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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

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

Susan Schwalb (SS): Well, I'm pretty sure — regardless of where they were — my father was born at home on the Lower East Side, his father first had a pushcart and then developed a little store where he sold fruit and vegetables. They lived behind it, they lived above it. And then eventually, the Bronx beckoned. It was nicer and they moved there. The dates I can't tell you. My grandmother, before she went to live with my aunt and then to a facility — she died at, I don't know 99 or something — she still had an apartment, when I was a child, on Burnside Avenue, a walk up of all things. When we went to visit her I couldn't believe it. It's when they made the decision she had to go live with my aunt, she needed more support. My mother was born in probably the Bronx or Manhattan hospital, but her family — she was not first generation. My mother's family came in 1850, or there about. They came from Germany. And the name is Rosenhain. And they were all restaurant people. So they were not poor little things like my father's family. My mother went to college. You know, she drove a car. I mean, she was an educated person. Her parents owned a restaurant in the Bronx. I don't know if Alexander's department store is still there.

SM: Yes, it's not.

SS: That's where it was. They owned the land and it was Rosenhain's Restaurant. It was not a kosher restaurant. None of the family was that religious, so they served everything. My mother ate all her meals there. She couldn't cook when she got married, of course, because they were never home.

SM: Yes, right.

SS: And then, I don't know at what point, when they sold it to Alexander's — I knew my grandparents, but by the time I knew them, they were living in Miami. Where do the Jews go? They go there. They ran an apartment hotel. They had — my father advised against what they were going to do because he was an attorney, but they did it anyway — they bought the building. They didn't own the land. Eventually, they lost it, because somebody sold the land. But I remember it, being there during a hurricane and things like that. After my grandfather died, my grandmother would come to us occasionally or we would come down. I spent a lot of time on the beach, I have lots of pictures of that, because we stayed at the apartment hotel. I even remember the driveway that during a hurricane, my cousin and I would play there, they were boarded up, we would fool around, they probably wanted us out of the house. But another part of that family owned a restaurant in New Jersey. I know very little about that. But my great

uncle, Arnold Reuben, owned Reuben's Restaurant, which was a famous restaurant in Manhattan. It was

on 58th off Fifth Avenue, between Fifth and Madison, and it's — I don't know, did you ever hear of Lindy's?

SM: Yes.

SS: Well, it's that. It's a much nicer, different kind of restaurant, but that's what people went after the theater. And we never ate a reuben sandwich, that is the name. But they had sandwiches named after movie stars and theater people, so it's very much that. I loved their apple pancake. And after Arnold
died, his son took over the business and eventually they sold it and it was a kind of chain there and then it went out of business, because the original restaurant was exquisite. I don't have pictures but there must be pictures because I went there quite a lot. When Arnold was there, we didn't pay. If he wasn't there, we had to pay. They had an apple pancake, looked like a pizza. And there's a recipe that was posted in the New York Times from Arnold Jr. I'm not much of a cook, so I've not tried to make it.

SM: But it had slices of apple in it or?

SS: Oh yes. It's an apple pancake, but more dessert special, a specialty. You know, it was amazing. I suppose somebody ought to try to make it to recapture this. My grandparents I believe lived on, probably lived on the Grand Concourse, right, because they would walk to the restaurant. They were wealthy people for the time, because they — my mother's birthday parties involved an elephant and all kinds of things.

SM: Oh my goodness.

SS: I mean, I have this from pictures, you know, and she would talk about it.

SM: And so how did your parents meet? Do you know?

SS: Ah, a classic New York story.

SM: How your parents met?

SS: Oh, of course. My mother was working at a hotel in the Catskills. She was the athletic counselor. And my father and his — he had two older brothers and a younger sister who survived, there must have been other children, but no one mentioned them — and he went with his, not the oldest brother but the one above him, and they went looking for women I suppose.

They went on a vacation. And that's how they met.

SM: Yes. Wow.

SS: It was a complicated marriage. I mean, they really came from two different worlds. It's not that my father wasn't educated or very smart, and he did get a law degree. In those days, you got a law degree after High School. But you know, what their courtship must have been like? I know my mother's saved all his cards, my father wasn't big on letters, or even emotions. He's part of that male generation where you — I mean, there were men who were more emotional than my dad. But my mother was also — she went to NYU, so she would drive from the Bronx, I don't think my mother was ever in the subway. She had a car from very young.

SM: Wow. Okay.

SS: She wanted to go away to school. And her brother had been away at some school and he had an accident with a gun. So her parents said, you can't go. I mean, she wasn't anything like her brother. So they got her a car. You know, in those days, you had to have money. And so we always had a car and at some point two cars. And I have my parents' wedding album, everybody, the men are in tuxedos, it was at some fancy hotel in Manhattan. I can't remember. Was it the Pierre? I mean, because her family had money. My father's family didn't. You know, my father made a living. More than a living and he became a judge and, you know, on and on, but —

SM: And so what year were you born?

