2023

Jewish Life in the Bronx

Julian Voloj
Reyna Stovall
Sophia Maier

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Jewish Life in the Bronx

Julian Voloj, Photography
Reyna Stovall FCLC ’25
Sophia Maier FCRH ’23

With memories about life in the Bronx by Harry Goldstein and Joy Ann Becker

Edited by
Magda Teter

O’Hare Special Collections
Walsh Family Library, Fordham University
2023
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Fordham’s Bronx Jewish History Project: An Introduction

Since 2015, Fordham has been building a Judaica collection. While the university already had an outstanding Holocaust collection—the Sydney Rosenblatt Holocaust Collection, which boasts over 10,000 items, including books, ephemera and material objects, and a teaching collection in Jewish history, with standard scholarly literature. It did not have a Judaica collection that would spotlight the historical and geographic breadth of Jewish culture. When I arrived in 2015, with a passion to teach with historical artifacts, with the support of the late Provost Stephen Freedman and Director of Fordham Libraries Linda Loschiavo, I began to acquire Judaica for the Special Collections and archives. The first items were some sixteenth-century works, including an expurgated copy of the 1546/7 Daniel Bomberg’s edition of Sefer Mitsvot Gadol, known as the SeMaG, by Moses of Coucy and Moses Isserless’s Zot Torat Hatat, published in Cracow in 1591. Over the years, we collected hundreds of Judaica, from early Hebrew prints, including an incunabula edition of the SeMaG, through centuries of examples of haggadot (our oldest original haggadah is from 1663, but we also have magnificent facsimile editions of several medieval haggadot, donated by Dr. James Leach; our newest from 2023). The collection now represents various aspects of Jewish life on all permanently inhabited continents.

A few years ago, I realized that while we were collecting Judaica from all over north America, India, Argentina, Europe, Africa, and now even Australia, we did not have anything from the Bronx. Our first Bronx item was the invitation to a bar mitzvah from 1951. Then came a few other ephemera.

In April 2022, Julian Voloj presented his photographs of the remnants of the vibrant Jewish life in the Bronx in a webinar. After the talk, Ellen Meshnick, whose parents grew up in the Bronx sent us a small family archive—a treasure trove giving us a glimpse of Jewish life in the Bronx in the 1930s and 1940s.
So, when we dedicated the Henry S. Miller Judaica Research Room to honor the Fordham trustee’s decades of service and support of the university, we opened an exhibit of Julian Voloj’s photographs curated by Ray Felix and accompanied it with an exhibit curated by Reyna Stovall FCLC ’25 spotlighting our growing Bronx Judaica collection.

A few weeks later, when Julia Gergely published a story about the collection in The Jewish Week, we began to receive many inquiries about the project from people who grew up, or whose parents grew up in the Bronx wanting to share their documents, photographs, and stories. Fordham had already had the Bronx African American History Project directed by Professor Mark Naison, and had recently established sister projects on Bronx Italian History and Bronx Irish History, all collecting oral histories through interviews. One of the students involved in the Bronx African American History Project was Sophia Maier FCRH ’23. She worked with Mark Naison on interviews and then wrote a thesis “A New-ish Jewish Diaspora: Rethinking Perspectives on Bronx White Flight, 1960s to 1990s,” which studied how Jews began to leave the Bronx. We thus decided to launch Bronx Jewish History Project, which would begin to collect oral histories and continue to collect personal archives, focusing on the daily life of Jews in the Bronx. I want to thank Professor Daniel Soyer, an expert in American and American Jewish history, for taking a lead on this project.

In this volume, we publish Julian Voloj’s photographs along with highlights from our Bronx Jewish collection curated by Reyna Stovall, Sophia Maier’s essay, and some personal stories.

This project would not have been possible without the staunch support from the University and especially from Linda Loschiavo, Director of Fordham University Libraries, or without the enthusiasm and patience of Vivian Shen and Gabriella DiMeglio at the O’Hare Special Collections and Archives, who have been
instrumental in making the exhibits happen and in accommodating the needs of our students. The
generosity of Eugene Shvidler, who provided the seed funds for the first years of the collection, and of
Fordham Trustees Henry S. Miller, Eileen Sudler, Dario Wertheim, whose gifts have supported student
curatorial internships, sustained the larger project of using historical objects and material culture in our
classes on Jewish history and culture. Finally, and crucially, the Bronx Jewish History Project, would not
have happened without the outpouring of interest from the public and without so many wanting to share
their stories and family treasures. I want to thank Ellen Meshnick for sharing her mother’s and father’s
memorabilia and Shoshanna Sanders for sharing her father’s written memories and photographs. This
project is about a community, and it has come to life because of a community.

Magda Teter
Professor of History
The Shvidler Chair in Judaic Studies
Part I: Traces

The Remnants of Jewish New York

Photographs by Julian Voloj
The Ten Commandments in the façade of a supermarket, a Star of David above the entrance of a Baptist church, a Hebrew date in the cornerstone of an apartment building—my photographs are images of remnants of a once-thriving Jewish culture.

But these images were not taken in Poland, Ukraine, or other countries that today attract American Jewish heritage tourists. These pictures were taken in New York City, the home of the largest Jewish Diaspora in the world.

My fascination with formerly Jewish neighborhoods stems from my own upbringing. Growing up Jewish in Germany, I felt that I was, myself, a remnant of a once-thriving culture. I was surrounded by former synagogues, forgotten cemeteries and other places with a Jewish past. This legacy was my heritage, and I was its keeper.

When I moved to New York City in 2003, I was fascinated by the diversity and richness of Jewish life this city had to offer. At the same time, however, I was shocked to discover that in this city that continuously reinvents itself, recent pasts were so quickly forgotten.
And yet, here in New York, I also found abandoned synagogue buildings, forgotten Jewish cemeteries, and apartment buildings with traces of their Jewish past.

I decided to document this heritage in neighborhoods such as Harlem, the South Bronx, and Brownsville—neighborhoods that very few people would now consider Jewish places. But they were in fact once home to vibrant Jewish communities.

The project has been a race against the clock, as many of the buildings are in bad condition and the threat of demolition looms. Some Jewish buildings have been reinvented as churches, community centers, and residential apartments. The photographs show synagogues without Jews, and neighborhoods with a Jewish past, but no longer a Jewish present. The black and white of the photographs gives them an historic character. They seem to be images of the past. Yet, they were taken just a few years ago.

My photographs are a re-discovery of (nearly) forgotten Jewish history, but they also examine the way Americans approach their own heritage, as well as the way culture is reborn and reinvented in a city in permanent transition.

Julian Voloj, September 2022
Essex Street
Lower East Side, Manhattan

For many American Jews, the Lower East Side represents a kind of origin myth. In this picture of Essex Street, the tenements represent the various layers of the neighborhood’s history; from old Judaica stores to Chinese bakeries to apartment rentals by Israeli brokerage.
In memory of
JOSEPH ELLIS
who departed this life
the 8th of October 1768.
In 1654, 23 Jewish refugees from Recife in Dutch Brazil, which had just been conquered by Portugal, arrived in what was then called New Amsterdam, Lower Manhattan with today’s Wall Street marking its northern border.

This group of Sephardic Jews founded North America’s first Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel, Hebrew for “Remnants of Israel”, the name reflecting their self-identification as refugees.

Their first cemetery dates to 1682 when the land was originally purchased by Joseph Bueno de Mesquita. It was in use from 1683 until 1833.
Towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled poverty and persecution in central and eastern Europe, hoping for a better life in North America.

New York became a haven for these refugees. Most of them settled on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the city’s historic immigrant neighborhood that once had hundreds of active synagogues.

While many buildings still stand today, their owners have changed. The Templo Adventista del Septimo Dia at the corner of Delancey Street and Forsyth Street was a synagogue until 1960.
Once immigrants had established themselves, many moved to the outer boroughs, seeking better living conditions. In Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a historically majority Polish neighborhood, two synagogues can still be found on Noble Street.

Here is the view from the roof towards Manhattan.
Lorelei
Grand Concourse, The Bronx

Positioned at a park at the southern end of the Grand Concourse, the Heinrich Heine Fountain was initially created for the city of Dusseldorf, Germany, where Heine was born in 1797. The fountain is inspired by Heine’s poem “The Lorelei,” one of the most famous German poems. However, growing antisemitism prevented the fountain to be erected in Germany for Heine’s centennial in 1897. Since New York had a significant population with German roots, both Jewish and non-Jewish, they decided to bring the statue to New York. While other locations were considered both in Manhattan and Brooklyn, the sculpture was ultimately unveiled at the current location in 1899, two years after the centennial of Heine’s birthday.
There are several prominent Jewish buildings along the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. While most of them were at one point synagogues, this one, dating back to 1926, is the former Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA), a Jewish community center serving primarily social not religious functions.

The YMHA was founded in New York City in 1874, followed by a YMWA – the W standing for Women’s – in 1888. Branches of YM & YWHA were established throughout the city. This one was the first in the Bronx and the forerunner of today’s Riverdale Y.
Former Talmud Torah Anshei Emeth/Burnside Jewish Center, The Bronx

Built like the YMHA in 1926, the building on 2019 Grand Street was the first home of Talmud Torah Anshei Emeth, which later became the Burnside Jewish Center. As the name indicates, it was more than just a synagogue. The building also functioned as a community center.

While today it is a church, the Jewish past is emblazoned in the façade, which shows a Star of David at the center top, as well as the Ten Commandments in Hebrew above the entrance.
KING OF GLORY TABERNACLE

"To express the reconciling and transforming love of God through Jesus Christ"
Former Talmud Torah Anshei Emeth/Burnside Jewish Center, The Bronx

Detail of the Ten Commandments in Hebrew above the entrance of the building on 2019 Grand Street.
Stars of David, The Bronx

The Star of David can often be found in the architecture of former synagogues such as in the former Temple Adath Israel, later Chevra Cheves Achim at 551 East 169th Street (L), the former Congregation Bikur Cholim, 1010 East 174th Street (R). The buildings, dating back to the 1930s, are today churches.
Dates according to the Hebrew Calendar
827 Forest Ave, The Bronx

Another indication of the Jewish past are dates according to the Hebrew calendar. There are variations in how these are displayed. On the former Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol Adath Israel at 827 Forest, the date 5673 is displayed inside a Star of David at the top of the building. The congregation was founded in 1904 and dedicated their synagogue in 1912, the year corresponding with the Hebrew date 5673.
Dates according to the Hebrew Calendar
1925 Grand Concourse, The Bronx

On the former Temple Zion, 1925 Grand Concourse, the stone on the side of the entrance shows both the year according to the Christian/Gregorian calendar, 1935, as well as the Hebrew calendar, 5695, with a Star of David in the center.
A cornerstone at the former Congregation Beth Israel on 1731 Washington Avenue has the exact date of the building’s dedication, July 29, 1934, as well as the date written in Hebrew letters (each letter has a numeric value) according to the Hebrew calendar the 17th of Av 5694.
Name References
335 Beekman Street, The Bronx

On some occasions, the church congregations now praying in former synagogues commemorate their buildings’ past in their names, for instance, the “Congregacion de Yahweh” included a menorah in the entrance sign. The church is in the former Chevrah Shomrei Shabbat on 335 Beekman Street.
Name References
1178 Nelson Street, The Bronx

The same is true for the former Jewish Center of Highbridge, 1178 Nelson Street, which now is called “Sinagoga Pentecostal Rehoboth.” Also visible in this photo the Hebrew date on the right side of the entrance, the letters corresponding with the year 1936 displayed on the left.
Ten Commandments
85 East 165th Street, The Bronx

The Tablets with the Ten Commandments are a recurrent decorative element in synagogue architecture in the Bronx, as it is at the former Adath Jeshurin, now Churst of God, at 85 East 165th Street. Barely visible is the Hebrew date on the left of the entrance.
Former Congregation Mircaz Harav, 2832 Valentine Avenue, The Bronx

On the former Congregation Mircaz Harav on 2832 Valentine Avenue, the Ten Commandments are not displayed as tablets as they were at Adath Jeshurin but spelled out in Hebrew at the top of the building underneath a Star of David.

Unlike other buildings, which now serve as houses of worship for other religious groups, this building was converted into a boxing gym.
Former Congregation Mircaz Harav, 2832 Valentine Avenue, The Bronx

On the former Congregation Mircaz Harav, now a boxing gym, on 2832 Valentine Avenue, a detail of the Star of David.
Former Hebrew Institute of University Heights,
1835 University Avenue, The Bronx

When I first photographed the former Hebrew Institute of University Heights in 2006 at 1835 University Avenue, the building was still abandoned. Since then, it has been renovated and it now functions as a Boys and Girls Club.

Above the entrance are still prominently displayed both the Star of David and the Ten Commandments.

Not far from here grew up Stanley Lieber, son of Romanian immigrants, who later became one of the most prominent figures in the American comic book industry under his pen name Stan Lee.

University Avenue at the corner of Brandt Place was recently co-named Stan Lee Way.
Former Hebrew Institute of University Heights, 
1835 University Avenue, The Bronx

The Ten Commandments above the entrance to the former Hebrew Institute of University Heights, now Boys and Girls Club.
Former Adath Israel/Beth Hamidrash Hagadol
1589 Washington Avenue, The Bronx

This prominent synagogue building served both Adath Israel and Beth Hamidrash Hagadol before becoming a Christian house of worship. The church congregation currently occupying 1589 Washington Avenue is very proud of their building’s Jewish past. I was there when the building was being restored, the state of restorations demonstrated that the current owners of the building were eager to keep the original details.
Former Adath Israel/Beth Hamidrash Hagadol
1589 Washington Avenue, The Bronx

This prominent synagogue building served both Adath Israel and Beth Hamidrash Hagadol before becoming a Christian house of worship, Iglesia Mision Cristiana.
Former Adath Israel/Beth Hamidrash Hagadol
1589 Washington Avenue, The Bronx

Iglesia Mision Cristiana, former Adath Israel and Beth Hamidrash Hagadol (interior).
Former Adath Israel/Beth Hamidrash Hagadol
1589 Washington Avenue, The Bronx

The former Adath Israel and Beth Hamidrash Hagadol became a Christian house of worship. As the building was being restored, the current owners of the building were eager to keep the original details.
Former Kneseth Israel/Shomre Torah
1011 Faile Street, The Bronx

The building on 1011 Faile Street in the Longwood section of the Bronx was built in 1925 and served two different congregations, first Kneseth Israel and then Shomre Torah. The three-story building is now a church.
Also in the Longwood section of the Bronx is the former Montefiore Center at 768 Hewitt Place. The Reform congregation was led by Rabbi Jacob Katz. At a time when orthodox congregations in the area held services strictly in Hebrew with sermons in Yiddish, this Reform congregation offered e sermons in English.
Intervale Jewish Center
1028 Intervale Avenue, The Bronx

The synagogue on 1028 Intervale Avenue was for a long time the last active synagogue of the South Bronx, probably best known for Jack Kugelmass’s documentary “The Miracle of Intervale Avenue: The Story of a Jewish Congregation in the South Bronx.” After its leader, Rabbi Moishe Sacks, died in 1995, the congregation stopped functioning, and the building was abandoned for decades. I visited the former synagogue with one of its former congregants, Benjamin Melendez, a former gang leader who reconnected with his Jewish roots under Sack’s guidance. The building was since torn down.
Former Sinai Congregation
951 Stebbins Avenue, The Bronx

Up the hill from Intervale Avenue, on what was 951 Stebbins Avenue (now 951 Rev. James A. Polite Avenue), is the former Temple Sinai, a Reform congregation, dedicated in 1916. Since 1943, this prominent building has been home to the Thessalonia Baptist Church, but many details of the original synagogue can still be found in its interior. Its former pastor, Reverend James A. Polite, led the church for four decades. He passed away in 1980, and a year later, Stebbins Avenue was renamed after him.
Former Sinai Congregation  
951 Stebbins Avenue, The Bronx

This former Temple Sinai building has been home to the Thessalonia Baptist Church since 1943. Many details of the original synagogue can still be found in its interior, such as, shown here, stained glass windows. Stebbins Avenue was renamed after Pastor Reverend James A. Polite, who purchased the Temple Sinai building in 1943 and led the church until his death in 1980.
When built in 1925, 1042 Stebbins Avenue (now Rev. James Polite Avenue) was the Young Israel Synagogue. It is now home to Congregation Mount Horeb, a Black Hebrew congregation founded in 1945 by Rabbi Albert Moses. While they follow Jewish traditions, this group of African American self-proclaimed Israelites is not accepted by mainstream Judaism.

The Black Israelite movement, which started in the late 19th century, is based on the idea that African Americans are descendants of ancient Israelites. While Black Hebrew Israelites incorporate certain aspects of both Christianity and Judaism, the Black Hebrew Israelites created their own interpretation of the bible. Many chose to identify as Hebrew Israelites or Black Hebrews rather than Jews to indicate their claimed historic connection to biblical Hebrews. It is a non-homogenous movement with varying beliefs and practices, including some extremist groups.
Teitel Brothers
Arthur Ave, The Bronx

Arthur Avenue is known as the Little Italy of the Bronx and as a result, the Star of David at the entrance to one of the stores there might come as a surprise.

The store is the Teitel Brothers, a grocery store founded in 1915 by Jacob and Morris Teitel, Jewish Austrian immigrants who had arrived through Ellis Island in 1912.

