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Rifkin, Howard

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Howard Rifkin (HR): My grandparents were born in Ukraine, got married in Ukraine. They had two daughters and a son that were born in Ukraine as well. They had two daughters when they came here that were born in the United States.

Sophia Maier (SM): Okay.

HR: I know more about my mother's side than I do about my father's side, but I know my father's parents were immigrants. He was born in the States. He had two brothers who were born in the States and one sister that was born in the States. All the grandparents and all parents are deceased now. That's just basic history of where my grandparents came from, where my parents were from, on both sides. My grandparents were Orthodox. My parents and myself were not although I was bar mitzvahed at an Orthodox synagogue. I went to the Hebrew school and all the way up to being bar mitzvahed. On the holidays, I would go to my grandparents — I would walk through the park and I was very young — and go to services where they were. And they had the screen. It was a one level synagogue, they had the curtain drawn between men and women. Passover, we went to my grandmother and grandfather. I used to do the four questions for Passover. But they were really Orthodox. And again, my parents weren't. I have a sister who lives in Connecticut. So that's basic. I went to PS 70. I don't know — that is the school — I went to Wade Junior High School. And then I went to Taft High School, which was right around the corner from me. I lived on College Avenue off of 170th Street. I was in the army for two years. I visited Israel when I was in the army for their 10th anniversary. We were at a retreat in Germany in '57 and the rabbis and the chaplains were talking, saying, you know, "Would you guys like to go to Israel for their 10th anniversary?" And I think about 100 of us said yes. We were the first German plane ever to land on Israel soil.

SM: Wow.

HR: And we were there for their 10th anniversary celebration. We could not go to the Old City because it was still under their control. But was an interesting trip. I was glad I went. After I got married I decided I wanted to be kosher. That didn't last that long [Laughs]. I just — there were certain things I couldn't eat. But we've always kept semi-kosher. I mean, I can [go to] Chinese restaurant and all the other good stuff. I had two interesting jobs. The first one I worked for United Artists Corporation, which was owned by Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks Sr. And Mary Pickford.

SM: That's great.

HR: So I worked with them in the Foreign Accounting Department. That was before I went into the service in '56. The other job I had when I came out, and after going around for a few places, I worked for a company called British Steel Corporation. British Steel was basically owned by the Queen [Elizabeth II]. Because in England, they had nationalized the steel industry, which is government. Government is the Queen. So I always used to say I worked for the Queen. They even had a picture of her in the office. And then eventually, the company moved to Houston and I was asked if I wanted to go. At first I said no. I came down here on a business trip with my boss. I told my wife I wasn't going. I didn't like Houston. She says, "No, I'm gonna go." So we came down and she said, "We're moving." And that was the end of it. Later on after we were here, our oldest son passed away. And the company was closing Houston and moving up to Chicago. And we said, "We're not moving to Chicago." Our son was here, the youngest son was here. So we said, "We're staying in here." And they said, "Okay, stay here," and there was another operation. So they said, "Stay here and take care of that one." So, I stayed in Houston. I'm still here, retired after a while. My wife passed away in November of '21. I live currently in an over 55 community. There are standalone houses, there's activities here to keep you busy. Whatever you want to do, you're able to do. They have a health club, they got a pool. They got a ballroom where they have a lot of activities. We met a lot of people here that we are still friendly with. My son is about 40 minutes away from me. I have three grandchildren and one great grandchild. And that's basically me. The friends I grew up with in New York when we were kids, five of them are still alive. Four of them have passed away. I still am in touch with them, like maybe once or twice a year just to say "hi" and "everything's okay," et cetera, et cetera. And they're scattered all over. There's one in San Francisco, one in Florida, one in Pennsylvania, and one is still in New York. And that's me [Laughs].

SM: Well, that's fantastic. I think that's a great overview. So I guess then my first question would be for you to tell me a little bit more about the neighborhood that you grew up in. What was it like? Was it predominantly Jewish?

