7-10-2023

Rotman, Diana

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Sophia Maier (SM): Great. 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?

Diana Rotman (DR): That's a good question because, okay, I am the youngest of three children. My brother — I'm 78 — so my brother passed away a couple years ago. He was 15 years older than me, my sister who lives in Manhattan now is 10 years older than me. So I was young, little, my parents were immigrants. They came from Russia, Poland at the time, which is now Belarus actually.

SM: All right.

DR: And how they got to the Bronx is interesting. A family member was actually just coincidentally, a few weeks ago saying, "Tell me about your parents." So I started looking — I have a folder because one of my cousins was doing this genealogy. And when my father came over, they didn't know each other, and he came through Ellis Island in New York. And we actually have a family brick in Ellis Island, which is nice. And he lived with — I'm not even sure — like, in those days, people were boarders in people's houses, you know, maybe he had a room in someone's house. And he didn't really have any skills because he was a farmer in Europe. And so I just remember, he told me, he drove a milk truck. I mean, not a car, a horse and buggy. I guess [he] made a living that way. And then my mother came over with her family, and wound up going to Canada, because they couldn't get into the US at that time.

SM: Do you know what years they came?

DR: 1926, she came in '26.

SM: That makes sense.

DR: And I'm guessing he came a couple years before to New York. And somehow everybody was related, third, fourth, fifth cousin, whatever. And so she was young at the time, but they wound up in Toronto. So my mother and her parents and her brother wound up in Toronto, and then — well actually the boat landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia. And she met a woman on the bus whose daughter I'm Facebook friends with. So I got this information from her. And the two of them became really good friends, they were young. They were like, 20 years old, wound up moving to Calgary together, which was pretty brave. And they lived together. But then somebody fixed up this woman with a man and she got married. So that left my mother high and dry, and she wound up going back to Toronto to live with her parents and brother. So then someone — it's a little sketchy there with the years — but a couple of years went by and someone from the family in New York, a distant cousin said, "I have a nice, handsome young man who I'd like you to meet who lives in —" I don't even know where he lived, the Bronx,

Brooklyn, I don't know. And so she came and met him. And then a year or two later, maybe not even a year, they were married. But she stayed. And then they got an apartment in the Bronx on some street that I found online that I never heard of. To this day, I don't even know — I have it somewhere. Then they moved to the street where I was born, Teller Avenue. Do you know the Bronx at all?

SM: Relatively speaking. I've been doing this for a long enough time that things are relatively in there.

DR: Right, because you said your family came from the Bronx too?

SM: Yeah. My dad was born in the Bronx. They left when he was five years old, but my grandmother grew up on Washington Avenue by Crotona Park and my grandfather grew up in Hunts Point.

DR: Okay, not at all where I — I mean I know those areas — we lived on a street off the Grand Concourse, it was like a 15 minute walk, Teller Avenue and 169 Street. It was a very nice street, very Jewish, like I'd say 90% or more Jewish. And there was a little shul down the street that my father went to and it was Orthodox so the women had the balcony seats and the men had the bottom seats. And we kept kosher, changed all the dishes at Passover and silverware and everything. And then when — so Teller Avenue — I'm trying to remember now — started, "changing" and non Jewish people started moving in. There were Black people, there were Hispanic people. And the Jewish people got real nervous. But my parents were older, because they had me later in life. They weren't going to be moving to the suburbs. They never had a car, they didn't know how to drive. So they had a relative who owned apartment buildings in the Bronx. So then we moved, I was 12, and we moved to an area called Mosholu Parkway.

SM: Yep. And that's up close to where I was at Fordham, of course.

DR: Okay. And that's where I met Susan and Robin, because they lived right down the street from me. So I was 12 and I met the two of them, and we became good friends and we're still friends to this day, all these years later. And so we went to junior high, we went to high school together. And also there were a lot of Jewish people, but not — actually, it was pretty Jewish. It was. And then when I got older, I graduated from high school but my parents were not real progressive thinkers and said, "Oh, you don't need to go to college." I mean, I was a smart girl, I remember. "Be a secretary and get married." That's what you do. So that's what I did. So I didn't get married right away, but I got a job in Manhattan. I was 17 years old. I just remember being petrified.