Tailors by trade, their arrival coincided with the mass immigration of Italian immigrants. Jacob claimed to have learned Italian before he spoke English. The store is now owned by the third generation of the Teitel family.
Former B’nai Israel
2080 Arthur Ave, The Bronx

On 2080 Arthur Avenue, not too far from the Little Italy of the Bronx, stands the former orthodox Congregation B’nai Israel. The building was dedicated in 1917 and now serves as a church. The stand-up comedian and actor Carl Reiner, who lived across the street, was once a member of this congregation.
The former Temple Adas Israel on 1289 Grand Concourse was one of the most prominent synagogues in the Bronx. The famous opera singer Richard Tucker, born Rubin Ticker, son of Bessarabian Jews, worked here as a cantor. The Temple was located at the corner of East 169th Street, where several other synagogues could be found. The building serves today as a church.
The former Loew’s Paradise Theater at 2413 Grand Concourse is not a Jewish building but plays a prominent role in the memories of many Jews who grew up in the area. The theater opened in 1929 and was one of five so-called Loew’s Wonder Theaters, lavishly designed cinemas in the metropolitan New York City area.
The Daughters of Jacob Geriatric Center was originally founded on the Lower East Side in 1896 as the city’s first shomer Shabbat (Sabbath observant), fully kosher nursing home.

In 1920, following the migration trend, the center moved from the Lower East Side uptown to 1175 Findley Avenue in the Bronx. The impressive complex, perched on top of the hill with its eight wings radiating from a central core like the spokes of a wheel, includes a synagogue.

In 1973, the New York Times reported that the Center found itself at a crossroad, having “to decide whether to remain in its old neighborhood a few blocks east of the Grand Concourse, which has been changing rapidly in recent years from middle-class Jewish to black and Puerto Rican, or to follow its old neighbors to the suburbs.”

It stayed, but due to the neighborhood’s changing demographics, the center serves not only Jewish residents and the Star of David on the building has recently been removed, and the center renamed as Triboro Center For Rehabilitation and Nursing.
Daughters of Jacob
1175 Findley Avenue, The Bronx

The Daughters of Jacob Geriatric Center was originally founded on the Lower East Side in 1896 as the city’s first shomer Shabbat (Sabbath observant), fully kosher nursing home.

In 1920, following the migration trend, the center moved from the Lower East Side uptown to 1175 Findley Avenue in the Bronx.

The Center has been renamed as Triboro Center For Rehabilitation and Nursing.

The photo shows the gate at Teller Avenue, which retains its historic details.
The Jewish Home & Hospital
2553 University Ave, The Bronx

The Jewish Home & Hospital Lifecare System, now the New Jewish Home, on 2553 University Avenue, fulfills today the role that the Daughters of Jacob Center historically fulfilled.
Former Jacob Schiff Jewish Center
2510 Valentine Avenue, The Bronx

German-born banker Jacob Schiff (1885-1920) was a prominent philanthropist. The Jacob Schiff Jewish Center was founded in 1920 after his death to continue his legacy.

Located at 2510 Valentine Avenue, just north of Fordham Road, the Jacob Schiff Center served as a modern community center for residents of the Fordham and Bedford Park sections of the Bronx. It serves today as a discount department store.
Former Jacob Schiff Jewish Center
2510 Valentine Avenue, The Bronx

Located at 2510 Valentine Avenue, just north of Fordham Road, the Jacob Schiff Center served as a modern community center for residents of the Fordham and Bedford Park sections of the Bronx. It serves today as a discount department store.

Depicted here are ornamental details on the building’s façade.
Part II: Life

Jewish Life in the Bronx
Highlights from Fordham’s Judaica Collection
Reyna Stovall
FCLC ’25
Jewish Life in the Bronx
by Reyna Stovall FCLC ’25

The first Jewish community in the United States found its home in New York City in 1654. They arrived from Recife in Brazil after this Dutch-controlled area was reoccupied by Portugal and Jews were forbidden from living there. Although the first Jews of New York were Sephardic, as the number of Jews in the United States steadily grew, by 1720 Ashkenazi Jews outnumbered Sephardim. The bulk of the Jewish population in the colonial period was in the South. It was only in the nineteenth century that New York became a major center of the Jewish population, first in Manhattan, then, in the early twentieth century also in the Bronx.

From the late 1920s, the number of Jews in New York boomed and the Bronx became a thriving neighborhood to which many Jews, some living in slums on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, flocked. It is estimated that by 1940, there were approximately 650,000 Jews in the Bronx and 260 registered tax-exempt synagogues, with at least twice as many unregistered synagogues in the Jewish neighborhood of the South Bronx alone. The number of Jews in New York soared following the end of World War II and reached a peak of 2 million in the 1950s when Jews constituted one-quarter of New York City's population. Most settled in the Bronx and set up distinct neighborhoods based on religious affiliation and ideology. This can be seen most clearly when looking at Jewish-owned businesses, which often were clustered into pods surrounded by residential buildings. The Kingsbridge neighborhood, the Grand Concourse neighborhood, Riverdale, and the East Bronx are only a few of the many vibrant Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx that thrived during the early and mid-twentieth century.
While there were many different neighborhoods in the Jewish Bronx, most of the documents in the Fordham University Judaica Collection come from the South Bronx and the Grand Concourse area. The documents we do have, however, are very diverse, covering a range of religious, educational, and personal experiences. This is largely due to the Farber/Meshnick archive which was kindly donated to Fordham on April 11, 2022, by Ellen Meshnick Immerman, the daughter of Martha Farber and Frank Meshnick. The Farber/Meshnick family kept many documents and items from various stages of their lives in the Bronx including experiences in school, their wedding, and the birth of their children. These documents have been integral in not only creating this exhibit but in piecing together the stories of so many Jewish families and communities that once called the Bronx their home.

The Bronx is no longer the thriving hub of Jewish life that it once was. About 50,000 Jews remain in the borough today, mostly in the Riverdale neighborhood. Despite the drastic decline of the Bronx Jewish population over the past decades, many initiatives have begun to preserve documents and culture describing what life would have been like in the Jewish Bronx. The Bronx Jewish Historical Initiative is one of these organizations which not only documents the Jewish Bronx of the past but also “the Jewish spirit that continues to contribute to the borough’s special identity.” While the Jewish Bronx of yesterday is long gone, it is up to us to preserve, remember, and pass down the stories of what was and what has become of the thriving Jewish neighborhoods that once made up the Bronx, as the borough becomes home to new thriving communities.
To Martha,

June, 1933

May you climb the ladder of success.

Your friend,

Flora Beyeler

June 27, 33

Mindful of everybody (pardon the spelling)
Robust
Truthful
Happy
As you like her!

That's MARTHA!

Autograph Book belonging to Martha Farber, 1933 – 1958
Inscriptions from 1933

Farber/Meshnick Family Archive
To Martha (mommy) Nov. 16, 1958

Who can be better than you:

Mommy Dear?

No one, yes

No one

Anywhere

Your daughter

Ellen Meshnick

Age 10½, 6th grade
HONOR ROLL

GRADUATES

981
Miriam Barlow
Dorothy Delucine
Beatrice Freiburger
Sarah Grinfield
Ruth Harkness
Florence Rothman
Rose Siegelman
Beatrice Wasser
Wilma Winter

983
Hilda Bush
Sarah Berlin
Eliza Cherkovitz
Fannie Fuchs
Marcella Gross
Ernest Lieberman
Beatrice Moschowitz
Sylvia Nuyten
Rosa Erni
Anna Zitterfeld
Anna Spiker

985
Estelle Bahner

981
Tasbe Barlow
Ruth Bremer
Helen Bythcott
Muriel Farber
Helen Kolln
Helen Lember
Neomi Leib
Edith Maier
Rebecca Sperman
Sarah Wiltzes

Class of 1981

Class Motto—"Tout est bien qui finit bien"

982
Sally Beck
Sylvia Bicker
Josephine Hayden
Maryrose Jewett
Leah Feld
Rhoda Rothard
Bernice Salzinger
Ima Blankenberg
Shirley Sherman
Emi Silverberg
Ruth Smeltzer
Mildred Suchman
Rita Waldoff

Class of 1982

Class Motto—"Knowledge is Power"
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

*Sixty Minutes, Junior High Yearbook*

*Sixty Minutes, Junior High Yearbook*

*Junior High 60*

*888 Stebbins Avenue (now Rev James A Polite Avenue), Bronx, NY. 1933*
Walton High School was an all-girl high school named after Mary Walton. The school was established in 1923 but moved to the building on Jerome Avenue and West 195th street, in 1932, just a year before Martha Farber would begin her studies.

In 1933, the year of Martha’s first year, the school’s student body was about 6,000.

The school became co-educational in 1977.
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

Martha Farber’s Report Card, 1935
Walton High School
Jerome Avenue and West 195th Street, The Bronx

![Image of a report card]

**WALTON HIGH SCHOOL**
195th STREET, NORTH of RESERVOIR AVE., The Bronx
MARY A. CONLON, Principal

**REPORT TO PARENT**

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**EXPLANATION OF MARKING SYSTEM**

- E: Excellent 85 - 100%
- N: Normal 70 - 84%
- D: Doubtful 55 - 69%
- F: Failure 0 - 54%

The Mid-Term Examination and Final Reports are given entirely in numbers. Marks below 60 indicate failure.
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive
Martha Farber's High School Memorabilia: Stenography Award (1935) and A Playbook in French from Drama Club Performing Mollier’s Play
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

Martha Farber’s Certificates and Diplomas, Junior High School, Stebbins Avenue, and Walton High School, Jerome Avenue and West 195th Street, The Bronx
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduates</th>
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<td>Viola, Grace</td>
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**Walton High School**

Jerome Avenue and West 195th Street, The Bronx

**Martha Farber’s Graduation Exercises Booklet, June 24, 1936**

**Farber/Meshnick Family Archive**
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

High School Graduation Photograph of Martha Farber, 1936
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

Frank Meshnick’s Junior High Certificate (1928)

BOARD OF EDUCATION
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

This is to certify that
Frank Meshnick
has completed satisfactorily the studies prescribed for the Commercial Course in the Junior High Schools of The City of New York, and is entitled to admission to the second year in this course in the High Schools.
Dated, Jan. 31, 1928

[Signatures of Board of Education officials]
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

Frank Meshnick’s Senior Book, Morris High School (1931)
1110 Boston Road, Morrisania, The Bronx
LEVINE, CHARLES
1735 Canoga Avenue
She love the future town.

LINDER, ELEANOR
1481 Colorado Place
There she flows—plenty of oil.

LEVINE, MOLLIE
5311 Jupiter Street
Although she's not a book worm, nevertheless she's quite "equipped."

LIPKIND, HENRY
1414 White Fox Road
Henry is rather in weight.
Not, after—like a true rolling stone.
He gardens no more. It belongs to the class—not a cent of his own.

LEVINE, RUTH C.
1023 North Boulevard
In girl's personality.
Both but that affecting charm.
That's why she was of family.
The little lady ought to be taken.

LIBNIS, BERNARD
500 Park Street
Bernard's moments they are perfect.
And his art is perfect too.
Can you tell us, Sir Preceptor,
Are bunch to offer you?

LIBREMAN, LOUIS
5131 Washington Avenue
Is he as pukel as his name?
We wonder.

LITT, GEORGE P.
563 Jennings Street
Listen be the wedding band.

LISZITZ, FLORENCE
1414 62nd Avenue
She comes to school every day in a car.
To her father a solicitous dinner.

MANDEL, ARNOLD
1339 Lytton Place
Big boy—big nose.

MANDEL, WILLIAM
1223 Franklin Avenue
"Secret William."

MARCUS, JACOB
1733 Franklin Avenue
A man's a man for what.
"Oh, yeah!"

MARGOLIS, RUTH
500 Washington Avenue
"Wishful I heard a voice cry, "Stop to more".

MANN, SAMUEL
696 Georgia Park North
You think he is a man.

MENOMARA, JOHN M.
61-11 64th Street, Jamaica, L. I.
The boy who shows the sound of Monica uplift.

MESPINO, MARGARET
721 East 17th Street
"I'm conferring that I love you"—Nady Vallee.

MESHNECK, FRANK
1411 Clinton Avenue
He came to the Penn in a school.

MARCUS, BENJAMIN
1300 Cuddy Avenue
First in our list, first in peace—and
First in the books of Mr. Haber.

MESSINGER, HAROLD H.
1325 Morris Avenue
All his friends pass F. T.
We wonder why?
Frank Meshnick’s
Morris High School
Graduation Diploma
(1931)
1110 Boston Road,
Morrisania, The Bronx
A notification that Frank Meshnick completed a diploma in accountancy (1941)
An invitation to a dance social at Mt. Eden Center, January 1941
Getting Married in the Bronx in the 1940s
Getting Married in the Bronx in the 1940s

Martha Farber and Frank Meshnick grew up 1.5 miles apart, or around 11 minutes from each other, with both Martha and Frank growing up in the South Bronx. While we do not know how the couple met each other, they were married on August 2, 1942, in a small wedding ceremony and reception at Feller’s Mansion. They signed a traditional Jewish marriage certificate, known as a Ketubah, prior to their wedding. This Ketubah is in both Hebrew and English and describes the duties each member of the couple would have to each other in their marriage. Their marriage ceremony was officiated by the cantor and mohel, Rev. Joseph J. Kaplan, who conducted his services in English and Hebrew. Martha Meshnick saved his business card, which he must have given to the couple or Martha’s mother who seems to have taken the responsibility to make wedding arrangements, sometime prior to the wedding. He operated his cantoring business on 1394 Crotona Avenue in the Bronx. Their wedding venue, Feller’s Mansion also catered for their reception. For the 25 couples that attended the wedding, they served punch, beer, fruit cups, and gefilte fish. The couple placed their order with the company in June of that year and paid $101.29 with an additional $10 deposit fee. They also paid a florist to arrange bouquets for the wedding, spending a total of $13 for easter lilies, blue delphiniums, and pink roses.
Mr. and Mrs. Max Farber
Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Meshnick

cordially invite you to attend
the marriage of their children

Martha
to

Frank

Sunday, the second day of August
Nineteen hundred and forty-two
at one p. m.
at Feller's Mansion
167 East Burnside Avenue
(Bet. Croton and Morris Aves.)
Bronx, New York

Bride's Residence
763 Fox Street
Bronx, New York
Feller’s Mansion Caterers Business
Cards, 107 East Burnside Avenue,
Bronx, NY. 1942.

Feller’s Mansion was a kosher
restaurant and caterer. It was run by
Rose Feller.

A pharmacy is now at the location
where Feller’s Mansion once was.
Receipts from Feller’s Mansion: reservation and deposit for a wedding reception (June 25, 1942); final menu and receipt for payment (August 2, 1942). Signed by Rose Feller, the proprietor.
Receipts from S&S Floral Co on 106 West 28th Street in Manhattan (the Flower district) for wedding flower arrangements ordered by Martha Farber's mother (1942).
Marriage Certificate

Issued to
Mr. Frank Meshnick
Miss Martha Farber

UNITED IN WEDLOCK
on the 2nd day of Aug. 1942

Rev. J. Kaplan
1394 Crotona Ave.

1394 Crotona Avenue
Bronx, N.Y.

Rev. Joseph J. Kaplan
Cantor
Performer of Marriages, Confirmations, etc.
in English and Hebrew

NEAR 170TH STREET

Dayton 9-1790

Farber/Meshnick Family Archive
Marriage Certificate for Martha Farber and Frank Meshnick issued by Rev. Joseph J. Kaplan of 1394 Crotona Avenue on August 2, 1942
Marriage Certificate for Martha Farber and Frank Meshnick issued by Rev. Joseph J. Kaplan of 1394 Crotona Avenue on August 2, 1942
Anna and Cyril Swerdlin were married on December 25, 1949, and had the Herr Karr Orchestra perform songs for their guests, at their wedding reception. These booklets were given out to guests detailing the song lineup for the evening with songs such as “The Star Spangled Banner,” “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” as well as Jewish songs such as “Hatikvoh” [sic] and two pages of a joke dictionary for the guests’ entertainment. The Hatikvah is the national anthem of the State of Israel. Composed in the nineteenth century, it was adopted as the Israeli national anthem in 1948, about one year before the Swerdlin’s wedding. Some of the jokes in the dictionary section include, “L’Chaim - famous last words”, and “A Mitzveh [sic] - laughing at your husband’s jokes,” as well as many other comedic plays on common Jewish phrases.
Songbook for Anna and Cyril Swerdlin’s Wedding Reception with the Herb Karr Orchestra, Bronx Palace December 25, 1949
Songbook for Anna and Cyril Swerdlin’s Wedding Reception with the Herb Karr Orchestra, Bronx Palace December 25, 1949
Family and Daily Life in the Bronx
Jewish Family and Community Life in the Bronx

At the height of the Jewish presence in the Bronx, institutions such as community centers, grocery stores, sports games, and even neighborhood streets created the vibrant and flourishing culture many former Bronx residents describe the Bronx as having while they lived there. The various shops and community centers gave Bronx residents places where they could find a close-knit community with each other. For the more religious members of the Bronx, community life began with the synagogue, in which there were hundreds scattered in short intervals between homes, stores, and apartment buildings. These synagogues catered to the different Jewish sects and, in many cases, ethnic identity as well. However, a substantial portion of Bronx Jewish residents did not consider themselves religious and only went to temple during the high holidays if they ever even went at all. For these non-religious Jews, community centers, such as the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association or YM-YWHA, as it was known, became a place where Jewish individuals and families would meet each other and find community. This was especially used by younger adolescents who used YM-YWHA events, such as dances and socials, to meet their potential life partner.

