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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Sophia Maier: Perfect. So yeah, just start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

Stuart Jacobs: Okay. Well, it's very interesting background, my family. My grandparents immigrated from Europe. They all died before I was born, so I never knew my grandparents on either side, maternal or paternal. My mother's parents owned a couple of restaurants in the Southern Boulevard, Tremont area of the Bronx. Apparently it was a very successful restaurant, but they died. My mother --- there were six sisters --- and their mother died when they were very young, and the older sister basically brought them all up. And they were living in the Pelham Parkway section of the Bronx. They actually moved from one street to another, but I was born in the same building that my mother lived in. My father's family, he had five brothers and one sister --- back then they had large families --- I think he lived in Brooklyn. I was born in the Pelham Parkway area of the Bronx. I lived there --- I was born in 1952 --- and I lived there with my parents until I graduated college. And then I moved to Queens because my girlfriend, who I met in 1973, was from Queens, so I moved to Queens. I got an apartment in Queens and eventually --- my parents were fairly elderly --- so I moved out to Queens, right behind Queens College, in that area. And then I moved a couple of times in Queens, but I always relished my childhood days in the Bronx. I have two girls. I keep telling them that --- and to this day, they'll tell you what's my mantra --- the Bronx to the center of the universe. I had, I mean, I can't tell you how many stories I have about growing up in the Bronx. I still keep in touch, literally, with --- I never counted --- I'd say at least between 50 and 100 people that I grew up with, whether it be from the neighborhood, from college, from summer camps that I went, people lived in the Bronx. And it was like, I'll never forget my days growing up in Pelham Parkway. The Pelham Parkway area of the Bronx, literally, it was probably 98% Jewish.

SM: Okay. That's usually one of my questions.

SJ: There was some Italian and some Irish and, you know, black families, but, I mean, everyone got along. Everybody knew everybody. You couldn't do anything wrong, because if you did, there would have been at least three parents there that knew your parents and you'd be in trouble. It was just great. And I still keep in touch, whether on Facebook or directly. I stepped in because we're actually --- I went to Columbus High School --- and we were supposed to have our 50th reunion in 2020, the pandemic came, it got canceled. They set it to have it, okay, in 2021, we'll have our 51st anniversary. Canceled with the pandemic. We are now scheduled to have it this coming October, and they basically opened it up to any graduating class. So but, you know, we get a lot of people at these reunions. You know, growing up in the Bronx --- I mean, being Jewish --- there was either a *shul* or a synagogue on, literally, every single street, small ones. I went to one that was right on Pelham Parkway. The Jewish holidays came around, nothing was going on in the neighborhood. Everything was shut down. Because whether it

was, you know, a Jewish establishment or not, the Jews weren't out shopping, you know? And it was --- I loved it. I thought it was the best, the best time of my life growing up there.

SM: Yeah. What kind of things did you do, I guess, for fun or just generally when you were growing up? Things that you remember doing?

SJ: Well, I was a jock. I played all sports. I would go to the elementary school, it had a school yard, and that was all of the guys. That's where you went to play basketball, stickball, softball, play touch football. And if you weren't there, we were in Bronx Park, playing baseball. Literally, we'd go down from eight o'clock in the morning --- I was down at either the school yard or the ball field --- until six o'clock. One thing about especially Pelham Parkway, and a lot of neighborhoods had it, you had specific seasons. And, you know, one season it was marbles season, and we all played in the middle of the street, on the sidewalk. We played marbles, and when the cars came we would move or they would wait for us to move. And there were different seasons. Stickball season. We played stickball in the middle of the street. You know, how many sewers can you hit the ball? That was a big thing, so we did that for fun. We were very close to the Bronx Zoo, so there were things to do. I was a big Yankee fan, so I'd go to a lot of ball games with my dad --- and my uncle had an affiliation with the Yankees, so he would get me seats right behind the Yankee dugout. I'd go to a lot of a lot of Yankee games and, you know, spent most of my free time playing sports going --- either playing, when I was really young, playing on the street. Back then, all of the parents would sit outside, they'd bring their folding chairs there and sit outside. And then we were playing ringalivio, Johnny-on-the-pony, stickball, marbles. There was always something. Slapball, we played slapball in the middle of the street. And, you know, it was great. I mean, I don't think anybody that --- and like I said, I keep in touch with a lot of people from Pelham Parkway and other areas of the Bronx --- and I don't think anybody would say anything bad about it back then. The neighborhoods changed a lot.

