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**"Len"**

Sophia Maier Garcia

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Transcriber: Reyna Stovall, Sophia Maier

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

"Len": Well, my parents were both immigrants coming from Hungary. My mother came from peasant stock in an area closer to Czechoslovakia so that my mantra used to be growing up is my mother was born in Hungary. And she emigrated to the United States from Czechoslovakia. My father was a yeshiva bocher in Hungary, he was from a more sophisticated city in Hungary. He attended the yeshivas there, had been interned twice during and after the First World War. And he fled from the experiences that he had. And so each of them came to the United States approximately the same time. My mother came, she was 19. And she came with her younger sister, who was 16. And they were steerage people, as my father was. At some point in time my mother was a housekeeper in Brooklyn until she got married. My father worked in the factories, loved the factories. My father's experience with the military and the government made him extraordinarily frightened of the clerk. So the clerk to him was the government, the entire government. All fifty million people are there to oppress him.

And they married and they moved into a new area of the city called the Bronx, the Bronx was then starting to get developed. Very much like Queens got developed after the Second World War. So the subways, the elevated trains were starting to make it up town to the Bronx, the subways were being created along Grand Concourse, Jerome Avenue had its elevated trains. And so it was a burgeoning area for young couples, and especially those that were factory workers. They were all factory workers. During their early marriage my mother was a homemaker and my father was a factory worker. He liked to think of himself as a skilled worker, but in truth, he was not. He was at best semi-skilled. They ran into issues, the issues being the conflict between religion and the need to economically survive. So my father started to work on Saturdays. And so to that extent, it created him as a semi-pariah within the community. And my mother had aspirations for me to be a rabbi. And so, through begging and cajoling, she enrolled me into a yeshiva, interestingly enough located at the corner of St. Paul's Place and Washington Avenue, so the contradiction of the location and the religious institution. And we lived for the first fourteen years of my life within two blocks of the yeshiva. And then when I graduated from the yeshiva, I elected not to go forward to Hebrew high school. And because I was rebelling against the concept of the religion. However, to be candid, I attended services, religiously, until I entered the service. So 24 years later, after my birth. So there was a dichotomy and a conflict within me all those years of religion versus my agnostic opinion.

And so, that was my schooling. So as I say, it was insular. The people that I knew were the people within the school. It was a relatively small school, I think there were probably two or three classes per grade. And I was not very happy at being stifled by the religion, the learning. And so while I was combating every single day that which was being taught, I was still learning. And so I was a rebel within

a rather rigid institution. And all the stories that you hear about the parochial schools and the punishments that were given, I can vouch for as being true. So it was the rapping of the knuckles, slapping on the head and stuff like that, to reinforce the learning. And then there was some favorite few who were children of dynasty rabbis. So those were the children to whom the rabbis who were teaching were essentially addressing their classroom activities to. This was a dual school system of religion and secular. So we were lucky in that the mornings were for religious training. The afternoons, after the public school teachers got off they came as a second job moonlighting and working within the yeshiva. So that's where we got our English. That's where we got our history. That's where we got our math. And some of them made lasting impressions on me. Specifically, math teachers, science teachers, a history teacher, an art teacher. So it was more rounded than the institutions that you currently hear of that are contemporary and in the newspapers from time to time. Not teaching the STEM type of courses. So we did get that.

So the days were long days, so that four days a week we went from eight to five. Two days a week we went from nine to one. That was on Friday and Sunday. On Saturday we were at synagogue. Synagogue in the morning, home for lunch, and depending upon the day, either back for afternoon learning, or camaraderie, or conversation in the afternoon and evening. And then that was the week. It was seven days a week. It was an immersion of religious training to a very substantial degree.

It created a handicap for me in that I was extraordinarily awkward around girls and women in general. Some two years after I was born, my parents had a young female child who died at eighteen months. So that had a major impact on my mother. And I think it had great impact upon me over the years so that my decision as to where to go to high school. I went to an all-boys high school.

SM: Okay, which one did you attend?

“Len”: DeWitt Clinton High School.

SM: Okay that's what I was going to guess.

“Len”: That was an all-boys school. And truthfully, my first exposure to Blacks.

SM: That makes sense.

“Len”: Because it was the society that I was in was basically a two block radius from school. And that was populated mostly by Jewish people, except that there was a smattering of German ethnics and Italian ethnics. But more so, German ethnics. And we encountered some antisemitism then walking in those two blocks.

