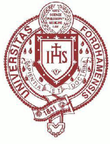

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Willner, Mark

Sophia Maier Garcia

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Sophia Maier (SM): Okay. I'm just gonna put it here. So, yeah. So, I purposefully leave the questions broad so that you can take it in whichever direction you see best. So, why don't you just start by telling me a little bit about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx?

Mark Willner (MW): Well, I grew up in Parkchester, in the eastern part of the Bronx. My parents — well, I know my mother was from Brooklyn. My father was from Manhattan. I'm not exactly sure how they met, but their first apartment was in the West Bronx, on Anderson Avenue, but then they moved to Parkchester, and I grew up there. I liked it very much. I have one brother, a little younger than I am. Parkchester was a very, very good place to grow up in. It was designed as a middle income community. You couldn't have too low an income, nor too high. But it was built by Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and very well laid out. There were, in a sense, four quadrants. I lived in the east quadrant. Every quadrant had a nice lawn, playgrounds. It really was, I think, one of the first of its kind in America, and the population was all whites. The only Black people you'd see were maybe part of the custodial staff. And it seemed to me — not that I was counting numerically, but I think between Jewish, Irish, and Italian, it was probably pretty well split. I had friends of all the ethnic groups there, all three ethnic groups.

There were two neighboring public schools. I went to one of them, PS 106. I could walk to school, came home for lunch, went back to school, and issues of safety and so on were nonexistent. That's the way it was. And then, I went to James Monroe High School. Parkchester was [geographically] divided. Like, this was Metropolitan Avenue. You lived here, you went to Monroe. Here, you went to Columbus or Evander. I was on the Monroe side, and it was a very good school, very middle class. Again, its population reflected Parkchester, although there was a small Black number of kids, but very, very few. I had to travel to Monroe either by subway or bus. And my brother went there, a younger cousin went there, and I liked it very much. In fact, to this day, I could tell you the Monroe alma mater. I couldn't tell my college alma mater.

SM: Really?

MW: But Monroe — there was a feeling for Monroe. You really felt good. I made a lot of friends. I was athletic so — of course, I skipped a year in junior high school, and you had to be 15 to go on a team, so when I got to be 15, I did go on the football team and the tennis team, which I liked. Your sense of camaraderie. The coaches were good. So, in general terms, that's it unless there are specifics. I did well. My parents did belong to Temple Emanu-El, which is a Reform synagogue, but then we moved to an Orthodox synagogue, not so much because we're Orthodox, but I had an uncle who was involved there. And, actually, I was bar mitzvahed in Young Israel Synagogue, which I'd walk to. Everything that was needed was within walking

distance. The major train stop was on the — well, it was the number 6 Line. Now, it's called, I think, the Green Line. The local number 6.

SM: It's the 6, yes.

MW: At 177th Street in Parkchester. That was a bit of a walk, but you just did it. There were two movie theaters in Parkchester. There was a huge Macy's, which may still be there. So, I was born in 1941. I got married in 1964, and I moved out. Otherwise, all that time, I was in the same apartment. One elevator. Building was clean. And it was just, it was the right kind of place to grow up in the '50s, if I may say. Not that there were wrong places, but this was the right kind of place, and there was a sense of community. My parents had a lot of friends. Lots of socializing, so I got to know a lot of my parents' friends and their children, and we all had a lot in common. So, those are kind of the general things.

SM: So, what did your parents do for a living?

MW: Well, my father was an assistant principal in a school, an elementary school in the Bronx. My mother, as I got past my teen years, took a job as a school secretary at another school, so my mother worked at a school as a secretary in Throggs Neck. My father was an assistant principal in a school in the Belmont area. PS 32 was the Belmont school. So, that's what they did. They both retired at retirement age and lived a good life until — my dad passed away first. My mother remained in Parkchester until, I think, 1990. And then, she bought, through an agent I knew, an apartment on West 70th Street, which was a good move. Parkchester was still okay to live in, but it was changing slightly, and she had a lot of friends, but she started losing some of them. So, this apartment on West 70th, just off West End, was very good. She liked the opera. She was near Lincoln Center. Had friends there. And she passed away some years after that. It was a very nice way to end her life.

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

MW: Yes. My dad had a master's in history, which, I think, had an impact upon me because I began history teaching myself, and then a chairman. My mother may have gone to college for a year, and that she never finished.

SM: And you said they were born here. Were your grandparents born here or were they born abroad?

MW: Well, I said my father was from Manhattan, but he wasn't born there. He was one of nine children born overseas. So, all my aunts and uncles on his side were overseas. He was the

youngest of the nine. My mother was born in Brooklyn. So, my father came here at a very young age, not even four or five years old. [Clears throat] Excuse me.

SM: And so, let's see. What did you like to do for fun or in your free time when you were young, when you were growing up in Parkchester?

MW: Well, I played a lot of ball. There were basketball courts near my house. I became a very big basketball fan, and, like some of my friends, I became a fan of the Boston Celtics. And, you know, I don't leave home without my keys, and next to my keys is my favorite leprechaun [Shows keys].

SM: [Laughs] The Boston Celtics. That's funny. And how did you become Celtics fans in New York City?

MW: Well, when I was — let's see. When I got interested in basketball, maybe nine, ten years old, first of all, there were very few basketball teams then as compared to now. And, secondly, the Celtics were doing very well. And, third, Bob Cousy, one of their stars, came from Queens. So, it's not that I ever lived in Queen — well, I'd go to Queens College. That's later on. I just started liking them, and it stuck. And now, I'm a diehard fan. Before the season began, I got the whole television list. I could tell you when every single game is, as well as the next one. I write it up. I've got the Celtics schedule here in my datebook, and for every game that they're playing, I've got it written down, and, because I'm a true fan, I write the game in green ink.

