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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Irene Konig (IK): I have a more of a Bronx accent than you do.

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

IK: Well, my family started out — my mother was born in Ukraine. She was born in Ekaterinaslav, which was Queen Catherine city. And it's now called Dneipro. And it's in the Ukraine, it's right near the Black Sea. Near Odessa. She came over when she was two years old, with her mother, and her father had come over a couple of years earlier. And so she didn't know any English, her family spoke Yiddish and Russian. She told me, when she first started elementary school, she didn't know what they were talking about. She said she had no idea. And she said, well, what I did is when everybody stood up, I stood up, when they sat down, I sat down. That's how she started. She didn't have any bilingual classes, she didn't have anything. There was so many immigrants coming in from so many different places.

A lot of them spoke all different languages, German and French and Russian and whatnot, you know, so they couldn't deal with that. They just figured everybody's going to have to learn how to speak English. And her grandmother, who came over later, she only spoke Yiddish and Russian. So my aunt, I have an aunt now that's 103. She was the youngest of that family. And she told me she could never talk with her grandmother, because she didn't know any Yiddish. And her grandmother only spoke Yiddish and Russian. My aunt only spoke English. So she never really could talk with her grandmother. Which I thought was interesting. And they lived in the same house, after my grandmother got older. My great grandmother didn't understand technology, which I don't understand either, so when they got their first radios, my great grandmother thought that there were little people living inside the box. And she told her daughter, who was my grandmother, she said, "Make sure to feed them, because they're doing a lot of work in there, they're talking all the time and singing. They gotta get really tired. Make sure that you feed them."

SM: [Laughs] Oh, goodness.

IK: Yes. So then my father, he grew up in the Lower East Side. And he grew up, he was kind of poor — I mean, they were both poor. And when I grew up — I was telling my friend who's from Houston, she grew up in a house — I told her I grew up in a one bedroom apartment. It was on Morris Avenue across from Taft High School. And it just had one bedroom. And so there were four of us. So what did we do? My brother got the living room fold out couch. And I got what they called a youth bed, which is now called a twin bed. And then my parents had a double bed. So I and my parents were in the bedroom, my brother was on the pullout couch. And we were there until I was 15. And then the apartment houses started sinking. So the city condemned them, at least temporarily. So my father had to find another place

for us to live. And he found that place which was near Tremont Avenue, it was close to Prospect Avenue, it was East 180 Street, and it was above a glass store. And I had never lived in such a big apartment, you know, like, wow, I'm gonna get my own room when my brother goes away to Rutgers. So I got my own room eventually. And we were there a couple of years. There were only two problems that I could see, there may have been more. One was that, once or twice a year, there were these terrible fumes coming up from the glass store. They would just come right up into our house and we had to keep the windows open, even if it was very cold, because the smell was terrible. It must have been some kind of chemical they were using. And the other problem was there was a bar on the street. So sometimes we would hear garbage cans being thrown and stuff like that, bottles and stuff. But other than that it wasn't bad. And then I was finishing my last year of high school at Taft, so I had to take public transportation to finish it, because before I lived right across the street from it. But when I was a senior, I had to take a bus and a subway, I guess, or maybe two subways, I don't know, it was a lot to get there. And then, after a couple of years there, we moved back. My father, I guess, wanted to move us back to the West Bronx. So he moved us to Highbridge, which was a very nice area at that time. It was very quiet and very clean. And that was my last home in the Bronx. But, of course, you know about the Bronx burning, right?

SM: Yes.

