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Edward Roybal

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Edward Roybal (1916-)
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: Bicentennial
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

U. S. Congressman from the 25th District in California.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; early stages of political life; early years of the Community Service Organization; poverty during his youth; effects of World War II on Chicanos.

45 minutes.
20 pages.

BICENTENNIAL

M: This is an oral history interview with Congressman Edward Roybal of the 25th District in California, the 23rd day of October, 1975, Washington, D.C. Conducting the interview is Oscar Martínez.

Congressman, first can you tell me where and when you were born, sir?

R: I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on February 10th, 1916. I was born in a barrio called Varelas, which is still the same-- it hasn't improved any. In fact, it's even poorer than it was when I was born, and it was poor enough then.

M: Could you give me a little bit of background on your parents and your grandparents?

R: My grandparents are both from New Mexico. We cannot trace our background any place else but the state of New Mexico. My grandfather on my mother's side was born in Belén; on my father's side in Santa Fe. His father, who was my great-grandfather, was also born in Santa Fe and they went to Pecos, New Mexico, when they were both young. They were farmers. My grandfather on my mother's side was a carpenter and lived in Albuquerque most of his life. We came to the state of California during the railroad strike. My father was a cabinet maker, or worked in the railroads at the time, and the strike, as you know, was lost. He came to Los Angeles because he didn't want to cross a picket line; he didn't want to be a scab, and I don't blame him. So our life started then in Los Angeles and I was just 4 or 5 years old at the time. So I lived most of my life in Los Angeles.

M: In Boyle Heights?

R: In Boyle Heights. I still have a residence in Boyle Heights.

M: You went to elementary and high school there?

R: [Yes, elementary and high school.] I went to a school called Soto Street School first and then from there I went to Euclid. When I went to Soto Street School I didn't speak a word of English. I went into the first grade and, of course, I could not communicate with the teachers and the teachers could not communicate with me. It was quite a difficult problem and I suppose that is why I became so interested and became the author of the Bilingual Education Act. If we had had bilingual education at that time I think the progress that I and others would have made would have been much greater. From Soto Street School I went to Euclid and then to Hollenbeck Junior High School, and then to Roosevelt High School. I graduated from there in 1934.

M: Could you tell me events, experiences, or incidents that stand out from your elementary through high school years?

R: Well, one incident is the fact of not being able to speak English. But being the son of a carpenter, a cabinet maker, I was taught by my father to add, to use a ruler, and I happened to be just a little bit better than others. In those grades we were adding 3 and 2, and 4 and 7, and so forth. One day the teacher caught me mumbling and she wanted to know what I was saying. When I tried to tell her she tried to force me to say it in English. Well, that was an impossibility. The result was that instead of being the first in the class, because of the fact that I was prohibited from using Spanish, I was the last. We could not use Spanish on the playground

nor in the classroom. Then when the time came for me to try to prepare to go to a university, one of the prerequisites was that I had to have a foreign language; so the foreign language that I took was Spanish. Now, educators at that time were not as educated as the educators are today. This idea of forcing the youngster to speak only English and forget the language of the home is probably the biggest mistake that this country has ever made. We are remedying that situation on the Bilingual Education Act, for example. Forty-two languages are used as a vehicle for the teaching of English, which means that these youngsters, now, will be able to speak at least two languages and will be able to compete with some of the Europeans who speak three and four languages by the time they get out of high school. So that is one of the things that stands out-- the discrimination that existed at that time, simply because we spoke Spanish. That remains as a scar with an individual and you cannot forget the fact that our background and our culture was belittled by the mere fact that we were prohibited from speaking Spanish. So, that is one of the things that stands out during my years [of school], of at least trying to get started perhaps in the field that I'm in now. I never had any intention, of course. That happened entirely differently. But it was an experience that I think has given me a broader insight into the real needs of ethnic groups throughout the country.

M: What about in high school, Congressman? Are there any incidents that stand out?