SM: Wow.

“Len”: And because we were readily identifiable as to who we were, and the fact that we were going to the yeshiva. So that was growing up. And as I said, it was basically eight years at an institution that was very insular. The profile in terms of nationalities that they came from, they were Hungarians, they were Germans, they were Czechs, and Romanians, and that's it. So it was Eastern European Jews in the main.

SM: And were most of their parents immigrants like yours?

“Len”: Yes.

SM: Okay.

“Len”: So there was a uniformity in terms of the population that went to this particular thing. There were also some Hasidim there so that my aunt married a Hasid who was a twin. The only mentioned twin aspect is during the Second World War he was a soldier, he was wounded. And then when he came back, he opened up a store. So he was open on Saturday. That caused a schism within his family in that traditionally — now he was older than I obviously — tradition-wise he was still a Hasid at heart. But economics drove him to require that he'd be open on Saturday. He was a very foreign individual. Perhaps a little bit more about him later.

So that was the first fourteen years then we moved to another part of the Bronx. So this area in the Bronx, Washington Avenue, St. Paul's place. I don't remember what it's called Melrose, or Mott Haven, or something like that. It's now populated to some degree with a lot of public housing. A former receptionist, a receptionist who formerly was employed by me happened to live in the building that I used to live in growing up.

SM: Oh, wow.

“Len”: Very nice Black lady who greeted everybody at the door for many years that I was practicing law. The other probably very important time was the Second World War had started. And just before the Second World War had started, my father found out that my mother's parents had been taken to the camps. Now my mother and her sisters and brother came to the United States because they were impoverished. And so the interesting tale I tell from time to time to my kids is that the progeny of my grandparents would collect dollar bills, put it in an envelope, and from time to time, send it to the rest of the family in Czechoslovakia. And this was a ritual. They would collect nickels and dimes, convert them into dollar bills and send money, that is actual dollar bills, in an envelope to their parents and siblings in Czechoslovakia. That wasn't necessarily the same with my father's siblings. I don't think so.

So when all the news was making it to the United States, about what was happening in Czechoslovakia with that Anschluss, my father would go to the HIAS offices weekly, and look at the bulletin boards to

see what news was coming out. And one day he came back, and he told my mother that her parents had been taken to the camps and were dead. So that was a major trauma from my mother. Taking you to a point in time, and the non-luxuries that were available. My parents didn't have a telephone until some time substantially after the Second World War. And radio was scarce enough. My mother and her female siblings used to write to each other on oak tag postcards. Interestingly enough, their default language was Hungarian. So their default language was not Yiddish. Their default language was Hungarian. So the first language that I learned was Hungarian growing up. And so daily they would exchange postcards. Her sisters lived in New Jersey.

SM: Okay, I was gonna ask.

“Len”: And so, daily, my mother would await a postcard. And she would immediately sit down and write a postcard, having mailed a postcard that morning, responding to the prior day’s received postcard.

And this went on for many years and one of the regrets is that I didn't save them. Even though at this point, I can't quite read Hungarian the way I could years ago. If you don't use it, you lose it. And so, this was their means of communication. And it was almost formalistic. The first paragraph was the same in every postcard. It basically said, “Dear sister, we are fine. Everything is good. How are things with you?” On the second paragraph, “On the other hand, this is what happened.” And then the third paragraph, “Look forward to receipt.” And when there wasn't enough room on the postcard on the back of it, you'd move to the front of the postcard and scribble on the sides of the postcard. And this went on for twenty years, thirty years, every single day. I exaggerate, because when the telephones came they started to make appointments as to when a call would be made so that my mother could be at the candy store receiving the phone call, because they were wealthier than we because they had a business. They were a butcher and grocer in the local community.

And that's a separate sociological study where they were because they lived in a company town, mining town in New Jersey. And the company would import Ukrainians and Hungarians to work the mines. And it was a company town. So there's a company store, and you rented a house from the company. If you lost your job, you no longer had privileges, and you no longer had a house. So that's a different sociological study. But in any event, when the war started, my father volunteered as an air raid board. We had many long walks and talks. So I would accompany him with his helmet. And we walked the block.

SM: Yeah. And how old were you at that time?

