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Gruder, Vivian

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Transcriber: Reyna Stovall

Sophia Maier (SM): I'm so so happy to be here with our interview subject, Vivian Gruder, and Reyna Stovall. And 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.

Vivian Gruder (VG): My parents arrived in the US each with their — no, my, my father came alone. But he had two brothers already here. My mother came with her whole family. What is it, seven children and their grandparents, parents. And they lived on the Lower East Side. In fact, she said, she lived on Hester Street. And she first slept on a table in the basement with the pipes overhead. And she met my father, they got married and, so far as I know, they moved to the Bronx in 1920, originally to Southern Boulevard. And then they moved to Fulton Avenue, which is right across the street from Crotona Park. That was my playground. And that was a big tree outside my bedroom window. As I write here, it was my arboreal — hat is the term I use — arboreal calendar.

SM: *Laughs* Yes.

VG: I still remember when I had measles, and there was no vaccine then. And the window shade was down for a week. I don't know why they did that. And then when I was over with the measles, the window shade lift was lifted. And it may have been around May first or maybe that's my imagination. And the tree had leaves and it was wonderful. The tree was destroyed by the Cross Bronx Expressway, because we were right by 175th street.

SM: Yeah, like many other things, right? And so what year were you born?

VG: 1937.

SM: Did you have any other siblings growing up?

VG: Yes, I had an older brother and a sister. And my mother said that when they were babies, that people would take — she and my father perhaps, and others — would take folding chairs and go into the park. And I think perhaps in those days, there was no fence around the park. Just as now, at least the last time I visited Fulton Avenue many years ago. There were no benches whereas, there were benches lined up on the street when I was growing up. Why no benches? I don't know and anyway, there was not a fence. When my sister and brother were babies, they took folding chairs and stayed in the park, sat in the park until 2am to escape the heat of the apartment. And I recall we as children played in the park until about 10 pm in the summer. But again, as I recall, but I have no confirmation of it from others, that that ended in 1945. After 1945 we no longer did that.

SM: And so, being born in 1937, do you have memories or stories about your parents and family's experiences during the Depression?

VG: No, no. No. I don't know if my mother had any relatives back in Europe. My father did but I didn't know about it then. Only more recently, I guess. My daughter began to do genealogical checking on the internet and discovered his relatives in Lvov, Poland pronunciation Lviv now, Ukrainian pronunciation. But they're gone now. They were killed in '43, '44.

SM: What was the neighborhood that you were growing up in like? Was it a predominantly Jewish neighborhood?

VG: It was like a Jewish village. I had a friend say that to me the other night, maybe yesterday. She grew up on the Grand Concourse and it too was like a Jewish village. Except maybe for, you know, some superintendents. And in school. The school was mixed. Lots of Jewish children but I remember there was one girl who I was a bit friendly with who was Italian. There was also, I don't know if she was in my class, but a big, what we would say then, Negro girl who beat me once. My mother had to come and meet me the next day to be sure I would be safely home. I mean, I don't know why she did it.

SM: How old were you?

VG: I don't know, less than 10 perhaps. I don't know for sure. One of my teachers was Miss Kelly, because there were lots of Irish teachers, and she regaled us with stories of her cat. And her cat who saved her life because her cat ate a can of tuna fish that she opened and the cat died. I guess the tuna fish was spoiled.

SM: Oh goodness. And so were the kind of shops and amenities reflective of that Jewish milieu, you know, a lot of kosher butchers or things like that?

VG: Well certainly kosher butchers. Your grandmother lived on Washington?

SM: Yes.

VG: Well, between Fulton Avenue and Washington, there was Third Avenue with the raised line. And then Bathgate Avenue where an uncle of mine had a grocery store. No, he had the store on 174th street and Bathgate Avenue. Bathgate Avenue was like a long open market of store after store after store and one huge knitting store. And there were no supermarkets then. Supermarkets came after the war.

SM: So what kinds of shops would you frequent with your with your family? Any in particular?

VG: I guess my uncle's grocery store. And I remember one big fruit store, where the mother of a friend of my sister worked, selling fruits. And I can remember that knitting store, but otherwise, I just know it was a huge, sort of open air market of shops.