SM: Of course!

DR: Taking the train down and working — I mean, I made a good living. I was making like $90 a week, which was, to my parents, oh my god, that really was a lot of money. And I lived at home. And then after a year or two I — and this is really through no encouragement. Maybe my brother. See my brother

was a boy and was encouraged to go to college. So he went to City College and graduated. But my sister, too, did not. She got married at 19 and had her first child at 20. But I did not follow in those footsteps. I just felt I was missing something. And I quit my job. And I decided to go back to school, which was a really big deal. Because my parents said, “Are you sure what you’re doing?” But at that point, a four year degree was very daunting to me so I went to a two year college, I went to FIT, which is now four years, but it was two years at a time. And I graduated and then at this point I guess I'm in my mid 20s, single, and I decided I needed to move and I got an apartment in Manhattan. Also to the dismay of my family, they were like, “What are you doing?”

SM: Of course, single, living by yourself in Manhattan.

DR: I mean, believe me, I am no rebel, believe me. I was Miss goody goody the whole time. But looking back, I'm kind of proud of what I did because I just knew I was missing something. And I moved in with roommates, and actually one of them was Robin. And then they — I don’t know, there was another girl and we split up and then I got my own apartment on 33rd Street. And I started working for a public relations firm. And that's where I met my husband, because his family owned the firm, which was very nice. [Both laugh] I married the boss's son, right? And we lived in Manhattan and I had my son in Manhattan, which was nice. I love Manhattan. I still love it. Do you live in Manhattan?

SM: Yeah, I'll be living in Manhattan. I'm actually in the apartment search right now because I was living in the Bronx while I was at the Rose Hill campus at Fordham. But since all my grad classes will be at the Lincoln Center campus, I'll be down there looking in like the Hell's Kitchen, Upper West Side area.

DR: Yeah. I mean, it's so expensive.

SM: Oh, yeah.

DR: Unbelievable. I mean, I was in New York a few months ago because my sister still lives in Manhattan. But she lives in — I mean, I would love to live where she lives. She lives in Battery Park City. Do you know where that is?

SM: Oh, yeah. Yep.

DR: And it's really nice, really nice, really expensive. They moved there, she and her husband, when it was nothing. And they were the first tenants in that apartment. So they got grandfathered into a pretty decent rent. But otherwise, it's like $5,000 for a studio apartment. It's crazy. So that's the story. And then I lived in Manhattan, and then my husband got a job opportunity in Chicago. So we moved. And that's how I wound up here. But living in the Bronx, it was nice. I mean, it was family, even though you know, everyone was family. Everyone knew each other. First of all, it's a whole different era of growing up.

We're talking about the 50s. There was maybe crime, but I mean — I'm sure there was but not the way it is now. No one had guns. No one was beating people up. I would take the — I lived near the Jerome Avenue Subway — not the subway, the el, the elevated train, when I was in my early 20s before I moved out. I would take the train with either friends or alone and meet people in the city and go to movies and parties, and take the train home by myself at 11 o'clock at night. Never thought about it. It was just a very nice, secure, safe little enclave of where people lived. And then things started changing. I actually went back to the Bronx several years ago, because a good friend of mine from that street lives in Queens. And she said, " Do you want to go see where we grew up?" And this was on Teller Avenue. And you know what, it didn't look that bad.

SM: Especially — things are very different, even from how they were in the 80s and 90s in the Bronx right now.

DR: It's improved.

SM: Things are much better. Yes, definitely. And that's why it's always very interesting to me doing these interviews, because a lot of people haven't been back to the Bronx since the 70s and 80s, you know, when the Bronx was burning, and they decided to leave, including my grandparents. So it's a very different image then really how it is like now, forty years later.