SS: 1944.

SM: '44.

SS: I'm almost 79. It's not fun, because it means I'm closer to 80 than 70.

SM: Yes, that's true.

SS: Now, I don't feel old, except when my foot hurts or my hand hurts. Generally, I don't

feel old. SM: You don't seem old, in my opinion.

SS: We're not our mothers. We're not like, I mean my mother didn't dress like an old lady. My grandmother did. But still, you know, we ate better, we exercised better. You know, we're in some ways healthier except for the genes. Everyone — my mother, her mother, and me, we all had breast cancer. So, you know, that's the Ashkenazi heritage, that you're more vulnerable to that. But I am lucky it wasn't a very serious — I mean, I had to have a mastectomy, I'm not

lucky about that — but lucky that I didn't have to take chemo and those other horrible things. I mean, I do know, but I don't know offhand, the date of their wedding, because I have their wedding album, it would say. If we were in my apartment, I could have taken it out and shown it to you. I guess we were living more in the — when we moved the Kingsbridge area, I was around two, because they were planning another child and had to have a two bedroom. And I shared a bedroom with my sister till I went to high school and we moved to a three bedroom apartment. So there was the gradual upgrading. One of my father's clients — people in those days paid in merchandise — they owed him money, so he wound up with a big green Cadillac. He loved it. It was a big Cadillac. I would drive to Manhattan after college to go to the print center to work. I remember cops stopping me — remember I'm a little person. I was a little bigger then, I was 5'2" — what is this little girl doing in this —

SM: Big old Cadillac?

SS: And they pulled me over. You know, nothing happened.

SM: So tell me a little bit more about the Kingsbridge neighborhood, what kind of people lived there?

SS: It was a typical neighborhood with a candy store around the corner where you had egg creams and malteds. And they had this big wall of penny candies. The big highlight came when a pizza slice store opened. There was a meat store, probably a fish store. There was an appetizers store, we used to go, [Gulkos]. If I came in there with my family, he always gave me a pickle. We were a few blocks from Jerome, where the elevated train is still there — that doesn't move — where there was a movie theater. So it was sort of on the other side of the Kingsbridge Armory. And there was the parks that they took us to, but they weren't close. You know, it was some park but not within a few blocks. I didn't like it there, it wasn't very pretty. I found a shul in Riverdale. And I'd been to a bar mitzvah — as I said, my mother's favorite holiday was Santa Claus and Easter Bunny. She knew she was Jewish, identified, but very secularized. And since I can't tell you whether my father was bar mitzvah'd or not, I mean, he wasn't as secularized as she. But because, once I got to about 12, he said, enough with the Christmas tree, Easter bunnies, and whatever. So they took us to a shul around the corner, it was on the second floor. Everything was brown: brown floor, brown walls. Brown. It was horrible. And then I went to a bar mitzvah at Riverdale Temple, which is still there, it's a very beautiful shul. And I told my parents I wanted to go there. So now I'm in high school. I cannot read Hebrew, because I didn't go —

SM: To Hebrew school —

SS: — as a child. I did four years there where I was confirmed. It was a reform shul. And you know, I studied comparative religion and many parts of the Bible and it was really quite nice. And that's when we moved there. And Riverdale is trees and prettier. But it was long to get to high school. I always missed the bus to the subway, so I had to run down — it's a giant hill —

and I had to run down god knows how many steps, walk and run to the subway station. I've been up there — and especially when my mother was in a nursing home I was up there a lot — and I don't know how I did it. But I was 14, of course I had that energy. And I never told my parents anything about the school and the — because the other way we had to go up through Morningside Park, when we lived more in the Bronx. That was the D or the C, I don't know one of the IND trains. And I never told them what it was like to go through Morningside Park. You could be mugged, I was mugged once. But when you come from the IRT from Broadway at eight in the morning, there were all these guys on the street getting drunk. And that was — I raced school. I never told them about that, because I didn't want them to take me out of this school. Where else would I have gone? They really couldn't afford private high school for me.

SM: Yes. It was a good opportunity, right?

SS: And Riverdale is still not mostly Jewish, but it has many synagogues. I just read it has the last kosher deli in the Bronx.

SM: Really? I think I knew that. Well, I didn't know it was the last, but I knew that there was a kosher deli there.

SM: I mean there are delis, but not all of them are kosher, but that one is. And there's still here, I don't know, the Second Avenue Deli is not what it once was, but it's still open. But I think I was there, the last time I was there, was when my parents celebrated a wedding anniversary. And my father was in a facility. I think my aunt and uncle were probably still alive, they came along as well.

SM: And so I know you had mentioned it earlier, but was the Kingsbridge area when you were there a predominantly Jewish area or?

