]

RM: I’d given a few little pictures and I don’t have those copies I’m afraid because he was in it. And when I went the next time they had them blown up and it was right down the hallway these pictures. And he died a few years ago and guess what? I went to the funeral and his sister who had been writing to me on and off for a long time, but I hadn’t heard from for years. They had a great big board of these pictures on like of, you know, of, of Alex and his wife and Beaches and the other girls. And I heard a girl say to her mother, “Hey there’s my teacher Miss Coletti.”

HR: [laughter]

RM: And I’m standing coming towards them and she could (inaudible), “there’s my teacher Miss Coletti, she was so nice.”

HR: [laughter]

RM: I, I looked at her and said, “Anne, I’m Miss Coletti.” But she almost she almost flipped.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: Can you imagine the small world?

HR: Wow.

RM: And the boy that used to live in the house, the little Doukhobor boy used to bring wood up to our stove and cook borscht for us in that house we lived in, he was there too and I hadn’t seen him since he was 5 years old.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: He was at the funeral.

HR: Wow.

RM: I didn’t mean to go into all this but I just want to tell you what a small world it is.

HR: It is, oh it really is when you’re a teacher isn’t it?

RM: Yes, well anyway, we—the guys, some of the guys would come by in cars, like, the Doukhobors. And they would say—I'd think, "Oh thy're gonna pick us up." You know, because we had to carry heavy books in our—and our meal every single week from the bus and we had to go over a mile or so over the bridge and down to the village, just one little community. And they'd go by and we'd say, "Oh they're going to give us a ride." And you know what they'd say?

HR: What?

RM: They'd look out the window and say, "Nice day for walking."

HR: [laughter] These, these were the Doukhobors?

RM: This were the young—there were only two young boys there. One night we—they had a guard guarding that house. They were afraid they were gonna burn it up. And they took the guard out when we went there.

HR: Oh.

RM: We didn't have a guard and we were scared to death.

HR: So how, how did you manage?

RM: Well we—every time we heard any sound outside we thought they were maybe gonna blow us up. But there was a Doukhobor family there, they may not have done it. And one day we heard somebody sort of talking Doukhobor and we were scared to death. It was another—it was Marg, my friend that was teaching, it was her cousin that taught in Castlegar and her boyfriend. They were pretending they were Doukhobor and they were trying to scare us.

HR: [laughter]

RM: We were terrified and then they were in the dark scari—trying to scare us, speaking Doukhobor.

HR: Wow.

RM: So anyway, and another night we heard somebody down below the window. So we didn't get much sleep. And here there's two or three Doukhobor boys with guitars and they were singing, "Home, home on the range."

HR: [laughter]

RM: [laughter] Oh it was so funny. Anyway I won't tell you anymore about that, I can go on but I won't.

HR: Well do you remember when, when you were there—I mean there seems to be so much that was going on around the issue of, of, you know, dealing with the Doukhobors and the blowing up of the schools. Were you, were you preoccupied as well with the war? Did you have to do rationing with the kids?

RM: Oh, Nelson was one of the—I have a letter from—that I wrote to my mother, or I wrote to somebody telling about all the war bonds and all the dances they put on for the servicemen, all the things they did in Nelson alone. I've got a letter I guess I've written to my mom and I've written somebody else, but I have that going back telling things that happened during the war, what happened in Nelson.

HR: So there was lots going on for raising, raising money and things and...

RM: Well in Victoria all I can remember them selling war bonds.

HR: But when you were teaching in Ootishania did you have to do any collecting of scrap metal or paper?

RM: Oh no nothing because it was just a little isolated community and they did nothing like that because remember, they didn't go to war.

HR: Right.

RM: Well some did now but I mean I, I don't want to say this for sure but they did tell me that when they came out here if you studied—go back and studied, that they made a deal with Canada because they went from Russia to Germany I think. I—anyway, they went to two or three countries and they were, they, they came out of the country because they didn't want to fight.

HR: Right, right and I think they struck a deal with the federal government that the provincial government didn't really want to honour.

RM: Yes, yes but a lot of the boys did not go to war.

HR: Okay.

RM: Trust me. So lots of Doukhobor young men driving around.

HR: So that, that was—you were really quite isolated in the, in...

RM: Well it was only not too far away from the the bus stop. It was about maybe a mile.

HR: But there wasn't any effort on the part of the community to, to, to address the war.

RM: Or even talked about the war.

HR: Or even talk about it.

RM: I never heard the war, period. And I was only there, like, 3 months. Was after Easter 'til the end of June.

HR: Right.

RM: Because, you remember, I took leave to normal school.

HR: Right, so then after you left there in June that's when you went over to Michel Natal.

RM: That's when I was offered a job, but I didn't really want it.

HR: I see.

RM: I only—I went to summer school and I—there's a big board in the Victoria High School was it? Victoria—there is a Victoria High School right?

HR: Yes, yes.

RM: That's where we did our summer school. And there was a big board with, you know, any notes that, you know, somebody had to meet with somebody at such and such a room. And I just happened to walk up and one of my friends said, "Your name is on the board." I was taking, by the way, I was taking two or three courses and one was music course, because I, I got my degree in music in Grade 12, 11. I was teaching music in grade 12.

HR: Yes.

RM: So I, I had a music degree for—I started piano by the way when I was young and then I played—did ballet and did a lot of things. But anyway, because I was in this music course somehow or other somebody—there was a lot of students in this music course, but there was a note saying, "Miss Colletti, Mr. Whittingham wants to see you in such and such a room." I didn't know who Mr Whittingham was. He was a principal at Michel Natal.

HR: I see.

RM: And there had been a man music teacher there that went to war. See years ago there were mostly men teachers, music teachers. Well not mostly, but I knew a few. So he went to war and they needed a teacher there so the kids could get their credits.

HR: I see.

RM: They got credits for, you know, the music classes. So he offered me the job. And I said, "On one condition, my friend Peggy Stolicker, who now lives in Mission (inaudible) that she come—she's a physical ed. teacher and if she can get a job as physical ed. teacher I will go anywhere they want." It was right near the border, it was cold. Have you ever been there?

HR: No, no.

RM: Oh my gosh.

HR: And was this for an elementary or a high school?

RM: It was Grade 7. They offered me the job in Grade 7 and one class of music. I ended up with I thought four but I read a letter I wrote to my mom. I had five classes of music as well as teaching regular classes except physical ed. I had to even teach a class at, at the girls at break, I taught a class at lunch time so I didn't have a lunch break. And I didn't know until I got there and he...

[continued]

RM: I, so I was already signed up or would never have gone, because I wanted to—I was offered a job in the public school in Nelson by the principal there. But I, I went in and watched them teach and I decided I don't want to. I was in a Catholic School, we were sheltered but oh my God! Two days in the public school I said to the principal, "Forget it, I don't want to teach here"

HR: For Nelson.

RM: For Nelson. I was—usually you had to teach in the country.

HR: Yes.

RM: And a lot of the girls from Nelson they had to teach in the country and here the principal offers me a job in the Catholic school in his school. Because I knew him, I used to walk home from school with him. And I knew his daughter. And he said, "You know, I watched you as you were growing up. And you know I've been really, really attracted to the way you act and how polite you are." And he offered me this job because I used to walk home from school with him. You know, I'd get out our school was just a block away. So because he had watched me and had

watched me playing with his daughter he offered me the job. Where the other girls in Nelson had to teach in the country.

HR: Wow.

RM: But I din't—I decided not to because I saw what happened that, that you don't have time to listen right now.

HR: And would, would you—you said something about if someone was from the area they would automatically get the job?

RM: Well he had, I guess he had a degree too. I don't know. Well ordinarily Nancy should have got a job there. And Nancy did it—but I know I didn't—I told you before her nose was really out of joint that I got a job and she didn't. But she doesn't know to this day I didn't want the job. But, she couldn't have taught music anyway. I had a degree, you had to have a degree.

HR: I see the specialization, you needed.

RM: Degree from London College of Music.

HR: Right.

RM: I got my degree in Grade 11.

HR: I see.

RM: But, so that's why I was offered a job. And I'm not a good singer. I even had a choir, I started a choir at Michel at the church.

HR: Ah.

RM: And I—oh I did everything, I did everything.

HR: Boy, you know, Reta we've been talking for well over an hour.

RM: Oh I know.

HR: It's been, it's wonderful and I, I, I don't want to tire you out though, and you keep you longer than...

RM: I talk about school I don't get tired. [laughter]

HR: You don't get tired.

RM: But it's costing you money though.

HR: No I don't mind at all what I would like to ask though is could we stop here just before you get into Michel Natal and can we pick this up some time next week, maybe?

RM: Yes and I'd like to tell you about Proctor too. It was the first, first day of school—they terrorized two teachers ahead of me. And on the first day of school I'd never met the students, I was walking along a pathway and there was big bank where the school would be and two boys, I looked up, had a huge rock and they were, they were ready to throw it down the bank at me.

HR: Oh.

RM: The very first day, I guess they said, "There's the new teacher."

HR: And what did you do?

RM: Well I ducked.

HR: Oh.

RM: And I don't even remember if they threw it, they saw me. All I remember them holding this huge rock ready to—and there were two boys, they were brothers. And they both had lice, I had to put them at the back of the room. And, and I won't go into that one either because they had terrorized two girls ahead of me and I had a terrible class.

HR: That was at Proctor after Michel Natal?

RM: No that was in, that was in Kaslo. That's where they do a lot of movies too, it's right on the lake.

HR: Okay.

RM: From Nelson.

HR: Okay.

RM: And lots of experiences there 'cause that was in—supposedly a Japanese internment camp because the Japanese were all over the town.

HR: Right.

RM: My best friend's Japanese today, I just wrote her a letter. We still try to get together, for 60 some years.

HR: Wow.

RM: So, that is a time I'd love to tell you about.

Reta McGovern Interview #2 – February 16, 2009

HR: 2009 interview with Reta McGovern.

[continued]

RM: That was Michele Natal it was about 15 years (inaudible) three, four pages long. But, things I had forgotten, I hadn't thought about in many years. But anyway, that's okay. First thing I want to tell you I did—how are you by the way?

HR: I'm fine thank you.

RM: What's the weather like there?

HR: Overcast, it's one of those grey days.

RM: Yeah, it's the same here but it was lovely yesterday.

HR: Yes, yesterday was just beautiful.

RM: Yes it was. Anyway, very quickly I finely got to talk to Dante.

HR: Oh you did?

RM: I've been trying for months, but, you know, with everything happening I didn't tell you—give you his address before because I didn't know for sure his reaction. That's why I sort of waited on it. So I phoned and he was so excited.

HR: Oh really! Oh my gosh!

RM: Ah he was so thrilled.

HR: Even though he's not feeling well?