IK: So the Bronx was burning down. The South Bronx was burning down. The South Bronx, at that time, was below 160th Street, south of that. And so, because so many buildings burned down, they had to — the city of New York — had to relocate all those people. So they put them in any available apartment they could find. They put them in the Grand Plaza Hotel, which was on 161st Street, and that went way downhill. You could see things, people putting wash out of the windows. That used to be such a fancy, fancy thing. People would have bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs, weddings. And it was so expensive, with a restaurant and everything. And then over the years, we saw wash hanging out down the windows and all kinds of stuff. So the whole neighborhood started going downhill. It was very sad for me to watch that. Like, what's going on here? Like, why is my neighborhood getting so bad? But on the other hand, I mean, down here in Austin, I was very conscious of neighborhoods going down hill. And so I created a neighborhood association here for my little neighborhood, which is about 535 houses. And I'm very positive on my email list. I try to send messages, "We're all in this together," "Let's keep it up," you know, and all this stuff. And I send out information, because I don't want to see what I saw there. Mattresses that were put on fire that came sailing down from the fifth floor down into the alleyway. That did it for me. I thought, wow, we've got four feet of garbage down here in the alleyway. When I looked up, and I saw that somebody had lit a mattress on fire and was pushing it over the roof, it came sailing down, I thought, oh my god. What has happened to this borough?

SM: Yeah, what's the thought process behind that?

IK: It's like, some people took their garbage down to the trash cans. Some people didn't want to take it down, so they would open their window and throw it out. That was so different from the way I grew up.

When I was growing up, nobody would ever ever do that. You know, ever, ever. They never would do it. So that's what the growing up was like there. But, I came down here for a visit. I decided not to go back. Because I thought, well, you know, what am I going to do? I'll go back and the neighborhood will get worse and worse. And what kind of a life is that? You know? To have to always be fearful. Like if you want to walk up the stairs in your house, and you could get mugged. And after I was down here a couple of years, my mother got mugged on the steps. She did get mugged. And then after I brought her down, about a year later, our house burned down. Our big apartment house burned down.

SM: So why don't we go back a little bit. Tell me about the neighborhood around Morris Avenue. Was it predominantly Jewish at the time?

IK: It was a mixed neighborhood. It was mostly, I would say, part Jewish part Irish. Probably some, I don't know, some immigrants. There were a lot of immigrants, you know? So I don't know what they all were. It was a very safe neighborhood. It was very nice. And I remember, as a child, the older ladies would come out for some fresh air. So they would come out in the afternoons and they would take their lawn chairs. And they would put their lawn chairs with the backs against the building, and they would sit there and visit. Almost every afternoon, if the weather was okay, they would be sitting there. While they were sitting there schmoozing, they were also watching the children playing and if they saw anything that they didn't like, they reported it to the mothers. I mean, they didn't actually stare at you, but they were watching, kind of while they were talking. So in a way, it was kind of nice, because you weren't alone on the street most of the time. There were a lot of people and that was nice. Here, there's nobody on the streets. Nobody, no children go out to play and no adults sit outside. Even when it's not as hot, they don't do it. So that was a really big difference.

SM: And what kind of shops or other amenities would you guys like to go to?

IK: Oh, well, we were a pretty frugal family. We didn't really, I mean, go out, aside from food shopping. My mother would take us to, sometimes she would go to the A&P, that was on Jerome Avenue. She had a shopping cart. And then other times, when we were little, she would take us to Bathgate Avenue. Do you know about Bathgate Avenue?

SM: Yes.

IK: So we used to have to cross Claremont Park. We crossed over. And she would have a shopping cart. And I probably went with her till I was about ten, maybe eight or nine or ten. And we'd walk up the hill in Claremont Park and then down the hill. And then we'd walk down to Webster Avenue. And they'd have all those shops with, sometimes you'd see horses and wagons, things like that. Then my mother liked — she had a fondness, she had a sweet tooth. Yes. She liked what they call Charlotte Rousses. Do you know what that is?

SM: Okay. Yes. Actually, I didn't until very recently, and somebody explained what it was to me.

IK: My mother was a great fan of that. To me, it was neither here nor there, but my mother loved them. A couple of times, after we finished shopping, she'd say, "And don't you want to have a Charlotte Rousse?" And I looked at her and I'd think, not really. She said, "Oh, they're so delicious. They're so tasty. Let's go and have that." And she would get us each a Charlotte Rousse. You know, to me, I didn't really have a sweet tooth, but she really, really liked it. And the other thing that she would do, when we crossed the park, if she saw any men, like, two or three together, like young men, she would tell me in Yiddish, she'd say, "*Red nisht dortn.*" Stop talking now. And I saw the man or men there. And she would have a straight face, and I would have a straight face, and we would just walk right past them. No talking. That was the clue. The signal. Stop talking. But she said it in Yiddish so nobody would understand it.