SM: Oh, yeah. [Laughs]

MW: Like, this Friday night, the Celtics are playing 7:30 on ESPN.

SM: Wow, that's awesome.

MW: Yeah, I'm into it. So, a lot of time at the playgrounds. Went to movies, fair enough. There was a Lowe's American Theater and a Palace Theater. And then, the fact that I had a big number of relatives — of the nine children my father was born into, quite a few lived in Brighton Beach. So, we often would travel from the Bronx down to Brighton Beach, and it also worked out, my mother's sister lived in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. So, it was very, very common for us, we would drive down to Brooklyn, and we'd see my aunt Mary in Bensonhurst, my mother's sister, and my father's brothers and sisters in Brighton Beach.

And, of the nine children my father was born into, only three were male. Now, that's significant because one of them was ultra-Orthodox, eventually made Aliyah to Israel. The second one only had daughters. So, it was my parents that had the only two Willner boys who would take on the

name. And, I mean, nobody ever said to us, "You'll take on the name." We just knew it, to the extent that, when we went down to Brighton Beach, my father's sisters could not stop doing things for me and my brother. We were the only two. One of those, my father's oldest sister, had a bakery in Brighton Beach, and I just wanted to go in that bakery like a kid in a candy store. In fact, it got to the point where we had these family functions, and I was amazed just how my mother's family in Bensonhurst got to know my father's family in Brighton Beach. It was one big mishpacha, and I just grew up thinking that's the way it is in life. You have aunts and uncles. I mean, it was just satisfying, welcome, respectful, and those brothers and sisters of my parents had my first cousins, had a lot of first cousins. We all got along well. So, I just assumed that's how life was for everybody in the world. You have your outlook on the world based on what you know. It could be good. It could be bad. So, that was the family, and great deal of emphasis on scholarship. It was just assumed I would go to college, and my cousins would go. Where you went didn't matter so much. There wasn't a push, but you just got — nobody pushed you. YIt was just assumed the way you got — it was just assumed. No questions asked. So, these were the guidelines. I think they're very typical of a lot of people I knew in the '50s, even people I met later on. Not just during the '50s, but even in college.

SM: Yes, a lot of people share that with me, especially about education.

MW: Yeah, there were guidelines, and, like almost every kid in the Bronx, I took the test for Bronx High School of Science. Didn't make it. But going to Monroe was — Monroe had an honor school. I mean, it was no shame to go to Monroe. And I had friends who went to Science, and I took the test, got a fair shake, and I didn't make it, so — but you just knew what the guidelines were. There were changes today. I'm not gonna go into them. Some were good changes, some bad, but one thing is for sure: you developed a sense of shame. If you went into a crowded bus with friends, you didn't start making noise. There was just a shame in knowing what lines not to cross, and nobody had to tell you. You just sensed it. So, while, in my father's family, it was nine sisters and brothers, one of them went to college. The others were all in business. I never was aware of or never came across any antisemitism. Maybe there was some. Well, at least there — nothing that I saw. Nothing trickled down to me. If something had happened, I would have heard about it because the family was very close. We had a family circle meeting for my father's family with nine children and their sons and daughters. We had a big family. I got to know Brighton Beach very well. So, that was growing up. I just assumed things, had the guidelines, and you do what you were told and you were rewarded, and if there were mistakes, you learned how to not repeat them.

SM: You mentioned that you never saw or experienced any antisemitism in your family. Did you see or experience any sort of racial or ethnic tensions when you were growing up?

MW: No. I'm trying to think. No. The only thing that, once — not that it bothered me — but this isn't a big thing, but there was a holiday. Maybe Rosh Hashanah. I'm not sure. There was some holiday, and there were two churches that bordered Parkchester, and they were having big events that had music and loud noise, and I just — I wasn't angry. I just thought it was strange that — they should at least respect — it was either Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. But, I mean, it wasn't antisemitic.

SM: Yeah, it was just something that I like to ask about.

MW: It was just coincidental that these churches — now, getting back to your question, no. The only thing that, well, today, would have a racial overtone was this. Well, I'll tell you what it was, and I think you can gauge it. I was on the Monroe football team, and Monroe had very few Blacks. There was one Black on the team, and one of our big rivals was DeWitt Clinton High School, and Clinton had a Black star who was in the backfield. I think the football team kinda labeled our guy him. I think that the Clinton star was someone named Rochester, so the coaches started to name our Black guy Rochester, and we had drills in which this guy would perform the way Rochester did. But, today, that might be a problem. I can't think of anything else.

One other thing — again, it's not really racial, but Monroe had a tradition of sometimes dances. So, let's say the boys' gym, you would line up dressed nicely, and, out of the passageway there, girls would come. So, you were on the boys' line, and a girl come, and you'd just meet her and start dancing. So, there was one instance where I think I or my friend went to the door, and then a Black girl appeared. I don't know what happened. I think one of us — I didn't stay with her. She was just — I don't know what happened, but lord knows. That's the extent of anything racial. I mean no, I can't think of anything that stood out. It was a school. Kids got along, and, well, there was a project near us, and that was all Black, and kids from there came to school, but there were no tensions and nothing that was disruptive.

SM: Yeah. Yeah, that's generally what I've heard as well, but I always like to ask because it's interesting. And so, you've talked a little bit about education. Are there any memories from your time at public school or junior high school that stand out to you in your experiences?

