



9-8-2023

## Jacobs, Jack

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### Recommended Citation

Maier Garcia, Sophia, "Jacobs, Jack" (2023). *Bronx Jewish History Project*. 42.  
<https://research.library.fordham.edu/bjhp/42>

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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

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

Jack Jacobs (JJ): My parents were both born in Poland. And they both survived the bulk of the Second World War, independently of one another, in the Soviet Union. At the end of the war, there was an agreement signed under which people who were citizens of Poland were allowed to leave the Soviet Union, purportedly to go back to Poland. But both of my parents, again, independently of one another, took a pretty fast look around and said no. To them, it was evident that there was extensive anti-semitism, that everything that they had was gone. So they kept on going, and they made it as far as Germany in the immediate postwar period. And they intended at that point in time to go to Palestine. My father, in particular, was a fairly committed Zionist. They made plans, and after some time of them prepping to go to Palestine, my father discovered, to his amazement and joy, that his only sibling had survived the war and was in New York, actually in the Bronx. And so they reversed course, and left the DP camp that they were in in Germany, leaving behind my grandmother, and my aunt and uncle and others, to go to the Bronx and find my uncle. And so it remained. They anticipated that after they arrived, they would be able to bring the rest of the family to the Bronx. And shortly after they arrived in the Bronx, they received a telegram from the remainder of my family, in effect, saying, "We have arrived safely in Haifa Harbor." And so my family remains split between people who are based in Israel and people who are based in New York and elsewhere in the USA.

My parents were in the Bronx, from the period prior to my birth, from the late 1940s. And I was born in the Bronx, in Royal Hospital, on the Grand Concourse, a couple of years thereafter. We lived, for the first 10 years of my life, at 2094 Creston Avenue, which was just north of Burnside. It was an overwhelmingly Jewish neighborhood, which also included, in particular, a concentration of Jewish Holocaust survivors, what they used to call, in those days, *di nay gekumene*, newly arrived people. And the concentration, of course, was quite deliberate. One person would help another and people began to gather in that neighborhood in quite considerable numbers. When I was a child living in that otherwise nondescript walk-up building on Creston Avenue, my aunt and uncle and my cousins also lived in the same building. And my father and my uncle also had another somewhat more distant cousin, who, with his spouse and children, were also living in the building. And our three families were by no means the only recently-arrived Jews. The building was overwhelmingly Jewish. And it wasn't only the building, it was like that for many blocks around. I think that the pattern, so far as I could figure one out years later — I didn't really understand that at the time — was that there were many, many American-born Jews, but that the American-born Jewish tended to be more established, and tended to have marginally higher incomes. And they tended to live in the best sort of parts of the neighborhood. So you'd find American born Jewish families on the Grand Concourse. And you'd find these immigrant families, like ours, on the side streets. And again, what I can't stress enough is how overwhelming the numbers were. When it

came to Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, public schools were closed, because such a large proportion of the kids were Jewish. And it was true not only for the public schools, because we did tend, all but exclusively, to go to public schools, it's was also true for the businesses. That is: They tended to close on major Jewish holidays. And since most of the people that I'm describing, most of the community that I'm describing, was from Eastern Europe, it was very heavily Yiddish speaking. Not religious necessarily, but some people were more traditional, and we can talk about that, too. There were many little synagogues, *shtiebelekh*, in storefronts and on side streets. But many people were not particularly observant. And nevertheless, they had mostly grown up speaking Yiddish. This is an era in which there were three daily Yiddish newspapers – the *Forverts*, and the *Frayhayt*, and the *Morgn Zhurnal* – available on every kiosk in the neighborhood. And Yiddish radio shows on WEVD and other stations, and a whole rich infrastructure of cultural institutions from a variety of different political and religious perspectives associated with them.

So I guess the bottom line is I grew up in this very intensely Jewish place, without knowing much about alternatives. I feel like on some level, I didn't really know that much about what it was like outside the Bronx. All of this was on some level exacerbated when, in the late 1950s, in the period before I even started kindergarten, my grandmother, who was living in Israel, came to stay with us. And she arrived in around '58, I think it was. My grandmother knew many, many, many languages, but English wasn't one of them. And so I became the designated translator and mediator between my grandmother and the rest of the world. My folks were busy with adult stuff. But whenever *bube* wanted to go anyplace, even if that was as simple as the butcher or the baker, she would take me by the hand and off we would go, and I would have to interact with the occasional shopkeeper who lo and behold, didn't speak Yiddish. Can you imagine?

