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"Robin"

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Transcriber: Casey Hunt

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"Robin" (R): I got it. I'm really new to zoom because I don't work anymore. So I don't have any meetings or anything?

Sophia Maier (SM): All good. 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.

R: Well, actually, my mother always lived in the Bronx. She was born in the Bronx. My father was born in Westchester, and his, family and my mother's family all were from Ukraine. So that's where they're from. So I guess they migrated to the United States. Really, I'm trying to think, where my mother's family grew up in the Bronx. And my father's family, as I said, grew up in Westchester. And my brother also grew up in Westchester, just for little while and then they must move to the Bronx where I was born. We lived on 205th Street near where the library, which is on 205th.

SM: Yeah. I think so.

R: So I remember when the library was built, as a matter of fact I had just taken out some photos from my storage unit and I found pictures of where the library was. So that was fun. We grew up in an apartment building until I was 12 years old. My brother and also my cousin Melinda who lived with us for a while. We moved to 208th street, in a two family home, and that is where we lived. And that is where I met Susan and she was across the street from me and that really was how I grew up most of the time. Yeah. You know it was fun in the Bronx

SM: So what year were you born?

R: I was born in 1944. Just became 79 [Laughs].

SM: So, should I wish you a happy birthday?

R: Oh, yeah. Thank you. No, we it was first and Susan's was yesterday. So we celebrated together. Yeah. Yeah.

SM: Well, that's great. Tell me a little bit more about that neighborhood that you grew up in? Was it a predominantly Jewish area?

R: Well, the neighborhood where the library is was mostly Irish, and Jewish. Yeah. But then when we moved to 208 Street, I would say it was a Jewish, mostly Jewish area. Although my brother did go to Fordham University. Yeah. I'm trying to think we went to the playground a lot, which was called the oval. Which was always fun. We used to bike ride. And we also um played basketball. And it was nice. It was, it was a fun area, it was good. And the schooling was I went oh, yeah, I should tell you. I went to public school, PS 56, which is, I believe, now on 207th Street and it was considered that an experimental school because when we were in the sixth grade, we were taught Spanish. And then we went, then I went to JHS 80. Yeah, so that's where Diana and Susan, and I became friends. And that's why we hung out together all the time. So it was fun.

SM: I guess I find it interesting that you mentioned that it was experimental, because you were learning Spanish. Do you have any kind of particular memories about that? Or was that just something that kind of stood out?

R: No, I think that's all that kind of stood out. Because then when I went to junior high school where it was, like completely a blank. I don't remember anything.

SM: And so what kind of shops or other amenities, besides the library, did you like to frequent?

R: I'm trying to think, Well, we did a lot of bike riding and roller skating. And I did go to ballet school. In which I did acrobatics, and the ballet school was near the oval. And her name was Madame Nina Anderson. Also, a luncheonette on 204th St & Bainbridge called Atlas where I had lunch. Girls went there. But Susan and Diana didn't go, but I had gone there. And I'm trying to think what else? I mean, they had the parkway where the kids used to sit on the parkway, but I never did because I was too shy. My brother did. And um you know, I think I basically also stay with my family a lot. We did a lot of things together. Going away to Long Island.

SM: So did you travel often to other parts of the Bronx or even, like you said, outside of the city?

R: Well, like I said, we went to Fire Island in the 60s. And we used to go to Rye Beach, and also Orchard Beach, you know, in the 50s. That was nice. But in the Bronx, we really didn't go any other place, but stayed in our area. I mean, even though my parents had a car, we went out of the Bronx. Oh also. We went to the Botanical Gardens, we used to walk which was free. Now it's really expensive.

SM: I know, I'm thankful as Fordham students, we get in for free, so I can stay all day.

R: Well, the thing is, I belong to the Lenox Hill neighborhood house, which is across the street from me. And I had a trip. I think it was two weeks ago at the Botanical Gardens, and I was in shock. When I found out it was like \$35 and \$31 to get in and I couldn't even get into the hot houses which we call. You know, I was so used to doing that. We used to go to Twin Lakes and gardens and we walked over to the zoo. Well, times change. Then, when we went to the zoo, we used to get dressed up now. Even to go out of the gardens, we used to get dressed up with a hat and everything. Very fancy. Now forget that. That's basically what we did. Yeah. You can't think of anything else. I mean, yeah, just bike riding, like I said.

SM: And did you feel safe in your neighborhood growing up?

R: Very, very safe. We I don't even think sometimes my parents locked the door. Until we were robbed. Yeah. Yeah. But also we used to go to Alexander's and Loehmann's. I loved Loehmann's, used to go there. Take the train there. Now I don't know what's there anymore?

