

**Oral History Interview with Dr. George Nahrebecky:**  
**Conducted by Bridget Brownlow, February 9**  
Transcription by Alison Froese-Stoddard, May 2013

BB: Ok, so today is the 9th of February, and it's Bridget Brownlow interviewing Dr. George Nahrebecky at Saint Mary's, and we'll begin by saying thank-you, George, for coming. Good day. If we could start by giving me your full name and your place of birth.

GN: George Nahrebecky, born in Montreal.

BB: Born in Montreal, great. And if you could give a brief overview of your educational background.

GN: Oh, St. Pat's, while it still existed here in Halifax...

BB: So you had moved to Halifax from Montreal...

GN: Yes, yes. Well...

BB: Ok.

GN: ...up to ((loud noise)) in Montreal in a Catholic school, uh, boy's only until... Also some Jesuit teachers still in uniform, so to speak.

BB: (laughs)

GN: And then of course, came to St. Pat's and uh, skipped a grade, so I actually wound up here at St. Mary's... I think I was still 15... no more than 16.

BB: (incredulous) You were 15 at Saint Mary's?! Oh my god.

GN: I think, no more than 16, anyway, because I had skipped a grade.

BB: Right.

GN: And my father – the reason we came to Halifax is that my father got a job here at St. Mary's teaching German.

BB: Teaching German. Is your last name German?

GN: No, it's Ukrainian.

BB: It's Ukrainian. Ok. But your father was a language...

GN: Yes.

BB: ...uh, prof in German here.

GN: Yes. And he, so actually I mean... I have a very, very long history with the department because of course he used to come home and tell some stories (laughs) about some of the... 'events' that had taken place

BB: (Laughs) ... You're truly falling in his footsteps!

GN: Yes, yes. (laughs). And of course, he retired and got a full time job here... so yeah.

BB: So, you went to St. Pat's, and then came here to do your undergrad at Saint Mary's?

GN: Yes.

BB: And then where did you go after that for your graduate degree?

GN: I did a Masters at Dal, and a PhD. at Queens.

BB: And a PhD at Queens. Ok. And all in languages.

GN: No. No, actually, I actually got a degree in Political Science. But I had done...

BB: Here at Saint Mary's.

GN: Here at Saint Mary's. But I had done several French courses, and after working some manual jobs for a couple of years my father suggested that maybe I should upgrade my French and perhaps be able to get a job in government.

BB: Right.

GN: I think he had the foreign service in mind in particular. I don't know what that means, exactly...

BB: (laughs)

GN: And I said, Ok. Sold my car, went back for a year of upgrading.

BB: Ok.

GN: I guess I would have been about... probably about 24.

BB: And here at Saint Mary's.

Gn: At Saint Mary's, yes. And I had, as a prof, in his first year here, Paul Bernard.

BB: Did you really?

GN: Still teaching in our department. He'll be retiring in a couple of years. Became a friend.

BB: Isn't that great. OK, so what year was it, your first year when you were 15 or 16, what year did you start at Saint Mary's?

GN: Um, I'm thinking... '69 or '70.

BB: Ok.

GN: I'd have to go back...

BB: So around that time...

GN: Yes, just about the turn of the decade.

BB: And so, let's start with ... What are your memories about the campus in 1969, '70?

GN: Much smaller. Everybody smoked, of course. Far fewer female students. Far fewer.

BB: Would you even noticed their presence? I'm interested in that, in particular. When you first arrived, women had already been here, but for a very short period of time. Did you notice them around? Or did it still... what did it feel like at the time?

GM: Oh no no, we noticed. (laughs) Believe me, we noticed. It's just when I think back, and I see my classes now, and especially in French where female representation is significantly higher than male... I think about some of the courses I was in, where out of say, 20 students, you would maybe have three females.

BB: Right.

GN: I'm just guessing, but you know, it's been awhile. Yeah, far fewer... Well, the campus was smaller, and the first year that I was here I'm pretty sure Father Labelle was still..