So we had a lot of good times. We had good times in Claremont Park. Only once I had an incident with some Irish girls. I was with a friend of mine. She was Jewish also, we had Jewish stars on. I don't know if it was a weekend or what it was. Anyhow, these Irish girls came around and there were a lot more, maybe three or four of them. And they were taller than us and everything. And then they saw our Jewish stars, they just got really [worked up], you know, "Oh, you're wearing a Jewish star? I think I'll take that off you." And they just ripped the necklace, so it came off. And then they luckily left us alone after that. That was the only time that I had an anti-semitic incident there. Claremont Park was a great park. It had playgrounds, it had bike trails. We would spend time there, when I was younger, on the High Holidays; my parents didn't belong to any temples or anything. So what we did, until the time I was in my early 20s, what we always did on the Jewish holidays, aside from having festive foods, is we would get dressed up and promenade. [Laughs] Have you heard about the promenading?

SM: Yes. Mostly I've heard about it in the context of all the people walking along Grand Concourse.

IK: Yes, they walked along Grand Concourse, also. Well, that was my last home, we walked along Grand Concourse till we got to this, I think it was called Mullaly Park. It was on 161st or 162nd street, on the Grand Concourse. That's when I was older, we promenaded there. My father would put a nice suit on, and my mother would get herself dressed up, and I would get dressed up, and we went to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. That's how we did it. And then when I was younger, we were near Claremont Park, so we would get dressed up, and we would go to the park, and other Jewish people would get dressed up, they would go to the park. So we would meet them on the benches. And then we would play and our parents would visit. And everybody was happy.

SM: Yes, I don't know, it sounds like a wonderful way to celebrate the holidays.

IK: Yes, I remember, in the Mullaly Park, I remember walking by, once in a while you'd see somebody you knew, you'd say hi. And everybody looked good. Everybody was dressed up. And it was very, very

nice. And when I came down here, I didn't really know how to celebrate the holidays other than promenading. So I had to learn, I had to give myself an education. The first thing I did after I was here a little while is I went to the temple, the reformed temple, to learn what you are supposed to do in the temple. How do you conduct yourself? What is it like? And so I educated myself. I kept educating myself. So eventually, I learned some Hebrew, I learned some of the Hebrew prayers and everything. But growing up, we didn't have it. My father, on the other hand, was orthodox, raised orthodox. And so my mother kept the kosher home. And so I still have remnants of that. I still don't eat pork or shellfish. I mean, once I did try it for a little while, but then I thought, well, what's so great about this? I can let it go. He was orthodox. My mother grew up in a household, her father was from that Black Sea area, and he didn't like religion. He was Jewish, but he did not really like religion. So he would not allow my grandmother to light candles or anything. He was just so much so [against it]. So the result was my mother didn't grow up with any kind of idea of what went on. You know? She didn't know. Neither, it seems, did her brothers or sister.

SM: And so did you grow up speaking any Yiddish at home?

IK: I didn't speak Yiddish, but I understood some Yiddish. And I had a great aunt, my aunt Fanny, I guess original name was Feige or something like that. Anyhow, she was like my grandmother, because I didn't have my grandmothers anymore. And so she would come and she would talk in Yiddish a lot of the time to my mother. And I would understand some things. And on Facebook, I'm on this group called, you know, one word of the day.

SM: Okay, yeah, other people have told me about it.

IK: So that's kind of fun, because sometimes I can read it, and I sound it out. And I say, I think I know something of what they're saying. Other times, I don't know anything. I just don't know anything. That's what it was like, it was very nice growing up there. I felt safe. I could walk to the Highbridge library, which was like, over a mile away, when I was 10 years old by myself. And I didn't worry about getting assaulted or anything. I mean, it was just such a relative feeling of safety, which I don't really have any more. I don't think anybody's got it anymore. We lost a lot in this country. We lost a lot.