RM: Well he sounded not too bad. He broke his shoulder and I guess his arm and I, he—both shoulders and he's blind in one eye, he told me, he's got that tumour I guess. But he talked, he talked fast, how do I have a terrible time to—but we were talking about old times when we were teaching and everything. And he talked so fast I couldn't hear a word he said. And that's something for me.

HR: [laughter]

RM: He could out, but he is—you'll love him, he's delightful. We talked for an hour and a half at least.

HR: So you were together at normal school?

RM: When I was at normal school, yes, there was 28, 30 at normal school. And there was only two boys. And I chummed around with Dante.

HR: And what was his last name again?

RM: Auden.

HR: Auden.

RM: Lanardon, L-A-N-A-R-D-O-N.

HR: Lanardon.

RM: He taught at, in—you ever been to London, Ontario?

HR: Yes.

RM: Well he was a teacher at university there.

HR: Yes.

RM: And it took us half the day to just go through it. He, he taught there for 35 years.

HR: Wow.

RM: And he has the only building—but anybody's name that I could see on it. They dedicated a building to him. I have a picture taken in front of the building, it says Lanardon at the top of the building.

HR: Wow.

RM: And very, very, very well know and very liked. Well he was completely (inaudible) there'd be people going down and saying, "Good morning doctor Lanardon." He's so humble he'd just, he'd say, "Good morning," you know. But everybody loved and respected him.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: But in normal school he was very shy. So yes I'm knew him at normal school, I'm Italian and I'm Catholic, so was he, so we chummed around together.

HR: So is he expecting me to contact him?

RM: Yes, yes. And by the way I've found a letter, but I haven't found it now, he didn't—couldn't even remember, that he'd wrote to me. He told me a little more about it yesterday where he taught up north close to Alaska and he had to go to his school on horseback.

HR: Mm do you remember wha, what town that was?

RM: He told me on the phone but I've forgotten it. It was in the Peace River somewhere.

HR: Oh yeah.

RM: Forgotten all about when I found his letter a while ago but I haven't found it yet going through them today, but he'll tell you the information but he's dying to hear from you.

HR: Okay. All right and will you give me his address now or should I?

RM: Yes and I gave him your's too. But he asked—he'd rather you call him.

HR: Okay.

[continued]

RM: Because November you can go I think at 6, you know. Kid's going on 6 I think you can start school earlier can't you?

HR: Yes up until December. I think the 1st of December is the cut off.

RM: Years ago they didn't do that, so I started when I was 7.

HR: I see.

RM: And I, I had the report card for Grade 7 and also Grade 1. I just was looking over it and I did quite well in Grade 1, I didn't know it.

HR: Did you speak English in Grade 1?

RM: Oh yeah, I had, I had, I already learned the—my mother came out when she was young and my dad came out and they spoke Italian. He taught me, but I lost it because we didn't live around Italian people so I spoke English when I went to school.

HR: I see.

RM: And Dad was never—he worked so hard that he tried to carry on and it was very difficult for him because he had an orchard, we had a store, we had a greenhouse, he fished, he hunted. So we were, we weren't—but he tried to keep it up with us but he didn't.

HR: I see yeah, I understand that.

RM: I only know a few words and one is "buonasera" it says goodnight, "buongiorno," good morning.

HR: [laughter].

RM: [laughter] And (inaudible) which means keep your mouth shut.

HR: [laughter].

RM: And my mother said, "Never say shut up to your children," and I never did. And she used to say (inaudible) and I thought, "What's that mean?" It means keep your mouth shut, never say shut up to your children.

HR: [laughter] You just get around it to the other way.

RM: But no, but I did speak it and I, then I took 5 years of Latin, 5 years of French. I took a bit of Spanish in high school but I, I can't remember them. You know, you haven't been in contact with anybody. I had a friend who used to write to me in French and I taught French in Proctor. Well I taught four grades in junior high-high school when the teacher was away. But there was nothing significant about Proctor.

HR: What year was that?

RM: Hmm, might have been '45 but it was only when my friend was on her honeymoon for a month or two, cause I told you most of the time I worked in Dad's store and when they needed someone they'd call me. And I saw quite a few letters, letters at, at the office I had to teach in different schools. I was just reading them.

HR: Ah.

RM: So.

HR: So was that at—that was after Ootishania?

RM: Oh yes, oh yes. I taught in Michel Natal, like, the next year. You know, and I was just reading a letter from Michel Natal and it said, "I wished I'd stayed in Ootishania because the kids were much better behaved than the ones in Michel Natal."

HR: [laughter] Well wha—when you were in Ootishania and you had to teach them English, do you remember some of the things that you did? What was...
RM: I was only there for a couple of months you see because the other teacher had been thrown out. I, I can't remember too much about just having a picnic and a little bit of a concert where they, they ate sunflower seeds and there was half an inch or an inch on the floor. And I didn't see —never met the parents at all.

HR: Did you, did you—you never met the Doukhobor parents?

RM: The thing is the weekends right after school we'd walk up over a mile over a bridge and (inaudible) bus. I'd go to Nelson when I worked nights in theatre, I worked in my dad's store house, worked part time in office. I did everything. And so I didn't get to know them. We'd been there weekends I probably would have.

HR: I see.

RM: I only saw—oh this is a story, very quickly. In, in Ootishania during the war you knew that tea was rationed, coffee was rationed, chocolate was rationed, different things were rationed?

HR: Yes.

RM: Food. Well there was a young fella there, his name was John Verigan. And he had a store, he worked in the store. And I would ask him, you know, I'd need chocolate bars for picnics and there were no chocolate bars (inaudible) he'd go under the counter and give me all I'd want. But he used to always try to take me out. And years ago you didn't go with Doukhobors. You might of but wouldn't let anyone know because they'd—we didn't know who was Sons of Freedom that was blowing up the schools.

HR: I see.

RM: It was fanatical or the other.

HR: Right.

RM: I think today it seems such prejudice, but we never thought about it then. But this young man used to try to take me out, and I went out with him a few times. Very nice. And I always had my teacher friend go with me ‘cause I didn’t want anybody to think he was my boyfriend. Well my s—his name was Johnny Verigan. My son used to phone me from New Westminster yesterday and said, “Mom did you know a John Verigan?” I said, “There are lots of Verigans,” and he said, “John, John Verigan became the leader. His great grand father was a—he was the, called Peter the Lordly.

HR: Ah so he was one of the Sons of Freedom.

RM: No, no, no. Peter the Lordly was a man, he was an Orthodox. He was a leader.

HR: Oh Orthodox.

RM: All the Orthodox Doukhobors wanted teach—go had their children go to school. The Sons of Freedom blew up the train he was on years ago.

HR: Oh that’s right, that’s right.

RM: And there was a big monument just beside the tracks just up from Castlegar. Well this man which is this fella that I met was either his grandson or great grandson, and I went out with him a few times. Very nice. And I had didn’t have any contact with him because I wasn’t in love with him or anything. He just that he take us—we didn’t have a car, he’d take us into town into Castlegar and we’d go to a show. But I had my friend come with me, the one who was teaching?

HR: Yes.

RM: My son said he died November 2nd I think it was, that’s my birthday and he was, he was the same age as me and that was him. He became the leader of the Doukhobors. My, my son researched it and he went to Russia, he tried to make peace, like, with the Sons of Freedom and the others and all cultures. I never knew a thing about him after I left, except I saw him on TV one day. He won the Order of Canada.

HR: Oh.

RM: He’s won how many awards, this is this Johnny Verigan. And my son is getting material for me. And I went with him, well maybe a couple of times I can’t remember, but he was always wanting to date me. And he became the leader.

HR: How did he get the chocolate bars?

RM: Ah well, we got so many 'cause dad used to have them too. Now I don't know how he did. See the Doukhobors, they say they were badly treated. They were not badly treated. I lived in the same house with them, we knew them all our lives. They were treated better than we were. When we went to the hospital to have a baby your mother could visit you and your husband. You go in the Doukhobors have all these, all relatives. "This is my uncle and this is my aunt and this is," and they never ever put them out.

HR: Huh.

RM: And they were—they got gas, the others didn't 'cause it was rationed. And they were well treated. And you hear, where did I hear—see it? Somewhere and my son told me they were not treated very well, and Nancy said the same. But Nancy didn't know them. Nancy's a white Russian, she calls herself.

HR: Oh, why?

RM: Oh no, you knew she was Russian?

HR: No, I didn't know that. Nancy Constable?

RM: Yeah, did you meet her?

HR: I've, I've spoken to her by telephone.

RM: She's phoned me two or three times. We were close friends.

HR: Ah.

RM: Very close friends.

HR: Do you remember her maiden name?

RM: Oh yeah I stayed with her family when I was teaching at Michel Natal, for a while. Lemushuk.

HR: Lemushuk. Oh yeah that's right, that's right. She mentioned that.

RM: I stayed with her family. That's how I got placed in Michel Natal because her, her parents had a room in their house. Because their older sister was just married, she married the mayor. So she, she—we were in touch all these years except I hadn't seen her since I last accepted the 50th anniversary in Victoria.

HR: I see.

RM: She arranged it. She did all the arrangements.

HR: Oh for the anniversary at the, at the normal school?

RM: Well we had it at the University of Victoria, 50th anniversary.

HR: Okay.

RM: The principal of the University of Victoria—we had this, he has this suite or some—you must know. In the university?

HR: The principal?

RM: Uh no but he was, but he was a principal. But anyway, he was—he had some high position and we were able to use his suite or wherever it was. There was 11—I'm not sure but we were there for one afternoon and evening and that is to be in his, in his suite or whatever it is.

HR: Oh I see. And who, who was it the...

RM: He was—we thought he was the principal of the university. But I don't know who he was.

HR: Oh maybe it was the president.

RM: President, I'm sorry, it was the president.

HR: Oh I see and what, what year was that?

RM: Oh boy.

HR: So 50, 50 years. So it would have been '93 maybe? '92-'93?

RM: '93 cause we went to normal school '42-'43 I believe.

HR: Yeah.

RM: So it was either '92 or '93, I haven't got it handy. We had a marvellous reunion. We had tea in the Government House we went to the Bell Tower at, at the cathedral there. Have you ever been up there?

HR: No I haven't been up.

RM: It's a windy road and all of the, all of the students were able to go up because one of the girls went to teacher training, her husband was one of the bell ringers or a relative. He'd been ringing the bell since—oh for years and years. Since WWI or WWII and I guess he'd gone to war and came back and was still there. And if you ever get a chance it is a education how they ring the bell.

HR: Hmm.

RM: They had all these bell ringers, lots of them. And everyone had to ring, another ring, and they did it just for us. Usually they ring the bells there at the cathedral once a day at a certain time.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And they rang it at a different time just to show us how, how they rang them. It was quite intricate. If you get a chance, go.

HR: I will, I will. Thanks for that, that advice.

