12-1-2023

Vozick Hans, Alexandra

Sophia Maier Garcia
Fordham University, smaier2@fordham.edu

Transcriber: Sonia Morris

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

Alexandra Vozick Hans (AVH): Sure. My parents are Canadian, and my father was living in a very poor environment up in Montreal, and he got an opportunity to— from a cousin I think it was— well, sort of a— it wasn't a cousin; it was sort of a— do you know what the word *landsman* — are you Jewish?

SM: Yes.

AVH: Oh good, you know what *landsman* means?

SM: Yeah.

AVH: He got an invitation from a *landsman* of his father's to come to New York and be trained as an X-ray technician. So, my father had no formal education, even like high school. So, he went to New York in 1927, and he became an X-ray technician. But then in the summers, he would go back to his uncle had a very rustic farm up in the Laurentian Mountains— do you know Canada at all?

SM: Not really, no.

AVH: They're north and west of Montreal. Just like the Adirondacks are to New York or the Catskills or something. And in the Laurentians, my great-uncle had a very very very very very rustic hotel, and my father would go up there for the month of August—and this is all to answer the question and help out—meanwhile, because my father's an X-ray technician and worked for the federal government, he had to take a month off to get away from the radiation. [unclear] have saved him, because he lived to be 90. So maybe it worked. So, he went up there, and there were three Jewish hotels in that little area; it's called La Macaza, and they had these three Jewish hotels, and one of the hoteliers had a hotel—we're talking about rustic cabins—but he had put up what he called a dance hall, and these three hotels were kosher for the Jews who lived in Montreal could come up for a week and have a kosher "vacation." So, in the dance hall, on Saturday, my father would run up to help his uncle, and all of his brothers were there, and all—we had a huge family—and they all were there. He went to the dance hall, and he met my mother. My mother was there with my grandmother coming from Montreal, because her father had just died, and they had a chance to get away and just have this week off. Okay. So, that was in maybe 1929, and then they got engaged—maybe '28 or '29—they got engaged, and then they

moved to New York because that's where my father had been living for the last few years, as an X-ray technician. When they got to New York, they didn't know a soul, except—my father's actually living in Brooklyn then—but what happened was when he lived in Brooklyn, he had been in contact with a first cousin, his father's first cousin, who lived in the Bronx. And his name was Sam, and Sam wound up moving to the Amalgamated in 1927 when it opened. So my father, when he'd just gotten married, my mother— first they lived in the Bronx, near Sam, and then when Sam moved to the Amalgamated, they moved to the Amalgamated— Sam moved in in maybe 1930 I guess, and my father my mother moved in 1932 and lived there all their lives until they died in '95 and '99. '98. So that's how they got there because they had so few relatives. May I ask how old you are?

SM: I'm 22.

AVH: 22, okay. You're a young, beautiful woman.

SM: Thank you.

AVH: So they lived in the Bronx, on the Concourse. And then this cousin, Sam, learned about this socialist cooperative in the northwest Bronx, where the Amalgamated is, and he decided to move there with his wife. And eventually, because it was so affordable—it was really middle income housing—it was so affordable that eventually my mother, when an apartment became available—because they were just started in 1927—and so when once they got there—you ought to go over there and see it, by the way, if you haven't—

SM: Yeah, I've seen pictures, but I haven't— like I've been to [crosstalk] —

AVH: — [crosstalk] drive around and it's beautiful, and it's gonna be 100 years old in 2027. You should just drive around. It's just gorgeous. Paul Levinson's wife is my sister; grew up [unclear] she could give you a tour. Anyway, okay. So, they moved 1932 because a new building called the Seventh Building had just gone up, and that was 80 Van Cortlandt Park South, and they lived there in Apartment H12, with two bedrooms and had two sons and eventually were able to move into C14 [unclear] in the courtyard. And if you read the history in the Bronx archives, you'll see what the historical background of the architecture is. But the idea was to get sunlight and everyone and fresh air. So they moved to another apartment in that courtyard where I was born, and then my kid sister was born, and they lived there. And then in, let's say, '52 or so, they moved into a new building with three bedrooms, because by then they had four children, and, you know, two parents, of course, and also at that time my father had become— had left the service working for the government as an X-ray technician and began an X-ray manufacturing business with my uncle, who also eventually moved to the Amalgamated. Okay. So, they loved it there because it was a community feeling that you all contributed time and effort; you were part