SM:: And so you mentioned you grew up in a kosher house, so what kind of food did you all like to eat? What kind of food did your mom make?

IK: My mother just did regular food. But once in a while she would make — well I remember once she made gefilte fish and she used to make matzah ball soup for the holiday. And she always cooked a turkey, no matter what the holiday was. And then she would make brisket. I'm blocking the name, but anyhow. We called it pot roast — brustdikel. That's what she called it, brustdikel. That was the kind of cut, so she would roast that. One time I had shav, which I didn't like, you know what that is?

SM: No.

IK: It's like a sour soup made from greens. It's not particularly good, nobody likes it. Maybe one in a million might like that. And sometimes she'd make borscht. And sometimes we'd have kasha. I still make kasha. I just do it simply now. But otherwise, she just had the regular food. We didn't have any fast food. We had everything, she would just cook it. And then when I got older, and she was working, I cooked it. And we made very functional food.

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

IK: Well, my mother was a very bright woman, and she went to college, which was very unusual. But she had to work during the daytime because my grandfather, he didn't really support the family. He was like a black sheep. So my mother being the eldest, she went to night school college. And she went and went and went. She wanted to be a chemistry major, very smart. But she could only take that during the day. And she had to work during the day. So I know for her, and for me too, family is very important. We ranked that, like, at 99%. So she did not go for chemistry, and instead she was a Spanish major. So she could do that at night. And then when she did, of course, it took her a long time because she was working during the day. Then the professor there told her, she says, if you can stay one more semester and come during the daytime, I'll give you the education courses so you can teach Spanish. But my mother said, I can't do it. She said: my mother needs the money. She needs the money. I can't quit my day job and do that. So when she finally got out of school, she had her degree, but she didn't have her teaching license. So she got a job with WPA, and she taught remedial reading. But when she was in her 50s, and I was already a teacher, I asked her, do you want to be a teacher? And she said, oh, can I still be a teacher? And I said, yes, you can still be a teacher. So I helped her. They had the exam for common branches. I helped her study, and we talked about things, and she took it and she got it, and she became a teacher. Later in her 50s she became a teacher.

My father had a small advertising agency. A one man advertising agency. My father was a very sweet man, he was very kind, and people who were customers sometimes took advantage of him. And so he stayed with that one job. And sometimes he had a woman help him. But then my mother went in to help him when I was about 13. She went into the office to help him. But then when I got her to be a teacher, it was really hard on him, you know? And I remember thinking like, well, should my mother stay with him and be aggravated because people don't pay? Or should my mother have a chance at having her own career? I sided with my mother, but my father was depressed about it, because he didn't have her anymore and he had to shoulder everything himself. So it wasn't so good. But it was what it was, sometimes you have to make a decision.

SM: And so what about we talk a little bit more about school? Are there any memories from your public school days that stand out to you?

IK: Well, I mean, my public school was very nice. I first went to PS 88. For the first, I think, two years, first grade and second grade. I was terrified of going. I was really scared. And my mother walked me over there, and she picked me up. We didn't have a kindergarten, so I started first grade. Anyhow, after a little while, I got used to it. And then we were switched over to PS 70. And then I walked those blocks. And everything was fine. I was a good student. I had friends, I had a nice time after school. Then I got into the SPs, the special progress classes. I was at Wade 117 Junior High. That was a lot of work. I remember thinking, when I was in graduate school, I was thinking, my time at Wade was almost as intense as this. So so much work, because we were condensing an extra half a year. Then I went to high school. And that was okay. I was in ARISTA and this and that, I did well.

