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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Sophia Maier: All right. So if you wanted to start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

Ellen Newman: Okay, my grandparents came to this country as very young children. Well for them, and, you know, I guess they were all originally on the Lower East Side, but they ended up making their home in the Bronx. So both of my parents are from the Bronx, all four of my grandparents lived there. I was born in 1953 in Bronx Hospital, and spent --- I was educated I went to PS 114, which was shouting distance from Yankee Stadium. Then I went to Macombs Junior High School. And then I went to Taft High School, on the Concourse, then I went to Lehman College, because ---

SM: All Bronx education!

EN: Yes, all Bronx education. And I got my master's at Lehman. Also, by that time, we had left the area around Yankee Stadium and we moved up to Scott Tower, which is across from Bronx Science and down the street from Clinton High School, so I used to walk to school. The number four train was right in our --- literally in our backyard. And then I started teaching for a couple --- in the mid 70s there was a terrible budget crisis in New York City, so I couldn't get a teaching job right away. That's what I was trained to do. And I didn't start teaching until 1977. In the Bronx, at Junior High School 80 on Mosholu Parkway. Yeah, so that kind of takes me through. But it was such a great place to grow up. We used to spend the summers up in the country; sometimes it was Sullivan County in Monticello, sometimes it was across the river in Ulster County, in Dutchess County, but we had tons of freedom. We lived two blocks from my mother's parents, and a bus ride away from my father's parents. My folks had a car, you know, so

SM: What did your parents do for a living?

EN: My dad was an accountant, college educated. He didn't have a CPA. So, for a long time, he was in private accounting, but then he would work for the IRS. So he had a federal position. He did large cases, he didn't do individuals. And my mom had some college, but she worked as a bookkeeper and rose to a pretty substantial position. She ended up in a job where she was the only woman in her department. So you know, they were both in plight. I think she went back to work when I was about seven. She'd stayed home --- my brother is almost three years younger than I am, okay --- so she stayed home for a number of years. Then we were kind of on our own.

SM: And what neighborhood did you guys live in? Close to Yankee, so ---

EN: We grew up in what's considered to be the Highbridge section.

SM: Okay, yeah.

EN: And then we moved to --- I don't know what to say --- maybe the Bedford Park section is what it's called. You know, I described it Paul Avenue --- it's like kind of Mosholu/ Bedford Park. So we just went from the south, 169 Street to 205 Street. And so, when I started working, I was actually able to walk to work which was pretty cool.

SM: And what was the building that you grew up in like?

EN: The building was --- okay, so the building in Highbridge was a rental. I think my parents made --- I think rent was maybe \$60 a month at the time. You smile when you think about it.

SM: Of course!

EN: When we moved up to Scott Tower, that was a middle income, a Mitchell Lama Co Op. So there was a small buy in fee or whatever --- I mean, it was not for profit, and you had to meet certain income criteria to live there. And I seem to recall that the monthly fees were maybe two or three hundred dollars a month.

SM: So a little more. And so was it --- either when you were in Highbridge or when you moved up there--- would you say it was majority Jewish or was it kind of like mixed ethnically? Racially?

EN: So I would say so my elementary school, and I was thinking about this, was somewhat mixed. I mean, there were a lot of Jewish kids. There were Irish kids, Italian kids, we had Puerto Rican kids. And again, it's before, you know, Dominicans came here or Central Americans. So it was Puerto Ricans and some black kids. But you'll laugh, so there was a kid in school that everybody knew and played with, you know Little League blah, blah, blah. His name was Sammy Feinberg.

SM: Okay.

EN: Wouldn't you know he was dark skinned? Wouldn't you know, Sammy Feinberg had a Bar Mitzvah when he was 13 years old. I guess his father was Jewish. So I'm like, even the black kids in our neighborhood was Jewish --- well just this one particular. And then when I got to junior high school, it became more and more mixed, racially and religiously. And then high school, also, more and more racially, religiously mixed.

SM: Would you say that that became an issue or it was more something you thought is normal?