While community life was formed by these bigger organizations, neighborhood streets were another way that Jewish Bronx residents found community. Younger children, in particular, would remain outside in the summers and on weekends until the sun went down. They used neighborhood parks and the stones natural to the New York City landscape as their playground. In addition to this more inventive form of play, popular games, such as baseball, marbles, and stickball, the former, a game similar to baseball but played with a broom handle and a rubber ball, typically a Spaldeen, were exceedingly popular for younger children as well. Oftentimes, former Bronx residents cite the games from their childhood and experiences playing outside with their friends all day as some of their fondest and most carefree
experiences from living in the Bronx. While baseball was popular amongst kids in the streets, the New York Yankees united all Bronxites regardless of age. In the 1940s and 50s, the Yankees were a sports powerhouse, dominating the game of baseball and winning seven World Series titles between 1943 and 1953. A combination of pleasure and pride made socializing at Yankees games a popular pastime for all Bronx Jewish residents.

Stores were another way that Jewish residents in the Bronx found community. Owning a store in the Bronx, such as a deli, a grocery store, or even a tailoring business, was profitable as there was a large market because of the Bronx’s growing population at the time. This was especially true of Jewish-owned or Jewish-oriented businesses such as Kosher Delis, which were in constant competition with each other for customers. For homemakers, however, the numerous shops available presented a chance for socialization. While they were mostly confined to the walls of their homes doing chores and cooking, going out daily to gather food for meals was a way for Jewish Bronx moms to make friends while getting out of their homes for a while.

Overall, community life in the Bronx was varied and changed according to age and gender, but for many Jewish Bronx residents, community life in the Bronx during the early and mid-20th centuries is often described as nothing short of idyllic.
Now married, Martha and Frank Meshnick travelled to Warrensburg, NY in the Adirondacks and stayed in the Echo Lake Lodge, which was opened in the 1920s. Undated, 1940s.
Farber/Meshnick Family Archive

Coach class tickets
**Farber/Meshnick Family Archive**  
*Martha Meshnick’s travel lists*

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Giving Birth

1947 brochure from the Lebanon Hospital’s maternity ward, located at Grand Concourse and Mt. Eden Parkway, and a receipt dated April 1, 1948, paid by Martha (Farber) Meshnick, after her daughter Ellen Hope was born a few days earlier.
Children

The Goldstein Family Archive
Jewish Life Cycle Rituals: Bar Mitzvah

Freddie Rothberg’s Bar Mitzvah, October 6th, 1951, Beth Hamadrosh Hagodel, 450 East 172nd Street, The Bronx. The reception was held at the Crotona Plaza, 1589 Washington Avenue.

Freddie, who has a hearing impairment, was taught his Haftarah by a family friend.
Jewish Life Cycle: Mourning and Remembering

A reminder sent by the Congregation Adath Jeshurun, located at 1058 Gerard Ave to Meyer Goldstein about an upcoming Yahrzeit for his father, 1948. The congregation sold the building to Church of God Prophecy in 1975.

(Goldstein Family Archive)
Jewish Life Cycle: Mourning and Remembering

A reminder sent by the Congregation Hope of Israel, located at 843 Walton Avenue to Harry Goldstein about an upcoming Yahrzeit for his mother in 1956. The congregation still owns the building.

(Goldstein Family Archive)
Jewish Institutions: Synagogues

Young Israel of Concourse at 1015 Walton Avenue was founded in 1930 (sold the property to Pure Gospel Miracle Revival Church in 1973). The photo shows the building under construction (ca. 1930). Next to it is a ticket for High Holidays from September 1931.

(Goldstein Family Archive)
Jewish Institutions: Synagogues

Young Israel of Concourse at 1015 Walton, Passover supplement, 1936. Harry Goldstein served as the editor of the newsletter.

Goldstein Family Archive.
“Shul dinner” at Young Israel of Concourse, 1930s (Goldstein Family Archive)
Jewish Institutions: Community Centers

A YM&WHA membership card for Natalie Levy, January 1, 1942. The Y was located at the corner of Fulton Avenue and E 171st Street, across from Crotona Park.

A ticket for a Purim play and concert by students in the Hebrew school of the Congregation Talmud Torah Ansche Zedek, located at 1358 Morris Avenue (since 1976, Bible Church of Christ), February 25, 1945

A notice sent to Mr. L. Herzog at 2226 Newbold Ave about a meeting at the Jewish Center of Unionport, 2137 Ellis Avenue in the Castle Hill/Parkchester neighborhood.
Entertainment

An invitation to a dance on Sunday, February 2, 1941, in Mt. Eden Jewish Center Center, sent to Martha Farber (posted January 30th, 1941). Martha Farber at the time lived over two miles away at 763 Fox Street.

Mt. Eden Jewish Center had a synagogue, a gymnasium, a ballroom, and more. It was located at 1660 Morris Avenue. It disbanded in 1980 and in 1988 sold to Bronx-Lebanon Hospital.
Kosher food in the Bronx

Kosher delicatessens, food producers, caterers, and restaurants could be found across the Bronx.

Here is a matchbook from Zion National Kosher Sausage Factory located at 482 Austin Place, near East 147th Street, in South Bronx.
Part III: Leaving

A New-ish Jewish Diaspora:
Rethinking Perspectives on Bronx White Flight, 1960s to 1990s

Sophia Maier
FCRH ’23
A New-ish Jewish Diaspora:
Rethinking Perspectives on Bronx White Flight, 1960s to 1990s
By Sophia Maier FCRH ‘23

One humid summer morning, I joined a group of retirees in a cafe in Delray Beach, Florida. Not your ordinary snowbirds, these were all Jewish former residents of the Pelham Parkway neighborhood of the Bronx. Over breakfast, they recounted to me the Bronx of their youth: the smell of multiethnic food wafting through open apartment doors, sleeping outside on fire escapes on hot days like that one. Most of the men did not know each other before they joined the group, yet they all became friends because of shared experiences in a place they left decades prior. Their uniquely powerful memories unite them and thousands of other Jewish former Bronxites who left during the period of white flight in the 1960s through the 1980s, yet their voices are generally left out of the historical records of Jewish life, New York City, and white flight.

I intend to bring their voices back into the conversation through a series of oral history interviews about their experiences growing up in the Bronx, why they decided to leave, and what their perceptions of the Bronx are today. Through a ground-up version of history, the unique circumstances of time, place, and socio-economic conditions of Jewish Bronx white flight provide much needed nuance to projects of white flight that have focused on other regions and groups and challenge the conventional narrative of suburbanization. I argue for a class-based analysis of Jewish white flight from the Bronx, through which it is clear that Jewish Bronxites fled to New York City’s emerging suburbs in order to reach secure middle-class status. Perceived urban deterioration, a heightened sense of the precariousness of their socio-economic status, and a faith in progress and upward mobility pushed these Jews out of the Bronx and into suburbs.
Jews have lived in New York since 1654 and would begin to make up a large contingent of the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jews influenced New York in ways that went far beyond the reaches of an insular community; they led unions and leftist political movements, Yiddish words became New York slang, and they influenced New York’s art, music, and theater scenes in such ways that internationally recognized “New York” artists were more often than not Jewish.¹ Eli Lederhendler points to New York as indicative of the entire Jewish-American experience, from its distinctly urban character — which would diminish in the last half of the twentieth century — to a sense of community and opportunity that, for these immigrants and their descendants, optimized the American Dream.² In his eyes, American Jews are bound to New York, geographically but also culturally, politically, and socially in a way that, for a long time, made it impossible to separate the two. All that is to say the roots of Jewish life were in New York and mid-twentieth century New York was unabashedly Jewish. Yet, a century that began with an influx of Jewish immigration was ended with a heavy outmigration, especially from the once majority Jewish Bronx.³ The goal of this research is to understand how that happened and what led the Jews of New York City to be uprooted yet again.

The Bronx was once a point of pride for a consistently upwardly mobile ethnoreligious group. Starting in the slums of the Lower East Side, in the first half of the twentieth century Jewish immigrants and their children saw the Bronx as a step up: spacious, airy, and clean.⁴ They were able to take advantage of the many opportunities the public school and university system offered for a free, quality education. This hopeful, progressive, opportunity driven perspective on the city was lost as the urban landscape underwent a fundamental change in the period after World War Two, leading to white flight. In the 1950s to the 1970s, factories were shutting down and moving out of the city while civil service jobs were increasing their education requirements, just as Black and Puerto Rican groups were moving in in large
numbers. The near bankruptcy of New York City in 1975 led to extreme austerity measures in the public sector that cut thousands of jobs and forced the City University of New York system to begin charging tuition. This meant that the jobs and opportunities that had been available to earlier immigrants like Jews were now either non-existent or unattainable by new immigrants.⁵

The Bronx became a haven for these poor minority groups who were being swept out of other areas of the city by “urban renewal,” a brutal policy led by Robert Moses which destroyed poor areas and built highways, like the Cross Bronx Expressway, or middle- and upper-class housing and amenities, like Lincoln Center, in their place. The perfect conditions for urban decline were already apparent in the borough, especially the South Bronx which had always been older and poorer: “Tightly packed apartment houses that could not compete with a suburban home, a continued outward movement of residents in search of better living space, a tight housing market that would propel many to the suburbs, and a population of renters that could move away easily.”⁶ The poverty and lack of opportunities for advancement for new Bronx residents led to an increase of crime and gang violence that would escalate to extreme proportions starting in the late 1960s with the crack epidemic.⁷ By the 1970s, the South Bronx was the nation’s foremost example of urban decay.

The storied past of the Bronx has been largely ignored by major histories of New York City and white flight, but recent histories have taken up the task of doing a ground-up analysis of the Bronx’s cooperative housing developments of Parkchester and Co-op City.⁸ They set the standard for using oral histories and other personal documents of individuals to draw out trends in the housing communities and neighborhoods. These books also communicate the unique environment of the postwar Bronx as a brief period of integrated living and relative economic prosperity defined by an overall milieu of hope. Yet, they show that even these cooperative housing developments were susceptible to the economic crises
that rocked the city in the 1970s and 1980s and the pressures to leave the city in search of that previously held hope and prosperity.

The opening of Co-op City in 1968 has particular relevance to this study. In a marshy corner of the Northeast Bronx, Co-op City was built by the United Housing Foundation (UHF) on the site of what was briefly the Freedomland amusement park. The UHF, holding the utopian ideas of Jewish labor leaders from the first half of the twentieth century, partnered with Robert Moses (of above Cross Bronx Expressway fame) and New York state and city governments to build the world’s largest housing cooperative. Significantly for my research, Annemarie H. Sammartino explains the first of Co-op City’s residents were Jewish from the already “transitioning” areas of the Bronx, yet earnestly attempted to create a multiracial community there, contingent on the fact that all needed to be of similar economic status to join the cooperative. It was only later, with the possibility of poorer, typically minority, residents joining the co-op that racist fears (from both white and middle-class minority residents) became expressed, revealing the close connections between class and race in the collective imagination of the time period. Her community-focused perspective reveals the complexity of this in-between flight — still in the Bronx but purposefully away from their old deteriorating neighborhoods — and the interconnected class and racial lines that were drawn.

Jews have not always fit easily into the category of “whiteness,” even as they would participate in white flight. Jews’ eventual inclusion into the fluid category of whiteness, like white flight in general, was not inevitable. In fact, their racial status has changed various times throughout American history. Matthew Frye Jacobson identifies that Jews had been legally white since 1790, and it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that Jews emerged as a racialized Other, as opposed to a religious Other. With the rise of race science, suddenly Jews were seen as unassimilable. The New York Sun wrote in
Other races of men lose their identity by migration and by intermarrying with different peoples, with the result that their peculiar characteristics and physiognomies are lost in the mess. The Jewish face and character remain the same as they were in the days of PHARAOH… Usually a Jew is recognizable as such by sight. In whatever country he is, his race is always conspicuous… After a few generations other immigrants to this country lose their race identity and become Americans only. Generally the Jews retain theirs undiminished, so that it is observable by all men.¹²

Race science and anti-immigrant fervor reached a crux in the United States in 1924, when the United States passed an immigration law which set quotas ensuring that Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe would be limited drastically. What resulted was the slow Americanization of Jews and other white ethnics like Italians as multiple generations were born in the United States. Coupled with World War Two, which both provided a chance for the descendants of Jewish immigrants to show their loyalty and patriotism and revealed the horrors of race science through the Holocaust, anti-semitism began to wane in the postwar and Jews began to be accepted into whiteness.¹³

American-born Jews had to grapple with their new racial position in society while they were also entering the middle-class in large numbers for the first time. They were active in Civil Rights coalitions — the supposed “Golden Age of Black and Jewish Cooperation” — at the same time they were being welcomed into whiteness.¹⁴ This transformation into whiteness, claims Karen Brodkin, was enabled by the economic prosperity and opportunity, specifically in the form of the GI Bill, of the postwar era.¹⁵ For her and others, whiteness meant middle-classness, or better yet, middle-classness meant whiteness. It is impossible to separate the economic from the racial, and these are the realities that Jewish Bronx
residents would have to wrestle with. The connection between middle-class economic status and whiteness was difficult to contend with for a culture rooted in the largely working-class standard of the borough, prompting what Rachel Kranson calls an “ambivalent embrace” for Jews with their new identity. Kranson argues, “Because [Jews] understood economic and social marginality as something integral to the Jewish experience, they could not wholeheartedly celebrate American Jews’ ascent into the middle class. Jewish anxieties over upward mobility… emerged out of this dissonance between the financial and social successes of mid-century American Jews and their deeply felt histories of exclusion and want.”

A genuine acceptance of the American Dream not merely questioned longstanding Jewish identification with the oppressed, but actively ignored the reality that this dream — upward mobility in economic and social standing — was not open to everyone. What this research will show is that race was not explicitly on the minds of upwardly mobile Jews moving to the suburbs, but secure middle-class status was. If this meant leaving their heterogeneous Bronx community for a homogenous white one, then so be it.

The very mechanisms that enabled Jews to enter into the middle-class (and white status) during this period were designed to keep people of color, especially African Americans, out. The US government, through the GI Bill of Rights and the Federal Housing Authority, reserved aid for college education and homeownership — two of the greatest signifiers of entrance into the middle class in the second half of the twentieth century — for whites only, solidifying the racial binary in a way that erased the “probationary” status of Jews. Cited in Jacobson’s Whiteness of a Different Color, Nikhil Singh calls the postwar suburban boom a case of “state sponsored apartheid,” and Jacobson continues, “Its hardening of race along exclusive and unforgiving lines of color held tremendous portent for Jews and other white races.” Even in this era of Civil Rights, “Both the progressive and the regressive coalitions that formed around questions of segregation and desegregation solidified whiteness as a monolith of privilege; racial differences within the white community lost their salience.” The evidence of de facto segregation in the
North through racist housing policies is supported by sociological studies which reveal a “dual housing market,” in which whites are able to acquire higher educational attainment and income with each generation, enabling them to move into better housing, while Blacks and Hispanics are restricted from moving into better housing regardless of their educational or income improvement because of structural restraints.  

The process of white flight, defined as the exodus of white groups from urban centers in the second half of the twentieth century, transformed the demographics of cities all over the United States. Previous literature has examined this phenomenon in predominantly Southern and Protestant communities. The trends these scholars identify are nonetheless essential to understanding the motivations of neighborhood turnover during this period. Mark T. Mulder’s work on evangelical congregations’ role in Chicago white flight serves as a precedent for this research in two ways: it focuses on a specific religious group, in this case evangelicals, and how their particular religious experiences and beliefs influenced their motivations for white flight, and also focuses on a northern, postindustrial city, as I seek to do with the Jews and New York City, respectively. Each author breaks down the dual role of race and economics that enabled whites to flee the city, while the minorities, predominantly African American, were left behind to deal with poorer schools, poorer quality of housing, and poorer public investment; while identifying the cooperation of private banks and government that made these disparate outcomes possible.

Kevin M. Kruse’s groundbreaking work, White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism, sets a solid foundation for my research. He points out that at the time of publication, 2005, there was little literature on white flight, an issue that remains to this day. He separates his work from previous literature that utilized a top-down perspective to analyze the segregationist movement in the postwar
era. Kruse writes, “Instead of focusing on the ways in which national politicians sought to exploit the anger and alienation of white voters, this study focuses on those whites themselves. The conventional framework, with its attention on the highest levels of national campaigns, largely neglects the important transformations taking place at the grass roots.” This mode of analysis of his focus population, Southern whites, is applicable to my project in that it points to the importance of a specific, ground-up history of ordinary Bronx Jews and their experiences and motivations. As Kruse explains, it is easy to look at groups’ experiences in the suburbs as something distinct, like a bubble (or gated community), but as this study will also argue, they are deeply influenced by their experiences in an urban setting that set the groundwork for their shifting beliefs and actions.

This specificity in group culture and shared beliefs makes it difficult to place non-Southern and non-Protestant instances of white flight under the broad umbrella of trends that previous literature has identified, even with limited Rust Belt examples. There exists, to my knowledge, little to no scholarly works specifically devoted to white flight in New York, except those who mention white flight as related to other historical phenomena. Kruse and others exemplify the specific nature of white flight for every group that took part in it. Kruse points to how white flight in the North was initiated by deindustrialization (though he points to Chicago and Detroit — New York is absent but applicable), and in the South was initiated by desegregation. This is one of many differences on a city-by-city basis. Geography and group identity are essential in understanding the lived experiences of individuals. It is not merely the economic crisis or drug epidemic that makes the Bronx different, but also the distinct Jewish presence (and subsequent absence) that makes it impossible to imply other religious and ethnic groups had the same monolithic experiences. In the case of Jewish people, they fall under a category that is both a religion and ethnicity, making their specific Jewishness doubly important in their beliefs and decision making.
I acknowledge that the use of oral histories for this study comes with its own limitations. For a long time, these sorts of interviews and memory projects were the work of sociologists. Historians saw their craft as something separate from memory, dependent upon documents and artifacts from well-preserved archives. Yet, at the same time the Bronx was changing, this perspective changed too. Pierre Nora presents history as something that buries real lived experiences and their memories, a top-down imposition on the common man. Yet, for my purposes here, history is being made through the stories of the oral history participants. With special consideration for their biases and the blurring of memory over time, this research will use oral histories for their strengths, uncovering people’s perceptions and process of remembering, and generally avoid using them for their weaknesses, establishing historical fact, unless otherwise backed up by documentary evidence.