And then I tried to figure out what to do about college. And I don't know if people have told you, but they probably have told you that when we were in high school, graduating, the counselors talked to all the girls. And tell me if this sounds familiar. They told us, you could be one of three things: you could be a nurse, you could be a teacher, you could be a secretary. So you had to decide which one you were going to be. I didn't really feel drawn to any of them. I figured, eventually, I'll have to be one of them. So I started City College. And I was a Spanish major for about two years. And then I started taking art classes and I just was very drawn to it. There was something that was calling me. I don't know what it was, but it was calling me really strongly. So I said to myself, well, okay, it's calling me, I better listen to it. So I went and I switched my major to art. And I got out with a degree. I didn't know what I was going to do at that point. I had to teach, because you couldn't make a living as an artist. And I was still living at home, so it wasn't that. Most people at that time were very responsible. When they graduated college, they didn't stay home and do nothing. We didn't stay home, because we felt we were an adult. When we graduated from college, we were an adult, and we had to have a job. A lot of people don't feel like that anymore. But I felt like that.

And so I got a job as an elementary school teacher for third grade. And I had a very difficult class, I came in in January. They were a behavior class. And I had never seen anything like that. I mean, one girl walked to the clothes closet and, on her way, she ripped another girl's cheek open. I had never seen anything like that, ever. I thought, what kind of kids are these? What kind of class is this? And these kids were two years behind in reading and math. And their teacher, who was teaching 35 years, she quit. She quit mid term because she couldn't take it anymore. And I thought, wow, I was only 20 years old. I thought, you know, I gotta get these kids up to the right level, because, what's the point? If they're on the first grade level, and they're in the third grade? It's really bad stuff. So I worked really, really hard, very intensively. And I got them up. I got them up in those five months. But I had a problem because I had a problem with a principal, who was a nice person, but he was — there was a boy in the class, he was Black, there were a few Black students. And one of them was very, very bright, and he was quiet. The other one was very rough, and he was like a bully. And so what happened is that I was able to influence him enough that he got very excited about math and doing well, and he would even do extra problems at home and bring them in to me. And I was like, wow, Brian has really leapt ahead. So I was really happy about that. But then, when I talked to the principal, he says, well, he's slated to be left back. And I said,

why is that? And he says, well, because he didn't do well last fall on those tests. And I said, yeah, but he's made so much progress. He can do it now. And he says, I'm not going to change it. And I was so shocked. I was very shocked. I was horrified. I was sad. I thought, what the hell? I said, give him another test. You'll see that. And he says, no, we're gonna go on what we saw in the fall. And I said to myself, I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here, because I don't like what's going on. I don't like what's going on, and I have to get out. And I thought about all kinds of things, but I said to myself, I'm 20 years old, I'm getting out. I'm getting out of this. So I found another place to teach. I was teaching art in a junior high school. And that was going — I mean, it wasn't like it was the career choice that I loved at all, but it was okay. And so what happened there was that I was teaching a lot of classes, and everything was okay. But then what happened? Towards the end of those two years — well, my father had died, which was very hard on me, but I still went back to work, I was still teaching. I was taking something to calm down, but I was still doing it. And then what happened is that my home room, the coats in the coat closet were being stolen. When the children would change classes, and I wasn't in the room, some of the kids would go in and steal coats. So I was like, whoa, that was my home room, it was wintertime. And I thought, this is no good. I have to talk to the principal about this. So I went down to the principal, and I told him, I said, "I've got this accordion type of closet, and we need some kind of a lock. You need something to secure it when I'm not there." And he said to me, "Oh, well, that shouldn't be a concern of yours." And I said, "I'm their teacher," I said, "Their parents can't afford to replace coats all the time." He says, "Well, just don't worry about it." And so that really bothered me. Coming from my background, I have very high moral standards. I just do, and I still have them. And so I went back and I told the children, I said, "If your parents don't like the fact that your coats are being stolen, then you need to have them go talk to the principal." So a few of them did. And then I was on his list. What he did is that, at the end of that semester, he sent the art supervisor, who I knew and liked, she liked me, and he wanted to do an assessment of my teaching. And then she gave him the report. So then he called me down — this was like, I don't know, May or June — he says, "I want to discuss your report." And I said, okay, and he says, "There's something really wrong with your teaching." And I said, "Well, what's that?" He says, "The supervisor found some wadded up paper in the desks." You know, from drawing. Some students wadded up the paper and they stuck it in their desk. And I said to him, "Well, you know, sometimes children do a drawing they don't like, and they wad it up and they put it in their desk. And then they did another drawing." And he said to me, "That's not the mark of a good teacher." He said, "If you stay here, I'm going to give you the worst program that you ever saw. But if you leave, voluntarily, I'll give you a recommendation." [Laughs] So I thought, wow, I could take this to the Union. I couldn't do it, because my father had died, and I was still very tense about that. And I said to myself, I have got to get out of teaching, because two out of two. And I'm not in sync with the current way of thinking. I have to get out of here, because it's not a good place for me. So I left teaching, and I went to get a master's in psychology. I had several jobs along the way, which were very enlightening. And so that's how that worked out.