RM: Oh we were fortunate, now it's windy, windy steps to go up there they're very narrow. But we were really fortunate. And then they had a big part—afternoon tea at the girl's house. Quite a few still living in Victoria you see.

HR: Yeah.

RM: I better not get that.

HR: Okay. I think the last time that we were talking, you left off at the story of how you moved then from Ootishania over to Michel Natal. And you were just starting to tell me a little bit about the school.

RM: Yeah, okay.

HR: Do you remember, do you remember anything about the school at Michel Natal?

RM: Oh heavens I taught there for a year. And I was just reading a lot of my notes here. You see I was offered the job, I think I told you, and I didn't want it unless my friend came, Peggy. No she didn't. They hired somebody else and the first thing they told me she would have. I had no idea what was gonna go on when I was there. He promised—the principal interviewed me in Victoria because I was taking a music class and I had a degree. And he told me I'd be teaching one music class bedsides my Grade 7 class. I ended up rereading and I'd forgotten, five music classes and I was just reading one of the letters there was 40 some I think in one in one class.

And it wasn't everyday I taught. And I underlined a lot of things here, but I just didn't get through all of them. You wouldn't want me to go through all of them.

HR: Was that Mr. Whittingham that...

RM: Yes, yes and he had one leg.

HR: Oh, what happened to his other leg?

RM: I don't know. He had a wooden leg anyways as I recall if it wasn't wooden it sounded like wooden.

HR: Okay.

RM: And he was a really nice man. Here we are, Lemushuk. I'm telling my daughter, or my sister about Michel Natal.

HR: Would you like to read that to me?

RM: There's so much—but when I just arrived there. Just one more sec. I just—they're all over the my bed.

Other: 'Cause I was still reading them. [laughter]

RM: Ah okay. [pause] I didn't get to many of them because I had written—read all the reports and all the schools that I went to by the different inspectors.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: I didn't know—and I was reading my, my reports cards in Grade 1 and Grade 7 at (inaudible) High School.

HR: Ah.

RM: This is April 20th, 1944 that's not one. No I'm not finding that. Just finished reading it. My whole bed is full of letters.

HR: Ah.

RM: And I was just underlining with red some of the things—here it is, here it is. By the way, Michel Natal, there were three cities—little towns: Michel, Middle Town and Natal. Michel is where the mine was.

HR: Yeah.

RM: Now Middle Town wasn't, Michel was sort of a little city but they were all joined.

HR: Okay.

RM: Now I taught in Natal. I lived in Natal and went—taught school in—it doesn't matter anyway they were all combined. There was about 3000 people there I've got it in this letter.

HR: Okay.

RM: In three towns and close by. And there are about—I have 400 kids in the school, but they were actually closer to 500 I discovered after, cause I just arrived. I'd written my sister, "I guess you're wondering how I like teaching. Well I like part of it. When I came down here I came with the understanding that I was going to teach Grade 7 and about 20 high school girls. Instead, I am teaching Grade 7 besides five classes of music, boys and girls. In one class I have over 40 boys and girls. Can you imagine it?"

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: And there was no—I'd never taught music before. Classes, you know, I'd take piano and got my degree in Grade 11 and I was teaching Grade 12, but I had never planned on having a choir because I'm not the best singer. Or teaching music, except for piano. And I had no equipment at all.

HR: So what, what did you do Reta? How did you?

RM: Terrible time. And I've written in here to my mom, "There was a Miss Eder in Nelson that's the music teacher and she promised to send me some material and some books to help in my teaching. There was nothing there."

HR: So you couldn't ask anyone for assistance, like the inspector or the trustees?

RM: I only—I didn't know the inspector.

HR: Okay.

RM: I only saw him once. And very, very poor town and I was desperate. I've got two, three letters saying that I'm sitting here wondering what to do. So some days I'd just play records and they'd sing. [laughter] Because I didn't have a clue.

HR: Did you have a—you had a record player though at the school?

RM: I must have had because I was just reading that I'd play records and the kids sang. Of course I had the piano in my room.

HR: I see.

RM: So I taught them songs, but still it wasn't regular teaching music. You know what I mean?

HR: Yes.

RM: You need a guide.

HR: You need a guide. You need instruments.

RM: I need instruments. Didn't have any guide at all.

HR: And you had no instruments either?

RM: No because there—I don't anyone played instruments in that school as I recall.

HR: Okay.

RM: Anyway, 40 boys and girls in one class. And I thought, "Gosh." But all, all about my age of course 'cause I was 21 I think when I graduated, 20. And they look older, you see, they weren't some of them were 18. But oh they looked older than me.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And I had a time—what a time trying to control them. The boys sit in the front seat and they grin and winked at me all during the lesson.

HR: [laughter]

RM: What do you think of that?

HR: [laughter]

RM: And then I can't find the next page.

HR: How did you deal with that? How did you manage? What kept you going?

RM: I complained. I, I, I didn't want to stay there. I didn't (inaudible) and I, I went to a place where they had a piano and they literally, they literally blew me right out of the water. Hated Catholics. Hated Italians. But when I first got there...

HR: Where was that, Where was that?

RM: Michel Natal.

HR: In Michel Natal. So was that the same school or a different one now?

RM: That's the same school.

RM: Same school, okay.

RM: Well anyway, when I'd go up the steps all these boys would say, "Wow, look at those legs." And they'd say, "Teach how about going out with you?" And this went on nearly every day. So one day, summoned my principal, like, like, we like—I had the piano in my room and I would go to another room to teach singing or something I've forgotten. The principal would bring his students in there. They were in Grade 12, students.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And they'd come and they would try to make dates with, like, when we were changing classes and the principal hadn't come in yet. And they would say "Hey Miss Colletti, how about taking you out?" This went on every time, but, you know, it just went on consistent. To begin with I was sort of flattered because I was young.

HR: Yes.

RM: But after it got to me. So the principal came in and I was fuming and I told him, "Mr. Whittingham I'm tired of your students telling me, you know, look at those legs, we'd like to date you." And he all the—you know what he did?

HR: What?

RM: Looked me up and down. You know what he said to me?

HR: What?

RM: "Do you blame them Miss Coletti?"

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: I almost hit him. He was separated from his wife because he was an atheist. I went to his camp, he was on his own. An older man. But I discovered that—think he had a bit of a crush on me because I read another part here and he took on—he reserved a place in the theatre to take all the teachers. And in the letter it says, "The teachers were shocked because never before had he ever reserved the seats at the, at the theatre." And guess what? He had me reserved sitting beside him because I was a young teacher, you see. The others were all of them were older.

HR: Hmm.

RM: So I should have figured it out then but I didn't because he was a really nice man. But can you imagine? I was just about quit.

HR: Wow, and why didn't you? What kept you there?

RM: Well, well I got to like the town. The people were wonderful to me. You know, the parents I'd met a lot. There was no PTA meetings at that time ever.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Never met a parent, but that time I met lots of them. I was invited out for meals, they gave me gifts. It was a poor town, very poor miner's town. And I just loved the people. Ordinarily I'd love the class and I was reading here I had three girls in my room that were really bad. I don't remember that they couldn't have been in my Grade 7 class, they were my Grade 8 class. So I knew pretty well everyone in the school because another thing, I had to go and conduct, I think I told you, the whole school outside in the school yard every morning. Which they hadn't told me that 'cause I never conducted music class in my life. So I'd get out there and, you know, you put your hand ov—and down and then over again, sort of fake it though. Every morning I had to conduct singing of "God Save the King" or Queen, whoever it was at the time. And the men, the soldiers that came in, miners they would sleep at hotels or whatever when they brought them in to mine the mine. The mines there the coal mine.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And they were changing shifts at that time. There was a fence outside of the school and the —these miners would say, "Hey there's a new teach, how 'bout taking you out teach?" Well, I had to put up with that. But nobody ever said anything 'cause, you know, and they were doing this while I was conducting "God Save the Queen", or whatever it was.

HR: [laughter]

RM: I—you know, it was a very unique town, very unique.

HR: What—tell me about the school. It was Grades 1-12?

RM: 1-12 and I was on the second floor and the bathroom was on the bottom floor. And one day —if I wanted to go to the washroom I had to go down to the bottom floor.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: First floor—there might have been three floors. And I had a boy in my room, he was a whiz, so he'd take over for. He was the smartest kid I've ever met. Grade 7 he was an absolute whiz, his IQ was so high. I'd say, "Delfia, take over." So he'd take over the class, I'd go to the bathroom. But the principal came in one day and said, kids I guess were (inaudible), he told me, "You're not allowed to go to the bathroom, to leave your class at anytime of the day and leave it to the children." Well I, I had real, real problems. Outside plumbing in the winter. Oh, and cold, it was right near the Alberta border and the wind would whip through there, ah. Have you ever had outside plumbing?

HR: No, no never. Not in the winter I haven't.

RM: It gets 20 or 30 below and the wind whipping through there, I'll tell ya. So anyway—but in the school they had inside plumbing, you see. Anyway, that's another story. [laughter]
HR: So when you were teaching the music classes who took your regular Grade 7 class?
RM: Well the thing is I, I didn't—I was trying to figure out, 'cause I couldn't remember how could I have taught five classes? I didn't teach physical ed.

HR: I see.

RM: So I taught—you know, when there was physical ed. on I would teach one of the classes but they didn't have singing every day.

HR: I see.

RM: It worked out that one day I'd have one, one class and the next day I'd have a different class and that's what I meant by five classes.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And then I don't remember ever having a lunch break. Well I was accompanist to—oh yes there were, there were instruments. There were instruments because I used to accompany the violinists children who were playing violin and different instruments at lunch time.

HR: Hmm.

RM: There were but I didn't have them in my class as I recall. But anyway, so I did this, and anyway—and the person, the teachers, took a break. Somehow or other I was always seemed to be busy and it matter that the teachers room was the boiler room and it was just absolutely filthy.

HR: Oh gosh.

RM: Well, you see, the thing is in a coal mine—ever been in a coal mining town where they cooked, they used to, they used to burn coal outside and they cook up coke. Ever heard of that?

HR: Oh yes, yep, everything must have been covered.

RM: No it was outside in open bins and they cooked—they'd be, they'd be burning the coal and the cinders would fill the town.

HR: Yes and like a little—like a blanket of...

RM: Oh well you couldn't see much of it but it would get in your eyes, and oh every morning I'd get cinders in my eyes you could barely get them out. And when I'd get to school my whole desk would be full of cinders. All the desks would be full of cinders.

HR: Whoa.

RM: So we had to—it was like ashes, but they were fine. So we had to wipe off the desks and I used to wear white blouses not knowing when I went there that my blouses would turn grey in a matter of days. But there were cinders, always cinders, cinders in my eyes. Very difficult to get a cinder out of your eye.