SM: Yeah, I mean, they're still on East Fordham Road there because that's my stomping grounds still. Because I teach at Roosevelt right now. I still go up there a lot. I mean, there still are a lot of different shops. They just, you know, serve different people right at the time. More Jewish. It was more like a Jewish Center. And now it's for you know, the folks that lived there now, but still a shopping center.

R: Oh, it is? Yeah. Well, they used to have Sears Roebuck there that that was probably near the university I think. I can't remember. But it seems like so long ago. My gosh. It was.

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

R: Excuse me? I didn't hear.

SM: What did your parents do for a living?

R: Oh, my father was an electrical contractor and my mother was a stay-at-home mom because my aunt was also sick. So she, my mother had to take care of her kids. So we lived in three rooms and it was difficult. But we managed. My cousin Melinda and I drew straws for who would sleep on the bed. Also my brother, he was allowed to sleep on the bed but my cousin and I either had to sleep on the cot or a bed. That's fine. It wasn't so terrible.

SM: Did any of them or did either of them have any high school or college education?

R: My parents did have high school, but my mother went to City College for a while. But then I guess she dropped out. That's what I heard. I'm not too sure. Like, I'm trying to think my mother lived on St. Ann's Avenue.

SM: But do you remember any stories about what her experiences were like growing up in the Bronx even earlier?

R: Um, no. All I remember, I think, is when she went on the train and she bought her mother a Christmas present and her mother was very upset about it. That was about it. They didn't say too much about what happened.

SM: Yeah. Go ahead, sorry.

R: Yeah, no, that's okay. Even my father just did some easy work on their property.

SM: Really? Yeah, I think that, you know, that's part of the reason why I enjoyed doing this project and getting to talk to people because then it's recorded, written down so that people can see.

R: You know, what I remember mostly also, is, oh, the Bronx, we have such big hills. And I was so afraid to cross Bainbridge Avenue. It was like, tremendous, when I was young. When I was older, I said, "Why was I afraid?"

SM: And so, a little bit more about your school experience. Do you have any memories from your time at PS 56 that stand out to you?

RG: Truthfully, no not really, because I was teased a lot. So it just went over my head. So I don't, I don't want to remember. But I did have a good friend there, Marjorie. And we stuck together before I moved to 208th the street.

SM: So what about your time at junior high school?

R: Oh, God, I hated it. I hated Evander, I hated it. I couldn't wait to get out of it. And then at 16 I had a boyfriend and everything went over my head in school.

SM: Why did you hate school? Just kind of negative things or?

R: Negative. And I just, I guess I didn't like the classes and everything. I was too much into my acrobatics and dancing. Hey, you couldn't do that. I mean, it's just, it was awful. But I did do the co-op program, which works one week and goes to school a week. So they gave us a test. And I worked as a key punch operator for the city. And I was earning a lot of money. \$65 a week. And everybody else who was a messenger or something. Earning 35 or 40. I was earning a lot of money. But yeah, I didn't pursue that career.

SM: And would you say that education was something that was important in your life or within your family, or were there other things that took place?

R: No, it wasn't important at all. If I wanted to go, you know, it was fine with them. They didn't care, right? I guess I was into my own little boyfriend, and they knew I was gonna get married. So education was like, at the time, the women really didn't work but it never worked out anyhow.

SM: Yeah, well, that's what I usually ask about, you know, if growing up as a woman during this period, the expectations of you were different than, say, your brother or your male peers.

R: My brother did whatever he wanted to do. If he wanted to go to Fordham, it was fine. And he became an electrical contractor and they didn't push anything. It was up to us what we wanted to do, so I guess I was lucky, I was really lucky. And after my divorce, I was so happy to move out of the Bronx because I wanted to stay in the village a lot. I was different.

SM: And did you ever experience or witness any racial or ethnic or religious tensions when you were growing up?

R: My brother did, not me. My brother was beaten up. No. And I'll never forget how I am now. I'm thinking about when we lived in the apartment building and I opened up the door and my brother fell in because a guy beat him up and my father ran out to get the guy. But nothing of it, and then my father and the guy who beat up my brother became friends. I guess they talked it over and everything. It was traumatic.

S: Like an Irish guy, or?

R: He was an Irish guy. Said, my brother was talking to a girl, and they were having ice cream together. I don't know who the girl was. That was the only thing but otherwise, we didn't have any problems at all. Not at all.

SM: And so, I guess a little bit more of a fun question. What kind of music did you like to listen to?

R: Oh, my God, I was more like the Mamas and the Papas and Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Things like that. I mean, I just enjoyed that type of music. I mean, people like different types of music. I was more like a hippie. You know? Still, I didn't wear all that makeup. Well, actually, I'm just trying to think. I had my hair like Mary Quant or something. But otherwise, that's what I liked. And I loved, we used to go to the village with all of the art. They had the village art show. My parents would collect art. So that's what we did. Mostly if it was an art show, we'd go down there and summers were always at Fire Island Always, we never made a stay in the Bronx.

