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Acs, George

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

George Acs (GA): Well, they along with me as an almost 3-year-old, escaped from Hungary during the Hungarian Revolution in late 1956. And they got to the United States in 1957 February of 1957. My mother had had a cousin with whom she had actually been in Auschwitz, and you know, they obviously both survived Auschwitz. But the cousin got to the United States a couple of years earlier and was established, had an apartment, in the Bronx, and my family moved in with them. For a relatively short time, until you know, my father was able to find a job. He spoke no English at the time. They left everything behind in Hungry – across the border during the Revolution by bribing border guards. So, they came to the United States. Settled in the Bronx just because they had that one family tie.

SM: Yeah. And so where did your family end up moving once? Your, you know, once your father got his job.

GA: So they spent a little bit of time in Washington Heights, and then from there, they moved back to the Bronx, to excuse me, a little street off of Southern Boulevard. Not far from Fordham. But just down on 174th Street and Southern Boulevard.

SM: And so tell me a little bit. Go ahead.

GA: No, no, please go ahead.

SM: No, I was just gonna ask you to tell me a little bit about that neighborhood. Was it a predominantly Jewish area?

GA: It had been. But we moved there, probably, as it was transitioning. You know, within walking distance. Well, at the end of the block that we lived on was a Kosher deli, and within walking distance, excuse me. Where a big open-air market, including kosher butchers. Which was predominantly Jewish. In fact, it's a neighborhood that Colin Powell, remember the general, lived in, and he said that's where he learned Yiddish because he used to work for the stores, as what was called the “Shabbos Goy”. He was the one who turned on the lights and did those sorts of things for people who otherwise couldn't.

But you learn Yiddish in that neighborhood, and you know he would have preceded me in age by about 15 years or so, maybe a little more than that, maybe 15 to 20 years. So, it had been by the time we moved from there in 1964, we were probably among the last Jewish people. And I don't have that many memories. There was a large synagogue around the corner right across from Crotona Park, but really, and at one time, it must have been a fairly well-to-do community cause I can still remember the brass railings. The double deck kind of synagogue because the women set up on you know, separately up on top. I don't think that there were many people left when we had moved. So we had lived there from about 1957-58 to 1964.

SM: And where did you move after that?

GA: To Pelham Parkway.

SM: And is that where you spent most of your time growing up?

GA: Yes, yeah. And we were in the part of Pelham Parkway that was not the area where most of the Jewish population congregated. So we were off of Lydig Avenue, on the other side of Williams Bridge Road, heading towards City Island. In the other direction, it was predominantly Jewish at the time. Where we lived was really a mixture of Jewish and Italian.

SM: And what kind of shops and amenities did you like to frequent in that area when you were growing up, or you and your family?

GA: So back then, when we moved there, it was relatively new. The apartment building we moved into was less than a year old at the time. So the ones I remember mostly was a pizza place that we went to a lot, and you know, I still tell my kids that for 25 cents, we could get a slice of pizza and a little soft drink. And there was a little store, I remember, still a very nice woman was there 24/7 and it was called the “Party Shop”. She sold candy, baseball cards, little toys, nothing really extravagant. But you could go in there and browse and look around all day long, and she wouldn't mind. There was also, which you don't see very much anymore, one of those candy stores, a luncheonette with comic books and sodas. And then the neighborhood started developing more. And you started seeing, you know, a supermarket came in dry cleaner those sort of things, a Chinese restaurant.

SM: And so what did you do? When you were young and growing up in that area. What kind of things did you like to do for fun?

GA: We played a lot in the streets on the sidewalk. So and in the school yard and also along Pelham Parkway itself. We would play touch football in the street, and I remember someone would always if a car were coming, would just yell out “Car”! So we'd all scatter in between the

parked cars. We would play what was called slapball. I don't know if anyone plays that anymore against the wall, with a bouncing ball, a stickball in the schoolyard, baseball on Pelham Parkway, and basketball in the schoolyard as well.