EN: I thought it was totally normal, I had no issues with that. I mean, my father was much more liberal than my mother, you know. But I had friends --- in fact some of them, you know, some of the kids --- Facebook has been a big thing, of course. Even for people --- well, I guess mostly for people my age nowadays. But I still keep in touch with a lot of my friends from all of my schooling, all of my Bronx people, you know, we just have a lot of history. And, you know, you talk about --- so one of my friends was this black girl, Patrice Johnson. Well it turns out Patrice knows my cousin's husband, because they knew each other from Columbia School of Journalism. That was just a funny thing. But for me, it was normal. Scott Tower, I want to say though, was more Jewish. Perhaps --- and I don't know, I moved there when I was 14 years old --- but perhaps because of the financial criteria that you needed to get in there, you know, to be eligible to move in. I'm just trying to, I mean, I definitely --- my best friend at the time there was Italian, but you I'm just trying to think if there were Latinos or black people and honestly, not that I can think of off hand. Maybe, maybe something will hit me later on.

SM: No, that's kind of, I guess, generally that, and Co Op City and places like that were generally --- did have, you know, less but especially like Parkchester, right. And usually because of those income requirements more than anything.

EN: Yes. Yeah.

SM: Um, so let's see. How did you feel about the neighborhood growing up there? Or like, did you ever feel unsafe or what kind of things did you experience?

EN: Never, ever. And I have to tell you --- I retired in 2009 and I continued to work in the Bronx until then. But in the last three years of my job, I was assigned citywide, I was the Senior Executive Director of Special Education Enrollment, and I had to go and visit schools all over New York City. I would take the subways, I walked through Harlem, you know, I mean not through the gentrified areas. I never --- I just never felt unsafe. You know, there were times on the subway. I mean, you have to be alert on the subway no matter what. But I don't know with if I'm unusual, but I just, I never felt unsafe.

SM: That's how you feel.

EN: I worked with special needs kids in the Bronx. I mean, that was my area of expertise, special education. So, in my second assignment, after --- and it's a long story and it doesn't matter --- but I ended up leaving Mosholu Parkway and I went down to school in the Tremont area, but like middle Tremont area: East 179 Street by Crotona Park. That was a rough neighborhood at that time. I used to step over crack vials when I got out of my car, you know, because from Highland Mills, I had to drive; there was no way to get there otherwise. The rats, the school was located by chop shops, and every so often the cops will come and raid the place. It was challenging, but I never felt unsafe. Of the rats, maybe.

laughing

SM: More than the people!

EN: We'd have parent teacher conferences. I mean, I had --- I was always in junior high schools. I had some big bad kids in my classes. I mean, some of them ended up in jail, but they never scared me. They never --- because I couldn't have done my job if they scared me. You know I used to *points finger at screen*

SM: Yeah, "I'll tell you!"

EN: Exactly, you know. Yeah.

SM: So tell me a little bit about Jewish life growing up. Was your family religious?

EN: My grandparents. Well, my mother's parents were religious, my grandpa davened three times a day with the --- he wrapped tefillin. And in those days there wasn't a place you could live where you couldn't find a synagogue walking distance away. And it's funny because I keep telling [my husband] Irv, he says, "Oh, my family couldn't afford to join a synagogue." Nobody joined a synagogue back then! I honestly do not know how they were able to support a building and a rabbi. I don't know. But we went with my grandparents to their synagogue, which was an orthodox synagogue. My mother, I mean my father went along with because he didn't have a choice, but my mother kept kosher, so we have four sets of dishes, you know, for every day and then for Passover, meat and dairy. There were kosher butchers all over the place. You know, it wasn't any kind of problem to be Jewish in the Bronx at that time. I wasn't sent to Hebrew school because girls didn't do that. But then, as I got older, I went --- there was another synagogue up the hill, conservative synagogue --- I used to just join them every so often, you know, for classes, I guess. And I'd say this would be on a Saturday, it was considered to be like a little torah study or whatever. And then they'd have, you know, I don't know what you call it --- I know Friday night it's called an oneg --- I don't know what that is Saturday afternoon.

SM: Was it all women? Was it all girls?

