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Cohen, Ruthie

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

Ruthie Cohen (RC): I am second generation American. Let's start with. My father's parents came from Poland. They were already married, had 3 kids. My grandfather was a businessman, and he was also a teacher, a *malamed* a wise man, and they knew quite a few languages. And then my uncle and my father were born here. I think they lived in Harlem at first, and then they moved to the Bronx. My grandfather actually was very unusual. He was a short little Jewish guy, his name was Goldberg, no doubt there. Yet he became friendly with one of the biggest antisemites, Dupont. Dupont said to his assistant, "whatever Sherry wants — his name was Shraga or Sherry Goldberg — get him set up in plastics." He did, he did well. He had a factory and they made buttons, and then that went into eyeglass frames. But, my father was the intellectual of the group and he did not want to do that, he was a teacher.

My mom's parents came separately as teenagers, and they were fixed up by a family friend. They were 16 and 17, which is amazing. He was a tailor and he was an amazing tailor, a lot of people became tailors but he was a very good tailor. He was very progressive and very politically positive and sweet man. Not that I remember them because I am the baby of my family. My mother's mother came over at 17 by herself on a ship. She had a good time, you know they brought her up from steerage. And she was a cigar maker, a factory thing. Anyway they got married, they had three kids but one passed away. So my mother is the baby, my father is the baby, and I'm the baby. I think my mother's parents lived in Manhattan, I think she was born on 22nd, East Side, and then they bought a house in the Bronx. A two family house and my mother said that they were a family of four, upstairs was my father's sister with a family of nine kids, the Katz's. Certainly in Bronx living, I don't know about the other boroughs, it was very family oriented, everyone lived with their family. Anyway, in the end everyone moved to 2785 Sedgwick Avenue. I don't even think there were people who weren't our family in there. I wasn't born yet, but my sister said that about every floor with one or two per floor, and eight apartments on a floor were our family. In those days everyone knew everyone and it was, you know, good and bad. It's like a kibbutz, it's the good and the bad, it's exactly the same kind of thing.

Before I was born my parents moved out of there, my father was really a bright guy and he said "no, I'm not paying rent," and he bought a two family house. Two houses away from 2785, it was 2805 Sedgwick. I was born and five weeks after I was born we moved around the corner of 197th to 2805 Webb Avenue, and that's where I grew up. Webb Avenue was a one way street, there was the reservoir, Our Lady of Angels Church, then apartment houses, some two family

houses. My street was all one and two family houses. The next street was apartment houses and then Kingsbridge Road. Before Kingsbridge Road was Kingsbridge Heights Jewish Center. So within three blocks you had the church, the Catholic church, and the *shul*.

The non-Jewish people, almost completely, were Roman Catholic Irish. This is what I would tell people, this is how the weekend would go. I would look out my window on a Saturday morning, looking out my window to the right towards Kingsbridge Heights, the Greek family, the Greek Jews, they had a part of our *shul* with their own service. Meandering all through the morning my mother would get there on time for the sermon. Rabbi Miller, he was a fabulous man, people came for his sermons, he was quoted in the New York Times frequently, very erudite, very real. And his sermons, he was a very unusual man. On Sunday morning, at that time they didn't have masses at any other time besides, at 7 o'clock, 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock, that was the thing. Every hour you would see people going this way, and that was it that was our whole thing. The only way I knew about other people, like Protestants, was in public school because PS 86 was probably 98% Jewish because the Catholic kids went to Our Lady of Angels. And the other 2% or 1% was Dutch Reform because there was a Dutch Reform church right on Reservoir Avenue, and others I don't know. And that was it. So on the Jewish holidays that we didn't get off, but most of us took — well, I did, because I was observant — took off at sukkot and all those holidays. They put all the Protestant kids in one class.

SM: Yeah, it's not enough to justify all these different classes.

RC: Oh, not even on different grades, though all of them fit into one so I guess it was. Yeah, that's what. But every teacher I had, except for the fifth grade, was an unmarried Irish Catholic teacher. Miss Sullivan, Miss Cale, Miss O'Rourke, Miss Ford. As a matter of fact, in the fifth grade there was Mrs. Paley. Well, I thought that didn't sound like a Jewish name. No one even thought that way. We saw her at Rosh Hashanah, and it was like the talk of the place. "Oh, my God! Mrs. Paley is Jewish!" But there wasn't any animosity, that's just the way it was. The only time I ever felt anti-semitism, this is my entire childhood, was walking to Hebrew school one day, I remember, I had a red coat on. And some kid from OLA took dog poop, put it on something, and put it on my coat. Mortified, of course. Mortified. I went right downstairs, walked right into the ladies room, washed it off and everything. But that was the only incident. I was hit with a snowball in my ear from somebody from OLA. I don't think that was anything anti-semitic, I think, it was just boy/girl ninth grade. But my father was well known at the church because he was on the Catholic school PSLA. At PSLA, it was like Monsignor this, Monsignor blah blah blah, Reverend blah blah blah, and Sam Goldberg, and so they knew him. Of course, the kid got beat up or whatever. We did't care.