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

VG: Oh, my mother was just a housekeeper. Well, my father, when he came, I guess, helped to work in his brother's two grocery stores, one, as I said, in the Bronx, and the other on the Lower East Side. And he continued to work for the one in the Bronx, but he also went off on his own as an individual seller. He sold butter and eggs. He contacted, I guess, farmers in nearby regions and got butter and eggs, which he sold and he worked. I mean, he would not come home at night until, I don't know, 10, 11, 12 or what have you. And he was on the subway in — when was it — 1960-something when we had the first blackout.

SM: Okay. '65, I believe.

VG: And he was on the car overnight. Finally, they let them off. And he had to get up, get out and walk on his own. I mean, we didn't know for some time what had happened.

SM: Yeah. And so kind of going back to the other people in the neighborhood or maybe in school, did everybody kind of get along with one another? Were there are a lot of tensions between different ethnic groups or religious groups or anything?

VG: I mean, among my friends, we were all Jewish. No tensions. One funny, in retrospect, experience. My brother, who was eight years older, was on the Jewish baseball team. And once they played the Italian baseball team in Crotona Park. And I guess everybody was surprised the Jewish team beat them. The Italian team was not very happy. And so they closed the gates of the baseball field and began to fight the Jewish boys. And I think unless I'm getting mixed up one story after another, that one of the members of the Italian baseball team may have been — I can't think of a first name now — his last name is [Rocky] Colavito. And years later, he played with the Detroit Tigers. I think it was the Detroit Tigers.

SM: So he was really good baseball player.

VG: Was it Colavito? I don't remember.

SM: Yeah, I'll look it up. Yeah. Oh, that's funny. I mean, there were a lot of lot of famous folks that come out of the Bronx in various capacities, you know, authors and scientists, the whole thing. Serial killers. *Laughter* Great. I know you were talking about playing in the park and things, so what other things did you all like to do for fun or in daily life?

VG: Play on the street, you know, hopscotch, drawing the hopscotch thing with a crayon. We would go to the apartment of one of the boys where we played variety of board games. Checkers, Monopoly. I think I had a game called Finance which was a version of Monopoly. Playing ball, I don't know, climbing the benches on the rocks and playing various things in the park. You know, as I thought of this and wrote my two and a half pages, I realized how that park was just a haven and a heaven for us having all that wonderful, green, hilly, rocky space.

SM: Absolutely. I think that was, from everyone I've spoken to it was really — everyone was outside all the time and so being in the Bronx provided that opportunity as opposed to being, you know, on the Lower East Side or other places where there wasn't that space.

VG: But even my daughter, when she was growing up on West End Avenue, Riverside Park was nearby. They never had street games. I never saw anyone to play hopscotch.

SM: Stick ball.

VG: Stick ball, that could be dangerous, you could break a window, but not even hopscotch not even jump rope. That was another game that we played, jump rope.

SM: Yeah, it's definitely different and I think even worse for our generation when it comes to being outside with all the technology and things now.

VG: Well, in the aftermath of my generation, it was fear, I guess. Even into my daughter's generation.

SM: Absolutely. And so what about some music that you liked to listen to? Was music a big part of your of your life growing up?

VG: Pop music in the 40s and 50s. I first was a Crosby fan.

SM: Okay.

VG: My brother was a Sinatra fan. And I wrote here, we sometimes had little competitions or battles at night with a radio, whether we would listen to a Crosby program or Sinatra program, but then I became a Sinatra fan. So that resolved that problem. And even once went to a — Sinatra appeared in person, not in the famous shows at the Paramount where we all swooned and so forth, this was at the Roxy Theater. I forget the year but I must have been in high school and I came with flowers to give to him when I went to the stage and put the flowers on the stage and then walked back, he said, “Why are you running away” or something to that effect.

SM: My goodness, that's fantastic. Yeah, my grandmother really liked Frank Sinatra as well. So do I. And so, along the topic of kind of just a topic of everyday life things, what about some food that you that you liked to eat, maybe that you grew up eating around the house or outside of it?

VG: My mother made the traditional Jewish food and I tried to do just a few of it when my daughter was growing up. But then I had also my experience living in Italy because I married an Italian professor and so I would also do Italian food. I tried to make stuffed cabbage once but it takes so long. You have to oil the cabbage and take each leaf off. Make the meat, fill each leaf. Once was enough, whereas my mother did it frequently. Of course. Polish word is placki. What is it? Oh, what are they called, the Hannukah pancakes?

SM: Latkes.

VG: And when I was visiting Poland, a Polish friend who was a student of my husband's in Bologna, took me to a place that looked like Chock full o' Nuts — you don't know Chock full o' Nuts?