“Len”: I was probably thirteen, fourteen. So my father was probably 44, 45. Too old for the draft. But doing his patriotic duty, he volunteered to be a warden. So when he would be on patrol, I would generally walk with him around the block. And he would tell me stories about his experiences and his fears. And he told me before he told my mother about what had happened to her parents. Then after the

war we moved to another part of the Bronx, which was Hoe Avenue and 167th Street, which is the Hunts Point area, near Southern Boulevard. The area between Westchester Avenue and 163rd street, I think. Yeah, 163rd Street.

It was a boulevard similar in breadth to the Grand Concourse, but not the same luxury aspects that the Grand Concourse projected. So, there was a movie theater at one end of the block and retail stores over probably a three block or four block interval.

And so people would parade there on the Sabbath. They'd do their *shpatsir*. So they observed the Sabbath, walk the streets, look at stores, talk. And when Roosevelt died, it was a street of mourning. They all poured out — at least in this community all poured out. And it was hard to traverse Southern Boulevard in that section because people just literally left their homes, their apartments and found solace with each other's presence as they strolled Southern Boulevard. My father opened up a small business in manufacturing. By then my mother had gone to work in the garment center. Because again, money was critical. It was not that unusual to see a sheriff moving people from their apartments involuntarily because they couldn't make payments. Well, furniture was recouped by the store that had provided financing to purchase the furniture. So there was a fair amount of that taking place. It wasn't unusual. And it was a mark of shame. So we moved to an area closer to where the factory was.

And so probably sixteen or fifteen, I started to, after school, work there. And so I was a stuffer of toys. Plush and otherwise. And traveling an hour and fifteen minutes each way before enduring to high school and then to college. From high school I either worked at the factory or when the factory closed down because of illness — my father's illness — I then started to work at an office. I was probably about sixteen, when I was in high school already. So after school, I'd be finished by two o'clock because it started at about eight. I'd be taking the train down to Midtown, where I was an office boy and work there till about 6:30 or 7:00. Then take the subway back home to the Bronx, so that my studying and homework was done on the trains. So, by the time I'd get home at 7:30, eight o'clock, you'd have dinner. And then to the extent that you could, you did your homework, you continued doing your homework. Obviously, it reflected itself in grades and also socialization. So my socialization was very limited pretty well during my entire education, including law school, because I worked after law school all the time. So I'd finished at law school at two o'clock, 2:30, and I was at work until about seven or what have you.

Summers I started doing the Borscht Belt in the Catskills at the hotels. From the time I was about fourteen, I started as a bellhop at one of the hotels. Then I was a busboy, then I was a waiter. And I did that for probably eight, nine summers. So that when the people I was working for during the winter — during the academic year — would say to me, "Why are you leaving now?" I said, "I can't afford to continue to work for you, because I make more money during the summer so I can pay for my tuition." So from the time I was basically twelve or thirteen we had an unwritten agreement with my parents that they would provide a shelter and for the rest of my needs I would take care of myself. So paying tuition

for college and law school was my obligation. And so one summer I worked as a camp counselor, and that was between college and law school. Because I wasn't sure as to whether or not I was being admitted to law school or whether I was going to be drafted because if I didn't get accepted by law school and maintain adequate grades, then I would be drafted and the Korean War was on and I opted not to participate. The irony, of course, is that I did go to Korea after law school.

SM: Okay. So I know that —

“Len”: One of the times, in terms of socialization and motivation, because there were very few opportunities for outlets other than the sort of society that I traveled in, so that even when I was in high school and college, on the Sabbath, I attended the services. And the services generally were in what would be called Haredi synagogues. And very strict. So at some point at the War of Independence in Israel, I was part of a group that was trying to encourage monetary and military support to the Israelis. We made — young people, my contemporaries, or ones that thought as I did — and there weren't many, by the way, because they were all waiting for the Messiah. And so we went to the rabbi, and asked him to make an appeal for contributions of whatever form it could be, and we were read out of the congregation, because it was inappropriate to do so. You had to wait for the Messiah to come, and this was an irreligious act. We were heretics. We were read out of it. And so I wound up going to another institution, more modern. That was interesting in the Bronx during this period of time, there were almost synagogues on every block. So the particular area that we lived in, there was one synagogue that was associated, ethnically, as the Hungarian synagogue. Its architecture was Moorish. And so I went there. Except the walk was a little too long. So I shortened it to one that would probably be listed as a Conservative synagogue, although it would be more Orthodox than the Conservatives are today.