So that was that part, the relations were that way. Then the people I knew who were not Jewish were almost all Italian. And that was through my father's work, and how I grew up, and how my

father was a track coach. So I grew up in a home that was very liberal. We had Blacks and Puerto Ricans all the time. Any derogatory word about anybody was never allowed, never said. We didn't speak that way. We didn't feel that way. So way before anything I was very fortunate to be brought up in my family. What else? My family? We were observant. Most of my friends were not. I called them Bagel Jews because their Judaism was not that deep.

SM: I haven't heard that, I like that!

RC: You like that, bagel Jews, because my husband was one of those when I met him. He knew very little. And I had one girlfriend that was more observant than I was actually. But we were good friends anyway, so we would do all the *shul* things together, but that was it. And I didn't write on Saturday, I didn't go shopping. So my parents would take me on Sunday with some friends so I didn't feel anything. Kosher at home. Which I kept till I was in my mid 60s. Always had a Kosher home. That's comfortable for me. It's a comfortable thing. There wasn't any big deal. I didn't eat at my friends' houses, but that was okay. And I do have one thing that's very cute and funny. When I was about 8 or so, my friend, 2 houses down, was having supper, and I was at her house, and she said, "Oh, yeah, we're having leftovers." And I didn't say anything. I come home, I said, "Ma, What are leftovers? Is it a pig, is it…" I thought it was *traif* , not kosher. I didn't know what it was, and I wasn't going to say anything. She cracked up. She says, no, we don't have that. It's just what it means leftovers. Leftovers? I didn't even know what leftovers were. No, she says, because we have your brother Eddie. My brother Eddie was a skinny, skinny kid that would start with the top shelf and work his way down and eat his way down [through the refrigerator]. And I had two brothers and a sister. So there were never leftovers, and we ate well, we ate meat every night except for Thursday night, for no reason other than my mom liked to cook that.

SM: What kind of things did you guys like to eat when you were growing up?

RC: Start with Friday night, because that's the big night, and it was always chicken soup with, not matzo balls that was just Passover, rice or noodles, roasted chicken, apple sauce with every meat meal, for no other reason than my father loves apple sauce, and one time somebody served it for dessert. I thought they forgot about it. It was so weird. In the winter we had, this was a very Bronx thing, half a grapefruit sectioned out with a cherry in the middle. But in the summer you had cantaloupe, or something. Then we would have the main dish, I don't even remember. I just remember my mother always had Saturday lunch because she didn't cook on Saturday. She would have meatloaf for something like that already in the oven. And for dessert, I would go to Phillips Bakery on Kingsbridge and Sedgwick Avenue every Friday, and get Challah, rye bread, seeded rye for the weekend. Oh, and either a part of a cake which was either a bunt thing with chocolate icing on the outside, marble cake, or chocolate cake. Something yummy.

SM: Yum.

RC: Yes, yum. It was very yummy, and we were allowed to have seltzer with syrup Friday night. Because my father was a health teacher, too, so we didn't have soda, and it was expensive, so we didn't have that. They had the seltzer delivery and so you had that, and Saturday you could have syrup, too. Saturday night, I didn't even know that people ate because we just had soft boiled eggs and challah and butter, you know, like a light thing. Sunday we were not the bagels and lox family. Only time we had what was called appetizing was when there was a special occasion, or a Shiva. Almost every week we went to my cousin's deli on 170th St between Jerome and the Concourse. Hymie and Yetta. Think they were Jewish? Kosher Deli, and we would share. I don't even remember what my father had, my mother and I would split a hot dog. I had it with ketchup. I didn't like the other stuff, half a hotdog and half a tongue sandwich. And that was delicious. And they, interestingly, came originally from Poland, but they were from Guatemala. I have a lot of relatives all over the world. I still have relatives in Guatemala.

SM: So they went there first before they ended up coming to New York?

RC: Yes. So they went there first before they ended up coming up. Then they moved to Queens and bought this deli and that's what they did. Then one son became a judge, the other, you know, like a typical story. Monday night, I think, was lamb chops. Tuesday night was veal chops, breaded veal chops. Delicious! Wednesday was some other meet. I don't know what. Thursday was dairy, which meant salmon croquettes, or some white fish, flounder. And you know, lunch. I went through phases. A year of tuna sandwiches, a year of egg salad sandwiches, but never meat sandwiches. Didn’t bring meat. This is, I think, very typical. Bronx Jewish, we had a kosher salami hanging on the back of the door. On the bottom, so it wouldn’t get dried out there was wax paper with a rubber band around it. So that was always there, what else did we have. That was the food part.

We had all the holidays at our house. We were a central location for everybody. Seders, we always had two, which I still do. My parents were observant, but not hysterical, like we turned on and off the lights. You know that kind of thing. We watched every Friday night I *Remember Mama* on TV in the sun parlor. We'd all lay around there and watch it. I grew up in a very warm and loving household, but different than my brothers and sisters, because they are 7, 9, and 11 years older than me.

SM: So what year were you born?