SS: Yes. You know, when — they didn't give the holidays off in those days — so when we stayed home for Rosh Hashanah or whatever the schools were empty. I don't remember them in elementary school, but I certainly remember this in high school, and probably it was the same in junior high school. So you know, the Bronx was still very Jewish. And I don't know, these things change. People moved to Westchester who got wealthier. They moved to Riverdale. And from what I read, it's still heavily Jewish, it's the only part of the Bronx.

SM: Yes.

SS: Because — it was an interesting article in one of these Jewish email newsletters that I'm now getting. And I remember that deli, it was okay.

SM: Yes, makes a difference, right. And so —

SS: And most of my friends from elementary school, and I don't remember in junior high

school a lot of friends, but in elementary school they were mostly Jews. Many were from the building I lived in. You know, I have one friend who I grew up with, we lost touch with each other. She was at Music and Art, but we were no longer friends. And then we went to our 50th high school reunion and met up after all those years and now I see her and talk to her.

SM: Really? That's great.

SS: She lives on 34 Street and Second [Avenue], she lived really close to me, I'm 21 [Street] between Second and Third [Avenue], so all those years I could have — but I thought about her, but I didn't know how to find her, and I didn't know how to look. It's before you had a computer and could look up anybody. You know, you looked in the phone book.

SM: And so what kind of things did you and your friends like to do for fun? Or, I know you had mentioned you went to the movies since you were very young.

SS: Yeah, but when I was in elementary school we played games in the street. You know, hopscotch, we would throw something and we had balls that we threw around and the boys played with knives and threw them into the soil around the trees, the so called trees that were there. You know, we celebrated Halloween, went around I think until I was 12. Susan, who I'm friends with, again, happily, who has much worse health than me. She has a heart condition, she has this and that. But the last time I went in costume we were 12. That would be you know — so she's dressed like a gypsy with stuffing in her thing, *Gestures towards her chest* you know. I dressed as a boy, and nobody recognized me. I had a scruffy hat and all that.

SM: Oh my gosh, yeah.

SS: Maybe my father's shirt on, something like that. But I envied the boys because they seemed to be able to do things we weren't allowed to do. And I would have never considered role/ sex change. I mean, I can't imagine it. But I mean, that's why I became a feminist, because I didn't like — I never wanted to change my name when I was a child. It's true. My father's name is a patriarchal — I mean, it's a German name. It's his father's name, but I still didn't want to change my name. And I married late and I didn't change my name. I only used Mrs. Boykan — my husband was Martin Boykan — when I was dealing with tradespeople. I would say, "This is Mrs. Boykan," like there was a big Mr. Boykan behind me. I had the bigger voice. You know, I never, I only use that when it's — even now, because he died two years ago —

SM: I'm sorry to hear that.

SS: — I'm still dealing with little bits of things with his estate. And sometimes I add it in parenthesis. You know, just because if I'm writing to someone who doesn't know me.

SM: For clarification. And so what kind of music — did music play a large role in, when you were young? What kinds of things would you like to listen to?

SS: Well it was pre Beatles and all of that. I'm a 60s girl. I went to a be-in, I went to this, I went to Country Joe and the Fish. But I didn't go to all these rock concerts, they're too loud for me. And I was interested in classical music very early. I mean, there were songs. It was the Everly Brothers in junior high school. I downloaded some of those songs, they're in my phone.

SM: Yeah, I'm taking a class right now, Rock and Roll to Hip Hop, and it's a music history course.

SS: Well I practiced in front of a mirror how to do the Lindy. I had to learn it. I mean, initially, when I was about 10, I went to a party and I didn't know how to dance, so I took some dance lessons. I came home crying. My mother said, okay, so we went to do the waltz, the foxtrot, the mambo and the cha-cha.

SM: That's great. And so how about food? What kind of things would you like to eat? What kind of things would your mother — well, I guess your mother didn't — did she learn to cook?

SS: My mother learned to cook.

SM: Okay, okay.

SS: My father was a lawyer for a bunch of butchers in the meatpacking district. And they paid him — we had steak, we had lamb chop, whatever, because that's what he brought home and in exchange for money. So not a great diet. I mean, I don't know. Whatever. You know, I loved Italian food when I was young, particularly pizza. I remember, I don't know how old that was, my sister was still alive — my parents took us to a restaurant in Little Italy, when there still was a Little Italy, and they didn't have pizza on the menu. And we made it — we had fits! It's embarrassing to say this. My father said, enough, and takes us out in the car and drives us to Mario's, in the Bronx, where we often went. I'm embarrassed, I love Italian food. And I'm not a big pizza eater, you know, I eat pizza, but it's too fattening too. The slice pizza is disgusting. But I have a good place in my neighborhood, which is alright.

SM: Well, down here I always think — I've been to Artichoke Pizza before, which I really like, but it was, like it's not something I could eat every day.

SS: Where is Artichoke Pizza?

SM: It's somewhere along the High Line. I forget where it is exactly in this area

because — SS: It's a little bit further down.

