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Adler, Lucille

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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

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

Lucille Adler (LA): My mother's family came from Poland, they ran away. Um, I got something here, I've got to knock it off, okay. First my grandfather came with one child. I guess got an apartment, and then brought his wife and children. And for whatever reason, they settled in the Bronx. And my parents, my mother stayed there for years. My father's parents were American. And they, unfortunately, I didn't meet most of my grandparents. They lived some place in Manhattan. And then when my parents got married, they settled in the Bronx.

SM: And so where were they living in the Bronx when you were born?

LA: Morris Avenue and 174.

SM: Okay. Is that where you grew up?

LA: Yup.

SM: And did you have any siblings?

LA: An older brother, eight years older.

SM: Okay. So yeah, so tell me a little bit about, you know, the apartment that you grew up in and the neighborhood? Was it predominantly Jewish?

LA: I would say, probably 99% Jewish and white. I think maybe there were three black children in the public school. And it was a beautiful section of the Bronx. And I went to Taft High School. I lived there till I was 15. My parents had a two family house. And when I was 15, they decided to move to the area called Riverdale, but not up the hill, at the foot of the hill. And because I was in high school, my mother let me continue a Taft, which was good and which wasn't good. I made very few friends where I lived. And I was with my old friends, which was great.

SM: Yeah. Was it a difficult commute getting over from Riverdale?

LA: Sure, it was an hour commute by bus.

SM: And so you said you lived in a two family house? Was that unusual for the neighborhood?

LA: Yes. It was mostly apartment houses. There were five, two family houses. And truthfully, I think the rest were all apartment houses for miles.

SM: Yeah. Most of the people that I've spoken with grew up in apartments, so that was very interesting to me. And so what kind of shops and amenities were in the area?

LA: 174 Street was an East West Street, I believe. And it was loaded with stores: the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. And I think that's where my parents did all their food shopping. I don't recall them going to a supermarket, we didn't really have supermarkets back then. My father used to go to an area called Bathgate to buy chickens, because they bought only kosher food.

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

LA: My mother was a school teacher in a Hebrew — Israel Salanter — was the name of the school. She taught eighth grade math. And then when they expanded to junior high, she taught ninth grade math. And my father had his own insurance company.

SM: And did either of them have any college education?

LA: My mother did. Graduate as a teacher. I don't think my father did, but I really don't know.

SM: Yeah. And so did many of the other people that you know, did their mother's work or did they often stay home?

LA: All of my friends — no, not all — most of my friends, their mothers were home. There were the three that worked but the rest were home

SM: Did that have any sort of impact or difference, would you think, on your upbringing?

LA: I kind of envied those that had their mother at home because I was a latchkey girl. I came home to an empty house. And I used to smell the baking in other houses and never smelled it in my house. But they were very good to me, so it compensated.

SM: Yeah. And so what kind of things did you like to do for fun, you know, when you were growing up in that area?

LA: Well, in my young young days, we used to jump rope on the street and play potsy and watch the boys play, I don't know, curbball or stickball. Then I got a bike and I loved to ride my bike. And we used to go to the park and I can't remember the name of the park near me. It was maybe five blocks. It was right after Mt. Eden Avenue. And just hang out with my girlfriends.

SM: What kind of music did you like to listen to?

LA: Interesting. The only music I listened to was my piano music. At that time it was classical music. And so that was the only music I ever heard.

SM: Really? And you never got into any of the popular music when you were older?

LA: Oh, when I was older? Yeah, I liked the show musical tunes. I was more interested — I took dance lessons. Typical stuff that a Jewish girl does. Went to camp in the summer.

SM: And where did you go to camp, upstate?

LA: Oh, New York. I don't know one was — I can't even remember where they were anymore. One was in the town of Guilford, New York. And then I went to another one, I think it was in Massachusetts, but I wouldn't swear to it.

SM: Yeah. And they were Jewish camps?

LA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, truthfully, everything was Jewish in those days.

SM: Yeah. Do you have any particular experiences that stand out from your time at camp?

LA: In camp? No. No, I mean, the usual. Boys raided the girls' bunks and things like that.

SM: And were most of the people with you also, you know, from the city?

LA: In camp? Yeah, they were all from either Long Island or one of the borough's.

SM: Okay. And so you mentioned that your family kept kosher?

LA: Oh, yes.

SM: Were they very religious?