RC: ‘44. I was the last accident. 3 out of 4 of us were accidents. Also their honeymoon was different than most. They got married at the end of June, because my father was a teacher. And, quite unusually, they took my father's car and they drove cross country to the Olympics in LA. So that was amazing, and of course visited relatives along the way, they said after. I have her diary, her log of everything that went on. They got dressed up every day, and after Chicago it

was all dirt roads till they got to LA. Amazing, 1932! So they were very forward thinking, and very liberal, very open-minded. We didn't think of civil rights as anything different than being… like that was it. In the sixth grade my father took a sabbatical because I was already skipped. I think they just wanted me out of the house. So they put me in school early and it was probably not a great idea, because I was not a good reader. I only have vision in one eye, so I really wasn't a good reader. My father was phys ed chairperson, taught biology, taught everything, led Boy Scout troops, ran track meets — like big ones. I was brought up going to Madison Square Garden, the old one, which was unusual because nobody knew what that meant. They thought the races were like horses. I said no, like people running. I would walk with him down to Van Cortlandt Park on Saturdays. We'd do track meets. He was all over the place with Melrose meets, Penn relays, whatever. Actually, he was asked in 1960 to help train the track and field for the Olympics in Rome. Well, but he was sick by then, so he couldn't. He died young.

Sixth grade, I was in a class that was held together from fifth grade, it was a very bright class, and they would take the SPs. You know what that is?

SM: Yes

RC: Where you skip. He did not want me to do that at all, because I was already the youngest in my class, very young. So after 28 years of teaching he took a Sabbatical that term and we went South. He also started a business called Olympic Conditioners where he cleaned and reconditioned athletic equipment. So he had a lot of schools. Everybody knew him, everybody. So we're going south and I'm ten years old, this is my first foray into the South. This was the fifties, 1954. So the first thing over the Mason Dixon line, we would go to a gas station. Of course, I had to go to the bathroom, because what else, and I start walking with my mom and it says: "colored," "white" and "colored." I looked up. I said, "What is that?" And I was mad, and I was a very quiet little girl. Nothing like now. I was just like it was all inside. I said I was going to go right there because of the colored one, because I was mad. My father said, "Come here Ruthie. The people that you're upset about will get into trouble if you go there, so don't do that. You're in a different area." I saw, my eyes were opened up. And I saw poor white people because it was just route 1, we didn't have I-95. It was then, going slowly through the South, it was a very eye opening experience for me. He had a student, George Pressley, whose father was nowhere to be found, because it's not that he was a bad man. He actually got rid of the mother. The mother was a drunk, but George stayed with the mother in some projects. My father said, this is a fabulous kid, and he did a lot of track and he became part of our family, literally. My father and I were the only ones at his wedding, it was in an apartment. He became like a big brother to me, and I was his baby sister. He passed away, he was 10 years older than I am. When he had a second baby he called me to be the godmother. I was thrilled because my own sister didn't make me the godmother, because in Judaism it's not really a thing. It's not like the same thing, but I was insulted. So he calls me and says, "I'd like you to be the godmother to Carlton

Eric." That's great. I said, "Well, what church do you go to?" He says, "Well, I don't go to church." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "We don't belong to one." I said, "Well, everybody should be born into something. I think it's important. What if he was to be a minister or something? You're putting him at a disadvantage. Call me back after you go church shopping." He calls me back. He says, okay I have a church, it's February 4th we're gonna go. I said, did you tell him I'm not Christian. He says it's not important. I said, you have to tell him, in a Catholic church, I can't even do anything. I don't think Protestants are restrictive about that, but still you can't surprise him. I'll take care of it, he said. So my husband and I go with my mother. The church is blacks and whites and very plain, definitely not Catholic. Very Protstanty, simple. I go up, Mary, his wife, said that we're going to baptize the 5 year old boy. So I'm holding the little adorable chub chubby. I'm holding him like this. George is behind me. Mary's there, and the friends, and the minister looks me in the eye, and he says, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

SM: I think you know the answer.

RC: In my mind, in a flash, I say to myself, do I say yes and lie or tell the truth and cause a racket? You know I always ask. You know you're putting those questions to yourself. What would I have done? What kind of person am I? And I couldn't lie. I couldn't say yes, because that's making a mockery of the whole thing. And I thought that was disrespectful. But I certainly couldn't say, yes. So this is silence, this dead silence. So George answers for me, he at least caught on. By the way, he got his doctorate. This is a kid who didn't even want to — so he caught on and he answered. Afterwards I said to the minister, that you had no idea, that this is not my doing. He was supposed to ask you and inform you, but I did it. I'm the one who's the reason he's here, because I do believe that if something happens to them, and I have become his guardian, for sure he will be going to church, because I believe in that. You have to have something. So that was a funny experience.

When George went to college, he went to North Carolina State. I think that was all Black at the time, so my father goes down. He's a freshman. My father goes down to see him. Well, he doesn't see my father walk in, but my father's also a little oblivious. So it's all Black guys sitting at the dining room tables, and he's this little guy like his father, a short little Jewish guy walks in. Everyone stops talking, so George turns around and says, "Dad!" He goes, and he hugs him, and he says, listen, I really wanna talk to you. I'm gonna go to the hotel, come over. When he goes to the hotel he realizes. Oh, my God, they won't let him upstairs, explain to the guy, listen. But the guy was very nice. So he went upstairs and he talked to him. And he said, you are good enough, probably, for the Olympics. That's how good you are, but much more important is your degree. You need to get a degree and I want to see you studying. He made Dean's list every single term.

SM: You said he ended up getting his PhD?