SM: [Laughs] I was going to say, wow!

JJ: There were some, there were some. So, she would tell me what was needed, I would tell the shopkeeper, and then I would translate for her whatever it was that the shopkeeper had to say. And we were a family of very modest means. There weren't a lot of frills. We lived on a fifth floor, walk-up apartment, and it was a one bedroom apartment where I shared the bedroom with my *bube* and my older sister. Indeed, I shared the bed with my *bubbe* and my older sister, slept on a bed adjacent to us. And my parents came from marginally different Jewish backgrounds, not vastly different, but marginally. My mother had been active as a child in the Jewish socialist secularist movement in interwar Poland. She had been, what they call a SKIFist, [a member of the] *Sotsialistisher kinder farband*, the Socialist Children's Association. And so, when my older sister and I were old enough, my mother's first inclination, was to enroll us, in a Workmen's Circle (now the Worker's Circle) School. Back then it was the Workmen's Circle, Der Arbeter Ring. And there were, in the Bronx at that point in time, quite a large number of such schools, such that the closest one to us, which was school 5-19, was literally down the block. I learned to read and write Yiddish simultaneously with learning to read and write English. I went to the Arbeter Ring *shule* six days a week, mostly after school. I attended PS 79 until three PM, and

then we crossed the street where they would give us a snack — a very modest snack — and then Yiddish school would begin. And I went through the the Arbeter Ring *shule*, the school, from the time I was five or six, something along those lines, until I graduated. My older sister, who I keep referring to, Helen – Chaya -- who was four years older than I, by the time I graduated was already in the *mitl-shul*, the high school associated with the Workmen’s Circle, as well as going to a public secondary school. And my parents insisted that of course I was going to go to *mitl-shul*, but I was going to travel to the school together with my sister, which meant also traveling together with her friends. And at that point I was 11, or something like that. At some point, I rebelled. And I said, “Well, you know what, I'm not willing to go with yucky Chaya and all of her friends, her girls.” I didn't want to go downtown on the IRT to *mitl-shul* with the girls. And my parents, in effect thinking that they had me over a barrel, because it was the last thing that they wanted, said, “Either you will continue going to mitl-shul , or we're going to enroll you in the local Hebrew School,” which, you know, this was not my parents cup of tea. In particular, it wasn't my mother's cup. But I basically responded by saying, “Go ahead, make my day.” And they did. I refused to continue to travel on the subway, and they enrolled me in the Hebrew Institute of University Heights, which was an orthodox institution. This was, once again, an after school program. I went, at that point, first to PS 86 and then to Junior High School 82. These were all very dense neighborhoods, you could walk easily from PS 26 to Junior High School 82 to the Hebrew Institute. And in the Hebrew Institute, I was a terrible student. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I didn't agree with any component of what they were teaching me. I had no interest at all in learning the prayers. I had no interest at all in learning modern Hebrew. I disagreed, insofar as I understood it, with the orientation of teachers, et cetera, et cetera. But there were rules, and one of the rules was if you're going to have a bar mitzvah under the auspices of this institution, you are going to go to synagogue, every *shabes*. And we will give you a stamp to show, to make sure that you were there. And if you don't have enough stamps, no bar mitzvah. So when I was 11, 12, and I wanted to have a bar mitzvah, like just about all of the other boys I knew of in my public school, I had to go to this orthodox synagogue every Saturday, and I had to go to Hebrew school, essentially every day after school. Not Fridays of course — but also on Sunday mornings. And I didn't like it. I didn't enjoy it. I didn't learn very much. But at some point, they bought me a 33 rpm record with my Haftorah portion on it. And I memorized the Haftorah portion, which I can still sing if need be, and then had the bar mitzvah in the Bronx and never went back to the Hebrew Institute of University Heights. On some level, that's the background, so to speak. But I can keep talking for as long or as short as you want. Do you want to ask more questions before I continue?

