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## Wolfthal, Diane Fialkow

Sophia Maier Garcia  
Fordham University, smaier2@fordham.edu

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Transcriber: Reyna Stovall

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

Diane Wolfthal (DW): Okay, my mother was born in Romania and came to New York when she was around eight. And I believe they started out on the Lower East Side or the south Bronx and gradually worked their way up. My father was born in New York, but just off the boat. And as far as I know they always lived in the Bronx.

SM: And so what year were you born?

DW: I was born in 1949. My parents were already living in the Bronx.

SM: And where were they living at that time?

DW: They were living actually quite near Fordham.

SM: Oh really?

DW: I don't remember the name of the street — what's that broad street, something Parkway? Was it Mosholu Parkway?

SM: Yeah, there's Mosholu Parkway there and there's Pelham Parkway there also.

DW: I think it was Pelham Park. We were living just off Pelham Parkway. But when I was six months old, they moved to Amalgamated Housing Corporation, so that's the only home I remember until later on.

SM: Great. So yeah, tell me a little bit about Amalgamated. What was the environment like there? Was it predominantly Jewish?

DW: So I don't know if other people — have other people spoken to you about Amalgamated?

SM: Not really, and that's why I was interested. I've done some reading. I mean, I know a lot of people lived in Co-op City, things like that, but not so much —

DW: So Amalgamated was, I think, really idyllic. And everybody I've ever spoken to feels that way. I don't know anyone who had an unhappy childhood there. I think part of it was that it was a very

homogeneous neighborhood; it was probably 99.9% Jewish. And, at least my group of friends were predominantly children of immigrants. And I'm sure there were some American kids whose parents were Democrats, but almost everybody I knew either was a Socialist or a Communist. It was founded as a socialist co-op by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. It was absolutely gorgeous. I lived in the first building, which no longer exists. And there were archways and there were fountains, and there were gardens. And everybody really — it was a very, very strong community. So if a kid would run across the grass, for instance, any stranger would feel free to tell the kid, you know, “We don't do that here.” And everything was socialist so there was a theater group, and there was a pottery group, and there were rooms and money given to each of these millions of groups. As a child, I just remember you would go out and play and your parents never felt it wasn't safe. There were millions and millions of kids, which, I guess, was the situation of baby boomers, by definition.

But I think what was different about this neighborhood, in part, was the immigrant kids — who were a sizable minority, if not a majority — did not have extended families. So, for instance, I and my brother went to Arbeiter Ring — went to a Workmen's Circle Yiddish class — that was every day after school. And I just kind of remember the whole neighborhood going. And the whole neighborhood also had a third-night Seder. I don't think other — maybe other co-ops did do this. And I certainly remember, for instance, my very good friend — I'm getting upset — recited the poem “*In Varshever Geto*,” you know, a poem about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. And these people either lived through it or they knew people who [did]; a lot of my friends' parents were from Warsaw. So, the Holocaust played a huge role for even somebody like me who didn't have immediate family die, although I had extended family who did. It was a living presence and that, I think, for me, and I think most of my friends, was the major touchstone to being Jewish. No one I knew went to synagogue. I don't even think I was fully aware that there was a synagogue in the neighborhood. If you went to a bar mitzvah, it was like my brother's, it was a secular, Yiddish bar mitzvah. He gave his whole speech in Yiddish. Everything was in Yiddish. So it was very homogeneous not only because we were all Jewish, (there might have been a handful of Christians, although I can't think of any), most people were, almost everybody I'd say, was left of center, secular. God was just not a presence in anyone's life. I didn't know anyone other than my grandparents who lit candles or who did anything religious, although all the holidays were celebrated but not in synagogue and not with prayers or with God. You know, I knew all the holidays, Tisha B'Av, everything else, but in a secular way.

SM: That's fascinating. Wow, that's really interesting. And you mentioned when we were emailing about how there were conflicts between the socialists and the communists living there?