RC: Yes, it was about drugs and stuff like that. He ended up teaching at Nassau Community College for many years.Whereas other people would use derogatory words, and this and that, there was no such thing. I'm not typical. So when you're interviewing me, I'm not really the typical. But there were people like me that existed is what I'm getting at, so I will skew everything you're getting.

SM: Yes, but I always say you know people who say to me that they do have the typical experience. So why does anybody care about me? You know this is all the same as everybody else. And well, it's the full experience. Well as a historian I know that the more that I hear the more I can write down this was a common experience. But everyone I have talked to has had something specific and special. That's why you want to talk to as many people as possible.

RC: Everybody's children, like my age, and their brothers and sisters, everybody got a higher education. I don't know anybody who didn't. Everybody. And I remember when my brother wanted to go to — my father had gone to Syracuse, but he, his family, had money. He went to the school of forestry. Can you imagine Sam Goldberg standing there? He was adorable. He was really very gung ho, very alive and very personable. And then he came home his senior year and he graduated from CCNY. So now he has 4 kids. My mother only went back to work when I was in the fifth grade, but we had someone in the house so I was taken care of. My brother Jack said, “I want to go to Syracuse.” My father said, "Listen Jack, I have 4 kids. I'm a teacher. I won't have the money for that. I can’t.” He said, “But I wanna go.” My brother worked his way through Syracuse 4 years and medical school. My parents didn't give him any money, none. Because he worked! When he was in college, he worked and he was in a fraternity. He worked in the Borscht Belt, being a waiter. He worked when he was in medical school as an X-ray technician. He had businesses. He did this. He did that. He made it work.

SM: I know you mentioned your father was a teacher. But in general was education something that was particularly important in your family?

RC: Yes! It wasn't even like people used to say, “Ruthie, what do you want to be when you grow up?” At that time, everybody who was a Jewish girl did not have the choices we have. If you were smart, they said you could be a nurse or a teacher. That was it. I didn't want to be a teacher because everyone expected me to be a teacher. So that wasn't it. I said, No, I want to be a maid because I love to clean. And they said, Well, what about college? Oh, I'll go to college. There was not a discussion in the house. My mother had started college, but then her father lost his job. It was the Depression. She was smart. You don't realize it when your kids, because they are parents, what do they know? Nothing. And I didn't know I was as smart as I was at all because of my brother. He was just 16, Jack, when he went to college and Eddie also graduated at 15. They were both geniuses, but Eddie went to Columbia on a Ford scholarship. All paid. Never paid a penny. Then he went to Johns Hopkins, never paid a penny for anything in his education. So my

older brother became a cardiologist, and he was actually head of the Medical Board at Montefiore for many years, and then he taught. When he got Parkinson's he became the teacher of all the incoming cardiology residents. He died of Lewy Body Disease. My brother Eddie was at Tufts Medical School. He was a geneticist, microbiology. He died of Lewy Body disease, horrible deaths, horrible deaths. These IQs were like 160s and 150s and very decent. My brother Jack was very secular, he was a wine maven, and this and that. My brother Eddie and I were very close. Family was very important to us, and Judaism was important, but Eddie was really observant. I'm not. I was never orthodox after growing up. So he went there for free. The other one worked his way through. So Jo Anne, my sister, went to — she wanted to be a teacher so she went to Cortland State Teachers College, which was very inexpensive. And she became a teacher in Scarsdale. I didn't even apply. My mother applied for me. I chose Binghamton, which was Harper, because there were two boys to every girl. I also was 16, a baby and a very baby baby. I shouldn't have gone, and I went in January, and it was a debacle. I didn't know how to study at all. I had been skating by, but I had a great social life. Because we didn't do anything in those days. Now when you hook up that's it. No, we had dates, nothing like that. I ended up at City College. My father was very sick. I had to come home. I went at night and I was very serious because my father was so sick, but I didn't realize he's dying because my father doesn't die. He's the epitome of energy, but he weighed 70 pounds. When he died he had a hole in his aorta, but I didn't see it, and no one bothered to say anything to me. So I was home with him, and during the day my mom had to work. And so I landed it up with an A in chemistry, the only A from the only girl in the class of 90 people because I had to put all of my energies that way.

Anyway, then in my junior year I went to Israel because I got a scholarship. Which was fascinating because Israel is only 15 years old. It was amazing. It's nothing like it is now. You can't even recognize it. But I've been back 11 times. I've lived there over 2 years. By the way, I went to the march in DC [after October 7]. Unbelievable. Wonderful, it was wonderful. Anyway, my brother Eddie had money to send me to Camp Ramah which was conservative, run by the conservative movement. And I said, I don't want to go there, the boys are too religious. My mother said, "Listen. Your brother's putting his money in there. You be grateful." That's it. I had a ball. I had a ball. So we grew up highly educated, constantly educated. I mean, I went to Hebrew school Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday. I had dance lessons and music lessons and that's typical. That was typical, everyone had music, some kind of a music thing. It was terrible. I hated the piano, I mean. I hated the practicing. I like the piano, and my mother's cousin was the teacher, and he said, "Sylvia, please don't waste whatever money you have giving me, because she couldn't care less."

SM: I was the same way. And tell me more about your experiences in public school.