HR: Mm.

RM: But, so that was another thing that, that—and another thing, I didn't know how cold it was there in the winter. And we had winter and I wore nylons. The first day I went to school I froze my knees. Everybody else had long johns.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: See in Nelson we were between the mountains and we never go that, that severe cold.

HR: How did you get to, to the school in the morning?

RM: I had to walk about a...

HR: You walked.

RM: I think it was a mile, a half a mile but you'd—I just about froze to death until I finally come into Nelson. I guess I must of bought long johns because my knees were actually frozen. The janitor had to rub my knees to get the circulation.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: But anyway, but I had a wonderful class. But I had one class, this was Grade 8 I believe, they were big kids. One was a bigger than me, I was small at the time. And she, she started fighting with another student in my music class. I told her to stop and she stood there and she was swearing at, there was—she was swearing at another student. And I said that, Carol I think was her name, "Carol stop it right now. I will, I will not put up with this in my classroom." She stood up bigger than me, big chubby girl, Grade 8, Grade 8 or 9, and she stood and she said, "Try to make me."

HR: Oh wow.

RM: And beat me up. So at that time they were strapping. Some of them needed it, believe me. So I went to the principal and I told him what happened and I said, "You either strap her or I'm quitting. I can't put up with this anymore." I had three of them, she was the worst. And oh he doesn't believe in strapping. Well you know sometimes they needed it.

HR: Ah, oh no.

RM: But anyway, so he when he said (inaudible), "Well I'm gonna—you brought me as music teacher I'm not staying, I'm not putting up with her trying to beat me up." She stood up she, she, she was going to hit me with her fist.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And she could have done it 'cause I was little.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: I'm not a fighter. [laughter]

HR: What, what happened?

RM: Well he expelled her for a couple of weeks. Week or two and she, she behaved after that.

HR: She smartened up.

RM: Yep, yep.

HR: Well that's good.

RM: But I had a beautiful class. I just loved them, they were po—very poor. I had—see Michel Natal they had a lot of cave-ins in the mine. They had no, they had no safeguards like they do today.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And many of the miners had died in the mine. I had two boys that were cousins, both their fathers had died in a cave in. Very, very poor, very poor.

HR: How, how did they make a living after their fathers died?

RM: I don't know. One of the lived in Middle Town. There were little shacks, little houses and there were no paint on them. And his mother used to invite me up for dinner, they were Italian. Lots of Italians, mostly the town was, mostly Italian.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And Russian, three quarters I think of my class were Italian. And they'd cook spaghetti, and the houses were inside were spotless. (inaudible) Where, where they, you know, burnt the coke. All the houses had no paint because they wouldn't, they wouldn't stay painted. Didn't have any paint. And their houses were absolutely spotless. And I got to know a lot of them. The people then they were wonderful to me, wonderful. But anyway, I got to the, to the classes. See my class, I, I loved my class. Took them—used to take them down and buy ice cream cones and one day the prin—years ago the principals weren't very lenient. But this principal was pretty good. I got, I—in the letter I just said I got in there I got a new bike and I had taken the kids bicycling the next day. Now that day I went out with some of them, 'cause I knew the whole school.

HR: Mm.

RM: I knew everybody. And I chummed around with some of the high school kids, like, you know, picnics and stuff. 'Cause I was young [laughter] didn't know any young people there.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: So anyway, I invited over—I said, "Mr. Whittingham is giving me half the day off in the morning and all afternoon so I could take the kids on a bicycle trip and we're gonna have a picnic and they're gon—we're gonna bring lunches." And that was in my letter and I'd forgotten.

HR: Had, had—did the kids have bicycles? Or did you just..

RM: Some of them did. This was junior high and they were high school, well Grade 8 and different ones. There was one—there weren't too many of them. But my class, they went with me so they must have had or maybe borrowed them. Because they wanted me to go skating one night, and you know the skating was an outside rink and horrible ice.

HR: Mm.

RM: You know, it wasn't smooth.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Freezing cold, 20 below zero and these kids go skating, skating.

HR: Wow.

RM: But they wanted me to go and I said, "I can't, I don't have any skates." I couldn't skate much anyway cause the skates years ago—but the boots were soft and you'd turn your ankle. That's why I have bad ankles, they weren't hard like they are today. They were soft leather. And I I said I didn't have any skates, which I didn't have. Well that night, knock at my door, there must have been 15 kids standing there holding the skates.

HR: [laughter]

RM: This is my brothers this is my sisters and they were hoping one of them would was gonna fit me and I'd wear them. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: And you had to sit on a bench and freezing your hands getting your—they put my skates on and I'm a horrible skater, anyway. And I had three or four in front, three or four behind holding me up, pushing me around the rink. [laughter]

HR: Was, was that on a, on a rink or a lake, or...

RM: Outside rink but it was—oh it was outside. Wasn't a building.

HR: Wow.

RM: They just skated on ice. You did it was so cold there they, I guess they, they, you know, they, you know, put water on it 'til it froze. There was an outside rink, but it wasn't inside. You can imagine trying to get your boots on in 20 below and the wind whipping through there.

HR: [laughter]

RM: I only went once.

HR: [laughter]

RM: You know, I wish I'd a had a camera to take—here they're all standing with all these skates hanging and saying, "This is my brothers, this is my sisters, this is my cousins," [laughter] gosh.

HR: [laughter]

RM: So it was—I do, I loved those kids. They were dear.

HR: How long did you stay at that school?

RM: For a year. I had to go back to—my sister got married that year and that's when I had to go back and, and help my dad in the grocery store. And then they would phone me other schools. But it was interesting, very, very interesting.

HR: So after, afterwards when they phoned you for other schools would you do substituting work, or...

RM: I, I—well, two of the schools like Ootishania I told you, that was first. And then Proctor the girl got married and for a couple of months a friend of mine so I filled in for her junior high and part of high school. And then Kaslo, the students had, had terrorized two of the girls I understood before I got there. They're the ones that through the rock down, that were gonna throw a huge boulder at me.

HR: Right.

RM: So you see—and then I only taught one full year in, in Grand Forks before I got married. Oh no, another full year in Balmoral out in the country in a Finnish community. So I taught in a Finnish community, a Doukhobor community, and, and Kaslo which was a, I believe, an internment camp. It was all Japanese in there and I, I had quite a time there, too. But anyway, Michel Natal my students were good, but I'll tell you Helen, there was no help at all for mentally challenged children. And I had some in my class, I mean really mentally challenged. They, they would promote them from grade to grade to grade. I had a boy in my class Delfia, I think I told you about him, big—looked like a big lumber jack.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And he was Italian (inaudible). “What’ll you do when you finish school Delfia?” “I’m gonna work, or work in a lumber camp.” And that’s what he was like, [laughter]. He couldn’t spell. I gave him 10, or I gave him about 30 spelling words one day. And I said, “Delfia you really study these.” I think he got two right and we all clapped. The kids got along really well and they supported each other. And I said, “Delfia that’s terrific!” [laughter] Two or three right in 30 or 40 words. And no help for them, none.

HR: Wow.

RM: I had a little girl with thick, thick glasses. She couldn’t read, she couldn’t do anything, just sat there. It was pitiful, you know, there was no help for them.

HR: Mm.

RM: Barely complained. But there’s always help in the schools today. So I had one boy that he could barely see, he couldn’t afford glasses and oh it was sad, sad. Some of them were quite well to do, but most of them very, very poor. And they just ate up the classes. I mean they just sat so attentively. Anything I taught they were so happy. So I just loved the children. So I don’t know what else I can tell you except that I used to go bicycling with them. I’d take them down to (inaudible) which was a, well it was a delicatessen. I’d take them out for ice cream. No wonder they loved me. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: And Delfia—evidently the boy who was so clever in my class, Sergio Muzio—you see these were all Italians. I couldn’t speak much Italian, but they identified with me.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And I said to Delfia when he was a whiz, he paid no attention in school, he should have been three or four grades higher ‘cause there was not anything he didn’t know. And I’d be teaching the class and he’d be looking out the window. I used to always try to trick him, think well he’s not listening.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: When I’d ask him a question there wasn’t one question he couldn’t answer.

HR: Wow.

RM: And I said, “What you gonna do when you get out of school Sergio?” And he was a funny little guy he said, “I’m gonna work, I’m gonna work in the mine,” he never smiled. I said,

"Sergio, you work in a mine? You are, you're, you're smart." Well he said, "Well I'm working," like everybody said they're gonna work in the mine. So I went to see his family. His father was dead from what I could understand he had a foster father and the mother couldn't speak English. They couldn't speak English. I had the older boy interpret for me. And I told them, "This boy is brilliant. You must, somehow or other, get him to go to university." And of course Delfia is just sitting, he's a strange looking little kid. He'd just never smiled, he just sort of looked ornery all the time like he was bored. Well he was bored. Well you believe it, years later I saw in the newspaper he was—he got how many scholarships and he was an A student at UBC.

HR: Oh that's wonderful.

RM: So I felt I helped one. And then later my son got a job, he was an engineer and he was just out of, out of—ah I'd forgotten the college here. And he was working for a fellow and I said, "Who's your boss's name Joe?" and this is years later. Guess what? Sergio Muzio.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: The boy that, that was clever, he was Joe's boss in Trail at the smelter. All those years. So anyway, but I, I don't want to tell you anymore there is so much to say. There were, there were the soldiers were on miner's leave. I think I told you?

HR: No, no.

RM: Oh yes, oh yes. They needed them to mine the, the coal mine because it was one of the, I guess, one of the only ones like that in Canada. They needed it for the war effort. So hundreds of soldiers, I don't know a hundred, but lots of them came in. And I was—I lived quite near the the CPR and I used to watch 'em. I'd watched all these soldiers come in and they had them sleeping in the hotels. They had whole places full of soldiers. So one other thing I was going to say, one day I went to school, I might have told you, and none of my—hardly any of my students were in the class. And the school was almost empty.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: So I said to the principal, "What's going on?" He said "Today's May Day," I said, "What do you mean about May Day?" Well that's a Russian—the, the, the Russians, or communists whatever, they celebrate May Day.

HR: Oh I see it's like Labour Day.

RM: I guess so. Yeah, yeah I guess it was like Labour Day cause the labour party was in there. In fact, I knew the guy who was head of the labour party in that area. But anyway, so they were

there celebrating, had a big picnic. So I only had a few children—so I learned a lot while I was there, learned a lot.

HR: That must have been quite an experience.

RM: Well the thing is then they bought in a bunch of, I swear they were, prisoners. And they, they worked the mine in Corbin just over the, the border. And they'd come in Saturday night dressed like Indians. They'd paint their faces, they'd come roaring into town. They called themselves the Corbin Indians. And they were scary, they were scary.

HR: They, they were brought into work the mines?