DW: There were. I can remember two incidents myself. When I was maybe in fifth or sixth grade, my mother started getting sick. We didn't know what it was then. And she wanted — she really needed an elevated building. And she was on the waiting list. And my parents could see that the Socialists were getting them and they weren't. We actually moved out of the neighborhood because she really got very sick and needed an elevated building. So that was something my parents told me, but I could believe it,

because I knew the people who were in power. But as an adult, I would say I was maybe, I'm guessing maybe 18. And most of the kids who had been raised socialist, because the communists had mistreated the socialists — I mean, badly mistreated the socialists, particularly in Russia, they were killed — they had a living animosity towards somebody like me, who — I was never a communist. In fact, my mother was never a communist. My father left the party before I have any memories of it. But I was called a red diaper baby because I was against the war in Vietnam and they supported it. So, you don't have many neighborhoods where fights are between — everybody's Jewish, everybody's secular. So you have to find some kind of tribal difference. To some extent it was between the communists and socialists.

SM: That's fascinating. Yeah, that's incredibly interesting. And so a little more about the neighborhood, what kind of other shops and amenities were in the area?

DW: The co-op ran a kind of grocery store. And in those days, very, very few people had cars. You'd just shop there. There was a candy store. And there was — you know, as a kid, I don't remember. There were a couple of stores, I don't remember what they were more than that. There was a grocery store and I remember the candy store. But what you really had, you were on the edge of Van Cortlandt Park. As kids, we would go into the park. You were just on your own to explore and to have adventures and to have great times. We had tremendous freedom and it was just beautiful. And we were also bordered by the Jerome Reservoir, so it was a kind of isolated neighborhood. It was like a little *shtetl* really.

SM: And what kind of games or activities would you get up to, anything in particular?

DW: I certainly remember that the girls would bounce balls and do “Hey, my name is Alice.” I only see out of one eye and I'm a total klutz. I mean, in those days, they didn't know it was because of my eyes they just thought I was accident prone so I couldn't do what some of the more skillful girls did. I couldn't jump rope because of the spatial [problems]. I was the steady ender who turned the rope and the other girls would jump in. We played hopscotch. There was a playground in the neighborhood and there were monkey bars and I loved the swings. But we did do a lot of stuff just hanging out in the park and playing pretend games. I remember in later elementary school, I would pretend I was a detective and I would follow people. I think I kind of did that on my own. But, I mean, I don't remember any — all the girls, I remember getting along. I don't remember any bullying. Through that elementary school period it was, you know, probably your friends were generally kids from your class. And there were four classes per grade. So we didn't have much to do with the kids who in the other classes— and it was a homogenous group. And so the kids in other classes maybe one of them I hung out with because she was in my building. And I remember we watched a Frankenstein movie in her house that scared me. I was shaking for weeks afterwards, I still remember that. I remember one game of spin the bottle. Maybe I was in sixth grade. All of this was totally unsupervised. At least while I lived there, because I moved in seventh grade. It was idyllic.

SM: Yeah. And where did you move in seventh grade?

DW: Then we moved one neighborhood over. I was like, across the street from Riverdale.

SM: Okay.

DW: It was a teachers' co-op. And I went to Riverdale Junior High School, which were probably the worst two years in my [life], you know, as far as schooling goes. And then after that, I went to [Bronx] Science where I was back with all of my friends from Amalgamated again. But the one prejudice I have in life is against rich people and it stems from those two years in Riverdale. Those girls were vicious.

SM: Okay, yeah, that's what I was gonna ask, if it was like a social thing. That checks out.

DW: I mean, I came from this island of socialists and communists to one of the wealthiest schools, and the girls had very different values. It was all about clothes, although it often is at that age anyway. And I didn't really care about clothes. And, you know, my parents — I always wore my sisters' hand-me-downs. It never bothered me. So I didn't change. I didn't accommodate myself to them. But I had a lot of grief.

SM: Yeah, that makes sense. And I mean, I think it's generally — and it's funny, because, as a young person, people are like, “Oh, you know, middle school, like kids are so much worse now.” And then I get the opportunity to speak with people like you, and it's like, middle school girls were always horrible.

DW: Yeah, I was pushed down the stairs. I was called names. And it was all about clothes. So what can I say? I tried actually to track down those girls. But you know, unfortunately, if they take their husband's name — and what would I say to them? There was one kid who was quite nice to me. And I did track him down. I thanked him. It turned out he was a bused in kid!

SM: That's why.

DW: Those kids, they just had very different values, it was all about — and I don't even think I was poorer than them. It's just my parents weren't going to spend a ton of money on clothes.