DR: And also, I mean, I put my address in of 1357 Teller Avenue and the picture of the building came up. So, I mean, if I hadn't — but it was, it's different. I mean, it was a three storey, three family building, we lived on the top floor, walk up, and there were bushes in the front and trees, and nothing's there. It's like, all the bushes were taken away. It's just a gate or a fence or whatever. And it just, there's no upkeep. I mean, it's different. It's different. And everyone knew each other, and everyone looked out for each other. And I do remember my mother, and all the ladies, all the mothers, they would sit on folding chairs in front of the building. I mean, really, like the olden days, the front of the building, and all the kids would play on the street. And there was not a lot of traffic. I mean, there were cars, but there wasn't a lot of traffic. And we would draw things out in the street, we'd play stickball in the street and scully, which is like with bottle caps, like a hopscotch but you're shooting bottle caps in these squares that you make. And the ice cream truck would come. And I remember, 25 cents, buying a Good Humor bar for 25 cents. And we never knew when that truck was going to show up. So you'd hear the bells and I'd scream. If my mother was not downstairs, I'd scream up, "Can I have money" and she'd throw a quarter down from the window. I'd get it and then I'd buy the ice cream. I also remember — wow, this is really dating — a cart. A man coming by for sharpening. The knife man. Sharpening knives and people would go down and once in a while a truck came by with a little ride like a little ferris wheel inside or little cars. So it was kind of a whole different generation of growing up.

SM: Yeah. So tell me a little bit more about Teller Avenue first, like the neighborhood, what kind of shops or amenities would you guys go to or frequent?

DR: Well, the street was small but going back it's even smaller because I'm bigger. And so down the street was Risers Candy Shop candy store, and we would go there and it had a — now I'm mixing up. No, it didn't. The other one had a soda fountain, on Mosholu Parkway, but Risers on Teller Avenue was just a candy store that we'd go to buy comics and chocolate bars or whatever. And then if we walked a little bit more to 168 Street or 169 street, I can't remember, like going towards the [Grand] Concourse, that's where the stores were. My mother — there was a kosher butcher, that's where she would do her shopping, her meat shopping. And then there was a grocery store like a mini supermarket. I think that came later. But I'm just trying to think down the other way, like Risers was one end of the block, then if you walked the other way there was a little grocery store where you would buy things. I'm just remembering she would send me there, "Go buy this or that or milk." And the guy, I don't think he had a cash register. I don't know what he had, or he would write everything on a brown paper bag like $1.20, 50 cents, and then I'd pay it. So that was that. And I'm sure there was a Chinese laundry, but I don't remember exactly. And what else was there? Oh, there was a big park down the street. That was really nice, called Claremont Park. Have you heard of that?

SM: Yes.

DR: I'd go there with my friends. There was a big playground. And I actually went back to Claremont Park a few years ago with my friend Roberta and it was nice. They put in a big swimming pool. Because when I was there it was sprinklers. If it was hot, you'd put your bathing suit on and go. The other thing I remember on Teller Avenue, on a really hot day, they'd open the fire hydrants and all that and all the kids would run through. And that was fun.

SM: So what about Mosholu Parkway too, what kind of things did you get up to there?

DR: So I was 12. I was older. I was in junior high at the time. But you know what, I'm mixing up. It's from Mosholu Parkway that I took the Jerome Avenue train.

SM: You said that.

DR: Oh, I did. Okay. Teller when I was a kid. I didn't do anything on my own. What did we do? There was another big park called — Mosholu Parkway was not that far from DeWitt Clinton High School — and it was a big park called The Oval, or the Reservoir.

SM: The Oval is right there, yeah.

DR: Right, right. So we would hang out there. And I would — so I was getting older. And as far as stores there was actually another candy store — I guess those were pretty popular then — down the street, and that had the soda fountain. And I remember I would meet my friends there and we'd sit and

have a coke or something. But, when we lived on Mosholu Parkway, Jerome Avenue was very close. I mean, you could hear the train from my window. And Montefiore Hospital was right up the street. So we sort of came up in the world a little bit from Teller Avenue, because it was a six storey building and it had an elevator. And the living room had three steps down to go into the living room.

SM: Like a sunken living room?

DR: So that was classy, yeah. They dropped a little sunken living room, right.

SM: Oh, that's great. Yeah, so how about music? What kind of music did you like to listen to?

DR: You know what, I really — I was just talking to someone else — I wasn't into like the music of that era. Elvis was really popular, but I'm telling you I was not — I liked, if you say rock and roll, I don't know was that just starting? I wasn't that kind of — you know who I liked? This is crazy. Pat Boone.

SM: Okay, that's more like country I guess or folk, right?

