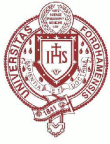

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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Sophia Maier: Great. So yeah, do you want to just get started by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx?

Michael Melasky: So my grandparents were somewhat typical immigrants from Poland, came to the Lower East Side and then to the Bronx. And I don't know what year, maybe the 40s or the 50s, where they settled in the South Bronx. Come from a large family that unfortunately didn't make it to the states. A lot of them, most of them, were murdered during the Holocaust. In fact, we thought everybody was dead, but we just happen to have a meet through Ancestry DNA recently with a survivor. One survivor.

SM: Oh wow, that’s great.

MM: My father would tell me stories that, when he was a kid, his family would go to a bungalow colony. And every time they come home from the summer, they'd have to find a new apartment, because the old one was rented out. But that wasn't atypical for a family during that generation. I was born in a housing project in 1957, in Marble Hill, which is just west of Riverdale. Those were city housing projects that were created as a result of post World War Two, when many of the vets came back from the war without a place to live. There was a significant housing shortage going on in the Bronx, and the whole city, due to a lot of the urban planning going on --- aka Robert Moses, I'm sure you’ve heard of him before. He did a lot of good and a lot of not so good, created a lot of need for low income housing. So my parents bought into the Marble Hill projects in the early 1950s, and that's where I lived and grew up through 1969. Then, my family and I moved to another Robert Moses development, Co-op City. So I'm the product of the New York City Housing Project and the Mitchell-Lama Co-op city.

SM: So tell me a little bit about the Marble Hill project when you were growing up. What was it like? What kind of people live there?

MM: So you familiar with a Tale of Two Cities?

SM: Yes.

MM: Dickens. So it was the very best of times, it was the very worst of times. But growing up in that environment, I didn't really know anything different. So, you know, I thought all people lived in cramped quarters with thousands of people. We had a small apartment, two bedroom, I shared with my sister who was six years older than me, so big conundrums there with a younger brother in the same room. Especially during the turbulent 60s. The projects were extremely, extremely diverse, with a mix of virtually every immigrant group you can think of. It was a playground, I never had to make a friend. I didn't know how to make friends because I never had to make one. There were literally hundreds of kids

my age at my disposal at all times. So when it was sunny outside, we went outside and played all day without any supervision. And when I mean played, that's a euphemism for we sort of did what we want to do without very little restrictions. And on the rainy days, or the cold, cold, cold days, when we couldn't go outside, I met with friends in their apartments and just, you know, indiscriminately go and knock on the door and you open the door. There were hundreds of playmates at my disposal.

SM: Yeah. Did you ever experience any tensions between different like racial and ethnic groups?

MM: I didn't see it like that as a kid, although it was very diverse, we were all the same. You know, it was more the socio-economic reason why we all live together there. All the all the fathers who worked --- very few mothers worked --- but the fathers that worked were all involved in low income, construction jobs, working for the city. Average pay was probably no more than three to $8,000 a year. Survival rate wages. My closest friends were African American, were Irish, were Hispanic, Jewish. There were gangs, but unlike the gangs of later years, they were ethnic ring gangs, they weren't drug gangs. Drugs weren’t a part of our society. Alcohol was, there was alcoholism. There were a lot of people that I met up with that were drunks, and we lived with them and they were part of the community. There was one memory, which I'll hold on to my death. Without getting into specifics, one of the gangs was pretty rough, and they would look for people to isolate and take advantage of. Unfortunately, my turn came one day when --- I can't even remember how old I was Sophia, I might have been eight or nine or ten --- and they tied me to a tree and took off my clothes and did some awful things to me. And I thought I was gonna die. You know, in today's world, if that would have happened to somebody that you knew or I knew, it would be on the front page of the newspaper, a huge investigation. Back then, they let me go, I untied myself, I got my clothes and never said a word about it. So it was a fun place to live, but it was very, very, very, very dangerous. And you had to be aware all the time of the dangers because people were on survival mode. Whatever they wanted to do to take advantage of others.

SM: Yeah. Did you feel like --- because obviously, you had an older sister --- did you feel like, even though she was a little older, did you feel like your experiences were different in that way? Because like, you were a man, and she was a woman, so you had kind of different experiences with that?