SM: Yeah, sure. I mean, maybe a little bit more about the — well, I guess first, so you had said that your parents came from different Jewish backgrounds. Your mother came from a socialist background. So did your father come from a more religious background?

JJ: I think it would be fair to say that his own inclinations were more traditional, rather than that his background had been more religious. They came from different parts of Poland. My mother was raised entirely in Vilna, and my father was raised entirely in Warsaw. And you've probably not had reason to study in depth the differences amongst Polish Jews —

SM: Not really.

JJ: — these are very, very different places, with very, very different traditions. And so my father's inclination, and the things that seemed more familiar to him included, attending, on major Jewish holidays, one of those little *shtiebelkh* in the Bronx and he would like to *daven* there. He wasn't a guy inclined to discuss what his own upbringing had been like, or the experiences he had gone through, but these were traditions that meant something for him. Where my mother really was, I think, more of a secularist, socialist, Yiddishist, diaspora-oriented type, though she was also intensely, intensely Jewish. Right?

SM: Absolutely. And so, maybe a little bit more about the neighborhood. I mean, of course, you mentioned that it was predominantly Jewish. What kind of shops or other amenities did you all like to frequent?

JJ: Again, you have to backtrack a little bit to say that we were very much a working class family. There wasn't a lot of shopping going on beyond what was needed. The basics. People would shop at the butcher, the baker, the fruit seller, right? It was, even in the 1950s, the kind of neighborhood where there were still horse-drawn peddlers who would come around to sharpen knives, things like that, or even to purchase old clothes. And I remember those very distinctly. The stores were mostly small, mostly family run. This was in an era which by and large predated the era during which many chain stores hit Manhattan. You did not have CVS or Duane Reade or equivalents. You had small mom and pop run stores, including delis or appetizing stores, serving the local community, which meant serving foods and selling products of interest to Jews. The bakery had very traditional Jewish products available for sale. The butcher was a kosher butcher, as was the deli, as was the appetizing store. And they were all packed within a couple of blocks. And it was also the kind of neighborhood where, literally on the corner of Creston and Burnside, which is to say extremely close to where I lived, there was a store that sold notebooks for kids. But the notebooks were not a notebook like the one I have in front of me, it's what we call a *makhberet*. These were notebooks where one could learn how to use the Hebrew alphabet, how to write in Hebrew or in Yiddish. And today, I think it would be a real rarity to find such a thing in most neighborhoods. But as a child, I never thought twice about the fact that this was the closest commercial establishment to where we lived. It was on the corner of Creston and Burnside. So that's the kind of stores.

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

JJ: My father was a tool and die maker. When he was in Germany, in the immediate postwar period, he was training to be an engineer. And he had got a couple of years of advanced training under his belt in '46, '47, '48, I would say. But the notion of going to live where his brother was, the notion of leaving Germany as soon as humanly possible, overpowered his desire to get a higher education. And so when

the possibility arose of leaving Germany, they left without blinking twice. They did not want to be there. And that meant the end of his initial dreams of becoming an engineer. He was a very, very hard working guy, and a very, very skilled craftsman. And he worked in the same plant in Mount Vernon in all the years that I was growing up, and indeed, for many decades after I was growing up. The Richter Metalcraft Corporation, which was a Jewish-owned entity. My mother did not work outside the home when I was a child. But she was both more ambitious than my father and more intellectual than my father. And so after I was old enough, my older sister was old enough, and our younger sibling was as well, my mother went back to school and obtained an undergraduate degree from Lehman, and then got a Master's in Social Work from Yeshiva and became a social worker in the Bronx. And ultimately she became a Supervising Social Worker for the Bronx Jewish Community Council, and worked in the East Bronx, the Allerton/ Pelham Parkway neighborhood. And for her, professionally, that was the crowning point in her career. In the period when she was in school, she had had a series of much more modest jobs. Almost all working for Jewish organizations in administrative capacities. She worked for the Bundist-oriented summer camp Hemshekh, as the manager during the summer season and in the winters as the secretary. And she worked for a series of other such organizations of different ideological orientations, labor Zionist orientations and others, until such time as she obtained her degrees, and then she worked as a social worker. And loved it. And loved the interaction with people. And by the time she began working as a social worker, and then as the supervising social worker, there was already a massive immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union into that neighborhood. Because my parents had been in the Soviet Union in the early 1940s, for a number of years — they were there from roughly late 1939, or 40, or 41, depending on whose case we're talking about, until the end of the war — they both knew Russian fluently. And so for the Bronx Jewish Community Council, my mother was a prize. Her Russian was fluent. Her Yiddish was fluent. Her Polish was fluent. She read English well. She knew German. And she had advanced degrees from respected institutions. And she really liked the work, liked the interaction. And she did it until a ripe old age.