DR; Yeah, I guess. I guess it's more pure. I don't know. But I didn't — like my husband, who grew up in Chicago, but then moved to New York, was a real activist. I was not. I mean, he marched against the Vietnam War and that was going on during my time. But it didn't concern me, honestly, just didn't concern me. Maybe it was the family I grew up with. They were just more interested in putting food on the table. Not politics at all. But I've come a long way because now I feel I'm very political.

SM: Times change too with that, you know.

DR: Yeah. And my sister, who's 10 years older, got married when we lived on Teller Avenue. I was nine and she was 19. And I remember her, you know, in her bridal gown and coming out of the building, and the whole neighborhood was there, it was like My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Remember that movie?

SM: Yes.

DR: Like everyone knew each other. And then she had her children pretty much after we moved to Mosholu Parkway, and I would go there often. I didn't have a great social life so I would babysit a lot. I loved those little boys who are now almost my age.

SM: Yeah, grown men.

DR: So no, I was not into politics. I was not into like, you know — "Oh, did you like Joni Mitchell, did you go to Washington Square Park and hang out and do protests?" No, no, I didn't. I don't think my friends did either.

SM: It's not that unusual. It's funny the amount of people usually, you know, you expect — oh, what kind of music did you like? Elvis and stuff. But it's an interesting amount of people that really weren't — like they knew it was happening, but I've had people tell me about they liked opera music and stuff that they grew up listening to because their parents were listening to it.

DR: Exactly, and my parents did not. They were not educated. And they were very kind loving people, but never branched out to do anything a little cultural.

SM: Yeah that makes sense. And what did your parents do for a living? Did your dad continue with the milk selling business?

DR: No, no, no, no, no. So, about a year ago, I — see a lot of my first cousins are not alive anymore, because I was the youngest. But there's one who is, I think she's 93. Because her father was my father's brother. My father had two brothers. And I don't know how this happened. I was trying to find out. They went into the fur business on 29th Street. That's still the fur district right? 29th and Seventh Avenue.

SM: Yeah.

DR: And they became furriers. Now someone had to teach them that. I mean, I'm not talking minks, I'm talking like pieces of fur that they made collars. It was trimmings of collars or cuffs. And I remember at the time, Daniel Boone was popular on TV. And so he made me a hat with a tail. The coon skin cap. So that was very cool. I was like, very proud of that. So he was a furrier and it was — my maiden name is very difficult. It's Yetelwell, and so the three brothers, they opened up a shop on 229 West 29th street called Yetelwell and Brothers, and they had that business for a long time. And, I mean, I didn't know about money, you know, but we weren't poor I don't think. We managed. We never went on vacations, we never ate out, we never went to movies but that was normal. I didn't feel I was missing anything.

SM: And your mom, did she stay home?

DR: She did. She actually spoke better English than my father. She went to high school to learn English. But she was a stay at home mom. And he provided the little — he made the living. He worked seven days a week. So it was really, I mean, he'd get up early, come home late, eat dinner, and it was the typicalL she cleaned, he did nothing. I shouldn't say that, he did a lot, he worked. He worked very hard.

SM: Not at the house, yeah.

DR: But it was a real division of labor. She was the house. She took care of the children, the clothing, the ironing, the cooking, everything. She did everything.

SM: Yeah. Did either of them have any sort of higher education or high school?

DR: No, neither one of them graduated from high school. In fact, my mother did go to English classes at night way before I was born, and so she was able to read and write. He could not, so I don't even understand how he was in business. I really don't. I guess maybe the other brothers or something, I don't know. Or they hired someone. Or they had a recommendation, this guy will help you do your books and accounting. Yeah, that's kind of — looking back, I mean, I wish — you're doing a good thing now. I wish I could talk to them. I just, I wish I could get a history of what was it like when you're 18 coming over on a boat where you didn't know anybody to another country? Pretty scary.

SM: I can imagine. And that's part of the reason why I like doing this, you know, you have all these stories recorded so it's not just for, let's say, scholars, but for grandkids or whatever, you know.

DR: Right, right.

SM: I had a question and now I'm blanking. Hold on.

DR: Okay, take your time.

SM: Did you feel like you had a different growing up experience than people who had American born parents?

