7-17-2023

Seperson, Susanne

Sophia Maier Garcia

Transcriber: Reyna Stovall

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than polished prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator. Time codes may thus no longer be accurate throughout the transcript. Where there are differences between the transcript and the audio recording, the transcript is the document of record.

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.

Susanne Seperson (SS): Oh, okay, that's pretty easy. So I'm an only child. My parents were Annie and David Bleiberg. And I was born in Germany and my parents were Holocaust survivors from Poland. And the way to come – the way to come to the United States was through Germany. It was easier for stateless people. And my father's brother – they both had some relatives, you know and my mother's aunt – great aunt – were all in New York. So, we came to New York because we had some family there. And I was two years old at the time.

SM: Yeah, so were you born in a displaced persons camp there?

SS: No. My parents had said that – my mother had spent a long time in Auschwitz so she said, "I don't want to go to a camp, I've been in enough camps." And since we had family, you know, they ended up – I think – from the story they told me, I think they were in a hotel for a few days and then they rented an apartment, which was a really big deal in those days because after the war it was apparently very hard to get an apartment. And this is the story I've been told. They had to pay $500 to the superintendent under the table to get the apartment. Which $500 is not cheap at any rate, but back then was a fortune. So that apartment was on Tiffany Street. And I remember as a kid being taken in a carriage to Crotona Park so it wasn't too far from there.

SM: And is that the apartment that you grew up in?

SS: No. I mean, when I was like two, three years old – really little. But then – my father first worked in a cleaning factory, which unfortunately led to his demise, because he was exposed to all these toxic chemicals. But at any rate, he opened up a cleaning store and we moved to an apartment in the same building, and it was an amazing building. And that I remember very vividly because I went all through elementary school, junior high school in that neighborhood. So that was off Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse. I still remember the address was 355 East 187th Street. And I'll tell you about that apartment – well I'll tell you about the first apartment on Tiffany Street, which was very, very large. But then in the 187th Street it had one bedroom, but it had marble windowsills. And I was very impressed with marble windowsills so whoever, you know, created it or whatever because it was an old building – we lived on the first

floor and there was no elevator. But on one side, you walked through all of these gardens to get there and we were at the end of the court. But when you looked out your window, you were like five stories up. So the whole thing had been built into a hill. And it had a marble countertop where you could make – you know it was really great for baking and pastries and so on. So I really remember that building very very well. I remember the garden there and they had like five gardeners and they used natural excrement for the fertilizer.

SM: Yeah, oh jeez.

SS: I remember running to get through that whole garden to get into the apartment because it stunk like crazy.

SM: Oh God.

SS: I remember that. I went to elementary school, which was, of course, the same street but down You know, it was so high up that there were just rows and rows of stairs. So that's my earliest memory of that neighborhood.

SM: Yeah, and so tell me a little bit more about the neighborhood. What kind of like shops and amenities would you all like to go to?

SS: Okay, so this was in the 1950s and it was all apartment buildings really. I went to elementary school to PS 85. I had a very good friend who lived not too far away, in the opposite direction of the school. But then when I was seven, I went to Hebrew school and that was the Jacob Schiff Center, which was right off of Fordham Road, not far from the Grand Concourse. And the big deal was – and they had beautiful shops on that street. Alexander's was the big store.

SM: Of course, yeah.

SS: And there were movie theaters there that I'd love to go to the movies because – it's just this great deal. The big – for 50 cents you got the A movie, the B movie, cartoons, and some news. And you could spend the whole day there. And the big thing, particularly when it got very hot, it was air-conditioned. And nobody had air-conditioned apartments. I mean, back then we used to go to Alexander's and just walk around just to cool off. You know, we had fans, but that was about it. But the highlight of my youngest years was not public school, which was fine. When I went to Hebrew school, they had a full-size Olympic swimming pool in it. You know, I could go once a week, and I learned to swim there. Well, let me put it this way – get better at swimming because I still love to swim to this day. And my friend Frances and I – she lived on Valentine Avenue – and we were like seven, eight years old. So it cost us 50 cents. We'd walk together and after we went swimming, we'd go to this place called Nedick's. And I loved Nedick's because it was a hot dog place with countertops. And I always had a hot dog and an orange drink and we sat on the stools and ate our supper out together, you know, eat out. And it was such a highlight, so that was important – mentally an important part of my childhood.

SM: Yeah. And what other kinds of things did you like to do for fun? Did you play a lot of those street games?