R: In high school I was quite active in athletics. I was a track man and participated mostly in track. But I was never able to train

with the team because I had a job in the mornings delivering papers, getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning; and then had a job after school. So my training was the bicycle in the morning. Again, we had quite a situation with regard to the Spanish-speaking. Boyle Heights at that particular time was about 75% Jewish. The Spanish-speaking community was relatively small. There were some Japanese, practically no Black students--two or three perhaps. It wasn't the community that it is today, so the matter of discrimination even in the schools was something that was subtle; but nevertheless, one could feel it. I felt at the time there was no effort on the part of the educators to try to get any of the Spanish-speaking students to a college. In fact, I was counselled to become an electrician simply because I got an "A" in Algebra. That was the reason. The other reason was that I was the oldest in the family and I couldn't go to college anyway and if I did I wouldn't have much of a chance for success anyway, because I was thinking at that time of preparing for the accounting field. I finally did go into accounting and from accounting to social work, from social work to the field of politics.

M: When you were a child, do you remember thinking about what you wanted to become when you grew up?

R: Yes, I wanted to become an accountant when I was a child.

M: Through high school you still had those same goals?

R: I still had those same goals. However, we had a most difficult time because of the size of the family, because of the Depression and so forth, really making the proper preparations; so the dream did not become a reality. My dream was that I would become a Certified

Public Accountant and then after that I would go to a law school and become a lawyer, and concentrate then on tax problems [and] on things that I felt, at that time, were important. While I do not belittle that thinking at this time, I think that it's most important that I did change and went into the field of politics, where the legislation that I have presented and the legislation that has passed has benefited more people than any accounting that I would have done for anybody any place.

M: Were your thoughts on what you wanted to do--to become an accountant--atypical for the goals that other Mexican American youngsters like yourself were setting for themselves at that time?

R: Oh yes, most definitely. In fact, it was most difficult for anyone who could get good grades to be in the "in" with the Spanish-speaking group. In order for us to be "in" we had to be around a "C" student. There were many times when we knew we could do a lot better and could become "A" students and do the work that was necessary to get those "As." We neglected it simply because of the attitude that existed not only on the part of [the] Spanish-speaking, but also on the part of the educators of the time. I just felt [at that time] that they were not really interested in having a Spanish-speaking person become an all-"A" student. For example, in the field of track... I wasn't an excellent athlete but I was the best they had. And I still don't remember a coach actually sitting down with me and encouraging me--telling me that I could win the game or giving me pointers as to what I could do to improve my stride. But I remember that same coach doing that with many others that I used to beat every week.

M: What did you run, Congressman?

R: My main race was the quarter mile; I ran, also, the hurdles. As you know, in the quarter mile the matter of stride, rhythm, and so forth is most important. Well, I don't remember coach ever sitting down and talking to me about my rhythm--how I could improve it--anything about my wind. I could see the difference in the way I was treated with that of the Anglo who was beaten by me every week. That, now that I think back to it, was a form of subtle discrimination that, again, is hard for a young boy to understand.

M: Did you feel a strong need to achieve at that time?

R: Oh yes, most definitely.

M: To what source do you trace the origin of this feeling?

R: I think poverty more than anything else. I grew up, as I've said, in these areas. I come from a large family. We went through a Depression. I had to work during the time that my father was ill because he would not accept relief. It was this poverty atmosphere that we grew in, I think, that provided the drive that was necessary to achieve certain things. I did not achieve everything I wanted to and everything that I felt that I could have. On the other hand, going into the field of politics, I have made available opportunities for others. I feel that the one job that I have is not to do something for people, but to make it possible for people to do something for themselves. That is what I strive to do. I don't want anyone to do anything for me and I don't know of anyone that wants anybody to do anything for them--that is, anybody worth their salt. So, my philosophy is that if I can do something that will open up opportunities for individuals and give them a chance to do something for themselves, that is the best service that can be performed. That

way we will not be dependent upon someone else, but be able to develop the expertise that is needed in our community to lift the community from our bootstraps, so to speak, into a higher economic and educational level.

M: Congressman, you mentioned poverty in your own family's case. Do you remember poverty being a concern of yours as a youth? Do you remember noticing differences of wealth between different groups?

R: Oh yes, definitely. I remember, for an example, having to eat turnips three times a day and going to the market to pick them up simply because that's all we had to eat. I remember also some of our neighbors were not all Mexican Americans at that time, a few percentage, and I remember the aroma of broiled steaks which we never had. Now, these are some of the things that one thinks about later but, nevertheless, they remain in your mind.