SM: That sounds great. Yeah, that's fantastic. I know that there still exists now a predominantly elderly population of, I guess, Soviet Jewry, still in the East Bronx. Down from where I was at Fordham. And so let's talk a little bit more about school. So are there any memories from your time at public school that stand out to you?

JJ: Well, what I would say about public school is the pattern at that point when I was literally in elementary school, was that the school teachers were predominantly of Irish origin and predominantly Catholic, and the kids were overwhelmingly Jewish, and very often the children of immigrants. You know, the schools were also terribly terribly crowded at some points. I remember very distinctly one year when there were literally not enough teachers at PS 79. And so they combined the second and third grades into one room because they only had one teacher. You know how many children that was? 50? 60? These are huge numbers. And we had to divide our time. Or, better put, the teacher had to divide her time dealing with what was really way too many kids. This half is going to learn math, while this half learns to knit. And then we're going to switch. Right? So what I remember was, from our perspective,

the schools were of high quality, there was an emphasis on skill acquisition. But they were resource poor. My parents spent years thinking about buying a home someplace on Pelham Parkway or something like that, and used to spend weekends looking at these modest homes around there where they knew a couple of other people, but they always were frightened by the costs. They were always worried what's going to happen if my father loses his job, what's going to happen if there's rapid inflation? They weren't risk takers. In 1963, one of my father's American-born cousins, who lived about 10 blocks away from us, a shade further south and a shade further west, decided to move. And she lived in a three bedroom apartment in 1878 Harrison Avenue, which was one block off University, near Tremont. And so we moved from the apartment on Creston to the apartment on Harrison. For me, it was a big deal. It meant moving to a different school. It meant that I wasn't in daily contact with my aunt and uncle and my cousins, and it meant learning a whole new group of kids, et cetera. And, in some ways, it wasn't really a great move for my parents, except that there was a lot more space. There were three bedrooms instead of one, it was an elevator building and not a walk up, it was affordable, it was a rental. But by the time we had been on Harrison Avenue for a couple of years, the era when the white flight to which you alluded earlier began.

SM: Yes, that's what I was thinking about.

JJ: My classes in public school were still all but exclusively Jewish, but people began voting with their feet. Not my parents, who were not risk takers, and who did not have a lot of money. But it was a period when the amount of crime began to go up. It was a period when you began to hear more about arson. It was a period when the nature of the stores began to change a little bit at a time. But my parents continued to live there. And I continued to live there straight through high school. I went to the Bronx High School of Science, which meant going on the number four subway, just a handful of stops. It wasn't the number four then, it was the Woodlawn IRT uptown from Burnside Avenue up to Bedford and it didn't take very long. It wasn't until I was already in college that my parents decided to move once and for all. But again, for all the reasons that I suggested, they didn't have so many options open to them, and they moved to Co-op City. And that was in '70, '71, something like that. They moved to Section Five of Co-op City, which at that time, was a place where many, many, many other Jews had made a similar choice. There was this fairly large migration of Jews from the West Bronx and South Bronx to Co-op City within just a very brief period of time. I no longer remember the figures, but I think that when Co-op City was fully built, there was something like 55,000 people.

SM: I think so. I read a really wonderful book, I actually recommended it to Dr. Soyer, called *Freedom Land*, and it's about Co-op City, the building of Co-op City. But I've spoken to a lot of people, and you can say, if you'd like, how you feel about it, but some people say Co-op City ruined the Bronx for that exact reason, that it took the Jews out of those neighborhoods.