So it continues right through law school. Then I was in the army and conditions permitted — the segue I started to speak about before in terms of developing some social skills, because my social skills were nil. So I ventured to the 92nd Street Y, getting out of the area to a place that I heard of once. And so I got on a train, because I'm accustomed to being on the public transportation system. And I went into another country. And the other country consists of boys and girls, young people. They had clubs and they had social activities. They had social workers that were all over the place, trying to encourage social engagement. And so that was the bridge for me. So that by the time I started midway through college, I started to be able to socialize because, among other things, the Y gave me that pathway that I didn't have before. So the first year or two in college, it was very awkward for me. It was beyond being awkward. It only became less awkward in the second two years.

SM: And what college did you attend?

“Len”: I went to City College uptown. And I went to NYU Law School. I'll leave the questions to you.

SM: I guess, given when you were young you were growing up during the Great Depression. Did that have, or do you have any memory of that having, a great impact on your family?

“Len”: Say again?

SM: Growing up during the Depression when you were young —

“Len”: Oh, yes. My father was petrified. My father was absolutely petrified. That's why he had a job, worked six days a week, hustled. Hustled every single day for that. Then at the garment center, the term “I worked the season” had a special significance that people don't quite understand today. The garment center was a seasonal thing. There was the winter, the summer, the spring, the fall. And you worked out of cycle in preparation for things going to retail. And so, it was more so for my mother that she would work for say, two months for the winter season, then she would be laid off. She knew that, when the shop would start again, she would have a job. Then, for a month or two months of that season, she would get unemployment insurance. The economic cycle was you would work for the season, you would get unemployment insurance for the offseason, then you would go back for the season. To give you a sense of economics, when my father retired at the age of 65 — because it was back breaking work, difficult work. He was picking up bundles of leather. And so one strip of leather is just awkward to carry. But if you get a whole bundle, it's very heavy. In any event, he retired, and his union pension was \$50 a month. My mother's pension was nothing. So that that was the economic milieu that existed and that was true of a large segment of people.

I ventured beyond the geographic areas where I lived, so that I would go to Crotona Park in the Bronx. Indian Lake, the handball courts that existed there, again, trying to find some area of socialization someplace out there. There's something out there that I don't have the benefit of. The first time I encountered Blacks was going through some territories that were Black. I did encounter, from time to time, being accosted and saying, “Give me a nickel man.” And it was then fight or flight. And I played handball at the courts at Crotona Park. Wilkins Avenue, Jennings Street, those are different areas. Generally the same ethnics that existed in the area that I was in. That was basically, to get to those areas, to get to Crotona Park, I had to travel. I had to walk over a mile. When I was still in the yeshiva, I would walk to Bronx Park, which was probably a five mile walk. By myself, clearing my head, thinking, “What's different?” I was different. When my brother came along six years after I did and basically two years after my sister passed away, I became a role model for him, because I never had a role model. Never had a role model. So that whatever I learned as to the outside world and whatever I conceptualized were probably wrong. Because there was no role model. There was nobody to be a lodestar, to say or to converse with, so that I was basically loner during this period of time. Some people were attracted to me, so people did try to help, because I was different.

One summer I spent with my cousin in New Jersey, my aunt on my mother's side. So I learned to play with the Jewish boys in the company town. Oh, one summer, I — this was when I was thirteen — when



I was thirteen, I worked on my uncle's chicken farm in Toms River, New Jersey. So I milked goats, fed chickens, and handled eggs for an entire summer. Nobody else but my uncle, my aunt, and me. So that was the socialization that existed for me. So major socialization when I went to visit with my cousin, who was my mother's nephew. And there was a whole Jewish community. And they all knew each other and they all collaborated. And they managed to put together a synagogue that was used when there was a death, a birth, a wedding, and the High Holy Days. They would import a cantor and they would import a rabbi. I think there was probably twenty Jewish families in this town of some 5,000 people. All the rest of them were Ukrainians or Hungarians.

SM: And was there ever — either in your neighborhood or in the factories that your parents were at — was there ever any sort of political consciousness or political organizing.