The Oral History Participants

As the basis for this research, 36 oral history interviews were conducted with Jewish former Bronx residents throughout the summer and fall of 2022. The only requirement to be interviewed was that the person was Jewish, grew up in the Bronx, and left during the period of white flight in the 1960s-1980s. A flier was sent out to synagogues in New York City’s northern suburbs of Orange and Rockland counties, and from there was spread through family and friend networks. Participants voluntarily reached out to me over the phone and email to schedule a date for interviews over the phone, zoom, or in-person.

The oral history participants represent a cross section of their generation. There was an almost equal breakdown of men and women, as shown in Table 1 below. The average age was 72 years old, with most participants born in the 1940s and 1950s and coming into adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s. Indicative of the mass migration of Jews in the late 1800s and early 1900s, 25 of the 36 participants were third
generation Americans, with an additional 3 having one second generation and one first generation parent (the US Census Bureau defines “first generation” as the foreign born generation, “second generation” as born in the US of at least one foreign born parent, and “third generation” as born in the US to two native born parents. For the vast majority of participants of this study, this means their grandparents’ generation immigrated to the United States from abroad). This trend points to the significance of recent immigrant experiences for the generation of Jews who left the Bronx, which would have an influence on their upbringing and overall culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
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Table 1: Gender of participants

There is constant conflict, usually in good fun, between the East Bronx (which most today would refer to as the “South Bronx”) and the West Bronx. I myself have fallen into the banter, joking that I could not be seen with a former East Bronxite I had just sat down with at a university event, though I am the product of both East and West Bronxites. What is revelatory about this rivalry is the deep edges that class cut, even through one borough. The Eastern/ Southernmost parts of the Bronx have always been poorer, while the Western/ Northernmost parts have been wealthier. Yet even those in the West Bronx, most famously the Grand Concourse, fled the borough in a self-fulfilling prophecy of neighborhood turnover. Even if these “West Bronx” Jews had reached middle-class status in their parents’ generation, which the “East Bronx” Jews had not, the fragility of such a situation led all groups out to new pastures — quite
literally suburbia that had very recently been farmland, or in the case of Co-op City, Freedomland — in search of a stable middle-class community.

The geographic regions of the North and West Bronx are overrepresented among the participants. This makes sense given the predominance of Jewish enclaves in these areas. Many of the participants began in the South or East Bronx in their younger childhood and moved with their families up to areas like the Grand Concourse or Pelham Parkway, indicating an upward mobility defined by geography even within the Bronx. The most common areas were in the North Bronx along Grand Concourse, Pelham Parkway, and the Northwest neighborhoods surrounding Moshulu Parkway/ Jerome Park Reservoir/ the Williamsbridge Oval, which can be seen in Districts 7, 11, and 12 in Figure 1 below. Many lived in public housing projects or co-operative housing, and all but two lived in apartment buildings.
Education played a major role in the development of these Jewish Bronxites, and the tables below indicate the progress that was made through the generations. Table 2 shows the high schools of the participants, with most attending Bronx High School of Science, a Bronx public high school that one had
to test into, or Columbus High School, one of the neighborhood high schools off Pelham Parkway. The other schools are representative of the geographic spread of the participants, pulling from various Bronx neighborhoods, like DeWitt Clinton drawing students from Districts 9 and 10 and Evander Childs drawing students from Districts 11 and 12, as shown in Figure 1. Most significant for this study, though, is Table 3, which compares the education level of the participants to their parents. Upward mobility is put into numerical form; while 19 participants’ parents had completed high school or less, a shocking 30 participants had completed college or more, many of them with masters or doctoral degrees. Most mothers stayed at home until the children were older, then often getting jobs like bookkeeping and secretarial work. Most fathers held jobs like truck driver, small business owner, and factory worker, with many veterans of the Second World War. In the participants’ generation, the women worked as well and typical jobs for both genders included teacher, businessman/woman, and doctors of various kinds. As mentioned above, there is a clear correlation between educational attainment and higher income which result in the ability to move into better housing. These participants reinforce the trend, all of them leaving the rented Bronx apartments of their youth and moving into the new homes of the suburbs, a marked transition into middle-class status during a time period when homeownership became the middle-class ideal.
<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Taft</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evander Childs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walton</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
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Table 2: High schools of participants

<table>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>College or more (Parents)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, trade school, other, unknown (Parents)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School or less (Participants)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or more (Participants)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, trade school, other, unknown (Participants)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Level of education of participants and their parents

The Jewish Bronx

The Bronx of the 1940s and 1950s was a distinctly Jewish place. First and second generation Jews, as they gained wealth in the New World, moved up to the Bronx for the improved living conditions. Martha Rosenbaum’s story is typical of the “moving up” mindset within New York City:
Well, originally they were immigrants — my grandparents — and lived on the east side [of Manhattan]. And then when their children — my parents, my aunts and uncles, you know — got a little older, they upscaled, so to speak, and moved to what was then more suburban: the Bronx. I was born in the Bronx, near 174 street, East Bronx. And then we moved to the West Bronx when I was nine years old.  

Most participants remember being in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, though the proportions varied. On Pelham Parkway, the neighborhood is remembered as 98 to 99 percent Jewish, while West Bronx neighborhoods were remembered as predominantly Jewish with a mix of Italians and Irish. The Bronx Public Housing Projects and surrounding areas were more diverse, “with a mix of virtually every immigrant group you can think of.” What united these neighborhoods, more often than not, was a class consciousness: Len Susman recalled the Grand Concourse as a “middle class neighborhood... so the neighborhood was calm,” and Michael Melasky remembered the relative calm of the Marble Hill Projects, despite their diversity, because “it was more the socio-economic reason why we all lived together there.” By and large, the old saying that Jews like to live close to one another rang true, and this would have strong implications for why they would leave.

The high concentration of Jews in these Bronx neighborhoods meant the neighborhood amenities reflected their cultural demands. The borough is remembered as full of kosher delis, kosher appetizing stores, kosher butchers, and synagogues on every street. Despite the fact that the participants were equally divided as to if their families kept kosher at home or not — and many were much less religious than their grandparents’ generation — these centers of Jewish life in the Bronx were frequented by all and recalled fondly. Levels of religiousness varied, especially as some sought to Americanize by doing away with “Old World” traditions. Americanization is also represented in the limited knowledge of
Yiddish, the language of their ancestors, for most of these third generation Americans. The common thread arose that their parents would speak in Yiddish when they didn’t want their children to understand, and, in the case of Harriet Terdiman, “my parents spoke [Yiddish], and then when we understood it, they switched to Russian.” The loss of such an immersive Jewish environment when moving to the suburbs, regardless of how religiously people participated in it, was recognized as a major loss of community.

You did not have to act on being Jewish to be Jewish in the postwar Bronx; you just were because the culture around you was.

The prioritization of education is one value reflective of the Jewish culture of the Bronx during this period. All of the participants attended Bronx public schools. Such high proportions of Jewish students meant the schools were next to empty on the High Holidays, which resulted in even non-religious families such as Betty Grossman’s — who only knew about certain holidays because the alternate side of the street parking was suspended — did not send their kids to school. During the postwar period, the Bronx schools are remembered as fantastic, with high quality teachers and high quality education. Some of those who are younger or lived in poorer areas remember a more negative experience, like Michael Melasky who, attending Evander Childs High School in the early 1970s, saw clearly that he lived in a different moment than his predecessors: “On a scale of one to ten, my education was a two… 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.”

Many participants are conscious of the direct role that education played in their shared mindset of upward mobility. Bruce Jacobovitz shared, “What's impressive to me about Bronx Science — and part of this is a Bronx mentality — was very often these are first generation Americans. Parents were immigrants. And
this was the first rung on the ladder that represented the American dream. It was all about education.”
Liz highlighted a similar optimism from this period, “My parents never felt there were any obstacles. You
know, we were in a very idealistic time after World War Two, with my father who could really feel gratified
that he risked his life for the freedom and opportunity. He and my mom and their generation took full
advantage of it and the people in my generation took full advantage of it.” Finally, Howard Cohen
acknowledged that such opportunities were not a given for everyone, “We had every opportunity... If
you’re born in a bad neighborhood, you’re going to really have to fight to get out of it, to get where you
want to be. As opposed to being lucky enough to be born in the right neighborhood where the people
have the same amount of work ethic and stuff like that... But there are some that have problems in the
neighborhood.” These quotes reflect the sense of optimism and assured American belonging that came
out of the post-World War Two time period, especially with the waning of institutionalized anti-semitism
that would have impeded educational and occupational opportunities. The phrase “work ethic” reflects
the clear association between striving for upward mobility in the predominantly white working- and
middle-class neighborhoods and the perceived lack of drive that was attributed to poorer neighborhoods
and their more likely colored residents.

The public school represented, for many, an opportunity to interact with those of other racial and ethnic
backgrounds that may not have been present in their own neighborhoods. For Harry Sweet, growing up
in the Murphy Houses Project, going to Bronx High School of Science meant interacting with other white
people for the first time, an experience that was akin to a “culture shock,” despite the fact that the
majority culture, still Jewish at that time, was his own. It was “different socio-economic groups” that
separated him from his peers, leading him to spend time with the few Black and Puerto Rican students
that made it into the elite public high school. This, though, is the opposite of most. While Anne Joy
Becker’s mother avoided sending her to James Monroe High School in the Southeast Bronx by saying
she lived with her grandparents, Beth Marks remembers going to the majority African American and Hispanic high school in the mid-1960s:

I think what happened is they almost wanted to magically put me in the honors school at James Monroe. And if you looked around the honors school, it was really Jewish. Even back then, I felt that there was some bigotry going on, because there was a lot of resentment from some of the other ethnic groups... And I did have Black, Hispanic friends. But you know what? They were in the honors school, the few they put in the honors school. And they were brilliant. They were like top of their class. But I felt for some of the other kids who I thought belonged there as well... So did I have friends? Yeah, but I think I got the message not to hang out at James Monroe High School after dark.45

This segregation through honors and special placement programs was a common trend throughout many interviews. Despite the fact the public schools were integrated, Jews — who made up the largest white ethnic group, because many Italians and Irish would send their children to parochial Catholic schools — would be “buffered” from the rest of the minority school population through the de facto segregation of tracking.46 Racist institutions were in place and the participants were the beneficiaries of the injustices, even if unwillingly.

Despite the structural impositions of segregation in some classrooms, most participants remember relative harmony between the different ethnic and racial groups. This can be attributed to childhood innocence or childhood ignorance, yet their memories ring a strikingly clear and united tone. Carol Packer sums up the shared sentiments, “As long as we had a group of people to play with, we couldn’t care less who they were. I mean, it just absolutely didn’t matter. You have two arms, you have two legs, it's good.
We're cool. Let's go. And if you didn't, we'll punt."

The participants themselves attribute such an environment of relative harmony to their upbringing and a general milieu of respect, things they generally see as lacking today. Helena Nejman shared she would take her friends to confession, and they would walk her to Hebrew School. She continued, “Where I lived [Tremont and Prospect Avenues] wasn’t Jewish at all… And by having friends of all different nationalities, it just strengthened my identity because I respected who they were and they respected who I was… She was a black girl. We always walked home from school together… I mean, it didn't matter. I think we lived in a golden time. I think we really did. It was a bubble. I think we just made that bubble.”

Yet the Bronx of the postwar years was not without its racial and ethnic prejudices. Many had more problems with their fellow white ethnics, Italians and Irish, than Black or Hispanic groups. Harry Sweet shared a story of how he and his Black friends from the Projects were attacked by Italian youths when they rode their unicycles down Arthur Avenue. Other exposures to prejudices came from adults. Playing outside with kids of color was no issue, but in the case of David Greene he could not bring them home, and in the cases of Betty Grossman and Anne Joy Becker they could not date someone non-Jewish or non-white. Anne Joy Becker’s lighthearted story of her first exposure to this idea highlights childhood innocence:

My first boyfriend when I was five years old was Raul Walton… And I remember going across the street, holding his hand, and bringing him upstairs. My mother would smoke cigarettes at the time. And she was on the phone, and she had a cup of coffee and she had a cigarette, and here’s this little schvartze [Yiddish slur for a black person], walks in with, you know, her little girl. I'm holding hands with him. And I didn't know — I just thought he had to take a bath, what do I know? And she dropped her cigarette, and she has to explain to me that I
can't be boyfriend and girlfriend with him anymore. I said, “Why? Because he's not Jewish?”
Like I didn’t understand. She says, “No, it's just he's not from the same tribe that we are.”
And I didn't know — I just didn't understand what that meant. And I broke his heart.⁵³

Similarly, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 led Michelle Verhoeff to rethink her harmonious viewpoint, “When Martin Luther was assassinated — and maybe a little bit before that — that's when it started to dawn on me, wait a minute, all my wonderful friends at school who happen to be Black — and I remember a little Italian girl who I really liked — it dawned on me, hey wait, they don't live anywhere near where I do.”⁵⁴ Yet, overall, the repeated narrative is one of integration, harmony, and safety.

It is important here to highlight the nature of oral histories as a personal remembering of decades past. A critical examination of the memories shared above brings to light the role of childhood innocence and nostalgia about this time period, yet it also reflects a general lack of knowledge of New York Jews about the systems of segregation at work in their city.⁵⁵ It is true they saw integration as the norm because they never knew anything else growing up, while it is also true that redlining and other forms of institutional racism prevented their school friends from living in their neighborhoods and being in their accelerated classes, or that the people of color they knew were of equal or lesser social class than them, never found in the exclusive middle-class enclave of the Grand Concourse. It could also be true that they do not want to share the racist acts or words of their friends, family, and neighbors — or even themselves. Charles Fogelman said there were little racial or ethnic tensions he remembered, but then followed up with, “I would not at all say it was an unbigoted place, because people talked in disgustingly racist terms about Black people and Puerto Rican people. You know, they referred to non-Jewish people as kind of the Other.”⁵⁶ In this deeper, more nuanced understanding, there is an acknowledgement of racist feelings
held by Jews and others in the postwar Bronx, talked about in private and hushed tones, but acted upon prejudices were by far the exception. Taking into consideration the time period, when people — among them two Jewish activists murdered in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, 1964 — were protesting and dying for integration and Civil Rights, for living amongst other races to be such a normalized experience is in itself exceptional, even given its brevity and limitations.

The postwar Bronx is remembered as a wonderful time and place to live, regardless of the working- and lower-middle class status of most of the oral history participants. They stress a sense of community, of everyone looking out for one another, be it the elderly watching over the streets and parks or the “commune without the commune” parental solidarity of co-op and public housing. They also stress the sense of safety that such a community-centered mindset provided. Mindy Gilbert eloquently summarized, “There was such a wonderful, secure feeling. I think that’s the word that comes to mind the most, it was so secure. And it’s just not like that anymore. It was — if you were black, white, whatever — you lived next to each other with so much more harmony than you do now. Or I don’t know, I guess everybody had more of the same kind of standard of life.” People may have been different racially or religiously, but as long as they shared that “standard of life,” i.e. economic class and aspirations for upward mobility, there was solidarity.

Leaving the Bronx

With such positive memories of the Bronx, the question remains why these people chose to leave the borough. To begin to answer this question, it is helpful to examine the motivations of those who moved to Co-op City. Co-op City, though still in the Bronx, was seen as both an in-between of city and suburbs — mainly for those who wished to leave but could not afford a house or were too elderly to take care of one — and a cause for the deterioration of and flight from the Bronx. When it first opened in 1968, the
cooperative housing development was primarily Jewish and, because of the down payments and cover charges necessary to be part of the co-op, solidly upper working- and middle-class. Some oral history participants point to neighborhood demographic change and the desire to be close to a Jewish community as motivations for their parents and grandparents. Others point to the bigger, higher quality apartments — with air conditioning! — that they could feel like they had ownership of as a motivation, pointing towards the continuous upward movement of Jewish Bronxites. These were a few of the motivations that those who left the Bronx felt as well. As Harriet Terdiman explained, “The neighborhood was changing. It was getting a little rough... So that's where the exodus was: the old went to Co-op City — and it was not that expensive, it was subsidized — and the young bought homes.”

