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## Rothstein, Richard

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Transcriber: Reyna Stovall

Richard Rothstein (RR): All right. I'm always amazed when this thing works.

Sophia Maier (SM): I know. Me too, having done school on Zoom for, you know, two years or so it was a difficult time. So yeah, if you just want to start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

RR: Well, let's see. My dad was born on the Lower East Side. And his father was in tinsmith/ plumbing. Tinsmithing was the stuff that they put on the ceilings with the patterns.

SM: Okay, yeah.

RR: Ok, so he did that for a living, and he had a store on Second Avenue in Yorkville. Later on, they moved to the Bronx, they moved to Briggs Avenue, north of Kingsbridge. There were still farms there in the early 1900s. And that's how they wound up in the Bronx. My mother emigrated from Hungary when she was 18. She relocated to the United States in 1923. And she met my dad at my aunt's millinery shop on Second Avenue. So that's how, like I said, my grandfather bought a house on Briggs Avenue. My father lived there, and they had the business in Manhattan. And that's how we wound up in the Bronx.

SM: And were they still commuting down to the Lower East side?

RR: I guess they were — Not on the Lower East Side, Yorkville.

SM: Okay yeah, yeah, yeah, sorry.

RR: And this was before there were subways. Well, they had the Third Avenue El. I guess that's how they did it.

SM: Okay. So what year were you born?

RR: Excuse me? I'm sorry.

SM: What year were you born?

RR: 1942. A long time ago.

SM: And where were your parents living when you were born?

RR: [I was born at Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan] My first eight years we lived on Webster Avenue on 180 Street, 2091 Webster Avenue. It's now a park, because the building burned down. There's an omen for ya isn't it. And then when — my dad worked for the post office in Wakefield on White Plains Road. He got a promotion and we moved to 2108 Harrison Avenue, which was right near NYU — which at that time was the NYU campus, now it's Bronx Community College. And that was a nicer, much nicer neighborhood with a park and grass and trees and stuff. So it was a big, nice move. Both working class neighborhoods, however. You know, everybody — mama stayed home and dad went to work.

SM: Yeah, and so tell me a little bit, I guess first about the neighborhood that when you were living on Webster Avenue. Was it a predominantly Jewish neighborhood?

RR: [Harrison Avenue] was, yeah [with some Irish neighbors]. Webster Avenue was not. It was a very big mix of Irish, Italian, very few Jewish people in that neighborhood. Not that it bothered us. My family was not very religious. I mean, we observed a few holidays at home and stuff like that. But we didn't go to temple and all that stuff. I don't know why, but we just didn't.

SM: That's true of a lot of people that I've spoken to, including my own grandparents when they were growing up in the Bronx. So, did you ever feel — I guess you were pretty young — but did you ever feel like there were any sorts of tensions between different religious or ethnic groups?

RR: Oh, yeah. Well, I was bullied as a kid. And in that era, the Irish and Italian kids were tough. They were big, including the girls, by the way. Here's a funny story: when I was in first grade, the teacher gave us an assignment to make a picture and I made a green sun. Well, she got all a dither about that, because that was very abnormal. She called — at that time, I guess it was kind of like a child study team. And the guy comes in and he talks to me and you know, “You poor kid you must be retarded.” So he says, “Well, why did you make the sun?” And I said, “Because I didn't have a yellow crayon. Kathy stole my crayon and she was too big to fight with.” Sometimes there's logic to when kids do things. But anyway, there were tensions, but it wasn't that overt. I mean, we all got along pretty good. I had friends from school and all different groups and religions. There were very few Black kids in my school. The ones that were there were outstanding students. Outstanding. I mean, there was a kid in my elementary school and junior high class, Marshal. I wish I could meet him again. He was brilliant. And a nice guy, really nice person. So wherever he is, I hope he's doing very well.

SM: And so yeah, tell me a little bit more about the neighborhoods, like what kind of things did you like to do? What kind of shops and amenities were there?

RR: Well, it was great to grow up in New York as a kid. I wouldn't trade my childhood for anything. We had everything within walking distance or certainly public transit. My dad never drove a car. We never had one, never needed one. He commuted by bus, or back in the really old days by trolley car, to work.

We went everywhere by subway or bus. The museums in Manhattan were free. We didn't call it "Manhattan". We called it "the city." We went to the city — or New York. We called it New York too. But the neighborhood had a lot of neat stuff. And we used to go to your school for concerts. It was called the Golden Band, and it used to perform sometimes on your campus, sometimes at NYU, and, of course, in Central Park. I used to be able to walk to the zoo. And it was free, except on Wednesday. Why Wednesday? I'll never know. But that was the day they charged a very nominal fee. We took our kids there when they were a little younger, when they were a lot younger, actually. And I couldn't believe what it cost to get into that zoo. Plus parking.