SS: I'm trying to think, fun. I don't know. I mean I did play Potsy sometimes. We'd use chalk and put it out on the street. But I do remember at a very early age, I'm gonna guess, maybe ten, maybe younger. Frances and I would take the subway down to Central Park and we went to the Wollman's Memorial Skating Rink. And we went there every Saturday, and I loved to ice skate as did Frances. And again, you know, kids were very independent at that age. And there was no fear like there is now. So we did a lot of walking around , you know, and exploring. And I remember going with my parents, in the spring – I had a great-aunt, ~~you know~~, one of the relatives on my mother's side – and we used to go to the Bronx Botanical Gardens on Sunday because my father worked the other six days of the week and also to the Bronx Zoo. But then the best place in the winter – I always went to the Museum of Natural History. And honestly, I knew every exhibit by heart, all the names I – you know, I loved that place. So, at any rate, it was a lot of exploring and things to do, like, you know, like that, that I really enjoyed it. And I remember when I was six, my mother had some distant relative come visit from Argentina and he only spoke Yiddish – excuse me Spanish and maybe Polish – but I didn't speak either of those. But the common language was Yiddish, and I knew my way around Manhattan extremely well. My parents and I always went, you know, did something on Sunday. And here we were, this man who I still remember, ~~you know,~~ my parents were working, couldn't take him sightseeing so I, this literal six-year-old, took him all over Manhattan. He was the adult, you know, he was in charge of the money, but I was in charge of sightseeing. And we walked all over Manhattan. I just remember feeling very important, wonderful, and thrilled that I knew the city so well. That was a great memory too.

SM: Yeah, of course. And what did your parents do for a living? Your father had the cleaning shop you said?

SS: Yeah, he had a cleaning store and my mother worked there, you know, for a while. And I think when I was maybe eight, she got a job as a bookkeeper in an office – maybe a little older, but I was still pretty young. And this was one of the things she – I was one of the only kids who had a mother who was working. And she got a job, you know, in an office. I can't remember the name of the first company but she got a job. And then she stayed a bookkeeper and a controller for most of her life until I think she was 90, she worked. And she passed away two months before her 98th birthday.

SM: Wow, that’s fantastic.

SS: You know, I come from a family that is, you know, you gotta make it, you’ve got to work, and it's good to be able to work. And my father, unfortunately, died at age 62 from pancreatic cancer with all that exposure to the chemicals from the cleaning factory. But then he opened his own cleaning store. And then after that, he opened a supermarket, and after that, he went into real estate. And the sad part is when the time came where was able to, you know, really enjoy life he passed away.

SM: Did either of them have any sort of higher education or – ?

SS: Well, my father finished elementary school in Poland, you know, they didn't require any more– and gained his apprentice status as a tailor. But my mother went to high school in Poland. They moved from a little town to a bigger city, and she was very, very academically gifted. So she went to a commercial high school and gained a business background. This is why there was a reverence in my home for education. Because as I said, besides those opportunities, her mother always said to her, "you don't need a dowry, your education is your dowry." And she (my mother) said if she had had a dowry she would have lost everything, but the education stayed with her. But she spoke multiple languages and she said it helped her during the war when she could translate, you know, and so on and so on. The highlight was – I was literally in kindergarten, I knew I was going to college. My parents said, "You are so lucky because someday you will go –" In those days, Hunter College was up in the Bronx before it moved. And I grew up in the Bronx, they said, "You will go to Hunter College and it is free." Because in Europe my mother went to high school, but you had to be able to afford it. And so that was, you know, from a working-class background to, you know, her parents to work to send their kid to, you know, high school, and she graduated from high school, which today would be the equivalent of a junior college. But there was just a reverence for education. I'll just say that.

SM: Yeah, no, I mean, that's something that I've found in, in probably almost everybody that I've spoken to, especially because of the first-generation immigrant background, that's what you do, you work hard. And you know especially –

SS: You go to school and you work hard to quote, "achieve it, make it." And my father didn't have that opportunity. And he – and as a matter of fact, before he died, he even said to me, you know, I had still had to write my dissertation. He said to me – I finished the classes and he said to me, "Whatever you do –" and I was thinking, get married, get married, and he said, "No, finish your education first." That's how important education was.

SM: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit more about education. So are there any other sort of memories from your public school days or elementary school that stand out to you that you remember?