RM: Yes,and they looked like, they looked like prisoners. Now the ones that came into our town they were soldiers.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: (inaudible) But these guys, they were rough and tough like lumber jacks. Big muscles and they'd come in with their face all painted like an Indian, they called 'em—And they'd come whooping into town like Indians on a Saturday night. And I used to go to dances, and they'd want to dance with me and I'd just wouldn't. I, I noticed in one of my letters I did dance because it was so tough, I was scared not to dance with them.

HR: [laughter]

RM: And my friend would tell them she, you know, my girlfriend. I was scared they were gonna beat 'em up because she wasn't very strong. My dad came to see me one night, didn't tell me he was coming. And he stayed in a hotel right above the restaurant. The next morning he came and he said to me, "My gosh, Reta. What are you doing here?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said "I've worked in a lumber town but I have never seen anything like this." These Corbin Indians came in after a dance, they smashed everything in this restaurant. Over-turned—Dad was sleeping upstairs. He wanted to get me out of there fast. [laughter]

HR: And did you go?

RM: No, no I stayed. But I stayed with—at, at stayed with the Lemushuk's and they were delightful.

HR: So you stayed with Nancy's family?

RM: Oh for awhile. But she didn't have a piano and I, I was teaching piano and teaching music, and also didn't have inside plumbing [laughter]. And they were delightful people. I can tell you a lot of things were going on there.

HR: Like, like what kinds of things?

RM: Oh, I mean like the Corbin Indians coming in smashing things. Oh I went up town one day and there was a, there was a pool hall up there and the guy tried to get me, date me. And I wouldn't and I walked away and then they—I don't know how many people in the town. And, and the men—see I'm, I'm not used to saying hello to strangers. Like in a small town we were an English town and most of them were pretty—I hope you're not, I hope you're—I guess you're English, are you? But they always thought they were a little better than us. Some of them in Nelson because I was Italian and Catholic. Public school used to call us "dirty Catholicers," because our, our school was a half a block away, a block away and we used to try to get out of school before the public school kids got out. [laughter] We'd try to run home because they'd call us "dirty Catholicers". So there was lots of prejudices in a small town. But I never talked to anybody I didn't know, I was very shy. In Michel Natal I guess everybody talked to people. So, (inaudible) men would say, "Hello," to me and I'd just walk by because I didn't know them. So, I was known as the snooty teacher.

HR: Ah.

RM: Specially the guy in that—in the pool hall. He was rough and tough and looked ugly and I wasn't certainly gonna in for his pool hall. So I was little afraid to go. I'd never go out at night alone. It was a rough, rough town.

HR: Right.

RM: But marvellous, marvellous people. I mean there were so many good people, I loved them. I stayed with a woman that just about—well I moved into another house to get the piano, because I had to practice piano. And when she found it was her son that I had met, he was (inaudible) went out once and I said I needed a place where there was a piano and inside plumbing. He said, "Well I have got a room. I'm leaving. I'll ask my mother and, and maybe you could stay there."

[continued]

RM: Frustrating, and they were bigger than me and they threatened me because they were bigger. Most of the girls were bigger and because I was little—and this is Grade 8 class. And I was so frustrated that I couldn't stand it so I let them go home. And I went home and I was sick, sick as the dickens. And the other teachers—when I told Mr. Whittingham I was thinking of quitting I couldn't take it anymore, he said, "I shouldn't have put up with it." And for 6 months I put up with them. The other teachers said that if it had of been, if it had of been them they would have

all quit, resigned a long time before. And I wrote on there, “The only reason I’m staying is because of my students because I love them.”

HR: Your Grade 7 students you mean?

RM: Grade 7, that was the main reason I, I stayed.

HR: So it was mostly the high school kids, I guess, that gave you...

RM: It was the Grade 8 class and I had five classes and the inspector came one day, and I was sick that day. And I was so wiped out I didn’t—I’d forgotten I had to accompany the students on their instruments. And at lunch time when the teachers had a break and after school ’til 5 o’clock every day. As well as teaching these classes. Anyway, I’d forgotten. And by the way that Miss Paul moved in about beginning of the year, I didn’t realize it. Quite a bit that I hadn’t told you, but anyway, we’ll finish Michel Natal. Did you get a hold of Dante?

HR: I, I, I did not yet, no. But I did get the “Doukhobor Daze.” I started looking through it, it was quite, quite humorous.

RM: Yes, and a lot of things that happened to them happened to us, but they were—those teachers were a couple of years before we were.

HR: And the—did you know any of them?

RM: Ah you know something? I may have met them once. It’s funny they lived just a few doors away from my mother in Nelson. And I think I—as I recall I went to visit them once. They were older, a little older and I don’t remember too much about it. But I do recall I had visited them. I didn’t know them when they were out teaching, no.

HR: No, yeah, they were there in the mid—about mid ’30s.

RM: Yes you see I was—is it mid ’30s? See I’ve forgotten.

HR: Yeah it looks like that. She said that she arrived—it was about, it was ’37 I think, ‘36?

RM: Oh and she was teaching in the, in the Doukhobor home at that time?

HR: In Ootishania, she said.

HR: Yes, yes. Now I didn’t know they’d been teaching in that school that long. I know they’d been blowing up the schools for quite a few years. You see, it’s been years since I read the book.

HR: Yeah that—well I haven't had a chance to get too far into it, but.

RM: But you just—you're just reading it, but you can't keep it.

HR: No.

RM: From the library.

HR: It's from the library, yeah.

RM: If I can get a hold of a couple, would you like one to keep?

HR: Oh if you could, yes I'd love one to keep.

RM: Yes, my son is so busy the next few days he wouldn't do anything for me. [laughter]

HR: Okay.

RM: But he's in the office here and he's way behind. But I will get him also trying to get the other book. It's called "Homefront" about all the, the servicemen and how they died.

HR: Yes.

RM: And he has one and we're trying to get more.

HR: Okay.

RM: Anyway, okay so I'm gonna let you ask the questions. And I'm gonna try not to keep you so long.

HR: Okay, all right. Well the first thing I wanted to know is how long did you stay at Michel Natal?

RM: A whole year. Yeah I stayed a year. And I did—I'd forgot I also taught a year in Grand Forks and a year in Knott's Hill Balmoral which was out in the country. I wanted a country school and I finally got one. The last school and that's when I got married. [laughter]

HR: So you went from Ootishania in '40.

RM: When I left to Ootishania I went from there to Michel Natal.

HR: So Ootishania was at the end of 1943?

RM: Just a minute, normal school was ’42-’43. So it was the beginning—no it was in, just the 2 months, I thought it was more. I was reading my letter, May and June of 1943, yes.

HR: 1943 so Michel Natal...

RM: May and June, just 2 months.

HR: May and June. And so Michel Natal would have been September of ’43 to September of ’44.

RM: Yes, yes I’ve got scads of letters I’ve been trying to read and I didn’t get to many of them.

HR: And so after Michel Natal where did you go from there?

RM: Well when I was in Michel Natal I’ve mentioned that my sister got married and dad needed me in the store in Nelson?

HR: Yes.

RM: Went to Nelson, I’m just trying to think where I went next. I think I went to Proctor. But there was nothing significant there. It was just a few months, a couple months. My friend got married and I took on her class of Grade 8, 9, and 10 I believe it was. But there was nothing really that you’d wanna hear too much about. There was only 3 months, I came home on weekends.

HR: Okay.

RM: I, I lived in a place called Holiday Inn right near the water ’cause it’s right on the lake.

HR: Oh okay.

RM: And best cook I ever tasted, ever, ever. [laughter] She was the cook that was in that Holiday Inn. [laughter] But nothing, you know, happened, you know, so I don’t want to cover that I could.

HR: Okay, all right no we’ll stick than with...

RM: And then from there I went to Kaslo I believe. And every time they needed me, and that was another school I told you that the boys that had this big boulder. And that was I think I was there for maybe, I don’t know, 6 months I think.

HR: What, what year were you married?

RM: I was married in—I can't remember. Let's see I taught in Grand Forks after that and Michel Natal. Could you believe I can't remember? 1946 I was 26 so it was 1948.

HR: 1948, okay, all right. And that was the end of teaching at that point.

RM: Yep.

HR: You stopped.

RM: I did a little bit of substituting at Jackson School when I moved back to Nelson because my husband didn't want me to teach.

HR: Okay, all right. And so with—I guess my, my main concern with your experiences in Michel Natal were around whether you recalled anything about the war or anything that you had to do in terms of helping the kids save and collect?

RM: No, no.

HR: No. There were no blackouts, no...

RM: No, no. Nelson is where they did a lot, in in the book I'm gonna give you, they did lots for the war effort. We took in so—you know, air airmen from England and Scotland and Wales. We had them in our home for—two of them stayed so long they were just like family. We heard from one right through until he died. For years and years. And it was like, honestly, it was like a second home to them.

HR: Okay.

RM: So in Nelson is where they did a lot in the war effort because many of them were English there.

HR: I see. And so in Michel Natal, I can't remember the name of the school. I don't, I don't seem to have written it down.

RM: I don't remember either. I just think it was just—I don't remember a name.

HR: Okay, that's okay.

RM: Maybe—oh golly it was just—as far as I can remember it's Michel School and Natal School. I don't recall a name on it.

HR: Okay.

RM: Isn't that awful?

HR: That's okay, yes. Do you remember—what do you remember about the school, about what it looked like?

RM: Well I recall, I think, it was two storeys or three I'm not sure because I taught on the second floor, as you know. And it was an old school. I don't remember too much about it, except that our, our teacher's room was at the, I told you where the, the furnace was.

HR: Yes, yeah.

RM: It was, it was a furnace room. That was the, that was, the teacher's room was the furnace room. We had no coffee, we had nothing there.

HR: Right.

RM: Something I didn't tell you—I should maybe explain it. So many, as I told you, so many children had lost their fathers in in the mines. There was no safety precautions at all in that mine.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And, and they worked the mine day and night. Some of the fellas that mostly were miners, they worked, like, all night and slept all day. And the others worked in the day and slept at night. So it was a lot of the miners were very placid looking, you know, terrible—with no colour in their faces because they never really saw much of the sunshine.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: So anyway I decided one day because I heard so much about them—and I was reading, reading one of my letters there was—they were gonna go on strike. And, and there was a lot of things that went on that I'd forgotten but it doesn't matter. What I'd like to say, I decided one day to teach—bring the children, some of them, they were a whole class into the mine. To just show them what it was like for their fathers. So many were still working there.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: How many were working there, because some were working in shops and stuff. So we went in and oh Helen, the water—you had to wear high boots (inaudible). It was narrow, really narrow and they had these little, little carts that went up and down with the coal. And the miners had, they had dark glasses on and they were chipping away at the, at the coal and just with their lanterns. And it was just absolutely dark and it was just—I was so glad to get out of there. My my pupils were just shocked. So then they realized what it was like for the miners and for their

parents that died. There was two cousins that that both had lost their, their fathers in the mine. And it still chokes me up right now when I think of no safety precautions. When they had cave ins they all died. Well most of them, I'm sure they all died. So my children had an opportunity to see what it was like.