SM: Yeah, well, now the only day it's free is Wednesday.

RR: Go figure that one out. But anyway, it was a good day — world class of course, always was world class. And we used to go to the Botanical Garden. Our schools were great. I had a wonderful teacher. If you want to, if you can get access to *Back in the Bronx* issues, I have a story in there about my fifth- and sixth-grade teacher. She was the same [teacher], she moved up with my class. And she was marvelous. I mean, she used to take the class on the subway. Can you imagine taking thirty-some-odd kids on a subway? She did. Well, if you misbehaved, you didn't go on the trip. I mean, you were isolated. And we would go to the museums, we used to go to the Botanical Garden, we had the school garden, so she was into gardening. And we used to go to the Botanical Garden right near your campus all the time. That too was free in those days. And then she used to treat us to ice cream at Crumbs. The whole class you know. That was great. Nice experiences. I used to hate going to the museum though with the class because you'd have like, hundreds of kids and one person going to guide the exhibits. And of course we — needless to say we had to take notes. And it's dark in there. So you can't see. And I was always in the back. I couldn't hear the docent, because they didn't have those nice little devices like they have now. So I used to come home very upset. My father would take me on Saturday to the museum, which of course now you can see anything you want. And again, it was free. And then I'd do my assignment and be done with it. But, yeah, the amenities that I grew up with, I got very used to it. And then when I got older, I missed them. We wound up living in northern New Jersey once my wife and I got married, and there goes the public transit. You're dependent on a car to go everywhere. And that's why I love living here in Silver Spring. This community is great. We have — there are 8,000 [people] in this community. We have our own post office. We have our own medical center. And we have little jitneys that go around the community. Plus, the public bus comes in here takes you to the metro. You could go anywhere from here in a very short, easy time, even though I drive of course, but you don't have to. And I mean, that's what I was used to. I loved growing up in New York. I still miss it, in some ways – in fact, next month I'm going to see a show in New York with a group. We're going by bus. That trip from here is a nightmare. It is. The last time I drove to New York, for a wedding, it took me almost eight hours.

SM: Really?

RR: Yeah, I was talking to the car. The guy next to me was ready to throw water on me. He probably thought I was nuts. But, we go by bus, by charter bus, so it's great. So that's pretty much the way I grew up in New York. I was not a very good student in school. I used to call myself quiet but dumb. I didn't make trouble, I never had discipline problems or anything like that. And it's not — you don't really appreciate what you had with schooling until you get older. And your grades don't necessarily reflect what you learned.

SM: Very true, yeah.

RR: You know, because I belong to a trivia group here — we have all kinds of activities here — and people are amazed that I know these answers. And we have a pretty bright crowd here. I mean, we got a lot of people who live here who worked for the National Institute of Health, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, engineers, scientists, whatever. Somehow or another I fit in. It always amazes me that I do.

SM: Yeah. And what public school did you attend?

RR: I went to — I started at PS 115, which was also a junior high school. We called it EBB which meant “everything but boys.” No, but it really meant for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It was on 83 and Valentine Avenue. My first three years in elementary school were there. And I went to PS 91 on Aqueduct Avenue and Clinton Place, right near NYU. It didn't have a name, just a number. And then I went to a prison called Junior High School 79, with all boys, junior high, which was the complement to EBB. And boy, that was tough. That was — a lot of the kids that came into that school were from the other neighborhoods, and they were rough and tough and tumble. And, you know, preteens and teenagers together. It was not a happy experience. It really wasn't. After that, I went, I lived with my brother in California for two years and went to high school out there. And that was a wonderful experience. But my dad got sick when I was a senior in high school, and I wound up coming back to New York, and I graduated from DeWitt Clinton. And I'm very proud of that, because it's a great — at that time, it was a great school and from what I read in the alumni news, which is a lot of propaganda at times, but it is one of the high schools that's still intact, that has a principal and they seem to be doing very well. But it has a very formidable history. The people that went to that school are amazing: Neil Simon, Richard Rogers, Robert Klein, etc. The list goes on. You know, those are the showbusiness types, but a lot of people behind the scenes went there too. And so it was a very good school. The only problem is I had to make up five regents exams.

SM: Because you were in California.