SM: Right. And so was the environment of the teachers' co-op similar to that of Amalgamated?

DW: No, it was just too little. I mean, Amalgamated was an entire neighborhood and this was two little buildings. People were much more just your typical, Democratic, still predominantly Jewish. But they weren't interested in making the co-op a haven, a heaven on earth. It was just a cheap place to live.

SM: No, that makes sense. And so were your parents teachers?

DW: My father was a professor, a math professor, and my mother, before she got married, being an immigrant, she was a factory worker. And she was happy not to work in the factory after she got married. She thought about working at different times but she didn't. She had, I think, two years of college. And she said that because she couldn't pass the math class — but I don't believe that because my father could have helped her. I think she just wasn't really — she loved learning, but she didn't see a point in finishing college, I think. But we were, of course, all expected to. I thought it was required. I thought the state came after you if you didn't go to college.

SM: Yeah. And so where did your father teach? Where was he a professor?

DW: Well, my father was blacklisted,. So, he could not work at any public institution. He had been at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies. So he was, you know, it's not just me saying, “Oh, my father was so bright.” And he wouldn't leave his parents because it's an immigrant family and they don't do that. So I think, basically the only job he could get — he was at Columbia, they didn't keep him because there was a quota on Jews. And then Brooklyn Polytechnic, as it was called then — I think it has a different name now — offered him a job. And he negotiated so that he wouldn't have to be on committees and he wouldn't — I don't remember what he got. It was a very easy job. And he took it, but he always felt it was beneath him, which if it wasn't for the blacklist, he would have done better but —

SM: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit more about school. So are there any memories from public school that stand out to you?

DW: I loved going to school. I was always with the same kids at school so it was — we knew each other very well. I mean, of course, most of my memories are from the later grades. I do remember one teacher, it was probably a fifth grade teacher, Mr. — maybe I better not say his name. But, looking back, we all thought he was molesting one of the girls. At the time, we didn't think anything of it, but now that stands out.

SM: Yes.

DW: And, on the other hand, he paid us all a lot of attention. He would read my poems out loud to the class. He taught us French as well. He was French Canadian. But generally, I was very, very happy in school. We had music, we had dance. I tend towards the arts, so those are the things I remember that we did. Maypole dancing out in the public. There were always assemblies where you would sing, I do remember feeling a bit uncomfortable because in those days, a lot of the teachers were Catholic. A lot of the assemblies we were singing, it felt like, Christian songs. But, you know, I was happy to sing. It didn't scar me for life. And I lived in such a Jewish ghetto I would say my schools were 99% Jewish until I got my MA. I had some Christian friends along the way, but I always felt Jews were the center of the universe because they were the center of my universe.

SM: That makes sense.

DW: I never felt like a minority until I moved out of New York.

SM: Yeah, I can understand that. And as a born and raised New Yorker too, when I went to live in Spain last year, it was a totally different experience. And were there any sort of minority students at all in your years of schooling that you remember?

DW: Well, I should say two things. First of all — actually three things. My parents, being left wing, sent me to an integrated camp. So at camp, the camp was about two-thirds Jewish and one-third Black. I knew Blacks, you know, they were friends although I didn't see them during the year. The second thing I should say is that we were deathly afraid of Christians. I was kind of raised to have my antenna up. And indeed, if we stepped outside our neighborhood, we would be — my brother did it more so — but when we moved to Riverdale, you were either Catholic or Jewish. And if you weren't wearing your parochial school uniform, you were Jewish. And I was beaten up, you know, called Christ killer, thrown to the ground, kicked, hair pulled. I didn't know if that was happening on a regular basis. I don't think it was, but it was repeated. Because this is pre-Vatican [II], so we did kill Christ. So that kind of reinforced my idea that you have to really be careful around Christians. And then the third thing, at [Bronx] Science, I would say that was the first time that there were Black kids, there were Asian kids, although it was still, in my day, it was still predominantly Jewish. When my daughter went, it was predominantly Asian, because it was based on the test. That's the way it fell out. I was very good friends with an Asian kid. And there was another kid, who was Greek Orthodox, who I was very friendly with at [Bronx] Science. But there were very few Blacks. And actually at camp I was quite friendly with a Black girl and I've tried to track her down, but again, it's probably — she's got another last name. But she was interesting, because the kids who were from Harlem were proud to be Black. She lived in the Bronx — in fact, I think Pelham Parkway — I think her father was either a lawyer or a doctor. And she had very, very long hair. And she would tell us, every day, that her ancestors were Native Americans, and that's why she had this long hair that “wasn't nappy,” to use her words. But we were close, I think in part, because we shared class: not that my father was a doctor, but you know, educationally it was similar, whereas the kids from Harlem knew a lot of pop music, which I knew nothing about. I mean, they were nice kids. We got along. But there wasn't much of a basis for friendship because we didn't have much in common.