HR: How, how did they react?

RM: Oh, I guess they were like me they were shocked, they didn't say too much. Just shocked. It was scary because the men were holding lanterns, chipping into the coal, and coal dust flying all over. And the coal dust was terrible, it gets in your eye you couldn't get it out. Every morning it would turn—and I'd be walking and get in into my eyes. And when I got to school my whole desk would be full of coal dust.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And I had to wipe the coal dust off our desks. So it was a very, very unique town and very, very poor. Anyway, and then another day I decided to take them out for careers. Like, to find what the, what the occupations were of all the people in town?

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Oh [laughter] I sent two boys to the, to the funeral home.

HR: [laughter]

RM: That was a mistake. [laughter] They came back and they were shaking like (inaudible) because they saw people that were dead and I didn't realize that. Oh it was terrible, they were shaking, "Ah ah ah, Miss Coletti." I can still see them shaking and white like ghosts. I had no idea what it was like in a funeral home. So there were lots of adventures I had there that would never happen anywhere else.

HR: Did the parents complain about that?

RM: No I had a—no I didn't. I, I just read a letter, part of a whole page in—parent after parent after parent inviting me for meals. One after—every single da—night here I went for a meal. And there were many of them that were mad because I hadn't gone to see them. So I think nearly every parent in the, in that school invited me out for lunch or dinner or to visit.

HR: Oh my, isn't that lovely.

RM: Unbelievable, unbelievable.

HR: And what, what were their homes like? Was there a range would you say?

RM: Actually, no. Most of the ones where I went to were quite, you know, quite average homes. Except for the ones in Middle Town where there is the—oh what's the name? The Matino, Roco Matino his name was, his father had died in a cave in. And they were in Middle Town which was between Michel and Natal where all the coal dust would come in, really come in there. And their houses were—outside they couldn't paint them, they were like little shacks. But the inside of this particular home of two of them were spotless. They were Italian people.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And they would have me in for meals and—little old ladies with the black, you know, the black dresses because they were still mourning their husbands. And they used to crochet me doilies and oh they did so much for me but very, very poor. So every parent, practically, in my class and other classes had invited me for meals and a visit. And that—I'm sure some of them were mad because I hadn't visited them. But half more the visit in this letter I was writing, I just finished reading. So that's probably one of the reasons I stayed.

HR: Hm.

RM: That's the one time I got to know, I'd say, nearly all the parents.

HR: Were, were most of them Italian?

RM: Well from what I could see in the, in my letter I've written down there about 70 or 80 percent were Italian. And there were, of course, the Russians and the Ukrainians. And there were a few other nationalities. But I, I've written here and I'd forgotten that that most of them were Italian. That's right, Sergio Muzzio I told you was going to go in the mine and he became that A student and won a scholarship to university 'cause I went to see his parents.

HR: Yes, yes.

RM: And they couldn't speak English and this ki—this boy was a whiz.

HR: That is such a neat story.

RM: Yes. And anyway, that was unique, this town. But very quickly, we want to swing over to Kaslo?

HR: Sure.

RM: Okay and I used to go home on the weekends. So I didn't get to see—meet many of the parents. And most of the husbands, their fathers were overseas.

HR: Do you remember what year that was?

RM: Just trying to think that's '42-'43 [pause] might of been.

HR: Right near the end of the war maybe, '44-'45?

RM: It was 1944 I believe because I only taught there a few months. It was maybe 6 months because I told you they'd run one teacher, maybe two, out, the students had. Terrible class. I didn't know it, but because I was (inaudible)dad's store, and every time they—I, I got the offer to teach at the school you, you pretty well had to go.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And they were the ones I was telling—but I'll tell you a little bit about the class okay?

HR: Sure.

RM: The teachers were really nice. Well I shouldn't say they were, they were—there was one man that he had something wrong with him. He was teaching in high school and I used to walk to school with him. I don't know whether you want to hear this. [laughter] He had a gnarled up hand.

HR: Oh.

RM: I think he had sleeping sickness or something, big tall guy. He used to walk to school with me every morning, I'd meet him at his place and I'd wait. Because I lived quite a ways from the school, and we walked together. I had the principal—was, was—used to put my (inaudible) every morning. He had a beautiful wife and I taught one of his daughters, she was smart as the dickens. He had two daughters.

HR: So you were boarding at their house?

RM: Yes, well I stayed at my sisters first but it was quite a ways from the school. So I stayed at the principals after because it was closer. And I never, never knew. So that was one, and the this other teacher as I say his wife was expecting a baby. We'd been to their place for a party, lovely girl, but she was useless. She would phone him when he was in school and say, "Mia, the fire went out," and he'd have to leave his class and go down light the fire. Maybe I'll tell you about the class now. As I told you the principal said there was one boy in there and he was a ring leader of the whole—all the boys except one. They all followed him, did what he wanted them to do.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: As he was a—they had a baseball team then, it was Grade 4 I think or Grade 5. I had three class 3, 4, and 5. Or yeah, 4, 5, and 6 doesn't matter.

HR: Were, were they all combined into one? Or did you take?

RM: Oh yes we taught in, yeah they taught—teachers, when we had one teacher for Grade 1 and 2. And then another teacher for 3 and 4, I think it was, another 4 and, 4 and 5. I had two of three classes.

HR: Okay.

RM: But I taught in the country school, all classes all grades.

HR: Mm-hmm, yeah.

RM: And so he told me everyday this boy gets a strapping, every day.

HR: Oh.

RM: So he said, "You can just send him down to the office at the end of the day or whatever, and he'll get a strapping." So I did—well he, you know, when I went in the boys were terrible. One little boy was nice and every—but they were breaking his pens and all their fathers, as far as I knew were in the war. And the girls were delightful. Beautiful class in the girls. So anyways, oh the kid—the boys they'd, they'd, they'd grab the girls skirts and pull them up and they just did everything.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: So I sent this boy to the office to get his usual strapping. I did that for a few days and I thought, you know something, you know what he'd say to the students the kids? They'd say, they'd say "Are you coming out to play? Are you coming out to play ball?" And they were competing against other schools.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: He was the pitcher. So because of him they were winning.

HR: Ah.

RM: So they'd say, "Okay, Gordie are you coming?" He'd say, "No I just gotta go and get my strapping," just like he's, "I'm going to go to the bathroom."

HR: Oh.

RM: It meant nothing to him.

HR: Yeah.

RM: So I tried everything. The principal said, "Well build him up when he's rea"—so he's reading a poem and I say, "That was really great," and he laughed right in my face, it was a big joke. And, and all the kid—the boys followed him. And they were just—I can't, I just can't believe the things that they did. I can't even remember them now. Except pulling the girls skirts up when they up in, you know, in line and they'd all pull all the girl's skirts up and...

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: They were a terrible bunch. And I tried everything and finally I thought, "Boy I'll try something else." This is important because—so of course as usual he's all ready to go to get his strapping and I said, "Gordie, you're not going to be strapped today." And there was a very important baseball game on that day and all the kids were waiting expecting him to come. And he just laughed at me, laughed in my face. He wasn't getting a strapping. I said, "You'll sit down in the chair." And he sitting there laughing and scowling at me. I just working at the blackboard and all the students kept opening the door and said, "Gordie when you coming out?" I said, "Shut the door he's not coming out." [laughter]

HR: Oh my goodness.

RM: And of course the beginning he thought it was funny, and after that he started getting madder and madder and madder. And I just ignored him. And I finally turned around and I said, "Gordon, because you're a good pitcher the kids, all these boys, are following you and you're pulling all these tricks and you, you kicked the last teacher out. You ran her out of here but you're not running me out." And I said, "Unless you smarten up you will stay here every single day. I, I've got all the time in the world." And I said, "The only reason that you're so popular is because you're such a good pitcher and you win the game. But if you ever broke you're arm, they'd probably beat the heck out of you." [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: (inaudible) He just looked at me in shock. So I said, "Make up your mind right now. If you want to play baseball and you want to keep winning then you better start smartening up and you better start leading the pack, instead of, you know—in a good way. And behave yourself and

you'll behave because I'm not, I'm not going to put up with it," but I said, "you're not running me out of here either." Well he, he, he sort of shook a little and he said, "Miss Coletti, I will try to be good." [laughter] Never had a minutes trouble with this, this student the rest of the year.

HR: Oh my goodness that was the thing. That you hit the, hit the right...

RM: Yep! I didn't know if it would work, but it worked. Because he couldn't play ball that day and I don't know if they lost the game or not, I don't know. Because he was really good.

HR: And he was good for the remainder of your time?

RM: Oh they all were. And only one incident I had. I had never strapped any child. I would've like to strap them all in one class in Michel. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: But one boy one morning I, I was I was calling the roll call and I couldn't find Melvin. And I said, "Where's Melvin?" And all of a sudden I hear he—the cloakroom. And the cloakroom, "Present." So he was in the cloakroom pretending he's not at school, and then he answered the roll, the roll call anyway. Well I gotta admit I took him out. And I said, "I don't think you'll ever do that again, Melvin." And I got a ruler and I just hit his hand a little bit, not very much. And I was scared to death because the only person I knew there, except for all the Japanese and the teachers, was his mother who lived next door to where I was staying. I stayed at my sister's at one point, and they were German people. [laughter] And his mother was my sister's best friend. His sister was my best friend, she was out of school. And I thought that they were gonna, they were come over and beat me up for, for spanking her son.

HR: [laughter]

RM: I was scared to go home. Well, you know, the next day, guess what? He brought me a bouquet of flowers. He was scared I'd tell his parents. [laughter]

HR: [laughter] He'd brought the bouquet?

RM: He's brought me a bouquet of flowers because he was afraid I'd tell his parents. He's what I —he'd been bad and I'd strapped him, or hit him. So they never found out he was buttering me up so I wouldn't tell his parents.

HR: Oh my goodness.

RM: So anyway, and I did ch—I, I chummed around with the Japanese and they were actually—quite a few pictures I, I—one of them was my best friend. (inaudible) We used to meet every

summer in the park there. It was, like, many years. So that's about all I can tell you because I used to go home the weekends and work in my dad's store.

HR: From Kaslo?

RM: Yes, yes.

HR: How far was it? How did...

RM: Oh it was only about, I don't know, 25-30 miles. Not very far.

HR: How did you get back?

RM: Well there was a little bus that used to take people into town every Friday night and came back on Monday morning. So that, that the driver of the bus was—the place where my friend stayed that—they were all his, all his pals and everything. And by the way, she owned up to everything.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: This girl. It's Muriel. Except the black dress. She had stolen it from her landlady. And I knew she had it, because she had it at the teacher's convention.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: But I didn't say anything. I mean, I didn't—I never saw her again.