BB: Yes, he still would have been president. That would have been his last year.

GN: Exactly.

BB: So were there, do you recall Jesuits running around..

GN: I certainly do. I recall stumbling... at that point, in the South Wing of McNally, there was a wing reserved for the Jesuits.

BB: That's right.

GN: And they were still living there, and I kind of stumbled in, looked around and thought – uh oh! And stumbled right out again.

BB: That's interesting! You're the second person who described that – yesterday in an interview, someone else described... He didn't really know what went on in that South

Wing. But he knew you weren't allowed in there! And the occasional drunk Jesuit would stumble out is what the other oral history interview elicited. It's so interesting!

GN: That, I didn't know. Surprised that anybody... um... Sure. It was the late '60s so you had all that, you know, upheaval. Hippies with long hair...

BB: And what were you like back then?

GN: Oh, I grew my hair long. I worked for the journal, which was a bit of a hotbed of... I don't know if you'd call it radical thought, but it was quite left.

BB: Oh, isn't that fabulous. I mean, I've poured over the journals from all those years. Absolutely.

GN: Did you see the one that was censored? After the, uh.. that was interesting. Yeah, I was around then. Yeah, with the War Measures Act.

BB: Yes!

GN: The majority, I guess, the editorial staff would have been possibly even leaning a little bit to supporting the separatists.

BB: Mmmhmm.

GN: I don't even recall so much.. so uh, But they were very intelligent, intellectual-type kid was the editor, and the assistant editor and so on, they were all... not necessarily all good students, but yeah. Very intelligent.

BB: The quality of the writing, in my opinion, George, is far superior during the years you would have been associated with the journal from what I've read. Say, in the last ten years.

GN: I'm not surprised.

BB: Really high quality writing, interesting stories, more reflective of how active the student body would have been at that time.

GN: Yes.

BB: Some really interesting stuff. Well, this is actually leading me to another question around, part of what I'm looking at is the secularization of the university. How big a deal was that, did people notice, was it... So this would have been right at your time as well. The university became, you know, not associated directly any more with the Catholic church. That happened in 1970. In the journals during that time, save for maybe one or two articles, there was virtually nothing written about that. I'm wondering if you have any memories around that as an issue.

GN: I don't remember it as being an issue. It just happened, you know, and that was that, and I guess the students probably just took it as being a natural progression. Nobody was surprised. The times, they were a' changing...

BB: (Laughs)

GN: You know? So no, I think you're right on with that observation that it wasn't a significant issue.

BB: Some people, in their oral histories, have pointed out that they would have been aware that the board of governors however, although the university became second to the board of governors, still would have been very committed in various ways to upholding Catholic morals and teachings. So there would have been conflict, although the university itself was changing, and still would have been conflict. For example, condom machines in the residences, and people on the board would still have been very upset about things, developments like that. What might or might not have been taught in the classroom would have been concerning, from a Catholic perspective for the Board of Governors. Does that surprise you to hear that, or..?

GN: No, especially insofar as.. I think those were days where there was sort of a polarization where young people were doing their thing, growing their hair long, drugs were coming on the scene and uh, the idea of free love, you know, let's get rid of these taboos, I think it would have been about the time that the Pill came out too as well, right?

BB: Absolutely.

GN: And then, of course, there was always a backlash for the older generation saying you know, you should get your hair cut... what are things coming...

BB: (laughs)

GN: Well, even the music reflects it...

BB: That's right!

GN: ...you know. And there was Woodstock and those kinds of things, so ... I'm not surprised. I didn't actually experience much of that firsthand, probably because I didn't participate in too too many university events. I would just go – the journal was a hang out place.

BB: OK.

GN: So we would just hang out there, you know, have some parties, and so on. Not during the day, we didn't, you know, it was...

BB: You had to work hard to put out those quality newspapers!