MM: Well, it wasn't so much the male female, it was the age difference. My sister, in the 60s --- she was born in ‘51 --- so she was a product of Woodstock, that generation. Whereas when Woodstock occurred, that was my bar mitzvah year, so I was a little behind that. So, she and I really didn't have much interaction. She was with a whole different peer group, many of whom, most of the guys, went to Vietnam. Didn't come home. You know, because these were the “low income” recruits. A lot of them saw action on the front lines, in the jungles of Vietnam.

SM: But you were a little younger. So you, like you and your friends, kind of avoided that situation?

MM: Yeah, when I became of age, the year before, they stopped the mandatory draft. I think in '74. And at that time, I was 17, so I missed it by a year.

SM: Yeah. So a little bit more about the neighborhood. So what kind of shops or other amenities do you remember growing up?

MM: So, we lived in an area that was surrounded by highway. The Major Deegan, some large broad streets, 225th and Broadway, Exterior Street, 233rd Street. The subway line was --- I think it was the one line --- was a block from my house. The commercial railroad, that was under my window. So it was a rather noisy area which I didn't really know or understand until I had had a friend from New Rochelle come and sleep over one time. And the windows were open because it was summertime. And after 10 minutes in bed, he said to me, "This is insane, how do you sleep?" And I said, "What are you talking about?" Not realizing the different worlds that we both lived in. But underneath the el, there was a whole bunch of shops: grocery stores, pizzerias, drugstores, and then a couple of blocks north, there were the clothing stores that we would go to, the shoe stores. There were no malls at that point, so all the stores that we went to with the local businesses that sold the variety of things that we needed. There was a Woolworths by the Five and Dime, things that you needed which in today's world would have been like the dollar stores. There was a couple of movie theaters in a neighborhood. So we would, on a real hot summer day, would spend the whole day in a movie theater, because it was air conditioned. And we'd watch the same movie, you know, five times in a row for a dime. There were plenty of parks. Inwood Park was close to us. The parks in Riverdale we would go up to every so often and play there. A couple of miles to the west, were the ball fields of Veterans Field and Harris Park, and as I got older, I became very proficient at baseball and played on those fields for many, many, many years. South of us we would hop on the train --- and when I say hop on, we never paid, just sneak on --- and go down to the Inwood area, Dyckman, hang out around there. Pretty busy. There was never not things to do. Never, ever. Never bored. Never ever bored. And, you know, by doing things that were appropriate and, oftentimes, inappropriate.

SM: You find yourself entertained.

MM: All the time.

SM: So, you had said that most of the dads worked in low income jobs and the moms didn't work. Was that the case with your family as well?

MM: Yeah, although, later on, my mom did take on a part time job. I remember when my sister got a little older and she was out of the house --- or out of the house most of the time --- she would go onto the subway and commute downtown somewhere. I'm not even sure where. My father was working in New Jersey, so he would have to drive about an hour and a half each way. And he had a secondary job too --- most of the people living there did. To support their families they had, you know, more than one job.

SM: What did he do in Jersey?

MM: Um, he worked in like a fabric company that made embroidery. Low skill, low paying. You know, the men of his generation were --- many of them, especially that came back from the war --- just looking, unless they went to school and became a professional --- which my father didn't unfortunately because he could have, they were stuck with low paying jobs. I remember people coming off the subway at night, and walking from the subway to the different housing complexes, being extremely dirty. Working in industries that were coal and soot. They looked like miners coming out of some of the West Virginia coal mines, that's how dirty they were.

SM: So a little bit about school. Tell me a little bit about elementary school or junior high school, any memories that stand out to you?

MM: So our local public school was a block and a half away and we'd all come home for lunch. It was extremely crowded. There were four to five classes in every grade level. It was a K-6 building, kindergarten was halftime. During that age, very, very few people, if any, went to preschool. So I didn't start my formal schooling until I was five. The junior high school was a couple of blocks further up the road, Junior High School 143 --- I only was there for about a year plus, and then we moved to Co-op City and I continued in the public schools there. Again, what I remember is, the public schools at that point were transitioning. They had been predominantly white. In many of those neighborhoods, they were had been predominantly Jewish, Italian, Irish Catholic. And it was changing to the colored minorities: black, Hispanic. And, looking back on it as an educator --- because that's what I did for 40 years, worked in the schools --- I'm not quite sure that they really knew how to deal with the transitions. Going from a subclass that was very much into education, very much into the American dream, versus the new generation of people that was still sort of transitioning from the South, and trying to get their roots in the city and having a very, very, very difficult time. And looking at it from a socio-economic perspective it was a very challenging time for New York City, in the public schools. When I finally made it to high school, where it was very diverse and very dangerous, and the gangs really started to sprout, and myself not wanting to be involved in that --- that's when it became very challenging, the school. I was bright, I could do stuff, I didn't have to work very hard. The standards at that time were pretty low.