DR: Absolutely. Number one, my parents were older. Which, I say that now but that's really ironic, because I'm 78 so I don't feel it, I don't feel like I look it, whatever, whatever. But I got married older. I got married at 32. Had my son at 34, had my daughter at 39. Which is the same age — I said, "Wow, what comes around goes around," right? — because my mother was 39 when she had me. And I always said, "Oh my god, you're so old, I wish you would dye your hair, I wish you would lose weight." And I said, "Wow, and I had my daughter 39." But you know what, she was old at 39, I wasn't. I was different. It was different. So my friends who had American born parents, and generally were younger, age wise, were just more cool I thought. And they drove, they had cars. We didn't, which I would go with them for rides and we'd go — there was a beach club in the Bronx. I don't even know if it's still there. I think, I don't know, in the Castle Hill neighborhood. I'm not sure. Parkchester? Called Shore Haven.

SM: Yeah. I'm not sure that it's still there but I've heard people share about it.

DR: Right. That was a big deal, Shore Haven. And so one of my — actually it was Robin — because she lived down the street and her parents had a car. And they were members for the summer. And they were nice enough to take me. I became a member. My parents said, yes, we'll pay for whatever it was. And I would go with her to Shore Haven and that was nice. And the other thing I did — I guess it was from Mosholu Parkway because I was too young — we went to Orchard Beach. By bus, by two buses.

SM: Yeah. I love Orchard Beach.

DR: Yeah, that's still pretty nice?

SM: Yeah, I like it. I was there maybe two weeks ago when I finished cleaning out my apartment. We went for a beach day. I've taken the bus over there myself.

DR: I remember standing — to get the bus, it was like these long metal bars you go in and out and I don't know if they still have the bus to get out of Orchard Beach.

SM: Yeah, there is some sort of structure there. It really is because a lot of people take the bus even now, you know.

DR: And then, you know, there are different sections, like numbers sections. And we all liked, all the young people, Section 10. I remember.

SM: Okay, yeah. It was the place to be.

DR: Where did you go? What section did you go to? You don't remember?

SM: No idea. I didn't check to make sure I was in the cool section.

DR: Right, okay. [Both laugh] So those are nice memories. Very nice memories.

SM: Let's talk a little bit about school. Are there any memories from elementary school, public school that stand out to you?

DR: Well, public school — when I lived on teller Avenue, I went to PS 53, which we drove around there too. It was hugely enlarged from when I was there. And it was nice. I mean, I had friends. I wasn't that social. So I mean, I had some friends. And then we moved — oh, I went to junior high school for like six months there before we moved. It was Jordan Elmont Junior High and I don't know exactly where it was, I think it was walking distance from where I lived. And then we moved and I went to PS 80 — wait, was that a junior high? It was Junior High School 80. That was also walking distance from Mosholu Parkway. And then I went to Evander Childs High School. Which was, looking back, a real mistake. I mean, I know you shouldn't have regrets, but I was supposed to go to Walton. Is Walton still a girls school?

SM: I don't think it's all girls now. But actually, my grandmother went to Walton when she was there.

DR: And it was a good school. I mean, you got a good education. And I didn't know anybody because I had signed up to go to Walton before I met Susan and Robin and these other girls, and they were going to Evander, and "I don't want to go." And my parents, they said, "Okay, whatever you want to do." So I switched over to Evander, and that was a shock, because it was in a very Italian neighborhood and just a lot of immigrants, not Jewish immigrants. And yeah, I mean, I did find [people], but it was not a great experience.

SM: Yeah, were there — because I know you mentioned when you filled out the little thing that there was a bit more religious or ethnic diversity up by Mosholu Parkway, as you got older — were there ever any kind of issues or tensions between different groups?

DR: No that I remember. [On] Mosholu Parkway we lived in the Jewish area. And if you walked a few blocks down — so I lived near the Jerome Avenue line — oh my god, I can't remember the name of the stop because the line was —

SM: It is Mosholu Park or at least — because I've taken the train up to the Mosholu Parkway stop before.

DR: Oh, maybe it is because I think the next step is Woodlawn.

SM: Yes. That's the last stop.