SM: I'm familiar.

VG: It just had stools. The coffee was the only decent coffee at the time. So it looked like Chock full o' Nuts, but it was a place that specialized in placki.

SM: Okay.

VG: Latkes.

SM: Did they have various kinds or —

VG: I don't remember.

SM: Yeah. So did you grow up speaking Polish or Yiddish in the house?

VG: No. My mother did and my sister knows it more than I. I don't know, except for words here or there. I went to Hebrew school, even took a class in Hebrew in high school for, I don't know, one year or more and took the regents exam and got, I think, an A minus, but I knew I didn't know Hebrew even with an A minus on the regents exam.

SM: And where did you attend Hebrew school?

VG: There was a Y, the YMYWCA, on Fulton Avenue and 169th Street. And they also had other activities, including folk dancing. And I forget what else.

SM: And so was your family affiliated with any synagogues?

VG: Yes. On Washington Avenue. If your grandmother went to Walton High School, she went to Walton High School?

SM: Yeah. She was supposed to go to the neighborhood school, but then ended up at Walton instead.

VG: Well you don't remember what her neighborhood was because I would presume it if she went —

SM: Well, she was supposed to go to Roosevelt.

VG: So how was it that she went to Walton?

SM: Well, Walton was an all-girls school. So I think —

VG: It was?

SM: Yeah, at that time, it's not anymore, I believe. But at that time, it was an all-girls school. So her parents wanted her to go to the all-girls school. She wanted to go to Roosevelt. But they had made a deal. If you go for the first year and you hate it, you can go to Roosevelt. That's where all of her friends were going, you know, from public school and everything. But then she made friends there.

VG: So the synagogue was on Washington Avenue. I guess around 174th Street, 173rd Street. I didn't know your grandmother's family.

SM: Yeah, I'll have to look back and see which one they attended.

VG: The Tremont Talmud Torah maybe. Oh, but yes, so you should know about Tremont Avenue, because Tremont Avenue was like the Broadway of that area. In the Bronx, there was a big library. I don't remember this, but my sister said how I spent lots of time, lots of time in the library. What I remember are the three, four, or five movie theaters spread along Tremont Avenue. And if you can believe this, on Saturday afternoon, my friends and I would go pay 10 cents to see a double feature, two movies plus the newsreel.

SM: Yeah, not the same anymore. I've heard that also the movie theaters, I guess later at least, were air conditioned. So on the hot days, you could go and spend an entire day.

VG: But there was no air conditioning then, so I can't testify to that.

SM: Did you ever go up to Fordham Road for shopping and things?

VG: We went to Alexander's. That was the big department store.

SM: And did you travel into Manhattan often? When you were young or when you got older?

VG: We had relatives down on the Lower East Side. That was a long trip. I mean to go to Macy's. Otherwise, I just can't say off my mind.

SM: And so let's see. I guess one more question about religious life. Did you all keep kosher at home?

VG: Yes.

SM: Do you still keep kosher?

VG: No, but I may have flirted years ago with having pork in my house. And of course, when I was living in Italy, we had prosciutto and salami. But I don't — in fact, if I want any Italian what we would say cold cuts, I would just have risalo, which is beef.

SM: Okay, so yeah, let's talk a little bit about school. Oh, well first, what level of education had your parents attained?

VG: I don't know about my mother, though I do know that she knew some Polish because, you know, neighbors would talk about the Poles. And when she was already in a nursing home, and my daughter was in high school, and my daughter told her, or I told my mother that my daughter was studying both — she went to Hunter High School, and so she went to Hunter College to take courses in both German and Russian. And my mother made a comment. I've never asked my daughter to recount this, because I don't remember what my mother's answer was. But the question was, "Which one is more difficult?" And my mother gave her answer. Whether she said German or Russian, I don't know. I assumed it would be Russian, but maybe she said German. But again, I would have to ask my daughter. My father, the poor man was 13 years old when World War One broke out. And so he was conscripted by the Austrians to dig trenches. And so his education ended when he was 13. Because then in 1921, he came to the US. But as I write here, I kind of think that he was one of the few fathers of Fulton Avenue who bought the *New York Times*, because otherwise I would see other people had the *Daily News* or the *Daily Mirror*. And our family had the *New York Times* when my father came home late at night. And I don't know who bought the afternoon newspaper, which was *The Post*, which in those days was a very liberal newspaper. And I think my father certainly also bought a Yiddish newspaper, which was, I think *Der Tog*. Now I know he was a Zionist, and he wanted to go to Palestine but he could not go because of the British white paper. So I don't know if *Der Tog* was a Zionist newspaper because there were different papers with different political outlooks.