RC: It was the first day I went. I had been in Yeshiva for 2 years. My father was principal, that is, in the afternoons, after he would go there. He grew up, only speaking English. His parents

only spoke English at home. My mother's father spoke Yiddish because he wanted to, and she would answer him in English, and my mother's mother spoke English to her, so she was very good with languages, anyway. So now all these people come after the war. They don't speak English. They speak Yiddish. She had to teach him Yiddish. He was really something else, she had to teach him Yiddish, so he could converse a little bit with them. So in public school my first day I was scared out of my mind because I had never been in a public school. My teacher was Miss Sullivan, an adorable young teacher, she said to me, "what school are you from?" I was embarrassed because I didn't want to say Yeshiva. I was very embarrassed and she said, "Oh, yes, I see here Yeshiva Torah V'Emunah." Then I heard everyone else's name, and I said, "Okay, I think I'm fine," and that was it. Religion was not an issue, my friends, some in the class, were Jewish, some, very few, were not Jewish. I didn't know what they were. Lillian Roth's family sounds Jewish, but she wasn't. She was Dutch Reformed. But she was my friend. It was not an issue. I don't know if the teachers — look, I don't know what their things was. They were strict, and it was, whatever it was. Same thing in Junior High School, not a problem. Everybody was friendly with everybody. It was not an issue, even in high school. I went to Walton. I hated that because it was all girls and I was in the honors class.

SM: My grandmother went to Walton as well.

RC: I didn't like all girls, I like boys. You know, the janitor would walk in and they'd scream. Silly. That was tenth grade because Junior High was through ninth grade. Then I went to Taft, snuck into Taft. I was not in the district. We gave my father's factory, so they looked at me like, "you live where?" It was Brook Avenue, terrible area. I mean, he never came for open school night because he was the first dean there. He didn't want to be recognized. So my mother went, and Goldberg was, come on. It wasn't all Jewish, but there was predominantly, I would say predominantly. No problem. People just blended, it didn't matter. Nobody really cared. It wasn't an issue. They were Black kids, there were Puerto Ricans, I didn't feel anything.

SM: I know you mentioned that, because you didn't go out or do things on Saturday, your family would go on Sunday. What kind of things did you like to do with your friends? Just what kind of things you'd like to do for games.

RC: I'll tell you. When we were little there was Ruthie Goldberg, Beth Blumenthal, she lived downstairs from us, Reba Dickstein, Elinor Friedman, and then Ellen Breslau and Marianne Lorenzelli. They were Swiss. So that was the group and we were within a year or two of each other. Jump rope, we played potsie, which is hopscotch. We did scully in the street, we roller skated on the sidewalks. We rode bikes. We rode scooters. We went ice skating in Sultans which is under the El on Broadway in Riverdale. What else did we do? We played red light, green light. We played giant step. When it was raining we would play cards, and we would play monopoly, board games. We were always busy. and we're always outside. It was fine. Somebody said, did

you miss having a Christmas tree because Hanukkah was not a big deal and all we had was orange candles? That was it, and we got one present, if you were lucky. Because to us it was singing the songs, not like it is now. Of course, Christmas was always Christmas. My father hired Peggy off a farm in Ireland when she was 18, to come and live in the 2 bedroom apartment with my mother and father in one room, the 3 kids in the other room, new newborn, 2 and 4. They were in the other bedroom, and she was in the living room, and then she moved to the house with them, and then she married. Of course Italian, because Irish and Italian. That's the only way it went. Which is so ridiculous because there such opposite cultures. Ridiculous. You have the Italian, warm and very, you know, mushy, loud and food, and this and that and family! And then there's the Irish, standoff and drink! Forget the food. This is the combo. Now they're getting married, her parents weren't there. She had an old spinster aunt. She married an Italian. They went to the church and my father gave her away. So my mother rode on the bus with my sister and, I think she was pregnant then, and my father walked from the Bronx to the church in Washington Heights. He gave her away, he got special permission because there was no one else. So I was born. They got married, and then the next year she had Michael the first child, so she didn't work anymore. So we went to their house with their Christmas tree. They had the big balls at that, so we went up to Washington Heights. Also, Mary Ann had a tree. I did envy her when she had first communion, because she had a bride dress. I said, "I want that." My mother says, "you'll get a dress like that, but you'll be older. But you'll get one of those." We went to the rockettes, the Christmas show, I mean, it was just that's theirs. This is ours. There was no problem, of course, that was the time when we were called Christ killers, too, but I didn't hear it as much. That was that, but we were very busy little kids and — oh, we played against the wall. What is that handball against the wall? You punch the ball against the wall?

SM: As you got older did you travel more around the Bronx or did you go into Manhattan?

RC: First of all, if we learned about Bunker Hill, we drove to Bunker Hill. That's the kind of thing we did. We were in a car all the time. My father was an educator. What can I tell you, when you're an educator, you educate all the time, because that's what you do, you share. We all became travelers. We all went all over, I mean last year I took a Jewish tour of Morocco. That was unbelievable, because of my history. History was my major, I mean in graduate school. But I love it because you're studying world history. And you're a historian. You know people think history, people don't know, think it's just memorizing dates — that is so irrelevant. You don't even have to know what I mean, you do after a while, you know it. But that's what I said: it's sociology, it's economics, it's anthropology. I mean, there's so much involved in history. It's much harder than my masters in chemistry. I'm a chemistry teacher. So my masters in chemistry was easier.