SM: Of course.

SJ: I have gone there periodically. Whenever we go up to my cousin's in Westchester, we take the Bronx River Parkway and drive right by Bronx Park. And I always tell jokes and tell my family, "Everyone salute. Salute Pelham Parkway, the center of the universe." You know, I've had them convinced of that. My wife is a Queens girl, so she doesn't like that.

SM: So what did your parents do for a living?

SJ: My father was well --- he worked for Dunham Bradstreet. He worked in the --- I don't know what area you would call it --- but in the printing area, proofreader, typesetter. When they moved their plant out to Chicago, my father didn't want to move, so he ultimately worked for the New York Times. And my mother was an accountant. She worked for a couple of companies doing accounting. She had a high school diploma. I don't know if my father did, he had some kind of degree. I think he was in the

Merchant Marines. He also did typesetting and stuff, printing to them. And I have a very large family. Like I said, my mother, there were six sisters and there were at least two cousins from each of them. Quite a large family. And we're very, very close. Before the pandemic, in 2019 or 2018, we decided to go on vacation together. So 14 of us, including a couple of our children --- like one of my daughters went --- we went out to Yellowstone, and we stayed in the park for three nights and then we went up to -- one of the other cousins had a place up in Big Sky up in Montana --- so we stayed in his place. So we're all still very close. During the pandemic and even after we have a zoom call, a cousins zoom call, and there are times there could be 15-20 people on the call.

SM: Did you all live close to each other in the Bronx?

SJ: Well, when my mother was a kid she lived in the Bronx. One of the --- eventually when they got they got married, they got an apartment in the same building that I grew up in. One of the other sisters lived up the street from us. Another one lived around the West Farms area. And one lived out in Nassau County around New Hyde Park, that area. So they were they were all fairly [close]. My parents didn't drive. So, you know, they always had to rely on one or the other, my aunts or uncles, to take us places. Eventually the one of them that lived up the street moved out to Wantagh, out on Long Island, one moved to Franklin Square, one moved up to Tarrytown. So they all somewhat scattered but we all still got together frequently. One to Wantagh on Long Island. So um, but yeah, the families always stayed very, very close.

SM: And so more about I guess the neighborhood a little bit. What kind of shops or other amenities do you remember in the area?

SJ: Oh, there was the most famous --- well, I lived on the street that overlooks --- and I actually overlooked --- a supermarket. It was on the top floor, and the supermarket was lower down, obviously, the roof. Some funny stories that --- back then didn't go to --- well, if you did go to a laundromat, you hung your clothes up and you had a clothesline that went from one window to the other window. And my mother used to hang clothes out on the lines. Occasionally things fell from that, so it went down into the into the alley way between. Between my building and food store was the *shul*, and there was an alley in between there. And if anything fell onto the roof of the supermarket, my dad would have to go down to the supermarket and say, "could you go up to your roof." But yeah, there were no mega stores back then, the supermarket was local, it was called Orlinsky's. And the story about that is there were bakeries --- and these were like Jewish style bakeries --- and a big fire started in the bakery and it burned down the entire street. And there's actually a very funny story about that, but I'll get to that later, I don't want to diverge from the food stores. There was Gloria's pizza, it was like the place --- Gloria's and Venice Pizza. Carvel on the corner. And everyone used to hang out at Carvel on that corner and my window would overlook it. And everyone call me, "Hey, is anybody out yet?" I had a great view. There were butchers, there were butchers on almost every street. There were at least three kosher delis within arm's throw of my building. They had toy stores, they had hardware stores. I remember there was like, I think,

a sewing store my mother used to go to, she used to do a lot of knitting. There were --- what else was there? We were near White Plains Road --- [where] the train was --- and there are a lot of stores up and down. Produce, clothing stores, the music store where everyone wanted to buy records. They were 45's then, those are the small ones, or the big LP's. We didn't have CDs or anything or media like we have now. And those were the stores. There were some clothing stores, there were some discount stores, John's Bargain store. Penrod's (sp?), where people went to buy their stationery, their things for school. A couple of Chinese restaurants. We knew the kids that went to school with us. So there was some --- in fact, referred to as the Chinese laundry --- which was one of my really close friend's parents. They used to always invite me, and they lived in the back --- which, these days would be illegal --- but they would always invite me in and feed me. We always went to --- friend's name was Jimmy --- so I went, "Is Jimmy here?" "Jimmy in school yard." Which is just down the street from where the laundry was. So it was very close knit. A lot of butchers around, you know, kosher butchers. Actually my brother and I actually worked one of them, helped clean up and stuff, delivering the rotisserie chickens to people, especially on Friday. So yeah, it was an assortment of stores. You go there now and not very few of them are still there.