LA: Till the depression. And then when they had work on Saturdays, that was the end of going to temple. I did not go to Hebrew school because they were too busy working. They were hit in the Depression. And it was mostly stay home and help around the house. I wish I did go to Hebrew school because I would have a better understanding. But by the time I thought of it, I was already with children and it was too much of an undertaking.

SM: And so you would say the Depression had a great impact on your family?

LA: Yes, very great. It changed the house from being strictly kosher to just kosher.

SM: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And is that why there's such a large age gap between you and your brother?

LA: No, she lost a child in between us.

SM: And so what kind of foods did you like to eat?

LA: Well, in those days, my mother made homemade borscht and homemade lenses, but she didn't make fancy foods. And I did not eat pizza till I was 21. I didn't eat Chinese food until I was probably 22. We ate Jewish style food.

SM: Yeah, that's funny. And so, let's talk a little bit about school. So what public school did you attend?

LA: PS 70.

SM: And do you have any experiences from your time there that stand out to you?

LA: I enjoyed it immensely. It was a good school, good teachers. Was around the corner from the house which was easy to walk to. I really enjoyed it.

SM: And what about junior high school?

LA: Went to Wade Junior High. It was okay. Nothing to rave about. I really don't have any fantastic memories of it.

SM: Yeah. And so what about your time at Taft?

LA: It was fun. You know, learning but we were growing, you know, boys dating girls, but I wasn't really involved in cliques. I was friendly with some of the girls that were involved in the cliques or the big shots, so to speak, but I was not in one. I was into sports.

SM: Which ones did you play? What did you like to do?

LA: Tennis was my first love.

SM: I play tennis as well.

LA: Yeah. It was — we played single handed tennis in those days. Then in later life, I took up golf. Volleyball was one of my favorite sports when I was young.

SM: And was the school similar to the neighborhood? Also predominantly white at that time?

LA: Yes.

SM: Yeah. And did you ever experience or witness any racial or religious, ethnic tensions between different groups when you were in school or around?

LA: Never. Never. Actually, in those days, I thought the whole world was Jewish. The whole area was Jewish. But yet I met Christian or non-Jewish people. We got along, never a problem. Now talk about living in the South, it's a problem.

SM: Yeah, I can imagine.

LA: Big problem, racism is very big down here.

SM: Yeah. Did you — I mean, this is skipping ahead a bit — but was it a big culture shock in comparison to what you were used to growing up?

LA: Yes. I always thought the South, you know, southern hospitality, that was what they put on the table and cook. They don't make friends easy. In fact, when we were moving here, I wrote a letter to the temple and the rabbi told me to come in. And we went in and met with him and he told us about the area and his words were, "don't expect to make friends. They're very cliquish. They have their family. They grew up with their friends, and they don't need any new people." Had nothing to do with religion. But, and that was true, because my husband and I used to work almost every day. And we would just get a wave from the people. They never said, "Hello, good morning, how are you?" Nothing, just the usual wave.

SM: And so in the Bronx, was it very different? You know, a lot of people that I've spoken to had this feeling of, you know, immense community, people hanging out in the street, things like that.

LA: Yes. Yeah, I remember coming home from school and the older ladies would be sitting on their chairs in front of the building and talking about us as we went by. I found people very friendly when we lived in the Bronx.

SM: And so, did you feel like you got a good education going through the Bronx public schools?

LA: Yes. Yes.

SM: Would you say that students today in the Bronx have the same sort of opportunities that you did?

LA: I haven't been back to the Bronx in over 30 years. I don't know what it's like. But if the schools were anything like they were, they should be getting a good education. The problem is — and it's not just here in Alabama — the young people don't care, they don't have respect. And they're just not interested in learning. They're interested in their computers, their cell phones. It's a very different world out there.

SM: Absolutely. And so, did you feel, as growing up as a woman during this period, especially with someone that had an older brother that the expectations of you were different than your male peers or your brother or anything like that?

LA: Yes. My expectations in my home, between my brother and I, were totally different. My brother was beyond genius. He was Menta. He graduated college at 18. He was beyond brilliant, which I'm not. And I always used to joke, I have all the common sense, and he has all the brains. But there was no competition between him and me. None whatsoever. He respected me for my sports, and I respected him for his brain. I felt no competition with friends. We were just friends. Didn't care if you were rich or poor, or fancy or un-fancy. You know, we were all kind of in the same boat. I think the Depression put us in the same boat, because we all crawled out of it together.

SM: Yeah, that was gonna be sort of my question about — that you found that it was similar, I think in that way, in the economic struggle.