JJ: Well, you know, for me, I think Co-op City — again, by the time my parents moved there, I was ready for college, so I didn't actually live there in the early 70s. My parents did, and so I would come

home on holidays, that kind of thing. It was a pretty alienating place. I didn't like the buildings at all. I thought they were Clockwork Orange-like, ugly and alienating. And there wasn't an easy subway connection, so it was pretty isolated for an adolescent. Did it ruin the Bronx? Well, that's a loaded phrase. There were lots and lots and lots of factors that resulted in demographic changes in the Bronx, and that may well have exacerbated them. But there's always more than one side to the story. And Co-op City was part of a much larger movement, the United Housing Federation movement, with trade union roots, which included unions that had been dominated by Jews for a long time, like the ILGWU and the Amalgamated, and it was sparked by the same people, more or less, that had successfully created the Amalgamated housing complex in the West Bronx, or Penn South in the West 20s. They were the people behind Co-op City. And when they created it, what they thought was "we're creating safe, modern, clean housing to replace the crumbling structures that existed in the West Bronx and in the South Bronx. With all kinds of amenities." So it becomes much more complicated than that.

SM: I agree. I definitely agree. And so, back to what we had been discussing before, what about your time in junior high school? So anything that stands out?

JJ: I'm not so sure that your trotting through the individual years of elementary school or junior high school really gets at the significance of the experiences I learned from, or what the experience was like for me. I think what I would say is, this very intense, Jewish acculturation ultimately resulted in my developing a genuine academic and intellectual interest in Jewish history and Jewish political thought and movements. So even when I left home to go off to college, I continued to take courses in Yiddish, for example, or in Jewish American literature. They weren't mandatory or anything of the kind, it was an interest of mine. When I moved back to New York, after college, and started graduate school at Columbia, I affiliated with the kinds of organizations that my parents had been affiliated with at an earlier point of time, or that they were still affiliated with at that point of time. I became active in the very small Bundist Jewish youth movement, which was socialist, secularist, Yiddishist, diaspora-oriented, and which was New Left-ish in orientation. I was involved extensively in the early 1970s. I edited one of the periodicals at one point in the 70s. And at the point that I started graduate school, I, together with the woman I was involved with at that point in time, moved to the Bronx. We lived at 3138 Bailey Avenue in the West Bronx, around 231 Street. And that was no accident. That's what I felt comfortable with, the world which I knew. Bailey Avenue, there, at that time, was not a Jewish neighborhood. It was an Irish neighborhood. The overwhelming majority of our neighbors were elderly Irish. But on a lot of levels, it was a very familiar neighborhood. It was a walkup building, like the buildings I had lived in 15 years earlier, the stores were not so dissimilar to the kinds of stores I remembered from the late 50s and 1960s. And it was very cheap, which made it possible for graduate students to live in the neighborhood. It made a difference, it made a difference. You could get downtown to Columbia from there on the number one quickly, so I did.

SM: And were you in school during the 1967/1968 Teachers' Strikes?



JJ: Absolutely, I was at the Bronx High School of Science. Yes, it was a pivotal year on a lot of levels. I was radicalized by that experience on some level. I am familiar with the allegations of antisemitism that were made in that period. And the kinds of things that were said in the course of the school struggles. I sided, on a gut level, without knowing anything in particular (I was an adolescent) with the strikers. And in that year, which we used "The year without an autumn," I was amongst the group that went into the school with what amounted to the strikebreakers. And it's kind of an interesting phenomenon, right? Because older, mostly Jewish teachers, were defenders of the union above all, teacher rights above all, and perceived their opponents as antisemitic. And I certainly had friends whose parents were teachers or administrators and in the UFT, and they were absolutely appalled. But for us, me and my friends, there was a couple of different phenomena going on. Science was a very strict place, a very strict place with a gazillion rules. To this day, I can still recite the key parts of the school's clothing regulations. There was a rule that said you can't wear "dungaree-type pants with patch-type pockets." Wow! And it had many, many, many, many such rules. We had a teacher at that point at Science, I mean, prior to the strike, who basically had as a rule that you weren't ever allowed to talk to him directly. If you wanted to ask him a question, you had to write it clearly on a three by five white index card and pass it to him, to the front of the room. And then if he was so inclined, he would read the question. If he wasn't, he wouldn't. So, you know, Science was very intense, right? Students were, by and large, bright, and the teachers were, by and large, bright. And it was an amazing curriculum compared to most other high schools, but also very, very, very rigid.