of— not that mandatory; you were just you encouraged to. And we had every kind of— I had dance classes there and music classes, and they were always political. It was all on the left, and it was almost entirely Jewish, not because of discrimination, but because Jews wanted to live with other Jews, and they were all union people—or, not all, my father wasn't, but many, many, many people were union people in the ’30s, when the unions were really looked down on, you know, really not acceptable. But anyway, they moved there in the ’30s, [unclear] ’32, and then they lived there, and then the Depression came, and that was—but this was affordable living; this was very affordable, and my father had a good job with the government. He didn't make a lot of money, but it was a regular salary, and so they stayed there. And then World War—well, the Spanish Civil War came out in ’39, ’38, ’39, and there were many left just in the Amalgamated, and some of them went off and fought for Spain, for the Republicans in Spain, and then World War II came. And when World War II came, the people who had gone off to be soldiers— my father was too old at that point and had too many children, but people who had gone off to be soldiers couldn't pay the rent, so— well, you'll learn all about this in the paper. Anyway, the Amalgamated had worked out an arrangement, said if you couldn't pay the rent, they put you on an account, and when they came back, eventually, they did pay the rent off. But meanwhile every single person, every single apartment in the Amalgamated contributed a dollar a room to offset the loss of it. This was socialism; this is what socialism is. It's not what the Communists talk— and we hated the Communists — it’s not what the Communists talk about. Anyway. So it was a wonderful, wonderful place to live. I mean, when there were strikes— in the miners’ strike, we sent food to them; we sent clothing to them— I mean, it was really wonderful, unified, progressive, concerned, invested in the well-being of other people. That's what we were. Okay, so fast forward to me. So I grew up there, and when I—I was born in 1945—when I started school in 1950, the war was long over then, and refugees from Europe started coming in, and my best friend didn't speak English when I met her. I'm still friendly with her. By the way, I have three or four friends that I'm still friendly from the time that I was born, and it's not uncommon. So we lived there, and in the ’30s they built a public school across the street, so we had— we could walk to school. And it was all Irish Catholic teachers, but we were all Jewish kids. They did have a synagogue right in the neighborhood, and you didn't have Reform or Conservative. You only had one way of being Jewish. It was not even Orthodox; it was just Jewish. But men and women sat separately, and we had a very progressive rabbi, and we all went to— my brothers and myself and my kid sister all went to Hebrew school; we all had bar and bat mitzvahs. But that was the more religious faction, somewhat more observant faction. Then there was a group of Yiddish-speaking people, many of whom had just come out of Europe, because that was their first language, and they started something called the shula [phonetic], which was— I don’t know if you know the expression bundist?

SM: Yes.

AVH: Okay, so they were the Bundists, and they didn't believe in God, and they would— they had their view, and we had our view. I didn't believe in God either, but that doesn't matter. What was important was we all belonged to everything. Maybe some people only did one, and some people only did the other, but there wasn't a feeling of division or or dissonance between the two groups. So, I went to, you know, Hanukkah parties and all that at the shula, and they, my friends, came to my bat mitzvah, which was not like what it is now. We walked over to my parents' apartment for coffee and cake after the bat mitzvah. And it was a big innovation to have girls at the bat mitzvah. But we had a very progressive rabbi. So we went to elementary school, and then they built a new junior— the elementary school had gone to eighth grade, but then, in the year that I was in sixth grade, they had built a new junior high school in Kingsbridge, which was not very far. And the brother who just was 5 years older than I went to PS 80, which is up near Jerome Avenue, all of that. And that's where Rob Reiner and Ralph Lifshitz—do you know that name?

SM: Ralph Lauren, right?

AVH: Yeah, right. And Penny, whatever her last name is, they all went to PS 80. But right after that, there was this new school called 143— and we all had, you know, numbers. We didn't have names. They had names, too, but we called them 143. Anyway, the point being that when we went to that school from the Amalgamated it was the first time really I left the neighborhood on my own; my friends and I took a bus up Sedgwick Avenue, and it was really, I mean, this is— we met kids from another school, who merged with us, and it was, again, almost all Jewish, and almost all white— it was all white but almost all Jewish, but it was a very big innovation, and in those years, if you had an IQ and a math standing, you could skip eighth grade.

SM: Yes.

AVH: Oh, you know about this, okay. I don't want to tell you about things you already know about, but you skipped eighth grade. So we went to junior high school 143, and then we had the opportunity to take the school exams, and I got into Science, as my two older brothers did, as my kid sister did. And some friends went to Music & Art, and some friends went to—nobody went to Stuyvesant then. It was either Music & Art or Science, or they didn't get in at all. So I went to Science, which was just around—it was a brand new building, again, right around the reservoir. So we could walk— we could— my point is, Sophie, that we could either take a bus or walk to every school we went to. Everything was close. Now, at Science was a whole new world. I mean, Carmichael, you know that name? He was a senior when I was a— I came in second year— tenth grade. Because of the SPs. It was a much more diverse group. Not very, it was heavily Jewish; now it's heavily Asian; then it was heavily Jewish. But my point to you, Sophie, is that I went from kindergarten right through high school with the friends I had gone to every other class with. And then we had the chance to go to college, and City College was free. And so 99% of the

class— well, 80%, whatever, of the class from Science went to City College. If you went to Brooklyn, or if you went to Queens, but very, very few; 85% went to City College because it was free, and we were still very middle class people. And so my best friends and I went through, as I said before, from kindergarten to college graduation. Okay. And all that time we had— in the sixties we— early sixties, because I graduated in ’62 from high school. We had this beautiful Van Cortlandt Park, and we would be in the park, and we would play guitars and do folk music. We were also Beat Bohemian types. And then there was a rail right in front of the playground, where Gouverneur Avenue hit Van Cortlandt Park South. And that's important to know that it was just perpendicular. And that rail had all of the rockers. They had transistor radios on their shoulders, and their hair was a little greasy, and, you know, they were like— what's the actor's name in Grease?

SM: Oh, oh, what's his face?

AVH: You know who I mean.

SM: John Travolta.

AVH: Yeah, right. No, John Travolta?

SM: Isn’t it John Travolta in Grease?