SM: Near the Chelsea Market.

SS: Yes.

SM: I went with some friends of mine a long time ago.

SS: I mean, the other restaurants we went to were kosher dairy restaurants. One was Ratner's, Rappaport's, and it was the Grand Street Restaurant, and we went there quite a bit. And I used to do my taxes with my father, this is out of college, and we would make a date. In the beginning, for the first number of years, I went with him to his accountant, and then we'd go out to this lovely lunch, because going for your taxes is depressing.

SM: So let's talk a little bit about school. So are there any memories from your public school experience that stood out to you?

SS: Oh sure. I remember lots of teachers. And when I was in third grade is when they were really teaching us left from right. And the way I remembered this for so many years, it's embarrassing how many — What was your last question?

SM: Um, remembering left from right.

SS: Oh, yes. So I remember sitting and the blackboard was my right hand and my left hand was at the window, the windows were over there. So that's how I learned. I'm a visual person, so for years and years I would visualize me in that seat and I would know which hand was which. I don't usually need to do that, not for a long long long time. But I mean, I didn't do badly in elementary school, I still can't spell well, I'm better with spellcheck. It taught me a lot of words that I always had — simple words, I always had trouble with. And usually I can see the word is wrong, but that is not my strength. But I could read very well and was good at math and a lot of other subjects. But I don't remember a ton of things about elementary school. We used to go home for lunch. Junior high school was okay. I didn't have a lot of friends at that point. High school was different, now that was special, because I still have some friends from Music and Art. Whether we were that close then, we're closer now. You know, the 70s was the height of the second wave of feminism and women's art movement, I met tons of people that I didn't really know well, then got to know.

SM: And how did you end up going to Music and Art? Did you have to — is it an application?

SS: Well, I wanted to be an artist. And I had to apply twice. It wasn't that easy to get in as a freshman, they took many less students. And I didn't get in. I was in ninth grade, junior high school. But I took lessons with the artist Ann Meltzer, who's no longer alive, who was my mother's art teacher, and prepared a portfolio and then I got in. You know, they made you come there, you had to draw a figure and something else. They had tests. I don't know what they are now. But the school was up at City College. It's another high school now, we had our 50th reunion there.

SM: It's over near Lincoln Center now. Right?

SS: Yes.

SM: Okay. Yeah, Fordham has a campus over there, so I've seen it a few times.

SS: You know, I took art lessons in elementary school, and there were art classes in junior high school. They didn't think I was a star until I got into Music and Art, because there were not many people accepted, and then the teacher liked me.

SM: Of course.

SS: And I wasn't the class artist, that was someone else who could draw portraits. But she didn't go to Music and Art.

SM: But was it something that you had always known that you wanted to do? Or that

you liked? SS: My mother was an artist.

SM: Oh, she was?

SS: So I wanted to ever since I was a little girl. Did I know what that was? No. My dad was an attorney. I think for about a year I said I wanted to be a lawyer, but that went away.

SM: Happens to the best of us with dads who are lawyers, myself included.

SS: Well, I don't — I have an analytical mind, but I don't think — I mean, I'm an artist. I have always been. Until I can't work, here I am. Artists never retire.

SM: No, that's wonderful. So did either — okay, so what — just for the record — so which public school and junior high school did you attend?

SS: It was PS 86, Junior High School 115, Elizabeth Barrett Browning Junior High

School. And I believe — for so long I had memorized that poem, her famous poem "How Do I Love Thee." I probably couldn't remember it now.

SM: And so what was it like going to an all-girls junior high school? Was that any — do you think it was any different than if you had been —

SS: I'm sure it was. There was some girls who dated, you know, I mean, or had boyfriends or whatever. When I finally fell in a better crowd. I remember going to some party that had boys at them. It was a boys' junior high school — I'm not sure I can remember the name — that wasn't close, but in the area, that's where they sent the boys. Was it a good idea to separate us? Who knows. When we once had a substitute teacher and it was a man, younger, youngish, he was probably in his 20s, and oh! What a sensation he was.

SM: Of course.

SS: Some girls, this is probably the ninth grade, were very mature. I was little. But they were flirting with him, it was very funny.

SM: And so were there any — that you remember — any tensions between different ethnic groups or even racial groups as you got older?

SS: Well there were no non-white students until high school. And then I don't remember that. There were plenty of non-Jews in junior high school. Elementary school, it was just in the neighborhood, right in there. But I don't remember much of that, you know, at all. And certainly at Music and Art we were quite left wing there. And I used to think it was a much higher percentage of non-whites until I went through my yearbook many years later. And so maybe it was 25% at most, maybe less. But I remember them, they were all in our — we were all in classes together. There was mixed dating. I remember, after the 50th reunion, a bunch of us went out for whatever, and there was — I didn't know them, but I remember them — there was a mixed race couple that was still married. You know, all this. I mean, there were a few girls in our senior year in high school that got married. They weren't girls, they were women back then. I was a girl.