MW: Well, yes. In my senior year, I had an English class. It was taught by the chairlady of the department, and it was an outstanding class. I liked to read, and my favorite author was, and still is, Charles Dickens. I read *Pickwick Papers*, and this woman was a real old-school person: dressed immaculately, perfect diction. She wasn't British, but she was the English teacher. And she had very high standards, and I just found myself rising up to her. We once read something about optimism, and I didn't know what the word meant, so I stayed after class to ask her, and she gave me a whole explanation. So, that was a very stellar experience. Then, I had two English teachers who I realized that were very young and tried to get friendly with kids — not in a sexual

sense — and they were nice and friendly and smiled, but they didn't inspire in me what that woman inspired in me. There was a difference. Any other scholastic things? Oh, yes. Eleventh year math, which was a combination of trigonometry and algebra, I had trouble at the start in the fall. I had a tutor. I worked very, very hard, and I got a 99 on the Regents, which really was — I deserved it because I worked hard.

SM: Yeah, that's an accomplishment for sure.

MW: It really was very good, and I got interested in math. And so, my senior year, when everybody's taking easy electives, I took advanced algebra and solid geometry, which are very tough courses, but I got through. I didn't fail, but I didn't get 95. Let's see. What else as far as high school? Oh, I had a very good French teacher. Very good. Solid, hard-nosed — not personally hard-nosed. And I took four years of French in high school, which very few people do. But when I got to college, to graduate Queens College, you needed five years of a language, a combination of high school and college. Since I took four years in high school, I just needed one year, so I was put into an advanced class in Queens, and, to this day, I can read French pretty well. Conversation, I can get by, not terribly, but I have great admiration for those teachers.

And went to Queens College. It was a trip from the Bronx, but of all the city colleges then — and there weren't as many city colleges then as now. There were basically four: Brooklyn, Queens, City, and Hunter. Queens had the highest reputation. All the others were good, but it was hardest to get into Queens because it was a very small campus. So, City, Hunter, and Brooklyn had bigger campuses, and I applied to Queens, and I got in. And it was a long bus ride from Parkchester to — it was even past Flushing, but I did it. And there were a few of us from the Bronx who went to Queens College. Every now and then, somebody had a car, so we'd carpool. Otherwise, it was a long bus ride, but you did it. Had some good professors at Queens. I started out as pre-med, but I found the sciences difficult, and I always liked history, so I majored in history. I got to know Queens very well, joined a fraternity, got very much involved socially. Entered college at 16, which was much too young because I skipped a year in junior high. And Queens, at that time, had a ratio of three girls to one boy. In fact, to get to Queens College, you had to have an average — doesn't matter if you played ball or what. It was a straight average. So, the average for boys to get in was slightly lower than for girls. Anyway, it was a very nice social life. I developed my first — what should I say? Love relationship with somebody. Went to a lot of parties. Nothing wrong, nothing raunchy, nothing sexual. That's the way the times were then. Got to know Queens very well. To this day, I could still probably get around if I had to with a car.

And then, I majored in history, and I took some education courses. I also was interested in law. So, my parents said — more or less gave me free choice. So, I applied to NYU Law School. I got a part scholarship. I went to law school. I liked it a little bit, but what happened was that I

entered law school in ’61, as things were getting heated up in Southeast Asia, and there was a draft. I was afraid I might get drafted. And so, I finished three years of law school, which was a very good education, and I got a job teaching, and I decided to join the National Guard. Now. That meant a six-year obligation. My brother that was drafted, he had to serve two years in active duty.

So, I got a job teaching, and I decided to stay with it, basically. And that worked out very well. What I could have had in law, I don’t know, but as far as the teaching, I became a high school teacher in the Bronx, taught in a ghetto school, in Morris High School in the South Bronx. It was all Black and Puerto Rican. It was probably one of the first so-called “ghetto” or so-called “inner city” schools. Ten years there. I also taught in Harlem at night. In those years, there was an extensive night high school system. Not as many night schools as day schools, and that was a very good experience because this was in Harlem — the class was all Black and mainly adults, and it was a regular high school. It wasn’t a bend over backwards welfare thing. There was a final exam. It was a regular high school. Adults, but it was a very good experience. First of all, I was in a minority as a white man. Secondly, to teach in the humanities to another ethnic group is — in other words, especially history, if I’m teaching a lesson on politics and economics or marriage patterns, you’re dealing with adults who’ve gone through a lot of the things you’re talking about. So, that was an experience.

I did that for seven years, and then I became a social studies supervisor, and the rule was, if you’re a supervisor, you couldn’t hold a job that a teacher had. In other words, my night school job was for teachers’ licenses. If you were a supervisor, you couldn’t do both. So, I became a supervisor, and I then got a job at a very good school, which is still very good. Midwood High School in Brooklyn. It’s across the street from Brooklyn College. I was there for 32 years. I came there very young. I think I was 32, and that was significant because, in those days, a lot of teachers wanted to become chairmen. When a vacancy occurred in that school, about 70 people applied, and I got it. In fact, one of my competitors was a teacher in the department who thought he was gonna get it. And the other thing was that it was a good school, so it was a school where the median age of teachers was very high. It wasn’t a young staff. I was maybe the youngest person there. Nobody resented me, but they were surprised somebody so young got the job. So, I didn’t feel out of place, but I didn’t come across as a big shot. But you learned, and I got along well with the staff, and the principal was a very sharp guy. He said, more or less, “You know you’re young, but don’t worry. As years go by, these people retire. You’ll be able to get your own people then.” And that is what happened.

SM: Really? Okay.