RR: I wanted an academic, not a general, diploma. And that's when I learned how to smoke. My friend taught me how. You were allowed to smoke in the school yard in those days, so my friend taught me how to smoke. Thank God I gave that up. That was a tough experience, but I did it. You know, I

accomplished it. I took five regents exams my senior year, four-year English, four-year history, World History and US history, 11th-year math, Spanish, and physics. That was, that was quite an experience.

SM: Yeah, I can imagine.

RR: I did it. I did it. I wound up going to college at CCNY. In fact, I started my classes that summer before I even graduated Clinton. I wanted to be an electronic engineer, so I thought. Then I had a math teacher who stuttered. And that was the end of that. I wound up going to a two year college called Voorhees Technical Institute. It's part of SUNY. And I have a two year degree that was hands on, that's what I wanted, hands on. And I was able to make a decent career out of it. I started out as a bench technician, and I wound up doing environmental tests on spacecraft components and stuff like that. So the first project I worked on was the Apollo.

SM: Wow.

RR: Yeah, the battery that went into the Apollo missile, the rocket that launched the Apollo.

SM: Oh, that's awesome.

RR: It was fun. Well, by chance, I started as a bench tech. And the guy next to me was making — he was there forever — and he made very little more than me. So my boss came to me one day, and he said, “How would you like to learn how to do environmental testing?” And I was 18 years old. And I said, yeah, only because it came with a lot of overtime. And the first thing I worked on was the test procedure and report for that battery that went into the missile. And the guy who came up from Martin Marietta, who was the prime contractor on it. He said, “Gee, you did a very good job.” I said, “Don't tell me, tell my boss. Better yet, tell my boss's boss!”

SM: Yep!

RR: And he did! You know, much to my amazement, he did. And the owner of the company came to me and said, “You did a very good job, and I'm gonna give you a raise.” And I went from \$75 a week to \$125 dollars a week. Oh, the guy from personnel came down and said, “How did you do that?” And I said, “Well, I did my job.” So anyway, it was a good experience, and I wound up, many years later, working for the federal government as a quality-assurance rep in the field. And that was fantastic. I loved it. I was 27 years with the feds, retired, I can't believe I'm going to say this, fifteen years ago. It's great to be retired, but I miss the camaraderie. And some of the work was — most of the work was interesting. That's basically my capsule.

SM: Yeah. And so how did you end up going to school in California? You said your brother lived out there?

RR: Well, my brothers were concerned because I was doing very poorly. My dad and mom weren't very into education. My mother would say, "Look at Mrs. Lebowitz's son, you know, look at how smart he is. He got a scholarship and this and that, and the other thing. How come you can't do that?" I said, "Because Ma, we live like crazy people, that's why." But anyway, we put the "fun" in "dysfunction." So my brothers were very concerned. They were both married at the time and had young children. And my sister-in-laws had it tough because, you know, here they are with little kids and they had a teenager in the house. And not that I misbehaved, but I was a teenager, you know, your brain's not developed, especially boys. So I did stupid things. And I didn't know a thing about doing housework. My mother did everything. I didn't know dishes got washed. I really didn't. They always appeared clean on the table. I didn't give it any thought. So my sister-in-laws were very adamant about teaching me how to be more considerate and all that, and I did it. I just didn't know to do it.

So, at any rate, that's how I wound up in California. But I loved the schools out there. The only thing is I moved a few times because they moved. And, you know, to be the new kid on the block is difficult. It is difficult. But the schools were gorgeous, coed, of course, which was nice. They were open campus, because the weather is almost always nice.

Almost, not always. It rained. It just never snowed. Then when I came back to New York, that was a tough experience. That really took a lot of effort. You know, and my house was not conducive to studying. I used to hide in the library around the corner, the Mellon Library on University and 181 Street. It's still there. In fact, they just refurbished it, you know, they fixed it up. But I used to hide there to do my homework or I had a friend and I'd work at his house.

SM: And was it a bit of a culture shock when you went over to California? Was it very different from what you were used to?