EN: It was separated in my grandparents' synagogue because it was orthodox. Yes, separate seating. In the conservative, no, it was not separate. My brother became bar mitzvah when we moved up to Scott Tower. And he went to an orthodox synagogue there, Young Israel. And I remember --- and again, we didn't *air quotes* belong there, but that's where he went. And I remember when he was studying for his bar mitzvah. They gave him --- we had reel to reel tape recorders then --- and the rabbi gave him a tape and said, "here study this." And we were sitting upstairs, I was upstairs with my mother and, you know, the women. And I remember my brother was it was almost like he was benching. And we said, "what the heck was that?" He said, "I was so nervous. My knees were weak." *laughing* And that was kind of the end of religious education. I didn't become bat mitzvah until 1995, when Rabbi Loeb had a class going and there were 13 of us who mostly had the same experience. When we grew up, the girls didn't

do that kind of thing. And my mother gave up being kosher because in those days --- she fancied, it was called saucy shrimp cocktail. It was a little glass dish. And there were little shrimp in it with cocktail sauce. And she said, "God's not going to kill me for this." So we had to be discreet when my grandparents were around. My father's parents were not kosher.

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

EN: No. It's interesting, back in those days my father's parents spoke Yiddish among themselves. My father understood Yiddish. My grandfather used to read the *Forverts* Yiddish newspaper --- that's on my father's side of the family. And on my mother's side of the family, neither of my grandparents had accents. They came here as very young children, like two or three years old. And they were so anxious to assimilate only English was spoken at home, although certainly they understood Yiddish, but they never --- I never heard them speak it. Only those typical phrase that you're probably acquainted with.

SM: Yes. Yeah, back to school a little bit. Did you feel like you got a good education? I mean, obviously, you went on to get, you know, your college degree and master's, but just in the Bronx public school education. Did you feel like you had a good experience?

EN: The best, the best. We had --- again at 114 --- all the teachers were experienced. I don't even know. You know, we just didn't know what religion they were, unless it was a giveaway. You know, I had Miss Mahoney in fourth grade, and then I skipped fifth grade. And then we have Mr. Mulley (sp?). And he, I want to say, was one of the most formative teachers in my life. I had him from 1963 to 1964. And I remember on November 22, we were sitting in the classroom, I'm not exactly sure where he was, but he came back in. He was a tough guy, but he came back into the classroom and he was crying because JFK had been killed. And, you know, [he] was an Irish Catholic. I mean, as a human, but I think ---

SM: Certainly, yeah

EN: It was just, and what's interesting with Mr. Mulley, he passed away about, I want to say, three years ago, but I went with a classmate of my brothers actually to see him, we reconnected. And we met him for lunch. It was just, and I don't know if --- you know, we spent a whole year in their classroom 10 months. And he brought the class picture along, he knew who everyone was. So elementary school was -- it was great. In junior high school --- so I was only in junior high school for two years. Because they truncated. Most of my friends, well the people who skipped mostly were too young to go into a two year special program where you skip again, so I was in a three year program. I wasn't thrilled with junior high school, because most of my friends --- because of where I lived --- I had to go to a different junior high school than most of my friends. But then, I mean, the teachers were fine. You know, that wasn't the issue, the teaching.

SM: That's not your main concern in junior high school though.

EN: Exactly, friends. And then in high school, most of us all got back together again. And, you know, I started high school in 1967. I graduated in 1970. Those were interesting times. So, you know, we --- I was a good student, I wasn't a great student. But that was on me, that wasn't on my teachers. I was in AP classes; I was in AP English. And our teacher took us to see Hair on Broadway. Can you imagine, you know there's nudity in the show? Can you have a teacher doing that now? No. Then there were teaching strikes during those times. You know, the Vietnam War, and then in college also, there was a lot of turbulence in those days.

SM: Do you remember anything about the 1968 teacher's strike, having been a student at the time?

EN: Yes. So we had --- they assigned us to another site to take makeup classes and it was ridiculous. I mean, it was kind of ridiculous. You know, we were mostly smart kids, so we could figure it out. I mean, when I skipped fifth grade, they gave us a packet to take home, "study this over the summer, read this." I don't feel like my life has been shortchanged because I didn't go to fifth grade. But Irv was actually a teacher in 1968 and he had a family by then. He got married the first time in 1964 and his first daughter was born in 1967. So, I think he --- I don't know if he crossed the picket line or if he was driving a cab at that time, but you know, he had a family to support but as a student you know ---

SM: It wasn't overly impactful.