SM: Yeah. And what did you say the name of the camp was?

DW: The camp was originally called Camp Juvenile and then they decided — because a lot of the kids were sent there by social services — then they decided to change it to Camp Hurley. It no longer exists, but it was near Kingston, and they still have a website for the camp that campers keep active. I don't know if you know the — what would you call him? Maybe, blues singer, Danny Kalb? You've probably never heard of him. His group was The Blues Project. He went to camp. He was our most famous [camper], but I went there from age eight to probably, I think, age sixteen.

SM: And did you often travel with your family or with your friends to other parts of the Bronx, the city, or upstate?

DW: Well, when you live in the Bronx, Manhattan is downtown. We didn't call it the city. It was just, you took the — I don't know at what point my parents let me do it but certainly my mother took me — I had dance lessons at the New Dance School. And then I took art lessons at the Art Students League in junior high. But many of my relatives lived in Manhattan. I knew Manhattan very well. And certainly, I would say when I went to [Bronx] Science, my senior year, I cut a third of the time. And it was basically, my friends and I would go to Manhattan, we'd go to museums, we'd go to foreign movies, so I knew Manhattan very, very well. I don't know that we ever went to any of the other boroughs. But with my family, we would take — I think in the summers, when I wasn't in camp, they rented a bungalow somewhere upstate. And maybe I went to a day camp there. And we took trips, like cross country. Once we took a trip to Florida, because one of my mother's sisters was in Florida. And I remember that mainly, because I remember the signs that said “No niggers, no kikes, no dogs.” That made a big impression on me.

SM: I bet.

DW: That's the main reason I remember going there.

SM: Yeah. And so, were you at [Bronx] Science during the '67/'68 Teacher's Strike?

DW: Okay, let's see. I graduated [Bronx] Science in '66.

SM: Okay, so no.

DW: But I remember the strike because that was one of the few times I've had fights with my husband over politics.

SM: Oh really?

DW: We met in '67 and we were married in '68.

SM: Okay.

DW: He became a teacher to avoid the draft. There was no way he was gonna go to Vietnam. If he was drafted we were leaving the country. So I'm wondering, if I got married in '68 — when was the strike? What year was that?



SM: '67 or '68. It was kind of both.

DW: So he must have certainly been student-teaching or something like that. He was — now what was that? Was that the strike about the community school boards?

SM: Yeah the school, yeah.

DW: He was more on the teacher side and I was more on the community school board side, I just remember because it was one of the rare things we disagreed about.

SM: No, that's interesting. And would you say that growing up as a woman during this time period, there were different expectations of you than your male peers?

DW: Are you kidding, how much time do you have? [Both laugh] I mean, I met my husband really young. So one political activity that I have that I know was mine — because it was before I met him so I must have been, let's say, sixteen — I was in a feminist consciousness raising group. I mean, my parents both really, really, really valued education. They both wanted me to excel. That was my father, in particular, he would have taken any — ugly, that would have been fine, but stupid, he would have had a hard time with. So in that sense, my brother was treated no differently. We were all expected to do well in school. But the larger world, I never — I mean, first of all, my generation in general, my corner of the generation, never thought about careers. We never thought about money. We never thought — we were very idealistic. So my idea about my adult life was basically formed by those foreign French films that I saw when I cut [Bronx] Science. So I thought, I just want to have an adventure. I don't want my mother's life. My mother was perfectly happy. But to me, the kiss of death was staying home and being dependent on the man. So it was one part there was something in the air that allowed us to dream big. I never thought in terms of careers that wasn't — dreaming big was not being a housewife and having kids. And my husband was the same way. He never thought in terms of making money. I mean, he did think in terms of not getting drafted.