RR: Oh, yeah. I missed New York very badly. First of all, everything out there revolves around owning a car. If you want to go anywhere by public transit, you've got to take three buses. I'm not kidding. Three buses, and an ox cart, I mean, it's unbelievable. To go to downtown LA, you had to take three buses from where we lived. And it took a long time because, naturally, these things ran on a crazy schedule. It's not like New York buses come every 20 minutes, maximum — they're usually even closer. In fact, I got in trouble with my sister-in-law because my aunt was visiting and she said, "What do you miss about New York?" I said, "The subway." "How could you miss the subway?" "Because I can't go anywhere." My bike was stolen, so I didn't have that. I never thought to ask for a replacement. Again, to go anywhere if you didn't have a car you just didn't. And then walking. I mean, distances are huge. Especially — this is Los Angeles. It's not like San Francisco where yes, indeed, you can walk. Absolutely in LA you can't and nobody's outside anyway. You don't see a soul. Anyway, so I was much happier once I was back in New York and settled in.

SM: And so let's see. How about, like, what kind of things did you like to do for fun when you were growing up?

RR: Well, I was not into sports.

SM: Okay.

RR: Okay, but I had model trains, electric trains, that I set up. I still do have a stamp collection that I'm active — we have a stamp club, so I'm active in that. We also have a model train club here that I'm not active in because I can't get under the table to do stuff. I can get under, I just can't get out. But I learned all my wiring, you know, basic electricity from the electric trains. I used to have two trains running at the same time and when the signal would turn red, and one would stop and let the other one go by, and then it would turn green and it would go. And if they wound up facing each other on the same track. Everything shut off. Failsafe.

SM: That's great.

RR: Which they could use here because we had some bad accidents on our Metro. I should show them how to do it. What else did I do? I hung out with a lot of friends. We used to hang out by the candy store when the weather was decent, and even when it wasn't decent. Just talk and relate to things and solve the problems of the world and stuff like that. I did a lot of walking. I used to walk a lot with my friends and talk. We used to walk to Fordham Road. Which was — you know, when I saw it last, I was very disappointed. Because it really looks third-world. It really does. It was beautiful when I was there. You know it was that anchor store. It was Alexander's, which you've heard about, I mean. I got a good story for you about Alexander's: I used to hate school clothing shopping. My mother would drag me there. Now, Alexander's had a bargain basement, which is where we shopped. But it also had another floor where, you know, things were nicely displayed and all of that. But no, no, no, we went to the bargain basement. Everything was on these counters or in bins. So if you wanted a pair of pants, all the women would — mostly women — would stand around and say, you know, "I got a size eight who needs a size ten," and they pass it back and forth. This woman grabs me one day and said, "You're about my son's size," and she holds up a pair of underwear. I was mortified. I was like eleven years old or something.

SM: Oh my god.

RR: But the reward was going to Crumbs for ice cream afterwards, so my mother bribed me. Let's see what other activities — I went to a lot of movies, movies were cheap and good. They were plentiful. Fordham Road had, let's see, it had the Lido which showed the second run movies which was the Jerome Avenue — there was one on Jerome Avenue. I forgot the name of it. Of course there was the RKO Fordham, Kingsbridge had a movie theater, and of course the Paradise. When I started dating girls, we went to the Paradise, because that was the movie theater to go to, and it was beautiful. And you had to



behave yourself. If you acted rowdy the usher would throw you out. And when we were kids, New York had a law that the kids had to have a matron. And she wore a nurse's uniform and she was trained by the Gestapo. And she'd carry a flashlight, and if you misbehaved and carried on and made a lot of noise then she'd come over to you and put the flashlight in your face and say, "Sit down and shut up," you know.

SM: Oh goodness.

RR: I think it was 25 cents for 10 o'clock and then you could stay until about 3. They would show double features and cartoons and all that stuff. So I don't know how they made money, but they did.

SM: Things were cheaper then I guess.

RR: When I was a kid the first movie I saw was at the Crotona which was on Tremont near Park Avenue, it was *Song of the South*, Uncle Remus, which they don't show anymore. It's PC-incorrect. If you want to see it, you've got to go to London.

SM: Oh boy.

RR: And I remember going with my parents to see the *Wizard of Oz* and it scared the living daylights out of me — I was about five — because with the monkeys flying that's —

SM: I know, it's scary.

RR: — That was scary. But we went to the movies quite often. Well, they were cheap. And they were good. Yeah, they were good.

SM: And so you mentioned Crumbs, the ice cream store. What other kinds of foods would you like to eat?

