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Jakubovitz, Bruce

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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Sophia Maier: If you just want to start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

Bruce Jacobovitz: So my parents got married in 1949. My parents were both born in the Bronx, so they ended up there because that's where they're coming from. But they're both born in the Bronx, my dad right near the Fordham campus. And my mom, she was an uptown girl. She was like by Mosholu Parkway, that area.

SM: And were their parents born in the United States or abroad?

BJ: Let's see. No, my dad's parents immigrated from Hungary, like early, 1920 there about. So way before the Second War, right after the first one. My mom's parents, one was from Lithuania, one was from Poland. So yeah, how they ended up in the Bronx, I don't know. Probably it was just a Jewish area. So my parents are both born in the Bronx, married in '49, moved into a building in '50, East 191 Street. That was the building that they lived in their entire married life in the Bronx, because they got married in '49 --- I'm one of four, I've got three sisters, two older one younger. My oldest sister was born in '51. And they had a one bedroom apartment then. My second oldest sister was born in '53, they moved to a two bedroom apartment. I was born in '56, they moved to a three bedroom apartment. My youngest sister was born in 1960 --- there were no four bedroom apartment --- so we all lived in the three bedroom apartment. And they lived there until I think '77, when they finally moved out of the Bronx and into the city. So always in that same building, just moving to bigger apartment as kids came along.

SM: And so what was the apartment and the area like? Was it a predominantly Jewish area?

BJ: Beautiful. It was a mixture. You know, I had friends who were Irish, Italian, and Jewish. And we were right across the street from a park called St. James Park. And 191 Street was only one block long, it was between Morris and Creston Avenues, so we had very little traffic, so we'd play in the street. And we were right across the street from the park. So if we had a bigger crowd --- everything depending on what kids come out of the school --- so you'd meet on the stoop. The stoop was literally --- I'm looking around for one, but they don't have them anymore.

SM: Not around here, but I'm familiar with the stoop.

BJ: These days, the stoop has little spikes on it, so you can't sit there anymore. But back then the stoop is where you met your friends, you hung out after school. And depending on how many kids you had, you'd either be playing touch football on the street --- if they're only a few of you --- or you'd go in the park and play baseball --- if you had enough of you. And everything revolved around the neighborhood.

You know, Italian friends Neil Crespo, Joey Pacico. Irish friends, Rory, I'm trying to think of what Rory's last name was. I can't remember. That was quick. *food arrives*

BJ: So everything revolved around being on the stoop and hanging out in the neighborhood. And there were --- you know, our world was Jewish, because we'd go to synagogue every Saturday morning. I grew up in what was kind of seen as an Orthodox home, not compared to what you see on the streets of Brooklyn today. But Friday night was Shabbat and we were in, and Saturday morning was always services. And Sunday afternoon, I could go out and play with my friends.

SM: But did you keep kosher?

BJ: We kept kosher, still do. I mean, some people wouldn't eat in a restaurant like this because they would say these plates had something else on it, but I'm not that person. So our world was Jewish because of that, but the friends in the neighborhood were everything. Mostly Irish, Italian, Jewish. Those are the three categories.

SM: And were there ever any tensions between the different groups?

BJ: Nah. Because we didn't really know. We were playing together, we were friends, we weren't involved in that. We knew that they celebrated Christmas, they knew we celebrated Hanukkah, because those are probably the most visible holidays. But there was no tension of any kind. It just wasn't an issue. So we'd hang out, we'd be in the neighborhood, we'd go to movies together. We'd play ball, all built around the building.

SM: And so what kind of, I guess, like shops or other amenities? Like you said you went to the movies. What other kinds of things?

BJ: Well, the big draw in the neighborhood was Alexander's. Alexander's was a giant building, right on Fordham and the Concourse. And that was where everybody shopped. The other place --- that wasn't drawn to me, but my mom and sisters --- was Loehmann's. Loehmann's was a famous store. Until a few years ago, there was one in White Plains. It finally closed. Loehmann's, apparently, I mean, my wife remember shopping in Loehmann's on Long Island.

SM Yeah, I was gonna say, I know it's a chain, but I didn't know it existed anymore. I know it mostly from The Nanny.