SM: Of course.

DW: But none of us ever thought we needed a certain amount of money. I mean, my husband still shops at Goodwill, you know. So that was one piece of it. At [Bronx] Science, there was a quota for girls. Girls were only — at least what we heard and what we saw — girls were maybe a third of the admissions. The big difference, the big time that I saw things, was when I went to graduate school. And because I was married, they weren't gonna give me a cent, because my husband could support me. It didn't matter that he was a junior high school teacher. So he paid for all my tuition. You know, I never got — I think maybe at the end, they were giving me like, \$500 or something. And there was a real hesitancy to hire women, because there was still the belief that they were gonna get pregnant, it was a waste of money to invest in them. Of course, sexual harassment, particularly in New York. I don't know how it is for young

women now, but then you just grit your teeth. If the train was crowded, twenty men had their hands on you; it's probably still the same now. I think there is a difference with construction workers. Anytime you went past a construction site, you know, you heard from them.

But what I did see was, for instance, my mother got very sick and it was expected that I would take care of her part time, which I didn't mind at all. I loved her to death and I've never ever, ever regretted it. I do remember my brother coming home from out of town school. I went to school in New York. And I was expected to do his laundry. At that point, my laundry at home was not done. I was not going to do his laundry. So there were times like that, that I felt like he was not being asked to do what I was being asked to do. Of course, looking back, my mother was a woman and he was not going to care for her intimately, but he could have done stuff in the house which he wasn't asked to do. At that time he was in graduate school and he was a mathematician. So I don't know if — I think it was mainly because he was male. He did get off easier. But there were a million and one things from the outside world. And there were just a million things that you saw that made it clear that women were going to have an uphill battle. And the main arena I saw it in was career. Career-wise it did not help that my second book was on images of rape. But that caused major repercussions to my career. So I'm sure any woman you asked in my generation will tell you the same thing. If you tried to do something other than being a nurse, a secretary, or a stay-at-home mother, you hit that wall.

SM: Yeah, definitely. And so I guess, a little bit of a more easy question, you mentioned you weren't up to date with the pop music. Was there any other sort of music that you grew up liking to listen to?

DW: No, I didn't. I didn't know much about pop music. That's why I couldn't be friends with them. I liked folk music. I like classical music. I took piano. You know, my parents raised me [to be] cultured, my brother got the same lessons I did. I took dance. I took art. So I did like classical music and folk music. Those are the main things. Of course, the Beatles. Once the Beatles —

SM: Of course.

DW: You know, I kinda liked earlier rock, but I wasn't that interested.

SM: And so what about food? What kind of foods would you like to eat? What did you typically eat at home or out?

DW: Well, my parents, I imagine, were rebelling against their parents. So both sets of grandparents kept kosher. Although one set was socialist, one set were anarchists, which was at that time, kind of a branch of socialism. So I'm imagining the anarchists were not believers, but they did keep kosher, so my parents did the opposite. When I was very young I remember — I can't even think of the name — bacon in the house. Then at a certain point, they moved away from that. It was mainly traditional. Well, my father was a health-food fanatic. So he had wheat germ, and lots of fruits and vegetables, and I couldn't stand

the way he ate. I think we had a lot of traditional Jewish foods like pot cheese and farmer cheese. And it was probably healthier than a lot of people. We didn't have much beef. And we didn't have — I don't know what most people eat. Eating was not a joyful thing in my house once my mother got sick when she stopped cooking. The larger family was great when we would get together for seders. It was a feast, you know.

SM: And so you mentioned your brother had his bar mitzvah, but it was very kind of secular in general.

DW: Right. I mean, in those days in general, it wasn't a major, people didn't rent out halls. I don't remember anybody doing that. So he — somewhere, I don't even remember where it was, we have a tape recording — he gave a speech in Yiddish, my father said something, and I said something in Yiddish. My mother said nothing. The teacher, the *lerer*, said a few words. I don't remember much about it. I imagine we went back to the house and had some food. And I don't remember going to anyone's bar mitzvah where it wasn't just something in the home afterwards. It wasn't a big deal. You didn't get presents, particularly, you know, it was very simple.