RR: Oh, well, of course we had the Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood. We had the exact same thing every time we went: chicken egg drop soup, chicken chow mein, white rice, and jello. Their jello was superb. I don't know what they did differently, but it wasn't the jello that you bought in the supermarket. It was different and it was very good. And when I got older and started going out with friends. My friend, my buddy said, "If you order chicken chow mein, I'm gonna beat you up. Try some of the other stuff." So I got indoctrinated into spare ribs and stuff like that. And, oh my god, what have I been missing all these years? And where else did we go? Well, of course, we had these great cafeterias. They don't have them anymore. There was one on Jerome and Burnside. There was one on Fordham Road called Thompson's. And last time I looked it had turned into a furniture store. It was near Jerome Avenue, and that was terrific. I mean, gosh, the food was superb. My daughter gave me a video of the

automat. We didn't have an automat in the Bronx, but we did have a retail store on Fordham Road. "Less-Work-for-Mother" retail shop, that's what it was called. But anyway, when we went to Manhattan we would go to the automat. That was a big dream. Of course we had the kosher delis everywhere, we had at least one on every corner. Now you can't find them and when you do they charge twenty dollars for a sandwich. And, yeah, that was basically it. We had a lot of variety to choose from. And, of course, my mother did shopping on Bathgate Avenue. Oh my god, and she used to *shlep* me along when I was a kid, and I used to get very tired of it, because she would walk two blocks further if something was cheaper.

SM: Of course.

RR: And there were very few supermarkets. Well, of course A&P was one of them, but we didn't shop at A&P. We did occasionally, but not too often. And there was one on Grand Concourse about 181 Street or so. I remember, each store on Bathgate Avenue was individually owned, but the owners kind of knew you. My mother would time shopping right before Shabbos, right before the butchers closed, so they had to get rid of the stuff. They would lower the prices and the guy would weigh the food and weigh the meat or whatever you bought. Then after he weighed it, he'd throw on a lamb chop, another lamb chop, for me, the baby.

SM: The baby.

RR: I was the baby. I used to be very insulted. But the food was good. So —

SM: — you got free lamb chops.

RR: So anyway, things like that. But going out to eat was not something we did very often. My dad made like 35 bucks a week. It went very far, though, I gotta tell you. Well, there were less things to buy. Nobody had one of these computer things, which drives me nuts. You didn't have these fancy TVs. In fact, we didn't get a TV until 1954. And that was a big hit. What people used to do was to take a walk on the aqueduct by the park there. There was a family that had a TV and in the summertime they would turn it so that you could stand outside their window and watch it. Or we would stand outside the store that sold them and the guy would hook up a speaker so you could hear the sound. So that was how we watched TV until we bought one. They were expensive.

SM: And what kind of music did you like to listen to?

RR: I liked a good mix. I'm still a big fan of the Great American Songbook, even though it was before my time in many ways. I was never a big fan of rock'n'roll. My wife was, so of course I indulged it. It was okay, you know. And of course WABC in those days played music. So if you had a little transistor radio, it picked up — it had a 50,000 — still does have a 50,000-watt transmitter. In fact, you drove by

that transmitter when you were on Route 80. It would knock the other stations off the air. You'd only get their station. Now it's a talk radio station. But Cousin Brucey, that was our big DJ and a few others. And I tolerated — most of the music from the '50s was okay. Some of it was awful. But then again, some of the Great American Songbook music wasn't all that great, either. There was some clinkers in there too. But my parents introduced me to classical music by taking me to concerts. We had those concerts from the Golden Band, as I mentioned. And then, I remember the Bronx House on Washington Avenue had — I remember I went to a concert there from the members of the New York Philharmonic. All these things were free, by the way, and they were wonderful. So I said, oh, this is great. And my friend's mom, when I was a teenager, we went to Lewisohn Stadium, which was by CCNY uptown, that was the New York Philharmonic. And they played Scheherazade, which is one of my favorite pieces of music. So I got into, well, different ones.

I never got into opera too much. And I'm not a big opera fan even though I did see Carmen at the Met, the old Met. Not the one at Lincoln Center. The unique thing about that theater was the venue. It didn't have a backstage. They used to store the scenery outside under tarpaulins. But for fifty cents, you could go get an SRO seat, an SRO spot, and go up in the balcony, and sometimes you saw a seat and sometimes you just sat in the aisle to see and I saw Carmen there. I forgot who starred in it. But they had first class and the orchestra was beyond reproach. They were great. So that was my background. And, like I said, I loved going to museums. I used to go just to go. I remember I was annoyed that the Hayden Planetarium charged admission back then. I mean, it was cheap but, you know, who had money? But it was still good. And believe it or not, we used to go to Coney Island during the summer.

SM: Okay. Yeah.