BJ: It's gone now, but it was a very popular woman's clothing store. So Alexander's, Loehmann's. The pizza joint, the coffee shop. There was a kosher deli on 188, maybe, and Creston. Clara's --- what we'd call a bodega --- but back then it was this little white haired lady named Clara who would make the best egg creams. We would always go there, 15 cents for an egg cream. And also 15 cents for three pretzel

rods, which was a good treat. So for 30 cents, you had a meal basically, egg cream and pretzels. It was wonderful. And then we'd play ball. There was a church on 190 and Jerome, and they had a gym with basketball court. They let us in to play there all the time. Nothing organized, but it was great.

SM: Okay, so what did your parents do for a living?

BJ: So my dad was in real estate. He was trained as an appraiser, but he also would buy apartment buildings. So I guess he was also a landlord.

SM: And did he have any college education?

BJ: Yeah, he went to NYU, got his degree from there. He went to what was then called NYU School of Commerce, which today I think is Stern --- not Stern College, but Stern Business School at NYU. And my mom went to Queens College. Well, so my mom went to High School of Music and Art, which one of the specialized schools in the city. I don't think exists anymore, I think it's called something else.

SM: Yeah, I think so.

BJ: Performing arts or something like that. And my dad went to Bronx Science. I went to Bronx Science, one of my sisters went to Bronx Science. But yeah, he was an NYU grad. She was a Queens College grad. And they met because their mothers set them up.

SM: Did she work once she married your dad?

BJ: No. She was --- it's a very unpopular term today --- she'd be called a housewife, but you can never use that term anymore.

SM: A stay at home mom.

BJ: Yeah. She was very active in volunteer stuff. She worked for League of Women Voters. She was the president of the Parents' Association of Bronx Science, involved in all kinds of charities, but didn't work for a living.

SM: And so, in regards to your sisters, were they encouraged to kind of get a college education and get a job as well, or were they more encouraged to kind of follow the path of your mom?

BJ: That's a great question. They all went to college. They all graduated, and they had jobs of various types. Two of them were teachers. One, like a nursery school teacher, and one a special ed teacher. But we were a very traditional family. My dad was very traditional. These days you'd call him a misogynist

I guess. But he strongly believed that their purpose was to get married and have babies. And so teaching was fine.

SM: That's an okay career.

BJ: But yeah, they definitely were never encouraged to go out and --- it was get married, have kids, raise Jewish kids.

SM: And, you know, it's funny, because I ask that kind of question about different standards. And it's interesting, because a lot of people are like --- I don't know, it doesn't conflict so much in the Jewish mindset, the fact that women are encouraged to be educated, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they should be like working outside of the home. Like it kind of made sense that they were still supposed to be, you know, thoughtful, but not necessarily, you know.

SM: Because in traditional Jewish upbringing, the woman is in charge of the upbringing. And it's an important job. And I think one of the problems that the religion has --- and this is getting a little off topic --- but one of the problems the religions has is it's perceived as being very sexist, misogynistic. And it really isn't. Like, people get hung up on the fact that men could count that towards a *minyan* and women don't. Women are offended by that. But that's because they don't understand the obligation to pray is on men as a way to regulate men. Seriously, three times a day, people gotta go for morning prayers, afternoon, evening, as a way to regulate men and keep them sort of under control. Women have the more important job of continuing the Jewish religion by bringing the children up. We need the women. The reason that's given for the Jews being saved from slavery in Egypt is that the women preserved the religion. Women kept the Hebrew language. Women didn't give up their Hebrew names, women didn't intermarry like the men did. So, it's probably because we live in a male dominated society --- well, we always have any way, it's change obviously --- so men had the better PR, whatever you want to call it. But women are the reason Judaism has survived hundreds of years.

SM: I believe it.

BJ: So women get hung up on the idea that they can't count as a *minyan*, so what? That's not a great honor.

SM: Yeah. So a little more about, I guess, your school experiences. So are there any experiences from public school or junior high school that really stand out to you?