SM: A little bit about Jewish life. I know you had mentioned that your family wasn't very religious. Did you grow up speaking any languages besides English in the house?

SS: No. My grandmother spoke Yiddish, which means I know a couple of words, but she spoke it well enough, you know. And since I am — I don't even know what my father's side spoke besides English. I think my mother studied French, but I never heard her speak it until we were in France many years later. So I mean, I have these expressions that I know.

SM: And you guys didn't keep kosher, right?

SS: No.

SM: Okay, great. So what did you end up doing after you finished high school?

SS: I went to Carnegie Mellon. You know, I didn't want to stay home. I didn't want to live with my parents anymore, so I didn't want to go to Cooper Union or Pratt or one of the art schools that many of my classmates did go to because I knew my parents wouldn't let me live in an apartment. I would have to commute. And I don't know how I got fixated on — it was Carnegie Institute of Technology in those days — Carnegie Tech, and I was a little nervous. I was interested in a school in Los Angeles, but it did seem far away, so I wound up in Pittsburgh. I applied to Syracuse, I got in there but didn't really want to go. My father wanted me to go to Cornell because they had a good football team. I didn't get in. And I applied to Carnegie. You didn't apply to too many. And I used as my safe school City College. I should have used Brooklyn College, it had a really — I mean, Ad Reinhardt taught there. I didn't know that. Philip Pearlstein. I mean, it had good teachers in art there. Not City. I taught at City for many years. It's a better art department now. Wasn't much then.

SM: And so was it a bit of a culture shock when you went to Pittsburgh?

SS: To go to Pittsburgh?

SM: Yes.

SS: Oh, I was happy to be away, but I often went home. I had a friend, maybe not my freshman year, probably by my sophomore year. Was a guy from the theater division. I had a lot of friends in theater. We knew theater people, architects. Never knew the music students, I don't know why. We didn't even know when their concerts were. I went to many things that the theater department put on. But I never knew music students, which is odd. But why did I get started on that tangent? I can't remember, I get off.

SM: Culture shock about being in Pittsburgh.

SS: You know, I didn't really go around Pittsburgh. Oh, and I had this friend. He was in the theater department. He had a girlfriend in New York and he had a car. And so every Friday, right after classes, if you wanted to go to New York with Victor, you came and you paid him I don't know 10 bucks or 5 bucks to cover — he made money on these trips.

SM: Of course.

SS: I mean, gas was nothing, I don't know. So he would leave you off in downtown Manhattan, and that's where he would pick you up on Sunday. So we would get back in time before the

dorm, the curfew. I mean, we lived in dorms. It wasn't until I was a senior that I had a small apartment in my second semester when I went part time, because I was fed up being in school. I just finished enough courses to graduate. So I don't know. I mean, I would come back. I would be glad to be in New York. I didn't want to live in Pittsburgh, you know. It was still, the steel mills were still there. You would see it in the night sky. I've been back to the school, I went back maybe seven or eight years ago. I was part of a drawing symposium, teaching my specialty. And with another school, besides that there were new buildings — some of them look like prisons, but whatever — Carnegie has a big engineering department. And in those days, there were no women in that. But now it's 50 percent. The architecture department had almost no women and no women teachers. So now it has a chair, who was a woman and half or more of the students were women. When I was there, I knew two women: one a little older on my floor, and one round my age who tried to kill herself. She left school and then the other one had a nervous breakdown because they didn't treat her well. It was all guys and guy teachers, they didn't want her there, so it was just such a pleasant surprise to see how things had changed. Because it really — I didn't have pretty much any women art teachers either. There was someone who came in for a semester. I only remember how they teased her. But when the guy who taught that two-dimensional design course, he was drunk, and he wound up not being able to teach the second semester. So they brought in a woman from Chicago, who was really interesting, but they all made fun of her. I knew there was some women graduate students, but they weren't my teachers.

SM: Yeah. And so did you feel like as a woman growing up during this period — I mean, whether at college or even when you were growing up — that the expectations of you were different from your male peers or you were treated differently than your male peers?

SS: Well we learned to type in junior high school, preparing us to be secretaries. I'm not sorry I know how to type, obviously, but when I left Carnegie, I never told anyone that I could type. I majored in graphic design and fine art and I went to work as a graphic designer because I had to go to work. But I was not the secretary. Never that. I mean, and I was the first woman hired in the art department who wasn't the secretary. Because I liked the art director and I suppose I flirted with him and he with me, people, nasty people there, spread rumors that I was only there because I was sleeping with him. He was a married man and he was like 100 feet tall. You know, he was like, if you've seen "Mad Men"?

SM: Okay.