Co-op City, which many claimed “ruined the Bronx” because it drew Jewish families from solidly middle-class neighborhoods like Fordham and the Grand Concourse, did not cause the deterioration of the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s, it merely accelerated it. As alluded to above, many people moved to Co-op City and out of the Bronx because of demographic changes and neighborhood deterioration. Co-op City did leave many apartments empty to be filled with new, upwardly mobile groups, who just so happened to be of a different complexion than their Jewish predecessors. Bruce Jacobovitz explained this phenomenon:

To some degree, it was natural, just natural evolution. Like we talked about with the Lower East Side, as people reached higher levels of economic status, they moved out, they bought houses in the suburbs. So some of it was that. A lot of it was Co-op City, a lot of it was racism. Because when Co-op City was built, and all these people left the Bronx, who filled in? It was folks from Manhattan. And if you were used to living in [white neighborhoods], suddenly all
these people are moving in, and you get nervous. And I don’t blame people, but yeah, a lot of it was racism.\textsuperscript{64}

Although not outwardly stated by most participants, racism must be taken into account. “The neighborhood was changing” — a phrase repeated so often by oral history participants I began to wonder if there was some official script they were instructed to follow — held both racial and economic implications. Valerie Hebel, who was just a child when her family left the Bronx, was straightforward in what motivated them: “integration.”\textsuperscript{65} Beth Marks explained how Parkchester, a development once reserved for only whites by the community’s creator the Metropolitan Life Company, was derogatorily called “Darkchester” as the demographics started to change.\textsuperscript{66} Yet most of the racial assumptions made had to do with class and upward mobility; the new groups were viewed as less motivated to work hard and succeed. This undoubtedly racist assumption held special significance to Jewish Bronxites who were accustomed to a milieu of academic excellence, held an unbreakable belief in the American dream, and had seen the Bronx as an urban haven for the working- and middle-class — one threatened by the arrival of poorer immigrant groups. Michael Melasky explained, “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.”\textsuperscript{67}

For most, these intermixed racial and class concerns translated into very real concerns about safety, something that was in stark contrast to the environment of security in their youth. Their safety concerns were not merely perceived or overhyped because of demographic changes; they reflect a very real spike in crime taking place in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. Also, many people who describe safety
as a motivation based it not off of news media or the stories of others, but real lived experiences. The participants share they would not wander out of their own neighborhoods — “It took on a whole different complexion. There was a lot of violence going on. You know, if you left the area that you live in, you kind of were prone to getting beat up” — and there were break-ins and muggings that served as the final push for many.\textsuperscript{68} The idea of “safety” was part of the larger environment that was under threat by general signs of neighborhood deterioration, like dirtiness, drug use, and vagrancy.\textsuperscript{69}

The correlation of increased people of color with increased crime was and remains a strongly held belief in popular culture and certain academic literature but has been disproven. John Hipp steps outside of that assumption and finds that crime induces those with the economic means — more commonly white people — out of neighborhoods, leaving behind racial/ethnic minorities who typically have less economic means to begin with.\textsuperscript{70} It goes beyond economic means as well: “Racial/ethnic minority residents cannot simply move to better neighborhoods when their economic resources improve — as the classic assimilation model posits — but instead face constraints that limit the range of neighborhoods they can enter.”\textsuperscript{71} These constraints are racial in nature and not faced by white groups like Jews, especially as the loosening of anti-semitic housing covenants in the suburbs meant greater opportunities in formerly unreachable neighborhoods. His study covering the 1970s to 1990s shows that perception of crime most impacts the out-mobility of whites, while African Americans are most unable to move out of higher crime neighborhoods and the most likely to be forced to move into them.\textsuperscript{72} This context to the oral histories provides a counternarrative to the perception that people of color cause crime to come to a neighborhood, an idea often presented by the oral history participants even if they place it in the more comfortable terms of class instead of outwardly identifying race.
There existed another layer to the motivations of white flight that, more than anything, defined the reasoning of those interviewed: a continuation of upward mobility. Their grandparents had come to America for a better life, their parents moved from the Lower East Side to the Bronx — and, for many, progressively better parts of the Bronx over time — and this generation followed the nationwide trends of the period and moved out of the city to the suburbs. Staying in the Bronx would have threatened such progress in two ways; it would not only have prevented movement forward, but, because of the socio-economic changes of the new residents around them, would have actually meant a step backwards for these Jews. They never forgot their working-class roots, with most one generation removed or the first generation themselves to not hold manual labor jobs and/or live in tenements. In Susan Wexler’s case, her mom would not let them forget it — she would take them back to her South Bronx tenement every year to “show us that we were very lucky” to live in the wealthy Bronx neighborhood of Riverdale. 

As Howard Cohen explained, Jewish Bronxites did not just up and leave, the neighborhood changed around them, and they felt forced out to maintain the progress their ancestors had made. Leonard Susman, in his explanation of white flight, pointed to the class-based analysis I wish to make clear here, “From an economic standpoint, unfortunately, the newer residents, by and large economically, are not as well off. And I believe the Bronx from a poverty standpoint is — one doesn’t like to say outstanding for something like that — has gained too many low-income residents who have social and economic difficulties.” Making a similarly insightful analysis of her old neighborhood, Joan Tarson showed the continuities from the days when her family moved out of their impoverished South Bronx neighborhood because of overcrowded schools:

You always have the group moving out and the group coming to take its place... So my grandmother's apartment — which was our old apartment — she lived there till she died.
When she moved out, they put a minority family in that apartment that had like six kids... in a two bedroom apartment. And that is why the schools over there deteriorated again to where they were back when I was there, it's like the same revolving door. When I was there, whatever group had moved out, and the Jews moved into Walton Avenue and the schools were all overcrowded, so then as people moved out to get out of there, it freed up some space, and then different groups were moving in.\textsuperscript{75}

These examples paint a clear picture of a class consciousness and understanding of neighborhood turnover trends held by many of the participants in white flight today.

For the most part, these economic and progress concerns presented themselves in terms of jobs and family. Numerous oral history participants pointed to a new job or job promotion out of the Bronx for themselves or their spouse as a main reason they left the borough.\textsuperscript{76} This job was associated with all of the things this generation of Jews wanted: solid middle-class living, an opportunity at ownership, more land and fresh air. Before the participants moved to the suburbs, almost none had lived in single-family homes and their families had rented apartments since they came to the United States. In their minds, these perceived housing improvements were ensured only by a move to the suburbs, especially as the borough that they so loved was “not the happy place that [they] remembered.”\textsuperscript{77} This was part of a much larger trend towards suburbanization, yet the deterioration and other circumstances of the Bronx make them unique.

Upward movement for their new families, especially their children, was an important motivation connected to the above mentioned push factors out of the Bronx, i.e. deteriorating neighborhoods, and pull factors into the suburbs, i.e. ownership and fresh air. Joan Berkley explained, “I think all of us wanted
to leave the Bronx... basically the urge at that point was you move out of the Bronx, you move to the suburbs, you have a family. And that's like the progression of what you were taught you were supposed to do. You know, you kind of follow the dream... you're starting your family, now you move." This move was more than just the fact that participants did not want their children in the deteriorating public schools. Almost all of the participants did not move permanently from the borough until after they were married, pointing towards the significance of the family structure. Once children came into the picture, the need to leave the borough for something better became even more apparent. Howard Cohen shared:

I think it’s part of growing up. I don’t think they necessarily left, they were moving on with their lives. Anybody who grows up in an apartment, they’re not big enough when they get older... If you can afford it, go to a building that's new and bigger and start there. And then after a while, when you start having kids, it ain't big enough for your family. You look for somewhere, and the places where they were: [Long] Island, Jersey, Connecticut. I mean, you had to go somewhere. And that’s the reason. I don't think it was necessarily because they wanted to get away from it, because some of them stayed there a long time. I know, unfortunately, one of my friends was born in the apartment. He died in it 84 years later. So for whatever reason, he never got married, obviously stayed in the same apartment. Not too many people like that.

This quote is revelatory in two ways: first, it reveals the “inevitability” mindset that many Jewish former Bronxites hold, that it was the logical next step to move to the suburbs and there was no other way, and two, it reveals the dichotomy between those who left to raise their children and those who, in the example of his friend, did not have such obligations to leave and stayed in the Bronx for his whole life. While this
is merely one example, it underscores the role that family played in this culture of both geographic and socio-economic movement.⁸¹

The movement into suburbia came to define American middle-class culture during the postwar period, so it was not merely that the stability of the borough seemed to be slipping out from beneath them, but that suburbia emerged as the place to stake their claim to full middle-class American identity. Would the participants have stayed if the Bronx had not undergone economic deterioration in the 1960s to 1980s? It is impossible to know, but the trends towards suburbanization were so much larger than them that it seems unlikely. The dream of the nuclear family in a private home with a white picket fence and car out front consumed the American mindset of this period, providing an explanation for why these oral history participants felt the movement towards this ideal was so inevitable. Popular culture and the media — even the government with its building of highways and housing loans — made it so; Bronx Jews just applied their own experiences to the larger trends of the time, even sacrificing much of the distinctive working-class Jewish experience that they so prize about their youth.

The sources reveal that while individual circumstances and motivations vary slightly, the overall culture of the Bronx as these individuals were coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s was to follow in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents, aspire for more, and to continue to move up in American society. These aspirations were threatened by real and imagined rises in crime and the decline in economic status of their neighbors and neighborhoods. Ellen Newman summarized the feelings around the influx of Black and Puerto Rican neighbors, “Things were changing… I remember our building super was Puerto Rican. And they were a really nice family… 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.”⁸²
Overall, it was seen as only a matter of time, the “logical… next step in [their] evolution,” but this did not necessarily need to be so and likely would not have been so without the larger trends of suburban construction and subsidization that existed in the period.83

The Bronx Today

Most of the participants do not go back often to the Bronx, and even less often to their old neighborhoods. Those who do return look for the safe, familiar attractions: meals on Arthur Avenue or City Island, visiting the Bronx Zoo or Botanical Gardens with family and friends, and, of course, Yankee games.84 Some don’t want to go back, for fear of what they’ll see: “I have no desire, it wouldn't be the same going there today. I wouldn't recognize the people, I wouldn't recognize the buildings.”85 Others, in driving through old neighborhoods, use words like “horrified” and “scary” to describe them.86

A lot of their current negative perceptions of the Bronx center around their own experiences in the period of arson and devastation in the 1970s and 1980s and the things they hear on the news today. Gun violence is a common theme.87 What is telling about their current concerns — keeping in consideration that interrelated economic and safety concerns are what drove them from the Bronx in the first place — is that they primarily blame economic problems for what continues to, in their opinions, blight the Bronx. Not merely poverty, but what they perceive as a lack of aspiration and stable family life to get out of it, very different from the Jewish mindset of their upbringing. Stuart Rudnick compared:

Even though we were considered, I would say, lower middle class at best — we were a 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.\textsuperscript{88}

These perceptions of broken families or less prioritization of education as barriers for progress were repeated in multiple interviews.\textsuperscript{89} Also, as former Bronxite and former Bronx District Attorney Paul Horowitz explained, “I think the Bronx for the most part is very poor... And there’s a lot of crime... Most of the people there are just hard-working people trying to do the right thing, but when their kids go to school they worry whether the kid is gonna get shot walking to or from school. That’s something I never had to deal with or go through.”\textsuperscript{90} Economics and crime went together in the mindset of most participants who decided to leave a half century ago and remain wrapped up in often repeated and yet disproven racist stereotypes. Given the participants’ lack of remaining personal connections to the Bronx, these ideas often stem from negative media portrayals and never forgotten memories of when the Bronx was burning.

There are others who see the current Bronx in a more positive light. As Anne Joy Becker eloquently put it: “I think that the Bronx is really kicking some ass right now.”\textsuperscript{91} Participants point to the revitalization of the Mott Haven area, with David Greene explaining, “What was once was once from farmland changing to human land is now gentrification.”\textsuperscript{92} Susan Wexler, who runs the New York City Marathon, shared of the South Bronx, “I run those races every year right past what was burned out and it’s beautiful now.”\textsuperscript{93} They see the diversity of the borough as something positive that has contributed to a “new blossoming
of the Bronx.” Michelle Verhoeff continued, “And it’s their time. The Bronx that I shared with you, that was my time. So I would say I do miss it sometimes.”

Looking back, despite the difficulties they may have faced in a poor and crowded atmosphere, almost all the oral history participants try to get across that the postwar Bronx was a wonderful place unlike any other. Their words speak for themselves: “It's always going to be the center of the universe,” “I have the best memories. I cannot imagine growing up in a better environment with supportive people all around me... these are still my closest friends,” “Every day was sunny. Unless there was the rare snow day, in which you went out with your shovel and played in the snow.” Some acknowledge that such memories are blurred by childhood innocence and nostalgia, while others credit their Bronx upbringing with a certain toughness created by a working-class urban environment. Tinges of sadness for those people and places lost are coupled with fondness for safety and community. And despite the assuredness that moving to the suburbs was the right move for their children, many participants acknowledge this Bronx and Jewish-centered community is something their children never had. As Marla Green put it, “You can take the girl out of the Bronx, you can’t take the Bronx out of the girl.”

The common trends throughout the nearly forty oral history interviews conducted for this study exhibit the uniqueness of the time, place, and socio-economic environment of Jewish white flight from the Bronx. In regard to time, the decades following World War Two were marked by optimism and relative prosperity. As this generation of Jewish Bronxites could look to their grandparents as recent immigrants to this country, they were intimately connected with the struggles that allowed them to take advantage of such prosperity. They knew fathers and uncles that had defeated fascism in Europe, they knew labor organizers and unionists, and they knew that they had access to the city’s universities free of charge if
only they worked hard enough. All this — coupled with the waning of anti-semitism in the postwar and federal loans to encourage home ownership in the growing suburbs — created the opportunities for growth and expansion in their lives. When New York’s financial crisis would send the city spiraling into poverty and crime, that was the final impetus needed to move on to greener pastures.

In regard to place, the Bronx was a promised land, living and ending its golden age in the participants’ time there, the 1940s through the 1960s. Their parents or grandparents had moved to the borough because it was considered a step up, a movement in the upward direction out of the crowded, dirty tenements they once called home. It had green space, good schools, and safety. It also had widespread integration at a time when elsewhere in the country people were fighting for a seat on the bus or at the lunch counter. As children and teenagers during this period, they saw, knew, and played with people of different races, ethnicities, and religions. Yet, as the Bronx began to change, as buildings began to burn and trash littered the streets, their once serene home became the poster child for urban deterioration. What once appealed about the Bronx — security and opportunity for the upwardly mobile while still close to the city — became the exact attributes that drew them to the suburbs.

As for the socio-economic environment, those of similar cultural and economic background stuck together — and would move together. The strong Jewish identity of these participants, regardless of their religious practice, points to the strength of Jewishness as both an ethnicity and religion that puts it in a category unlike any other. This identification lends itself to the cultural practices and beliefs that motivate this ethnoreligion in the United States, such as persistent belief in the liberal values of hard-work, progress, and diversity. The lower middle- and working-class status of their parents’ generation — who aspired once to the Grand Concourse then to Co-op City — meant they knew hardship, identified with one another on class grounds, and similarly aspired for more. Class overcame other traditional
barriers like race; to bring up Mindy Gilbert’s statement again, “If you were black, white, whatever — you lived next to each other with so much more harmony than you do now… I guess everybody had more of the same kind of standard of life.”\textsuperscript{98} This standard of life did not mean everyone was upper- or even middle-class; it meant everyone took care of themselves and the Bronx because they aspired for more. In the minds of the participants, this is what was missing in those that moved into the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s, with the unspoken racial implications of this mindset undergirding all class consciousness.

In an example of how these factors are separate from other examples of white flight, one can look at Kruse’s book White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism again, this time as a point of comparison. In Atlanta, major white flight was caused by de jure desegregation of areas that had once been solely reserved for whites and would “flip” as Blacks living in overcrowded neighborhoods expanded outwards. Initially, organizations were started to stop neighborhood turnover in the working- and lower middle-class areas first affected by this change. Eventually, with cases like Brown v Board of Education (1954), desegregation, even in the smallest capacities, pushed whites out of the city as opposed to having their children go to school with Black students.\textsuperscript{99} In the Bronx, despite racial prejudices and racialized conceptions of crime within neighborhoods, the overwhelming majority of Jewish Bronxites had long been going to the borough’s public schools with students of color. This was not a factor. There had never been solely, legally bound white and non-white neighborhoods, even if in practice white/Jewish neighborhoods had few people of color. Nonetheless, they still shared the neighborhood amenities, public transportation, and public schools with fellow Bronxites of color without the legal (and sometimes physical) battle of segregation as shown in Atlanta. In all of the oral histories, nobody sought to stop the racial transition, as in Atlanta, but ceded the ground and moved out as quickly as possible. One explanation for this disparity is that the whites that left Atlanta were largely homeowners, whereas Jews in the Bronx had rented, making it easier for them to leave and making ownership in the suburbs
— or partial ownership in Co-op City — an important motivation to continue their outward movement in line with their history of upward mobility. Similarly, it was not an economic crisis that drove people out of Atlanta, as it did in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s.

In this one brief comparison, it is evident that no single narrative of white flight in the United States exists, even if the phenomena take place in the same time period. A nuanced understanding of each occurrence of white flight enables scholars and others to identify the specific motivations behind diverse individuals. Only a ground-up history such as this one, which puts the memories of individuals first, can unlock both the differences and commonalities that define a period of mass movement that permanently altered the urban and suburban landscapes of the United States. Further studies should be conducted on other Northeastern cities, like Boston, other boroughs, like Brooklyn and Queens, and other white ethnic groups within the Bronx, like the Italians and Irish, as every group will have their own story to tell.

Without such a people-centered perspective of history, what can be left out of the narrative is the sustained connection and immense pride of those Jews who left the Bronx. My greatest takeaway from conducting these interviews is the deep emotional connection that remains, despite the physical and temporal distance. The participants point to this connection as something unique to the Bronx and Jewish experience. While only future research into other groups and places can confirm such a belief, the sentiment remains. Anne Joy Becker shared, “When people say ‘so tell me a little about yourself,’ ‘I’m a Jew from the Bronx’ is the first thing I say… The Bronx is part of my family. It’s not even just the borough. It’s like, I’m part of that Dutch family [the namesake of the Bronx]. It’s like, I’m part of the Bronx.” Pride is the word that comes up over and over again. While oral histories miss the chills and the tears shed upon remembering — and those less than comfortable details that are left out — they do capture the overwhelming power of shared memory that overcomes the loss of shared time and space.
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5 Gonzalez, *The Bronx*, 118.
9 Sammartino, *Freedomland*, 8-10.
19 Rosenbaum and Friedman, *The Housing Divide*, 38.