BJ: The biggest one is switching from private school --- where I was for elementary school --- to Bronx Science --- which is a public school. My parents sent all four of us to yeshiva. Again, not like the kind you see in Brooklyn, but there's a school called Ramaz in Manhattan, which is a Jewish Day School. Somewhat Orthodox, I guess, but the kids that go there aren't really so much, but the school itself is. So

I went there. My oldest sister and my youngest sister went through all 12 years, first grade through high school. The second oldest sister and I, each left after eighth grade, and we both went to Bronx Science. So the biggest change to me --- and Ramaz was in Manhattan --- was in my early education years, I was taking the number 4 subway line from the Bronx down into the city. I could count every stop, I used to be able to name every stop along the way.

SM: I think I probably could, because that's how I get to work.

BJ: But then, yeshiva and I didn't get along.

SM: I was gonna say, what was your experience like that like down there?

BJ: I had a good time with my friends. I was never a good student. I would barely pass. My parents --- you know, as a parent now, I feel bad for my parents. Because they would take me for like, IQ tests. It was like just stupid maybe, or was I lazy, you know? So it must have driven them crazy, especially my father because I was the only son. He had high expectations of me, and I will wasn't meeting them by any means. And he wasn't really shy about letting me know that. But so as eighth grade came to a close, it was clear that I didn't like it there. They didn't like me in there, the school didn't like me being there. So the school was shocked when I got into Bronx Science, because they didn't think I had the goods. And Bronx Science you only got into because took the test, you had to qualify. So they were stunned that I got in. And for me, it was like opening up a whole new world. Going to Bronx Science, I mean, first of all, no more subway, I would ride my bike to school. And it was the first time I had black kids, and Puerto Rican kids. I had a few Irish and Italian kids in the neighborhood, but suddenly you're in Bronx Science --- and back then it had a large Jewish population, but not yeshiva kids like me. So that was a whole new experience, I loved it. I played on the soccer team, I was involved in clubs. The best thing about it was school was over at three o'clock, as opposed to almost six o'clock at yeshiva. It was great.

SM: And so did you feel like you got a good education at Bronx Science? You know, in the, I guess, Bronx public school arena?

BJ: No question. I mean, I don't know what it would have been like if I hadn't gotten in and went to Dewitt Clinton or somewhere else. But Bronx Science was a public school, but with a very private, elite kind of feel to it. Not elite in a monetary way, though.

SM: Because anybody could get in.

BJ: What was amazing about Bronx Science was, we were elite academically, but many kids were below the poverty line. Even today, I was on the board, the Alumni Association Board, for many years. Half the kids are on food stamps. What's impressive to me about Bronx Science --- and part of this is a Bronx

mentality --- was very often these are first generation Americans. Parents were immigrants. And this was the first rung on the ladder that represented the American dream. It was all about education. So yeah, I had a great education there.

SM: So did you speak any languages besides English in the house?

BJ: Hebrew. Not in the house so much, but I had learned Hebrew at yeshiva. And then the best thing was, I went to Hebrew speaking summer camp.

SM: Okay, where was that?

BJ: It was in the Poconos. It was called Mossad (sp?). And I went there for years, loved it, summer camp was like the greatest thing ever. And so my Hebrew got better. I still speak it today, somewhat.

SM: And was it a bit of --- were you used to going out into the wilderness having grown up a Bronx city boy?

BJ: It was a little weird. Not so much as a kid, but when I moved up here. I remember --- my wife and I got married in '84 --- and we lived in Larchmont, but in an apartment, like the city. And then we moved up to where we are now in Chappaqua. And I remember, we had a dog and walking the dog at night, and you're walking along like woods. And you'd hear a noise, which now I recognize, probably a deer or some kind of animal. And I'd be kind of scared, "Oh shit, what's out there?" And it's nothing. But being so used to --- having grown up in the city --- and so used to the noises, people and all that around and not thinking twice about it. Now I'm in this area with like, wilderness and like woah this is weird. Little different. Yeah. Very different experience.

SM: And so what did you end up doing after you graduated from Bronx Science?

BJ: When NYU for two years, kind of because my dad had been there, one of the sisters had been there, seemed like the thing to do.

SM: And were you on the --- did they still have the uptown Bronx campus at the time?

BJ: Not by the time I came along. My dad had gone in the city. My oldest sister went to the uptown Browns campus, which today I think is part of Bronx Community College. When I came along, it was downtown. And that was good for me, because I lived on campus. And so I remember being in a dorm on University and Eighth Street, right off the corner of the park, and it was 1974. And I mean, I was 17-18 years old.