HR: Where was the teacher's convention?

RN: It was in Fernie. No, no wait a minute where do I say it was, Michelle Natal. Nelson, it was in Nelson.

HR: Was this common? Did you have them very often, or...

RM: No, that was the only one I can remember ever having.

HR: Okay.

RM: We only had one. But, and that's down, see, I never met the (inaudible) and the mother of this boy, Gordon, mustn't have cared because she would have been down my neck and she never even heard from her, I didn't even know her.

HR: So the, the parents at Kaslo you didn't get to know them?

RM: I never met anyone other than the German lady living next door, the one I strapped her son. [laughter].

HR: What, what was the population mostly? Was...

RM: Oh golly, see this was a ghost town. And that's when the bring—brought all the Japanese in. There weren't many apartments, there were old old apartment that were loads of Japanese families living in the apartments and in houses, there were lots of empty houses. And I, I just don't know because you see the Japanese came in, but before that there weren't too many people there. Well there was maybe a couple of thousand.

HR: I see.

RM: So I'm sure there's a lot more there now because it's a very popular place to do a lot of filming of movies there. So all of these things I tried to remember, but I know Helen you must have lots of people in the—students that have given you your story so it couldn't have—it's pretty hard to put very much in from each person.

HR: Well yeah, it's—there there will be a little bit for each person. But there's one thing that comes up in my mind listening to your stories, and that makes me wonder about the relationship you had with other teachers. Would...

RM: You know I really—the teachers were really, really nice in Kaslo, but you see because I, I'd go to school in the morning and right after school then I'd go home. And the one teacher I'm telling you about—see I don't remember them too well. I mean they were all nice but they had their own lives and most of them were married, because I was a young teacher.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: So, I chummed out with, chummed up, chummed with the, like, the Muriel who was one of my best friends and Japanese girls 'cause there weren't many young—well not that I remember any young people.

HR: Right.

RM: Right, too many young people there other than Japanese.

HR: And what, what about when you were at Michel Natal? Do you remember doing anything with the other teachers or...

RM: Well, I was telling you that the—yes I was telling you that the principal took all of us to the show one night and reserved seats and he'd never done it before and he's reserved one beside me.

HR: Oh yes that's right.

RM: And the others teachers—except for the atheist in Grade 1 she had nothing to do with me because I was a Catholic.

HR: Right.

RM: And the other teachers were delightful. In fact I've just finished reading—I went bicycling with one, one, one day, and I think I went to visit them. Had me—they had me up for, me up for dinner another day. So the other teachers were all really nice except those two and the principal was an atheist but he was a really nice man.

HR: And did, did, did you talk to each other about teaching? You know, did you share material or share...

RM: See we didn't—I didn't have any material at all in my class. And I've written quite a few letters asking my mother to go and see Miss Eder, who promised—she was a professional, a music—musician and school teacher in Nelson. And she promised to send me all these (inaudible) for teaching music and spelling books and I never received—I don't think I ever received them. And in the two, three letters I've written I've asked my d—my parents to have her send them to me.

HR: Mm.

RM: I was sort of between the devil and the deep blue sea there.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: It was just a matter of accompanying, you know, the different students on the piano when they were playing the violin or whether...

HR: Right.

RM: And teaching pia—and teaching—I didn't teach the piano I taught singing, but I had never taught singing in my life. But because they needed someone to teach music—and I, of course, I taught them the basics of music and that. Because they needed their credits and the man who was teaching there before was transferred overseas and he left no records.

HR: I see, yeah. So the other teachers wouldn't have been teaching music at all?

RM: No I was the only one. I knew I had taught five classes in different days. I see in one of my letters when the inspector came in there—I had taught three classes that day and, and two social studies in another class. And Grade 8 class refused to sing when the inspector came in. The one I was telling you about.

HR: Yes.

RM: They would not sing.

HR: Oh my gosh. What happened?

RM: Well I, I...

HR: What did the inspector say?

RM: Well I'll answer that, I, I don't remember what he said but I did read the report and I got a good report. But, he was just shocked that they wouldn't sing.

HR: Yeah.

RM: And I was terrified I was going to get a horrible report. And guess what? After he left they started to sing and they apologized.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: That was in one of my letters, I'd forgotten.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: That was in Michel Natal I'm talking about.

HR: That's...

RM: In Kaslo, now we—and I did really know that we had teacher's meeting.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: But that's all, I didn't have anything else in that. So we did have the odd meeting I guess in Michel Natal. Now in, in Kaslo I don't recall ever having any meetings with them.

HR: Okay.

RM: But I didn't know them very well because, you know, they would go home—we'd go home right after school.

HR: Right.

RM: And the only ones that I knew was this one that—and the principal where I stayed. And his wife was teaching, she was delightful. Just a darling.
HR: Did, did you have to take work home with you after school and work at night or?

RM: Oh yes. Oh definitely. Oh yes, but not as much as in Michel Natal, because I taught all, all, all classes. And of course when I went out in the country you had—I had seven grades all classes all subjects. And the teacher ahead of me there in the country school had left no records.

HR: Did you have enough materials in the way of books?

RM: No.

HR: No?

RM: No.

HR: How—what did you do? How did you make do?

RM: Well as far as the teaching music I, you know, I taught them just—you had to teach them sort of scales. Not that they ever learnt anything. And I just had to accompany different ones on the piano and mostly singing.

HR: And what about the regular class, You're your regular Grade 7s?

RM: And I had to teach all the subjects that except physical ed. And I had a lot of homework to do. Well not as much, cause I kept—couldn't have had 'cause every letter I'm going out for dinner or going to a show. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: But I couldn't leave the school 'til after 5:00 because I was always accompanying someone on the piano, and that was every day.

HR: So you had—you taught usually 'til 5:00?

RM: No I accompanied students on the—they were preparing for a music festival or something, like, I'd play the piano and they'd play the violin or they'd play instruments.

HR: I see, so...

RM: But I used to get paid for that.

HR: But the books that.

RM: An extra $5 a month that's all.

HR: For doing the extra hours.

RM: For doing—for being a music teacher with a degree and doing all those hours I got $5 a month. Would you believe it?

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: It's out of my mind. [laughter] Only because I loved the pupils.

HR: It's a very sobering story. Makes me feel, makes me feel under worked. [laughter]

RM: No, but I had so much fun with all of my students. And I took them on picnics and I went skating and I was reading my letters here and I can't believe the things we did together. And at that time the other teachers didn't do things like that. They mainly taught purely in the class.

HR: Right.

RM: And I was just fortunate that I was able to—young teacher, the youngest in the school they'd ever had, I guess. And I was able to because I was young I thought of a lot of ideas that the others teacher would never have thought of or never did.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Because nearly all were married in the school in Michel Natal and the ones in Kaslo I didn't know them very well. I met them in the cloakroom and that's about it.

HR: I see.

RM: Except for the one that, that tried to kiss me and grabbed a hold of me. He was stronger than a horse. And he never touched me again and I never talked to him again either. Oh by the way, he used to go to, he used to go to sleep in his classroom.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: And his—I'd see his students coming out and I'd say, "Why are you out early?" "Oh Mr. So and so is asleep."

RM: Head, his head would be down on the counter and he'd be sound asleep.

HR: Ah. [laughter]
RM: I really don't think he taught them very much. [laughter] He ended up in White Rock, you know where White rock is?

HR: Yes.

RM: And, him and his wife—I noticed I was reading the papers from time to time, and they were very involved with the theatre group there.

HR: Ah.

RM: And I did go to see him once, but he wasn't there.

HR: I see.

RM: And I talked to his wife. So anyway, but in Kaslo that's about all I can tell you except I chummed around with the Japanese and they had a Japanese newspaper there that the young Japanese were, were writing. And the RCMP—we didn't see. They were around, but you didn't see much of them.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And the was a doctor, did I tell you? There was two doors away in a big old house. There were old English homes there. And he was Dr. Shimatakaharra, did I tell you about him or do you remember me telling you about him?

HR: I remember—I recognize the name, yeah.

RM: He was one of the top, I guess, surgeons of varicose veins (inaudible).

HR: Oh that's right, that's right.

RM: And he lived—he could not have an office, they didn't let—he couldn't practise out of an office in Kaslo. But, he practiced out of his home.

HR: Ah goodness.

RM: Beautiful man and he was—we were—where I stayed with the principal and his wife there were in a beautiful English home. Do you know where (inaudible) like outside it was really nice. And he lived in one two doors down. And my mother had varicose veins so bad they were hanging like grapes.

HR: Oh wow.

RM: So bad she could barely walk. No, none of the doctors could help her. Do you believe, Dr. Shimatakaharra helped her? My mother—her veins and she could barely, could barely walk before when he was finished she was walking.

HR: That's so good to know. I, I wonder what ever happened to him.

RM: I don't know, but he was one of the best I'd say in—he had come from Victoria or Vancouver, I'm not sure. But he was absolutely fantastic. And there was a baker there that couldn't, that couldn't—didn't have a shop and they bake out of their home and I chummed around with the daughter, one of them. I chummed around with the Japanese mainly.

HR: Right.

RM: Got to know them really well.

HR: That's good that you found, I guess, some young people.

RM: Well, you see, I was young and the others were all older in all these schools.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Because you were supposed to teach in the country at that time.

HR: Right.

RM: And I wanted to reach in the country because of my degree they kept getting me to the city schools and I, I literally demanded the country school.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Country school, Ootishania, that was country.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: But I only taught two, three grades there.

HR: Right. Okay well I, I have no more questions then, Reta. I, I don't know if you have anything else that in your mind that you want to share with me, but...

RM: Oh I, I taught in Grand Forks and I just want to tell you one thing there.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: I was there for a year. And there was one little—there were Doukhobors, two Doukhobors in the class. And one day they had to tell us what their parents did.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: You know, like their occupations. Some was lawyers some was doctors. One little boy got up to the board and he said, "My father is a carpenter. He builds up the schools and then he blows 'em up."

HR: [laughter]

RM: [laughter] He darn near blew my mind. "He builds them and then he burns them and blows them up." That's how he got, that how he got his job. So then he's build another school, he was involved in building another one.

HR: What—when was this? What year was this?

RM: That was in 1945, I believe I was.

HR: '45.

RM: I taught there for a year. And there was a flood in Grand Forks and it flooded the ba—the whole—the dam broke and the flood gate—the water came down and you'd see chickens and you'd see a dog and everything in the water. It was just going down so swift and it, and it actually covered the basement of the hotel I was living—I was staying in when I was a teacher.

HR: Oh no.

RM: We had a real bad flood, and Trail was flooded, the whole city was—the downtown area was all flooded because this dam had broke.