23 For example, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America’s Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age*, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019 about urban renewal, which makes mentions to the white flight that contributed to both suburbia and the need for renewal.


28 Rosenbaum and Friedman, *The Housing Divide*, 38.

29 Martha Rosenbaum, interview by Sophia Maier, July 8, 2022, 1. Susan Eisenstein, interview by Sophia Maier, June 24, 2022, 1.


31 Michael Melasky, interview by Sophia Maier, July 6, 2022, 1-2.


35 Grossman, 5.


38 Grossman, 3.
Moore et al., *Jewish New York*, 293 write: “Many New York Jews failed to see racism underlying de facto segregation in the City. Unless parents brought segregation to consciousness, most New York Jews did not realize that their home turf was racially segregated.” This is also evident in interviewees that saw segregation/Civil Rights as a South struggle, not a local one.
For more quotes on how marriage/family influenced people to leave, see Greene, 15.
Part IV

Memories

The neighborhood is mostly divided into small neighborhoods, that are about a stretch of some main through fare. This was an area, 1980's when private cars were much more unfamiliar. This was where people lived and went about their daily lives. The neighborhood contained your house of work and entertainment. Generally, you left or entered the neighborhood through the significant gate, mostly determined by the character of the neighborhood.

10 years was spent in such a village, which I'll call the Green Neighborhood, from the main central thoroughfare which ran from the boundary of Southern Boulevard to where Freeman Street merged into the Bronx River. The neighborhood extended north and south from Freeman Street. On the south, Westchester Avenue provides a natural boundary. The intersection of Westchester Avenue with Southern Boulevard functions as the main approach into the area, from which you could go west into such crowded shopping areas, or go south on Southern Boulevard for the business located in the shady shade of the covered.'

If you could climb the stairs to the platform of the Freeman Street Station, the CRT deep into Manhattan or north to reach Westchester Avenue, Park Avenue & Grand Central Road.

...
Herbert Goldstein’s Bronx of the 1920s and 1930s*

Transcribed by Magda Teter

Bronx is mostly divided into small neighborhoods, clustered like some rural village about a stretch of some main thoroughfare. This was even more the case in the ‘20s and 30’s when private cars were much rarer [than] today. Much of your shopping then was perforce within your own village-neighborhood, you recruited your friends from those who lived in the neighborhood. The neighborhood contained your house of worship, and the places of entertainment. Generally, you left or entered the neighborhood through a specific gate, mostly determined by the character of the public transportation.

My first 6 or 7 years were spent in such a local village, which I will call the Freeman Street neighborhood, from the central thoroughfare, which runs from the western boundary of Southern Boulevard to where Freeman Street runs on the east into the Bronx River. The neighborhood extends north and south a few blocks from Freeman Street. On the South, the diagonally running Westchester Ave. provides a natural boundary. The intersection of Freeman with Southern Boulevard functions as the main gateway. From there you could go west into such crowded shopping areas Wilkens Avenue, or go south on Southern Boulevard for the various businesses located in the dark shadows of the overhead IRT ‘El. Or, you could climb the stairs to the platforms of the Freeman Street station and take the IRT deep into Manhattan or north to the rural pastures of the Bronx River and Gun Hill Road.

* There are about five pages of fragments of what seems to have been intended as a fuller memoir. Regretfully, we have no additional writings. The author captures the geography and transportation network of the Bronx in the early twentieth century.
Walk with me on a day, say in 1927, into the neighborhood starting under the ‘El where Freeman Street crosses Southern Boulevard. On the S.E. corner of the intersection is the imposing structure of the Bronx branch of the Bank of the United States. Built in the best monumental style of the period its highly polished brass door opened into an awesome temple of banking. To the south of the bank was the local movie house, the Loew’s Freeman (I believe), where I probably saw my first movie, still in the silent era when the only sound came from the electric organ whose keyboard was dimly visible to the left of the screen. I have few specific memories of the rest of the Southern Boulevard area at this intersection, just a vague impression of small stores nestled in the shadow. One exception was that towards the end of this period, there was a health-food store just across Southern Blvd from the theater. The owner was one Joe Rosen. My father and he entered into a friendship that lasted long after we moved from the neighborhood. Joe Rosen was responsible for the ideas my father developed about proper nutrition, ideas, which had a lasting effect on me.

Freeman Street rises sharply eastward from the station—in memory that hill rises almost too steeply to be climbed. The Bank building lines most of the south side of that hill—I have no memory of the north side. At the top of the hill is the intersection with Hoe Ave running perpendicular to Freeman Street. Like many streets here about Hoe Ave is named after one of [the] rich 19th century New York citizens who had summer estates in what became south-east Bronx. The Hoe of Hoe Ave is more famous than most; he made his money from the invention of the Hoe high-speed printing press which made possible the flowering of New York’s many newspapers in the 19th century. The block of Hoe Ave south from Freeman St. to Home Street played a special role in our lives. I’ll postpone a description for a while.

From Hoe Ave, Freeman Street continues with a slight turn to Vyse Ave. The south side of the block was lined with small stores, where wares during the day were displayed on the sidewalk outside. I rememeber
a hardware store, a butcher store, a fruit store, and a dairy, which, if memory serves me right, was the progenitor of the Dutch chain [?]. Across Vyse Ave, at the S.E. corner was a relatively new large apartment house (with entrance court on Vyse Ave) which sticks in my memory because on the second floor was located the apartment office [of] a young dentist, a Dr. Berlin. My father was one of his patients, but the relationship flowered, as often did with my father, into a close friendship. They shared similar experiences of domestic tribulation (I believe Mrs. Berlin had left him), and my father continued to visit him long after my family had split up and I was living alone with Dad. While my father was being treated I would sit in the waiting room dipping into a multivolume life of George Washington I found in the shelves. Either Berlin was not very successful or (more likely) he let Dad come out of the regular hours, for I don’t remember seeing any other patients.

*  

Much of the Bronx landscape consists of ridges and valleys running North and South and the lines of rapid transit tend, for the most part, to follow along them. On the map, they stretch out toward the Westchester border like some ghastly elongated fingers only connected into an overlapping nexus in the palm that is the South Bronx. From West to East, there is first of all the line of the Harlem Division of the NY Central, running along the banks of the Harlem [River].† Next to the East is the IRT elevated along Jerome Avenue Valley. The Independent line follows the Concourse Ridge and the main NY Central tracks follow the Webster Ave Valley. Next east is the 3rd Ave Elevated followed finally by the IRT-White Plains line. (Only in the flat sandy east Bronx peninsulæ, the rapid transit lines can go off in arbitrary directions, like the Pelham spur.) By the start of the decade of the ’20s all these were in place, except the Independent Concourse line which had to wait till 1933 to run.

† Now, MetroNorth.
From the mid-19th century on, people tended to settle only in the immediate vicinity of one of the stops or stations of these lines of rapid transit. To switch metaphors, each of the railroads or subways were like spines, with population areas stretching out like ribs on either side of the spine. Especially in the earlier decades of the centuries, each of these localized neighborhoods tended to function almost as independent villages, and one lived in many ways centered about the small tightly closed neighborhood. I lived the first 6 ½ years in one such neighborhood, which had spread out from the Freeman Street station of the East Side IRT line.

The IRT subway which ran up Lexington Ave in Manhattan plunges under the Harlem River and stops first in the arching caverns of the 145th Street Station [sic]. Shortly thereafter it emerges into the open as an elevated northeasterly over Westchester Avenue, with several stations along the route. At the intersection of Westchester Ave with Southern Blvd, the elevated has a sharp turn north into Southern Blvd, transforming that broad open thoroughfare into a dim cavern, fitfully lit by the sun rays piercing the gaps between the rails. The first stop on the Southern Blvd route is Freeman St.; the elevated continues to Boston Post Road, and further past Bronx Park up to the northern border at 248th Street.

Freeman Street stretches east and west on both sides of its intersection with Southern Blvd. Both sides were equally well built-up, and I dare say that at this time, it was all considered one neighborhood. Certainly, when my parents moved into the area, they lived on the west side of the ‘El, first in Minford Place, then on Fox Street. But the time I was born, and certainly by the time I became aware of my surroundings, the family had become centered on the eastern side. I know my paternal grandfather had to move to 1416 Bryant Ave by 1916, because he buried his first wife, my grandmother, from there. My parents wound up in the same building, and my father’s sister and her physician husband lived close by. As a little boy my picture of the neighborhood was confined to the eastern side.
Joy Ann Becker’s Bronx of the 1960s and 1970s—An Interview with Sophia Maier  
June 20, 2022

Sophia Maier (SM): Perfect. And if you just want to start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

Ann Joy Becker (AJB): Okay, so let me see. I come from two different sides of the Jewish track. One is the Sephardic and Ashkenazi, and the other is the Litvak [Lithuanian], and the poorest section of town. So my grandparents, from my mother's side, were Polish and Russian. And my father's side is German and Polish. So my father's side was more of the snottier version, my mother’s was more of the poor version. My grandparents were peddlers on Pelham Parkway, they peddled tomatoes and things like that. And my grandmother was the business woman, and my grandfather was not, and if a tomato was bruised, and he wants to throw it away, she says, “No, we'll sell it for a penny, they’ll make sauce.” So that was kind of like the grandparents end of it. As far as my mother and father, not a very religious upbringing. Definitely knew I was Jewish. My brother was bar mitzvah’d, my father was bar mitzvah’d, both circumcised, obviously. That’s, I guess, that's the telltale sign right there. And I was not bat mitzvah’d, I had an argument with the rabbi and was basically kicked out of Hebrew school.

SM: I thought my father was the only one, but it seems not.

AJB: Well, let me let you know that I'm pretty proud of how I got kicked out. I asked my rabbi, “if Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel, which were sons, who did Cain and Abel procreate with?” And he looked
at me, and he was like, “they probably had, like siblings,” and I said, “but that’s still incest.” I was 12 years old. And I got kicked out of Hebrew school. And to this day, no one has answered that question.

SM: I never thought about it before, but now that I have, I’m gonna have to start posing that question to people.

AJB: There you go. I’m like, so who were the ones, who did they fool around with? Because honestly, it was either their mother or somebody else, but who was the somebody else? So that was how I got in trouble, and that’s kind of, like, defining me, even at the age of 62. Like that story should be my eulogy. You know, it kind of gives you, Sophia, an idea of who Ann Joy Becker is. And I moved out of the Bronx, probably, let me see --- I turned 18 October 6, I told my mother that I’d be moving out after Christmas. And on December 26, I moved to Manhattan. My mother said, “I thought you meant AFTER Christmas. You know, like after, like, you know, a few months, maybe a year?” Nope. December 26 I moved out. I moved to Manhattan. I moved in with this woman, Sharon Wellesley, who was 15 years my senior. She was a roommate, who actually passed away last year, I was very upset about that. COVID really did hurt a lot of people that I know, in reference to --- you know, it’s 62 years old, your friends now are not just moving away, they’re passing away. And it’s very, very difficult at this point in my life, but I digress. So anyway, so I moved to Manhattan, I finished up going to college. And that in itself is an interesting story. Since I lived on 77th and Second, and I went to Queensboro Community College, if you take your car somewhere and you try to park the car when you come back, there's no parking. So I had a gentleman, who I was very good friends with, who did a thesis in art, and he made a paper mache fire hydrant for me that was weighted down with sand. This is no --- I'm not kidding around --- right in front of 315 East 77th street, where I used to live, there was a synagogue next door and next
door was like a hydrant a little further down. I put the hydrant in front of 315 East 77th Street and when I came back from college, I put it back in my trunk to park my car.

SM: Oh my god, that’s hysterical.

AJB: And back then --- isn’t that great --- back in 1978, I paid back then $35 for that fire hydrant. And that fire hydrant saved me thousands and thousands of dollars in parking tickets.

SM: Oh my god, I'm sure.

AJB: Yeah, so that's my story in reference to living in Manhattan. I lived in Manhattan for several years, met a relationship that I was in for 19 years, moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and then I lived in Medford, Massachusetts, and I lived in Chester, New York, and I've lived in Hackensack, New Jersey. I'm like, I'm like a balaboosta from all over the, you know, the New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts area. I never really settled down with either jobs, cars, or places to live, only friends in my life, because that is what's more important.

SM: That seems like a good way to do it, I'm not gonna lie.

AJB: That's what I'm saying. People go, “Oh, how many jobs have you had?” It doesn't really matter. It's how many friends have you had in your life. And like I said, my friend Yvette, I’ve known for 52 years. Michelle --- who sent me the link to you, Sophia --- I've known since we were born, our mothers were best friends. So 62 years I've known her, she's 26 days older than me. I said, “Do you want to be
on the phone with me?” And she was like, “No, that’s why I sent the link to you. I’m not doing that.”

*laughing*

SM: Well, so what neighborhood did you grow up in, in the Bronx?

AJB: I grew up on the outskirts of Parkchester. I grew up on Thieriot Avenue, which is, like, near White Plains Road, or PS 102 was literally across the street from me, which was the public school. And I went to Christopher Columbus High School, instead of James Monroe, because even back then, when my mother went to James Monroe, it was bad. And my mother was 33 years older than me. So she said, “You’re not going. You’re a white girl. You’re not going to James Monroe. I’m going to make believe you live with your grandparents on Bronx Park East and you’re going to Christopher Columbus High School.” And that’s exactly what happened. I still wear the Christopher Columbus High School ring, which I bought with my own money. I graduated high school when I was only 16. I didn’t turn 17 until I started college.

SM: Wow. So were you in the SP program?

AJB: No, I was not. Actually, I’ll tell you, it’s really funny that you even said the SP program. My friend Michelle was definitely in the SP program. I, in sixth or fifth grade, I had a great teacher in fifth grade, and my reading level was maybe third or fourth grade reading level. I didn’t really like reading books and my teacher --- his name was Mr. Delapizi (sp?) --- he said to me, “tell me what you do like to read?” I said comic books. I loved Archie comics, I loved Superman, all that. He goes, “Okay, I want you to read an Archie comic, take one of the stories, and then write a paragraph about the story you read so that I can understand what you read.” And he did that for about six months. And in six months, I went
from a third-fourth grade reading level to a sixth-seventh grade reading level in fifth grade. By the time I got into sixth grade, he said to me, “if you do not increase your reading level, you’re going to go into a really bad class in Junior High School 127. And I don't want you to do that, you should learn a different language,” you know, Spanish, French, whatever. And because of that, I went into seven-two -- instead of seven-SP-two --- I went into seven-two, which is one step down from the SP classes. But I skipped third, and my mother also got me in --- my birthday, like I said, is October 6 --- so she got me in in September when I was turning four October 6. Well, turning five October 6, I should say. So I was still four years old when I started kindergarten. So, not only did I start earlier than I should have by a year, but I also skipped third.

SM: Okay.

AJB: So if that makes sense.

SM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, it makes sense. The math work out. I think.

AJB: Yeah, it does.

SM: And so, I guess more about, your public school experience or the neighborhood you grew up in: Was it a predominantly Jewish area? Was it a mixed group?

AJB: See, the two-block radius --- 1475 Thieriot Avenue, there was 1425, 1450, there was like four different buildings in the Archer Stratton Co-op, which was on the outskirts of Parkchester --- was all Jewish. But, of course, I found the Italian boy to have as a boyfriend, you know. There was like Germans
around the corner, the Spanish and the blacks were really on the other side of the highway, of Cross Bronx Park. I was on one side, and, like I said, PS 102 was right across the street from us. So Thieriot Avenue, the Archer Stratton area, was all Jewish and Italian, predominantly Jewish.

SM: And were there any kind of tensions between the groups?

AJB: There was tension between the Germans, believe it or not. We had more problems with the Irish and the Germans than any blacks or Hispanics back then. I was born in 1959, so we're talking like 1969. You know, segregation, all that stuff that was going on, we didn't really know about that, because I didn't care whether you're black or not. I mean, we were from the Bronx, that was all that mattered to us. We didn't really see color, like I had colored friends and I never went, “Oh, wow. You know, you're black.” *laughing* Like, it never mattered. It didn't matter to us. And it's really weird, there was --- my first boyfriend when I was five years old was Raul Walton, who ended up becoming a very famous bass guitarist in Germany. Like he ended up moving to Germany, like, Germany? What the hell are you doing in Germany? But he was my first boyfriend. And I remember going across the street, holding his hand, and bringing him upstairs. My mother would smoke cigarettes at the time. And she was on the phone, and she had a cup of coffee and she had a cigarette, and here's this little schwartze, walks in with, you know, her little girl. I'm holding hands with him. And I didn't know --- I just thought he had to take a bath, what do I know. And she dropped her cigarette, and she has to explain to me that I can't be boyfriend and girlfriend with him anymore. I said, “Why? Because he's not Jewish?” Like I didn’t understand. She says, “No, it's just he's not from the same tribe that we are.” And I didn't know --- I just didn't understand what that meant. And I broke his heart. And I recently got a hold of him, maybe about the past five years, I remember he's the same age as me so he's 62 like me. And I said, “Raul Walton, do you remember little Ann Joy Becker?” And he said, “Ann, there’s not a day that doesn't go
by that I don't think about holding your hand and going upstairs with your mother smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee.” Him and I speak, like we stayed friends, but it had to be secret. It had to be secret, and we just didn't get it. You know? What do we know?