AVH: Okay. So there was a little bit more of that group who were on the railway and rock and roll, and then there were the beatniks, or the Beat Bohemians, or whatever we wanted to call ourselves. And we were against nuclear war, and we were, you know, we were very progressive. But because we went to City College and there were no dorms, our home and our neighborhood was our dorm. Because our friends were next door, around the corner, in the other buildings. We never went through the agonizing separation, most of us, from our friends. Some people did, because some people went off to Wesleyan, or— well, they didn’t have Wesleyan then, but Swarthmore, or, I don't even know about Harvard, but Cornell, or some of the schools upstate New York. Brandeis. But people began to leave then. But at my age group, most of us did not. Most of us stayed in undergraduate school at City College, because it was free. I mean, you know, you can’t beat that. And then I met a boy that I had been at Science with, who came from Riverdale, who's also— and he decided to go to Harvard for graduate school, and I followed him and became a social worker at Boston University. And then I stayed. So, it wasn't white—you mentioned white flight 5 minutes ago—it wasn't white flight. The education took us out, and the education did take many, many, many people out. And also, we didn't ever experience home ownership. We all lived in apartments. The idea of home ownership was like, you know, like America with the golden streets. I mean, it was a dream but not necessarily a good dream; it was just something that people might have reached for. So anyway, I left, and I stayed living in

apartments. But what I'm saying is that some people like my kid sister eventually left and bought a house. Many people lived in the Amalgamated until they had their first child. They got married, and then they came back. So, is that an answer? I mean, is there more that I could say about that?

SM: Yeah, no, I mean, that makes a lot of sense, you know, in regards to the leaving part in particular. I mean, I have more questions, even though that was wonderful. But, you know, that was kind of— what I ended up saying, for my thesis was that Jews left the Bronx to attain secure middle class status, and the idea of middle class status was changing at the same time that the Bronx was changing. So it was like the idea that to be middle class you needed to own a house; you needed to— you know, suburbia was kind of that whole idea for a lot of people, obviously not for everybody, but for a lot of people, and especially at the same time, because of the financial crisis in New York City and different things. The Bronx was also deteriorating, so it was like staying there wouldn't have really been an option if you were aspiring for more, you know?

AVH: Okay, let me just correct one thing. There is and was a whole swath of people who never considered leaving. I mean, that died there, like my parents. They might have gone to Florida in the winter, or something like that, but there was such stability and such a strength of commitment to the whole notion of cooperativism. Every morning, I grew up with— the milk container had printed on the sides: cooperativeness is the principles of socialism applied to business. This is what we grew up with: very strong feelings. First, we had to be middle class even to get in there. Or lower middle class, maybe, because the state had— so we could have a tax rebate on the housing, you had to fit in a certain income, except during the war and Depression, when people lost their jobs or their [unclear]. But I'm saying it was an extremely stable neighborhood. It was not until the later ’60s, when they built Co-op City? And when some affluence, as you mentioned, began in my age group, people born in the 40s and 50s began to aspire to more. They now had college educations. My father hadn't even gone to high school. My mother had one year of high school. Lots of folks never did that. So we began, they began, people began to aspire to a little bit more, and people were having children and all that. We were the only neighbors, with 1,500 families in the Amalgamated, the only family that had four children. I’m just mentioning that. But many people had three children or two children, and some people had no children or one child. I don’t know if I answered your question or your comment.

We didn't feel the deterioration of the Bronx. The Amalgamated was an oasis. It was between Van Cortlandt Park, which is the largest park in New York, and the reservoir. It was from Broadway up—well, it was more than Broadway—we have to look at a map to see what I mean, but it was 1,500 families in, I don’t know, 20 buildings or something, and it was a little oasis of safety and security, and it was financially affordable, of course, and supportive. I mean, it was enormously supportive, plus all the community activities. And as people got older, it became a

naturally occurring retirement community. So my parents stayed on because, I mean, they weren't going to leave. They had a beautiful three-bedroom apartment overlooking the park, on an elevated building, and there were supers, and there were the help people, and there was a washing machine room, and it was all kinds of services. Plus food; there was— it became a terrible grocery store, but originally there was a very good grocery store that was fully cooperative. So, anyway. People began to leave in the later ’60s and the ’70s because Co-op City was built. That was 15,000 apartments, and that was a mistake. We knew the president of the organization, Abe Kazan; I knew him very, very well, and my mother worked for him. And he had the idea, well, small is good; big will be better. And of course it wasn't; you know, economy of scale did not help. And so people began to move to these new apartments, not necessarily from the Amalgamated, but from the Bronx. And then the Bronx deteriorated, and the apartments were let go. And lower income people— landlords— I mean, we hated the idea of landlords. “Landlord” was like talking about the taskmaster. So they moved, and then, of course, I never went back. My kid sister lived there and had two children, and then she moved. My parents, as I say, died there. And they had many friends who were still there at that time. But they had moved in in the 1930s, so, of course, they had 60 years or so, more than 60 years. Yeah, 60 years. Yeah. So what can I answer now?

SM: So, I guess tell me a little bit more about the neighborhood outside of the Amalgamated, or just what kind of things that— you mentioned that you liked to go to the park; what kind of other shops or amenities or things did you like to do in the area?