DR: That's the last stop. So we were next to the last stop, because then it goes into Yonkers. And so that was all pretty Jewish. But if you went down to the D train, that was a lot of Irish. Irish lived there. But we never hung out together. So I didn't feel any antisemitism at all. Actually, luckily, my whole life I really never did.

SM: Yeah. Good.

DR: You know, I'm not sure my kids did either. One time — I always worked, even when I was [in school], in any summer, I always got a part time because I do have secretarial skills so that came in handy for my summer jobs. And just one time I remember — and this is the only one someone said to me — because I said, "I'm taking off for the Jewish holidays" or something. They were in shock, "What? You're Jewish? You're kidding. Your mother's Jewish? Your father's Jewish?" I go, "Yeah." They go, "Wow, that's a surprise." You know, not that they said anything bad. It was just kind of implied.

SM: Yeah. That's funny. And so I know you kind of touched on it a little bit already but you felt that growing up as a woman during this time period that your parents or other people had very different expectations of you?

DR: Right. Yeah, they did. And especially because I got married at 32. That was horrifying. You know, that's not supposed to happen. I mean, I had boyfriends but that's —

SM: — not the same —

DR: — the point. Right.

SM: Yeah. Great. So let's see — just thinking about it — was there a reason that — because there's a lot of people actually that I've spoken to that have large age gaps between them and their siblings, usually, it was because of the Depression. Do you know if that was the case, or it was just kind of like —

DR: No, that was not the case. I don't know, my mother really — and I don't know this for sure — she got pregnant very easily, put it that way. So she had my brother. I think they were married 10 months or something. And then from what I heard from her and my sister, he was sickly, but I don't know if he really was. I think she was a very overprotective mother. Like she was afraid to let him play ball, that sort of thing. So okay, I don't think she wanted more children. And then she got pregnant again. And I know she terminated several pregnancies. You know, not legally, but she did. And then five years later, I guess she decided to keep the baby and that was my sister, who was 10 years older than me. And then what happened in between those two? I don't know whether she terminated pregnancies or just didn't get pregnant. I have no idea. But then she rented a place in the Catskills, you know these little bungalow colonies?

SM: Yes.

DR: And so she would go up with her two children, my sister and brother. I guess by bus, I don't know, for the summer, and my father would come up on weekends because he would be home working. And one of those weekends, she got pregnant.

SM: And we got Diana.

DR: And by the time — it must have been early in the summer, because by the time she came home they felt it was too late to do anything. And that was me. And can you imagine? I mean, I'm okay. But growing up knowing, no, I was not wanted at all, because that was made known. I mean, 10 years is a big gap.

SM: Oh, yeah, definitely.

DR: So basically, I kind of grew up as an only child.

SM: Yeah. Well, it's funny, my parents — this is not related at all — but my parents had a very difficult time having children. So they had me and then both my brother and sister are adopted. So you could never do the, as kids do, the "You were an accident or all this stuff," you know? Can't say that with us because they tried really hard to get the children.

DR: Oh, that's nice that there are siblings, that's nice. But then after I became older and got married, I became closer to my two siblings, even though the age gap was still there, but it sort of shortened. It was better. And now my sister is 88 and lives in Manhattan but I am extremely close with her.

SM: Yeah, that's great.

DR: And it scares me though, because she's 88. It makes me nervous, like, you don't live forever. Actually thank you for doing this because it kind of brings back a lot of memories for me too that I hadn't really thought about.

SM: Yes, of course. I guess a little bit — the last kind of area, a little bit more about Jewish life. You said you kept kosher. Was your family very religious besides attending the Orthodox *shul*?