“Len”: Oh, I was very politically conscious, so that I'm not totally candid, or perhaps descriptive, sufficiently. One of the things that we had, as I was growing up, was a restaurant called “The Cafeteria.” Now, the cafeteria conceptualization is that you have an open area where you have tables, and then you have counters, where you purchased things. You'd get a ticket coming in, and as you got to a station and what you're taking, they would punch a number in at the end of the line. So it was a place where people would gather. So I was very aware, politically and philosophically — more in the concept of philosophically — so this was a time of the rise of communism and socialism. So what I would do late in the evenings — now this was from time it was I guess, fifteen — I would go to the cafeteria where I'd be able to get something for a dime, and sit there all night. And there were tables where there were Trotskyites, there were Zionists, there were socialists, various versions of socialism. And we used to argue, and used to fight. Verbally not physically. There was no cancellation of people. And so, we would argue. It was ferocious, but we would come back. And one of my good friends, or one of the friends that I met on my traverses to Crotona Park, was a person whose family was communist and he was communist. And I remember, the demarcation point for me, in terms of communism versus capitalism,

is a discussion that I had with him where was telling me, in no uncertain terms, that communism was the thing to be because you have an obligation to the state, the state knows best. And I said, “You know, maybe that SAT or that vocational test defines me as being a good engineer. But I don't want to be an engineer, I want to be a lawyer. Why should the state tell me I should be an engineer? If you're telling me that that's a requirement, I'm not going to ever be a communist.”

Now, that concept caused me difficulty in public high school. Because again, I was a quirky kid. And the schools then contained some communist cells. So that up at DeWitt Clinton, I managed to get a history teacher. So the history teacher gave term assignments and I was assigned the Ku Klux Klan during the Reconstruction. And I picked up on the concept that the Ku Klux Klan had various metamorphoses, in that it went through phases. At first it was to protect, because there were ruckuses. And there were various Black militias that were taking place, physically harming the white populace, taking revenge on others, what have you, and this was a counter-force to provide protection. It didn't get

into the other part of demonizing the Blacks and doing the hanging. In any event, the history professor gave me an F. And I was in a special class at the high school. What they did is they had the regular run-of-the-mills, and then they had certain service classes. So mine was the Reason Squad. So our sole role was that we had special tests, we would then populate the other classes, acted as monitors, brought papers in, helped with the grading and stuff like that. And I had a tough Irish teacher, she was a homeroom teacher. And so the homeroom teacher would get the grades that would come from the various departments and then enter into a report card. So, at the point in time, when the grades were coming in, in comes my grade from the history teacher, giving me an F for the term. And so she comes to me and said, "What's this about?" I tell her what it's about, and she goes stomping out of the room. And she goes down to the teacher and has a confrontation with her, does not get satisfaction, goes to the principal and the principal has my paper regraded. Needless to say, I didn't get an F.

Two other things come to mind in terms of me in particular, but kind of tells you something about the times. There was social upheaval during this period of time. So that, as a young kid of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, I was deeply steeped in political movements. I was very steeped in communism, in socialism, in social contracts, natural law. These were important to me. Internalized in the main, except when confronted. So I wasn't doing any politicizing. I wasn't looking for converts. But if you wanted to talk about it, I was there to talk about it. Two interesting observations, this same history teacher says in her presentation, in essence said, with all the things that are going on, why is it that in the United States, where you have a capitalist system when, in truth, it should be socialist or communist? So I timidly raise my hand and say, "Because it's the aspiration of everyone to be a capitalist. They all strive for achievement, that's why they came here." So needless to say, she did not give me a star for that particular session, either.

So the social turmoil was there. Strikes were taking place, people were being evicted. Some parents were striving — which I read about in books — striving for education for their kids. My father did not. My father could not see the point that by going to college, and surely not seeing the point of going to law school. Being the quirk that I was, I said, I'm going to college. And when it came to law school, quirky me said, I'm going to law school. It's not to say that, once I was there, he was not supportive or proud. But he just couldn't comprehend it. What I needed to do was learn to trade. To learn a trade because I had to sustain myself. You can't sustain yourself by being a college dumbbell.

SM: [Laughs] Yes.

"Len": And with law school, then you have to be a politician, that's the given in his mind's eye. His only contact was the concept of the lawyer politician and criminal law. They were deathly afraid of the cops. The cops were all Irish. Deathly afraid of the cops. What else would you like to hear?

SM: I guess maybe a little bit more about the neighborhood itself. Whether when you were growing up in the Melrose area or when you moved a little bit further north, about — I know you mentioned it was

predominantly Jewish, but what kind of shops and amenities were there. I mean, you already spoke that you didn't have much free time, but where people would like to go. Candy store, laundromat, any sort of things like that.