EN: It wasn't overly impactful. And I mean, we knew about the stuff going on in, what was it?

SM: Brownsville

EN: Brownsville, Ocean Hill-Brownsville. I mean, we knew all about that stuff. And you know, nobody faulted the teachers in any way, shape, or form. But, you know, again, as good students, I don't feel like anything was missing in my life as a result.

SM: And I mean, you can definitely speak to this as an educator as well. Do you believe that Bronx students today have access to the same sort of resources or quality teachers that you did when you attended school in the Bronx?

EN: Okay, so I got to visit again --- I was the district administrator, I was the head honcho, basically, for special education for district 10. And then a couple of years later there was a reorganization, so it was districts 9 and 10. So basically, it was the entire west side of the Bronx. And part of my job --- and again, I started doing this in '97 until 2007, before I went to the Chancellor's office --- so I had 10 years doing that. And there were a couple of instances. I mean, I visited classrooms and specific classrooms, you know, and I would always write a follow up report on what I saw for the principal. I would always

go with the principal. But because I came from the teaching profession in the schools, you know, I wasn't some outsider.

SM: You knew first hand.

EN: They knew who I was. They also trusted my opinion on these things. And there were times where, I have to tell you, there were teachers who were just terrible. And I would work in collaboration with the teacher or the immediate supervisor in that particular school to — how should I say — I remember one instance, and this was in a Riverdale school, where I sat for two hours in the classroom with the special education supervisor just observing this teacher. She was a mess. She happened to be a Jewish teacher, you know, but she was a mess. And she ended up --- I wrote the report, sent it to the principal --- and before the teacher even looked at the report, she said, “I know what it's going to say and I'm resigning.”

SM: You're like, makes my life so much easier.

EN: Yes! Some people just needed to be in a different profession, you know, because they were not meeting the needs --- the special needs kids need more support, not less. I worked with a very tough population, and at that time, I was also overseeing --- there was a committee on special education --- and they had a chairperson that I worked collaboratively with. We were on the same floor in the building, and we worked very closely together. It was another time, I went into a bilingual special education class in the Norwood section of the Bronx. And the teacher, I don't know what month it was, let's say it was February and she had work on the bulletin boards from October. You know something like that. I go, “what's going on?” And she couldn't give me a satisfactory answer. So I went through children's work, blah, blah, blah. And she ended up --- she didn't file charges against me, but she was --- so she ended up going to the deputy superintendent and complained and he ended up going to the school. I think she ended up --- they brought termination charges against her and I think she was terminated because she was terrible. So part of what I had to do is ensure that all of the kids, no matter what section of the Bronx they were, from, you know, from my side --- from the west one --- had access to materials, teachers, part of my job also was teacher training. So I did that. I worked with principals. Cause, you know, just because you're poor and you're from the Bronx --- or rich and from the Bronx --- doesn't mean you shouldn't have the best. So I tried.

SM: Yeah. So tell me a little bit about why you decided to move out of the Bronx. And when you decided to do that.

EN: I moved out of the Bronx, my father stayed in the Bronx. He --- my parents separated, my mother moved to Yonkers --- my father stayed in Scott Tower. And in 1978, I was 25 years old. I said, it's time to move out, you know, but I was still working on Mosholu Parkway, so I got an apartment in New Rochelle. Because it was still close to the school, I had a car, and it wasn't so far away. My grandparents, all four of them, ended up moving to Co-op city.

SM: Okay. And when they moved, or when you moved up to New Rochelle, was it like, did you feel as though you were trying to get out of the Bronx or what you were trying to get to was pulling you in? Does that make sense?

EN: Yes.

SM: Kind of like, just why?

EN: There were certain details I'm not going to get into, but I liked where I moved in New Rochelle, there was tennis and beach clubs. And, you know, so for me, it was more about a social thing. Getting away from anything. My grandparents, on the other hand, moved to Co-op city, I think, because the neighborhoods were changing. And that's, you know, just how it was. They were --- the buildings opened in, I think, they moved in 1968-1969, in the late 60s.

SM: Yeah that's the year the buildings opened up.