SM: What was your experience like there you said, you know, in the 60s, and since you've been going there for so long, you know, it changed a lot.

R: It's completely different, completely lately different. I mean, they used to have beach taxis, and we used to take the beach taxi to the Grove, where seven guys could dance with one woman. I had a friend Chris, and she used to go with me. And then my mother and her mother said we want to go too and we all went together and we used to get home at five in the morning. So I loved Fire Island and now it's just busy busy but that's how things go. That's how it progresses.

SM: I know you mentioned that you liked to enjoy the art. Did you ever make your own art yourself?

R: I tried but it didn't work out.

SM: I was just wondering. I'm the same way, I can admire it as much as I want but I can't do it.

R: What I used to like to do was paper mache. That was what I like because you get your hands dirty. But otherwise, it's easier to buy it then.

SM: And so what kind of foods did you grow up eating? What kind of things did you like?

R: Not much. I didn't like food. I still have a problem. I'm trying to think what kind of food my mother used to make matzah brie when it was the holidays, I don't they didn't mind that. We had a lot of chicken I believe. Oh yeah. My father used to go to the bakery because I love crumb cakes. So he used to go every morning to buy bakery items. But otherwise food was not my thing. I just didn't like it. Anyway, my mother was not a not a cook [Laughs].

SM: That'll do it. And so yeah, let's talk more about Jewish life. Was your family religious at all?

R: No, not at all. No. My father was brought up in an Italian neighborhood. Although, my grandparents lived with us. And my grandfather was a Cohan they called him. And they really, he went to Schul like every week, but otherwise we did nothing we will really not at all. We did not celebrate too much. Or if it was like Yom Kippur, my grandfather used to say to me, old men and skinny little girls have to eat. So otherwise, we know we didn't light candles. We didn't do any more. Susan's mother used to light candles.

SM: And did you grow up speaking any languages besides English at home?

R: Well, my grandmother, after she had a stroke, she spoke Yiddish. Which I didn't understand too well. And I used to say, "Momma, speak English." And she said, "What do you mean? I am speaking English" (in Yiddish). That was about it. But no, we weren't.

SM: And so you guys didn't keep kosher either?

R: Well, we didn't eat ham. And we didn't drink milk with meat, and that was about it. We didn't keep kosher.

SM: Kosher style-ish.

R: Yeah. But, you know, people had different dishes and everything. No, we didn't have that at all.

SM: And so yeah, what did you end up doing after you finished high school?

R: Well, after high school, I started working. And I went, got an apartment, and I shared an apartment with some girls. And then, I worked at a place and the sharing was too much for me. And I got an apartment here where I'm living now for, like, close to 50 years. And that's it. So I worked in architectural firms in the accounting department doing things like that, I worked for an interior designer, and I did go to NYU for interior design, which I only got a certificate, which is not a big deal. Although when I retired, it was different.

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

R: Well, the thing is, is that actually, I never left the Bronx. Because my parents and my brother still lived in the Bronx, the same place and my brother picked me up and I went to the Bronx to go food

shopping. Because shopping here in the city was very expensive. So I used to sleep over still in my same room. So somehow, I don't think I ever left.

SM: And have you been back there at all? Anytime recently?

R: The only time I've been to a Botanical Gardens, otherwise, I wouldn't go back. I mean, it was sad when I had to give up my house. And now people, I don't know what they're doing in it. I know how my mother kept it. And it's sad. And I just don't want to go back to see these things.

SM: And did you see a lot of the, you know, changes like the arson and things that were happening in other parts of the Bronx in the 70s and 80s?

R: Truthfully, I just stayed in my area, and that's it. So I never knew what was going on in another area. You know, it's just like, you are just stuck in one place, you know?

SM: And so, I know that you had mentioned that. you'd like to go down to the village. Were you involved in a lot of the different movements that were happening in the 60s and 70s??

R: No, not at all. No, I didn't. I didn't like crowds or anything. I did meet a guy in the SDS, but I think he was ridiculous. There was violence and I decided that that's not me.

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

R: I had pleasant memories, because my parents made sure that we did a lot of things on the weekends. And, we went to my aunt and uncle in New Rochelle, or my grandparents. They made sure that we did things like even going to Playland, and they made sure that we were happy. It was good memories that I had.

SM: Yeah. And so, is there anything else you'd like to add that you don't think I've touched on or asked about?

R: I'm trying to think of something else. Watch when I leave, I'll go, "Oh, my gosh."

S: It always happens, but of course I'm around. You can always shoot me an email or anything.

R: Oh, I can? Oh, okay. So if I think of something I'll let you know, because I'm trying to think about anything. Nothing I could think of, no. Just as I still have two good friends, Diana and Susan. You have to be very grateful for that.

SM: Absolutely. Well, thank you. I will end the recording.