SM: I think that one was because I know the *Forverts* was more of the socialist one. Yeah. And so were either of your parents politically active outside of Israel, or I guess, politically conscious?

VG: They were Democrats. And, you know, my father was a Zionist. When they finally visited Israel — so I was the first in the family to go in 1962, I was in Europe at the time, so they visited Israel some years after that — and I was told that when my father got off the plane, he fell down and kissed the ground.

SM: That's fantastic. So yeah, we got off topic on the education, but that's wonderful. So back to your education. Do you have any memories from public school or anything that stands out to you? I mean, like you had mentioned, I guess the teaching force at that time was predominantly Irish.

VG: No, Miss Kelly was. But as always, I mean, there were Jewish teachers too. I don't know what ethnic group was predominating. Other than Miss Kelly and the principal, who always seemed to have an odor. And the story was that he was gassed during World War One and maybe, I don't know, maybe it was the effect of something. I have no idea. Otherwise, I can't remember any teacher or teaching experience from elementary school, although I did get into the — what was it called? The SS class?

SM: SP?

VG: SP, was it? And so we advanced. Oh, yes. I remember. When I was in first grade, 1A, I came home one day and my brother gave me, I think, a dime. And I said, "What was this for?" Because I was skipped from 1A to 2A. And then I got into the SP classes so we advanced as well. And a few years ago, I was at a luncheon with members of my class from Barnard College, and other people, too, indicated that they had entered Barnard when they were 16, 16 1/2. It's all because you were able to skip grades when we were in elementary school, and then I went to junior high school. And I remember I remember I had a young Italian woman who was an English teacher. Now, I don't know if she was in junior high school or high school. She was very nice. I don't remember her name. But I think — again, I don't remember if it was junior high school or high school — I took a Spanish class. And at that time, the song *Besame Mucho* was popular. And so I thought I'd ask my teacher what it meant, he said to me, "Kiss me much." And I think we both felt a little embarrassed.

SM: *Laughs* Yeah.

VG: Maybe I have some vague recollections of an English teacher. That was for him, I guess, I wrote the paper about our trip around Manhattan Island, which was published in the high school newsletter and was my first published writing. And we had a music teacher who was a handsome young man. I had, unfortunately, a high school teacher who was a big bore, because she just sat there reading her cards and one fact after another. But that didn't dissuade me from history. My brother was a big inspirer in the

sense that he loved history. And then — I think it was already when we had moved from the Bronx, he was in college — I typed up his history papers. And that got me even more interested in history. But that was post-Bronx.

SM: And so did you feel like you had a good educational experience? Like you received a good education?

VG: Oh, no. While I was still at Roosevelt, I knew that — I refused to take the exam for Science, [Bronx] High School of Science, because I said to myself, if there's a High School of Science, why isn't there a High School of History? So I thought I'd skip [Bronx] Science. I don't think I would have made it because I was very poor in math. I took the test for Hunter. And after 45 minutes, you know, I left because I couldn't do the math. So that's why I had to go to Roosevelt. I knew even then — I don't know why I knew then — the experience was sort of mediocre. Years later, when I was teaching at Queens College, one of the presidents, a new president, also happened to be, years after me, a graduate of Roosevelt. And he was on the football team. And I spoke to him and said I too had gone to Roosevelt. He said how much he liked it, I guess maybe because of the football experience. And I kind of made a face.

SM: Yeah.

VG: Oh, yes, my economics teacher — was that what she was called? — Mrs. Lerner. There was a Mr. and Mrs. Lerner. I forgot what Mr. Lerner taught. Mrs. Lerner may have taught social studies, economics, I don't remember. She was a graduate of Barnard. And she was the one who insisted that I applied to Barnard. And so I did.

SM: And what was that — I know most of the people that I've spoken to, you know, were either City College or Hunter College at that time, mostly because of the low costs. So how was that? I guess, let me rephrase my question, or actually ask a question. Was that, for you, kind of unusual during that time to choose to go to Barnard as opposed to one of the [public] city colleges?