LA: We heard, “We can't afford, we can't afford.” I mean, my parents didn't run around. We never went to movies. Their social life was getting together with the family once a week. And I got dragged along. But no, there was, I mean, everybody on the street was the same. We weren't — nobody was going anyplace.

SM: And did things change dramatically with that, as you got older, and the Depression ended?

LA: Well then the war came and that, again, changed a lot of things. A lot of the men — we used to have stars in the window for everybody that was in service. Almost every window had a star, which meant a boy from every family went. So it was hard times for everybody, but we stayed close as friends. We never, no friend had more than the other. The ones that lived in an apartment had as much as I had just because I lived in a house. A couple of the mothers worked. I can't even recall maybe, we were seven very close girls, and one, two, maybe three, possibly four mothers worked.

SM: And were you, I know you said that your brother had graduated college at 18, were you expected to go to college as well?

LA: Yes.

SM: Okay. Was education an important part of your upbringing?

LA: Sure, my mother was a teacher. *Laughs* But I didn't go to college. I went to business school.

SM: And where did you attend Business School?

LA: I think it was called LaSalle Institute. It was in Manhattan. It was stenotyping, what you see the court reporters doing on those little machines. But when I graduated, I was too young to get into the courts, so I got a job in a bank in Manhattan, and I was already dating my future husband. I really didn't want to go to college. The usual.

SM: And so when did you end up leaving the Bronx?

LA: 1952. Married, I lived in an apartment. And then we bought a house in New Jersey.

SM: Okay. And were you noticing, like at that point even, that the demographics of the Bronx were starting to change, or was that something that —

LA: Oh, it had nothing to do with it. There were no homes affordable in the Bronx. And in later years, my brother went back to visit it. Oh, God. I don't remember, 20 years ago at least. And he said, "Don't ever go back." It had changed so much.

SM: Yeah. Well, yes, '52 is a little earlier than most of the people. Most of the people that I've spoken to have left, you know, in the late 60s or the 70s. And then by that point, things had already changed, began to change very dramatically. And so, going back a little bit. Did you speak any languages besides English in the house?

LA: No. No, my parents used to talk Yiddish.

SM: Yeah. But you never learned it?

LA: Not really, but I kind of understood some of it.

SM: That's again, common with most people I've spoken to. Or they'd speak in Yiddish when they didn't want you to know.

LA: *Laughs* That's right.

SM: In those days, parents didn't talk in front of children. Never heard them talk about family or anything. They must have all done a lot of talking behind closed doors.

SM: And so you said you would get together with family each week for Shabbat or just in general?

LA: It wasn't even on Friday, because he wouldn't travel on Friday. It was a Sunday and they go to this aunt and that aunt and was mostly the same few aunts but all the others showed up.

SM: And most live nearby in the Bronx?

LA: No. No, I don't think any lived in the Bronx. My mother's family, a couple lived in the Bronx. One of her brothers lived in the Bronx, another one lived in Brooklyn. And my father's family was Manhattan based.

SM: And would you travel to the other boroughs often?

LA: Yeah, because my father had a car.

SM: Okay. Did you like to go, you know, into Manhattan and do any things down there?

LA: Oh, yeah! My mother, being an educator, she took me to see Broadway shows. Occasionally, we'd go to see Radio City Music Hall. I became 16 and 17, you know, dating, we would go into Manhattan to a show. Of course, we couldn't go to bars and I never would go to a bar. I've never been in a bar by myself. I wouldn't do it. Yeah, we went to Manhattan. After I was married, we'd come in once or twice a year, take in a Broadway show or meet friends for dinner or something like that. And I worked in Rockefeller Center, which I thought was oh my god. Oh my god, I thought I was way above myself. Had to wear my gloves, you know?

SM: Oh, that's great. And did you go back to the Bronx at all to visit your parents or anything after you left?

LA: Yes. I went in every Friday to visit my mother or my mother-in-law who lived on the other side of the Bronx. I can't remember the names of the streets. But yeah, we would come in all the time to visit the family.

SM: And when did you say the last time you've been back is?

LA: To the Bronx? Well, my first husband is dead 30 years. So I don't think I've been back to the Bronx in over 50 years. Yeah, because none of my friends — they all left. They moved to Long Island. And so I would go to Long Island. I can't recall the last time I was in the Bronx really clearly.

SM: Yeah. And so are you aware of anything that goes on there today or?