HR: Oh dear.

RM: So it was an interesting town too. I was going to tell you too about another thing.

HR: Okay.

RM: When I got out in the country ’45-’46 out near Salmon Arm. Now that was really an experience, a real experience. Because I taught all grades, all subjects. There isn’t any, any records at all. The teacher ahead of me I guess the inspector—finally the inspector, and they kept him there for a couple of years I think. And evidently the inspector came one day and he was fishing and the children were pulling the whole classroom apart. There was only one room.
HR: Hmm.

RM: So we had a coal oil lamp, we had a potbellied stove and it was so cold the window was broken. One of the windows and the wind would whip through there It was—oh it was cold, 20 below zero and I was—I practically freeze to death. It was so cold in the classroom, one day I found a mouse and it was frozen and I threw in the fire (inaudible) that’s how cold it was. That’s how cold it was.

HR: How come, how come they couldn’t get the window repaired?

RM: Well, who was going to repair it? This was out in the country. The farms were a mile away from farm, from another, or half a a mile or whatever. And I could have placed a cardboard but it was hard to st—you know, keep it on. The only books they had in the whole—and I got—we had a dance, I had a dance and because we didn’t have any books in the classroom at all. So I had a dance and made enough money to buy a set of Book of Knowledge.

HR: Ah.

RM: I didn’t have any books before that. Oh it was terrible, those years.

HR: Ah.

RM: And many of them didn’t have books in their home. And this in the classroom there was—you wouldn’t believe the, the, the variation of people in it. It was a Finnish community.

HR: Oh.

RM: And ever Saturday night—when I first moved though we had—oh it was after I was married we had our own steam bath. But some of them were so poor. There was one little boy that used to come to the school, and he never changed his clothes. He had the same gaunt close on every single day. And the nurse came out one day—once the, the nurse would come out every few months inoculate the children and check them out and everything coming in from Salmon Arm. This was the country, about 20 miles from Salmon Arm.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And this little boy, I remember him coming to school with sandwiches and one day he pulled a dirty string out his sandwich. Another one day it was a rusty nail.

HR: Oh my gosh.

RM: And my husband told me that he had actually been in that—see my husband was a bus driver and he told me, he wasn't my husband then, that actually he had been in their home and there was squirrels running around and it was absolutely unbelievable.

HR: Oh gosh.

RM: Filthy dirty. And this boy would come, looked as if he hadn't had a bath. Imagine taking a huge rusty nail out of your sandwich and dirty, I didn't often look at his sandwiches, dirty huge string.

HR: Wow.

RM: And when the nurse came one day to examine him his mother came, who I had never met. Grimy looking, she had a baby and it was pitiful. The baby was just 2-3 months old and she had not changed the shirt it was pitch—it was black. It was so tight it, it was, it was an undershirt. It was cutting the bay's arms it was just absolutely glued into the baby's arm.

HR: Oh gosh.

RM: I'll never forget the nurse getting her scissors—she could barely get the scissor under to cut it up.

HR: Good grief.

RM: That baby's circulation had literally stopped. And nobody ever reported people years ago. Where would—who would you report them to?

HR: Wow.

RM: And the husband I understand was working and this baby, you should have seen the diaper. Oh my gosh, I was sick. To see the terrible, terrible situation there. And actually she told the mother "You better get some clean clothes and new clothes for that boy and for that baby." And then coup—few days later, or the next week, the boy came in, nice fresh new clothes.

HR: Wow.

RM: And he might have had a bath. So I mean the situation—well I would—some are really strange, really strange.

HR: It's a good thing for the nurse.

RM: Well it's a good thing she was there. And the doctor came one day and oh he was so good looking [laughter] whoa he was good looking. There weren't many more—many eligible men around. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: He only came once though. [laughter] And anyway, I had to teach all the subjects in every grade and the gir—some of the children in Grade 3 couldn't read a Grade 3 read—a Grade 1 reader.

HR: Wow.

RM: I worked day and night I went—I worked Saturdays and Sundays working with the children to get them up to where they should be.

HR: This was just at Kaslo? Or did you have to do that at all of the places?

RM: No this was at Knott's Hill.

HR: Oh near Salmon Arm.

RM: That was near—about 20 miles out of Salmon Arm.

HR: I see. But that wasn't the case in Michel Natal or Grand Forks or the others?

RM: Ah you mean with the poverty?

HR: Yeah.

RM: Oh there was lots of poverty in Michel Natal, but there was nothing like that.

HR: But were you—did you have to work weekends to try and get the kids up to, you know, work on your...

RM: Not in, not in Michel Natal. I worked with some of them after school. But when I had a chance because I was usually you know accompanying someone on the piano. But no that was the worst I have ever seen, I think. And most of the people around they were farmers and quite

well to do in Balmoral with their little school. And there was Finnish people living nearby. And every Saturday night they had a, they had a, they had a weekly bath, you see, in the steam house and everybody would go and get their weekly bath. It—not all of them some had their their own, their own—well they didn't have a bath tub, we didn't have one either. And I wouldn't go, I wouldn't go.

HR: Right.

RM: I had a sponge bath at home with cold water [laughter] I wasn't used to it. I was from a home we had plumbing and everything.

HR: [laughter]

RM: I would never go. Can you see me sitting there in a steam bath with all the parents of my students?

HR: [laughter]

RM: The kids would come next day, "Oh Miss Coletti!" You know, there was no way I would go and have a steam bath. But I would have to—I would work after school every single—nearly every night until 10-11 o'clock at night and I was terrified of the dark anyway. With the coal oil lamp I'd stay—well I had to prepare lessons for, for seven or eight grades.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: Every subject, you can imagine it.

HR: Yeah, no I can't imagine it.

RM: Can't imagine it. Then I would have to carry lots of books home and work again at home with—under a coal oil lamp. I think that's where I ruined my eyes.

HR: Hm.

RM: And it was so cold.

HR: Mm-hmm.

RM: And, and the darker it got the scareder I got. I was scared of the dark anyway.

HR: Where, were you living when you were in...

RM: I was living about a mile or so away from the school. And it was only a few farm houses between the school and where I was living.

HR: Were you boarding with someone?

RM: Boarding with a, a couple. They had no inside plumbing, they had no electricity.

HR: Wow.

HR: And the man was a little bit off and so was his son. I was scared of his son, he was 17, out of schools. He was always playing tricks on me. To the point—one night I was leaving, you know, I was ready to go home and I went in the cloak room, there was no lights in the cloak room in the school, this is Balmoral I'm talking about. And I was just grabbing for my coat I heard this, "Yah!" And here it was this boy and his friend trying to scare me, I almost had a heart attack.

HR: Oh goodness.

RN: I almost had a heart attack. They were waiting for me in the cloakroom in the dark.

HR: And what did you do?

RM: Oh I almost had a heart attack. [laughter]

HR: [laughter]

RM: And I believe in—he had a car, I remember that because he met me at the, at the—well the scariest part was the fact that I got—I had a letter from the inspector there offering me the school. because I wanted a country school. Because I was teaching in Grand Forks before in a, in a city school.

HR: Yes.

RM: I always wanted to teach in the country because I loved Ootishania. I loved the kids there. So I, I was offered this job. Not knowing anything about it. And it was a Mr. Johnson that wrote the letter—or they said I was going to be staying with him and he'd be meeting me at the train station. Of course I, I took the train and they dumped me off at a, a black room—station I guess it would have been the train station, no lights as I recall. And I went in I waited and waited and I was cold and I was getting scared [laughter] and the next thing I knew two young punks came in. I shouldn't say that but that's what they were, and that was the Jackson boy and his friend the one that scared me in the cloakroom. And he announced he's Mr. Johnson. And I was staring at them. They were playing a trick on me.

HR: Oh no.

RM: I was terrified, I'm staying with this young punk. And they were silly, they put—they were really silly him and his friend. And I didn't want to go with them and they said, "Well, you know, we offered you a, we offered you a home and your staying with us." Well what could I do?

HR: So what did you do?

RM: Well I had—they drove me to the house, the farmhouse a few miles away, and of course the real Mr.—father and mother were waiting for me. [laughter].

HR: Ah.

RM: So that was my introduction.

HR: Oh great!

RM: So—and, and his father was as whacky as he was. But the mother was delightful, delightful. But no electricity, no inside plumbing. In the winter I almost froze to death. And I had to walk. The nights my husband didn't take me home in the bus which is—didn't take me home very often because I would work then 'til 10 or 11 o'clock at night. The darker it got the longer I stayed in the classroom. [laughter] And I was scared to death to walk home along that country road, I just didn't know what was going to pick me up or, you know, rape me or whatever. I was just terrified every single night that I walked home.

HR: Gosh.

RM: Now there was only houses set way back from the road, there were none near the road, there was only a few. And there was one area called Cougar Gulch and the kids would come to school and some of them would be shaking and I said, "What's wrong?" "Well we saw a cougar today."

HR: Oh yeah.

RM: And one area—the cougars went through this area of the road that I had to pass every night.

HR: Oh goodness.

RM: I was just scared to death. I never saw a cougar but it was really scary.

HR: But you stayed there for a year?

RM: I stayed there for about—really I had nervous breakdown and I don't know if I stayed out the year. And then I got married after that 'cause you see my husband said he wouldn't pick me up if I didn't marry him. [laughter] He was a bus driver, [laughter] I told people that.

HR: [laughter] So, why—you liked it at Ootishania but you didn't stay there. How come you didn't stay there?
RM: Oh because I was only there for the 3 months. I wanted to—I really don't know. They wanted me to stay but it was difficult because these children couldn't speak English, some of them, and I had never been taught how to teach them.

HR: Right.

RM: So, you know, I sit down or I'd say (inaudible) and they'd say (inaudible) and I'd say, "sit," and they'd say, "sheet." And, you know, it would take you two years to teach them English, some of them.

HR: Yeah.

RM: And I wasn't, I wasn't—I had no training, I didn't have any training in teaching them.

HR: Right.

RM: Very hard to teach the older ones that could speak English, and then try to teach the other, the others and try to teach them school at the same time. But the inspector said if they spend 2, 3 years in the classroom don't worry about it in Grade 1.

HR: I see.

RM: So you know it was a very difficult.

HR: Yeah.

RM: And then I'd go home on weekends and I had to walk a mile to the the main highway, get a bus into Nelson.

HR: Right.

RM: You know, work in the theatre at night in Nelson and then work in my dad's store the next day and part of the time in an office and then work in the theatre again at night. I had three jobs in the weekends.

HR: Right.

RM: Not that we needed the money, I was just a workaholic.

HR: Yeah.

RM: And I loved working. I loved working in the theatre, I met some wonderful people. I did that for even when I was teaching in Kaslo, I still came home and worked on the weekends at home.