And strike school couldn't have been any more different. The students that went in and the teachers that went in, were very open to new and creative approaches to what should be taught, to how things should be taught, to what the interaction between students and teachers should be like. And again, the Jewish element is a little bit complicated by the fact that there were some Jewish teachers who were far far more radical than the UFT, or Albert Shanker, or the people out on the strike line. There had long been some Jews attracted either to the Communist Party or to organizations that were sympathetic to the Communist Party. And some of those people were people who were teachers in places like Science. So some of the teachers on the inside were radical Jews and lots of teachers on the outside were Jews, and they hated each other's guts. By and large, I would say, the teachers didn't blame the kids who were going in, they might have thought that we were naive or hooligans or whatever, but they didn't think that we were responsible for the underlying antisemitism that they perceived or the radicalism that they perceived that they were very, very unhappy with. But yes, that was a very important moment, September, October, November of 1968, in a very tumultuous era. And I remember it very clearly.

SM: Yes. And did you have any involvement, after high school when you were in college, or when you were at Columbia with any of the other sort of protest movements that were going on at the time?

JJ: Oh, sure. I was involved in the anti-war movement, I would go to what we used to call the moratoria, which were the big demonstrations in Washington, DC. For sure. When I moved back to New York, as I indicated, I became directly involved in the infinitesimally small Jewish socialist youth movement. And,

you know, we would go to demonstrations, sponsor events. This week is a very significant anniversary. In the United States, in our era, you say September 11, one presumes you're talking about September 11, 2001, obviously a horrific moment. But the first thing that comes to mind for me when I hear September 11 is September 11 1973, which was the day on which Salvador Allende's government was overthrown by Pinochet and the Chilean military. And I remember very distinctly that the Jewish socialists sponsored an event in defense of Allende with some resistance from Jewish quarters, who were much more concerned about what was going on in Israel at that moment (which was also very worrisome), and thought that our attention was misdirected. For me, Salvador Allende was something of a political hero. I was a left socialist, he was a left socialist, he was committed to democratic norms, I was committed to democratic norms. And I thought that it was an outrage that, with American support, the democratically elected socialist figure had not only been removed from power, but had been killed. So yes, I was involved in protest movements.

SM: And so as you got older, I mean, specifically, since Science drew from other parts of the Bronx, and also that the neighborhoods were changing over time, were you ever aware of any sort of racial or ethnic tensions that were going on around you?

JJ: So first of all, Science had not changed that much by that period. I graduated from Science in 1970. The number of black students, for example, at Science then and now, was tiny. Yes, I knew some, yes, I was friends with some of them. I remember some not fully stated tension around that. There was a girl (she and I were both 15, and I'm using the term on purpose) who was Black, and who was a friend of mine at Science and who invited me to her Sweet 16 party. I remember my parents not being real happy with this. And I remember *her* parents not being real happy. I remember going to her Sweet 16 party, and I was like, "Hm? What's this all about?" So yes, there was some of that. Not a lot. There weren't that many Black students at Science at that moment, or, for that matter, Hispanic students at Science at that moment. There were non-Jews. But at Science, as had been true in the elementary schools I went to, there was a pretty heavy concentration of Jewish students. I don't know what the numbers would be. I don't know if anybody knows what the numbers would be. It was a lot.

SM: And would you say that education was an important value through your parents and other members of your family?

JJ: Absolutely, unequivocally. And there was never any question in my mind that I was going to go to college. There was never any question that I was going to pursue higher degrees. The money issue was real. And also other political changes in New York. So my older cousins and my older sister and others, without question, had gone to CCNY. No ifs, ands, or buts. Of course, that's where you're going to college. By the point that I was ready to go to college, CCNY was already beginning that period of open enrollment and of free tuition. And there was a massive, massive expansion of CUNY, that, on some levels, overwhelmed CUNY. And at that moment, the advice that kids like me were getting from the one guidance counselor for 500 kids that you had a place like Science, is: this is not a good moment. That's

not really what you want to do. So I applied to a bunch of different schools, private and public, and got into some. And after I had gotten in, my parents basically took me aside and said, there's no way for you to go to a private college, that's not happening. I remember going to an interview at Bard College with a girl with whom I was close then and with whom I am close now. Bard looked like the colleges you saw on television. It had a bucolic campus. In the country, small classes. People wandering around the lawns and sitting in circles reciting poetry. This looked like a good college to me. And I applied and got in. And I remember my parents said: that's not happening. So I instead went to SUNY Binghamton. And I got, what they used to call it, an NDSL loan. And I got a Regents scholarship. And I got a job in the kosher kitchen. And those three things together meant that even I could afford to go SUNY. My rent, when I moved off campus, was \$26.50 a month. And so I could make it happen. I didn't suffer either, it was fine.