RR: It took almost two hours by subway, but it was worth it. You know, my mother was ahead of the curve, she would — we would get there at about five o'clock when the sun was starting to set, so you didn't get too much sun. She was right, of course. Mothers usually are, even though they're pedantic about it. I used to love going there. My mother would pack a lunch that could feed a small nation. And then we'd buy food there. We'd walk down the boardwalk from Brighton down to Coney Island and go on the rides and stuff. And we'd eat more. We'd stop at Nathan's — real Nathan's, not the ones that are in the suburban areas. That's a completely unique one.

And I met my wife on Orchard Beach. She was a Hunter student, and she was there with her friends from her house plan. And my friend talked me into going to the beach that day, because I was having an argument with my parents for a change. And he said, "Get out of the house, it's a beautiful day." So I said, all right, and I reluctantly went. Then the rest was karma, or *bashert*. We were married 56 years before I lost her. It was a good experience.

SM: It sounds like it. And so you know, I think I can already guess what your answer will be to this question based on everything that you've shared. But did you feel like you got a good education and you had a lot of opportunities in that regard?

RR: Absolutely. When I went to those New York schools, even though Junior High 79 was disastrous, as far as I was concerned. I learned things there that I take with me my whole life. I had a great algebra teacher, a great general science teacher, a wonderful math teacher. And I learned how to type. A lifelong skill. In fact, I insisted that my both daughters, who are in their 50s now, but I insisted that they — even though they weren't interested in going into commercial stuff, they went off to college — but I said take a typing class, even if it's for no credit, take a typing class. And they both did. And they typed a lot quicker, a lot faster than I did. And lo and behold, who did I meet at a reunion from DeWitt Clinton High School years ago was Mr. Rich the typing teacher. I don't know how. I said, "You taught me a lifelong gift." But yes, I got a very good education. This New York City school system in those days was excellent. Once they decentralized, it went downhill. Because you have non-professional people making decisions and that's bad. You've got to let teachers teach. But that's even going on even now as you well know, especially in Florida and Texas. You know, you're having people interfering with the teaching system. And that's not good. I mean, these people are trained professionals. My wife was a school teacher. She was a special ed teacher.

SM: That's great.

RR: And she was certified from preschool all the way through middle school for it. And even though she taught in New Jersey, in the city of Passaic, that was a rough and tumble community. However, kids are kids, I don't care if you're in Scarsdale or Passaic or the Bronx or whatever. It's not the kids. It's the administration of the school. And she used to come home very aggravated because the administrator that supervised her never taught. You know, that's like teaching someone how to drive without knowing how to drive yourself. How could you do that? So, anyhow, but yes, the schools were wonderful and especially the guidance counselor I had at DeWitt Clinton High School who set me up with that academic diploma. I'll never forget her. And she only did guidance half the day. She taught, I think she taught history or something like that. She wasn't a full time counselor. She was great. Everything worked out. Okay, what else you got?

SM: So tell me a little bit about Jewish life growing up. I know you mentioned that your family wasn't very religious.

RR: Yeah, we weren't very religious. We did go — on the Jewish holidays what we did years ago was dress up in our finest duds and walk down the Grand Concourse.

SM: Yes.

RR: Okay, especially if — usually the weather was very nice. For some reason on Jewish holidays, weather is nice. I think G-d has a hand in it. To this day, I am not very religious. My view on religion is I'm not into the ritual. Even though I go to — we have services here on Friday, Friday night — once a month, on Friday night, I go to the Oneg Shabbat. I cannot sit through a Saturday morning service unless somebody I know is doing something and I gotta be there, because you do want to support. But we have a large Jewish contingent living here. We have approximately — our Jewish residents group has approximately 800 members.

SM: Okay, yeah, that's a lot.

RR: So we never have a problem getting a minyan. We do have a traveling rabbi. It's like, you're alright, have a yarmulke, will travel. He's a very nice man, comes here every week, every month rather, and does the things and we have a cantor and a choir. In fact, the cantor taught music in the New York City school system.

SM: Oh, okay.

RR: So he's quite familiar with DeWitt Clinton. You're still alive to tell the tale, that's good. So that part is good: you just assumed when you were Jewish in New York, in the Bronx anyway, that most of your friends will be Jewish. And they were, you know, and of course, the teachers in the schools, most of them were Jewish. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in those days, the schools were open. But they decided many years after that, that it's crazy. You got three kids in the class. You have to, you know, bring everybody together somewhere because they didn't have coverage. You just assumed you were going to marry a Jewish girl. I just assumed it. I don't know. And like I said, it was just something you did. It was not a hard and fast rule. So my friends did marry out of the religion. Much to the grandparents', usually, upsetment, but it works out. It works out. My brother-in-law's son married an Italian girl and she's great. And they have terrific kids.