SM: Yeah. And so, did you speak Yiddish in the house often? Or was it more —

DW: Never. My father didn't even know English until he went to school, even though he was born here. They only spoke Yiddish. So I know he knew Yiddish. And my mother knew Yiddish because that's what they spoke in Europe, but I guess they wanted to be American so they didn't speak it at home. I really don't remember them speaking it at home at all. So when I went to Yiddish school, all the other immigrant kids were speaking it at home and so I was always hopelessly lost, although they kept promoting me. I never really spoke Yiddish well. As an adult when I wanted to do Jewish Studies, I kind of got my Yiddish up to speed. I was never terribly good. I mean, I could read and I had a limited vocabulary.

SM: And so yeah, so what did you do after you attended Bronx Science?

DW: I applied to three out-of-town schools and got rejected from all of them. But I got into City College. So I went to City and all my friends, because they were kids of immigrants, went to City. I don't even think they applied out of town. And nobody thought about [if] you could get a scholarship. We all went to City, it was, you know, we were young. We were sixteen. So it was kind of like a different high school, in a way. We all lived at home, at least for the first two years. And I met my husband there when I was a sophomore. And because we had limited — we weren't going to live together, our parents would have freaked out — we decided to get married. You know, we just kind of did it on, “if it works out, great. If it doesn't, we'll get divorced.” And of course, that was 54 years ago. So —

SM: It worked out all right, I think.

DW: Yeah, for sure.

SM: And was City a kind of, I guess, you know, talking about the late '60s. Was City in a very turbulent period?

DW: Oh, for sure. Well, Vietnam, of course, affected all these kids' lives directly. And it wasn't just Vietnam, because I had friends who were Zionists. And you know, some of them just — two of my friends, two friends in my circle, one close friend and one a less — went to Israel and never finished college. So in Vietnam — I mean, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] was pretty popular at City. Because my father had left the party and felt like he was burned by the party, I was kind of raised to always think independently and not get sucked into anything. And if I see a charismatic leader, just by nature, I run the other way. So I was one of maybe five members of the Independent Committee to End the War in Vietnam. We had absolutely no influence. But SDS was a very macho group. It was not my speed at all. And we were active in — my husband and I were active against the war. We would go on marches. I think we went down to DC, I don't have a clear memory. You know, we were active where we could be. There were strikes at City, of course, at that time. Although most of our classes met anyway, I don't have a memory of how that happened. But you know, Vietnam affected our lives so you couldn't really stay neutral. And I think for all the people I knew, the biggest influence was the Holocaust because German soldiers had said they were just following orders. None of these boys were going to just follow orders. That was just in their DNA. They were going to think whether this was something worth getting killed for, worth killing other people for, because of the example of the German soldiers who thought you just follow orders. So I don't know a single person, none of my friends went to Vietnam, not one.

SM: Yeah. And so did you — you continued your education after City, right?

DW: I never stopped going to school, although I was taking care of my mother two days a week. So, and I'm sure other times like if they needed me. So I went part time. It took me a long time to finish. I went for my — when I graduated with my BA, of course, I never thought of going anywhere outside of New York. So I applied to NYU and Columbia and also Queens College and Hunter, and I got rejected. I'm telling you this because my first job was at Columbia.

SM: Okay, yeah.

DW: For my BA I was rejected. For my MA, I was rejected, and for my PhD I was rejected. And then that was my first job. So I was good enough to teach there but not good enough —

SM: Yeah. [Both laugh]

DW: But I had a very checkered college career because my mother was sick and I was an emotional wreck. I knew she was terminal by the time I was thirteen. It was an autoimmune disease that was just vicious. She would have periods of being okay but then hospitalization. So I was a complete wreck. I didn't start doing well until graduate school. Once I got out of the house, once I got married and out of the house. Also one part, my father put so much pressure on us that I was rebellious. I just stopped doing work because it was never good enough. But once I got out of the house, it helped me to see that I really did like school and I did want to do work. And my husband set a good example. You know, I had never realized that you had to actually do the schoolwork to do well, because my father had this idea that either you were a genius or you weren't. Well, clearly, none of us were geniuses, you know. And then I saw him doing homework. I remember the light bulb going off, because I had always just coasted through. "Oh, yeah, you are supposed to do homework."