SM: And were you in school, either in school or teaching, during the 1967-68 teachers strike?

IK: Let me think. I was teaching, we were on strike. 1967, I was still teaching. I can't seem to remember that too well. But I wasn't picketing, I wasn't out there picking. I may have stayed home, but I don't think I was picketing.

SM: Okay. It's just something that interests me. So whenever people are there, I always like to see if anybody has any memories.

IK: We had Albert Shanker. He was a very good leader. You know, as I said, I could have brought some of these problems to the Union, but I didn't have the emotional energy to do it. I didn't want to do it.

SM: And so kind of, in addition to your experience with the school counselor, do you feel like growing up as a woman during this time period, that your parents or your teachers and things had different expectations of you than, say, your brother or your other male peers?

IK: They had no expectations for me. My mother just figured that I was smart, I would do the right thing. My father figured the same thing. So they never discussed what I was going to do. I mean, it was like they just never discussed it. They just assumed that I was going to do something, and it was going to be okay. And I assumed that too. My brother had gone on to get a PhD in physics, in theoretical physics. I didn't think I was as bright as him, but I did have more social intelligence. So I figured I would go on as far as I could go. It was not even discussed, it was just assumed that I was gonna do something.

SM: Would you say that education was something important in your upbringing?

IK: Oh, of course. You know, I mean, I wouldn't say my father or mother were intellectuals. My brother was. But yes, I liked to read, I was very intelligent. He was very intelligent. And so we just knew we were going to do something. We didn't know what exactly, but we knew. And I had a lot of confidence in myself, you know? I had self confidence. It's funny, I still have self confidence.

SM: That's great!

IK: I still have it. I have some friends who are still wrestling at this point in life with their image, with themselves. Are they good friends with themselves? I never had that. I just felt like I was smart. And I could think well; at this point in my life, the last 10 or 15 years, I've been doing things to help people. And of course, most of it is from my house, but I've been problem solving for people. I'm giving them resources and I'm calling them giving them comforting words. And I'm trying to do good work from my home, which is not as good as getting out all over the place, but I'm sending out positive vibes in all directions. And I think it's good, because people are thanking me several times a week, different people are thanking me, that's been going on for years. And plus, you know, even though I got sick, and I had to give up my whole career, basically, in psychology, but even so I was able to create all this art. I have

like 400 pieces of art. And I was able to sell some. I was able to give some away, and people were very happy about it. So I felt like that was a good thing to do.

SM: Yes. And so, as the Bronx began changing during your time there, did you witness any sort of racial or ethnic tensions that were going on?