SM: And so what other kinds of things were going on in your neighborhood? Like stores? Or what did you do for fun? Things like that.

AJB: Um, what we did for fun was we had Parkchester Bowling, so we all belong to a league, of course. Every Sunday, we would go to the Evergreen Garden, which was a Chinese restaurant, because Sunday was typical of having Chinese food in the Jewish religion. I mean, that's what it was. We didn't really go --- like my father would take two-week vacations or whatever, he worked for the transit authority, so it was big for him to go to like Disney or to Canada, you know, to Niagara Falls. And we used to have triptychs, so he’d have the highlight pen out and he’d show exactly where we were going to stop like every stop. You know, there was no Mapquest or GPS or cell phones, it was like, he would sit down --- my mother would have the cigarette hanging out of her mouth, he didn't smoke --- and he would go, “we're going to stop here, this place and fantasy place.” And it was like, it was a trip to do the trip. Yeah, that was part of the vacation was planning the vacation. And we did. We went to Canada, we drove to Florida, Georgia, all these different places, but we never flew, like to California. We would fly to Florida, maybe but not cross country. He stayed in the eastern coast and that was it. That's what he was comfortable doing, and that's what we were comfortable doing.

SM: And so you said your dad worked for the transit authority. Did your mom work?
AJB: My mom worked, believe it or not, for Lerner’s as she was a key punch operator, which back then the punch operators were basically the original computer programmers. It was basically you punch on a data card. *breaking up* And she was 52. So in 1948-ish, 1949, my mother was already a supervisor for Lerner’s stores and she was making about $40 a week, which was a tremendous amount of money back then. My father was a Navajo --- that’s the best way to call him --- but a very innocent boy. Like the only person he probably ever had sex with was my mom. I can’t imagine him --- he would be very proud of himself, the fact that he went into the war. He fixed planes in the Army Air Force because they didn’t have an Air Force. It was called the Army Air Force. My father died a few years ago, he was 92 years old. My mom was 76, so she died about 18 years before my dad. And then she finally came for him and said, “Norman it’s time to come.” So he did. But my mother stopped working when she married my father. And my father, actually, he didn’t want her to work, obviously, he wanted her to have a family. Typical male --- and not in a chauvinistic way at all --- my father was a very quiet, loved his mother kind of a mama’s boy but not a mama’s boy. Not that he was defiant, he totally respected my grandmother, his mother, but he was a different type of mama’s boy, a very gentle man giving, warm simple, simple minded. And not in reference to having mental incapacity --- everything was very black and white, there was no grey. And totally was very clear with what was right and what was not. And not, maybe it’s right. It’s like, “This is wrong” or “This is right.” Whereas I’m more grey, I’m more like my mom, and I have more tolerance for grey. It’s okay to change your mind. You know what I mean? It’s okay to be wrong, and then maybe make it right. And my father was never like that. He was like, “No, wrong is wrong.” And that’s it. There’s no making it right because you already did it wrong. You know what I mean? There’s doing it again, but there’s no doing it right. You did it wrong. And now you did it again. You didn’t do it right. If you did it right you would have done it the first time. So yeah, that’s incredible standards. You know what I mean?
SM: High standards for you to grow up with.

AJB: Yeah. But I was okay with it, because, you know, since I'm a great person, I kind of understood his black and white. Whereas he couldn't understand my grey, but I most certainly could understand his black and white. So I actually had the advantage over it. You know, more education, a lot of different things happened to me and just life. Just life in general. I'm just not a typical heterosexual feminist Jew, I'm a lesbian feminist Jew. Do you know what I mean? I've been with my wife of 23 years. And I'm pretty proud of that, because I'm just very blessed.

SM: Yeah. Sounds like it. So what was it like growing up in a co-op kind of setting? Did that set you apart from other apartment buildings?

AJB: It totally did, because we had a Mr. And Mrs. Club. You have to understand that in a co-op setting, where all the children are basically my age group or my brother's age group --- my brother was five years older than me, so the he had his own set of friends, I had my own set of friends --- you had 17 mothers and you had 17 fathers, and they had the right to smack you as much as your mother did. And there was no DYFS, you wouldn't call DYFS on them, or whatever. It was like, “You know what, I got caught doing something by my Aunt Helen. I better tell my mother before she does, because otherwise, I'm really going to get my ass kicked.” So it was great growing up in a co-op because it was a village bringing up the children. And when we had --- when one of the kids had measles, and it was the summertime, we were all exposed to the measles where the parents would actually take rounds of taking care of 15 kids with measles, so they wouldn't miss school in September. They made us all have freaking measles in the middle of July and August --- or chicken pox or the mumps or whatever the hell it was. If one of the kids got sick in the summertime, we all got sick in the summertime. We were
exposed to it. Like think about that for a second. I mean, not that you would do that, obviously, with COVID because it's a deadly thing. But measles, it wasn't a deadly thing. And then the parents were able to sleep in sections, because if my mother took a four-hour shift, then she'd be able to sleep. And then my Aunt Hellen would take a four-hour shift, and then my Aunt Ruth picked up where she was. So you had 24-hour care by 17 different mothers. It was great. It's like a commune, but without the commune.

SM: Yeah, wow, that's fantastic. I mean, I feel like that. I've been doing a lot of recent reading about Rochdale Village in Queens --- I've been I was reading a book about it --- it's a lot about the co-op and what the idea, like I guess the philosophy behind it is and like, it's exactly that, like that is exactly what it was meant to do.

AJB: It's without being a commune. Like it's a commune mentality without being a commune. Like, you know what I'm saying, we all had our own apartments, obviously, our own fire escapes. So whatever we did was super crazy. But, you know, all the women played Mahjong and the guys went bowling and they were in the bowling leagues, and it just was like this incredible world within the world. It was just incredible. And, you know, people talk --- I live one town away from Lakewood in New Jersey, which is basically kind of like Williamsburg, it's like the Brooklyn community --- people go, “Ann, you're really Jewish?” And I said, “Do you think that all Jews are the Lakewood Jews?” I said, “Didn't you ever hear the 12 tribes of Israel?” Like, just think about even just about the terminology of the 12 tribes of Israel. I said, just thinking about even in your religion where Jesus Christ is God, do you really think he had red hair and blue eyes if he came from Israel? You look like a schwartze, that's what he looked like. He was dark-skinned. He had brown hair and brown eyes, not blue eyes and freckles. I mean, he was Jewish,
for God's sakes. I was like, his last supper was a Passover meal. Like why aren't you Jewish? I don't get it.

SM: No, I'm from Monroe. So, I you know, I'm more than well aware of the “you're Jewish?”, coming from the Hasidim too. I'm not even --- you know, I'm a paternal Jew, I hardly count for most people, let alone them.

AJB: I know Monroe really well, because I had a house in Blooming Grove.

SM: I was in --- well, so I my parents’ first house was in Blooming Grove, actually, on Mangin Road, and then we live now in Highland mills.

AJB: Okay, so I was on Evergreen Drive. And the reason why my address was Monroe is Blooming Grove is too small to have its own post office.

SM: Yeah, that's what it was for them. I mean, we moved out of that house when I was five years old, but my mom has said it. I know that's how it was.

AJB: That's how small the world is. And actually your name even, being Sophia Maier, it's like really funny because as I'm looking at you, you look like my cousin. I had a cousin Debbie Samuels. Her first husband was Jerry Meyer. And she had a daughter, Melissa, and her daughter looks like you Sophia.

SM: Really?
AJB: Yeah, really.

SM: We'll get into this, we'll get into this after I finish recording. But I wonder if you know, my grandparents. So let's go back. So you touched a little bit about your school experience and that teacher that really changed your experience. What kind of other memories stand out to you from either public school or junior high school?

AJB: High school definitely would be the next best experience I had. Robert Folchi (sp?) --- who ended up becoming the District Superintendent of Schools --- was originally the principal in my school, a really nice Italian guy. And you got to remember that I graduated high school when I was only 16 years old, so things like getting even my high school ring and things like that I had to make my own money when I was like 15. I used to call bingo for the synagogue. They used five different synagogue names, so that they could make extra money for the synagogue, and I was running bingo at 15 years old. And every time the cops came in, they had to hide me because I wasn't even 18 to be gambling. It was craziness. It was like a Jewish thing. It was run only during the summer, like telling you crazy stuff. But this guy, Mr. Folchi, I went over to him like almost the first day of high school --- and I was like this really little nebach girl --- and I said to him, I said, “Are you Italian?” He goes, “Yeah,” and I shake his hand and I go, “Smart people.” And him and I were like the best friends for the three years that I was in high school. And I had a very bad experience with my math teacher, his name was Dana Levine. He was --- let's put it this way --- he was such a bad teacher that I drew devil ears on him in my yearbook. He wrote in my yearbook, “Dear pill, it was great having you transferred.” And so I was in the chorus. And when you graduate from high school, you don't physically have your diploma, it's in the mail, they give you like a booklet or something. But yeah, it's just like a piece of paper that goes, “Yeah, you're really graduated.” And he was sitting next to Mr. Folchi --- and this is going to be some cursing on the on the
on the thing, so I'm just letting you know ahead of time --- but so Dana Levine was sitting next to Mr. Folchi, who made my life miserable. And it was geometry, it was it was trigonometry --- we're talking about hard math, not like, you know, algebra --- it was trig and geo. And he's sitting next to Folchi. And I said to Mr. Folchi, "Principal Folchi, are we really graduated? Because I know that I'm up here singing and we're done singing the song and I'm about to get off the stage, but I don't physically have the diploma yet. Is it like in the mail? Is it definitely? I definitely graduated?" He goes, "Yeah." I said, "Are you positive?" He goes, "I'm positive." I turned to Dana Levine and I go, "You are the biggest fucking asshole I've ever met my whole life. And if I ever meet you again, it'll be too soon." I said, I wish you tsuris, tsuris and festering boils." And I turn around and Folchi's laughing like you are right now, and I get off the stage. And he wasn’t coming back the following year, and Folchi knew that, but I didn't know that. He was the worst teacher, and it's a shame because I'm great at math. And I took math in summer school because I failed the algebra regents in math. And I went to Fordham University for summer school for --- excuse me, Roosevelt High School, which was next to Fordham University, I'm lying when I said Fordham, it was across the street.

SM: Yeah, no, I've been there.

AJB: Okay. And I had a great teacher, he had nice like coke bottle glasses --- because when you had cataract surgery back then they gave you coke bottle glasses, they didn't have like contact lenses or implants --- and I got an 86 on the algebra regents that I took the second time around. And he sent me a postcard that said, "Cherub, you're my cherub. It was a pleasure having you in my class." Do you know how tortured I was by Dana Levine? And it helped me to graduate high school.

SM: Yeah. Oh my god.
AJB: I've been very blessed with these different teachers when it was really at the cusp --- I could have gone either way. Had I not met Delapizi in fifth grade, I would have been in a bad class in junior high school, who knows what would have happened to me? Had I not met Mr. Alessi for my summer school, and I didn't graduate high school and I was left back where I wouldn't be with my best friend of 62 years, never would have gone to Queensboro Community College, I never would have moved out of my house. Like, when I think about all these different things, I go, “God had some intentions for me. And it's my job to figure out what those intentions are.”

SM: Yeah. That's a good way to look at it. Do you have any memories of the 1967-1968 teachers’ strike from when you were in school?

AJB: No, what I have memories of is 1969 Stonewall where a gay bar in New York had a major brawl with the police officers in New York City. It was more --- I was already, even at 10 years old --- I was already looking more towards activism in feminism and --- even a 10 --- more of the Carole King kind of. I had a Jew fro, I had frizzy strawberry blonde hair. I looked like Carole King from Tapestry. I was very hippie, like very aware of more that than the teachers. Because I figured the teachers as kind of like a female role, there weren't many male teachers. It wasn't something --- it's really funny that it's not something that I wanted to get into and I ended up, in 2015, getting my bachelor's degree in education and becoming a teacher for a couple of years. And I went, “I'm not doing this shit.” I said, “Talk about politics. Like, you can’t even teach the truth.” You gotta teach that Christopher Columbus was a hero. Are you kidding me? Like he raped and plumage and stole land from the Indians. Like why are we closed on Christopher Columbus Day? So I had a hard time being a teacher, again because of that gray part of my personality. I'm like, “This is bullshit. I can't lie to my students.” You know, and
they loved me. They call me “Mrs. B from AT&T,” because I worked AT&T also. They knew that I had a hard time biting my tongue. You know what I mean? So it didn't last long, especially when Trump became president, then I was even more outspoken. I just couldn't shut up. It was really impossible as a Jew, as a gay Jew, as a woman. I was like, I had such a problem. And you know, it's very scary just what's going on. And I'm gonna say this, which has nothing to do with growing up Jewish, I guess, in the Bronx. But I think, in reference to being mandatory, they should have reversible vasectomies for males. And this is what I think, because it's reversible. You can't really reverse a tube tying but you can reverse the vasectomy. And when the man is financially responsible, where he's married and is ready for children, then it can be reversed but he has sign that, but it's mandatory. He has no right to choose one way or the other. Then I'll be okay with it. But in reference to anything else --- and, you know, I'm kind of torn because I'm not okay with Roe vs. Wade being full blown either, because I don't believe that after five months, you should have an abortion because to me that baby can live. And so I have a hard time with that also. I go, “They really are formed. Like even if they're little, they really are formed.” So it's not okay to be full blown that way either.

SM: That grey area, like you said.

AJV: So it's hard. It's very, very hard for me. But vasectomies, yeah, so I want to go on the road. I want to get a Partridge Family bus. I want to get a 401C, I want to become a nonprofit organization because I have my ministry. I actually am an ordained minister. And I want to go around the country talking about mandatory vasectomies.

SM: I'd support you. I'd donate to your nonprofit.
AJB: You know what I mean? What do you think? I mean, this way, a woman doesn't have to worry about --- because it's really affecting the minority women. It's women who don't have a voice, it's black women who are poor. It's not a rich Jewish Long Island woman who's going, “Oh, I need an abortion.” Okay, we'll call it a DNC and put it on your insurance. That's not what Roe vs. Wade is hurting. So that's why, because I'm one of those rich Jewish Long Island women. Even though I'm not, but I represent that.

SM: Yeah. That's funny. Like I said, I would donate to your nonprofit.

AJB: I'm gonna take you on the bus. We'll go we'll talk. And you'll promote your book. You're gonna promote your book.

SM: Yes, of course.

AJB: You'll meet different Jews. You'll meet different Jews along the way and ask them what they feel about, you know, what's going on, from their lives from the Bronx to now?

SM: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So we're gonna get back on topic.

AJB: Yes, I'm sorry.

SM: No no no, no apologies. This is great.

AJB: And I say you're related to me. I'm telling you right now. I think that you are related to me.
SM: Look, you play Jewish geography, I'm sure that somehow some way we are. That's always my favorite.

AJB: Is the name Samuels sound familiar? Like when I said Samuels, or Meyer is more of the connection?

SM: Yeah, is it spelt the same name as mine? Is it spelled the same?

AJB: I'm not quite sure if --- Melissa is like my fourth cousin, my third cousin Debbie Samuels --- who became Debbie Meyer, and then Debbie Storiali --- she passed away when she was 30 years old from a brain hemorrhage. She was a director for Letchworth Village, which was for the criminally insane in upstate New York. And was working like crazy, like 110 hours a week or whatever, and had horrible headaches, a lot of signs before she passed away from a brain hemorrhage. But Melissa has got to be about 35 years old, very young woman. What are you about, 22?

SM: Yeah.

AJB: You're 22, right?

SM: I'm 21. Yeah.

AJB: Okay. I was pretty damn close. But you look that.
SM: Still at an age where a year older is still a compliment and not an insult.

AJB: Yeah, that's true. But I still could be your grandmother at 62 years old.

SM: Well, actually, my mom is 62 years old. So, because she had me later.

AJB: Right, when she knew she wanted the kid.

SM: Yes. Yes.

AJB: That's the way to look at it. My mom had me when she knew she wanted a kid.

SM: Yeah. So back to a little bit about Jewish life growing up. So you said your family wasn't religious? Did you keep kosher? Did you attend a synagogue or anything?

AJB: Didn't keep kosher. Our synagogue was Orthodox, but really more on the reform. It wasn't where the men sat downstairs and the women sat upstairs --- yes, there was a separation of the two, but we didn't really follow it. I mean, I sat next to my family during the breaking of the fast, all that stuff. I didn't really --- I wasn't really brought up like that, we didn't really have Passover meals every year, we were invited to family members who celebrated Passover. My mother never really had the Passover in the house. It was from going to our families. And that means that my grandparents, my father's mother was very religious --- Vice President of Hadassah, I'm a lifelong member of Hadassah based on my grandmother --- she was extremely religious, but I wasn't very close to her because my mother didn't like her. If that makes sense. I wish I would have known better, because she was just a brilliant, warm
nurturing. Just very, she was very --- not strict Jew, but really appreciated the Jewish religion. Whereas my parents didn't really have that appreciation that my grandmother had. And my grandfather, my dad's father, was not religious at all. He was like, “Yeah, whatever. What's to eat?” and fart and go to sleep. I mean, that was like his whole life. But my grandmother just loved talking about the Jewish religion and celebrating who she was. And she wore a wig. I mean, she was religious, very religious. But my parents kept me away from that, because I wouldn’t have been accepted by, I guess, the rest of the 17 couples of friends, because we were not religious. Like we didn't grow up in a religious neighborhood. I kind of wish I did, but I got a hold of that later in my life, like anything that I didn't do when I was younger, I did when I was old, because you're responsible for it. You can't keep on saying “because you didn't do this for me, I didn't do that.” Well shut up and do it, then. You know what I mean?