SM: Yeah. So let's talk a little bit about school. Do you have any memories from public school or from junior high school that really stand out? Or generally kind of what your experiences were like?

SJ: Um, elementary school was literally two blocks away from where I lived. The fun thing about that, you know, they had the crossing guards. The crossing guards knew every single kid by name and were friends with the parents and stuff. Elementary school, it was good. Still, on Facebook, people still post a lot of things about elementary school, about teachers and stuff. How mean certain teachers were, my best teacher. Junior high school we wound up having to take a bus. The junior high that we went to was in the Parkchester-Castle Hill area, so we had to take a bus there. We got to meet some other people that were from that area, and actually became friends with a lot of them. High school, I went to Columbus High School, which it was maybe about a 10 minute walk. It was on the other side of Pelham Parkway. Columbus was a great school, it was actually, back then, it was referred to as the Harvard of the Bronx. It was very high academic standings there. And, yeah, it was basically everybody from Pelham Parkway went there. Large Jewish population, but there were people that came in from other areas. I had a very diverse relationship with different friends, ethnicities, or religions. I had a friend --- actually, I still keep in touch with him, like on a regular basis, he's actually a lawyer down in Texas now --- his father was the super of the building next to us. They were Puerto Rican. And we, you know, we actually made him an official Jew, because he went to more bar mitzvah's than a lot of the Jewish kids did. So, you know, we stayed very close with him, I stay close with other people that are from other areas of the Bronx, the Van Nest area and stuff.

SM: Were there ever --- did you observe among other people --- any kind of tensions between different like, ethnic or religious groups?

SJ: Absolutely not. We all got along, there was never any tensions. Yeah. I mean, yeah, were people I've had disagreements and fights with, but nothing that would have equated to being anything to do with religion or race and stuff. I mean, I had back then --- I mean, listen, our neighborhood, there weren't a lot of, like I said, it was 98% Jewish. There were some of the other families there --- because, like the supers' kids --- families that were not Jewish. And so I know where some of the churches were in the area, or where they went, but nothing seemed to matter to us. We got along fine. I can't say as many black friends back then, you know. I mean, I did have black friends. One of my really close friends --- this guy by the name of Dennis --- we were friends from elementary through high school. Nobody thought about race. I mean, I know that years ago there were a lot of race issues, but not that I recall in my neighborhood.

SM: Absolutely. And so were you involved in any sort of extracurricular activities in school or sports, anything like that?

SJ: Like I said, I was a jock. In high school, I was on the track team, I was on the cross country team. When I was in college, they wanted me to be on the swimming team, but I couldn't because you couldn't compete in two sports at the same time. In college, they wanted me to run track, but I'm --- a guy that I got friendly with --- I played a lot of roller hockey and they were forming an ice hockey team, so I wound up playing ice hockey in college. I played a lot of sports besides hockey, track, I played competitive racquetball, I was water ski instructor, a water safety instructor. I played a lot of different sports. When I was growing up my life revolved around sports, basically. I was in the Boy Scouts for a couple of years, but our Scoutmaster left and the new Scoutmaster was a real --- pardon my language --- he was an asshole. We would go on camp outs and stuff, and my father didn't drive so they always relied on parents to help drive, and they didn't have enough drivers. The Scoutmaster said I can't go because my father doesn't participate in the driving, so my father basically told the Scoutmaster what he can do. And I quit the troop and after that I guess a lot of my other friends quit the troop. It was a good experience, but I probably should've stuck with playing baseball instead of the Boy Scouts. But, you know, it is what it is.

SM: So did you feel like you got a good education and you had a lot of opportunities?

SJ: Oh, yeah. I mean, you know, in retrospect, you look back and yeah. I mean, the schools that I went to were grade schools, I mean, I wasn't the greatest student in the world --- I wanted to goof off and stuff --- but I got a good education. I got my college degree in education, secondary education. I never really pursued that, I went in for business. Not personal, individual business, but I got into the business world and I had a successful career. I actually just retired a couple of months ago.

SM: Congratulations.