MW: When I retired in 2005, almost the entire department of thirty — it was a very big school, 4,000 kids — thirty social studies teachers, as of that time, most of them were people I hired, or I

had a role in getting them the job. In fact, I just saw some of them last week. One of them had a retirement party, and it was like going back and seeing a lot of people who remember me. But I could remember, they would say, "Mr. Willner, you remember? I came to you in 2004." And I would say, "I know you came to me, I can't recall the year." But it was very heartwarming. One of them, in fact, said to me something very nice, one of the best I ever heard. It was a fellow who was retiring soon, and he said to me, "When I'm retired, I want you to be there to give a talk." So, that was very nice.

SM: And what was your time at Morris high school like during that period?

MW: Well, that was a real eye-opener. I was a young person. All Black and Puerto Rican. I had some great supervisors, people who got their job in their 40s and 50s, and I got mine at 32. That's why getting mine — when I became one, it was unusual. I had two very good supervisors, and I just kind of learned the ropes. There were some good teachers who I went to for guidance. And then, a job in the dean's office opened up, and the high schools then, maybe now, the average teacher had five classes in all the public schools, which is still true, but if you get a non-teacher position, like a dean or assistant, you only teach two or three classes. Did you go to high school in New York?

SM: Yes. Upstate, but it was the same thing.

MW: So, I became a dean of boys in the late '60s, a very tough time to be in a minority school. That was a very significant experience because this was the '60s, time of a lot of racial strife. Nothing really in the school itself. I mean, any kids I saw were kids who were cutting class. They may have been in a fight. But I don't recall — I was there for 10 years from '63 to '73, when everything was going on. King's assassination in '68. There was not one incident between a kid and a teacher of racial dimensions. There may have been situations where a kid was acting up just because he was a pain in the ass, but nothing like that. But there was a lot of Black activism, pushing Blacks to become heads of schools, parent involvement. Oddly enough, there wasn't too much in the field of education like there is now. There weren't any moves to create Black electives and so on. None of that, unlike what it is now. I'm not saying what it is now is right or wrong, but in those days, the Black movements were more to gain power, let's say, to universities, power politically, but not so much in the schools, but I do remember, though, one incident — not an incident. Not even an encounter. This was '65 or '66. I became friendly with a woman dean who was a Black person, and I was using a textbook called *The American Story*. She asked me to see a copy. I'll never forget. She looked at me with a grim face and said, "Which American story are you teaching about?" She was a good person, we were friends. That had a tremendous impact upon me, and for the early '60s, we're talking in terms of education now. This was the mid-'60s.

And then — well, two things I want to say. The experience with minorities in Morris High School was all — it was a ghetto school. Secondly, I told you I taught in Harlem. I had one other experience that was very interesting for someone who wore two hats, a social studies hat and an American citizen hat. My other contact with the Black communities was the National Guard. I didn't mention this before. I mention it now because it's important. In 1963 is when I joined the National Guard, and the US was sending more and more troops to Southeast Asia, and I was sure I was going to get drafted, so I had to find a reserve unit. A reserve unit being either the Army Reserve or National Guard, and to go into one of those, you would fulfill your military obligation. It was very hard in the mid-'60s to find a unit because everybody was looking for one. But there was one armory that had openings for a very [interesting demographic] reason. So, let me tell you what it is with a question. What is the most well-known thoroughfare in Manhattan? In fact, there's parades happening. Big things. It's the most well-known thoroughfare in Manhattan throughout the world, seriously. It's right near Temple Emanu-El.

SM: I was gonna say, like, Park Avenue.

MW: More than that.

SM: Well then Fifth Avenue. There you go.

MW: I'm a lifelong New Yorker, and I never knew until this time, Fifth Avenue begins at 8th Street. If you follow it north to the end — and I'm not trying to be pedantic — do you know where Fifth Avenue ends? Most New Yorkers don't. Not that —

SM: I mean, I'm trying to think, in my experience in the Bronx, if I ever was on Fifth Avenue.

MW: Well, Fifth Avenue —

SM: I don't know that I was.

MW: Fifth Avenue doesn't go in the Bronx. It stays in Manhattan. Starts at 8th Street, 14th Street, 23rd Street. Fifth Avenue ends at 142nd Street. There's an armory there, it had openings. Why? *Pourquoi*? Because white guys didn't want to go to Harlem. This is the world. You take it or leave it. I signed up. Other places, for example, there's an armory near here. You know the Park Avenue Armory?

SM: Yes.

MW: It was packed.

SM: Yeah. You'd never —

MW: Couldn't get in.

SM: — get in. Yeah. Wow.

MW: And who wanted to wait around until Uncle Sam says, "You're drafted"? Got into the — it was called the 369th Infantry because it was built in the Civil War, but during World War I, the unit there went to France. It was called the 369th, and here's another fact of life that's fascinating. You walk in. There's a beautiful lobby, and there's all kinds of French military medals and flags. Why? Because the army was not integrated. They fought for the French.

SM: Yeah, they fought for the French.

MW: They were known as the Harlem Hellfighters, and you walk in --

SM: You were a part of the Harlem Hellfighters? [Laughs]

MW: Well —

SM: Before your time, but you were in the end. That's insane.

MW: The Harlem Hellfighters. And I was a social studies teacher. Amazing. So I was in that unit for two years, and I was a true minority. Just a few white guys. But that meant going to drills every weekday, every Thursday night, going away for two weeks in camp where you slept and lived with the guys. Talk about an experience with other people. I was living with people who were different from me in many ways. So, that experience, plus Morris High School, a ghetto school, plus teaching in Harlem was a tremendous eye-opener for me with blackness and so on, and I never had any problems. In fact, I became very good friends in the armory with a fellow named Sandy, and in those days, when you joined your reserve unit, you went away for basic training somewhere, and then, for the next five and a half years, you joined the unit. So, by chance, a young Black fellow who I became friendly with in the Harlem armory went to Fort Dix with me. His name was Sandy Young, and we were in a barracks. Double bunk. He was bottom. I was on top. We became very good friends, and no problems.