GN: Yes, exactly! Well, I remember interviewing, who was the interim president who eventually became mayor of Halifax?

BB: Edmund Morris.

GN: Edmund Morris. I remember ...

BB: He was the first lay...

GN: Yeah, he was. I remember interviewing him.

BB: Do you remember what about?

GN: Oh, just in general. I wasn't...

BB: I think I read that article. I'll dig that up for you. That's coming back tomorrow...

GN: I really didn't do too many, I only did them when I think I was asked because I preferred the photography part of it. But I do remember interviewing him, and I think I was present at the interview when they interviewed the new president.

BB: Carrigan.

GN: Carrigan. And uh, my picture of him is actually in the yearbook. Black and white, of course there was no digital photography, and we had this beautiful darkroom..

BB: Upstairs?

GN: Yeah, on the fifth floor.

BB: Really?

Gn: Yeah, with mice and everything.

BB: (laughs)

GN: They're everywhere! Actually, I fed them. I remember seeing this cute little mouse running around and leaving a cookie for it. Thinking hey, it's not hurting anybody. But it was, it had some sophisticated equipment.

BB: Right. So would you look back at that experience being involved in the journal and whatnot, how do you think about that? A meaningful part of your university time?

GN: Yeah, very much so. I was a little bit reluctant... I was more conservative. I went along to a large extent, these were my friends and I didn't say much, but I was at times less than comfortable with some of the opinions that they were putting out.

BB: Can you think of an example?

GN: Well, I think the FLQ crisis would have been one of them. I don't think I thought it appropriate, given the circumstances that they should uh, put that on the front page. It was made clear that people were very worried about that. There had been an article written at one time that caused a bit of a furour., which was administration as 'pig'... I don't know if you came across that. But anyways, but it was....

BB: I think I have. I'm going to go back and look now.

GN: The journal certainly didn't spare... was not shy about criticising.... Whatever, you know.

BB: In fact around that, you would be interested to know this, someone told me that Henry Labelle would have suffered a lot of criticism, vis-à-vis the journal, and apparently that ended up being quite devastating to him, that he really struggled with how to handle that, and...

GN: Well, I'm not surprised. That rings a bell, now I would have been, again, young and sort of arriving on the scene, probably....

BB: He was on his way out when you..

GN: He was on his way out, I was on my way in, and our paths crossed, but I do recall some... unpleasantness there.

BB: (laughs)

GN: Scathing criticism...

BB: Yes. And I suppose, another participant in the oral histories has pointed out to me that, you know, that was the... it was very difficult from the Jesuits' perspective to be mindful of that, that not only was there this student protest culture, but that they had been so accustomed to lay out direction, you know, so it was extra rebellious, if you may, and their vision of how students should be interacting, behaving, and yeah.

GN: Yeah, I can see that. Yeah, absolutely. Sure, somewhat shocking, you know, the social developments, you know, by extension what was happening on the campus.

BB: Yes. Now, do you have any recollections of any interactions with Mount Saint Vincent?

GN: No. I remember a big event used to be dances at King's. And I don't remember... They certainly wouldn't have been a weekly affair, probably held once a month or something like that. And they would have been held in the gym, which was packed. That would have been known by the different campuses, and our students would have gone there as well. I didn't, but....

BB: What were those dances like?

GN: Uh, a lot of fun!

BB: (laughs)

GN: A lot of fun, and I don't recall people worrying about... you know, people drank and the rest of it, but I don't recall every having to worry about violence..

BB: Right.

GN: I don't remember anything like that.

BB: Would you have had live bands, and things like that?

GN: Yes.

BB: Yeah. The overwhelming recollections from people around all these years is - a lot of fun.

GN: A lot of fun. Absolutely right.

BB: What an exciting time.

GN: At the same time, it was carefree,

BB: No AIDS, no...

GN: No! There wasn't very much. Also, there wasn't the anxiety about marks, and you know, if you failed, well - which I did - I failed three courses in the first year...