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

GA: My father owned a dental lab so he made dentures for dentists, and my mother, most of the time, at least, until I was about 12 maybe a little older, was a homemaker, a housewife. And then, I think probably when I was in high school, she went to work in my father's office. So she did the books and that sort of thing.

SM: And did either of them have any higher-level college education?

GA: No, no, that wasn't something that was available to Jewish people in Hungary. My father had wanted to be a dentist, but when he was of that age, Hungary had something that my father used a Latin term he called it “numerous closes”, which basically meant they had a quota of no Jews in college or professional schools. In an apprenticeship in a little town that he was from and worked side by side with a dentist in Hungary. My mother didn't go to college. She was deported to Auschwitz on the day of her high school graduation. She was very, very bright. She was very smart. She could watch an episode of Jeopardy and know every answer, every episode. Yeah, she'd sew stuff up unbelievably.

SM: Did their experiences in Hungary or her experiences in the holocaust have a long, lasting impact on you when you were growing up?

GA: No, because they were the kind of people who never ever spoke about it. They certainly had friends or relatives, for whom it was a major factor in the rest of their lives and also had a great impact on their kids. But our family it was not like that at all.

SM: And so let's talk a little bit more about school. Do you have any memories from public school that stand out to you?

GA: Oh, sure. I went to a yeshiva, and I did that for 8 years. I remember, it’s probably an exaggeration to say nearly every day, you spend 8 years in a very small building and with largely the same kids for most of that time. You do remember lots of things. It was an opportunity for my parents to send their kid to a school which they never would have had in Hungary. You couldn't have sent them to a religious Jewish school, even though my parents were not religious at all. But you know it was an opportunity that they saw in America, and I still remember they had to pay $20 a month tuition, which was a lot of money. But they did it.

SM: And did you feel like you got a quality education there at the yeshiva?

GA: Oh, yeah, I got a great education and that was only with 3 hours of secular education a day. You know, the math, English, Science sessions ran from one in the afternoon to 4:05 in the afternoon. From 8:30 to 12:30 it was religious studies. But only, did I get what I thought was a great education, but in our graduating class, we had probably about 20 or so kids, 8 of them got into Bronx science. 8 out of 9 who took the exam and the one who didn't get in he only took the exam, so he didn't have to go to school that day. There was no way he was ever gonna get in, so in the era, they delivered a really pretty good education. Yeah, I have absolutely no complaints about it.

SM: Was it also predominantly students with foreign-born parents, or were there students with American-born parents there as well?

GA: I think it was a combination, when when you're younger you don't necessarily appreciate who the families of your classmates are. Looking back at it, my sister, who's about 9 years younger than me, had set up a Facebook page for the yeshiva. I've gotten to see some of the people who were there for years and they occasionally make reference to their background or to their parents. And it was really a mix of people, some who are first or second generation Americans. And, others who had literally just gotten off the boat.

SM: Yeah, yeah, I asked, because a lot of people that I've spoken to who attended yeshivas were predominantly people whose parents were the generation that had come here. Versus a lot of people that I speak to that had American-born parents were usually the ones that were sent to public school. So I'm interested if there was a trend in that way.

GA: Looking back at my specific class, there were probably only — of the 20 — probably only about 5, including my family, 5 or 6 who I know with a fair degree of certainty were very recent immigrants to the country.

SM: Yeah. And did you grow up speaking any languages besides English in the house?

GA: Hungarian predominantly.

SM: Do you still speak it? I know it's an incredibly difficult language to learn.

GA: Yeah, yeah, no, it's a really tough language to learn. I haven't had much chance to practice it lately, but I still understand it. And if I'm pushed, I can speak, maybe at a second or third grade level. But you know I can make myself understood. My sister, who really grew up speaking

English but understood Hungarian, has in the past 10 years or so taken Hungarian classes, and probably at this point surpasses me in language.

SM: And so where did you attend high school after you finished the yeshiva?

GA: I was at Bronx Science.

SM: Oh you were!

GA: No, I wasn't that 9th person.