HR: It was predominantly Jewish. Most of the area was Jewish. When the holidays came, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the school closed to account for the population. The local stores, there was kosher and non kosher, the delis, the supermarkets, grocery stores, bakeries, there was a movie theater, catering hall, candy stores on every block. There was an apartment house. We lived on the second floor. It was one bedroom, a living room, kitchen, bathroom for my father, my mother, my sister, and me. I slept in the living room on a foldout Castro convertible bed. My sister slept in the bedroom where my parents slept. We had a small, I think seven inch, TV. We got that when I was about thirteen. We would have watched all the cartoons and the early shows and all that was on TV. We face a courtyard. They used to have the people on the streets. The apple man was cool. There was a potato man that came by. There was a guy that was doing "I Cash Clothes." The ice men came, the fisherman came. This is all in the streets. We played ball in the streets, stickball and punchball. We went to the school yards and

played games there, handball, et cetera. We played with marbles. We used to go to the park a lot and just sit there and talk and sneak cigarettes in every once in a while. And there was no drinking and there was no drugs at that time and no gambling. The pool room we used to go to once in a while. They would let us in, sometimes they didn't. I was a pin boy in the bowling alley at one time when I would go just to earn a few dollars. And there was two synagogues on the block, about like a block, block and a half away. And I do not know the reason why I went to the Orthodox one. They were both Orthodox, but I went to the one that was on Mount Eden Jewish Center, which was by the public school that I went to. So I don't know why I ended up going there. I have no knowledge that I can remember that that was the one that was picked out for me, but that's where I had my bar mitzvah. And my grandmother worked for a catering place. And the person that owned it was a rabbi. And he is the rabbi that married my wife and myself. So that was a nice experience, too.

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

HR: My father was a truck driver. He was a cab [driver] earlier on in life, but he was a truck driver for his whole life. My mother was basically home and then she was a bookkeeper. She worked for a company called Maurice Ratner, which was then given to Bill Blass, the designer. And he designed and gave my mother a dress from our wedding.

SM: Oh, wow.

HR: Yeah, so that was very nice. And that's what my parents did. Just workers. And my —

SM: And did they have a college education or anything?

HR: No.

SM: Yeah, okay.

HR: Just high school. I went to Pace College in New York. I used to go at night because I was working during the day. Then I went into the Army for the two years. I came out, went back to Pace at night, but then getting married and I just couldn't do everything so I had to leave college.

SM: Yeah. And so a little bit more about school. Are there any memories from public school or junior high school that stand out to you?

HR: Let's see, in public school, PS 70 was the only one that had a swimming pool. So, that was nice. Other than that, there was one teacher I liked very much. You know, you get a crush on teachers. Her name was Jerusi. And I also remember doing the flagpole. I think that's in May or something. But it was — we didn't have buses so you walked. And I walked to school, every day back and forth regardless of

the weather. You just walked through the snow and the rain, either in boots or things like that. Carried a lunchbox or a bag, and you just didn't even think about it, because there was a big park there. It was called Claremont Park. That's where we used to play. So just walking through the park, and there was a block and a half after that. For junior high, which was Wade, which was past PS 70, sometimes I would go by train, and sometimes I would go by bike. At that time, we just rode bikes and we would park it in a garage. They let us park it there, and then just go to school. In school not too much that stood out. I did the New York Times, I would be selling it or delivering it in the school. And everything was good. There was no problems. And there was no activity really. I would just go to school, and then come home. Nothing unusual that I could think of going to Wade Junior High and then Taft High School, which was right around the corner. I was in the school band. I played the trombone. One of my other friends played the trumpet. The other friend — and these are ones that are still alive — played the sousaphone. It's a big trombone. It's like the Johnson's band guy, and another one played the flute.

SM: Did they give you the instruments for free? Or did you have to pay for them?

HR: I took lessons and I had my own. I don't think the school gave — well the sousaphone, yes. Because they are big. Because I remember I used to be taking my trombone in a case. So I had the trombone and I would take lessons home. And I was in the band for two years. And we did school concerts only. And I still have two of the programs from there with my name in it and my friends names in it. Because I had found it when my mother passed away, she had it. So I made copies of it and sent it to my friends, their children, you know, so that they had it. I worked at the movie theater that was on 170th Street, while I was going to high school. And then from there, again, I worked and then went into the service. So that was —

SM: And when you were at Taft, was it still predominantly Jewish? Or did it draw from other neighborhoods?

HR: It was more of a mix.

SM: Yeah, okay.

HR: We had — basically, there was some African American — you know, quite a bit, because it was the basic high school in the area. So it wasn't like one in every block. So it was a big draw for the kids and it had them all mixed. There were never any racial problems at all that I recall. Never ran into any negative problems during school. You know, friends, non-friends. But it was just a simple life. Everyone was there for a reason, to learn. And, you know, just waited for graduation [Laughs].

SM: And did you feel like you got a high quality education in your time in the public schools?

HR: Oh, I think that was the way to go. I learned a lot. I don't remember a lot now but I think I learned. My one negative problem has always been spelling. I'm the worst speller in the world.