SS: Well, I can just I – in sixth grade, we had the color guard and I was really thrilled to be in the color guard because we got to do assembly, got to walk down – and then I went to Junior High School 115 which was called EBB, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or "Everything But Boys." So it was a public school, but it was all girls. And what they did is the – you know, they had been a neighborhood school. And I guess it got too crowded. So they divided – they didn't want to do boundaries, so they divided the boys and girls and the boys all stayed at the older school and afterwards went to, I think it was DeWitt – the DeWitt Clinton High School – (Walton high school was the girls' High School and Clinton High School was the boys'. And the girls all – you know what, maybe that was high school, or wherever the boys went. They built the new school they gave it to the girls. It was PS 115. So I went to the SPs, which was called Special Progress, special classes of some sort. And I went to two years of the three years, so I got out in two years, which is good, because, you know, as much as I liked school and I was good at school, I really couldn't wait to get out and live life.

So I went there, and then we moved to Pelham Parkway. Which is, you know, another part of the Bronx further down on Fordham Road, past the White Plains Road and near Jacobi Hospital. So

then I went to the High School of Music and Art and I was an art major. And I really enjoyed that. And it was a little more sophisticated musically and artistically, and I just really enjoyed that. And then from there, I went to what was Harpur College or now SUNY Binghamton. And from there back to the city to the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. So that's, you know, the trajectory of my academic career.

SM: Yeah, did – okay, multiple questions come about. First, when you were living on, I guess, you know, on 187th and then Pelham Parkway, were the neighborhoods primarily Jewish at that time, or was it kind of mixed?

SS: It was mixed, it was definitely mixed. But most of my friends were Jewish, I will say that. And it was just – and they were from public school. But I'll be honest, my class was mostly Jewish because on Tuesday afternoons, they had religious instruction where they let you out early. And I went to Hebrew school at the Jacob A. Schiff Center, where I could swim. I went there four days a week. So we had Sunday school, and then it was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, but Tuesdays for a longer period. And so when the Jewish kids left the class, they didn't teach anything because I think there were three kids left in the class, and they were always resentful. And I think the Catholic kids went to their religious instruction but there just weren't that many. There were only three kids who were left in the class on that Tuesday when we got out early. So it was, you know – there were a lot of Jews, so I'm gonna say most of my friends were Jewish because – not all of them, I might add, but just that's what the school was made up of.

SM: Yeah. And did that change at Music and Art? I mean that – because that takes obviously from all parts of the city.

SS: You know, it's ironic. I'm trying to think who my close friends – I would say – when I was in elementary school there was one – they call them African Americans now. Then we called them something else. But one boy and there was one girl who was mixed. And I was friendly with the girl. And then there was a young boy that I was friendly with who was definitely not Jewish. And I always wondered if he was – his name was Steven McDonald – and I always wonder if he was the one who became the police who was shot, because I have no idea. But, you know, obviously not Jewish. By the time – again, when I went to junior high school, it was almost all Jewish again. When I went to high school it was very mixed. And I had mixed friends of different racial and religious backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds and so on. But you know, really, it wasn't an issue. I don't know how else to describe it that this wasn't an issue. And I think part of it was music and art because I know this will sound dumb and egotistic, but we all felt very fortunate that we were at Music and Art and it was such a liberating environment. We knew we were special so that's what connected us. The differences really – many of my friends were not Jewish. It just wasn't an issue. You know, it was like, you're into the arts, we're musicians, we're artists. It was just – there was a different kind of thinking and I really, really liked that.

SM: Yeah. And what was your experience like there? Did you feel like you got a good, like education or – ?

SS: I got a fabulous education in everything, not just art or music. I mean, it was a really solid education. The teachers were great. I think the only thing I missed during that time was because they were so – what can I say, avant-garde, we didn't have a senior prom or anything like that. And at that point, we lived in Pelham Parkway where most of the kids – almost all the other kids went to Christopher Columbus High School and we moved there because we had relatives close to there and they all had, you know, parties and they all had senior dances. And I didn't have that and it didn't exist in my school. So it just didn't exist so that, I would say the one thing that I felt lacking. But as far as the education goes, it was excellent.

SM: And so what kind of music did you like to listen to?

SS: 60s, popular 60s music. But I was an art major so I really liked my art like that, you know, I loved – I loved going to museums and just learning. I think what I really enjoyed and it sort of explains my background. I became a sociologist. I enjoy seeing art in its historical context, like why they made art certain ways and what was popular at different times, and how it was usually a reaction to something, you know. And then enough of this it's time to start something new. You know, so I would say for my own pleasure, I feel 60s music.