SM: It's much more straightforward, math or science is like, here's the answer. History, we tell our kids — I teach. Just yesterday, the other teacher said, “There's no yes or no in history.” There's no like black and white. There's no easy answers ever.

RC: All of history was written by men. So, ergo, women, who certainly in Jewish history had a tremendous impact because they were the business people. If their husbands were talented in Torah, they did Torah. Rashi's wife ran the vineyards, they were the brains behind the whole thing. They ran everything. But you don't hear anything about that. Well, and now I mean Einstein's wife. He stole from her. He did. He stole a lot of the math from her. Yeah, not the only one.

SM: How did you end up going to school for Jewish history?

RC: One thing about city colleges at that time before open enrollment. It was very difficult. Oh, it was. Did you know that the faculty was the highest paying faculty in the United States?

SM: No.

RC: It was. Unbelievable professors, unbelievable. I was going to be a doctor so I was pre-med. So that meant all of my science classes were geared for chemistry majors. It was biology for chem. That's how specific biology for chemistry majors. Physics for chemistry majors, everything like that, math. But we had to take speech. How to give a speech, all that kind of stuff. We had to take 2 years of English lit and language. So when I finished Spanish I took Hebrew. That's because my brother had it. His future wife was Israeli. So they were talking in Hebrew, I said, “Well, I don't understand them. I've got to learn this.” So I actually learned Hebrew as a language. Well, the math and science everybody had to have. We had to take everything. I had to take economics, which I hated. Yeah, I always hate that. Money's not for me. Good thing. We had to take sociology, political science, art, music. You had to have everything. You came out of there very well rounded, very well rounded. So then I graduated, and I became an instant teacher, because when I graduated I went to Mexico with my friends, the Mandina sisters. She was my friend from college. She ended up being the head of the law school at CUNY. Well, her father worked for the Board of Ed and the other one became a teacher, I think, at Queens College in English. So these are 2 sisters, and we were going to Mexico. I broke up with my soon to be husband. But it wasn't a big break, a divorce before the marriage, and we were going there, and it was funny because he was so thrilled because everyone in Mexico is Catholic and Jewish girls only went out with Jewish guys. He said, “Oh, God, girls!” And they wore crosses, so I never wore anything. But I put a little *cha*i on. First stay out of the bus these gorgeous guys come over and see this and says, “*Shalom.*” I went, “Oh, my God, Mr. Mandinas gonna kill us!” It's the most Catholic country — because, they lived in Bayside, and all their boyfriends were Jewish. I said, “Oh, my God!” Anyway, it was really funny. We had a great

time, but they were walking around with the bikinis, with the blonde hair, with the crosses, and I'm the one in a one piece bathing suit in the middle. The father calls me up, and he says, "Ruthie, come home," I said, "why?" He says — well, because he works for the board — "we're starting a thing called the Instant teacher program." All you have to go for is 6 weeks. There are 3 classes: how to teach science, adolescent psychology, and methodology. I said, because I never took any education courses, I was not gonna be a teacher. He said, and all you have to do is teach for one year and take 2 courses. I said, alright. I had nothing else. I said, sure. We came home, and Kenny joined it, and he did the same thing. Kenny's my husband and I loved it. I wanted to be an actress my whole life. But I am, I mean you become an actress. It doesn't matter if you don't feel well, you come in, and you just go and you do it. And you're expressive.

SM: It's more of a show than anything else. You gotta make it interesting.

RC: Especially chemistry, because you gotta make it interesting. I referred sex to everything, you know. I put in little references and in the middle I would talk about what to name my new dog and talk about my kids. I always broke it up, because they never knew what was coming out of my mouth. And that was fun. And I loved it. It was my calling. So that's how I went into that. And then when I finished that, I said, "Now I want to go to school for me." I had to get the masters, because that's what you do. So I went to NYU, and I said to my husband, "What I paid for one term is more than I paid for all of my college together, because it was free." All the stuff was free. Well, not college was free, but well, it was actually. I went for Hebrew Studies. I had the most fabulous teachers, and we had nuns in the class. It was very interesting. I loved it. And then I finished it and I took my COMPS. I was out of the hospital, I just had the baby, June 1st. I took my COMPS in July. And then I said, "Okay, now, I'm starving for more." Oh, my God! There's so much more. So the choice was Columbia or Yeshiva. So I went to Rabbi Miller. That's who I wanted to tell you about Israel Miller, and was now Vice President of Yeshiva University, but he was — He couldn't perform my wedding because it was just after the 6 Day War, and he was representing the Presidents of all the Jewish organizations in the United States here to go to Israel. I mean, he was a very renowned and lovely man, lovely, and my father had been his counselor in camp in Baltimore. So that's what happened there. And I went to him and he said, "Truthfully you'll be much happier at Columbia." So I went to Columbia and they said, "Well, it's 5 days a week." We had no money, my husband was teaching. I took 3 years off for each kid which meant one salary. Which was like maybe $12,000 a year. I mean, it was nothing. I can't do that I just had a baby. He says, "Well, I can make an exception, you can come 4 days." But on the fifth day, I'd have to sub. And I said, "there's no choice for me here." So I went to Yeshiva, and he was right. It's too parochial for me. The boys were, not the teachers, they were fine. I chastised them. I said, "You better change your ways if you want to get young people to follow you. You cannot be the way you are. You're too narrow. You're not open." So that was it. I was there, and after 106 credits, they said, "I think you have to take your orals." I said, "Oh, I don't want to do that." And what are you going to do with it? I was really not doing it for anything. I