SM: Living your best life.

BJ: There's girls, there's drugs, there's drink. And it was the 70s, nobody was worried about any of the stuff you have to worry about today. So, yeah, I mean, I was like a kid let loose in a candy store. And it was just a great time to be in the city. Maybe not if you were working and had a job and all that, but as a student. Hanging out in Greenwich Village in 70s. There was no AIDS, there was nothing to worry about. Pot was probably --- you call it weed now, we called it pot --- 30 bucks, you got an ounce of pot. It was probably garbage compared to what there is today, but it worked for us, we didn't know any different.

SM: And so were you aware of, I guess, the arson and devastation that was going on in the South Bronx during that period?

BJ: Well, yeah. So what was --- what we became aware of in the early 70s, the neighborhood was changing. Not in a good way. There was more crime. I got mugged once, I remember. I remember thinking I was a hot shot and I had a boombox. Not a really big one, but you know, decent size boombox. And I was like carrying it in the street, because --- why? I don't know. I thought it was cool -- - And some guy comes along --- white guy --- and mugs me and steals my boombox. I felt like an idiot. But that started to happen. The park became a gay hangout, at a time when gay is not what it is today. And my parents finally moved in '77 because they just felt the pressure of the neighborhood changing and time to get out.

SM And where did they move when they left?

BJ: Into Manhattan.

SM: And so when they moved, did you remain in the Bronx or?

BJ: Yeah, well, it was weird because when they moved --- so I'd been at NYU for two years. Then I took a year off, I dropped out these days. These days they call it a gap year, that's a nice way to say dropping out. But it took a year off. I worked for a while, I had an apartment in the East Village. I worked in a store, probably got paid five bucks an hour. I don't know what it was back then, maybe less. And then I went cross country with some friends. These two girls were moving to San Francisco --- two girls who I knew from the dorm at NYU --- and so this other guy and I decided to hitch a ride with them. And we took like six weeks going from New York to San Francisco, camping along the way. Of course, we all ended up hooking up with each other, because it was the 70's.

SM: There was no fear.

BJ: *laughing* Kind of a great life. It was a fun time. And then when I finished that year of craziness --- oh, I went to Israel at some point during that year, because friends of mine who had not dropped out

were doing their junior year abroad in Israel, so I would hang out with him. And I would travel around the country on my own with a backpack, and then come back to their apartment and hang out for a while and then go back out again.

SM: And what was going on in Israel at the time? How was it to be there?

SM: It was great. It was 10 years after the Six Day War, so Israel still had the Sinai. I remember going down to the Sinai and camping along the beach, all the way down to Sharm el Sheikh and then even South of Sharm el Sheikh there was a little area called Ras Mohammed. Which was the best snorkeling I've ever done in my life.

SM: Really?

BJ: It was like being in a tropical fish tank. And climbing what they thought was Mount Sinai. It was great being there. I mean, it was in between the Six Day War, which was obviously a big thing in Israel, and the Yom Kippur War was '73. But I guess the country had recovered from that. It was a great time to be there. So I did that, but then when I came back, I transferred to Syracuse. And I transferred to Syracuse because --- having grown up in the city, and then having gone to NYU in the city --- I felt like I was missing college. Having grown up in the city and then having gone to NYU, I felt like I was missing college because college to me was cheerleaders, sports teams.

SM: Campus.

BJ: Like what you have at Fordham. That's college. NYU was just a bunch of buildings downtown.

SM: I didn't want to go there.

BJ: No, it's not college. So I transferred to Syracuse, which was great. That's where I ended up meeting my wife --- we didn't date then, but we did after college. And so I wasn't really --- to get back to your question --- my parents moved, and I guess when I'd go home to visit I'd go to their apartment in Manhattan, but that never really felt like home because I never lived there. When I graduated Syracuse, I came back to the city but I came back to Manhattan. Nobody was moving to the Bronx back then. And the Bronx --- you felt bad for the Bronx in the late 70s, early 80s. They had a whole bonfire, the batteries thing and fires going on. I think, for those of us who grew up there, the Bronx was such a wonderful special place. To then see it in such bad shape like it was, was painful. And you got a little --- you had nostalgia, certainly, but you got a little defensive about it. You had to tell people how great the Bronx was. Nobody would believe you. Now the Bronx is booming. I mean, you look at the South Bronx, that whole Mott Haven area where you get on the Deegan. All the new buildings are going up there, it's fantastic. And it's a whole different population. So I think --- I can't tell you if everybody felt this way --

- I remember feeling like, I have been telling my wife for years now, the Bronx is coming back. She's like, "Yeah, right." And it is.