SM: Well you left it up for interpretation!

GA: It's true.

SM: And how was your experience there at Bronx Science?

GA: Yeah same thing it was great. The teachers were really excellent. It was a difficult transition for me in that first year, but after that, it really clicked. So it was really good.

SM: And when you were there, I guess, was it still predominantly Jewish at Bronx Science, or did you get to experience going to school with a lot of different groups of people?

GA: Well, there were different groups of people, but it was still predominantly Jewish. It wasn't the way it was in the early forties or fifties where it was essentially a Jewish school. But, I was there in the late sixties and early seventies, and there was a good mix of people. My sister graduated 8 years later, and I remember being at her graduation and was really surprised to see how many people of Asian background were at the school back in 1980. And that was an 8-year difference, and it was really a quantum change at least to my perception in that 8-year period.

SM: Yeah. And I know it's predominantly Asian today. So it's interesting. I didn't know when that transition took place. And so did you ever experience, at school or in the neighborhood, any sort of racial or ethnic-religious tensions with other people in the area?

GA: There's really only one episode, and all the time that I was there, that and this was while in elementary school that some people came after us because we were Jewish. But, otherwise, no. Now, in the Pelham Parkway area, where I lived which had a large Italian population you would hear people using racial epithets all the time, in the era and in the mid-60s, late sixties, and early seventies. But at the same time, they were best of friends. So you know, sometimes, if you look back at it, well, that's hard to square. How can you possibly be both, or say both? But I never felt

any kind of, you know. Someone might call me a derogatory term. Then the next thing you know, I'm over at their house having lunch. Their Italian grandmother would be saying things. We're all the same people. So, I never felt that otherwise other than really just one episode.

SM: Yeah. And were you in school, or do you have any memories of the teacher strikes in 1967, 1968?

GA: So I have a very vivid memory, because 1968, September 1968, was when I started Bronx Science and the teacher strikes that was when the teacher strikes started. And I remember we were all there on the sidewalk not knowing what to do. And the principal of the school, Alexander Taffel walked up to us and said, “kids, go home there's no school today”, and you know we didn't really know who he was. At least the little group I was in didn't really know who he was. And then someone else came and told us, “that was Doctor Taffel”, who was really legendary before then, and he was just an incredible Educator. And then it didn't take very long for some of the teachers to on their own setup classes elsewhere, like in the Bronx, there was a place called the Jacob Schiff Center, where I went, which was right off Fordham Road, Valentine and Fordham, which was a Jewish center. Where I remember the woman who ended up being my homeroom teacher would hold classes. It was really an interesting time, because this was going on all over the Bronx that they would set up these ad-lib, informal classes. There was no credit for, but it was to keep the kids off the street to keep their minds still functioning. You know, after a summer of maybe really not having done much. So it's really a lot of commitment for them to have done that.

SM: Yeah, for sure. So tell me a little bit about Jewish life growing up. I mean, obviously, you attended the Yeshiva. You mentioned that your family wasn't very religious?

GA: Correct. Alright. We would go to synagogue on the high, holy days. That was basically it. And when one of the kids we knew, or one of my classmates had a Bar Mitzvah. Nobody had Bat Mitzvahs back then. It was all Bar Mitzvahs. But that was really it. We celebrated just like now we're celebrating Hanukkah, and we would do Passover Seders. That was really it. And, yeah, nothing beyond that.

SM: Did your family keep kosher?

GA: No, no! And in fact, my mother taught me a lesson that to this day, I think, is one of the most important lessons I've ever learned, and it was when I was in yeshiva it was probably fourth or fifth grade, and you see things in black and white when you're going to a yeshiva. And you know, even though ours was not really over the top, but they do in a way, try to indoctrinate you and get you to to think in a certain way. And one of those ways is keeping kosher while wearing a yarmulke if you're a boy. But so I remember once at home finding a package of sliced ham in

the refrigerator. I remember being outraged. How could there be sliced ham in the refrigerator, and I confronted my mother. Probably am a 10-year-old or an 11-year-old. And she looked at me, and she said “If it tastes good, it's kosher.”