SM: Yeah, that's funny. I am an appreciator of art for the same reasons but as a student of history as opposed to a student of sociology.

SS: Okay, all right. I get it.

SM: And so what about food? What kind of food did your family usually eat? Did you go out to eat at all?

SS: Okay, when I was a kid, first of all, I grew up in a kosher home. So when I was a kid we – I can't even remember eating out except for Carvel, which was a real treat – or Jahn's there was a wonderful ice cream parlor that we went to and then we went with all my cousins. At the end of the year, we'd always have somebody graduating from somewhere. So we got the "kitchen sink," I remember that. But as far as my mother was a fabulous baker and a cook and so on. I celebrated all the Jewish holidays. So my father's brother and his children would come over for holidays. So Sunday was the day we were all home, my mother would make – I don't remember what we had. I remember she made a potato kugel just kind of like a big potato pancake. I remember that was really, really good. And on the High Holidays, she would make a babka, which was also very delicious. And she made gefilte fish which I didn't love love. But on Friday, she would do the chicken soup and frankly, I hated the meat from the soup. So, it's not a memory that I dwell on. But she was a great cook and baker and you know I have some of her recipes which I make – which is good as my children like it as do my grandchildren.

SM: Yeah. And so, you know, you kept kosher you attended religious school. So, was your family pretty religious?

SS: Yes and no. My father always worked on Saturday. So we went to the services only on the High Holidays. But we always did the Passover Seder, and we always celebrated Hanukkah. So it's kind of – we're not kosher anymore, but then kosher meant being kosher at home. But when

you go out, you can eat anything, but don't eat pork, and then it got to, don't eat shrimp, but hey, we all like shrimp. So it just – it evolved [laughter]. When I got married – my husband did not grow up in a kosher home. And at the beginning, we tried, and then I said, you know what, this is not what's meaningful to me. So we gave it up.

SM: And did you like attending religious school at Jacob Schiff?

SS: I hated it, everything about it. The only – and I had to go Saturday mornings to services too, so I was there literally Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. And so I know, I know how to read and write Hebrew. I, you know, I know a lot compared to other kids who didn't get as much of an education in Hebrew. And I can say, as an adult, that's fine. But, you know, it wasn't what I really wanted to do, or where I wanted to be. But the highlight, what kept me going, was the swimming pool. That was really my motivation.

SM: And were girls and boys educated in the same way there or were they separate?

SS: Absolutely, it was co-ed classes. It was conservative. So everything was together, services were together, you know, it was all mixed.

SM: Yeah. And did you feel in general – I mean, I know you were an only child, but did you feel in general that growing up as a woman during this time period, you had different expectations of you than your male peers?

SS: You know, one I'm going to say, that's hard to say, but I will say this, it was definitely get married, have children, but also get an education. So the two were like two commandments, you know, I was definitely going to go to college, I was definitely going to graduate, and I was definitely going to get married. Those were the givens. I would say, as far as male and female, the time that I really felt it the most I remember I was – I graduated college – graduated school early. So I graduated at 19 – I graduated high school in 1965 and then college in 1968. I remember being paid less than a man, getting very upset. And I was told point blank, we had the same exact job, he had a family, I didn't. I remember that – this is a highlight, I applied for a credit card. And I was working right after I graduated college, which I could tell you about. And I applied for a credit card, I think it was Lord and Taylor, and they refused to give it to me unless my father signed for it and I said, "Take your card," and "I don't want it," you know, because I said, "I have a job, it's a good job." You know, "If you're not going to give it to me then I don't want it." So I remember being very conscious of all of those, you know. The whole – I mean, back in the early 60s, very conscious of the Vietnam War, you know, because everybody I knew was, you know, they were worried about their draft card. You know, their number being called. The Civil Rights Movement was huge. And the Women's Movement was huge. So I was, you know, very, very attuned to all of them.

SM: Yeah. What were your kind of experiences like with that? Were you ever involved in any of the protests, or were you just kind of –?