SM: Did you have any sort of culture shock going up to Binghamton and leaving the Bronx?

JJ: Sure. Even though a very, very high proportion of the students in Binghamton at that time were from New York and the New York suburbs, still, yes.

SM: And still today.

JJ: I remember thinking: This ain't Creston Avenue. A lot of my friends, in fact, most of my friends, were Jewish kids, but not Jewish kids who had had experiences like mine. Jewish kids from the suburbs, Jewish kids from Nassau County, or from Westchester. So they were Jewish, but had American-born parents, and came from families with somewhat more money. But there was enough cultural overlap that I remain very close with some of those people to this very day.

SM: And so, I guess, a few more like, fun sort of questions. What kind of things did you like to do for fun when you were growing up, when you were a young person?

JJ: When I was 13, I was given a bicycle. And I loved going bicycle riding, it gave me a freedom that I otherwise didn't have. I could go any place I wanted whenever I wanted. I did read a lot when I was a kid. I did like reading. Every summer, in a pattern that I'm sure you heard about from lots of other people, we would go to the Borscht Belt. And we would rent a bungalow in Sullivan County. And we would be there from when school ended until school began, in all the time that I was little. And I loved being out in the country, especially because my cousins mostly would come with us. I loved swimming in Lake Huntington, and things like that. Those were fun things.

SM: And did you ever, besides going up there in the summer, did you travel in other parts of the city or outside of the city at all?

JJ: We would travel to Brighton Beach once a year, because one of the very, very tiny number of my father's friends and acquaintances from the pre-War period who survived the War, lived on Brighton Fourth. Motele Goldzamer. Motele was older than my dad, and, in pre-war Warsaw, when my father was an entry level apprentice in a metal shop, Motele was his supervisor, was like a journeyman. I can't remember the exact titles anymore. And Motele survived. Motele survived the Warsaw Ghetto, and eventually got married and moved to Brighton Beach. And we would go, once a year, literally once a year, to Brighton Beach to see him. And I remember those visits to this very day. And now when, once a year, I go to Brighton Beach, I can still pick out the building that Motele lived in, and remember the walks we took and the boardwalk. And that kind of thing was also emulated in one or two other instances. We didn't travel. That never happened. We didn't go on exotic vacations, either outside the country or inside the country. But my parents also had a friend, Rudy, who had been in the same DP camp in Germany as them. And when my parents left to go to the States, he stayed behind and finished engineering school. And as a result, by the time he made it to the States, he was a full fledged engineer, and ended up getting the kinds of jobs my father would have gotten if he had finished. So Rudy lived at various points in places where IBM or NASA was located. For a long time, he lived in the Washington DC suburbs. And I do remember, even as a child, going on a bus with my father to see Rudy in Silver Springs, Maryland. Once in a great while, those were the big adventures. Not beyond that.

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

JJ: Depends on when. I was at Woodstock. You can figure out almost precisely how old I am from these conversations. Woodstock was very impressive. I didn't have a clue what I was getting myself into when I went with a friend from high school. But it was in the Borscht Belt, right? It was in Bethel, which was just a couple of miles from the bungalow in which we had spent most of our childhood summers. So what I remember was taking a bus from Port Authority to Woodstock. And this was before the festival began. But the roads were already essentially impassable. Getting within a few miles of Bethel, and the bus driver announcing "This is as far as I'm going, I'm going to turn around and everybody has to get off," but I knew where I was. I remember the music. I do remember Richie Havens singing Freedom at Woodstock. And that was an important experience.

SM: That's really cool. I mean, that's pretty close to where I'm from. So I know the area pretty well. I actually haven't been up there, but I've been meaning to for a long time. Let's see. I forgot to ask earlier, but did you live in a kosher home?