M: Do you remember having any feelings toward the people who enjoyed this standard of living as opposed to the many who did not have very much?

R: No. I had no feeling. I always felt that if they could do it, then it would be possible for us to do it. But never any envy of any kind. I suppose that was due to my mother's influence, perhaps my dad but mostly my mother. She used to tell us that anything was possible and that if you belittled the success of others you are hampering the chances of your own success. So, in order for yourself to be successful you have to applaud your brother's success in order to really enjoy your own. This was kind of a philosophy that she had and she constantly talked about it. It reminds me very much

of the creed of one of the service clubs--her philosophy was pretty much patterned after that.

M: Any feelings about the class structure, though, in the United States, other than an identification of people who had something, having accomplished it themselves, raising themselves by their own bootstraps as opposed to other people who inherit wealth or were born into it?

R: I don't understand what you mean by "feeling."

M: Thoughts, ideas that you or anybody else in the community may have had about the position of the Mexican American community, the people who lived there, who suffered as a result of occupying that bottom layer in the society as opposed to the ones who were higher.

R: First of all, we did have a great deal of pride in our family, which is something that I think was unique. It's still unique on the part of the Mexican American community throughout the United States. You don't find that kind of pride in all ethnic groups; fortunately you find it in ours. It was something then that gave strength to one's belief that there was something beyond the so-called poverty atmosphere. Even though there was a great deal of struggle that had to go on before we got out of it and a great deal of suffering, we still looked beyond the point which we were in, looking forward at all times to better days. This is what I mean about the matter of the discrimination. First of all, [there] existed the pride in the home and then our ultimate desire to do something about it [discrimination]. There were many instances in the Boyle Heights area [when] we were children. For an example, when Evergreen Playground was open they wouldn't permit a Mexican American student to go bathing except on a Tuesday. There was a barber shop that's still there; it was called the "Leader Barber Shop." It's on Brooklyn

and Soto. [The barber shop] wouldn't cut a Mexican's hair. I, for an example, went to get my hair cut there. I saved money to do it because this was more or less a status symbol, getting your hair cut at the Leader Barber Shop. [I] was told that I had to have an appointment. When I tried to make an appointment, they wouldn't give it to me. I argued and finally they told me that they would cut my hair but they'd have to throw the comb away after they did so. Well, this was right in the Boyle Heights area. Now, coming from that particular atmosphere in which you had to go through this struggle--going back to the home and feeling this great family pride, the togetherness of the family--and then trying to look to the future was a most difficult thing, because the obstacles were too great. But, nevertheless, that drive, I think, comes about because of the cohesiveness of the family and because one helped the other in this particular struggle, and because one is so understanding about the things that I have described with regard to discrimination. They understand how one feels; one goes home and tells the family about this, and then the encouragement that comes at the dinner table gives us all kinds of things: "This people are just ignorant people. We were here before the Pilgrims landed. We have as much right to the United States as they have and perhaps even more, and eventually through education we will be able to have them understand that this right is an equal right." All these things that go on in a family--I think they go on in every family in different ways. I think it was really the background that has made it possible not only for me, but for other Mexican Americans, to acquire some measure of success.

M: Congressman, when did you first become a politically aware person?

R: I've always been a politically aware person. I was always interested in reading about Senator Dennis Chávez, for an example. At that time he was a member of Congress. I was interested in reading about some of the politicians of the state of New Mexico. I was interested in voting. But I think that the Roosevelt era really made me a Democrat. I remember the suffering under the Hoover administration and then I remember that we were losing our home, for an example. I remember that during the Roosevelt administration they passed a homeowner's loan corporation that made it possible for us to keep our home. My father was, at that time, able to get work-- WPA or whatever it was. But nevertheless it turned the situation completely and I became more interested in the political process as a result. I was never one that intended to run for any office. I felt that that was the job of someone else. I went into the accounting field and I was the cost accountant for Mission Dry Corporation. [I] became interested in the health field. I applied for a job and was given a job without having had any training in health, but was given a three-month refresher course--a seminar course they called it--and prepared for the field of health education. I became the Director of Health Education for the California Tuberculosis Association and worked in that field for nine years. The way I went into politics was that I had established a group of advisors made up of doctors and professional people who would advise me as to the problems of the community [and] how to tackle them, but primarily how to organize the community for health work.