SS: Yeah, okay. So, first of all, I went to school in Binghamton and at that time, we knew what was going on. But at least the people I hung around, nobody really did anything. But I went to a

couple of marches and protests, you know, when I was back in the city after I graduated. I went with some friends, and it was – my parents were very, very leery about that, because – and they were right. They said the government is taking pictures of who is there. They were very weary about that. And I, you know, I went occasionally, but I did have one experience. I went – I knew I had to get a job, you know, after I graduated, so I did that. But then I took some graduate courses at night at City College, and that was in sociology. And that was the time – I don't remember what their names were, but there were a lot of protests, and they were firing different professors, and there were, you know, rallies, and I had just come back from Binghamton, and I said, "Oh, I thought it was a party that I was going to." Little did I know.

SM: Oh gosh.

SS: And it was not. It was a rally of people who were – let's put it this way, massively discontented with the US government's position in the Vietnam War and it was a place I should not have been. And I was able to get out, you know, gracefully and tactfully. But I really wanted out – there was a lot more going on that I hate to say it, innocent me knew barely understood or knew about. And when I saw some of it up close, it made me very uncomfortable.

SM: Yeah no, that makes sense. It's interesting, because speaking with a lot of people who were coming of age during this time period, generally people have – it was especially coming out of college – life was changing very radically, you know.

SS: They were. The thing is, I go to this party and it turns out there were people from the military who were AWOL. And I was like – and they were dressed to the nines in their uniforms with their rifles, and I said, "What the hell am I doing here?" I mean, I thought I was invited to a party [laughter]. You want to talk about – you know, thank God, nothing happened, and everything was fine but I think of myself – people always say being in the wrong place at the wrong time. ~~I go,~~ I could see how that could happen. And so I went to that once and then I said, "No, I'm not interested. It's not my cup of tea."

SM: Yeah. And so, what was your experience like when you first went to Binghamton? Was it a bit of a culture shock leaving the Bronx?

SS: No, I was dying to get away. I wanted to explore the world. So, first of all, in those days, there was a trimester. So I went in the summer. And there were 300 of us in the whole school, which was about, you know, it was smaller than when I went to – Music and Art which was a small high school. There was no culture shock because most of the kids came from, you know, New York City and Long Island, and Westchester so – and it was summertime and I just loved it. I had a wonderful time. And then in my – in between my – in between my would-be-called Junior/Senior, in between my second and third year, I took classes in Paris at the Sorbonne, and that was very exciting. And I went with a girlfriend from college. So, it was all good.

SM: Yeah, that sounds great. I mean, I know that – well, I guess, later – I'm trying to – I'm thinking of my European history that it was also a kind of time of change and in France too, but maybe a few years after you were there.

SS: [noises of agreement] So it was all good. So, at any rate, my experience – I just want to go back because I know you're focusing on the Bronx. When we moved to Pelham Parkway, we lived in a one-family house, a semi-detached house, and there was a garden – you know, we loved the backyard. We ate out all the time. It was a very comfortable place to go. When I went into the city from there, there was a train that got off at the Esplanade. I can't remember the name of the station, but it was called "the Dinky" because it only ran two stops that connected you to the number seven train to go into the city. So that was – having this little trolley car. I mean, it was a train, you know, a subway. But it was like a little nothing train station that we always had to go to. I just grew up – my high school years on Pelham Parkway – my fondest memories really of the Bronx, were the Bronx Botanical Gardens, where I spent a lot of time. There was a temple we belonged to on Pelham Parkway called – on Esplanade Avenue. The name is still the Pelham Parkway Jewish Center. I think it had the most amazing, amazing stained glass windows. I mean, like, maybe 20 feet high or 10 feet high something like –

SM: Is it still on the parkway?

SS: Yes, it's right off the Parkway on Esplanade Avenue. Beautiful. It's boarded up. It's not used – but the windows they rival the synagogue windows in Israel. I mean they're magnificent. And it always bothered me that, you know, I always said, "I just hope nobody breaks them." Because I knew from an artistic point of view they were not done in a medieval style they were done in a contemporary style. And I always enjoyed looking at them.

SM: Yeah. You grew up speaking Yiddish in the house?

SS: No, my first language, because I was born in Germany, was really German because I had a nurse and she spoke German to me. Of course, German is not that far from Yiddish. When we came to the United States when I was two, it kind of morphed into that. So that was the language – that was the whole language. My parents spoke Polish to each other when they didn't want me to understand. But, you know, my parents spoke English. My father opened up a business, my mother, you know, was there, and I went to school. I think I started at age four and a half. And I suppose, you know, my primary language. I mean, yeah. So, we didn't speak Yiddish at home, we spoke English. Except in the very, very beginning, obviously. I understood Yiddish completely and I could speak Yiddish completely. And if somebody said that, you know, I took German – I learned a lot of languages because my parents were multilingual and they always thought it was important to learn, I had an ear – a knack for it. But when I took German for my graduate degree, you had to pass a language exam. I went to the Goethe Institute one summer. And the thing was, I have a beautiful German accent and everything but my vocabulary remained at the level of a two-year-old or of a five-year-old. I had a very limited vocabulary, but whatever I said, I said, beautifully.