SS: I mean, that was in a publishing house. I was in commercial art, but my boss went out — we had two hour lunches. I didn't know what to do with myself. I took walks, I went to the UN, I mean, it was ridiculous. And if you went with John — I remembered his first name, I was telling this story recently — you had to keep up with him because he had three martini or two martini lunches. You know, at lunchtime, I had to have at least two drinks of something, I don't know what I had. I'm sure it wasn't a martini. But it could have been, I don't know that I drank wine. It was hard liquor. And we came back to the department, he closed his office door and

probably took a nap. Four o'clock he would emerge, and all things would be busy. Couldn't go home early, because between four and five is when the afternoon work got done. It was a strange time. I mean, were these men happy in their roles? He was coming from Connecticut with children and a wife at home. I don't think any of us were truly happy in these stereotypic roles. I mean, I was allowed to go to art school and go to college because they figured I'd get married. I didn't need a functional career. But you know, I didn't want to get married. I was 37 when I met my husband. So, if you lived with my parents, you would understand why. They were a mismatched couple. I never understood their marriage, never. But, you know, after my mother died, and then I eventually went through the boxes of stuff she had, that I'd saved from her apartment. Most of them I couldn't look through, even though she was in a nursing home, I couldn't look through them until she died. And they saved all these notes to each other. And I figured they did love each other at the beginning. Were they a good match? My mother was a semiprofessional artist. She never liked to be home when someone told her to be home. I mean, she got an allowance as an adult woman in a marriage, to buy the food and clothing or whatever. And she didn't love that. So she got a substitute license and began to teach when I was about 9, 10 and I had to make the dinner for my father. She wasn't home.

SM: And so I know you kind of hinted at it earlier. How did you get involved in the feminist movement?

SS: It was easy here. I came back from college, I really didn't know that many artists or art community here. And I didn't know at what point — I knew a few people and a few people from school got involved in different things. And I went to my first Women in the Arts meeting, it was after the Huntington Hartford show "Women Choose Women," which was very powerful to me. And that was the museum where the museum MAD is, [Museum of] Art and Design. That was where this other museum was. And a friend who was in the show from school told me about this art group. And I went to a meeting. There were 50 women in the room while saying they're artists, and of course yelling and there is a lot of arguments because people who weren't in that show were jealous and all that. All I saw was, wow! 50 women artists? I didn't know too many. And there I was. And so I wound up doing the newsletter for that group. And I was at an artist's residency and I met the editor and founder of a feminist literary magazine called Aphra, and I was their art director for about a year and a half. And you know, I got more and more involved in these things, which includes 1977, going to the big conference for women in Houston. There was all these meetings around the country and I had friends and they said, "Come we're going to Albany," and they kept pushing me forward. And so I went to Houston, which was a life changing experience. And then I organized, in 1980 — remember this is all before computers — an International Festival of Women Artists in Copenhagen, where the international UN meeting was. And how did I do that? I didn't have money. I'm working part time at university, at City College. I figured out how to use their mailroom. So I just went there and dropped off things because I was an underpaid teacher there. And when I needed to phone the head of the committee, we were like co-whatevers in Copenhagen — who spoke English because she had lived in the United States, went to art school here — I had to go up to the UN where they would let me use their phone. You couldn't have called Copenhagen.

SM: You could hardly call New Jersey.

SS: Even with my husband, you couldn't call Boston much. That's where my husband was, running up an enormous phone bill, which I made my father pay. They wanted me to get married, and they liked my husband a lot.

SM: So they'd encourage it.

SS: You know, I said, "Alright, you have to pay my phone bill." I was active when I went up to Boston, I founded a Boston chapter of Women's Caucus for Art, which is, I think, still running. I was the co president for a year or so and then an active member. And this is an outgrowth — Women's Caucus for Art was founded through the College Art Association. I don't know if you know what that is.

SM: No.

SS: They're meeting now in New York, an annual meeting and this year it's in New York City. It's up at the Hilton. It's a place where you get jobs, and there are loads of panels and presentations. I was going to go up tomorrow, but I don't think it's going to work. I have a dealer coming here at 10. So that's agh. Maybe I'll go to see the Whitney. I haven't seen the Hopper. Maybe I'll go see it with someone who's here from Israel. But am I active now? Informally, I'm still a member of the Women's Caucus, I dropped out, then I came back, because I had to organize — what year was it? 2020. Cynthia Navaretta, who was a book publisher, architect, and active through all these groups. I got connected with her the first day that I went to a women arts meeting, she invited me to join her and her friends for coffee. I only remember that Pat Passlof, who's deceased, was there. Her husband was more well known than her but I thought she was a more interesting painter. Milton Resnick.

SM: Okay.

SS: You know that you have to find all these names.

SM: Yeah. Oh, I will.