SM: What high school did you attend?

MM: Evander Childs. And I only really noticed that after I graduated from high school, near the top of my class, that --- I was fortunate enough to go away to school, you know, to one of the universities in the state --- I was totally 100% unprepared for the academics. It took me a couple of years to gain my footing. A lot of the kids that I was in classes with were coming from very affluent communities where

school --- like yourself --- is the priority. That was not the case with me growing up. So although I was as bright as they were, I was not prepared.

SM: Yeah. So did you --- I guess you kind of already just addressed this --- but I usually ask did you feel like you got a good education, and you had a lot of opportunities?

MM: On a scale of one to ten, my education was a two.

SM: Okay. And do you attribute that a lot to just their unpreparedness for kind of the changing population or?

MM: I think so. The schools became places where, you know, gangs of kids could come together to wreak havoc. And a generation prior to that, that wasn't the case. Kids went to school to become professionals. And I got caught in the transition of that. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back on it --- as I said, because I was an educator and an administrator in the schools --- I could see that from a lens looking back forty years.

SM: So transition a little bit. Tell me a little bit about Jewish life growing up. Was your family religious at all? Did you attend a synagogue?

MM: So, my grandparents were Orthodox coming from Eastern Europe. On my mother's side, not my father's side. My father's side was mostly secular. My parents had no interest in belonging to a synagogue, but they did have interest in sending me to a religious school. And not a reform or conservative, one an orthodox one.

SM: What were your experiences like there?

MM: I was in religious school six days a week, many, many hours a day, in addition to public school. Up until the time I was bar mitzvah'd, and then I walked away from it for a long time. I was the only one of my friends that was even involved in that, mainly because, you know, my parents, through my grandparents, insisted that occur.

SM: Did you keep kosher?

MM: No. Kosher style. You know, my parents grew up in kosher homes and didn't hold on to it. Although I married into a family that kept kosher, so that felt good.

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

MM: So my mother was fluent in Yiddish. She would speak to my grandparents in Yiddish, because that's how she had grown up. And I learned phrases here and there, but I don't. My Hebrew was better than my Yiddish.

SM: Well, with all that schooling I'm sure it was.

MM: And it helped me later in life because I, in addition to becoming an educator, I was also a religious school director. And the training in Orthodox schools helped me with that. I'm like the assistant rabbi in my shul, I can do any kind of thing --- with exception of being a *mohel* --- I can do anything within a religious setting. I had really good training.

SM: Yeah, I am sure. And so, after you attended college, did you return to the Bronx?

MM: For a very short period of time. I met my wife during that time, and she got a job working for the Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged on Kingsbridge Road. And I was finishing my master's then at Hunter College. So once I completed my master's, my wife and I --- and I got employed --- we moved to Rockland County, before moving to Orange County.

SM: And when you left the Bronx, was it more of a conscious decision to leave the Bronx? Or did you feel that you were drawn to the opportunities elsewhere? If that makes sense.

MM: It was a very conscious decision, Sophia. The Bronx at that time in the early 80s was challenging, and I didn't want to raise my family in that environment. I mean, I love my parents dearly, but my parents were still living in the 30s and 40s and the 50s when I was a teenager, and had absolutely no clue what it was like for me as a young adult teenager growing up in some of those neighborhoods. And that's why I said to you before: it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. There's some pieces of it that I absolutely loved, that I would wish that my kids had the opportunity to experience. Unfortunately, that didn't continue into my adolescence and young teenage years. It was very dangerous.

SM: Yeah. I forgot to ask earlier, what had prompted your family to move up to Co-op City?

MM: So the housing project that we were living in started to become even more dangerous. They became filled with people that didn't have --- and I'm not --- it just became filled with people that just didn't have drive. The first of the month, when the welfare checks came out, the lobby was filled with people. It became a very dangerous place to live. And Co-op City was seen as the savior, which, in reality, it wasn't. At the time it was --- the apartments were twice to three times the size that we lived in, in the housing project. Those weren't my best years. I don't look fondly back at my high school years and Co-op City. I think I said to you earlier, as a young boy, I never had to make a friend. I didn't know how to make a friend, because there were people everywhere. I mean, that was the beauty of living in

that environment. So there was a lot of positive to it. By the time I moved to Co-op City as a 13 year old boy, I got lost. I was lost. Those years between 13 and 18 were challenging. The only thing that saved me, quite frankly, was I was a very good athlete. I was able to handle myself on the ballfield really well, and that saved me.