SM: I was the exact same way with me learning Spanish because my mom is Puerto Rican, but we didn't, you know, don't speak Spanish. Well, now I speak Spanish, but I didn't. But even in the days of seventh, eighth grade, when we're learning how to say, "Hello, my name is," "Oh, it's so impressive," you know? [laughter]

SS: You've got it, you've got it.

SM: So when did you eventually move out of the Bronx?

SS: Well, let's see when I went off to college, and then when I came back, I think I was there for a year. But then I sublet an apartment in Manhattan because I was going to graduate school, and I was, you know, working in Manhattan that year. And then, really, when we moved to Queens – I got married and moved to Queens, my husband, and then we were there for a year and a half, two years – or maybe two years. A year and a half – no I think my daughter was a year and a half, so we were there probably for three years and then we moved to Locust Valley, and we've been in Locust Valley ever since.

SM: Okay. And how did you feel about leaving the Bronx at the time and moving into Manhattan?

SS: My parents were dead set against it, because they felt that you know, a single girl shouldn't go off and live on her own. But I was very happy because I was going to school there, I was working, I had friends. So, for me, that was good. And honestly, I graduated college when I was 19, just before my 20th birthday. I wanted to see the world. I knew there was a big world out there, and I wanted to explore it. And you know, I just didn't want to be in a – frankly, a village, you know. The Bronx environment, Pelham Parkway community, it was like a village, and I wanted out. And the ironic thing is I love the Locust Valley area but spend a lot of time now driving between Locust Valley and Manhattan and before that between Locust Valley and Oakdale. I taught at a college in Oakdale, for 40 years, 42, I think. But I spend a lot of time now in Manhattan with friends and acquaintances because I do volunteer work at the UN. I represent Generations United, which is in DC. I represent them at the United Nations.

SM: That's really cool.

SS: So I do some good stuff. I mean, I'm happy with what I do, let's put it that way.

SM: Yeah, no, that sounds amazing. So were you aware, kind of over time of the kind of arson and devastation that was starting to happen in other parts of the Bronx?

SS: Oh yeah. Okay, so here's the – Tiffany Street, where I first lived. It was near where they made a movie called Fort Apache. That became the bad area. And so I was very aware of that. And then Pelham Parkway, quote, "was still good," that was totally Italian Catholic. I will tell you that whole area was very safe. And it was really – because of the stereotypes, but it was true, the Italian – a segment of that community that really monitored it very carefully. And with the – Pelham Parkway is a big strip, as I'm sure you know, of grass, and I remember going horseback riding there with my father as a kid. But one time, they found a dead body. And word got out that if this ever happens again, heads will roll. It never happened. And there was no crime where I lived, nothing. It was well maintained. But the real issue was when Co-Op City was built. That's when all of the middle-class people moved from Fordham Road, Grand Concourse, they moved to Co-Op City, and that, frankly, destroyed the Bronx because it left these beautiful apartments. You know, and they then just let – you know they went downhill. It was really very sad – it was basically an urban renewal project, that nobody looked at the consequences of doing it. Or there

were no plans of how to maintain the existing areas. Because I remember when the area around the courthouse about 161st Street and Yankee Stadium, that was the hoi polloi, if you lived on the Grand Concourse – my great-aunt that I mentioned, lived there. That was the fancy neighborhood, you know, and then it went downhill so rapidly. I remember that.

SM: Yeah, you're not – I've read – I actually read a – there's a book that came out somewhat recently about Co-Op City called Freedom Land –

SS: Freedom Land! I loved Freedom Land. I could see that from my window, my bedroom window, because it was high on a hill, I could see all the way out. Before they built it, believe it or not, there were farms in the Bronx. They had chickens running around a couple of blocks away. I mean, it was not like you think of the Bronx now.

SM: And so would you go back to the Bronx often or at all, after you and your husband left?