But I have a different view of it now, of course, because this is a very eclectic community here. We have every minority that you can think of. And sometimes you can't even imagine. And we have a lot of people from India, we have a lot of African Americans, they have their own club too. And the thing about all the clubs here is that you don't have to be [part of the community], you could join any club. There are no restrictions. You know, I'm in the baby boomers, but I was born after the baby boomers club. We have about 800 members. So you could join any group, any club, and that makes it very nice. And they all put on, for their holidays, they all put on special events. The Chinese club puts on the dragon dance and all of that. It's really neat. So it's great. You learn a lot of things, a lot of cultures. But even growing up in New York, I learned a lot. Having friends from different religions. That was important. It was important and it leads to you being very tolerant of other people and understanding that, hey, you know, this is an important day for them.

But you still had to be careful. In those days when I used to — when I went to Hebrew school for the short time that I did, it was on University Avenue. It was the University Heights Jewish Center. You have to walk past Holy Spirit, where they would try to stall and if you were wise you did not walk on this side of the street. Especially on Good Friday, when, my friend told me, the nuns preached that the Jews killed Jesus. So of course, these kids would come out all ready to kill you. I used to walk across the street, on the side of the street or walk with a group if you can and find some other guys who were in that school. But yeah, there were problems, but I'm glad I did grow up Jewish in the Bronx and had exposure to things. I did go to a few services. I went to some of my friends' bar mitzvahs. I was never bar mitzvahed. I didn't want it. I saw a movie once. I think — it was on PBS, it was called *Bar Mitzvah Boy*. It was filmed in London. He too was never bar mitzvahed. And his grandfather tells him, "God says when you're thirteen, you're automatically bar mitzvah." Solved the problem, so was I.

SM: And so did you grow up speaking any languages besides English in the house?

RR: Well, of course, I took Spanish in school. I don't speak it with any kind of fluency but I do understand it. I know enough to get in trouble. But my first language, believe it or not, was Hungarian.

SM: Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RR: My grandma lived with us, when I was a little boy, until I was eight years old. She passed away when I was eight. But she lived with us and she only spoke Hungarian and German. So she fought with my father in German. That was the secret language. Which, you know, combined Yiddish and German together. And then after she passed away, the Hungarian disappeared from the brain. But I did learn Spanish, I did okay at it. That was the other good teacher in the junior high, Mr. Peretti. Mr. Peretti. He was a nice man. He never failed anybody. Thank god. He was a nice man and very patient with us. But no, I encouraged my kids to take Spanish and I'm glad they did. Because down here it's — everywhere in this country now it's a second language and you really should know it.

SM: Oh, yeah. No, I speak Spanish as well. And it is, especially living in the Bronx now, it's a very, very helpful tool.

RR: Well, I could read it, you know and that's important.

SM: Absolutely. I guess, as you got older, and were attending college, were you aware of the arson and devastation that started going on in the South Bronx or the demographic changes that were going on?

RR: Yeah, that really bothered us, right. We moved — my wife and I were married in 1966. She was still a senior at Hunter. And they wanted to place her after she graduated into a school on Brook Avenue below Claremont Parkway. And I said, that was a bad neighborhood when I was a child. Okay, so I said, we're not going to — we're going to move out of New York. And she wound up working in East Orange,

New Jersey, as her first teaching position. At that time, John Lindsay was the mayor. And the city just deteriorated under him. It really, really, really did. I mean, it was terrible. He just didn't pay attention to what was going on. And when they started burning buildings in the Bronx, it was time to get out of there quick. Really because we were living on Nelson Avenue and 167 street in Highbridge, not far from Yankee Stadium. And we were starting to get afraid for our safety. It was not good, not good. Now, then the same thing, later on, two years later, that same thing happened in East Orange and we have to get out of there. East Orange is very close to Newark where they had the rioting. That was very frightening. I mean, until you hear it and see it — we didn't see it, but you could hear it in a way because people were running towards us. We were a border town to Newark, minutes away. And I remember going to work and seeing armored vehicles on the street from the National Guard. That's scary.

SM: Yeah, absolutely.

RR: That's scary. And when I saw, you know, I remember when Carter went to the — was it Carter? Yeah, it was Jimmy Carter — went to Charlotte Street, that famous picture. Charlotte Street was never paradise, you know, but people didn't burn down their apartment houses in those days, my goodness. You know, it was not — I mean, Colin Powell grew up in that neighborhood. It was upsetting, you know, to see your institutions burning, your neighborhoods going downhill. I felt very bad about it, still do.