And so, there was a six-year commitment. I was there for two and a half years. What happened the other three and a half years? The other three and a half years came about through what I'm gonna call reverse discrimination or reverse racism. I joined in '63. In 1965, there was an American encampment in South Vietnam, in Pleiku, that was blown up. At that point, there was the highest death tolls of Americans in the Vietnam War. So, President — it was Johnson —

began to send even more and more American troops overseas, so the question arose. As troops that were officially stationed, maybe, in Germany were sent to Vietnam, somebody had to replace the American forces. At the same time, forces in Vietnam needed more. So, the bottom line was this. It was assorted by the Pentagon that there would be 100,000 reservists throughout the country who would come together as a Selected Reserve Force, SRF. So, it meant that units throughout America would have extra training and so on. Well, this 369th Harlem armory was under a central command. For example, if these five fingers were five different armories in Manhattan, there was one armory like a central headquarters. This central headquarters in Brooklyn was going to be part of the Selected Reserve Force. Are you with me so far?

SM: Yes.

MW: They had to be brought to the full strength, and they had vacancies, so they would draw from the five armories under them. So, the 369th sent a few people to the unit that might be activated, and all the guys they sent were white because everyone knew this SR Force might go to Vietnam. Well, I was very upset. So, what do you do? What every citizen does. I went — I was teaching at Emanu-El that time, by the way.

SM: Yeah. Really? Okay.

MW: I went to the head rabbi then, Nathan Perilman, and I was in the religious school then. It was only on Sunday. I went to occasional Sabbath services, but I knew there were drills sometimes on Sunday, so I asked him to write a letter to the commanding officer of my new unit, more or less. Okay. Didn't work. So, what's the next thing to do? Well, I was active in a political club, and this is in the 1960s, not 2023. It was a very active liberal Republican club on 83rd Street, Metropolitan Republican Club. The club had a lot of Jews. In fact, the club was very powerful. This former mayor — you may have heard of Mayor Lindsay?

SM: Yes.

MW: He came out of the club. But there were so many heads of New York departments from that club, and also the congressman for the Silk Stocking District came out of that club. The assemblyman, the state senator, judges. Very active. I joined because I thought, as a social studies teacher, I want to see how politics works. And it was very interesting. I came there, became a district captain. Okay. So, now, I knew some of the people there, like my congressman and my state assemblyman, so I went to them for help. So, the state assemblyman was a man named Bill Green. I asked him — he's a state official — to write to my commander, and he liked me. He said, "I'm not gonna write to your commander. I'm gonna write to Governor Rockefeller's major general." In charge of the whole National Guard of the state, not just this little commander, which I couldn't do.

SM: Of course.

MW: I figure, Mommy, I'm home free. He's gonna talk to the head man. So, Bill Green wrote a letter for me. I see him a week later.

SM: No good? Oh.

MW: And this is what really was scary. The head of the guard gets a letter from the state assemblyman, and he more or less sent to Bill Green a letter. "Mr. Willner, as a member of the unit in Brooklyn, blah, blah, blah..." And the tone of the letter seemed to suggest that the unit is so close to being federalized, they can't afford to have a vacancy. Otherwise, my ass could have been sent back to Harlem. Well, that scared the heck out of me. This one unit in New York's gonna be federalized. Either next stop Saigon or somewhere else. I was stuck. So, that's one way in which a major issue affected my life, but I never got to Vietnam because of another major issue, and this, too, is part of — you're a history person. You'll appreciate this. So, a foreign policy issue in Vietnam affected my even joining up this. So, I go to this unit in Brooklyn, to schlep — at least it was a nice area of Park Slope. The main reason that unit, unlike others, didn't get federalized was because what is the major issue which might call the National Guard to active duty? I don't mean overseas. I mean in America.

SM: Yeah. Well, I mean, at that point, right? It was the anti-war protests, right? They were afraid of revolution, basically.

MW: Well, you're not wrong, but the anti-war protests, I don't think any one of them resulted in tremendous violence or unsafe things.

SM: No, although they did —

MW: No, you did get a — your answer is wrong, but it's wrong, but for a good reason. Think of something — if the Guard is called out, usually because there's something negative. What might that be? Even today.

SM: I mean, an attack on US soil as well, right?

MW: Well, yes, but that didn't happen. Okay, let me —

SM: Yeah, go ahead.

MW: I'm not trying —

SM: Go ahead. Tell me.

MW: If there's a natural disaster, the Guard deploys for the hurricane. What was the single most domestic issue that wrought violence in the 60s?

SM: Domestic issue? Like —

MW: Race riots.

SM: Yes, race riots.

MW: The Guard is called out. So, in the 1960s, there were some racial tensions in New York, but nothing that required the Guard to be called out, but we were given extra training. So, that's one reason why my unit, while it was part of this SRF force designed to go overseas, never got activated. So, I was two and a half years of my six-year requirement in Harlem and three and a half in Brooklyn. It finally ended, and one bit of irony: I did get to Vietnam.

SM: Really?

MW: But not through the National Guard, and this, now, goes back, if I can, to education issues. I've had three Fulbright grants in my career. One of them was in 1969. I had a Fulbright to South — it was called a "Fulbright in Southeast Asian Studies." I was in Indonesia and Singapore. And there are basically two kinds of Fulbrights. The usual Fulbright is somebody studying for a doctorate and is going to get a Fulbright, let's say in France, "the rise of bourgeois society in the sixteenth century." Another kind of Fulbright affected me was the teachers, like myself, in high schools —
SM: Yeah, I applied for a Fulbright for next year.