SS: I went, okay – I went a few times. I'm trying to think when. My mother sold the house in the Bronx, and she sold it now about 25 years ago. Because she stayed there until she was about 80. So we would go and visit her, and her area really hasn't changed. And we had a beautiful tree in the backyard, like an Apple Blossom tree, no magnolia tree. I mean, it was really very pretty. So you know, my children when they were little babies, liked going to the Bronx. It was a high point because it was so pretty. So, you know, I would go back. Until she moved, we went there I'd say regularly. Then after she moved she sold her house, we went back once, because the people who bought the house really did a magnificent job. And so they showed it to us. And then I went once back because someone passed away in the area, but after that, I never went back.

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

SS: That's interesting. One piece, I left out, every summer, my parents would rent a place in Far Rockaway. So I loved the beach and I loved going to the beach and I loved the water. So for me the Bronx, it was, elementary school was fine. junior high school, not so much, I didn't love it. High school, honestly, I loved high school but it was such a pain in the neck to get there because I had to take a bus and a train.

SM: Yeah.

SS: And so I needed – the classes because I had all this extra classes, they were long. So you know, that's when I felt like, ugh I have to come all the way up here. Like if you lived closer, think of how much better it would be because of time. But I would say, you know, very fond memories, particularly elementary school, you know, I had my clique of girlfriends, and we would play jump rope, you know, and we would just hang out. And it was – it was fine. When I was in junior high school, as I said, I had some close friends in elementary school. And it was a happy childhood. I mean, I had my parents take me, always to the Botanical Gardens or to the Museum of Natural History. I think once or twice, we went to – the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We also went to the Lower East Side because there were a lot of Jewish restaurants down there. And so we would go down there and I just enjoyed it. I loved getting a sense of the lay of

the land, I didn't feel constricted in any way at all. Every kid had a lot of freedom, the safety issue was not like it is now.

SM: And so feel free, you don't have to answer this but did your parents experiences in the Holocaust have a kind of long lasting impact on your upbringing?

SS: Okay, that would be a whole discussion in and of itself.

SM: Yeah.

SS: And I would just say this, I'm just saying in general, every kid grows up in whatever family they grew up in, and they take that as that reality as natural. Kids have no basis for comparison. And they're very accepting if they feel loved, they are very accepting of whatever goes on around. So you know, when you say like, well, "Were you impacted by this." I can't even tell you because I know I was, but at the time I didn't know that. Do you know, I didn't know to what extent – the biggest loss for me is I didn't have grandparents. That was a real loss. The fact that I didn't have brothers and sisters. I couldn't even articulate it, but I had very close friends, you know, a friend in particular. So it was more loss of family, but I couldn't particularly attribute it to the Holocaust. But I will tell you as I got older, and I've been trying to write a book for years now about my mother. I have presented a lot of papers and I've written parts of it and presented it to be published, but I never pulled it all together. Which is one of the things I really really want to get my act together and do. I would say yes, the answer is definitely yes. But, I didn't know that at the time. So I'll say the positive things were, it was go to school, it was, know a lot of languages, try to understand what was going on around you, be alert to political, you know, trends and things. Be alert to that because you never know what tomorrow is going to bring. But I can only say that as an adult, I could never have said that as a child. I was totally unaware.

SM: Yeah. And did you feel like, you know, that your experiences were different than your – sorry, than your peers with American born parents?

SS: I wasn't – it wasn't articulated that way. I will say, okay, my closest friend lived on Valentine Avenue, Frances. Her parents were also survivors. I didn't even know it at the time but I can tell you now, they were sent to Siberia. So their experiences were very different. She was one of three children. So, you know, was it an accident that I became such good friends with another, you know, child whose parents survived the Holocaust?– My other very good friend who was my best friend from first grade, and I still remember Jane – they left the Bronx and moved to Queens. I actually went to Queens to Bayside, and spent time with her on vacation. And they were all American born. And so I would say, you know, if we're talking about differences, my mother had a number tattooed on her arm. So that was, you know, that was a difference that I was aware of, you know. It wasn't that I was an ignorant child, because I really wasn't. But I couldn't have articulated the differences. Like I said, most of my friends' fathers – their fathers were in World War II, and they were all GIs. And I'm saying this now as an adult, it always bothered me like, "How are you different because your parents are Holocaust survivors?" It was like me saying to you, well, "How are your parents different because your father fought in World War II?" I know, my father-in-law who has since passed, but you know, he was away for like three, four, five years. I mean, for a very long time. Nobody ever said to my husband, "How are

you impacted by the fact that your father was in the war?" It was just whatever it was – he was born after the war anyway. So, you know, nobody says "How we were impacted by –" your parents' experiences and we just take it for granted. It really bothers me that people want to point to something. I'm not saying that we weren't, I'm just saying that there is no uniform or universal response to that. Just like there's no universal response to "Oh, your father was a GI during World War II, you know, how did that impact you?" Everybody's experience is different.