IK: Well, I wouldn't say that I was a victim or anything, because I got out in 1976. And so I didn't really have — I wasn't around people for like three years before then. So I didn't have anything. The only problem I had with Black people was only one time, and it was a strange incident. I was 20 years old, I was on the City College campus, and it was during winter break. And on winter break, you know, there's not a lot of people there. But I had a lot of books, and I was going to the library. And so there were not a lot of people on the streets, and there was still some snow. And I was walking back towards the subway at 145 Street. And these three Black boys, they were probably about 13 years old, they came over to me. And they kind of surrounded me. And I was short. And I thought like, wow, like, what's this? You know, I had all these books, I had my pocket book and everything. And I was just walking to the subway, but they surrounded me. And I got really nervous. And I said, "What do you want?" And one of them said to me, "I want you to kiss us." And I thought, whoa, like, what's this? Like, I've been going to the school for four years. I'm trying to go to the subway, right? And these boys around me. And I was kind of worried because there weren't many people out. Plus I was encumbered with all this stuff. So I said to them — I didn't know what to say — but I said to them, "If I do this, will you let me alone? Will you let me go on my way?" And one of them says, "Yes, yes, we'll let you go." So I said to myself, okay, I better do it, because if I don't do it, I don't know what's gonna happen. So, I did. I did do it. And then one of them said to me, you know, it was gonna go further. And I looked at him and I said, "Look, you gave me your word of honor, that you would let me go." I said, "That was your word of honor. And I kept my part, and you have to keep your part." And one of them said to the other, "Yeah, well, we did say that." He says, "Okay, we'll let you go." So they let me go. But I was scared after that, and I thought — that was 1965 — and I thought to myself, you know, I can't do this walk from the subway anymore. I'm gonna have to take a bus and a train and a bus, instead of one, because I don't want to go through this again. I was lucky that they didn't abduct me or rape me who knows what, they were young. But still, that was the first time that ever happened. That's the only time I had a problem, you know? Of course I never forgot it.

SM: Of course not. That's not something you forget though.

IK: No, you don't forget it. But I survived it, but otherwise I didn't have a problem. But even here I'm careful about walking alone. There are some halfway houses around my block. And so I don't really go walking alone or walking around the neighborhood. It's a changed environment. Now our country is so split, I have never seen anything like it in my life. I have never seen people so extreme on either side. I'm like a centrist, you know, let's get along with each other. It's real crazy out there. It's so extreme.

And I think back to when I was growing up, I would say, we had Republicans, we had Democrats, but we didn't have such viciousness, and people wanting to kill each other.

SM: Did you have any experiences with all the protests and things that were happening surrounding the Vietnam War or women's liberation or anything?

IK: Well, the women's liberation, I just, I don't know, I felt liberated myself. I didn't think I needed liberation, because I was pretty liberated. As I told you, I had a good self image overall, and I didn't feel oppressed, I didn't feel downtrodden. I felt like I could do whatever I worked hard to do. The Vietnam War. When I was — 1965, they were beginning to do the drafting and things like that. And so not in 1965, but around 1969 or so, I'd say, or 1968. I mean, that was getting more and more known. And so I remember going on a candlelight march or something like that, with a boyfriend at that point, but I was not particularly politically active.

SM: Not related at all, but just thinking, did your family ever go on any trips outside of the city or kind of travel around generally?

IK: My family did not travel. My great aunt had a home in Chatham Township, New Jersey. That's where she lived. And so for the summers, until I was 14 when I started to work with my father, my mother took us out there. We spent summers in Chatham. Do you know where Chatham is? It's near Morristown.

SM: Okay. Yes, I'm familiar.

IK: So at that time, they had a big pool, they had a community pool, and we had an outhouse. It was pretty chill for the summer. And then when I was 14, I started working with my father in the office. And that was it. They didn't go on trips, we didn't have a car. We didn't go anywhere. We didn't go to restaurants. We didn't go to hotels. We just didn't go. My parents were frugal. And in a way, it was good that they were frugal. And I find that I tend to be frugal too. My father was born at the turn of the century, so he was an older father. And they both went through the Depression. So I was raised very non-materialistically. I'm still like that.

SM: [Looks away] Sorry, it just started to downpour.

IK: Oh, you have rain there?

SM: It's been raining a lot actually on and off.

IK: My brother lives in Queens. He's still living in Queens.

SM: Okay. I'm from Monroe, New York. If you're familiar with it at all.

IK: It's like mid-state?

SM: Not even really, I mean, it's like 45 minutes from the Bronx. So just on the opposite side of the river, but in general, yes, it's been raining quite a lot recently.