was doing it for me. And then I said, Okay, this is where I came and said, “You know I'll go to Fordham.” I’ll teach at Fordham. That would be okay and I'll teach in a Catholic school. That was my first thought. But, as I said to you, I realized as life went on, forget Catholics, Jews know nothing. They learn for their Bar Mitzvah. They don't learn the language, really, they just read it. It means nothing. Most of their parents don't tell them why we always discuss why we did something. So it's pure. You do this, this and this. Well, most people don't want to do that because it doesn't mean anything to them. So they can't explain to their kids, either, and they don't know their history at all, only Bible stories. Which to me is nothing. I mean, it's a base, but it's not. It's stories. I didn't take them literally. But after you go to Israel — and have you been to Israel?

SM: No, I mean, we were supposed to go in December, supposed to go on birthright in December. So that's obviously not going to happen. But sometime in the future.

RC: Yeah, birthright is not going. My first grandson went on a year course, as did my daughter, with Young Judea. The second one didn't apply to colleges for next year, because he's going to Israel. But he's not going to Israel, not if it's like this.

SM: Not next year.

RC: So we don't know what he's gonna do. Anyway, so that's how I got to that. And I took my orals. That was horrible. My husband was a gem. My orals were in January and what was so awful about it was I had 150 books to read. 150 books and articles that were on the list. So he would take the kids to school. One was going to Westchester Day, and the other he’d drop off at some lovely lady's house and then pick them up later. So I had from 8 to 4, totally alone. He was amazing. He really was amazing. It was tough. Then I go in on the day of, and I was really dying because who walks out but Shlomo Rifkin, who's a Rabbi. A very well known Rabbi. He was just finishing his PhD. And I'm saying, “He knows everything.” It's like this is second nature to him. This is not second nature to me. So the Major was modern Jewish history. The minors were modern Jewish philosophy and medieval Jewish history. Well, I did really well on the Major and the philosophy and I blanked out. I totally blanked out on the most major poet of the Middle Ages. They said, “It's okay.” Dr. Berg, who was the Middle Ages guy, who I love because he reminded me of my brother Eddie in so many ways. He'll re-examine this in March, and I did. I went to Kew Gardens where he lived. I aced it because I knew it. I was so panicked. So I did everything, and then it came to the thesis. I had no more time off, and we didn't have the funds then. It's 1978. I had to use my Spanish and Hebrew. So I was going to do something in South America, except, they were killing Jews in South America. You disappeared, you were gone, they killed them. They threw them out of airplanes. I've since read about it.

SM: I was a Spanish minor as an undergraduate. So I did learn.

RC: So you know. Where did you go for undergraduate?

SM: I was at Fordham

RC: The whole time. Where are you from?

SM: I'm from about an hour upstate. I'm from Monroe, New York.

RC: Oh, I know where Monroe is. It’s not really New York, not New York.

SM: It’s not the city, not NYC.

RC: Yes, of course. So that's how that's how it all came about. So I didn't write my thesis. I didn't care. I was so happy with all the things I learned, so happy.

SM: That's fantastic. That's kind of what I've been going back and forth about. I'm currently a student at the Graduate School of Education, and I teach at Roosevelt, across the street from Fordham.

RC: Oh, my god, my husband taught there!

SM: Really? So I teach in one of the schools that it's broken up into now.

RC: I know they're all broken up now. So what school do you teach in?

SM: I teach at Belmont Preparatory High School.

RC: And what do they do? What's the emphasis there?

SM: I mean, it's really like college readiness. I mean, there are no white kids there. It's a predominantly Hispanic, so I speak Spanish, probably for a third of the day. There are so many kids that don't speak any English at all.

RC: That's so great.

SM: It's such a wonderful experience. But I love doing this so much. The only reason I would go back to get my PhD is because I want to continue learning this and doing history.

RC: You're young, you can do it. And why not, if that's your passion. This is our passion and not everybody — My girls never had a passion, they went to college because you go to college. Neither of them had a passion. And I have a passion and you have a passion. And we're good teachers. We can do something with it.

SM: Exactly.

RC: Don't worry about the school. You'll know how you should do it. Where would you go, here at Fordham?

SM: I was looking. I mean, I will probably stay in New York, Columbia or NYU, eyeing that? Fordham? I would like to do it in American History. Because the thesis that I wrote as an undergraduate was focused on Jewish white fight from the Bronx. That's how this all started, the Bronx Jewish History Project, because I did my thesis doing oral history interviews about people who left the Bronx and about the demographic changes. And then I had all these interviews, and I said to Jewish Studies, "What should I do with them?" And they said, "We'll start this project, and we'll pay you to continue doing this." And that's how we've created this archive. And now there are 50 plus interviews, and we do more every month.

RC: Fantastic.

SM: Yeah, it's amazing.

RC: Do you have anybody else?