Well, these advisors at one time happened to be active in the Roosevelt campaign. They had \$250 left in the treasury. They decided that they were going to ask some young fellow to run against an incumbent City Councilman. They went down the list and I suppose they found no one else so they asked me. I turned it down, but the man who was the head, Frank Faust, had helped me quite a bit. I had helped produce motion pictures in Spanish in the health field on tuberculosis and venereal disease, and I was able to show these motion pictures in every one of his theaters. He controlled every Spanish language theater in the United States. So, I was known, really, not only in the state of California, but in Arizona and in New Mexico and in Texas--wherever they had a Spanish language motion picture house. I became a success because of that and he knew it. So when I turned it down he told me in no uncertain terms that if I didn't run I could just forget about showing any of my "propaganda" in any of his motion picture houses. He called my boss in San Francisco and told him that. My boss immediately called me. He summoned me to go before the Board, and said that in order for the organization to continue to have that kind of community support, that I had to run. I got a leave of absence and I ran. I was defeated in the primaries for the nomination by 370 votes. Then I asked the organization to assign me to Los Angeles only because I had the whole state. I used to go up and down the state of California. I told them, "Since you got me into this now you must assign me only to Los Angeles County," which they did. My campaign committee became the Community Service Organization.

M: That was the origin of the CSO?

R: Yes. My campaign committee became the Community Service Organization; I organized it. Then four to six months later we got the help of Fred Ross, who was really responsible for the development of the CSO the way it is today. But the start was my campaign committee. The first thing that the CSO did was to conclude that it was not going to be a political organization, that it was not going to make any endorsements, that they were only going to endorse issues. It was a most successful venture. We had an average of 450 people coming to every meeting every week. We had committees all over, fighting different causes. We registered and ended up with a net of over 11,000 people. Incidentally, we're talking about Spanish-speaking people now, so you can just imagine how many people we had to register in the Boyle Heights area where the Spanish-speaking population was only 20%, to get 11,000. So these 11,000 people, then, were contacted and gotten to the polls, and that's how I got elected. Because of that organization, we fought many causes. For an example, we were able to change the Captain of the Police Department in the Boyle Heights area and we were able to stop the obnoxious treatment of young men who were thrown up against the car. Policemen would go through their pockets and it was quite an embarrassment with their hands up in the air. That we were able to change. We were also able to get the Police Commission to accept our recommendation that all people in the Police Academy be given a seminar course on the problems of minority groups-- take them into the Boyle Heights area and show them what the situation was to try to give them an understanding of what they would be facing if they went into that area. Well, that was carried

on for a year until Chief Parker, after having promised that he would continue it, actually discontinued it. The CSO was also responsible for one other thing that I think is most important. Many people don't know [about it]. I went out purposely to try to buy a house at the real estate office located on the corner of Beverly Boulevard and Atlantic Avenue in East Los Angeles. I went into the office, told them that I wanted a house by a certain number because at that time all that area was being developed with new houses. I gave the man a check for \$250 which, incidentally, I didn't have in the bank, but nevertheless took a chance. He, in an embarrassed way, told me that it wasn't his fault but he couldn't sell to a Mexican. I took my card out and gave it to him. I was already a member of the Los Angeles City Council-- this was the first week that I served as a member of the City Council. I gave him my card and walked to my car. By the time I got to my car, which took maybe thirty seconds, he was right behind me and said, "I can sell to you because you're different." Well, you can just imagine what I told him in a most polite manner.

M: What did you say, sir?