VG: Well, in terms of finances. I mean, nowadays thinking about it, when I started the tuition was \$300, I think, and I had a New York State Regents Scholarship, which was then \$150. And then it got moved up to \$250. When my niece went to college, it was still \$250 and hadn't changed. And then the tuition went up to \$600. When I left Barnard, I think it was \$900. So I don't know how much of a strain it was on my father's finances. But, you know, he paid it. I was just captivated by the educational experience there.

SM: That's wonderful. As a student of history as well, I can imagine that that was wonderful. And so when did your family, you mentioned, so when did your family end up leaving the Bronx?

VG: Well, going to Barnard from Fulton Avenue was quite difficult. You had to take the Third Avenue L to 149th Street and Third Avenue. And there take a train to Third Avenue, where you could connect up with the number one train. And then the one train up to 116 Street. So it was a big pain in the neck. And my sister was living in Inwood. And I guess they found an apartment in Inwood. And so we moved there. I remembered when I was a freshman, I went out on a date with somebody at Columbia when I was still living in the Bronx, and after taking me home, he never asked me out again for a date. And then when we moved to Inwood, I was one block away from Columbia Baker field. I don't think he asked me for dates anymore, but I was friendly with him. But that was a little irony in the history.

SM: Yeah, that's funny. And so did you feel like, as a woman growing up during this period, that the expectations of you were different than either your brother or your male colleagues?

VG: I always was following in my sister's footsteps. And so she went to Hunter, and she was planning to become a kindergarten teacher. And so I began thinking I would become a kindergarten teacher. But as I moved from one grade to the next, my idea of what I would teach moved up. But when I was in Barnard, my brother had become a lawyer. I think I toyed with the idea of going to law school. But then I decided, what was it that came to my mind? I can't think of the words, the thought that came to my mind, that I wanted to do history. And it was something in particular I said to myself, and so going into my senior year, I decided I wanted to go to graduate school. And since I knew you would be tested on a foreign language, I was only in my senior year at Barnard that I began to study French, because I became intrigued by the French Revolution. My father was disappointed because he said — I forgot to say that when I was planning to go to college, my father's words to me was to go to apply to Brandeis because there were nice Jewish boys there. I did meet some of those people later on at Harvard. Michael Walzer and Marty Peretz, who became publisher of the New Republic. They were at Harvard when I was at Harvard. And so I studied French. So, again, my father said at that point, when I was a senior, he wanted me to go to law school because he thought I would make a better lawyer than my brother, who was not very disciplined as a student. In fact, the only grades he did well in were his history courses.

SM: My brother's quite the same way but I don't think he is becoming a lawyer anytime soon. And so was — I mean, obviously, you and your siblings ended up being very well educated — was education, very important as a family value growing up?

VG: I don't think we talked about it. I think it just happened. Because I remember once, when I went on a tour sponsored by the College of Staten Island to China, and there was a dean from the college who was Chinese, and she was telling us how her family instilled in her and her brother how you had to compete and do well in school. I don't remember that at all. I mean, it was just something we did.

SM: Yeah. That makes sense.

VG: And so I don't know how others have expressed themselves.

SM: No, I think it goes both ways. I think it was almost an unspoken value, like, it was an expectation, but it wasn't something that needed to be said necessarily. It was, you're gonna go to school, and you're gonna do well in school. And you're gonna go — what's interesting to me in some of the people that I've spoken to is that there was still, regardless of the gender norms of the time period, there was still this idea that women should be well educated, regardless of if they're going to end up being wives and staying at home, because their role is to teach the children. That it's still very important to have intelligent and thoughtful women.

VG: Yeah, and I guess it was in the cultural air of Jewish families about the importance of learning, of study.

SM: Definitely. At least in my own experience, I feel like it's kind of an implicit aspect of Jewish life.

VG: But what you just said before, made me think of another experience of college, but this is post-Bronx.

SM: That's okay. No, no, continue. It's about your life. The Bronx is just part of that.