MW: And it was basically in the summer, when you're not going to school, and it's for a generalist. So, for example, in Indonesia and Singapore, I would go to important historical sites. I would learn a little bit of the language, go to religious places, know the economy. In other words, get a general view. And I was four weeks in Indonesia, four weeks in Singapore. Two contrasting societies in many ways. And one of the restrictions was my wife couldn't be with me. There were just 20 of us in the program, and while it was hard to be away from my wife — whom I'm still married to, I love her very much — she even let me go for the eight weeks. But I think the Fulbright people want you to have no other concerns. For example, we're going to visit a Buddhist temple in Singapore. It's easy to get 20 people in a bus. If you have 40 people, with their wives… And someone could get sick. So, when the — I'll get to Vietnam in a few minutes, okay? The Fulbright program, four weeks is in Indonesia, and there's four weeks in Singapore. My wife met me in Singapore, and by this time, I liked Asian history. My favorite part of history.

I knew enough about Asia to go to certain places. So, one of the places I wanted to go to was in Cambodia. There's a famous ruin there. You ever hear of Angkor Wat?

SM: Yes.

MW: I wanted to see Angkor Wat. So, got there, and you knew the Vietnam War was going on. All right. I mean, if it was gonna be dangerous, the airlines wouldn't go there. So, we flew — I think we were in Malaysia. Anyway, we landed in Cambodia, and right away, an interesting bit of history. We got off, we went to Phnom Penh, the capital, and then took a flight to Siem Reap, where Angkor was. Got off the plane. Some attendant came up to me and started speaking French. My wife didn't know why, but I knew the French had imperialized — I mean, these things, they hit you. It's not just textbooks. I knew enough French to get by. So, we stayed in a lovely place. We were the only Americans, probably the only white people.

Okay. So, now, we're leaving Cambodia. Let's see. Cambodia's over here, and the next stop is gonna be Hong Kong. And get on board, and the captain says, "Welcome aboard, blah, blah, blah." And it was Air France. Air France was the only major airline that still — Pan Am, which was in existence, didn't fly to Saigon. Only Air France, for the colonizer. And the captain said, "This flight, blah, blah, to Hong Kong with the next stop in Saigon."

SM: [Laughs] You were like, oh, my God.

MW: My wife — I hadn't told her this.

SM: You knew, but she didn't?

MW: Yes.

SM: Okay. [Laughs]

MW: She turned to me, and — bright woman — said, "Mark, Saigon? There's a war going on." [Laughs] "Yes, honey." Well, the plane took off. And then, something happened, not bad. It was beautifully clear skies, so, I mean, here's Cambodia, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong. Air France had so many flights there, even with — except maybe at the end of the war it stopped. But it was a beautiful, clear day, and I started getting sick, and I think it was more psychosomatic because I had been in the National Guard artillery unit, and we're up in the air now. No other planes. Viet Cong didn't have planes. And I began hearing shots in my head. I just… it was one thing if I was back home, teaching about the war, and if I'm in the Bronx, and the war's over there, it's far away, right? Like right now, Israel's so far away. But I'm flying over territory that I taught about, and the Viet Cong were acting in Cambodia. So, I broke into a bit of a sweat, and I didn't

pass out, but it was a very strange experience. And, as the plane gets to Saigon — from Phnom Penh to Saigon is maybe an hour — I'm really getting worried. Nobody else in the plane was bothered. Only because I was a teacher who taught about Southeast Asia. So, the plane moves in. We're now in — it was called Tan Son Nhat Airport, now it's Ho Chi Minh City — I looked around. I didn't see any Vietnamese on the ground. It was like an American airport. And I even saw a Red Cross truck, which I knew had people in it. So, then, we disembarked for about an hour. I felt better. At least my feet are on ground, but I realized this Viet Cong sappers come riding, they were blowin' up airports. So, what did I do? I bought some postcards. [Laughs] Sent home: "Mom, guess where I am."

SM: Oh my goodness.

MW: So, I sent them to friends. I was starting to feel better. Then, we got back on the plane, and, this is the coast of Southeast Asia, soon as we left the coast, went into the South China Sea, I, right away, just felt better. Medically, I'm sure there are ways to describe me. I went to Hong Kong, which was fun. So, that was my Vietnam — so, I joined the National Guard. I didn't get to Vietnam that way, but I did get there.

SM: Wow.

MW: So, the other two Fulbrights were interesting. In '73, got a Fulbright to Mexico, spent the whole summer there. In 1982, I had a Fulbright to South Korea and got very much into all of Korea. So, while we're on education, something else is interesting. I got involved with some of the consulates in New York. Almost every major country has a consulate here. And the Board of Education, then and now, gives what's called in-service courses. Do you know what they are?

SM: Yes.

MW: So, I knew a woman who was a jade expert, American but a jade expert, who had some kind of contact at the China Institute. The China Institute, which is now in Downtown New York, was on 65th, right near Emanu-El. It's 120 East 65th, just between Lex and Park. And she and I developed an in-service course for teachers. What it meant was that — New York City teachers start off with a certain salary, and for every additional 30 credits, they can get salary increments, and the credits can be with courses that are approved. So, you can go to Columbia or NYU to get a course, but if the China Institute gave a course and it met certain Board of Ed requirements, you would get three credits, and it's much cheaper there than going to NYU. So, basically, I gave a course at the China Institute. It was a 30-hour course, 15 sessions, two hours each, and it covered basic topics. I was the supervisor, and the China Institute supplied the speakers. It was a very good course. Lots of people took the course. From there, my name — and I'm not being egocentric — I got to be known in the city with the result that I eventually had

courses at the Israeli Consulate, the Korean Consulate, the Indian Consulate, and at Columbia SIPA, School of International and Public Affairs.