SJ: Thank you. And I have two wonderful daughters that are very successful. One lives down in Bethesda, she works for a pharmaceutical company, and she's very, very successful there. The other one works --- she lives in Queens --- she works for a non-profit, and she loves what she does. She used to work at a different non-profit that worked with the developmentally challenged individuals. And now she works for another non-profit. And I guess I look at their upbringing as a function of how well I was brought up. Very close with my parents, my brother --- I have one brother that, unfortunately, died way too young by an accident. My brother moved to California when he graduated college. Ultimately, when my parents died, he moved back to New York and he lived with us. I'm sitting in his room right now. Which is now the computer room. But my kids looked up to him more like a big brother than an uncle, and they were like devastated when he passed away. And they're just very close with each other, with their cousins ; they speak with their cousins, go out to dinner with them a lot. And it's all a function of my upbringing, my cousin's upbringing. It just transcended down from how our parents brought us up and the culture that we lived in, in the Bronx. All these problems now with, you know, race, racist issues and stuff. I mean, my family is the furthest thing from that. We all get along with everybody.

SM: Do you feel like growing up as --- I know, you said you had a brother, but maybe your female cousins --- did you feel like growing up as a man during that period, you had kind of different expectations than the women that you were growing up around?

SJ: No, one of my female cousins was my brother's age --- which is about three years older than me --- there were no expectations. I mean, we didn't look at things the way they look at things now. We just looked at each other as a family. I don't know. I guess the mindset now is different than it was when I was growing up. The biggest thing we had to worry about, back then, some family struggled with finances and stuff, but everything seemed to work out in the end. And we all came up very strong.

SM: Yeah. So let's talk a little bit about Jewish life. So was your family religious?

SJ: I was brought up in the conservative atmosphere. My parents kept a kosher house, and so did my mother's sisters, all kept a kosher house. We all observed the holidays, Passover we would always go to my aunt's house out in Franklin Square for the seder. Thanksgiving we would --- well, that's not a religious holiday --- but we would celebrate all of the holidays together. When the High Holidays came around, the whole neighborhood basically shut down. We went to *shul*, I belonged to Pelham Parkway Jewish Center, which is where I was bar mitzvah'd. And basically, they would --- at least my father would --- stay there almost all day. And when I was very young they had children's services. And yeah, we observed all the holidays. On Yom Kippur, my mother was, you know, adamant. I mean, she went to some extremes. You weren't supposed to open up mail or anything. She actually would cut up sheets of toilet paper, so that we didn't have to do that during the holiday. I'm a diabetic --- I became a diabetic when I was 14 years old --- and because of that, I had to eat normal regular meals. My parents would fast, and I had what I always teasingly referred to as a "presidential pardon." My mother would keep --- nowadays, they talk about the carbon monoxide --- but my mother would leave one of the jets on, on the

stove on a very low flame, so that she could make food for me. But we lived on the sixth floor. We had an elevator, but my parents wouldn't take the elevator. I was a kid, you know, I didn't even take the elevator going down, I would just run down the stairs and stuff. But most of the neighborhood was the same way. We had the Young Israel, which was a block away. We had the *shul* that was right downstairs and there was one in the back, out on the street in back of us. Some of the non-Jewish stores would still remain open, like Gloria's Pizza, but don't dare go in there.

SM: Someone is going to see you.

SJ: A parent is going to see you. What we usually did --- well, I remember doing it sometimes --- we had friends that lived in the Castle Hill area, which is probably about a 30 minute walk, who couldn't take the bus. But we would walk there and hang out with friends there and stuff. My parents were friendly with the rabbi from the *shul* downstairs --- we lived right across the street from the *shul* --- even though they were very orthodox, but it didn't matter back then. But, you know, these days, the ultra-orthodox don't even recognize no reform or conservative as being Jewish.

SM: Exactly. Did you speak any languages besides English growing up?

SJ: Well I --- funny thing is that my aunt's, all my aunts, from I guess from their growing up --- they picked up some Yiddish. When they didn't want the kids to know what they were talking about, they would speak Yiddish. But you know, after a while, you pick up little bits and pieces. I never spoke Yiddish. I mean, I did take Spanish in school, but other than that Pig Latin.

SM: *laughing* Oh yeah.

SJ: That was my language.

SM: So you already said after college you decided to move to Queens because your girlfriend lived out there. How did you feel about leaving the Bronx at the time? Like was that kind of a conscious leaving or?