JJ: I think it would be fairer to say kosher style. My parents mostly didn't buy non-kosher meat. We generally did not eat pork or pork products at home. On the other hand, I don't think we had two sets of dishes. And I think that the rules could be suspended when necessary. So in the same way that we didn't travel, we didn't go out to eat very much, with one exception. And the exception was, on the day when we got home from the country every year, we would go to the Chinese restaurant on Burnside Avenue. And at the local Chinese restaurant where you could choose one from column A and two from column

B, my older sister, the American born daughter, was put in charge of ordering for everyone. She would consistently order spare ribs. And my parents would eat it without blinking twice, knowing perfectly well what they were doing and liking the fact that they had an American born daughter who could, for them, swim in this American sea. Of course that milieu was not any more American than we were, these were recently arrived Chinese immigrants.

SM: And so what kind of food did you eat? You know, when you were at home?

JJ: East European Jewish-inflected food. My mother would make pot roast and lokshen kugel and potato dishes and chicken. And she liked to bake. My mother's family had been a family of bakers with bakeries of their own in Eastern Europe. So I grew up eating the cookies and cakes that my mother baked. She likes to make babkas, for example, amongst many other such things. She liked apple cake. And she was a good cook, even though her home had been privileged enough that when she was a child, not only did she not cook, her mother didn't cook. People cooked for them. But there's no question the kind of food that we ate was almost stereotypically East European Jewish food. "Potatonik." You know what a potatonik is?

SM: I don't think so.

JJ: They taste like potato latkes, but instead of being individual pancakes, it's like a kugel made of potato.

SM: Is it just potato kugel or is it something different?

JJ: It's like potato kugel. It was a variant.

SM: Okay, yes.

JJ: So in winter times, we would eat *flanken* and potatonik. In summer times, we liked eating and did eat a lot of cold borscht with *shmetene*, sour cream, in it. Or noodles with raisins and cottage cheese or or or. And I'm not so sure that my parents ever Americanized their diets in any significant way. Vegetables, at that point, often consisted of peas from a can, or the equivalent, peas and carrots. That was a fairly typical one.

SM: And so at what point did you end up leaving the Bronx, besides when you went to university?

JJ: You mean leaving permanently?

SM: Yes.

JJ: Well, the late 1970s, the mid to late 1970s, after that period on Bailey Avenue, I moved down to Morningside Heights and lived close to Columbia. From the late 1970s onward, I lived on 115<sup>th</sup> Street and Morningside Drive for a long time. Later, at 528 Riverside Drive. And, you know, like a lot of graduate students, I was a graduate student for a long time. Many years. I moved from one Columbia apartment to the next through the late 1970s and early 1980s.

SM: And were you aware — I mean, like you talked about the things that had started to happen in the South Bronx when your parents were still living there. Were you aware as things continued to get worse with the arson and devastation?

JJ: Sure. The neighborhoods that we lived in were neighborhoods which were thought of as the West Bronx. We didn't live in the South Bronx. But yes, the same phenomena that had earlier impacted the South Bronx absolutely impacted the West Bronx, particularly though not exclusively, after the opening of Co-op City. And I was absolutely, certainly, aware that not only was my family leaving the West Bronx, but so were the families of almost everyone who I had known at Science or earlier. None of them stayed behind. Literally no one. And it happened within a period of just a couple of years, in the 1970s, that there was this massive movement. As you doubtless know, the white flight phenomenon was real.

SM: Great. And so the last question I usually like to ask is, when you think back about your time growing up in the Bronx, what kind of emotions, sentiments, or memories do you associate with it?

JJ: Positive ones. It was, first of all, not just a matter of the Bronx, I lived in a very stable household, in a very supportive neighborhood. I received a good education, a good secular education and a good Yiddishist education. And I developed affinities that have remained with me to this day. A lot of my academic work in recent decades has been work that stems from the kind of context in which I grew up. So I would say that my feelings are positive.

SM: That's great. Is there anything else you would like to add, anything we've missed, before I end the recording?

JJ: My question for you would be who else would you like to interview? I know a lot of people. If you give me some notion of what else you're looking for.