SS: Cynthia had died and her son didn't want to do anything. In fact, he didn't tell her closest friends that she had died. And so we organized a zoom memorial and used the technology and everything from the Women's Caucus, so they shamed me into rejoining. I'm still a member. But you know, I don't — I mean, now this is an anachronism, I would say I'm not looking to be in a lot of women's shows, but the dealer on the corner who's coming tomorrow, he's doing a women artists show next month called "Roar." And when he showed me the list who's in it, I'm very impressed. It's mostly very well known names. Some I didn't know. And then I happened to go in there a couple of weeks ago to check on that he had a flood in the basement. I showed with

him, like in a group show some years ago, maybe 20 years ago, and we're friends. I see him at art fairs, I like his gallery. And my Boston dealer had gone in there. And so he said, "Oh, I'm doing a women's show. Would you like to be in it?" Sure. Why no, I don't have — I have a dealer in London, I have a dealer in Connecticut, and one in Boston. And I need one here. It's a tricky operation. So I'm happy to be in anything anyone invites me to be in.

SM: Great. Wonderful. And so, in the time that you were away at school or still living in New York City, were you kind of aware of —

SS: I knew nothing about these art worlds. My mother —

SM: Oh, I was going to ask you about the Bronx.

SS: Because I came back there! We were living in Riverdale by then. And I only left home about six months after college, so I was still at home. I remember when I was a sophomore in college, I was invited back to speak at Riverdale Temple as part of a service where they invited some other young people who had been involved with the synagogue to speak about their experiences, and I told a story about some distant relative or friend of a family who took me to lunch on a weekend in Pittsburgh. And so they took us to Squirrel Hill, which is the Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh, to a giant deli. And the thing is that I don't remember the food, but the waiters were all black, in white uniforms. And I was startled because I'm used to New York from my youth — not now, but in my youth — there were old men, gruffing and whatever who were the waiters. Certainly not young women and not even young men. You know, today, there are none of these places anymore. It's a whole new world here. You can still find kosher food here, but my favorite one is Israeli. Second Avenue Deli, the food isn't so good anymore. It's way too much money. But so I brought back Jewish experience, I [joined] the Hillel in college and did events with them all the time. And I know after John Kennedy was shot, my roommate and I, we went to a big, huge synagogue where I had actually done drawings because it was so elaborate there with the vaulted ceiling and stuff when I was a freshman. We went there, because everybody was, we all were — I was printing photography in the design department. And I came out and they said the president was killed. I said, "I don't believe you" and I left. I came out a little while later, the president was killed and everyone in the college went into mourning. My family in those days, and they were Republicans, but they were Rockefeller Republicans. I don't think today, or even — I mean, way before Trump. I don't even know if they liked Bush. So they knew Eisenhower, Nixon. You know, they were delegates to something in California. I wasn't.

SM: And so were you aware of the deterioration that was going on in other parts of the Bronx at the time?

SS: No, because I didn't go there. You know, unless we, I mean, I don't remember that that Italian neighborhood looked at any different. We used to go as a child to see all the lights. It

was gorgeous. I went to a Brooklyn neighborhood a few years ago with my husband on a tour. Dyer Street? It's a tour you can take. It's extraordinary! It's worth it. I mean, because I investigated it, and it was far from the subway. And I thought I'll go on these tours. It'll be easier, and if there's something we ever want to come back to — once was enough! But I did not know anything about what happened outside of Riverdale, because I didn't go there. I mean, we went to the Botanical Gardens and the [Bronx] zoo, but those places are still there and they're still fabulous.

SM: Yes, that's right where I live.

SS: You know, I mean, I want to say four years ago, five years ago, six years ago, we went up to, by train, to the Botanical Gardens to see the orchid show for my birthday, which is this month. So I remember my husband, that's what I wanted to do. In Massachusetts, I always wanted to go to the beach in February. This February —

SM: It could have been, would have been a nice beach day today.

SS: Exactly. I'm still wearing layers, I don't trust the weather.

SM: Just in case. I know. It might rain on me on my way back.

SS: No, I mean, I took my husband when I was around 38 or 39, so that's 1981-82. We went to visit our childhood neighborhoods to show each other our childhood. And we went up there. And you know, the building I lived in was still there. The school was still there. The Armory was still there. And there was a funny little place where — it was beyond the school yard — where my mother organized a garden, where they used to have these extraordinary potatoes that you could take out. I'm not sure what stores were there and what wasn't. Marty took me to Washington Heights —

SM: That's where he was from?

SS: — to the park that was his favorite part, to show me the bridge he used to dream on. And I can't remember, I'm sure he showed me the house they used to live in. Now that's all Dominican, I was aware of that.

SM: Yes, completely.

SS: When I took him to the Bronx I wasn't — you know, when we just went to this neighborhood — I didn't go to see what stores was there, I don't remember what people we saw on the street, you know. But after Sue Jaffe and I met at our 50th high school reunion, and we're talking about high school — she was a public school teacher of children, kindergarten, first

grade — and I said, “Maybe they'd like us to come back to PS 86.” We went to school here, we became very successful adults. And I wrote the principal. I never heard back. And that's when I could see it was all Hispanic. And I thought, well, maybe he doesn't care about two old white ladies, Jews, who lived there and went to school there.