R: I don't think that that is important to this conversation, but I tried to be as much a gentleman as possible. But I went back to the Los Angeles City Council and reported this incident. That got publicity, I think, in every major newspaper in the United States--that a GI had been refused GI housing in the city of Los Angeles. That, then, forced these people to sit down and negotiate with us, and they opened up the project so that Mexican Americans were sold housing. The same thing was true in Montebello and in

Monterrey Park. Again, we went through the same process and were able to change things in those areas where one could not buy a home unless he were either Spanish or Italian or Argentine. But if you said that you were of Mexican descent or looked like a Mexican, like I do for an example, [you] could not buy a home in those areas during that time. The CSO was responsible for that change. So, these are some of the original struggles that went along with my election. With the help that we got from the people who were involved, we were able to effectuate changes that today are taken for granted by many individuals. I am sure that there are many who live in this area today that never know such a struggle ever went on.

M: What were some of the major obstacles that you faced from the majority community in trying to organize around these issues, in trying to get yourself elected, and what were some of the obstacles in the Mexican community that CSO faced?

R: Well, first of all, we'll take the obstacles in the so-called dominant community, and there were none because it was one of complete indifference. They thought we would never be able to do anything. They never did anything to help us and, consequently, [they] generated an atmosphere of complete indifference and let us go about our business. Within the Mexican American community the motivation, I think, came from the fact that most of those who organized CSO were World War II veterans. We knew that we were equal in the battlefield--that we had all of Europe and all of the Pacific in which to die--but we seemed not to have a place at home in which to live in peace, in which to have equality in

employment and so forth. It was because of that particular situation that the CSO became a reality. These people [were] fighting for some of these rights that we had already fought for and actually were gained in the battlefield by some of those in our own family who gave their life in Europe and in the Pacific. So, that came about, as I say, because of this motivation. Now, looking at this thing from the standpoint of the overall Spanish-speaking community and leaving out those who were not World War veterans, I would say that there was a very sympathetic attitude. The attitude [~~was~~], "Well, let's see if we can't do something." I don't think that that same attitude prevailed during the '60s and it may not even prevail today. Fighting for issues means unity, and you can't fight for an issue if there is disunity within your ranks. I think that there was a great deal of unity when the CSO was organized. I don't think that there's another organization that has accomplished as much in the field of civic awakening as the CSO has; again, it would mean being traced back to that spirit of unity that existed. I don't know what will ultimately happen with the community, but I see a situation today where the community has not made the advancement in the same pace with which we started back in the old CSO days. Had we kept up that pace, I think we'd be farther ahead than we are today. But there are envidias; there are jealousies, of course, as I've said, within the community. There was a struggle for recognition; the fight over federal funds. Many of these things I think have hampered this progress. What has hampered the progress, mostly, has been the lack of unity; that did not exist at [that] time. When I

ran for the City Council I was the only Mexican American running. Now, if someone runs for anything, there are four and five. We still don't realize that we cannot divide our community five ways and expect to win. We have to be behind one candidate, behind one issue, behind one thing at a time. Once we have accomplished that, then we go to the next thing. So, the general spirit of cooperation and brotherhood that existed at that time, I think, made the CSO a forward-looking organization that did accomplish a great deal.

M: Would you say, Congressman, that one factor of why you were the only candidate when you ran as opposed to many candidates running in recent years in different elections, was that back then there were fewer qualified Mexican Americans because few people at that time from our community went on to get an education?

R: That isn't so because there were others that ran at that particular time. I was not the only one that ran for office. Eduardo Quevedo had run once or twice before. Other Mexican Americans had run for office before. They were the only ones that ran, and at that time there were other people who were qualified to run. The matter of qualification is nothing that has happened just now; we've had qualified people in our community right along. The thing is that there wasn't that motivation on the part of the community. Now, you don't see other ethnic groups running their qualified people against one another. There's at least some means of control. So, I think we have to develop that. We do have more qualified people than we had before because more people have gone through college, and there are more opportunities that are made available now than we've ever had before. These

