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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Sophia Maier: Tell me about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

Stuart Rudnick: Well, my family grew up in the Lower East Side. And when they had a chance to move out --- because it was pretty slummy in the Lower East Side --- so they had an opportunity. There was a new projects being built, called the Sedgwick Projects in the West Bronx, off of 174 and University Avenue. So when they had the opportunity to move, that's exactly what we did. So they moved into the projects in the Bronx. And I was born in '51, I think they were already living there. And we lived there till 1968. And then we moved to Co-op City, which is another part of the Bronx. And part of the reason my parents moved, they felt the neighborhood was changing quite a bit. And so we essentially went from one project to the other, but this was considered, I guess, a move up. There was more space, and, you know, it just seemed like it would be a nicer environment.

SM: So tell me a little bit about the Sedgwick Projects or the area when you were growing up? What kind of people lived in a neighborhood? What kind of things you'd like to do?

SR: It was a great place to grow up. Nobody locked their doors. Everyone knew each other. Parents left their kids with people next door. I mean, literally, it was, I mean, no one locked their doors. I don't know how else to say it. It was a beautiful place to grow up. And there were lots of friends, lots of people to play --- you know, we didn't have a lot of possessions, so we play things like stickball and marbles and ringalivio, and, you know, all the kinds of games that you didn't really need things for, to buy. And parents --- I think, at least in the projects, pretty much we left, went out, played, and then we came in for dinner, other than when we were going to school. So, that was pretty much the environment, no locked doors. We lived on the first floor. And everyone knew each other.

SM: Was it a predominantly Jewish area at the time?

SR: I would say --- I wouldn't say it was predominantly Jewish, I would say it was predominantly white. Although the neighborhood was a mixed neighborhood. As you went outside of the projects, there were more, there were black and Hispanic communities. But it was all, you know, relatively peaceful. And I think there were a decent amount of Jewish people, but they were also other nationalities as well.

SM: And so you said there weren't many tensions between either kind of ethnic groups or different racial groups?

SR: Not really, not really. As we got older, things started changing a little bit. Some of the neighborhoods, surrounding neighborhoods, seemed to become areas that we tried to avoid. But all in

all, it was a fairly mixed neighborhood. I'm not sure exactly what caused the mass exodus and how everyone knew it was time to do that. I don't really, totally understand that. I'm not sure many people do.

SM: Yeah, absolutely. And we'll get we'll get a little more into Co-op City later. But I know a lot of people that I've spoken to point to the opening of Co-op City as --- not even so much as leaving --- but as a, like you said, kind of an opportunity for better things as the neighborhood's themselves were kind of changing in a negative way.

SR: And more space.

SM: But what kind of kind of shops or other amenities do you remember going to in the neighborhood?

SR: Really, nothing other than the local candy store, the local bakery, and the delicatessen, and the supermarket. Those were your basic. There was no real shopping, if you wanted to buy clothes and stuff like that you went to Fordham Road where there was stores --- which you wouldn't know --- but Alexander's, places that have closed. That's where you went shopping, but in the immediate neighborhood it was really just the local supermarket, candy store, delicatessen, and bakery.

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

SR: My father was a truck driver. And my mom --- which was typical in those days --- took care of the kids. There were four of us, so she was home taking care of the kids.

SM: And so did either of them attain any college education?

SR: Neither one. And neither one graduated high school.

SM: Oh, okay. So let's talk a little bit about school. Do you have any memories from public school or junior high school that stand out to you?

SR: Yeah, I mean, we walked to both the public school and junior high school. And both of those schools were --- you know, I have relatively good memories of both. High school, I went to the High School of Science. But my memory of both schools was good education. And learned a lot, sort of set me up for high school. I skipped a grade, they had the SP's back then --- I don't know if you've heard of that --- so I was in the two year SP's, so I skipped the eighth grade.

SM: So then you went to Bronx High School of Science.

SR: I went to Science and then from there, I went to CCNY.

SM: Okay. And so, at Science during that time, did you get involved in any kind of extracurricular activities or anything like that?