SJ: Well, it was a little bit more than that. While I was in college, I worked at the bookstore. And when I graduated --- the people that owned the bookstore owned several other college bookstores, LaGuardia College, Kingsborough Community College, then they started running the bookstore at the State University at Old Westbury --- and they asked if I would want to manage that store. I was the assistant manager at Lehman at the time, and I didn't have any job opportunities, so I said, "Yes, sure." But driving from the Bronx out to Westbury every day was a little bit of a *schlep*. So I guess moving to Queens also helped with the commute. I didn't have to go over the bridge day and pay the toll. They weren't paying me big bucks. That was also part of the reason that I ultimately moved. I didn't stay there very long. I worked there for maybe about a year, but my brother was still living out in California and

became very sick. It was a freak thing, he had a tooth infection that went down into his lungs, and he was in the intensive care there for several weeks, so my parents and I went out to California --- he lived in Berkeley at the time --- so we went there. And when I came back, I just decided enough of the bookstore, I'm gonna get a real job. It's time to put on my pants and get a big boy job. I just quit and started looking for a job.

SM: So, did you notice, I guess at the time, did you notice that the Bronx was changing in your neighborhood or just in general in other areas?

SJ: Not so much at that time. But I do periodically go back there. My best friend, we're like brothers, he grew up with me in the Bronx. We did everything together: went to school, we played sports together, in the boy scouts --- I'll forgive him for finding my hat under the leaves one night --- but he's actually coming in in October for this reunion. So, you know, I go there periodically. I have noticed --- and other friends that have gone back there --- we've noticed some changes. One thing is the Bronx House, which was like a gathering point, we had --- every month or so --- they had a dance or something, it's still there. Carvel is now a bodega. A lot of the stores have changed with the demographics of the area. I know that at one time I was told that there were a lot of Armenian Jews that were living there. But you can see. It's funny, because I drive by my old building and the front of my old building, it looks the same, but it looks different. Obviously some things have been upgraded in the neighborhood. But definitely the demographics are the biggest change that I see there. I actually, there have been --- I mean, there's been violence all over the place --- but recently, just a week or two ago, we saw that there was a violent incident that took place on White Plains Road and Pelham Parkway. I know exactly where that is. A couple of months ago, there was somebody that was selling fresh fruit and vegetables on the corner there, and they didn't license, so the sanitation came in confiscated all their stuff. I know it. There's a Choc-full-o-nuts right on that corner, right near where the train station is. So yeah, a lot has changed, but you kind of you say, when you see these changes in that, what was it like back then? It's funny, because I've seen pictures in the past --- Pelham Parkway, now it's a roadway and there is the park and in the middle of it --- there used to actually be a riding academy up near Pelham Bay Park. And that I've seen pictures --- first when I was in high school --- of what it used to look like many, many years ago before when they rode there. And it was all farmland. So things --- it's an evolution. There are rocks on Pelham Parkway that we used to climb on. Rocks that literally have been there for millions of years. They did a report on --- I don't know what program it was --- about some of these stones and the age of them. And it's just very interesting to find out how my old neighborhood is in the news. Something interesting that's not violent or bad news. You hate watching the news these days, because it's always bad news, so it's interesting seeing that.

SM: Yeah. And so I guess my last kind of question: when you think about the Bronx today --- not necessarily what's going on in the Bronx today, but when you think about the borough in general and your experiences there --- what kind of memories and emotions do you associate with that?

SJ: It's always going to be the center of the universe. I love going back there, for better or worse. I mean, I go by the school yard and it's not a school yard anymore. There are these temporary trailer classrooms all through the school yard, and I said, "get them out of here. This where we used to play ball." It's not the same, but still it is something very near and dear to my heart growing up there. I think it was absolutely the best experience in the world growing up, and just, I said, I still keep in touch. One of these days, I should sit down and see, but I probably keep --- maybe not every day, but you're on Facebook with them. You see it's their birthday, you wish them happy birthday. If they have some good news. I found that one of our good friends passed away, and they don't live locally but it's just sad you've got these things. But it's just --- my wife grew up in --- well she was born in Brooklyn, and they moved to Queens. And she had a couple of friends. Nowhere near the amount that I had, and I just cherish the fact that I'm still able to somehow keep in touch with them. A lot of them moved down to Florida, and I don't see them on a regular basis, but I see them on Facebook and I still, you know, I still get to wish them, and they wish me, happy birthday, happy anniversary. So, I mean, that's the biggest thing is just keeping the memories and it's something I'll never forget. It was really a really big part of my life.

SM: Absolutely. Thank you.