LA: No, in fact, I think I recall, my father died in '89. That was the last time I was back in the Bronx. Do I recall what's going on there? Honestly, the same garbage that's going on all over the world. I mean, crime is very high. I know — we were taking the children to Madison Square Garden, I think it was. And we parked our car and we were walking. And my daughter said, “Why are all those people sleeping in the street?” So I mean, I don't know what it's like today. You just told me that Tavern on the Green is closed.

SM: Oh, yeah. I heard that.

LA: I can't believe it.

SM: No, I was just there last year. That was very surprising to hear.

LA: That was so beautiful. I have a friend living in New York and loves it.

SM: I mean, I love being here. I live on Arthur Avenue and 188 Street.

LA: That's where I think my — Arthur Avenue sounds familiar.

SM: It's the Little Italy, the Italian neighborhood. Right across from the university. And so were you aware sort of during the period of arson of the 1970s and 80s what was happening in the Bronx?

LA: No.

SM: So I guess, when you think back about your time in the Bronx today, what kind of memories or emotions do you associate with it?

LA: Very warm. Very easy living. I rode the bus and the subway myself as a — I had to wear braces and the dentist was downtown — by myself. I never worried. I didn't look over my shoulder. Didn't start God, I can't tell you how many years. I know when I lived in New Jersey I didn't care if the door was locked by day or night. Usually it was wide open by day. It's only 50 some years ago that we started locking doors. It was very safe back then. And it was — I loved to walk up and down 174 Street. Go in get an egg cream, which nobody knows of down here. Dych's dairy, the bakery. I mean, it was such an easy, simple life.

SM: Well, thank you. Do you have anything you think I haven't touched on that you would like to add?

LA: I don't know. I mean, the world has changed. You cannot blame it on life in the Bronx. It was very safe. I mean, we went to a movie theater. We walked every place. We always had a nickel in our pocket to make a phone call.

SM: Yes, I've heard that.

LA: Right. I took the train and never had to worry. Never worried. Once, that was in my later years, I was still living at home with my parents. I was followed home. But I was lucky my father worked from home so he saw me and you know, I called and he, I mean, I called with my voice. He didn't have a phone. And he came out and the person ran the other way. But I never had a problem working in Manhattan. In fact, when we were 15, we used to go downtown and meet the sailors when they would come off the ship.

SM: Oh, yeah? Oh, that's great.

LA: But I didn't have any experiences negative.

SM: That's wonderful.

LA: I mean, I've read some of the articles in "Back in the Bronx," and there were cliques. And that's boys stuff. Girls don't do that. In fact, one of my friends was not Jewish, and we got along fine.

SM: That's great. Well, if you think of anything else, you know, you've had my email.

LA: I don't know what to think of, give me an idea.

SM: Well, anything. You know, some people I've spoken to and then, that night, I'll get an email. And it's like, oh, you've jogged my memory. And I forgot to tell you about, you know, my favorite candy store that we went to and whatever. Anything really.

LA: Oh well, the automat!

SM: Yes. I just found out about that very recently, actually.

LA: I think it was on 170 Street. My brother used to take me every Sunday, because my mother taught in the Hebrew school and they had Sunday school. So we used to walk, and we'd eat in the automat. That was a thrill. Put some money in and out pops a pie or something.

SM: Yeah, I can imagine.

LA: Yeah. But it was just, it was a very safe world back then. Made it easy to live. Everybody was friends with everybody. And I went to music school. I don't know the name of the street. It was a busy street with a trolley on it. And I had to walk about 40 minutes to come home. My mother never worried about it.

SM: Yeah. And you said you played the piano?

LA: Yeah. I regret giving it up. It reached a point where I'd been taking so many years that the music I was playing bored me. And when you reach that age, I said, I'd rather take dance lessons or something like that.

SM: I also, like a good Jewish girl, played the piano for a very long time, until I graduated high school.

LA: *Laughs* But do you still play?

SM: No. *Laughs*

LA: No, I don't either, and I regret it very much.

SM: Yeah. But I think part of it is definitely like, I think about it sometimes because I am a big fan of jazz music. So I'm like — but you never play that when you're a kid. And it's like, that's something that would interest me. I think about playing again, but we'll see

LA: Well, you should. I regret that — I don't have the piano anymore — but I regret that I got away from it. I could have taught myself jazz or popular music. I do remember saying to the music teacher, “Can't I play some popular music?” So he threw in one or two songs but it reached a point where I had to practice three hours a day. And what teenager wants to sit and play for three hours? I wasn't going to be a born musician.

SM: No. Well, thank you. I will end the recording.