VG: I was at Barnard when Millicent McIntosh was president. And every year she would speak to, I don't know if it was just the freshman class or the entire class, and tell us that we don't have to think that we're just going to be wives and mothers, that we should, after college, make something of ourselves. And years later, Barnard constructed a building which was called the Millicent McIntosh Center. And then years after that, the Millicent McIntosh Center was demolished to be replaced by a bigger building with a different name, an alumna. I know my feeling was, and I think others had it as well, very distraught that the only thing left at the Barnard campus for Millicent McIntosh was just some greenery outside the new building. So one summer when I was in Bologna with my husband, I didn't have much to do. So I opened my computer and began to search for the names of students in the classes around the time that I was a student and began to send out — I found the names and emails — and began to send out email messages to them explaining this matter about Mrs. McIntosh, and how we should try to find something on campus to name after her. In fact, I think I had done some searching because it's near where I live. And I remember going into a lecture in a new building at Barnard. And it was called, maybe it's still called — oh what's the name, it had no name. I mean, that's what my thought was, you know, like Odysseus, when he's asked the name —

SM: Nobody.

VG: Maybe the name of the room will come to me. So I thought, well, why can't we try to have it named after Mrs. McIntosh. So that was the proposal. And then when I got back these responses, I forwarded them to the then President of Barnard and lo and behold, I got a response and she told me to contact the

Vice President and I contacted him. And I had a meeting with him. And he said, well, they wouldn't give the name to the no name room, because they wanted a big donation for that. But they would name the student dining hall in that building for her. I accepted. And everybody was pleased with this. And then I think it was near 2013 — 2013, I guess, yes — that there was a ceremony for the naming of the student dining hall as the Millicent C. McIntosh dining hall. Then a few years later, outside the hall, there was agreed to have a bulletin board. Nobody consulted me about what should be on the bulletin board in the alumni office, and what they put on it were photos of various phases of Mrs. McIntosh's life, you know, fine. There's even a photo with me. There was a meeting my last year at Barnard, which was in 1956. It was a presidential year. And so I organized a student conference. And Mrs. Roosevelt came and Senator Je — what was his name? What was the Republican liberal senator? That's the center down in the 30s.

SM: Oh, starts with a J.

VG: Well, whatever. Yes.

SM: Yeah. Jarvis, Jarvis,

VG: Javits. And Mrs. Reid, who had been the wife of the owner of the *Herald Tribune*, I don't know if it still existed then. So there's a photo on the outside the McIntosh student dining hall, you know, me with Mrs. McIntosh, Mrs. Roosevelt, Senator Javits, but you know, all these photos of Mrs. McIntosh. And here I had all of these responses from alumni about how important Mrs. McIntosh's words were every year, and what inspiration incentive it gave to these young women to study, enter a profession, make something of themselves, even, as one of my friends wrote, to continue to read newspapers while changing the diapers of her children. So I have wanted to get the new administration in the alumni office to have either a video — because now there are lots of videos in the hallways — or something to have these alumni comments. Because her importance to the students was how she inspired them, not her so much her varied activities, shoveling the ground when they began to build them Morningside Building, the public housing. Nothing from Barnard, absolutely nothing on it. Nothing from the alumni office. So I'm busy, as I said, editing these articles of my husband's, but if we ever get through, I will go back to bothering Barnard.

SM: I hope you do.

VG: How can an alumni office not want to do that?

SM: Frustrating. I know — I work at Temple Emanuel on Fifth Avenue. And I teach Sunday School and one of the girls that I teach with is a student at Barnard right now. She's a freshman.

VG: And they don't know this history. Ask her and let me know.

SM: Oh, yeah. I'm going to — no seriously next Sunday, I will. I will, because I'm sure she'll be like “What?” She might know the name because of the dining hall, I don't know. We'll see. So after you finished at Barnard, you continued your education in the city, or?

VG: No, I was at Harvard.

SM: Oh, yes.

VG: I got my doctorate at Harvard in French history.

SM: And so what was that like? Did you have any sort of culture shock in going up there?

VG: Well, before I went to Harvard in my first year after Barnard, I went to the University of Chicago and that was a culture shock. Because particularly in the winter, after 5pm — I was living in International House — you couldn't leave. It was too dangerous. I think even one night somebody may have been killed outside International House. And here in New York at that time, when I was studying for finals, I would be at the library at Barnard until 11 o'clock at night, and then take the number one train up to 215th Street, didn't think anything about it. So Chicago was a shock. Cambridge no. I mean, maybe it was difficult to gain friends, particularly since there were few girls in at least the history program, then. So my friends were solidly guys from New York. There were some other guys. I don't know if I felt any — certainly no prejudice as a Jew.

SM: I was going to ask.

VG: Maybe my history mentor, the one I was assigned to, may not have been very open. But nothing expressed.