EN: So my grandparents were in building one, section one. And they had been on Shakespeare Avenue for really long. I mean, decades and decades and decades. And at that time, they were as old as I am now. You know, and we're now living in a 55 and over community. So I guess they just --- they looked at it as a new place. I don't know if they were running from anything, but all of their friends were going elsewhere. And my father's parents went to section five on Hutchinson River Parkway. And again, the same things. The neighborhoods were changing, there weren't as many Jews there. You know, a lot of the Jewish families were going to Rockland County. I don't think too many were going to Westchester County, because it was just more expensive than Rockland. And some were going to Long Island, because back in those days --- I mean, I remember my uncle, my mother's brother, moved out to Nassau County. He got married in 1962. I want to say he bought his house in the mid 60s. He paid at that time, I don't know, maybe \$25,000 for his house. And he's still in that house, he's 85 years old. His wife died two years ago, but he's still in that house. So, you know, things were changing. And I guess people --- I mean, I remember our building super was Puerto Rican. And they were a really nice family. You know, nobody had a problem with that. But, I don't know, how should I --- Jews generally liked to be among other Jews. And I guess, when you grew up in the Bronx, it surely wasn't exclusively Jewish, but, as I mentioned, there was always a synagogue a few blocks away.

SM: The community was present.

EN: Yes, the community was present, very much unlike being in Monroe. I mean, how does Emma Green's mother know me? From temple, you know. So either you affiliated with a temple or didn't. And the first house we lived in in Monroe, before we moved to Highland Mills, there was no Jews there. And I remember one of my neighbors --- they were just building Cromwell Hill Commons --- And one of my

neighbors said, “this place was very nice until all Jews — city people moved in.” And the Zuckerman brothers were building Cromwell Hill Commons, so I knew exactly what she was saying under the surface. My daughter found a swastika in one of her textbooks, she found one on the back of the bus seat. And I have to tell you that never never in the Bronx never, never, never in the Bronx --- the only time I ever felt any semblance of anti-semitism is when we moved up to Orange County.

SM: Yeah. That's true. So let's say, um, you kind of just answered basically all my questions with that. Well, obviously, I had a question that said, “Did you return to the Bronx,” but obviously, you were still teaching in the Bronx for a long time. So I guess more like --- what was your perception while you were teaching during the late 70s and the 80s about like, like you said, kind of changing neighborhoods or did you have the same thoughts about the Bronx that you did when you were growing up there? As it was kind of changing and you were teaching and things like that?

EN: I did. I still have the fondest warmest recollections. I don't think there's a single thing I would change. You know, I often and those of us who grew up in the Bronx --- I imagine people from the other boroughs feel the same way --- but I almost --- I did live in an elevator building, you know, so when I was a young child, we lived on the sixth of a sixth floor buildings. And then we moved to the second floor, so if I wanted to take the elevator I could, if I didn't want to I didn't have to. But when we moved to Scott Tower, we were on the seventh floor. And I remember taking the elevator up or down and every time the elevator door would open, you'd smell whoever was cooking what, at that time. And you could always go outside and find people to play with. Always. There was Little League. We had --- there was a big YMHA on the Concourse. They had a swimming pool, and I didn't go there often, but I did sometimes to socialize. And I often, we often, those of us who raised our kids in single family homes, said, “gee, you know our kids really missed out on having that kind of experience.” Just because I think it made us more worldly. You know, I think when you grow up in the suburbs, you're often insulated from so many things. I know when we moved up to Monroe we did it because we needed a bigger house. We had an apartment in New Rochelle and it was one co-op and we only had two bedrooms and I had two stepdaughters already. And we wanted to have our own kids. But I just --- it was so white --- Monroe in 1982 was so white and so not Jewish unless you went to a synagogue. And, you know, over time, I would actually bring my kids on school --- when they were young --- on school holidays and whatever, to work with me in the Bronx, so they could see kids who looked different than they did. And, you know, as they look back, they always enjoyed those times not because they were coming to work with mom, but they were like, celebrities, you know. I remember taking Erica, my older daughter, to the Bronx Zoo on a field trip with my class. They would take the carriage and this and that. Again, I never -- - I wanted my kids to grow up knowing that people didn't come in only white. Or only Jewish. You know, I mean, they knew about that, although I sent Erica --- there was no Mensch Makers [preschool] at the time --- I sent her up to Middletown to what was called the Hebrew Day School of Orange County, and Jess went to Mensch Makers, you know, because otherwise they were never going to meet Jewish kids.