SR: I was involved not a super amount. I found Science very challenging for me. Most of the time I spent studying and doing homework and trying to keep up with the kids that were much smarter than me. I didn't really have fond memories of Science. It was a little too much pressure for me.

SM: And do you have any memories of the 1967-1968 teachers strike?

SR: No, but I have memories of the Vietnam riots at the beginning of CCNY. But not the teachers strike. I don't really remember that.

SM: Well, what were those --- what were your experiences with the Vietnam protests?

SR: Oof. Well, as I began CCNY, the riots --- it was really quite violent, and school was closed at the beginning of my school year. So it was a very volatile time. Wasn't a good time in this country, although isn't much of a good time now either.

SM: But kind of like you said, you felt like you got a good education in the in the Bronx public school system?

SR: I do. I do. I felt the education was good, I felt part of the problem was that we didn't get much help from our parents. So we had to really do it on our own, which was fine. But I think I probably would have done better if I had a little more assistance from my parents as I was growing up and doing homework and stuff like that. But the school system itself, I thought, was more than adequate. It certainly helped me to move forward with my studies.

SM: Yeah. And so do you think that Bronx students today have the same kind of, I guess, educational level or opportunities that you did?

SR: I don't think so. Unfortunately. Even though we were considered, I would say, lower middle class at best --- we were blue collar family --- but we certainly always had food on the table, there was no food insecurity. We had clothes on our back. So we probably, even though we were in the lower blue collar class, I think we still had more --- fortunately, or unfortunately for the kids today. You know, my sense is that there are a lot more families that are divorced, single parents. And it's very hard to bring up a family --- it's hard enough with two parents, let alone with some of the situation that exists today. So my sense is that the education level is not quite the same as it might have been back when I was going to school.

SM: So changing tracks a little bit. Tell me about Jewish life growing up, was your family religious?

SR: No, very non-religious, although they wanted me to get bar mitzvah'd, which I did. But there really wasn't any Jewish education at all from my parents, other than the fact that we got bar mitzvah'd. And I did go to Hebrew school and then got bar mitzvah'd.

SM: And so did you attend an Orthodox synagogue?

SR: Well, in those days, there were no reform, so we went --- it was conservative. And so I did go to Hebrew school, and actually enjoyed it quite a bit. And staying there as a junior cantor. So I enjoyed that, but the minute I got bar mitzvah'd it was done.

SM: Yeah. So you didn't keep kosher?

SR: No.

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

SR: My parents spoke Yiddish when they didn't want us to understand what they were saying.

SM: Yes, that seems to be a very common trend.

SR: Yes, yes.

SM: Oh, but you don't, and you and your siblings never learned?

SR: No, I mean, I speak a little Spanish just from learning it at school. And I did learn Hebrew, though I don't really remember it. Whatever I studied the either in Hebrew school or regular school was the only other language education I had.

SM: So tell me a little bit about moving to Co-op City. You said that --- or I guess, how did you feel about moving there at the time?

SR: You know, it didn't really matter to me, because I was now getting older. I was 17. And in our family, certainly, the idea was to get out of the house as quickly as possible, as soon as you were old enough to be able to make money and get out on your own. The Co-op City move was good because we had more space, and I only had to share a room with one brother instead of having three people in the room. So, in that sense it was, it was helpful. And I think I was just beginning college, so, you know, the transportation and getting to CCNY was a little bit different. But moving to Co-op City was somewhat inconsequential. Went along with it until I was able to get out on my own.

SM: Yeah, so when did you end up deciding to leave the Bronx?

SR: I left the Bronx. In probably, I think was the late 70s. Moved to Yonkers. And I was seeing --- let's see, in '69 I started dating my wife --- who wasn't a my wife then --- but we started dating in '69 and we got married in '75. I was living with her in a different part of the Bronx, Mosholu Parkway, and then we got our first apartment in Yonkers.

SM: Okay. And was it --- at the time --- kind of a conscious decision to leave the Bronx? Or was it something about Yonkers that you wanted?