“Len”: Well, we lived on the second floor of a walkup in all the locations. We did encounter water rats. So those weren't foreign objects to us. We didn't have laundromats, so my mother used a washboard. The kids that I knew were the kids from the yeshiva and from the synagogue. I had very few friends that were outside, or even acquaintances, that were outside of the parochial system, except for the children of my mother's friends and my father's friends and also my cousins. They went to public school. My brother and I were the only ones that went to parochial school. So repeat your question. Maybe I lost my train of thought.

SM: No problem. Just speak a little bit about the shops and other amenities in the neighborhood that you went to.

“Len”: There were no amenities, in that if you wanted to go shopping, you went to Bathgate Avenue in the Bronx, which is now an industrial park. The grocery store was an Italian grocer, the barber was an Italian barber. There were very few, there were truly no supermarkets at that time, so it was the grocer. My father, every morning, because he wanted everything fresh, at six o'clock was down at the Italian grocer getting his hard kaiser roll and whatever it is that he needed. And he was gone from the house by seven. What's interesting is, when I graduated law school, the Italian barber was one of my first clients.

SM: Really?

“Len”: When I decided to do income tax returns to supplement — this was before HR block and Turbo Tax — the barber would permit me to put a sign up and use a corner of his shop to prepare tax returns without charging me. And to encourage me. So the relations were good, the relations were good.

SM: Yeah, I know you spoke a little bit on some of the antisemitism that you experienced. Did you also, were you aware of any sort of religious or other ethnic tensions going on in the area?

“Len”: Yes, the answer is yes, in that when I was going to yeshiva, as I indicated before, we were subjected to physical attacks by ethnic Germans there, and we were frightened to go into Yorkville. By the way, my parents, from time to time, we would go to Second Avenue Theatre, which were Yiddish plays. By the way, my father, coming to United States, did not speak Yiddish. My mother taught him Yiddish and she taught him how to read Yiddish. They went to night school. So they had their citizenship papers before they got married. Southern Boulevard boarded on some — it was a draw for some Blacks and Hispanics, Puerto Ricans. And so there were some encounters of problems there. But I think it was more just kids with turf. So when I would go up to Bronx Park, from time to time, I'd get harassed by some of the Italian kids up near Fordham. Nothing more threatening than, “Whatcha doing

here boy?”, that kind of thing. And, “Don't come here again.” But, you know, a little shoving but nothing more threatening than that. The more threatening areas were the traverses on Southern Boulevard. And yes, I did carry a weapon. And it was only when — we have a holiday in anticipation of Yom Kippur, which is basically called Salichas, which means prayer, so looking for redemption. And we would go to the temple at midnight. So there I am, whatever age I am now, and carrying a weapon. And somebody comes up behind me and clamps his hands around my body. And I whirl around with the knife in hand. It was one of my friends going to synagogue. So I stopped carrying a knife. It's better to take the blow than to inflict it. And so, yes, that was around.

We were aware of narcotics, in that one of the people that was peripheral to the people that I knew, he graduated high school and he went to the Marines. He lived opposite Precinct 51, which is Fort Apache. So he comes back from the service and he's hooked on narcotics, so he OD'd. So that was our experience with narcotics. It just was not as rampant as we have today, but it did exist. So his exposure was he picked up the habit while he was in the Marines. Okay, your turn.

SM: And so, I guess overall, did you feel like in your experience in the yeshiva schools and then also at DeWitt Clinton, did you feel like you got a good educational experience that you, you know, had a good education from?

“Len”: No. The reason why I say no, is I was too thin. I was spread too thin.

SM: Yeah.

“Len”: If I had only gone to school, then it was one thing. But I didn't. I had to sustain myself so that half my day was working. One day — my day consisted of three parts, going to school, working, and then coming home to catch up and filling in. So concentration was hard because in addition to going to school, I was a voracious reader. And so, when I wasn't doing one thing, I was doing something else. So I was reading political philosophy. I was reading about that, I was reading about American Indians. I was reading about the various things — I was keeping myself so that I was always in motion. I did have a photographic memory. It's not enough to be able to capture enough so that I never prepared for a test. I didn't have time. I was on the fly, so that while the education was available to me, not saying that it wasn't, I just didn't have the time to do it. In that, when I was doing term papers, I was doing them at night, while others could afford to do it in the afternoon. They can afford to be at the library. I went to libraries, but to take books out. I just didn't have time to do the kind that would make me a better student. So I had to deal with my natural talents to fake it through.

SM: Yeah, that makes sense. And so after you served in the military, did you return to the Bronx?