AVH: Okay, well, in the Amalgamated itself, there was only a grocery store; there was a barbershop; there was a pharmacy, which was run by this cousin Sam, who had brought my father's family to the Amalgamated. There was a synagogue, the old synagogue, and then eventually they rebuilt it. They built a new synagogue, but it was still run by the same rabbi, and there was a candy store, a famous candy store. Oh, the most wonderful bakery in the whole world was there, but that was on — this is all on Sedgwick Avenue and Van Cortlandt Avenue West. So, there was just a little area that had six or seven stores, but, you know, it met everybody's needs. But if you walked a mile, or half mile, whatever it was, you could go out to Jerome Avenue, and there were many more stores there, and there was a movie theater there called David Marcus. So we would go to the David Marcus. That was a big deal to go to the movies. Or we’d hang out in the park. I mean, there was a golf course, but we did not play golf. We went at night to smoke cigarettes. And there was a lot of, you know, there was a lot of hanging out, guys and girls. But there was nothing so bad happening. There were no drugs. Drugs came in later, after I left. But there were no drugs. The biggest problem we had was smoking. I mean, you’d say now it was a problem; then, we thought it was freedom. And it was a wonderful playground. So we’d go to the playground, or we'd walk; I mean, we would just take walks. There was a bus stop, and people would take the bus to Fordham Road where there were some stores: Alexander's and many more shops. Or we’d walk down the hill to Broadway, and

we'd take what we called the IRT then, and we would go to — there was Stelladora, a famous Italian restaurant, and there were just lots of little stores there. That started to be— it was very Irish. And you had to be careful, because when it was Irish you had to be careful, because sometimes the Irish boys didn't like the Jewish boys. And there was some tension, you know, but I never experienced that. I really never experienced any of that. But you heard stories. Anyway, that part of the Bronx was very Irish, and eventually it became very Hispanic, and it's now very Hispanic, and when my sister left— her children are extraordinarily bright; she's extraordinarily bright, and my brother and us were too. But when my kid sister left, and she moved to Westchester, she sent her kids to Fieldston, in Riverdale. Where did you grow up yourself?

SM: I'm from Monroe, New York, so about an hour [crosstalk] —

AVH: — [crosstalk] I don't know where Monroe is.

SM: It's about an hour north of the city.

AVH: Okay.

SM: But I went to Fordham as an undergrad.

AVH: Oh, so you went to high school in Monroe.

SM: Yeah.

AVH: So people began, like my kid sister, not to send their kids to the local PS 95, because then there were a lot of bus children coming in. I'm not saying anything against bus children, but they're all Black, and it changed the nature of the school. I'm not saying that was bad. People who were there, they then had an opportunity, if they could afford it, to send the kids to private school, but my sister's children were so extraordinary, my nephew particularly, that it would have been terrible for him to have gone to just public elementary school. So that's Paul Levinson's son. So he's now been a music editor for Rolling Stone magazine. But that's after going to Harvard in classics. So some people went to some of the private schools; we didn't have many. Some went to Mother Cabrini. There were a couple of Catholic kids, and they went to Mother Cabrini, which is all girls, I think. Or they went to public high school. But the big draw was the public free colleges. So Hunter College or City College or Queens College, they were the big draws, and of course, Hunter College is right next to Science; it was up— walkable from the Amalgamated, or take a bus. And so, you know, people went there. But my own friends did not go to Hunter. My own friends either went to City College, or they went out of town to what we called sleepaway college.

SM: I've never heard that before. I like it.

AVH: Well, because it was like sleepaway camp. We had our own day camp; that was the other thing. You know, the symbol of the Amalgamated is a circle with two pine trees. It's the same symbol of cooperativism in Finland; that's where it started, and in Sweden, and so our day camp was called Circle Pines. So our local people— we had counselors who were paid, and oftentimes they were just big teenagers. All the teenagers in the Amalgamated, and we had the kids— we all— again, we went to all the schools together, and then we went to day camp together. It might have been in high school— not high school, but junior— not even junior high school; it might have been in fifth and sixth grade, and maybe junior high school, that some people went to sleepaway camp. And some people went to Yiddish speaking camps, and some people went to Hebrew-oriented camps, Israel, Young Judea kind of camps. But I went to a more socialist-oriented — but I worked in that when I was at City College, so I was always at home. My parents really didn't want us to — oh, the other thing I have to tell you, Sophie: I was 16 when I started college. Many of us were 16 when we started college. My kid sisters— my oldest brother was 15 and a half when he went to Columbia. My next brother and myself and my kid sister were 16, and that's what you did then, because we skipped a year. So we were so young that, looking back on it, there was a great advantage to being at home, living in your parents' apartment, and having your friends all around. But we were very young, and of course there was no drinking of that sort then, or even if there was, there was no driving. So, we took the subway. You know Columbia, of course, and Barnard; there's a street called, you know Broadway, you know, of course, and West End Avenue. There's a famous bar called the West End Bar. That was our hangout place from City College because we had no place else, and of course we had friends who went to Columbia, who were more affluent or much smarter and could go to Columbia on scholarship. So, the activities you asked about were everything, anything that you wanted; there were stickball games in the schoolyard; there were stickball games, there was — we played potsy, which I think some people have another name for now. When you draw the numbers on the floor, and you jump on them.

SM: Yeah, like hopscotch.