SM: Me too.

HR: And if it wasn't for doing iPads, and when they correct you — the spelling — I'd be lost most of the time. Because I always used to always have to ask my wife how to spell this and that. I try watching Wheel of Fortune to see if I can figure it out. Sometimes I get it, sometimes I can't. Most of the time, I can't. But as far as learning things, yes. Algebra was a very bad subject for me. English was okay. History was okay. Language, I had a problem learning French because that's what the option was. There was no Spanish at that time. It was either English or French. I had a problem learning French. I also had a problem, and I still do, reading Hebrew. Yet I did a bar mitzvah. And I would say maybe five or six years ago, I redid my Haftarah, to the synagogue that we belong to. And then also, I did a reading from the Torah passage. I had tremendous help. A lot of it was memory when I would see the word I'd memorize what it was. But when I go to services, it's very hard to read. A lot of it is a memory because you keep hearing the same thing over and over. The rabbi tried to help me with reading here. I got to a certain point, I just couldn't do it. But at least I feel that I redid my bar mitzvah. And I was very happy to do that.

SM: Yeah, that's impressive [Laughs].

HR: We also – we, my wife and myself, celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary. We redid the ceremony. We had a rabbi reperform and also the place we did it at we were able to play — I had the video made of the movie — so we replayed that while we had the ceremony going on. So they saw the ceremony of the original wedding and they were there for the 50th.

SM: Wow, that's great. Where did you originally get married? Had you moved at that —

HR: Ellesmere Caterers.

SM: Okay.

HR: It was on 178th Street in the Bronx. And my son, the older one, got bar mitzvahed at Leonard's in Great Neck. And the youngest son got bar mitzvahed here in Houston.

SM: Okay. Speaking of languages, did you grow up speaking anything besides English in the house?

HR: My parents spoke some Yiddish. I would catch a little bit of it. My wife spoke Yiddish. I would hear Yiddish. But I never got into it. I remember doing on Passover, when asking the four questions, I had sometimes done it in Hebrew and in Yiddish, again, it's just a memory of doing it. But not reading

it. I could not read Yiddish. Although my father every once in a while was able to because he used to buy *The Forward*. It was a Jewish paper.

SM: Yep.

HR: And I actually wasn't into religion or being Jewish as much. I'm more into it now that we're older than we were when we were younger.

SM: That makes sense. I feel like that's pretty common, you know.

HR: Oh, I also had polio when I was young.

SM: Oh, really?

HR: Yeah, I had it. I was in the hospital for a good two weeks only. I had the Sister Kenny treatment, which is hot packs. And my regular doctor — I had a stiff neck — my parents called the doctor. He came on a Saturday. Just, you know, the regular doctors who made house calls at that time. Got an ambulance and they took me down to Willard Parker Hospital, which was down near Bellevue. I had a spinal tap, which almost killed me. I had the Sister Kenny treatment and that was it. Nothing after that. So it was caught fast and taken care of fast. That's my illness when I was young.

SM: Yeah. That's crazy. And so you also mentioned you used to — did your family used to take trips up to the country?

HR: Well, during the summer we would go to the bungalow colony. And we also had gone down to Asbury Park in New Jersey.

SM: Okay, yep.

HR: We were on the beach down there. We were in Bradley Beach, which was right next to Ocean Grove. And then became Asbury Park. So we went down there for, I think it was two years. And this is when I was, you know, just a kid. But the bungalow colony, my wife and kids — we went either three or four years up there. I used to take off on Fridays. So Thursday night right after work we would just drive up there and then drive back on Monday morning to work. So we had a nice weekend. We met a lot of friends up there. Some of them lived right close by to where we were. We eventually moved to Co-Op City in the Bronx. That's where Freedomland used to be. And the friends from the country, two of them moved in the same place. And so we kept [in contact], and it was very nice.

SM: And what had prompted your move up to Co-Op City, just kind of the bigger —

HR: Well, we were living on Gun Hill Road in the Bronx. And they were building Co-Op City and just no special reason we went there. You know, we checked the apartments and decided to move. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to do with the area we lived in. It wasn't changing. Montefiore Hospital was there which was getting very big. The kids still were able to play. The school was right across the street from where we lived. I had two cousins that lived in the same building as we did. So it was comfortable. And again, most of the time I'm working during the day. So it's my wife that was home. She didn't work. She helped out with a dentist in the building. But basically, she didn't work. The kids went to school. So it was basically nighttime. You know, after — you get home and you sit down and you watch TV, basically. And that was it. But no, nothing caused us to move to Co-Op City.