IK: Right. When it gets like that, it gets like that. So yeah, it was really nice growing up at that time, and it would have been nice if my children could have had that. My children grew up here, they were native Texans. And I started the "Damn Yankee" club here. I started a lot of things. I started a lot of groups and clubs and stuff, but I felt like if somebody ought to do it, I ought to do it, because I was smart and I was good at it. Like my husband said, "You're a good schmoozer." So I figured that if I see something that I could do, I'll just go and do it.

SM: I think that's great. How did you feel about leaving the Bronx at that time when you left?

IK: Well I came down here for a vacation. That was from my boyfriend, who I thought was still my boyfriend, but he had been here like two and a half years already. And he forgot to mention he was going out with another woman. So when I arrived here, I went to stay in his apartment for — it was supposed to be two weeks — anyhow, I was not feeling good. I was sick at that point. I got sick from being at Willowbrook, I got that illness we spoke about. And so I was like, okay. And then when this woman came in, I thought, like, who's that? Well, it turned out it was his girlfriend. And I thought, oh, boy, he forgot to mention her. She said to me, "Who are you?" [Laughs] I went out with him for two years in New York. And so it was very awkward. So I told him, when I decided I was going to stay and not go back to the Bronx, I told him, "I have to get my own apartment." I said, "This is too awkward for me." So I got my own apartment. It was the same complex, but I got my own apartment. They eventually broke up, you know. And it took a long time, but eventually, we got married. It took a really long time. And then we had two native Texan children.

SM: But you felt like it was the right move for you at the time because of the neighborhood change or —

IK: I thought about going back to the Bronx. And I thought, well, what have I got there? I have my mother. Aside from my mother, I didn't have anything else. I thought, well, the crime is getting worse. And I didn't like that, I was very uneasy about that. And I thought, well, what's the point of going back? I see what's happening. I might as well start over again. Sometimes you just have to cut whatever you're doing and just start again. A new start. And then I got my mother out after another two years, or a year and a half. I got my mother out, which was very good. And she had a wonderful life down here. A wonderful life. Because I was a good daughter.

SM: [Laughs] Well that'll do it.

IK: That's it. And I tell my oldest daughter, I tell her all the time, "you're a good daughter," because she's not as hands on with me like I was with my mother, but I don't need her to be. And she's a little bit like me, not that much, and something like her father, but she's a good daughter overall. And when they were little, we read the story of Meshka the Kvetch. Have you heard the story of Meshka the Kvetch?

SM: I haven't, but I'm familiar with the kvetch. So I understand the gist.

IK: It was about this woman, her name was Meshka the Kvetch, and she complained all the time. Well, I don't see my daughter as much as I want, my son doesn't call me and this and that. And she was always complaining, so my daughter said to me, "Well, when you get older, don't be like Meshka the Kvetch." So I try not to do that. I try just to send her positive vibes. And she's a good daughter. She has a lot of boundaries, which I never had with my mother, you know, because we didn't know anything about that. So she has a lot of boundaries, and I try to mostly respect them. And she doesn't hold grudges, which is good. So we have a good relationship.

SM: That's great. And so my last question for you, when you think back about your time growing up in the Bronx, what kind of emotions or memories do you associate with?

IK: Very good, very good memories. I felt like I was given a very solid and good foundation. I was given very good values. I had respect for people. I had a high moral standard. And I felt like I could do whatever I set my mind to. I felt safe overall, growing up, and I felt that it was just a very nice way to grow up. I felt that while I was growing up, and I felt it after I was growing up. So it was just like a slice of time that was very good. Aside from, you know, occasionally going under our desks for the atomic bomb warnings, that wasn't so much fun. That was only in the first, second, and third grade. And then we had the shelter drills, that was also about the atomic bombs. But other than that, it was okay. I mean there weren't shooters, there were no shooters coming in to kill us. And we didn't have any terrible things going on in other countries. We had a pretty safe and pleasant existence.

SM: Well, thank you. Is there anything you want to add that you think I haven't touched on before I end the recording?

IK: Well, I mean, will people have access to this? How will they see it?

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