AVH: Hopscotch, yes; we called it potsy. Yes, we played with Spaldeens, which are those pink balls. The summer camp, Circle Pines, was a great activity. We went swimming, but you had to go to swim in a public pool. So first we went to Tibbetts Brook, which then didn't allow people who didn't live in Yonkers or Westchester, we wound up going to a public pool in Astoria, Queens. We took the bus, I mean, not a not a public bus like a school bus, a camp bus. And, you know, singing songs all the way back and forth. I mean, there was a lot of spirit in the Amalgamated. Every winter at Hanukkah, the old ladies would sit in the basement of the synagogue, and they peeled potatoes, and they would make knishes. And everybody loved the potato knishes. And I don't wanna say that this was Nirvana, you know, a utopia to live there.

There was dissension. It was a tenant owned and operated community. My mother was a big shot in the community. But there were people that didn't like her. Definitely people who thought that Kazan was a dictator— not like Stalin, but that he wanted things his way. He had a strong mind. He was a Russian Socialist, but he was brilliant and wonderful, and there were a lot of people who were in support of him, as my mother and father did. And there were a lot of people who didn't. And some people didn't like my mother because she supported him, but I didn't hear all that much. A few people I would hear and ask things about my mother. But the important story to tell you about is that we had this public school called PS 95, which had a big auditorium. We had two auditoriums in the neighborhood: that one, and there was a neighborhood auditorium on Hillman Avenue. Art shows and music shows and camp shows and all those— you know, any kind of activity. But in the auditorium in PS 95, they had an election for the board of directors, because it was all tenant owned and operated. Now, the socialists, or the left wing people, were progressive people, Liberals— oh, in New York it was called the Liberal Party; it wasn't called the [unclear]. The Liberal party people, the people who were more progressive came to vote. And the Communists— see, this was a cell of Communists, and we all whispered about it, but we didn't like them, but we knew they were there. They came, and they tried to take over the election to run the Amalgamated, and my mother was put in charge of the election, and she said, "If anybody speaks out of turn, if anybody disrupts this" — can you imagine doing this now— "But if anybody disrupts this election, they're gonna be sent out of the auditorium." And they had an election, and the board was saved for the progressives and not the Communists. And we knew who was a Communist; it was like maybe 10, 15 families. We knew who they were, but they were whispered about. So anyway, it was a lot of political conversation. We were all very political, ban the bomb, and opposed the war in Vietnam, and civil rights, and one of our big complaints to Kazan and the Amalgamated was that it was not integrated. Not many or any Black people wanted to live in the Amalgamated, because, first of all, they couldn't necessarily afford it. But also, that wasn't their community; their community was in Harlem. And in those days that was Harlem. But my mother would eventually—this is apropos of this—my mother eventually went to work for Kazan to allocate apartments. So she did all the allocation of apartments, all the developments that were all through the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and some in Manhattan. Eventually Kazan wanted to put—in the end, it was Co-op City, but before that— not Staten Island—eventually Kazan wanted to put in a development, which is still there, called Penn South; it was just south of Penn Station. My mother said to him, "We have to integrate it." This is 1966 or '64. And he said, "Okay Ida, you do what you want." She made sure, in those days you would call it, to get the "best Black families." So, you know there's a movie out called *Rustin*?

SM: No.

AVH: It's on Netflix.

SM: Yeah, I'll look it up.

AVH: Bayard Rustin was — he was the one who organized the March on Washington in 1963. Bayard Rustin was one of the first families she got to move in. He was a gay man; I don't know that he had a family, but he moved in. There were other Black doctors and teachers, but she did everything she could to bring in Black people. My kid sister worked for her at that point in the afternoons or Saturdays, and my mother—this is not progressive—my mother made sure there was a Black family on every floor. The idea was, "first come, first serve." But she didn't want that. She wanted a Black family on every floor so people would get comfortable with this. Yeah, okay. So this was, you know, the do-good feeling about Liberalism. We wouldn't do that now, but that's what was done then. And of course it was all brand new.

SM: And were you, when you attended City College, you know, later in the '60s, were you involved in a lot of the protest movements and different things there as well?

AVH: Oh, the civil rights, particularly. Yeah, civil rights, because we were in the middle of Harlem. City College was in the middle of Harlem. And I graduated in '66, and all of the— first it was the anti-war, because the draft had come in, and so many of our young guys, who were at City College, were draft eligible. And then they became draftable once they graduated. So, there was a very strong feeling under— first of all, the war in Vietnam was stupid, and second, we didn't want people going off to war, and we didn't want them killing brown people. You know, that's how we called it, talked about it. So, yes, there were lots of marches, but also—and marches to Washington, as well as marches through to that neighborhood of City College—but that was when Harlem was still viable. I student-taught in Harlem, and it was safe enough to do that. And yes, we were involved in all the political actions, sit-ins; we had— we used to call them teach-ins; we would have teach-ins, and that was before the sit-ins. It was before the civil disobedience came in. But we had to educate ourselves as to what the Vietnam war is all about. I mean, we had to find Vietnam on the map, you know. So, yes, so, it's politically involved. But also, City College was such a diverse place, it was 18,000 students. I mean, we were so diverse in interests and activities. My husband, who is five years older — I did not know then — but he was five years ahead of me. He wound up majoring in biology and going off to medical school, but many people went off to get jobs, or they became teachers, or they went off to graduate school. Liberal arts, lots and lots of liberal arts.