SM: No, it's funny. A few people I've spoken to as well --- that I've done interviews with --- its very, you know, the kind of culture, especially in the co-op’s at the time was not very --- everybody was Jewish, but not religious. And then people found, kind of once it was their decision, found a little more religiousness later.

AJB: Correct. Correct. And, you know, I've even delved into the Jesus concept and stuff like that, because a couple of things that happened to me on like a Sunday, and I go, “Well, it should have been a Saturday.” Like, I wish it would have been shabbos, why is it happening on Sunday? Maybe there is something to this, you know, Jesus thing. So, I have looked at all this different stuff. And I'm kind of like --- let's put it this way, I know that there's something bigger than just you and me on the phone. I mean, and I know that I'm very blessed, because too many things have happened that I'm still here. You know, everything from blood clots where I didn't even know I had blood clots to not even getting
COVID. Like, you know, people have died around me with COVID. Whether it be underlying conditions. Yeah, I get underlying conditions, but they shouldn't have died. Like, you know what I mean, it's like they should die with, not from, something. You should be like --- even prostate cancer --- you should die with prostate cancer, not from prostate cancer, because it could be avoided. So, I didn't appreciate the fact that people died from COVID. And it's really changed my appreciation of how blessed I am. You know, even where I retired in May of last year --- and now they want to increase social security by like, 11% --- I'm like, I'm making pretty good money, but I worked my ass off for 40 years in retail. I've been a retail store manager, like my whole life, so I made a lot of money. And I worked a lot of hours, and it has everything to do with being brought up Jewish in the Bronx. I really do give appreciation to being brought up Jewish. I think I would have been different if I was brought up Catholic and gone to Catholic school. It just is different.

SM: I agree. I know exactly what you meant.

AJB: Yeah, and people who are not Jewish have no clue what the hell I'm talking about. Just you not knowing what I'm talking about shows exactly what I am talking about. You know what I mean?

SM: Yes, absolutely. I do, I do.

AJB: So how am I doing? How am I doing Sophia?

SM: You’re doing great. You know, I love doing this, so this is wonderful. Like this --- it's great.

AJB: You’re kvelling. Are you kvelling?
SM: *laughing* Yes. I’m also schvitzing a little bit, but that’s because it’s hot in here. So did you guys --- did you speak any other languages besides English?

AJB: Oh, Yiddish. Yes, a bissel. But let me tell you something, there was a difference even with Litvak and Galician even with Yiddish. But to make people believe and understand Yiddish, I go, “You have to understand that you have to imagine…” Like they talked about Pig Latin. Let’s talk about Pig Latin for a second. I said, “People that are living in France and Germany don’t know what Pig Latin is, you’d have to be from the United States understand what that is.” But during the Holocaust, whether you were from France, or Germany or Japan or Israel or United States, you all spoke Yiddish. And when you came to whatever country you came to, you were able to speak to each other. I said, “That’s how much sekhel we have.” Now what religion or culture can say that they only have one dialect? Not even English has only one dialect of English. When someone from England talks to me, I have no clue what their frickin saying and you’re speaking English. I’m like, “What? What? What did you say?” And they’re like, *incoherent garble* so I have to like smile. But it’s true. But the Jews --- I did a paper, when I was in college, about slangs and where slang came from, and the biggest thing I couldn’t find was kike. And I said, “Where did that come from?” Like I know where nigger came from, Nigeria, and WASP, White Anglo Saxon Protestant. And I worked for Norton’s wallpaper and paint store in Paramus, New Jersey and then opened my own wallpaper business, George’s Window and Wall fashions in Oradell, New Jersey. I still was going to college at the time, and this little Jewish old man came into the store, and he heard me talking about the word kike, and he goes, “I know where that came from.” So I make him sit down, I get my pen, my paper, I roll up my chair. And he goes, “When the Jews came here, they didn’t want to sign an X because it looked too much like the swastika, so they signed circle, and a circle in Yiddish is kikel. And the schmuck on the other end, who was doing the papers, where he was stamping
the paperwork, called them a bunch of kikes. And I said, “You mean that I kicked the shit out of people because they called me a circle? And he said, “Yeah. That’s exactly right.” That's where kike came from, kikel means circle. We didn't want to sign an X, it looked too much like the swastika. I got an A on the paper, that was the icing on the cake of finally finding out where my heritage, where that word came from. So now did I teach you something?

SM: I was gonna say, you learn something new every day. I've learned so much. Yeah, I would have never guessed, to say least.

AJB: Never in a million years. I went --- first of all, I didn't even know that kikel was circle in Yiddish, I had no clue what it is. But it really is. He goes on, “And that's where it came from.” I’m like oh my god.

SM: Yeah. So a little bit about when you decided to leave the Bronx. Obviously, you said December 26. What motivated you to move out?

AJB: So this is the scoop. When I came out to my parents --- and my mother was like, one of the coolest women in the world, may she rest in peace. I mean, her name was originally Fanny Achberg. And when she was in school, the teacher taught her Francis as her first name. She goes, “if you're going to learn your name as being Fanny, you're going to get your ass kicked every day. So your name from this moment on is Francis.” And my mother only spoke Yiddish when she first started school, and she became Francis Achberg. And my mother had paid like $500 to legally change her name, probably about 20 years before she died, because she didn't want to be buried, “also known as.” Faggy was her name, I mean, that's what's on her tombstone, Faggy. But my mother --- when I told her at 16 that I was gay --- she said, “I've known since you were three, you mean you finally figured it out?” And I said,
“Ma, can I get some, like, please get some credit for my own sexuality? Are you gonna take even credit for my own sexuality?” She was like, “Okay, fine.”

SM: A good Jewish mother.

AJB: My Jewish mother. So I didn’t want to bring my girlfriends home to the house. I just, I wanted to find a place that I can have my --- even though my mother didn’t care, she really didn’t give a shit. She really didn’t --- I was respectful of that. I think that even if I was a straight woman that was having boyfriends coming to the house, I probably still would have wanted to live on my own. I wouldn’t’ve wanted my mother to walk in. I mean, there’s a lot of different reasons. And so I moved out as soon as I could, not because I didn’t like it at home, not because my parents --- I mean, I’m sure I could have lived there until, my parents died --- but that’s not the point. And I wanted to explore and live my life. And if I made a mistake, then come home and say, “mom help me.” And believe me, my parents helped me quite a few times, but I never moved back. But my parents definitely were very, very supportive of me. And I’m, again, very blessed. And I think even if they were religiously Jewish, like my grandmother was, she didn’t care. I was her granddaughter. I didn’t have to worry about carrying my name on whatever. I wasn’t responsible for the name of Becker, you know, being carried on. And I said, “but if you're gay, your name does carry on because you don't change it.” *laughing*

SM: That's true, and you're more likely to carry it on then. Exactly.

AJB: That is correct. But I just, unfortunately, I didn’t meet Carol before Ellen. Had I met Carol, who I’ve been with for 23 years, I definitely would have had children. Yeah, but I was already 39 years old. I
wasn’t going to start having kids. The world is tough enough, trying to explain two mommies, it’s hard, man. It’s hard.

SM: And so at the time of did you --- what did you think about leaving the Bronx? Was that something that you considered?

AJB: Well, I lived in Manhattan and I would call up my mother --- it's really funny because I would call my mom up at 11 o'clock at night --- I'd go, “Ma, you awake?” “Yeah.” “You feeling like anchovy pizza?” “Yeah.” “I'll come pick you up.” I would drive from Manhattan to the Bronx, bring her back to Manhattan, we'd go get anchovy pizza to like two o'clock in the morning, and then I would turn around and drive her back to the Bronx and go back to Manhattan again, because it was that close. Like to me, even though it was a 45 minute drive, I think. So I moved out of the Bronx, but I never really moved out of the Bronx probably until I left Manhattan. When I moved down to Manhattan, and moved to New Jersey, Hackensack, New Jersey, then I was finally out of the Bronx, so to speak. And that was already, I was 21. So 21 years old was really the separation. I never really went back to visit the Bronx anymore.

SM: How did you feel about that?

AJB: Um, it was really kind of hard for me. I was in a very toxic relationship for 19 years. And unfortunately, when you're in a toxic relationship, you sever ties with a lot of different things. The Bronx was just one of the things, you know, tried to sever my ties with my parents, tried to sever the ties with my old friends. When you are in a toxic relationship, that's what you do, you isolate yourself. So the Bronx was just a part of the isolation. But it was very, very hard for me and I wear my --- I'm not kidding around --- I have my Christopher Columbus High School ring. I graduated in 1976, I wear it every day. I
sleep with it. I used my own money to pay for that. So I remember, I told you, I had five different synagogues --- even though it was one synagogue --- doing bingo. I made $350. And $310 was the ring back in 1974, so I bought the ring for my graduation of ’76. And I was only 14-15 years old and then I gave my mother the $40 difference because it paid rent for that one month in the Bronx. You know, my father was schlepping television tubes, he would not only work for the transit authority, but to take care of my brother myself --- my brother is visually handicapped, so he went to a special school --- my father would also fix television sets. And it used to be tubes --- these huge tubes that would go into the black and white TV sets --- come in two big suitcases that would open up on both sides and we’d schlep them up the stairs, because people didn’t have elevators, and fix their television sets for like 40 cents, $1.20, whatever he charged to make extra money. So he didn’t want my mother to work, like I told you, she gave up a really lucrative job. And my father made sure that we had steak, if we wanted steak. My mother would make a steak for me and maybe make a meatloaf for my brother, if that's what he wanted, chicken for my father, if that's what he wanted. She didn’t just make a roast beef for all of us to eat, whatever we wanted to eat, she made it. So again, very fortunate, and we were poor. Yeah, you know, we were.

SM: Yeah. Did you feel like --- I guess growing up as a woman during that time period --- did you feel that you had different expectations than your --- not necessarily your brother --- but like other your male peers at the time?

AJB: No, because I was a tomboy. So I didn't like the same things as my friend Michelle or whatever. You know, they were playing with Barbie dolls, I was playing with GI Joe. I was like, “Fuck Barbie, I don't want to. I don't want to worry about the different bathing suits on the breasts. I don't care about that. I want to know what kind of uniform to put on GI Joe.” It was totally different. So I was really more
of the boys. And the boys accepted me as one of the boys --- and I wasn't interested in them as a girl, because I was gay --- I was one of the boys. So um, I had more girlfriends than they did. You know? So that's the way it was. Even though I didn't know that --- I don't mean girlfriends like I was having sex or anything like that --- but girls had more crushes on me than they did the boys. You know. So. Anyway, neither here nor there. Like my friend Michelle of 62 years, she's definitely heterosexual, has two children. I mean, we're so close that her daughter Brianna was named after her father, Bernie, and me, Ann, and that's why her name is Brianna. So, you know, she's my sister. Like she is like my sister. So that's the kind of love that we have. It was never, I would never do anything else in reference to that, because I just adore her. She's part of who I am.

SM: Yeah. So I guess you would have --- so do you remember hearing about or seeing, kind of especially in the South Bronx, the arson and devastation that was going on elsewhere in the Bronx when you were there?

AJB: No, because we --- my father read the Daily News. The daily newspaper didn't really have --- if my father had read the Times, it would be one type of upbringing --- but he read the post in the Daily News, which was sensationalistic. It's almost like the National Enquirer coming to the house. So anything that was relevant --- in reference to segregation, the uproar, the teachers strikes or whatever --- only if it was a transit authority strike, because he worked with the transit authority, would it matter to him. So even the news being watched, it was really watching what's the weather gonna be like tomorrow. You know what I mean. And when John Kennedy even was shot, I remember that I was taking a nap at the time. He was shot in 1963 --- that was November of ’63 --- I turned four years old October of ’63, because I was born in 1959. And I was taking a nap. It was like three o’clock in the afternoon, and my mother actually woke me up to tell me that the President was shot and killed. I had
no clue what the hell she was talking about. But she was so --- I mean, I clearly remember that, but it's not something that my father would like cut out of a newspaper or make me look at it and understand it and do a report on it. Like we didn't have that type of upbringing. It's like, that's the type of upbringing I would have done with my children. I would’ve created scrapbooks for them to understand “this is what you were doing when this happened,” so they actually have almost like a diary before they’re able to write their own diary. But my parents never did anything like that.

SM: Yeah. So when you think about the Bronx today, what do you think about the people that live here? What do you think is going on? Do you think the Bronx is back on the mend?

AJB: I think that the Bronx is really kicking some ass right now. Because what it is, is all the people that were just renting apartments, they became co-ops, where they actually own a piece of it. And it totally changed the look and the feel of the Bronx because now they had ownership. Jimmy Carter became president and then he became key in Habitat for Humanity in the Bronx. I mean, he was just, you know, doing all this different stuff with renovating buildings that were burnt out. And there were heroin addicts inside the lobbies and stuff like that. So the pride of the Bronx is back. The Black Lives Matter movement. There’s so many different things going on in reference to New York or New York City. The Bronx is a part of New York City, it’s part of the five boroughs. I even know why it's called the Bronx, instead of Bronx. Do you even know that reason why?

SM: I think. Well, I know where Bronx comes from, a Dutch settler, and so it was after a river that he founded. I'm not sure if that's where that comes from as well?
AJB: Correct. Yes. His name was B-R-O-N-K-S was his last name. And so he owned most of the Bronx and sold it. And yes, he was definitely a Dutch-German settler. Like Colonel Tom Parker with Elvis Presley. No, I'm only kidding. Anyway, I saw the Elvis movie, that's another story in itself. But that's why it's called the Bronx --- and they made it an X instead of K-S --- not the Manhattan or the Richmond or the Staten Island. But yeah, that's why, so a lot of people don't even know that. And I even have Bronx shirts and everything. And I have Thieriot Avenue, like, on the back of it or something. I'm very proud. Like, the first thing when people say “so tell me a little about yourself” and I'm like “a Jew from the Bronx” is the first thing I say. So it is --- I would probably say that it's probably --- the Bronx is probably 70% of Ann Joy Becker. I mean, like, if you were able to look inside my body, 70% of it is made up of the Bronx, like, if I didn't have all those experiences. My good friend Evette downstairs, like I said, of 52 years, who I met at Castle Hill beach club, you know, playing handball. You know, I was the first one to new to know, when she got laid and even her kids were born on my birthday. She still forgets my birthday. And they're like 31 years old --- when I say her kids, they're 31-year-old twins. But that's what I'm talking about like, we're from the Bronx. I mean, Michelle was from the Bronx. Evette's from the Bronx. My wife is from West Milford, I mean, New Milford, what can I tell you? But it doesn't matter. 70% of who I am.

SM: Yeah. That's great. Have you been back in recent years?

AJB: Yeah, I go back because of Hawaii C's --- I have a little soft spot for this really good Asian place on Williamsbridge Road, right off of Pelham Parkway. It's Hawaiian C's, and they make the best poopoo platter. There's this chicken that comes like it's chicken giblets inside a tin foil over the poopoo platter. It's so good with a pina colada, and I'm good to go.
SM: Fantastic. I just wrote it down. That'll be a spot.

AJB: Hawaii C’s on Williamsbridge Road in the Bronx. Oh my god, it's great.

SM: I'll be there. Sounds good to me. So my last question, and you kind of already talked on this, but when you think about the Bronx today --- and this time, I kind of mean like, when you think about it and your experiences --- what kind of emotions do you feel? I mean, you said proud but ---

AJB: I'm kvelling. It makes me smile. Like there's nothing that ever happened --- and again, I'm very, very blessed. I was never mugged. I was never, you know, molested nothing --- and no one I know was mugged or molested in the Bronx or shot. You know, we did drugs, whatever we did, my group of friends must have had like God just hovering over us because we never --- we lost one person who actually was hit by a car when he was 12 years old. It was maybe about six months before his bar mitzvah. Matter of fact, his parents got the invitations to send out that night. So the day that he died, that night, they got the invitations to send out for his bar mitzvah. And the last thing he said to his mother was, “F you, I'm going,” and he went to Noble Field to do a Little League game, that she asked him not to walk along where the highway was where the Cross Bronx Expressway was. There was a Mobil gas station that's still there. And he did go that way and this woman put her foot on the gas instead of the brake when she saw him, and she pinned him and killed him instantly. And he was 12 years old --- he was my boyfriend at the time --- it was the first time my mother ever gave me she gave me a quarter valium, believe it or not, when I was 12 years old, because I lost it. That was the biggest tragedy that ever happened, other than grandparents dying, you know, just the normal of your family passing away. A 12-year-old boy passing away --- his name was Jeffrey Young --- and, you know, that was the biggest tragedy. But there was nothing. There's nothing, when I think of the Bronx, that I don't
just kvel about because I'm just so proud to be from there. Even at 62 years old, when I go back, I show off different places that I stayed on Lydig Avenue. My grandparents were peddlers on Lydig Avenue, Pelham Parkway area. They had a fruit stand, you know what I mean? The Achbergs are actually written in journals about the Bronx. And his name was Lewis Achberg, my grandfather, and they're talking about my grandfather, my mother's father. So it's just a very proud --- it's almost like the Bronx is part of my family. It's not even just the borough. It's like, I'm part of that Dutch family. It's like, I'm part of the Bronx. You know what I mean?

SM: Yeah. Well, do you have anything you’d like to add before I end the recording,

AJB: I don't know. But if anything happens, where you have to do follow-up or whatever, please keep my number handy because I have no problems with follow-up or whatever, or any questions.
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