DR: No, I think it was more tradition. Coming over from the old country and following the ways like everyone else who came over, that's what you did. You kept kosher, you went to *shul*, and you changed dishes. You know, on Yom Kippur — you observed the holidays, but I don't really know, now that I'm older — I have a good friend that I was with yesterday who is religious. Tisha b'av is coming. I'm like, "Oh, my God, what is Tisha b'av?" I'm not that much aware of all the Jewish holidays. I mean, no, I am, that's not true. Put it this way, I'm more traditional. I don't keep kosher. But when my kids were growing up we did belong to a temple here in the suburbs, and they were both bar and bat mitzvahed. And my husband couldn't care less to tell you the truth, it was me. I just felt I needed the tradition. And even now, with COVID, of course I wasn't, but I dropped — he died 12 years ago so I'm on my own, but I dropped out of the temple because it was super expensive and I felt it wasn't doing anything for me. I didn't feel anything. And my son actually — he lives in California. He's divorced. And his kids know nothing, which is a little bit upsetting to me. They should. And my daughter is married to a Jewish guy. They have one child. They live in Chicago. And they do belong to a very progressive synagogue. It's called Mishkan. And on Kol Nidrei I always go with her because I still want to feel something. And I do fast on Yom Kippur. It's just something that I want to do.

SM: And you said that you grew up speaking English in the house, but Yiddish was spoken?

DR: 100% where they spoke very little English and I understood everything. I would have friends come over, and my mother would talk to me and they'd say "You understand that, really?" And I'd go "Yeah." And now I wish I spoke. Understanding is easier than speaking. But do you understand? Did your family ever speak Yiddish?

SM: No. I mean, my dad's family lived three generations in the Bronx before they came here. So it's been long lost, even though I tried it out. It's on Duolingo so I tried. Of course, we use certain Yiddish-isms and stuff.

DR: Right.

SM: I would like to learn some, at least. But even the letters, even written, even though they use Hebrew characters, even those have different pronunciations and stuff than Hebrew. So I would be kind of lost.

DR: You know, on Facebook, there's a Yiddish group and I joined it. I mean, there are hundreds, hundreds of people in it. And at the beginning, it was fun. I don't think it's fun anymore. But I still see the stuff that people write. Like, what does *meshugenah* mean? Like, things that people know, I mean, but then other sentences — but you know what, there's so many dialects, that my parents spoke in a different way than what these people are saying, even just by reading it. So I'm not that interested anymore. But the funny thing is, my daughter was in New York last weekend, she went on her own and was visiting my sister and her husband and she took a video, which was great, saying to my sister, "I want you to teach me Yiddish words." And so my sister grew up just the way I did, understanding everything. And she said "Oh my god, this is hard." I just, I'm feeling — I'm gonna say a word to you, you may know what it means — half in English — "I went for a walk and I got really *farblunget*." Have you heard that word?

SM: No.

DR: Okay, it means lost. I got lost. But she doesn't know how to say I went for a walk.

SM: Yeah, but she knows certain things.

DR: So it's mixed. It's Yiddish and English.

SM: Right. It's interesting because my boyfriend's not Jewish, but he would go to Jewish Studies events with me. So then he hangs around enough, even my own family who doesn't really speak Yiddish, but enough where he hears these words that he doesn't know the meaning of.

DR: Right.

SM: But the funny story with that is that one time we were walking down the street down Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, and he tried to use the word *shiksa* in a sentence. But he didn't know what it meant.

DR: Oh, he didn't know what it meant.

SM: Well, because he had heard it. And I said to him, I was like, "Where did you learn that word?" He used it completely incorrectly. And he goes "Oh, I don't know what it means, a little Hasidic boy called me it on the subway." [Both laugh] "Um, yeah, it's not a nice word."

DR: Wait, somebody called him that on the subway?

SM: Yes, on the subway. He is not a woman.

DR: You know what it means. Because he's a man.

SM: I was like, "It means a non-Jewish woman and it's not a very nice word."

DR: Right.

SM: Oh, it was funny. I was like, "Don't use that word."

DR: Exactly. [Both laugh]

SM: Oh, yeah. So how did you feel about leaving the Bronx when you did and moving into Manhattan?

DR: Good. I felt good. I needed to come into my own a little bit. I was feeling a little smothered. So I guess, of the three siblings, me being the youngest, I don't know the reason, I just felt I had more drive than the others. And my sister got married really young. And my brother got married at 30, which in those days was old. For a man — for anybody. And his wife is actually still alive, which is great. She's 92. And she lives in Teaneck, New Jersey. So we talk all the time. And I like living in Manhattan. Manhattan is awesome. I love it. I was back there in early May and I hope to get back. I go often, as often as I can, because I get there, I get off the plane — even like for fun, I need a New York Fix — I love when I get off the plane and when I hear the people talking, [in a New York accent] "Oh, you're in New York."