SM: So, you mentioned — oh, wait. Sorry, I had a question, and I forgot. Let me see. Let me look at my list.

AVH: Take your time.

SM: So yeah, usually I have some fun questions about music or food, things like that that you enjoyed. Or did you like music, or what kind of things did you like to eat?

AVH: Oh, yes. Well, folk music was the big thing. Early rock and roll, Presley, and Motown, and all that, but that was probably a little bit after the folk music time. Folk music was a very big call, Baez and— I met Bobby Dylan when he first sang in the— oh, that was the other thing to tell you, because we had no place to go at night like when we were in college, and we wanted to do something other than going to the West End Bar. It was very easy to get on the IRT — I think you call it 2 and 3 now.

SM: Yeah.

AVH: To go right down to The Village. We spent a lot of time in The Village, and of course, we had coffee houses. And in the coffee houses they had folk music. And the Gaslight, which was on MacDougal Street, was one of the big coffee houses that we went to, and that's where I saw Bob Dylan. And we went to Columbia to see Joan Baez. But this is again ’62, ’63, ’64, in those years. So that was what we did. So I loved the music, and we had our concerts in the auditorium. The auditorium was called the Vladeck Auditorium. That was the Amalgamated auditorium; that's where we had all of these activities, not the school auditorium. The Vladeck auditorium was named after a woman who had been active in women's rights movements, and now her grandson is active on MSNBC to talk about—

SM: — Oh yeah, I was gonna say that the name sounds familiar.

AVH: Steven Vladeck, Steve Vladeck. I wrote him not too long ago to say that I actually— did he know that grandmother had an auditorium named after her in the neighborhood. Yeah, I mean, this was the good left. This is not the, you know, the crazy— this was not—what should I say— this was not MAGA on the left, because this was progressive, all for one and one for all. Let's take care of each other. We’re a community, we’re a collective. We need to help each other out, and if you're hungry, we’ll help; if you're [mumbles] — you know, all that kind of attitude. And it really imbued us with a sense of responsibility for each other, and I still have that. Andvwhen I first moved to the private house, what we call the private houses which I live in now, I couldn't understand why everybody on the street owned their own lawn mower. I thought, Why can't we just buy one lawn mower for the whole street? But of course, that's not— doesn't fly in suburbs. So it's a different mentality. And I'm not sure I’m answering your question, but that mentality… it just stayed with us that you cared about your neighbor, and you knew your neighbor. You may not have eaten dinner with your neighbor, but you knew your neighbor; you knew — oh, that was another rule, unspoken rule. You could know everybody's name in your grade and in other grades, but you could only play with people in your own grade. And we had about, I would say, 80 to 100 people per grade. I had 40 people in my elementary school class; I had 40 people in my

junior high school class, so I mean, they were big, and we were good. Oh, God were we good! And in our elementary school, we learned music appreciation, art appreciation, science, but we learned a lot of math. And then when we went to junior high school, we learned science and more math and literature. But it was just a different world.

SM: And do you feel like, you know, throughout— from your time in public school all the way through City College, did you feel like you got a really good-quality education from the public system?

AVH: Better than my kids got. And my kids grew up in Newton public schools, and Newton public schools are excellent, but we were exposed, as I was saying, we were exposed to music appreciation, and we took trips to the museums. We went to the Natural History Museum. And I think we had a broader education. I think they have a deeper education in terms of knowing about science and computers. We didn't have computers; we didn't— we had the Xerox machine on the City College campus. We didn't even know what Xerox was. But I think I had a broader education. But there were problems with it, like I remember in sixth grade we were learning about, I don't know, something. Oh, well, every day from fourth, fifth— no, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, after school I went across the street, and I went to Hebrew school after school for an hour, an hour and a half, and we learned Hebrew history. So it was a big division in my mind between what was Jewish history and what was American history. I could never connect them, and that was, you know, it was— when we were learning how to read, we got books about Dick and Jane. They all had blond hair and blue eyes, and we didn't have blond hair and blue eyes. I didn't have white hair then either; I had— it was darker than your hair. So we felt a little bit other from the mainstream, but we had so little contact with the mainstream that it didn't make a big difference. But I wanted to get back to it that he was— oh, we were talking about something in sixth grade, and we were talking about— let's say it was Egypt, and the slaves were killed, or the Civil War, and the slaves were killed. And my teacher said to me, "But you know, life didn't mean that much then." And I came home to my father, who was not an educated man. I came home to my father, and I told him the teacher; he said, "That's not true. Why would anybody say that; that's just not right." Turns out my teacher was Jewish, but that was crazy. I mean, so you get crazy things. But that was because it was still the '50s. That was the world of the '50s then. So a little infiltrating into our experience was the white privilege education attitudes, attitudes in white privilege education. But we still had the Judaic education and Judaic values system. Did you have Jewish families in Monroe?

SM: Yeah, yeah, it's a very Jewish area. I live near Kiryas Joel, which is a big Orthodox— they're Hasidic—community. I'm not a part of it, but—

AVH: — You live in Kiryas Joel?

SM: I don't, but that's the town next to ours. So, there's a massive community next to ours. That's Kiryas Joel; I live next to it. But generally, it's a pretty— I would say— I mean, like you were kind of saying, most of my friends, especially those that I'm still friends with, I knew from Hebrew school. And we all went to school together, but it was the Jewish girls.