SM: And so after you finished your doctorate at Harvard, then is when you came back to New York?

VG: Oh, no, because I had to do research. I had a Fulbright, so I spent a year in Paris. Then came back and began to teach at Douglas, which was a woman's college at the time. And then got a job teaching at Hunter in Manhattan and the Bronx, which is now Lehman. And then got a post at Queens College, which is where I taught for the rest of my teaching career and, of course, going back when I got grants to France to continue to do research.

SM: That's awesome. Yeah, I have been encouraged by various people to get my PhD in history. So this is like —

VG: What history are you interested in now?

SM: Well, currently, like New York Jewish history, and I don't know if you know, Dr. Daniel Soyer from Fordham, but he is going to be speaking with us. And he is a scholar of that variety. But that's been my interest recently, and obviously, the source of my thesis and things.

VG: Jewish history is a growing field, whereas French history has undergone major changes in subjects.

SM: Yeah, I took a class last semester with a wonderful professor who I'd taken before for a course on the French Revolution. And it was called "Myth, Memory and History in Post-1945 Europe." But he's a historian of 1930s, France, like interwar France and things. So yeah, he and I have had many conversations in that regard. Which is a little saddening to me, but you know.

VG: I mean, I've received emails from H France, which is the site for French historians. There are many subjects that come up that I find interesting, but because I don't have time to read them, I save the ones of interest on my computer. There must be oodles. I keep saying when I'm through the editing.

SM: And so when you were back in the Bronx, when you were teaching at Hunter, did you find that things had been changing during the period of the late 60s and then early 70s? The Bronx was undergoing a lot of demographic and economic change.

VG: You know, I keep wondering, why is it that I have this memory that after 1945 we kids didn't play in the park late in the summer? I guess, you know, there was influxes, saying too much. There were new groups coming in, the first group was two people, I think. The superintendent on the street who was Puerto Rican, maybe he drank too much. Maybe going to the Y. In addition to that experience I told you, the girl who hit me. She was at 169th street so that was a bit further south. And maybe there were already Negroes, as we said, in that part. I don't know if it was actually dangerous, it just, you know, these were new people — different. And one felt a bit strange. I don't know if it was, you know, any sense of discrimination, just the sense of strangeness. And gradually people began to move. I explained why we moved, whether it was also coupled with a sense of fear, I don't remember. But, you know, it has greatly changed. Yeah, I mean, the Bronx is now predominantly what? Black, Hispanic?

SM: Hispanic actually.

VG: When I lived there it was Jewish, the building next to us was largely Irish, the Irish were the tough guys.

SM: Yeah. Oh, yes.

VG: The Italians were nice. And the Italians largely lived a bit further north. Like Little Italy in the Bronx is at 183rd through 185th street.

SM: Yeah. North up to basically Fordham Road.

VG: In fact, even when we moved to Inwood, it was then predominantly Irish. My father came home one night, and we lived on the street with — in order to get there, you had to go through a small park — and he was attacked by Irish kids one night. I don't know if we talked to the priests in the area — there were so many young, attractive men who were young priests. So it was largely Irish, and then some Jewish. Now, I remember, years later, maybe my mother was still living there, there was Dominicans were coming into the area.

SM: Yes, definitely in Inwood.

VG: I don't know what the neighborhood is like now.

SM: Yeah. It's still predominantly Dominican, actually in that area around Inwood. Although it's becoming increasingly gentrified up there. They're calling it — I was just looking — Little Dominican Republic or something like that. Because that's sort of the predominant group up there. Yeah. And so, when you think back on your experiences in the Bronx, what kind of emotions and sentiments do you associate with it?

VG: Well, I didn't express it here because I was so taken up with, you know, the haven of the park. But I guess it is doesn't have anything to do with the Bronx. It has to do with the fact that the family didn't have the means to do something in the summer other than go to the park or go to Orchard Beach or — yes, we did go to Rockaway, I think because my father had a store or relative had a grocery store and he worked there. I forget what particularly it was, but so we went to Rockaway for many summers, and I regretted the fact that we couldn't go someplace where there was greenery —

SM: Up to the Catskills or something.

VG: — because I don't like the ocean. I mean, my great nirvana was to be able to swim in the Mediterranean, when I was married and living with my husband. And for a number of years, we went to a friend's house which was right on the Mediterranean, so any ocean beach, even in California, is not attractive. But it was the ease of life and having that park which, you know, reading this and writing it seems was like a kind of wonderland, in retrospect. I mean, my daughter, even if she lived in a nicer neighborhood in Manhattan, didn't have that easy outlet on the street or in the park.