SM: What? [Both laugh]

DW: College I had like A, B, C, D, every single term. If I liked the course, I would do well in it, and if I didn't, [I wouldn't]. So then once I got to Queens College, it was like, whoa, I loved it. I had great teachers and it was a new program and I did very, very well. And then when I graduated from there, even though I again got rejected from NYU and Columbia — you know, it's the old boys' network — two of my professors spoke to their buddies and within a week I had entry in both those programs. I went to NYU.

SM: Okay. That's great. So, did you — I remember you said you returned to Amalgamated. So did you ever live outside of the Bronx?

DW: Oh, briefly when we first got married. I don't think it was very many years. We sublet from my aunt's nephew, his apartment in Washington Heights for one year. And then we got a rent-control building in Inwood, incredibly cheap, I think they put in all new appliances and it was still, I think, \$78 a month.

SM: Wow.

DW: Yeah, well, it was in Inwood but the super was an alcoholic and he would regularly set fire to the building. Of course, it didn't bother us. But without our knowing it, my father put in an application to go back to Amalgamated. And one day they called me up and said, "Well, we have a penthouse apartment in Amalgamated, would you like it?" And I was like, oh my god, it was like [indecipherable] those weekends where the house or the building had been on fire because he got drunk and he set the building on fire. It was a walk up. You had to bring the garbage downstairs. And so, you know, going back to the Bronx was like, we both wanted to do it. So we lived in Amalgamated for another, probably twenty — it was probably something like twenty years. And our kids were both born there. And one was raised there completely.

SM: And did you see any sort of change over time in Amalgamated or just in the Bronx?

DW: Well my generation moved away. And so other people came in and they were largely — I did feel they weren't as committed to the socialist ideal. You know, of course, I have a kid's memory of how it was, so maybe there were plenty of disagreements. But I remember, for instance, somebody blasting music from their car, and it was not something that me and my friends would have done. So there were cultural differences. I had a neighbor who lived with broken glass, and I would tell her, "You can go to the office and they'll replace it. It won't cost you anything." And she just didn't. So I felt like there wasn't as much pride in the place. But of course, we had been raised socialist and we I didn't — I just took it as a cultural difference.

SM: And you had said — I'm sorry, you had cut out before. You had said "It was mostly —" what? What was the new —

DW: Black and Hispanic who were moving in.

SM: Yeah. Okay, that makes sense. I just — you had cut out completely.

DW: Yeah, yeah. But we were happy there. We moved out of that neighborhood because it was probably — first of all my kids were going to private school, which we could ill afford. But there were shootouts in the playground. There were a series of shootings, and I just thought, "It's time to leave. I'm not going to have my kids endangered." And so we moved to Riverdale at that point. My kids were already going to Fieldston. And they were both on scholarship at Fieldston. And we moved to Riverdale and we really — we thought we could afford it, but we couldn't. And that ended up causing us to move out of town. If we had stayed in Amalgamated, we could have afforded it, but I didn't feel safe. It was also — the first year that we moved to Amalgamated I was severely attacked. It was an attempted rape. And I had a concussion and a lacerated eye and a broken jaw. And everybody, of course, asked — "Was it a Black guy?" It was actually a blond, blue-eyed guy. But I had that in my mind already. And then when the shooting started I thought, "That's it," you know?

SM: Yeah.

DW: But it was actually — and I think that passed, and it didn't get any worse. And I think it's fine. But I always, because of my Riverdale experience in junior high school, I always worried about being poor and being stuck. And I thought, we've got to get out of here. I didn't want to get stuck. I have friends who still live there and they can't move because they have no equity in a home. If they wanted to move they couldn't.

SM: Yeah. And so how did you feel about leaving the Bronx at that time?