SM: And so have you been back recently at all?

SS: No. I don't have a car. There's no reason.

SM: Oh, it’s a *schlep*. It took me a little while to get down here today.

SS: Well, I have been up in Riverdale. I had a show at the Defner Museum, the Hebrew Home, whatever they call it now. And I was in a group show there, so I went there. And I went to Wave Hill. My goddaughter lives in the Bronx. And she moved, but somehow I haven't come up to see her new apartment, so maybe this spring. She's supposed to be studying very hard. She has — she went back to get an education degree at Hunter, there are five tests you have to pass. She's got a problem with the math test. I just paid an enormous amount of money for a tutor for her, because she took the test twice. And when I talked to her, she finally admitted to me that she needed a tutor and she couldn't afford it. So I gave her one chunk of money. And then she found a better place to study. The second set of money, I said, “You owe me this one. When you’re a teacher, you’ll pay me back.” I mean, I just wanted her to know that I was not a place you could always go. Usually when she wanted money, I would not lend it her. I’m either giving you the money, or I'm not. And that was the first $500. But the second $500 I thought, I think you're gonna have to try to pay me back. Just I wanted to make a point, because she and her husband are terrible with money. They cannot save anything. And one of the reasons I want her to get this job, so she'll have a pension when she's in her 70s. So that — she has no money. Neither does her husband. So what are they going to live on, Social Security? You know, you can't live on it. I can tell you that. I mean, I have my husband's Social Security. And now that — you know, I had heard that you lost your — you only can have one.

SM: Okay.

SS: And so whichever one is higher is the one you keep. But I talked to them about a variety of things, what do you do with a couple that is both on Social Security and one of them dies? How does the remaining spouse live, if they were living on both? “Well, you know, Social Security is supposed to be a three legged stool, with your pensions and your savings.” I mean, who are they talking to!? Most people don't have jobs with pensions anymore unless you work for the government.

SM: And so I guess my last question for you is, when you think about your time in the Bronx or how it's impacted you, what kind of emotions and sentiments do you associate with it?

SS: I was generally happy living there as a child. You know, in elementary school, we built snowmen, we played with the kids on the street. It was fun. You know, it wasn't beautiful enough, but we did go to the Botanical Gardens and the [Bronx] zoo every weekend. It would be a family discussion and we'd go to one of them. My mother was very big on going to these and being involved in these places. She became head of Cultural Affairs in the Bronx, under borough president Stanley Simon who later went to jail, but she had a great job and was always going places. And I don't look back at it in a negative way. I was glad to move closer to culture in Manhattan, there was no art in the Bronx. They have the Bronx Museum, I've been there. It's nice. But that wasn't there when I was a child, there wasn't anything like that. I was always coming, wanting to come to Manhattan. And I think I was even in junior high school when I went to lectures on Saturdays about art. Could have been high school, but I think it was earlier because I could travel, unlike kids today, I traveled to junior high school by subway and bus. It was a very uneventful event, except when men exposed themselves to you in the subway. I was a brave kid. So I don't look back on it as wishing I grew up somewhere else. I don't know what I would have known. We went to visit friends in Westchester. I didn't envy them. I mean, I didn't know too many people up there. By the time I was in high school, I went all over Manhattan. One weekend, I'd be at the Modern. And the next one at the Met. We had passes. The Met was free, of course, in those days. And we had school passes. So I would go up to the Modern and sit in front of my favorite paintings and then study at the old Donnell library, which was across the street, because I was looking for something else. We considered — my husband and I looked at apartments in the Bronx, when we were moving, he was about to retire. And he didn't want to move back. And that's where you can afford to live. We could have bought, for what we sold our house for, two apartments, one for one of the studios and whatever. Would I like to live in Riverdale now? I don't know. I have people talking about that big senior project, affiliated with Hebrew Home, which is called something else. What's it called? I mean, it's not a nursing home, it's independent living. And it's very fancy. It's not open. It's got a swimming pool and this and that. It's connected to the big facility there, it overlooks the Hudson. Someone in a support group that I'm in has been looking at that. I don't want to do that. I mean, if I'm well enough to go places, I still want —

SM: To be where everything is.

SS: I mean, if you have to get on a bus for an hour, to get to a museum, how isolating is that? I don't know, it depends on my health. I have no illusions about this. I have money so that I can hire people to help me. I don't have long term nursing home care. I'm gonna hire people. I didn't have to spend too too much on my husband because he — after he was diagnosed with cancer in summer of 2020, by the fall, I hired a companion. He didn't need anyone to dress him. He just needed encouragement to eat. They would go until he couldn't. But he needed that, you know, so. I don't know. Hopefully, I'm not like that, but nobody knows. I know plenty of people who don't know what to do because they're single and living on their own.

SM: Well thank you.