“Len”: Yep. I stayed at home until we got married. So I didn't leave the house until I was 31 and got married. And that was not unusual with the group. My wife in Brooklyn, didn't leave the house until we

got married. So that while she lived in Brooklyn, and I lived in the Bronx, our experiences were similar, except she was “wealthier” in the sense that her father was a butcher. And also, she went to the public school system. But the ethnic part of it was consistent with what it was in the Bronx.

SM: And how did you two meet?

“Len”: When I came back from service. And with a year after coming back from the service, I went into practice for myself. So for a year, I had two jobs. That is six serially. I stayed at one firm for six months for what they did. Went to another firm for six months and realized that it would take me too long to become a partner so I started my own firm. And my mother's friend — I'm sorry, I had two friends who just passed away the early part of this year.

SM: Sorry to hear that.

“Len”: One of whom knew me all of my life. So he pushed my baby carriage. His mother and my mother were friends and lived a block apart. So when I came back from service, he took me under his wing. He was a social butterfly. He was a man about town. He was 32, I was 31. He was 33, I was whatever-have-you. And so I joined a ski club, so that every couple of weeks we'd go skiing. And so a larger group of people, friends, and we would meet at one of the bars in Manhattan. And during the summer, go to one or more of the hotels that catered to single young people.

So one summer, I had gone up to Dalton, which is in New Hampshire and met a young woman there who we were not simpatico. I mean, we were not. And she was a collector of people. And then, that summer passes by, and the ski club – I'll weave it together – the ski club would meet on Madison Avenue and 38th Street and drink, once a week, and also when we came back from skiing. And when we met, invariably, somebody would come over to me, “I got a girl for you.” And my wife-to-be was geographically undesirable. I was from the Bronx, she was from Brooklyn. It's a waste of time. So I said thank you, but no thank you. It happened on more than one occasion. And one time she came down and we chatted. And she had her car with her and I didn't have a car, or didn't have one with me. So she drives me to the subway station and said, “Very nice meeting you” and “Goodbye.” Then I get an invitation from the person from Dalton saying that they're going to have a party in Forest Hills, Queens. I had never been to Queens. It's just not within – I'm in the Bronx. The farthest I'd been was Manhattan. My practice was in Manhattan. And so I said, “Okay,” and I slept over at my friend's house. His parents moved to Queens in Kew Gardens. And so I slept there. And I got him invited to this party also. So the two of us show up at this party in Forest Hills and who should be there, but this person that I had rejected on two occasions. And we continued the conversation and three months later, we were married. So we met in March, we got married in July.

SM: And where did you move after you got married?

“Len”: Into Queens because it was equal distance between our parents’ homes. None of them drove. But we could drive so it made it difficult for them to come and visit us but we could get to them within a half hour each way. Going to the Bronx or going to Brooklyn. Now also things were new and it was affordable. She was a teacher and I was a young lawyer.

SM: And so were there — at that point when you left — were you aware of, sort of changes going on in the Bronx?

“Len”: Sure, as a matter of fact, after our first child was born, my wife says “You have to move your parents because we can’t go into that area.” So we did. We moved them to Pelham Parkway. So they lived on Lydig and Wallace – no, Holland. Holland and Lydig, in the Pelham Park area. So we moved them there and they remained there until they each passed away.

SM: Okay. Great. I think that’s pretty much all the questions that I have. This has been really wonderful. Do you have anything that you would like to add, that you think I haven’t really touched on very much?

“Len”: Well, I pretty much prepared for this.

SM: Yeah.

“Len”: Not today, some ten years ago, in that at my eightieth birthday, I published a memoir, which I distributed among my family members, for them to keep or not to keep. And so, basically, I had to sit and congeal what we spoke about now in different type of detail. So I discussed different things and more in terms of a message as to a value system that I believed in and did it by way of illustration, as opposed to pontificating, which is easy to do and I try not to do. So, those were formulated then and from time to time, revisited over a period of time. Each of the kids and grandkids has a copy of it and members of the extended family do. And of course, is colored further there having lived with me during these series of times developing value systems. So that, among other things, one of my current friends had, many years ago, believed in creating something called a living will. A living will being a statement of philosophy.

SM: Yeah.

“Len”: And my retort was I’m not going to sit down and do that because if my children and grandchildren don’t understand my value system having lived with me, then this is just another material to tuck away and never be looked at again. So, I didn’t subscribe to the living will concept. Coming back to where we started, the differences in the experiences of the other two people who are my contemporaries are very different. One is a female so her experiences are obviously different. They both did co-ed — their experiences are different. So they generally met me, one in high school, because I went to DeWitt Clinton and he went to DeWitt Clinton. And then spent two years in college, and then he

went into the army. So he got drafted into the army. So he served two years and then came back, finished two years and then went on to law school at night.