DW: We didn't have a clue. If I knew what was going to happen, we wouldn't have moved. We didn't have a clue. I mean, to go from Amalgamated to Phoenix, Arizona, where it's so rightwing. And they pretended that they didn't know what Jews are. It was the most antisemitic experience we've ever had. And we had a young kid in the school. So it was — well, our kids are eight, eight years apart. We had one young kid in the school. They were under tremendous pressure to convert. I never saw so many missionaries. You know, it's Latter Day Saints. It's the second largest population of Latter Day Saints in America after Salt Lake City. A tremendous amount of missionaries and also just people who don't know about minorities and don't want to know about minorities. So the first year we sent our younger kid to public school, their diversity program was “Christmas Around the World.” And if I would complain about anything — like the PTA had a ham sale. And I said, you know, not only Jews don't eat ham, but Muslims don't eat ham, they were like, “We don't have any of those here.” I had already told them I'm Jewish. If I complained, for instance, about the music curriculum that it was all Christian. And you know, crap. It wasn't Bach, it was Jingle Bell Rock or something. I was given the choice that my kid could go to study hall. And basically, the whole way they dealt with minorities, we should all be like Jehovah's Witnesses and just absent ourselves. You don't ask for change, you just withdraw. So she goes to study hall, and every minority is there. Jehovah's Witnesses, all the non-Jews. So that was their ideal, that you do not rock the boat. I mean, you can see that, I think, with Trump, that you stay at 1950. When minorities know their place, you do not — I mean, we went to the school board to complain and they were like, shocked. They had never heard these complaints before. And then we went to the Jewish Federation, and people complained every year about the same stuff. So they did know but it couldn't penetrate their consciousness. Then we really understood what it was to be in the minority. I mean, it was eye opening to me, because even though I knew intellectually Jews are a drop in the bucket, I had always been protected. And there are too many of us, you know [Laughs]. The Jews that were there would tell us to shut up because, like my husband complained about a Christmas pageant at the school he was working at and he was fired. And the Jews who were native would say, “We used to have to kneel at the Christmas pageant. So don't complain that it's [indecipherable], we don't have to kneel now.”

SM: Things have gotten better.

DW: And we weren't going to take second class status in a public school. I called up a publicly funded school, it was a charter school, for my daughter to ask about — I knew how to phrase it. I said, “What's your science curriculum?” And they said — and this is a publicly funded school — “We're a Christian school; we do not teach evolution.” You can imagine going from Amalgamated, not only are there plenty of Jews, but your kind of secular cultural Jew are a dime a dozen, to a part of this place where even the Jews are telling you to be quiet? And we got Holocaust denial literature on our lawn. It was one thing after the other. We really felt oppressed. And we were only too glad to go from there to Houston. I learned there that a New York Jew is a particular kind of Jew, because there are so many of us here.

SM: Yeah. I think that's definitely true. And so do you live — you said you live part time now in Houston and part time —

DW: Our ideal would be to live half a year in New York. We have an apartment in another co-op. A limited equity co-op, also very inexpensive, in Spuyten Duyvil. Our ideal would be to live half a year there and half a year in Houston because our kids came to live in Texas to be near us, so we can't desert them. My heart is in New York but it hasn't worked out once yet. First there was COVID. This year, we're back again in Houston because my husband got gallstones and we didn't want to do the surgery there. So, yeah, we hope for half and half. In the Spuyten Duyvil apartment, we have a view of the Hudson and the Harlem [River]. It's just breathtaking. We're up on a hill and I love that neighborhood. We walk seven miles a day. To me, again, it's just perfect. And I feel at home. I can have gray frizzy hair and I don't stand out. People dress like I dress and I've made new friends because it's so easy. People are so much — of course, I have plenty of friends who are not like me, as an adult — but people who really get me usually are people who come from a similar background.

SM: It makes sense. And so I guess my final question for you is when you think back on your time in the Bronx, what kind of emotions or memories do you associate with it?

DW: I only have positive memories from my childhood in Amalgamated. I feel like it was such a tight community. I mean, I actually believe in integration. I don't think it's necessarily good to live with people who are exactly like you, but they were exactly like me, and it was just so secure. And you just felt like you were embraced by loving arms. It wasn't weird to have communist parents. It wasn't weird to be Jewish. It wasn't weird to be bookish. You know, you just felt like it was normal. I mean, there is a website for people who grew up in Amalgamated during these years and everybody says the same thing. And there were billions and billions of kids. So I mean, when I look at my grandkids, and they don't — you can't go out on the street and play. Everything has to be by car. It was just — it was really perfect as I remember it, but of course that's a child's memory.

SM: Great. Is there anything you want to add? You think I missed our conversation before I end the recording?

DW: No, I thought about it, but no.

SM: Okay.

DW: I certainly had my say, so thank you for the opportunity.