SM: Okay. That's awesome.

MW: The one that I liked the most was the Israeli Consulate course. What happened there was very fortuitous. I used to go to a lot of social studies conferences, and usually, the conference has the speakers, and there's a room with book sellers. So, I always liked to see what's the latest publication. On this particularly day in the early, I think, 2000s, there's a desk for the Israeli Consulate. I said, "Well, what are they doin' here?" There're no books they publish. Well, there was a woman there, head of the Cultural Affairs Committee of the Israeli Consulate, and she had materials and brochures in Israel, hoping teachers will get them. Well, to shorten the story, I talked to her. I wrote up an in-service course on Israel. It had never been given before. I don't know of any course — maybe Columbia had a course on Israel, but nobody since the '60s. Regular 30-hour course, so what should it be about? And I felt it should not be about the conflict. Because, otherwise, people only see Israel in terms of the conflict. So, what happened was like, as we say in Hebrew, *niah simcha*. A happy wedding between — I took care of the Board of Ed part, the consulate took care of the speaker. The consulate knew who in New York — for example, they have a consulate for economics, a consulate for this, literature, a teacher, maybe, at Fordham or NYU who knows Israeli literature. So, for 15 sessions, I did the history part. There was Israeli literature, Israeli cooking, Ethiopian Jewry, naming and claiming, Israeli transportation. That was the course.

SM: That's great.

MW: We gave it at the — well, first, the Center for Jewish History. You know where that is?

SM: Yes.

MW: And then at the Israeli Consulate, Second Avenue and 43rd Street. And a lot of teachers took the course, and many of them were Black, because the city's faculty demographics were changing. And I would ask the teachers on the first day, "Why are you taking the course?" Some would say, "Well, it's cheap for three credits with the Board of Ed." But many of them, many of the Black teachers — this is really surprising — said they wanted to learn more about Israel. It was junior high, elementary, right across the board, and they felt that what they were seeing in the newspapers wasn't the whole truth. I was very surprised by that. So, there was a regular course. There was a term paper, there was an attendance requirement, there was a final exam. No BSing, and people took to it. And one of the most striking lectures — this goes back about six or seven years — was a very dark-skinned Black Ethiopian woman who had made Aliyah but was in America for a while, and she was so happy to be Israeli. She was more pro-Israel than some of

the friends I have. It was just — her lectures, and the Black people were — oh, they were strung out. They couldn't believe it.

On the subject of in-service courses, I got to, with the Korean Consulate — and then came the Holocaust. I knew the ADL had what was called the Braun Institute of Holocaust Studies. I don't know if it exists any longer. At this time, the ADL was not the office — right now, the ADL's on 3rd Avenue, about the 40s. At this point, it was near UN Plaza. So, I knew somebody who worked in the ADL. I suggested a course on the Holocaust. She said, "Okay." We made up a curriculum, submitted it for approval, and, at that time, the Museum of Jewish Heritage hadn't been fully built. You've been there, haven't you?

SM: Yes.

MW: The Morgenthau Wing, which has the classroom, it wasn't built, and this was the 1990s, I guess. So, the sessions were at the ADL headquarters. But then, the Museum of Jewish Heritage had an office on Lower Broadway. Our room there was devoted to this Holocaust in-service course, and, again, the beauty was that, as far as the Board of Ed and the bureaucracy, I could take care of that, and the museum could get survivors to come in. They had a whole closet of speakers. So, the course is very interesting. Then, when the museum expanded and built the Morgenthau Wing that now is where you enter the building, the course moved there, and now, it became even better because, if you're teaching — well, let's say, if you had a session on Kristallnacht, it was a two-hour session. The first hour is a lecture, and then you go to one of the floors where there are Torahs and pieces of buildings, I mean artifacts. It was a remarkable course. So, it made the rounds, and eventually, though, it got to be very, very busy, and the museum — you see, I was still working. I was still a chairman in Brooklyn. They wanted, now, to have somebody who was gonna be there full time, so it's not that anything was wrong with me. I was only there one day a week, but if things came up during the week, they needed someone. So, the course continues to this very day. It's called "Meeting Hate with Humanity," and it's given by somebody at the museum who gets speakers. I go there occasionally because the museum also has its own program for speakers, like Fordham, you said, has. So, I'm down there a lot, but now, I'm one of the students. I'm no longer the supervisor. So, that, too, was an interesting experience. So, the course really got built up, and now, it's taken by dozens of people every year. And I got paid for it, of course. So, between that and the consulates, I was kept very busy. So, you ask what to do? And I met many teachers throughout the city. Those were all very good experiences. I don't do them now. I could do them, but it's enough. The only real teaching I do —

SM: You've done your part, I think.

MW: Yeah. The only real teaching now is here at Emanu-El. When I did retire from the high schools, though, I was, for a while, in the Brooklyn College School of Education, working with student teachers. But, when the pandemic came and student teaching stopped because there was no classes to go to, I wasn't working. And then, when the pandemic ended, I wasn't interested in continuing, so I don't do that now. So, the only pedagogy is really here, which is — it's enough. I spend enough time, and that's, so, in regard to education, other things, I know it's roundabout, but I'm trying to paint a picture.

SM: No, that's fantastic. I'm interested — I think it would have been at your time at Morris High School — do you have any memories of the teachers strikes in '67 and '68?