SM: So once you left, did you go back to the Bronx often?

MM: To visit my parents, with my children. Then they moved out to Florida. They retired. Certain restaurants we go to. When my mother got ill, we placed her in a facility in the Bronx that I was familiar with. So we were there are a lot. Couple of times I went to Yankee Stadium. But very little desire to return. Although, interestingly enough --- and I haven't said this before --- my sister in law is a city planner and she knows stuff that we don't know about the changes that are happening in the city. They look out 10, 15, 20 years. And most of her work has been focused in Brooklyn, where there's been an incredible resurgence of the borough. And I think if you walk through the streets of Brooklyn, you'll find that, you know, 90% of the young adults there are from Rockland, Westchester, and Orange County. Unbelievable. Two of my kids are living down there for many years.

SM: Yeah. I know more than a few people down there.

MM: And so when I ask her about the research in the Bronx, she says it's coming. It's slow. It's different. You know, there’s more ethnic neighborhoods in the Bronx today than probably anyplace else in the world. It's more of a challenge to make the moves that need to happen, although she said it's coming.

SM: And yeah, that's usually one of my questions. Especially, you know, do you think that the Bronx is back on the mend? Do you ever hear --- when you hear about the Bronx today, what do you what kind of things do you hear about it? If at all?

MM: Again, from my sister in law that. You know, the housing prices are starting to rise a little bit, not like they have been in Queens. I mean, 15 years ago a three bedroom home in Queens was going for a quarter of what it goes for now. In the Bronx it’s a little higher, but hasn't gotten there yet. I think --- and again, I don't know this for a fact, and I'm just sort of presaging this and guessing --- I think schools in the Bronx still have a ways to go. Just from the little I can see, other people that I speak with that are still educators down there. It's still very challenging.

SM: Did you teach in the Bronx or were you up in Rockland?

MM: I taught for one year in the Bronx. It was really sad. It was really sad. I wasn't going back. Looking at back on it now as an educator and as an administrator in the schools, if I had somebody like myself --- a young, bright man who has a tremendous amount of potential --- I would have done a lot more to keep him there than, at that time, nobody even knew I work there. I got handed a pink sheet at the end of the

semester saying “thank you, goodbye.” It was the most a unnurturing, uncaring professional environment I've ever been a part of and I was there for a few months. It was. Looking back on it, trying to be introspective about it, Sophia, was it me being young? Or was it just being involved in a system that wasn't ready for change? And I think more the second, although maybe a combination.

SM: So yeah, so my last kind of question is, when you think about the Bronx today --- not necessarily what the Bronx is like, but when you think back a little bit, like you said, be a little introspective --- what kind of, you've spoken to this a lot, but what kind of memories, what kind of emotions do you associate with it?

MM: I think going back to my Dickens quote. It was a wonderful, wonderful place as a young child to experience. But as I got older, and I began to see some of the challenges faced, and really nobody addressing them. I have friends that live in the Riverdale neighborhood, essentially. And I never really considered that the Bronx.

SM: Yeah, depends on who you ask, right?

MM: You know, if nothing else, the housing prices in Riverdale are consistent with those of Brooklyn and Queens and more like neighborhoods of like New Rochelle and Scarsdale. I mean, it's just a whole different world. I hope and pray that the leadership that's in place wants to restore it to its hayday. I mean, the Bronx in its day --- again, when my parents were young, in the 30s and 40s --- I mean, the Grand Concourse was the *Champs-Elysees*. You wouldn't find me dead after eight o'clock on the Grand Concourse as a kid growing up. I don't know about today. I really don’t know.

SM: Yeah, it's better, but it's still I mean, I wouldn't be --- I wouldn't walk around by myself anywhere but you know, at night, but there either.

MM: I know where you live, currently, it's an enclave. Safe, like a four block square radius, and you’re very well protected. But you know, outside that area --- from my memory, I can’t talk about recent, but from my memories --- I wouldn't be there. You know, it's interesting, my kids. Two of my three kids chose to live in the city for a long time. One still lives there. They didn't choose to live in the Bronx. They went to Queens and Brooklyn. So what does that tell you?

SM: Well, thank you.