SM: Okay.

“Len”: So their experiences are quite different. The female I didn't meet until our respective children went to school together at Solomon Schechter. So that coming back again, when it was time for my children to go to school, there was a dichotomy between, and a difference of opinion between, myself and my wife. She was a product of the public school system and I suggested that children go to a yeshiva. Here I am the rebel. I don't believe in it. But I thought, to answer part of your other question, as to getting the education. I got a different education in the exposure. I didn't have to necessarily accept it but the exposure was there. The introduction of the concept of a philosophy at a very early age. The introspection at a very early age, the idea of learning together was one that was inculcated at an early time. The earliest time the idea of questioning was inculcated at an early time. There were merits and demerits. So if that would be something that you'd be interested in I'll ask them, yes, they would be prepared to do it and then pass on the information.

SM: Yeah, that would be great.

“Len”: I'll do that.

SM: Perfect. And so I did think of, usually I like to end on a much more broad, maybe philosophic question. You know, when you think back on this — on your time growing up in the Bronx — what kind of memories and sentiments stand out to you, like what emotions most strongly come across?

“Len”: Well, to color it just a little bit. I was angry for a very long time. And it was a constant thing. I was angry, because I didn't know enough. I was angry because I didn't get exposure enough. I was angry, because I didn't have time to think things through enough, I was angry for not having the luxury of things that I thought would be available, or should have been available. I was angry at a society I was continuously delving. So anger was a major aspect of my growing up there. What was the second part of it? I mean —

SM: Yeah, that was basically — that's a good answer. Do you feel the same way today?

“Len”: Looking back, it was not — looking back in an idyllic world it was not. It was tough. It was hard. It was survival to a very substantial degree. There were contemporaries of mine, whose parents were slightly higher on the upper — on the scale of financial success. And they were able to not work after school. They were able to think of going to an out-of-town school. I never even heard about it. So to give you an idea, in terms of the stifling part of the parochial education, there was no way to identify where to go after eighth grade, except towards the continuation of a parochial education. So that I had to

go out on my own to find out that there were other systems around. And a way to differentiate. So I didn't know that Bronx High School of Science or Stuyvesant even existed, didn't know. I knew that I had to find something that was male oriented. Female and I would not work out well. They're not supposed to sit next to me. You go to synagogue, you don't sit next to a female. It's different. It's just very different in terms of densification. So those kinds of things — I became the role model for my brother, so that his was a different experience. Same household, different experience. I would fight for him not to work after school, to get that extra – fight for him to go to Stuyvesant, fight for him to go to MIT. Fight for him to move out of town.

SM: Yeah.

“Len”: Do those things. Identify,, pass on information that wasn't necessarily correct, because I didn't have the experience or the knowledge to obtain that experience. Now, so mine was a factory mode in terms of education. The methodology of earning a life and life was one geared towards a factory environment. Money and earning and not doing physical labor was inconsistent with the way I — how that happened, I don't know. Fortuitously, I was successful in doing it, success in my way. And I like to end it basically by saying the basic thing that I come away with is that I learned to basically say, there are phases in one's life cycle. There's one where you accumulate knowledge. There's one that you accumulate assets. And there's one that you retire with and retirement is essentially going and doing something else and not depending upon that something else to provide the livelihood. And fortunately, as my father used to say, “You can't take your money with you as a certified check.” It stays. So what's the purpose of being the wealthiest person in the cemetery?

SM: Yep.

“Len”: And so when you have enough, that's enough, then it's time to provide for others, help others. And so that's the end for me.

SM: Perfect, yeah. Thank you so much. That's really wonderful. I've really, really enjoyed speaking with you today.

“Len”: Will my daughters and sons be able to get access to that?

SM: So what I'm going to do —

“Len”: Because that's what Sharon asked me the other day.

SM: Yeah, so what I'm gonna do after we finish speaking is I'll send you — I know I got your oral permission, but I'll get a written permission for you to include it. And then Reyna and I will transcribe



the interview and then it'll be uploaded so that they'll have access to it, your grandkids, anybody who wants to they'll be able to see it.

“Len”: Okay. Thank you.

SM: Perfect. Thank you.