opportunities have been made available through various means. For example, they're made available here through Washington with the federal funds that are being spent all over the country, bilingual education being one, the scholarships, the monies that are being spent in Los Angeles at the present time with CETA, with revenue sharing--most of this comes from the federal government, not from the city of Los Angeles or from the state of California. So, opportunities have been made available. We must admit that we are more qualified people, but because we are qualified, because we have more people who are better educated, this is why we should sit down and develop a logical plan for advancement; and this is what we haven't done. Now, I am planning such a program with others. We will be meeting here in Washington in another two weeks with a group of elected officials from throughout the United States to formulate such a program on a national basis. I'm hoping that if we start it from this area or angle, we can get it down in the community. I've already tried it in the community; I've tried it on two occasions, three perhaps, where I got these candidates together, told them what the political realities were in their district, the votes. On one particular instance there were five of them running against one another. I was told by each one of them that they had a mandate from the people and therefore they were going to run. And that same evening there was a rally at the local high school and one of them got up and said that I had called that meeting and the reason that I'd called the meeting was because I was jealous, that I didn't want another Mexican American to be elected to office. That is perhaps the most ridiculous statement that

has ever been made, because the more Mexican Americans that are in office the easier my job is. I can then be referring people to them. If they're in the City Council, my office doesn't have to take care of the problems that our people have in the city; I could refer them to a City Councilman, for an example, as I do now refer some of these problems to some of the Assemblymen that we have, the Senator that we have. Before they were elected, I had to do it all. So, the more people of Mexican descent that we have elected, the better we can distribute our responsibilities and the more each one of us can do for the community from the standpoint of giving direction to the community. I still believe that it is not anyone's job to do anything for someone, but to make it possible for them to do something for themselves--to direct them, to give them guidance, to give them advice, and then give them the help that is necessary--so that whatever they want to accomplish, they can accomplish with our full cooperation.

M: Are you optimistic about this up-coming meeting that you're organizing?

R: I'm optimistic about the success of the meeting, looking into the future. The only thing that will make this projected plan a success would be money. By that I mean that we have to raise sufficient funds to provide the staff that is necessary to make it work. Now, the CSO was successful because it had a staff, and the staff monies, incidentally, did not come from the community, but it came from the Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago.

That was the seed money. Then we were able to get money from business interests in Los Angeles. The same thing can be done in this particular instance. We can get the funds that are necessary to provide the staff so that we can become a self-sustaining organization. It will be an organization that will, I think, provide a means of political communication throughout the United States. This organization is going to be made up of Democrats, and I suppose that the Republicans eventually can get theirs. But since I am a Democrat I'm interested only in what the Democratic party has or has not done. It is going to be the purpose of this group to see to it that we get full cooperation and are able to participate fully in the Democratic party process.

M: Congressman, what effect did World War II have on Chicanos who came back from that conflict into the communities and started working for the betterment of these communities?

R: Well, unfortunately, I have to give a lot of credit to World War II from that standpoint. Had World War II not taken place, we wouldn't have the advances that we have today. I say that because the man who went from the barrio to the Army and to the ~~Armed~~ Forces as a whole, found that he was equal on the battlefield--getting more Congressional Medals of Honor, for instance, than any other ethnic group in the United States. The record that was set up at Bataan by a Spanish-speaking group--the Infantry from the state of New Mexico, for an example--was excellent. It's still a historical fact that it was the entire regiment that went down finally in Bataan and Corregidor--the heroic stand that they took--followed then by actions of the same

kind on the part of Mexican Americans in Europe and in the Pacific. All of that provided the basis that made possible a change. In other words, when we came back we said, "If we were equal on the battlefield, why can we not be equal here? Why can we not buy a home? Why can we not have the same opportunities in education, the same opportunities in everything else? This is our country. We already lost our brothers." I lost two, for an example. "We've already given this." I think that this is what awakened us more to the fact that we had to fight for these things and anything else. Well, fighting wasn't new. We had to fight in the barrio. We fought again in the battlefields. But coming back to fight in the political arena was just something that was more or less an old hat; but we had to reassess our values. We had to look over our techniques and so forth and to look towards new objectives. That's what happened in so far as World War II is concerned. And I say it's unfortunate that it took a war to finally get us to come to that realization. I don't know of anything that did come out of that war that was good; but if there is, I can point to this as being the only thing that was good out of war. I'm very much against war, incidentally. I continuously vote against war and I think that war is probably the most foolish thing that human mankind has ever developed-- assinine, stupid. I sincerely hope that we don't enter into another conflict any place else in the world.

M: Thank you very much for your time, Congressman Roybal.