SM: Yes and no. So right now there's one other student that I work with that's now started doing interviews. For a long time I was the only one doing the interviews themselves, but we have a faculty advisor, and we actually just got a grant for next semester to expand. Hire more people to do the interviews, do the transcriptions, things like that. So we're growing.

RC: Interesting. Well, I'm just trying to think of who else? Well, there's my sister. But that would be a 7 years older version of what I just said. It's very similar to mine. So that wouldn't be good.

SM: Definitely think about it. And you can always email me their information, or you can give me their email. They can reach out to me. We're always looking for more people to talk to.

RC: Okay, because you know, there's everybody's different experiences. All my cousins had different experiences. I'm gonna think it over. And I'll ask them first so that they don't waste your time.

SM: Yes, I appreciate it.

RC: How old are you?

SM: I'm 22.

RC: You're a baby. I'm gonna be 80 this year. It's ridiculous, so ridiculous. But you know what? I have a lot to say.

SM: So when did you end up moving out of the Bronx? How long did you live there?

RC: Well, when I went to Israel my mom sold the house in the Bronx. I was 19 and my father had passed away, and I was devastated. So she sold the house. Actually it was a Jewish family, just to note that that wasn't the flight yet. It was before, because it was 1963. She moved down into Manhattan and I came home. I had never lived in an apartment, and we were like 2 roommates. We had a one bedroom, you know. She got a King size bed, 2 twin mattresses, you know, like it was her phone here it was my phone here, but my mother was very close family. To show you how close we are: my brother and I got a list together of relatives all over the world in 1998. I invited 160 people and 120 came. We did it in the mountains in the Catskills because I didn't know who these people were, I don't know if they had money. It was the Rye town Hilton. Well, that's too much for somebody. I don't know if they were Kosher. I had no idea who these people were. Anyway 120 people came from all over. They came from Belgium. Matter of fact this summer. I'm thinking of taking 2 of my grandsons to Belgium, to Antwerp, and to Glasgow to visit people. So that's the kind of family it is. But what was I saying before then?

SM: Just about how close the family was. So you and your mother moved into Manhattan.

RC: Yes, so we moved downtown into Manhattan and when I got married we were in Manhattan. London Terrace was where we were, and we were there for 4 years. Then we moved to Armonk. And we were there for 30 something years. My girls grew up there, but they were very New York kids, because my mom lived on 57th and 1st. So I said in the 80s and 90s, "Well, you're gonna go to grandmas. You cannot use subways because they are really bad, and you can't go in cabs because I'm not paying for that." You could walk, or you could take a bus, and so they love New York. Now you were talking about going around when I was from 12 on. I went to the city by myself on the subway. All my dates were on the subway. No one had cars. Not until way into college. Nobody. You didn't need a car. It was stupid. Just didn't need a car, and so we were out at all hours. I went downtown. I went shopping and met my friends. My friend came from Newark. We would meet at Penn Station, and we would go here, there, and everywhere. My friends came from Long Island. They would come in. We would go out. So New York was always very accessible and safe.

SM: That's great. And so I guess my last question for you. This has been really great, but I always like to end by asking you know, when you think back about your time growing up in the Bronx. What kind of emotions or memories do you associate with it?

RC: Joy. Just joy. My brother, Eddie said, "You should write a book. 'Ruthie from the Bronx,'" because I have a great sense of humor to do that, and I'm going to write books for my grandson about my life and their grandfathers'. I tell them all the time. It was a very carefree time. You just never thought of any kind of problems. We walked to public school, we walked everywhere. We walked to the library, we walked around the reservoir. We went to *shul* dances all the time and since I taught all the boys how to dance, I danced every minute. Because that's what you did. You know they were shy to dance with anyone else. I taught them so they would cut in all the time, and then others would see, oh, she likes to dance so dance contests would be fun. My father was very strict, so I never would do anything to make him angry. He didn't have to touch me, he just had a look at me, that look, the look. I tried that with my girls and it really didn't do much. My younger one would look right back.

SM: Gosh! Not me.

RC: But it worked in school. I didn't have to yell. Only in Junior High my first year teaching. I yelled because they gave me the worst classes. I mean, there was 8-1 to 8-14, and they did it by intelligence, 8-14 being subhuman. And that was my official class. And when did they give them science? Eighth period. I mean first of all, you don't give a newbie those classes, one good class, and then 8-8, 8-9, 8-12 and 8-14. But the third week I broke a ruler on the desk. Then one day I said, you have to stay after school. Then I didn't know what to do with them. I didn't know how to punish, but somebody gave me great advice the first day. She said, "You are not their friend, and don't smile." I said, "What do you mean? Don't smile?" Do not smile. And I did that. I wasn't mean, but I didn't smile. I didn't make it like that kind of thing. It was so cool, because by the Spring, Kenny and I would rent bikes every week, and the kids would rent bikes and come down to Central Park. In May, the mothers rented a bus and we went to Bear Mountain. My principal says, "I don't wanna hear about it." So it's very good advice. And I tell that to people I said, just don't smile. You could always work that way. You can't go the other way. You can't be all friendly and then get strict. It doesn't work. You have to start off. This is business, and then he's out. And it's true.

SM: So if you have any other questions you could ask me or call me back.

RC: Absolutely. Yeah, thank you so much.