SM: Yeah. It's just — it's interesting, because I've talked to a lot of people that lived in Co-Op City or other people that just say, "Co-Op City ruined the Bronx and that's why I got —" so everybody seems to have very strong opinions about it.

HR: Right. When we first got married, we lived pretty close to where I was born and my wife was born, like two blocks from where she was born and about four blocks from where I was born. So we still lived in the same basic neighborhood. Because, again, parents were still there, and made it easier. And again, I worked. She stayed home with kids, and weekends, you know, depends on what we were doing. We saw our friends almost every single weekend. And then the summer is when we went away.

SM: And so when you were in the service, did you — was it kind of like a culture shock, very different from your experiences in the Bronx?

HR: Yeah. I enlisted in '56. This is right before the six months volunteer came out. But I didn't know that. I just decided to be drafted and since I came from New York, they did my basic training in Colorado. And my advanced basic training was in California. So they kept me away from New York. And then from California, I came back to New York to get on a boat to go to Germany —

SM: — to go to Germany, yup —

HR: — where I was there for about almost nineteen months. I was in Heidelberg, Germany, which was the headquarters for US Army Europe. But while I was there — and I was a truck driver at the beginning, and then I ended up in personnel — but while I was there, I was able to go to the Brussels World's Fair.

SM: Wow, okay.

HR: Which was a big experience. Went to Berlin, only to the part of it you're allowed to go. And went to Israel, and went to Munich. Didn't do much traveling when I was in there, but just waited until my tour was over, came back, got discharged in '58. Ended up getting married in '59. And I had to go to one

summer camp for a week, which was in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. But I would go there just in the morning and come back at night, each day, for five days. And that was my full army service. I don't regret it. Again, there was no racial problems at all. I never saw it until later on in life. Growing up as a kid and as an adult there wasn't anything that's like it is now. Everyone was treated equal. There was no segregation, whether it be in the streets, in the schools, commuting on buses, or trains or driving. It was a simple, enjoyable life. It's a shame. And that's when you learn a lot about people. And to me, the most important thing was, they used to call it street smarts. You learned a lot from being on the street, and how people are. And what you see now is night and day.

SM: Yeah. When my mom was in the army, she was stationed in Germany as well, but like 20 years later from when you were there.

HR: And how did she like it?

SM: I mean, she liked it, but she also liked to travel. So she would go, you know, on the weekends, she'd drive down to, I don't know, the Alps or whatever, she liked to ski so she'd do things like that. So that was coming from — she grew up in Jersey City. So coming from that experience and being able to drive around Europe when she had time off was that to her was like, amazing, like opening up the world, you know?

HR: Right. I just think the army was very good for me. It was peacetime. It was in between the two wars. It was a good experience. I learned a lot about people. And I had no regrets doing it.

SM: Yeah. That's great. And did you similarly have any sort of culture shock when you moved down from New York to Houston?

HR: Oh, yeah. Workwise because [in] New York workers are fast, in Houston they're slow.

SM: Yeah [Laughs].

HR: There's no rush. And since only two people came down from New York in the accounting department, and there was more that were down here, I had to adjust to their way of working, not have them adjust to the way I was used to working. And that took a while for me to adjust. Laid back, but you get the job done. But there's no urgency. And I had one, two — I had four girls working for me and they were great. And I'm still in touch with two of them. Every once in a while I hear from them. They say, "Hi, how are you doing?" And it was nice.

SM: Yeah. And when you were younger, growing up with the sister, were your parents or others' expectations of you different than your sister, like as a man growing up versus —

HR: They could be. She's seven years younger than me. And I know when my mother was in the hospital, giving birth to her, which was in Mount Eden Jewish Hospital, I went over there and tried to get her to come home. My mother had somebody take care of me and I ran away from her. And the woman who took care of me was from the building. I didn't want to be with anyone. But my sister, I would guess — probably I would say yes, to a certain extent. She went to college, she finished college, as far as that. But as kids, I don't think there was any rivalry between us. We learned from our parents how to take care of each other, you know, share things. And there was no arguments or fights. When my father died and my mother died we were always together. And if there was any costs incurred with my mother, we split it. Didn't even question anything. So that I think we learned that from my folks, who taught us you don't — you know, between family — you don't fight, and my kids understood that too. Although they would argue, they were brothers, you stick together. That was only three years apart but you still take care of each other. And that's what they did. So I'm in touch with my sister and my brother-in-law. Not so much my nieces and nephews, just on occasion. My niece, I'm more in touch with than my nephew. And my niece's husband, who's a doctor, he was doing some work down here so we saw them a little bit. And they went back up to Connecticut to move, so they're up there. My nephew is out near Cape Cod. The only time we see them is if it's some type of an emergency. Either that we went there or, when my wife died, my niece came down, my nephew didn't. And, you know, you're just in touch.