SM: And so is there anything else that you'd like to add before I end the recording? I think this was really wonderful.

VG: No. If I didn't say anything more, I can leave this with you.

SM: Yeah, oh I'd definitely like to read it.

SECOND RECORDING

VG: Should I begin?

SM: Yeah, go ahead.

VG: When I was a senior in high school I was invited for the Sunday program, the Youth Forum, on television. And that Sunday the guest — well usually the guests were people involved with public political life — but that Sunday the guest was Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers. And in the first part of the program he was asked political questions, which he may not have been liking because during intermission the moderator, who was the actor Faye Emmerson, asked if we would please ask him questions that he could more easily answer. So, thinking of my family wanting to see me on the television screen, when we began again I raised my hand, I was called, and I said, “Mr. Robinson, do you think that the New York Yankees discriminate?” And he said yes. And that created a ruckus among the New York sports writers for a week.

SM: Wow.

VG: I remember one article said, “A youth asked.” And I thought, why did they not even say a young girl asked. And I've recounted this — I sent this information, even a photo that was in the *Daily Mirror* of Jackie Robinson surrounded by the students. I sent it to this new Jackie Robinson museum that is in downtown Manhattan. They haven't responded to it at all and I visited the museum and nothing about it.

SM: Yeah wow.

VG: My next memory which is far from the Bronx but I don't know how much —

SM: Yeah, go ahead.

VG: In the summer of 1970 there were two international history conferences in the Soviet Union. One was the Economic History Congress in what was then still called Leningrad. The other was the General History Congress in Moscow. And each of these may have been for a week. So a friend and I decided to take advantage and to go and visit the Soviet Union and we made plans via intourist for five weeks. So after those two weeks of congresses, we traveled for three weeks. I had a friend in New York, an elderly Jewish man from Russia who worked for YIVO, have you heard of YIVO?

SM: Yeah.

VG: And he had a sister living in Moscow and so he asked if I would go and visit her. And so I did. And she had a son who worked in the Moscow Circus and he came to visit me twice at the hotel. The hotel we were staying at was right across from the Kremlin. And on each floor there was a kind of breakfast nook. And he came twice and we talked. And there was video cameras in the corners. And I thought to myself, oh like the video cameras in the corners of the lobby in New York but very different in the Soviet Union. And he asked if I would take back with me some things he would give to me. And I said yes. I didn't know what he would try to give me. And so when I packed I had, you know, a big bag that I carried with varied things. And I just hoped no one would look in. And no one did look in and I got on the plane and I felt relieved. But my friend said, "Stupid, don't you know you're still under Russian authority on this plane?"

SM: Oh god.

VG: And so, when the wheels hit the ground in London, I had a thrill up and down my spine like I had once read in an article in the *New Yorker*, a French nobleman who visited Russia in 1825. When he crossed the border into Europe, he had that thrill up the spine. Lots of people, you know, I thought they're not waiting for Vivian Gruder. Marahari was it, his tailor Richard Burton? No. That was the day that four planes were hijacked. It may have been the first hijack of planes, I'm not sure. And three of them were sitting in the desert in Jordan. And so I get back to New York, I see my Russian friend and maybe he knew what these were because he took me to a man's office. I can only recall that it was maybe the neighbor. And as it turned out what I carried with me were letters from two people who worked at the Moscow Circus but not the man I met, his colleagues. I mean, he told me it was two friends of his and disks of dissident poetry. And a few weeks later there was an article in the *New York Times* and I learned from the article because — I don't know if I learned it from the man from B'nai Brith or my Russian friend if they actually looked at what was in the things that I carried — but a *New York Times* article informed me that these were the first letters composed by Soviet Jews addressed to the President of the United States, Nixon, and the Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Mier, asking for their help so that they could leave the Soviet Union. And what was it, two or four years later with Sharonsky and others, this became a big movement. I don't know if you want to include this, but I recently saw that the American Historical Society of Jewish History has now acquired the archive for the movement for Soviet Jewry. So I contacted them to tell them what I just told you. And in the interim I was trying to see if I could find the *New York Times* article. I haven't done so yet. I did first call the *New York Times* and they said no, they don't have it in the archive. I mean the archive for just the month of September is a thousand things or something.