BB: You were so young.

GN: ...because I didn't do anything. Plus I had gone into, for some reason, gone into science, thinking, man, that sounds interesting, maybe where the drugs are, and I wasn't very good at that... (laughs)

BB: (Laughs) Well, look at you now, Ph.D. !

GN: But it was, I mean, I certainly get the impression that the younger generation now isn't having nearly as good a time as we did. I mean, it was carefree. There were jobs...

BB: That's right.

GN: There were make-work projects left, right, and centre, and as a matter of fact, when I graduated, I went straight into one, and it was common knowledge that you weren't going to do a heck of a lot. And it was going to be an 8-week project, so you could go on unemployment. And it was organized and sponsored by the government. Supplying services.

BB: Right, right.

GN: You know? So yeah, nobody seemed in particular to be worrying about too much.

BB: The types of pressures like that...

GN: Besides, the usual heartbreak, and that kind of thing... but everybody seemed to be having a really good time. Very carefree.

BB: Lovely. Really, to be able to have those memories of that experience. For sure.

GN: And even when I came back a few years later, things still seemed to be pretty laid back.

BB: Anything in particular that you can recall about when you returned when you were 24?

GN: Um... yes. I was actually – I started working. Before I didn't need to. Somehow or another, I stumbled through and I guess I had the smarts to be able to pass without having much work. Then I started working, and wound up in upper level French courses. My impression was, I think that the students had matured... some.

BB: And you had matured...

GN: And I had matured. Yeah.

BB: So it didn't seem as wild to you? I mean, still carefree but not as wild.

GN: Yeah. And of course by that time I was associating with the older students, who were in their 20s...

BB: Right. So this would have been '74, '75, around there....

GN: I'm thinking '75.

BB: Yeah.

GN: '75, '76.

BB: OK. Anything else you can remember that stands out for you? Either time of your time at St. Mary's.

GN: Just anecdotes?

BB: Yeah, anecdotes. Any anecdotes, any...

GN: Oh yeah, I remember this philosophy class, falling asleep, and the bell would ring, in those days. It was a big classroom in McNally, and at the change of classes, the bell would go off just like in high school. And I remember falling asleep, and of course – you know how that goes, you pretend that you're not, by putting your hand over your forehead, and pretending to be really absorbed in the book, you know, and meanwhile, you'd be dropping off. We had done a fair bit of partying in those days, and uh – it was deathly boring, this philosophy class. I just heard, as I was dropping off, "What can you tell me about Hegel?" Philosopher, whatever... There was a pause, and obviously he saw me keeling over, and he said, "George!" So I snapped to, and just heard that, and said, "What would you like to know?" (laughs). And he laughed, and the bell rang, and I remember him saying, "Saved by the bell!"

BB: (laughs) That's right! Totally saved by the bell!

GN: There wasn't too much. Of course, we were all skipping at the bottom of the classes.

BB: Right, yes.

GN: All of us were. Sometimes we'd go, sometimes we wouldn't. I was in an interesting position, because I knew some of the profs through my father.

BB: Right, of course. Was that more pressure for you?

GN: You didn't really have pressure then. Honestly...

BB: Did you live at home?

GN: Yes.

BB: Ok.

GN: I lived at home, I paid half tuition, the regular tuition at the time was around 700 and some odd dollars. So I paid 300 or so, well I didn't - my father coughed it up. But you know, stuff will probably come back to me, and I'll share it with you.

BB: That would be great. No, this was so wonderful. You've given me a wonderful insight. And your time with the journal... all of this is very relevant. As I move forward, and will be looking again at the written documentation, vis-à-vis the journals, I may come back to you and ask you some specific things...

GN: Sure. And if something does come back, which it will...

BB: That would be great.

GN: ... I'll jot it down, and you know, we can meet again.

BB: That's fabulous. Thank you very much.

GN: You're welcome.

BB: That's absolutely wonderful.