SM: Yeah, so let's see. So I guess, do you just, generally speaking, do you think that representations of the Bronx or residents of the Bronx in the media represent how it is? Or do you think that it presents a different story than you've experienced?

EN: So what I think --- our local news here is Philadelphia. And all you hear about are shootings, you know, all the bad stuff. And I think that's how it is in most urban areas. You don't hear about the good stuff, the stuff that works. And there's a lot of stuff that works. You know, there's a lot of stuff that doesn't, but I would say most stuff does. I have to say that one of the things that bothers me is --- I know that there is a lot a lot a lot of gentrification going on in the Bronx right now. And it worries me, because where do people go? What happens if you have to leave? Yep. I just read a book. I was a discussion leader for my book club here. And we read a book called *Nomadland* and it won the Academy Award for Best Picture last year. And it's where do you go when you can't stay where you are? And that's how I feel about what's going on in the Bronx. I mean, I'd be happy if they were fixing up the building --- although I have to --- there was something that I did the other day just for fun before I knew I was going to be talking to you. I happened to look at my grandparents' building on Redfin, it's a real estate site. And there's an apartment in my grandparents building that is listed at \$166,000. Now, it might not sound like a lot, but I think my grandparents must be rolling over in their graves to hear this kind of thing, because they could never have afforded. I don't know. You know, I mean, if it's for people in the Bronx who are doing well, who can afford 100? But this is Shakespeare Avenue. I mean, the building is the same, the guts are the same --- that particular building was built in 1900.

SM: Yeah.

EN: You know, so I was talking to my brother about it because where we went to school, near Yankee Stadium, they are charging a lot more than that for apartments. People want to pied-à-terre. You know, you can't go to Brooklyn, you can't go to Manhattan or Queens. Who wants to go to Staten Island? So where do you go? To the Bronx.

SM: Absolutely. Um, yeah, so I guess last question. Do you still go down to the Bronx today? Have you visited recently?

EN: So the summer before COVID, I think I told you, maybe I didn't. So I have --- one of my daughters--- did you go to Hebrew school at Monroe Temple?

SM: Yeah.

EN: Did you know either? You're probably too young, Erica or Jessica Newman. They both worked with Cindy Gelfan. You're probably too young.

SM: The younger one Jessica sounds familiar. But I wouldn't --- if I saw a picture probably.

EN: Well, she's 35. So anyway, we've taken them. Erica, my oldest daughter, lives in Israel. She's been there for 15 years. Rabbi Loeb did such a good job. She went to camp, she went to Crane Lake Camp, fell in love with an Israeli guy who was working there. And after I told her, "please don't marry an Israeli," she didn't listen to me. But anyway, they love the Yankees love, love, love. And they all --- all of the Israelis have been to Yankee Stadium several times. I park my car on the street, I know all the back streets, I know how to get around traffic there. So we were there, not last summer, maybe the summer before? Yeah, it was two summers ago we were there. So I have no problem --- we go to eat on Arthur Avenue. And yeah, I have no problem going back. Yeah, I love it. But I mean, right now I can't. Erica wants to go again this summer. I said, "Erica, I'm not." We have the Philly stadium here, you know, if you want to go see baseball. So for me, it's just that it's more of a schlep. But like one of my best friends --- my best friend who I've worked with, then she came to work for me --- I snagged from the school, she worked for me. She's Puerto Rican. And she lives in Parkchester with her companion. So we go there periodically. In fact, waiting to hear from the travel agent. We're thinking about going on a cruise together. But you know, so the only times I go back now is if I have a reason to visit someone or go someplace. I went to City Island for dinner not so long ago. But yeah, I miss the Bronx. Would I want to move back? I'm 15 minutes from my daughter and three of my grandchildren down here. But it was an experience that I would not change for anything in the world. And I wish that everybody could have that kind of experience. How do do you feel about being in the Fordham section?

SM: I absolutely love it. And it's like, I'll stop the recording because that's all I needed. Anyways, that was really wonderful. Thank you.