And that made such an impact on me. Not just for the food. Yeah, but you know, for a lot of different things in life, I think there's applicability to that. So you know, it's not that you need to have situational ethics, or, to have fluidity in your morality, or anything like that, but that there's more than a rigid kind of dogma that should be guiding your thinking and your life, and you should be open to experiencing those sort of things. And that's lasted with me, for at this point 60 years.

SM: Yeah, I like that a lot. And the way that you're thinking about it, what kind of foods did your family like? Typically, when you are growing?

GA: Basic kind of foods. I don't think we ever had a vegetable other than a fresh vegetable, other than lettuce, while I was growing up. But you know there were a lot of frozen vegetables, bird's eye. My mother would make her version of Hamburgers, without the buns. Friday nights were almost always fried chicken and french fries. And she didn't really cook Hungarian style, because Hungarian style, even though, you know, we weren't kosher. Hungarian style mixes a lot of dairy with meat, and that was something that was on the other side of the red line. That was something that we wouldn't do or she wouldn't do. So there wasn't much Hungarian cooking. It was mostly you probably would have a hard time discerning it from, you know, American cooking.

SM: Yeah, makes sense, and so what did you do after you graduated from Bronx Science?

GA: I went to Fordham.

SM: I didn't know. I've yet to have actually gotten to interview somebody who attended Fordham during this time period and was Jewish. So did you have any anxieties going to a Jesuit school during this time? There are very few Jewish students now.

GA: So no, it never crossed my mind. One of the reasons was that a number of my friends, who are all older than me, went to Fordham. It never, never really crossed my mind. When I was one of the co-founders of the Jewish Student Union. Maybe there were 10 of us? Later on, I was in student government. We convinced the University that there were far more Jews. So, we got a much larger budgetary allocation. So, you know, even though there were 10 of us, only 10 of us or so in the organization, we were constantly putting on events, including mixers. I don't even know if you know what a mixer is. But so we were constantly doing events and parties. Hanukkah parties and mixers. We did a university-wide seder, and seders over the years.

With a very small core of people. But, it never crossed my mind, and you know the Jesuits. I thought the Jesuits were absolutely great. They were great educators, and they loved talking about Judaism. They loved the seders. They drank a lot, but they really enjoyed it. And you know, I had some great teachers who happen to be Jesuit and very welcoming.

SM: Yeah, yeah, that's generally been my experience as well. What, inspired you to, or you and your group, to create the Jewish Union at that time?

GA: I don't really remember. It was probably over beer, you know. Back then, you could drink when you were 18 and in the student center. Down in the basement, they had a place called the Ramskeller, where you could go for a beer in between classes, and I just remember, you know, meeting a couple of people in freshman year who just happened to be that they were Jewish. And you know we're talking "Hey, you know we should do something". There must be more. Well, if there were, it wasn't really obvious that they were, you know, many more but that was it. There was no real need to do it. It wasn't like, you know, we've gotta defend ourselves, or you know. Otherwise, you know, who knows? No, there was nothing like that at all, and it was much more for social reasons than for any political kind of statement. There was, just there was something in common.

SM: I'm your legacy. And I was the president of the Jewish Student — now, it's a Jewish Student Organization — when I was an undergraduate at Fordham the last 2 years that I was there.

GA: Back in the sixties and early seventies, we were much more leftist, so it would have been a union.

SM: Yes.

GA: That was the terminology.

SM: And were you involved in the anti-war movements that were going on during the period?

GA: It was actually a little earlier than that. Most of the anti-war protests in New York were in the late sixties and early seventies and that's when I was in high school. And yeah, now we had a number of days where we marched out of class and it went from Bronx Science, which was 205 Street, and marched to Fordham Road, which is about 190 Street. During my college years, the big thing was Watergate. So you know that it was actually really interesting that in the summer of 1974, when, other than summer classes. The campus is really pretty empty. There were a lot of people, and I took some summer classes, so I was there anyway. But there were a lot of people congregating on campus in the first week of August basically expecting something to happen.