SM: Yeah. And so, when you think back about your time in the Bronx, what kind of emotions and memories do you associate with?

HR: Very good memories. As far as growing up, happy times, no sad times. When my grandfather died, that was more — it was harder on my parents than it was on me. I was closer to my grandmother than my grandfather. And when my grandmother died, I was in Germany. I wanted to fly back for the funeral. My parents said no, they wouldn't let me. My grandmother on my father's side had passed away before I was born, because I'm named after her. When my grandfather died on my father's side, he was sort of like somebody that no one really wanted. He was sort of an outsider, all along he was never invited. And my wife always questioned it, as to why either my uncle or my parents never invited him anywhere. He was completely outside. Although I saw him, I knew where he worked. I would go by, I would say hello to him. I had no problem with him, but he was sort of an outsider and nobody could figure out why. I would never think of it that way until later on in life. But compared to my grandparents on my mother's side, it was night and day. Looking back now, I would have — it would have been different, I would have been completely different. But when we got married, my wife's grandfather, and my grandfather on my father's side, did challah together. They were like twins, they looked like in their tuxedos.

SM: [Laughs] Yeah.

HR: But when he died, it was not as emotional for me as it was when my grandmother died. And again, when my grandfather died, it wasn't emotional for me at all. But growing up in the Bronx, and living

there on the street where I lived, and all my friends were there that are still alive, it was just — we had fun. We were able to do things, stay out until whenever we stayed out, play games in the streets, hung out in the park, go to school together. I mean, it was just very nice, comfortable living, never got into trouble with cops, or any gangs. There wasn't basically any gangs or anything like that. And we went to the movies on the weekends. And that was it. I wasn't that much into sports, except for baseball a little bit. Not so much football until we got older.

SM: Wonderful. Well, thank you. Is there anything that you feel I haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

HR: I know that a cousin of mine on my mother's side, my aunt's son, did a lot of ancestry work. And that's how I got to know where my grandparents came from. He did tremendous research. I did a DNA thing. I haven't found anyone. Because I know most of my cousins. I have very few cousins still alive. As far as first cousins, I have two first cousins who are alive from the aunt that was born in the United States. All the other first cousins are deceased. And I have a few second cousins, I think two or three. On my father's side I have a second cousin alive. He has a brother, which I never knew. But I knew their parents. And that's all, as far as I know, that's alive on my father's side and for the ones on my mother's side. So the family is very dwindled down to a precious few you say. But I've enjoyed everything. Again, there was nothing outstanding in my life that, you know, I could raise a flag for. I take care of myself, I hope. With my son and grandson we go to the Texans football games. With three generations, we have gotten a video of that. The Texans did a three generations going to Texas. We used to go to the Jet games in New York.

SM: Well I was going to say, as long as you're not a Cowboys fan I can still like you.

HR: Who?

SM: I said, as long as you're not a Cowboys fan.

HR: We don't talk that name.

SM: [Laughs] Go ahead.

HR: My oldest son was a fan of Nemeth. And he even sent an invitation to Nemeth for his bar mitzvah [Laughs]. He got back something, I think it was his name, they signed it. But he used to go to the football games. My son and a cousin went and they sat in two seats and his father and me sat in two other seats, completely different areas. And then when my youngest son was born, I used to carry him into the game because he was too little to need a ticket. And he sat between my cousin and me. And my father had one seat in another area, so there was quite a few going to the games.

SM: Yeah. That's fantastic.

HR: We don't talk about the Cowboys here.

SM: Good, good. All right. I still feel like we can be friends after that because I'm a Giants fan. Texans are fine but no Cowboys.

HR: I never got into the Giants. I got into the Jets.

SM: Yeah, that's okay, respectable.

HR: The only time I actually went to a Giants game was when after Kennedy was assassinated, and they were going to play that Sunday.

SM: Yeah.

HR: And, sure, he got killed that day, they still had the game that day, which was weird, the Giants. But how big of a project is it that you're doing?

SM: Yeah, so here I'll end the recording.