…

SM: Wow. Yeah, I was interested in what you were saying, cause I'm a graduate student at the School of Education right now, so I teach. I teach in the Bronx, at Roosevelt High School. But I teach religious school on the weekends. So I teach Jewish history on Sundays, and then I teach the rest of history the rest of the week.

AVH: Where do you teach English, and where do you teach Hebrew?

SM: I teach at Roosevelt High School. They've broken it up now, so it's Belmont Preparatory High School in the Bronx.

AVH: It's private?

SM: No, they're all public schools, but they broke up the big high schools in the Bronx. So it was once Roosevelt.

AVH: Oh, it was once Roosevelt, yeah, I know Roosevelt.

SM: Yeah.

AVH: Yeah, I live right near DeWitt Clinton, which was all boys then.

SM: Yeah. And then I teach at Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan, on Fifth Avenue and East 65th Street.

AVH: And that's Conservative or Reform?

SM: Reform.

AVH: Okay. So, that's one other thing, just between you and me, I'm not gonna go into it. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a Reform or a Conservative synagogue; there was only one way to be Jewish. And that was what the rabbi told you. And I remember, Sophie, in fourth grade— the rabbi is a big guy. He came storming—and it was so formidable—he came storming into our room, our classroom, after school classroom. And so I had to be 9, and this had to be

in ’54 or so, and he said, “I want you to know that Jews believe that if you have to make a choice between the life of the mother or the life of the fetus, you let the mother live and not the fetus, because the mother has—” and I remember his word: “the mother has tasted life, and the fetus hasn't.” I never forgot this. This must have been the time of some political case, some national case where some woman was — abortion rights case or whatever. But the attitude, then, is like Terry Schreiber — not Terry Schreiber, because she wasn't pregnant — but the pro-life people now — we were certainly pro-choice. The division, then, was the rabbi was telling us we had a religious commandment to let the mother live because she had a different experience than the fetus. And the fetus had no experience. And birth was considered when you took your first breath. Well, what grade do you teach?

SM: Ninth grade.

AVH: Ninth grade?

SM: Yes.

AVH: Oh, no, I mean Hebrew school.

SM: Oh, religious school, I taught fifth grade last year, and I moved up with my kids. So I do sixth grade with them now.

AVH: And that's after school?

SM: It's just Sunday morning.

AVH: Just Sunday morning. Well, good for you, good for you… Okay, so what I'm saying is that to organize the values of Hebrew school and the values of American school was very different. And even in Hebrew school, I remember having questions, because I asked the teacher in third grade, I said to her that, “You always told us that Noah came before Abraham, and Abraham was the first Jew. Well, that means Noah wasn't Jewish. So I mean, how do you— how come we're talking about Noah all the time?” And she said, “But if Noah knew about Judaism he would have been Jewish.” Which is ridiculous.

SM: Yeah, I don’t know that that’s a— I don’t know about that one.

AVH: Well, no, I mean it's crazy. But I mean, see, there was a little bit of indoctrination that was going on with everything else. We had pictures of the pioneers. The pioneers were the Kibbutzim who had just gone — because, remember, Israel only became a state in ’48. I was there in ’54. And it's, you know, it’s a new place. You’d see all these videos of all these people in short blue

shorts and little short sleeve blue shirts and hats, caps. So, anyway. But that would— Hebrew school was part of the Amalgamated, too. Whereas shula, which was the Yiddish place, they had the holidays, but they weren't so invested in Israel, and they certainly weren't invested in being observant. We had a range of observances, as I still— I mean, I'm not observant. I have a younger son who's very— he's not Hasidic, but he's certainly Orthodox. And my middle son says his mother is Jewish, and my oldest son— and he's not Jewish. My oldest son, as I said, is Conservadox, maybe. Conservative. There was a range, as in my own sons, they all— and I took them all to Reform synagogue because I thought that was easier than what— and for bar mitzvah and training and everything. But we had both. And we all got along. And my parents paid dues to both. But not everybody saw eye to eye.

SM: Yeah. Were you— did your family keep kosher?

AVH: No, but we were kosher style, so I never had ham or bacon or shellfish in the house. I still don't eat that at all. My kid— my youngest son is kosher, of course. He's still kosher. My oldest son is kosher style like me, and my middle son will eat anything. But he knows that I don't. I mean, so they wouldn't, you know, serve pork roast or something. So my own feeling reflects the range. Yeah, go on.

SM: And did your family, or, did you and your family ever travel outside of the city when you were growing up, or —

AVH: We went to Montreal every single year, if not once then twice. Because the family was in Montreal, and it was, you know, a 7 hour drive. It wasn't that impossible. By the way, my father and my uncle were in business together, making these medical instruments. They made the first CAT scans in the United States. Oh, they made the first CAT scans, but they never patented. That was for the people; medicine is for the people. It wasn't for your greed. By the way, do you pronounce your name Sophia or Sophie?

SM: Sophia. But it doesn't — I don't mind either way.

AVH: Because I just, reading it now, I didn't remember it was Sophia. I think Sophia is prettier than Sophie.

SM: That’s why I was named Sophia, instead of Sophie.

AVH: I think it’s a very pretty name. So my father and my uncle owned a car in common because they worked together, and they lived right around the corner from each other, and they each couldn't afford a car. What was I going to say about that car? Oh, so in that car we would go

to Montreal, and we did that quite often. Sometimes in the summer there'd be — you've heard of Workmen's Circle?