SM: Yeah. No, absolutely. I think it's, you know, it's funny, because when you talk to a lot of people who left during that period in the 70s, a lot of them have never been back. So when they think --- they're like, "Oh, I went back, and I wanted to go see where my old house was in like, 1985." --- it's like, well, it's not gonna be the same as it is today. But that's kind of the image that people still hold.

BJ: I think it's not just true about the Bronx that people get frozen in a particular time period. I think one of the things that kept me connected to the Bronx was the Yankees.

SM: Yeah, so I was gonna say, have you gotten back? I mean, I know you were back for our class in the fall.

BJ: That was great, I'd love to do that again. It was fun. Yeah, well, I was always a Yankee fan. I'd take my kids to games when they were little, I will still go once or twice a season. So I was there in May, I guess, for a game. And, you know, being from there, I wouldn't deal with the traffic on the Deegan. I'd know how to go down Sedgwick or the Concourse or Jerome Avenue. And being a Bronxite, I wasn't going to be one of these bridge and tunnel people that parked in a garage. When I got to Yankee Stadium, I find a spot in the street, because that's what you do. And it's just fun being in the Bronx. And if you weren't from there --- or if you just went for games or whatever --- you'd be nervous because "Oh no, the Bronx." Right. But I walk along, people to talk to you, talk right back. Not a big deal. Nothing to be afraid.

SM: And so, kind of like you and I were discussing earlier, now that I'll have this to write down. What do you kind of think about that period of white flight, like what with people leaving the Bronx and what was really driving them to leave?

BJ: To some degree, it was natural, just natural evolution. Like we talked about with the Lower East Side, as people reached higher levels of economic status, they moved out, they bought houses in the suburbs. So some of it was that. A lot of it was Co-op City, a lot of it was racism. Because when Co-op City was built, and all these people left the Bronx, who filled in? It was folks from Manhattan. And if you were used to living in *loud noise over recording* suddenly all these people are moving in, and you get nervous. And I don't blame people, but yeah, a lot of it was racism.

SM: So my last question for you, when you think back --- not necessarily about what's going on in the Bronx today, but when you think back today about your growing up there and your experiences --- what kind of emotions and sentiments do you do you associate with that?

BJ: You know, the one word I would use is pride. Having grown up in the Bronx and I'm proud of it. I think it made me who I am. It was a great place to grow up. It was bucolic back then. It was a melting pot. It taught me to handle myself in any kind of situation. Yeah, I have great memories of the Bronx. Which is why it's so funny --- I forget the name of a woman in your class who invited me to speak.

SM: Oh, yeah. Karina.

BJ: Yeah. So we're at a Yankee game --- I guess, early part of last year --- I'm there with some buddies, we're being obnoxious. We're in our 60's. My wife would have like, slapped us if she'd been there. There's Karina and some of her friends, they're sitting right in front of us, I don't know how we end up getting into a conversation, but we're being our stupid guy selves.

SM: Friendly selves.

BJ: Thank you, friendly selves, and we get into those conversations. She's like, "Oh, you're from the Bronx." And she invites me to speak to your class. I jumped all over it. And then preparing for that was fun because she had sent me --- or the teacher had sent --- a list of things to talk about. And I remember creating these index cards, like crib notes and everything. And it was just a fun class. I remember that it was a beautiful day. It was like today. We were under a tree.

SM: Yup, sitting outside on Eddie's.

BJ: It was great. So yeah, definitely pride. I mean, a little bit of rose colored glasses, maybe. But mostly pride. When you're from the Bronx, nobody can take anything from you.

SM: That's great. Thank you.

BJ: Was that helpful at all?