SM: Yeah. And that's why I, you know, that's why when people ask me how many of these interviews I want to do, and especially last summer, when I was doing it for my thesis, I was like, as many as possible. "Do you have a number?" I'm like, "No," they're like, "50?" I was like, "Sure," you know, whatever. Now I've done over 50. But it's really it's like, you know, and I'm sure that someone else coming from an academic background, right? It's like, if you're going to make a statement about anything, or anybody, any group of people, you need as many people, you know, saying the same thing. But then you always have to say, but this is not a universal experience. This is you know – these people say this.

SS: Look for patterns but you can't really universalize. Of course, there's a lot of variation. It's not – it's never simple. Reality is really a complex enterprise. I will say this, you know, my husband is a professor, and he's still working at St. Joseph's in Patchogue, on Long Island, and every year they do a Kristallnacht Memorial and they have a speaker, and I've spoken for them years ago. And they had a history professor – this was just a couple of years ago. And I hate to say it, I don't believe she got her information right. But I spoke up, she was so ignorant. I spoke up and I said "You're just absolutely wrong." And I told her how she was wrong. And the whole audience gave me a round of applause. Because – and I still remember what she said, and I just – "where did you get this idea?" So you never know how people are going to hear things. You know, and their interpretation of what they hear can vary tremendously. And her whole thing was about agency. She said, "The Jews, you know, they went to the camps because they didn't exercise their agency." I said, "You know nothing about this." I mean, we could spend hours, I could tell you stories about going into the camps or escaping from the camps and being in ghettos. And so, and that's a whole different conversation. But the point is, you know, I don't know who she spoke to or where she got this idea. And I just said, "I have to correct you." She's a history professor. I said to myself, I hope to God you never get tenure because – and she wouldn't answer me, she was dead quiet. I said to myself you just – I mean, I'm sure she studied something, but it wasn't very thorough. So that's why I'm very loath to generalize.

SM: Yeah. Well, this has been wonderful. But is there anything else that you think I haven't really touched on that you'd like to add?

SS: No, the only thing I would say is if you have the tape, since you're taping it, if you'd like to send me a link, that would be wonderful. And if you would also send me a link with anything that you write up about this. Or your link to your thesis, I'd love to read it.

SM: Yeah, absolutely. So yeah, once I get off the phone with you, I'll send you the written release so that I have your written permission to include it. And then once my colleague and I are done transcribing it, I'll send you the link with the transcription.

SS: Okay. You know, I'm involved with the Holocaust Museum in Glen Cove. Because the museum does tolerance, Holocaust tolerance education. And I suggested it to them, because there's a program – now I can't remember the name of it – like descript, I think or something. It will take this tape and it will print it out for you.

SM: Oh really?

SS: It's cool, I think it's Descript, D.E.S.C.R.I.P.T. because my grandson had interviewed me and he told me about it. And I – you still have to go through it because it doesn't like pick it up perfectly. But it makes your life a million times easier. Because when I wrote my dissertation, I also used tapes. And I sat, you know, with the headphones and typed it out and it took hours, and hours and hours. But now you get a running head start by using one of these programs. But the D-script one was really pretty good.

SM: All right. Yeah, that's great. We usually use Otter AI, which is just another one of those, you know.

SS: What's it called?

SM: Otter, like the animal. O.T.T.E.R.

SS: I think I remember he told me. My grandson is the computer genius [indecipherable] in my family now. He liked Descript, but he said it was much easier.

SM: Yeah, I'll definitely look into it. Because I'm always looking for better because it is true – but especially the difficulty right is always going to be with names. People use Yiddish words, you know, proper nouns of all kinds. So yeah, wonderful. Yeah. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I hope that everything goes well with your husband.

SS: It was my pleasure. And I hope in a few minutes my husband will be out of surgery and they'll call me and tell me you know, everything's fine and he's going to come home with me. So timewise I appreciate your patience. (Interview took place while SS was in a hospital waiting room.)

SM: Yeah no, I sincerely hope so as well.

SS: Okay, thank you. Take care.

SM: You too. Bye.

SS: Bye bye.