SM: Yes.

AVH: I think it's called Workers Circle now.

SM: Yeah, it is.

AVH: Okay, Workers Circle—Workmen's Circle then—had a hotel, and rooms, and all that. Sometimes people went for a weekend, or whatever — Camp Unity, I think it was called, or Unity House, Unity House. And there were these very left-wing camps, Camp Kindering? Camp Kindervelt? Kinder something else. Anyway, in the Catskills and the Adirondacks, there were all kinds of Jewish camps, of every shade. Mine was socialist that I worked at, so we did go out; we did go to Manhattan, and we went to the Young People's Concert. My parents took us to Leonard Bernstein. You hear of him? Once a year we might go to Rockefeller Center and see the Rockettes. But, you know, they had— my sister— we were all 5 years apart, and my kid sister was still kind of a baby, little girl, so we didn't do a whole lot of evening things. But in later years — I mean not as children — but in later years, my parents had many friends in the Amalgamated, and they would get theater tickets, and they would go to Manhattan. We were not bound to the Bronx, and once we got into college, my best friends and I went down to The Village all the time. It wasn't so dangerous then, so we went. We had a famous folk singer that we loved, Jack Elliot, and— you wouldn't have known him. He's still alive, but you wouldn't know him. He was giving a concert at what they then called Harper College, they now call it New Paltz. But my friend and I took the bus up there. We began to spread out, but I'm still best friends with Sarita, I mean, forever and ever, and the other friends, too.

SM: So was it any sort of, I guess, culture shock to you when you moved up to the Boston area?

AVH: Yes. Yes. You'll forgive me for saying this. It was very girlish. It was not at all— I mean, I knew I had been to Cambridge, and I thought Cambridge was heaven when I got there. Because it was so much easier to live with the little streets and the little buildings and all that. And Manhattan was— my friends were moving to Manhattan or graduate school someplace. But it was so different that it took me a while. First of all, I hated graduate school; I hated Boston University. It was so sectarian and complete opposite of everything that I knew about in New York, where everything is non-sector; City College is non-sectarian. But it was just… girlish is the word. And also it was the German Jews that settled Boston. It was the Russian Jews that settled New York, and we were very much the Russian Jews; my family came out of what is now Ukraine, and they came out in 1905, and most of my friends came from Eastern Europe, and— except some, then, after the war, came from out of Poland. But it took a while to get used to. It's

still different here. It's not *hamish* [homelike]. You know enough Yiddish, to know what *hamish* is? Homey. So for the Jewish holidays, I have all our Jewish friends here, but I'm much more observant, and I'm not observant at all. But I'm much more invested in the religion. And it's more part of my life. One of my friends said, “How come I'm Episcopalian on Sunday, and you're Jewish all the time?” And I said, “You know, it’s an ethnicity.”

SM: Yeah, it is; that’s the difference.

AVH: Yeah. It's a big difference. In Boston, I felt there was an ethnicity, and I still do. And in Boston, there are the Irish or Italian— well, very Catholic city, very Catholic, and it's much more integrated now. I mean much more—I don't mean to—I mean much more diverse now in everything that it is. But yes, it took a while. Now my neighbor, who used to be much more Jewish, in Newton, which is like a suburb of Boston— I'm trying to think what would be like the equivalent of — maybe like Scarsdale. Not as affluent as Scarsdale but maybe like Scarsdale. We have 90,000 people here and a third of them Jewish. And we have Reform synagogues and Conservative and Orthodox, but I don’t know how heavily— they’re all attended, but I don’t— you know, once my boys were all bar mitzvahed, of course I dropped out, because, you know, everybody does. Yeah. Anyway, what was your question; you had another question.

SM: Well, no, that was it, but I— my last question I usually like to ask is, when you think back about your time growing up in the Bronx, what kind of memories or sentiments do you associate with them?

AVH: What kind of memories or what?

SM: Sentiments, feelings.

AVH: Security, safety, comfort, familiarity, welcome, acceptance, love, familiarity — I said familiarity, but it was like, everything is familiar. And a kind of freedom. I never encountered anti-Semitism; I still haven't, actually. But of course it's all over now, which drives me to drink. But it just didn't occur then. And if there did— if anything did occur anywhere, all the Jews would rise up, as well as the Christians, and fight it off. Now, it's another struggle. So the Bronx was home. Home in the very best sense of utopian home. Although, you know, when I scratch the surface, there were differences there. There were complaints and all that. And most of us, by the way, growing up in this utopia couldn't wait to get out. It was only when we were your age or older that we began to look back and say, “Oh, wow, that was really something; we really wish we had stayed there.” So that's— it was just a one— and my friends now, who all live all over, some in Boston, some in Westchester, some in Manhattan, some in the Upper West Side, some in Brooklyn, we all say the same thing: “Oh, what a wonderful place it was to grow up in the Amalgamated.” And we have a web— we— not a website, Facebook page. Bronx— growing up

in— Bronx— growing up near— something like that, the Amalgamated. I would strongly encourage you to read that: the Bronx archives piece. Or I could make— email— actually, I could email it to you.

SM: Yeah, email it to me; that way I'll be sure to have it.

AVH: Yeah. I'll send it to you.