And they all just wanted to be together and you know, when word came down, you know that Nixon resigned, the night before was August 8th, I think. 1974. The next day, the campus was packed. Edwards's Parade was filled with people. Yeah, in jubilation. So it was really the maybe 5 or 6 months preceding that was really a pretty active time, for you know, campus, wide protests and declarations of where you stood. Yeah, it was. It was an interesting time.

SM: Yeah, what did you study when you were at Fordham?

GA: Biology, Theology and Philosophy.

SM: And what did you end up doing, When you graduated?

GA: I went to dental school.

SM: So is that when you left the Bronx?

GA: Yes.

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

GA: Leaving the Bronx? You know, again, really not. I didn't give it much thought. You're 22 years old, so you know you do feel like you are an adult. It's time to move on. But I did go back and forth between Boston and the Bronx quite a bit over the 7 years I was in Boston.

SM: Were you aware of — I mean, by the time you were in college and going forward — this sort of arson and devastation that we're going on in other parts of the Bronx?

GA: Oh, yeah. So when I first went to Boston, it was September of 1976, which was pretty much the low point. That's when Gerald Ford, president of the U.S. basically said– I think Ed Koch was mayor then that New York can go drop dead. And, when I returned to the Bronx for work in 1986, I spent a few years working in Brooklyn, when they had the criminal arson that killed about 80 or so people in the dance club, which was probably another low point. In the Bronx, over that period of about 10 years or so, dropped dead to that arson that killed 80 people. But yeah, no I was pretty pretty aware of it. Even when I was up in Boston, I used to listen to WCBS radio all the time so that's where I got my news, instead of getting it from WEEI which was then the Boston all-news station.

SM: And so since, obviously, the city has gone through a lot of changes since that time period, do you think that the Bronx has been on the mend since then? Have you been aware of anything that's been going on in the area since then?

GA: Not as much. I was actually there last week. I have been there 3 times in the last 10 months, which is about 3 times more than I'd been there in the previous 20 years. And so, you know, when I drive on the Cross Bronx Expressway or go through the neighborhoods I'm still in awe of you know what's there, what I recognize as well as the changes that I see in the demographics. For example and the buildings and the rents you know, and the new buildings. I was actually in Arthur Avenue about 4 months ago, not having been there since probably 1994, when I went, when I moved away from employment from the Bronx. I've heard that Arthur Avenue, the Little Italy neighborhood, has shrunken down in size. I'm so amazed to see some of the restaurants that I remember that were there a long time ago. But you know I definitely did see change but, also, I saw constance.

SM: So my last question for you is when you think back about your time growing up in the Bronx, what kind of memories or sentiments do you associate with them?

GA: I love the Bronx. In fact, we're getting ready to sell this house here. Kids are long gone and it's a really big home, big property. I would move back to the Bronx. I actually looked at a place right on Broadway, near Manhattan College just last week. My wife would probably throw me out. But, I very much like the idea of being in the Bronx. I got a chance to do some exploring in Van Cortlandt Park a few months ago, I went to the Botanical Gardens, and I had never been there before. Even though I grew up within about 4-5 miles of it for 20 years or so and lived within 4 or 5 miles of it, I had never, ever been there. So I think the Bronx, when you look and what it has, from City Island to Riverdale, to Orchard Beach, to the parks and to some incredible neighborhoods, and such a variety of people. It's a pretty incredible place and its history is absolutely incredible. When you look at the number of really accomplished people in the arts and sciences, humanities, sports, and medicine who've come from the Bronx. It's astounding, not to mention how many of them were Jewish.

SM: Absolutely, well, is there anything else that you feel I haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

GA: No, no, I think you know you covered a fair amount of ground. You helped rekindle some memories. So you've probably validated for me that I'm not totally in cognitive decline. But yeah, maybe just in the early stages.

SM: Well, thank you. I'll end the recording.

GA: Okay.