SR: Yeah, we were definitely looking to move to Westchester County. Yeah, so Yonkers was logical next step. Close enough to everything, but just sort of moving and having, hopefully, more opportunity.

SM: Yeah. And so did you notice at the time, kind of the arson and disinvestment that was going on in other parts of the Bronx, especially the South Bronx?

SR: Yes. Yeah, I did. And I worked in the South Bronx, I worked in the produce business, so I was traveling to the South Bronx fairly regularly. When I started college, I started working part time at Hunts Point, so yeah, I saw the, unfortunately, the area's getting --- unfortunately, not really doing well. So I was traveling to the South Bronx by train. So, yeah, I did see that. And we did make a conscious choice to move out of the Bronx.

SM: And how did you feel about leaving at the time? Yeah. How did you feel?

SR: It just seemed like the next step in our evolution. As my wife and I were looking to better ourselves and stuff, we just were ready to make the next move. It wasn't difficult for us to do, we felt we had good years in the Bronx. And they were good years, they were very good years, but it was time for us to find places in Westchester County for us to live. We thought it would be more suitable for us.

SM: And so once you left, did you ever return to the Bronx?

SR: Well, I went back to the Bronx all the time, because my wife's mother lived in the Bronx and my mother lived in the Bronx. So we were always going back to Co-op City and to Mosholu Parkway. We were in the Bronx all the time.

SM: And so have you been back recently?

SR: We, let's see. Yeah. We have friends who live on the Grand Concourse, near Mosholu Parkway, the end of the Grand Concourse. So, you know, we see them from time to time. We go to the Bronx Zoo, Botanical Gardens, Arthur Avenue.

SM: I live on Arthur and 188th, so...

SR: Ah, yes. So we are still quite familiar with the Bronx and do go there.

SM: And so do you think that the Bronx has made improvements since that difficult period in the 70s and 80s?

SR: I think it has. We have friends who've stayed in the Bronx, and have nice apartments where they are. I think there has been an improvement in the Bronx. And hopefully there'll be more investment and more opportunities for people, because, you know, the Bronx is really a wonderful place. And I spent 18, the first 18 plus years of my life in the Bronx.

SM: No, absolutely. And so my last kind of question is, when you think about the Bronx today --- not necessarily what's going on in the Bronx, but when you think back --- what kind of memories and emotions do you associate with it?

SR: I have nothing but great memories of the Bronx. I wouldn't trade my childhood for anything. To be able to grow up in a place where you never locked your doors, where, literally, I could go next door and someone was always there to watch out for me. Parents trusted other parents to watch kids if they had to step out. It was really almost a communal kind of experience. And it was really a great way to grow up. So I have very fond memories of that, and, you know, I'm glad that I had the opportunity to grow up like that. I also feel that growing up in the projects --- in Sedgwick Projects and Co-op City --- also was very helpful to me growing up in the concrete jungle. And knowing what that's like living in the projects and growing up in a blue collar family. So yeah, I have very good memories of the Bronx, and wouldn't trade it for anything.

SM: That's great. Do you have anything else you'd like to add? You think I missed out on?

SR: Well, I guess, the only other thing I would say is, I would like to understand more exactly how, why there was a mass migration. I mean, you know, we were in the middle of it, but I don't quite understand how that could happen and how neighborhoods could just change like that and people could just all decide to go. You know, most of the people went either Co-op City or LeFrak City in Queens. I think those are the two main areas, at least from the Sedgwick Projects. So I wish I understood more about that, you know?

SM: Do you have any memories of kind of what the adults were talking about at the time? Or were you kind of shielded from all of that?

SR: You know, I was shielded in the sense that parents made their own decisions and didn't discuss it with their kids. But I always felt that they were nervous about the neighborhood changing and wanted to find a better place to live, even though we were all getting older and getting ready to move out of the house. I think they, my parents, were also looking to have more space and maybe just a better quality of living.

SM: Yeah. Well, thank you.