SM: Absolutely.

RR: The South Bronx had a lot of industry. You know, Tuck Farberware was one of the factories there, who made the pots and pans. And there were defense contractors. There was all kinds of different companies down there, and they wound up moving away.

SM: So did you ever return to the Bronx once you had moved out with your wife?

RR: Yeah. Well, we had family there for a while. When we moved to East Orange we still went to my dentist. Bless his heart, Dr. Cohen. He even checked our kids. We have gone back because we had, at that time, we had family there. Phyllis's mom and dad lived on Bouck and Burke Avenue off of Gun Hill. And we used to visit there. In fact, her mother wanted us to move to Co-op City, so that she could watch our children and Phyllis could go to work. And I said no, that's not going to happen because that's going to turn into a project. And it did, which is a shame because the idea was good. But it devastated the Bronx. All the middle class people moved out of the Concourse area and the neighborhoods into that thing, and it's the most inconvenient place you can be. I still remember Freedom Land. I used to go there when I was little. And you still have a two fare zone to this day. You know, that hurts. Especially now I mean, in those days it was 15 cents. Now it's about two bucks to ride on the subway.

SM: \$2.75.

RR: Wow, Wow.

SM: Yeah.

RR: My nephew's coming down here from New Jersey and he said to go across the George Washington Bridge is now fifteen bucks.

SM: Oh yeah.

RR: It was fifty cents when I started to drive.

SM: Yeah, no.

RR: And by the way, it was never supposed to have a permanent toll.

SM: Really?

RR: Once the bonds were paid off it was supposed to be free. Ha ha on that.

SM: Not the case.

RR: Indeed. But to go back to the Bronx, like I said, there were still pockets of nice neighborhoods around the Pelham Parkway area. I had an aunt who lived on Lydig Avenue and that was a nice neighborhood at that time. Still had a lot of Jewish influence. It had the deli and Orlinsky's Appetizing. Used to buy — you couldn't get appetizing out where we lived in New Jersey. Well you could, but it's not the same. So we used to go buy lox and white fish and all that stuff. Orlinsky's.

SM: That's great. And so, you know, when you think back about your time in the Bronx, what sorts of emotions and memories do you associate with it?

RR: Well, family, visiting family of course, that was always nice. I had an aunt that lived on Briggs Avenue. And I thought it was an absolute paradise because the building had an elevator. And her apartment had a sunken living room, we all had to step down into the living room. And I thought, wow, this is really neat. By the way, remember, I was five. And fluorescent lighting was just starting up in the late '40s. And she had a circline lighting fixture in her kitchen. I thought that that's a miracle. The things you remember. I enjoyed visiting people and like I said, going back — if I had to go back now, well, no, nobody I know lives in the Bronx anymore. They moved out to Long Island or Queens, or some people moved to Brooklyn. The funny thing is that some areas are getting gentrified, because nobody could afford to live in Manhattan.



SM: Exactly.

RR: My wife was born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

SM: Okay.

RR: Nobody could afford to live there anymore.

SM: Oh, yeah, no, definitely not anymore.

RR: She grew up around the corner from where Barry Manilow lived.

SM: Okay, yeah.

RR: South Second Street. They probably passed each other on the way to the little grocery stores. But yeah, it's sad to see that it deteriorated. I hope it comes back. It will eventually, you know, everything is cyclical. It's got to come back, because the Bronx has wonderful infrastructure. It's got a great labor force. I mean, it's got all these people that now if they hadn't — I know they made Bathgate Avenue into an industrial park. There were some contractors, some government contractors in there. But I think one of the things that really hurt the Bronx was that Cross Bronx Expressway. That was the beginning of the end when they literally cut the borough in half.

SM: Yeah.

RR: Because when I was a kid, the South Bronx was 138 Street. Not now. It's anything south of 183 Street. And that highway was obsolete the day it opened. Now I hear they want to double decker it or something like that.

SM: Gosh, I haven't heard that. But I can imagine.

RR: It's a nightmare. You know, the two times I've had to use it to visit people. Because I mean, 24/7 it was bad. You know, three o'clock in the morning I come home from a date and there's traffic. Where did all these people come from?

SM: Well, that's wonderful. Do you have anything else that you'd like to share?

RR: No, I hope this was helpful. I enjoyed speaking with you.

SM: Yes, me too.