SM: There's a certain familiarity.

DR: One thing I have to say that people have said to me — and I don't know if you're picking up on any of this — but I do not have a New York accent.

SM: Yeah, I think you don't have as strong of a New York accent as some of the people that I've spoken with. Because yeah I grew up — I'm from Monroe, New York, which is probably where the bungalow colony where they went to is because there were a bunch over here. So it's about 45 minutes north of the

Bronx, on the Jersey side of the river. And I grew up thinking that all adults had New York or Long Island accents, because that was all that I ever heard. So I started bringing friends home from school, who weren't from New York, who were from California or whatever, and they're like, “Wow, I can hardly understand these people.” I'm like, “What?” So I'm not fazed by it, but you have a less strong, I would say, Bronx accent then some other people that I've spoken with.

DR: One of my teachers in school, when I was at FIT, I remember he said something like, “One way to speak proper English is where people don't know where you're from.” Just have a pure — and I've kind of strived for that. But there's certain words that still stick with me. My daughter just laughs. I said, “Okay, I'm gonna have some orange juice.” [AR-ange] Orange?

SM: Orange. I know, I say like Florida, that’s how I am. Well the accents are interesting, too because a lot of people that I'll interview that are a little bit older than you, like in their 80s, their late 80s or I've even spoken to people in the early 90s. But mostly, they're in their late 80s. Their accent isn't what we picture of a Bronx accent as much because — and I found this out from a professor of mine — they've got what's called a transatlantic accent because all their —

DR: — because they came from Europe?

SM: Well, actually, because all their teachers were Irish so they had this very — they grew up in the era when all of the school teachers were Catholics or Protestants or whatever whereas later people grew up, now by the 60s, the schools predominantly had Jewish teachers. So it was like they grew up listening to different accents than other people did, which I thought was very interesting.

DR: Yeah. My sister has much more of an accent than I do. Like, she will introduce me. She'll say, “This is my sister” [sist-AH]. See, I hear it. I really hear it. I'm really sorry that we cannot see each other. I wish we could see each other.

SM: I’ll send you a Selfie when we get off the phone.

DR: You know what, we could have done this on FaceTime.

SM: Oh, yeah, you're right.

DR: I just thought of it like two seconds ago.

SM: Yeah, I guess it depends on — you know, we didn't know we both had iPhones or whatever. But it's true. Yeah, we could have.

DR: Can we go on for a second now?

SM: Yeah. Well, let me ask you my last question.

DR: Yeah, sure, go ahead.

SM: Because I usually like to end with the question, When you think back on your time in the Bronx, what kind of emotions or memories do you associate with it?

DR: Warm. Gentle. Family. Friendly. Insulated. Just pretty secure. So it was nice. It was nice growing up there.

SM: Great. Yeah, let me see if I can —

DR: Well you have my number?

SM: Yeah, I think I'm just gonna click FaceTime and you should be able to accept it. There you go.

DR: There you are! [Laugha] Oh my gosh, you're so pretty.

SM: Thank you.

DR: This is so nice. See, we could have done this.

SM: Yeah, I didn't even think about it.

DR: But I'm glad I got to see you.

SM: Yes, absolutely.

DR: You're kind of like what I imagined.

SM: Yeah?

DR: Okay, really nice. Sophia, thank you for doing this. This has been nice for me and I hope you got some good stuff.

SM: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much. I will follow up with you, I'm gonna send you a permission form so I have your written permission to put this in an archive. But other than that, thank you.

DR: You need like a real paper?

SM: I'm gonna email it to you. So you should just be able to fill it out on the email, like online, and send it back.

DR: Okay.

SM: Yeah, don't worry about that.

DR: All right, so thanks for this wonderful opportunity.

SM: Yeah.

DR: Good luck with all that you're doing. And if you ever need anything else let me know.

SM: Yeah. Thank you. If you're back in New York, you let me know. I could show you around town.

DR: You're wearing your Jewish star. I am too.

SM: Oh, yeah, I always wear it.

DR: Oh, good.

SM: Wonderful.

DR: All right, take care. Talk soon. Bye.

SM: Bye.