MW: Oh, yes. '68 was a very bad year for a number of reasons, and I actually — I was part of the UFT, United Federation of Teachers. I disagreed with some of the things they were saying, but I knew what they were saying and why they were saying it. So, actually, I thought of going in one day to work, but the thing was that a lot of kids in that area, the South Bronx, didn't want to go to Morris. Had a very bad reputation. It was a better school safe-wise, but the reputation was it was South Bronx, there was ethnic militancy, and we had one day there was a very serious incident there. I'll tell you about it in a second, and I was the dean too. So, that strike was very bitter, and there were some Black communities in Brooklyn who wanted to take over the schools, but I had no tension. But there was one incident that was really ugly. There was a group of radical activist students. One of their signature pieces were — you know who Angela Davis was?

SM: Yes.

MW: Walked into school one day. The lobby had ceilings higher than this, and I swear to you, there was a poster of her from here all the way up. This must have cost money that the kids in that school didn't have, but they were attached to a radical Black power group. And what is Angela Davis's picture doing on the first floor? No fight, but there was a big discussion, and I really — it was the start of a Black power movement in the school that, one day, was very bad. Two kids staged a fight in the cafeteria, which brought the police in. Other kids were causing a problem, and the idea was that this would cause the school to be shut, and the principal, who was a white Catholic, would have to leave. It was a very well planned guerrilla activity. Cop cars came, and it was very ugly. The two students who promoted this were jailed. It made the front page of the *Times*. Even though I was dean, I wasn't that much involved, but I was aware of what was going on. And there was one incident where — not a racial one — a fellow dean found a kid in the hallway who should have been in class. There were words, and the kid punched the teacher and knocked him out. The kid was a boxer. And this teacher was in the men's room. I could see he was very unconscious but could speak. He saw me and said, "Mr. Willner, have José arrested," and he passed out.

SM: Oh my goodness.

MW: That was bad news. Donald, my friend, survived. José was arrested, but that didn't, I mean, directly involve me. I never had a problem, and yeah, there were kids I discharged. I was in court a few times. But, at a certain point, I wanted to get out of it. I liked the teaching part, but I found something was happening to me. It wasn't racial. It was that I was starting — I'll give you one example that speaks volumes. I was once at an uncle's house, talking, and, "Hey, Mark, how's things at Morris?" And I said, "Yeah, I had two kids that were busted," and my uncle looked at me, because "busted" wasn't part of our vocabulary. I was becoming enmeshed in a world of things which weren't me. So, that was just an example of why I started to leave. What am I going to do? Well, schools had openings, like Stuyvesant had an opening for a teacher. I tried for that, but, at the same time, I was taking courses to be a supervisor. You had to meet a certain amount of education courses to get a license. I was taking courses, and I looked up to see where the supervisor jobs were, and I found some schools. In fact, one of the schools who asked me for an interview was Monroe, where I went. Now, this was in 1973. I graduated in 1957. It was a different Monroe. I got there early because I liked the school. It was like returning to a place that was once nice in your memory. The demographics had changed, and there had been some incidents there. I went to the library because I worked in the library when I was a kid, and there was the librarian who I worked for. She was very depressed. She began kvetching and retching, because she was speaking to somebody who knew it when it was. And then, my interview's in the principal's office, and I'll tell you, I approached that door, and I stopped for a second because, in my mind, if you were going to the principal's office, you were in trouble. I was Mark Willner, the 15-year-old boy. Really, it was amazing. I said, "What am I doing? I shouldn't be here. What if my parents found out?"

So, I had an interview. It went very well, and I was used to interviews, but they threw one question at me that was a beauty. They knew my background, I was dean at Morris High School. And at that time — this was 1973 — there was a Black activist, not known so much for violence, but radical talk. I forgot his name. He was an author. Let's say X, okay? It wasn't Malcolm X, but I just can't remember the name. But the thing was this: the interviewers said to me, "Mr. Willner, if you were chairman and Mr. X wanted to come to speak to students, what would you do about it?" It's a good question for the social studies, not the chemistry chairman. For social studies. So, I never expected that. I expected questions on curriculum, teaching complaints. So, I gave a pretty good answer, I think. I said, "I would definitely tell him he can come." But they expected me to say, "Well, he's violent." I said, "He would come." But then, both my social studies license thing and my deanship came together, and I said to them, "I want him to come, and I want students to be there. This could be after school, but I'm going to ask any student to come to do some reading about so-and-so beforehand. And then, of course, I want to contact the police department." So I expounded, and I think it was pretty quick, wasn't it?

SM: Yes

MW: I didn't expect that. And the principal of the school was one of the interviewers who, himself, had been a social studies chairman. So, I'm being interviewed by somebody who knows the ropes, but I was also going to jobs at other schools, and Midwood came across with a job. So, I knew that I was a finalist at Monroe, because, the day after my interview there, they wrote to Morris, to the principal, and said, "What can you tell us about Mark Willner because we're interested in him?" When I got the Midwood job, I felt — even though Monroe liked me, I wrote to them, more or less saying, you know, "I'm appreciative, but I've decided to take a job at Midwood High School." I then got a letter from the Monroe principal, who I said had been a social studies chairman. One of the best letters of my career. It said, "Dear Mr. Willner, congratulations upon your getting the position at Midwood High School. You'll do a good job there, as you would have done at Monroe."

SM: You're like, "All right." [Laughs]

MW: And that was that. I also was a finalist at Bronx High School of Science. Finalist means, the administration gets three people, and maybe I could have had it, but, you know, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. The Midwood job was a very good job, even though it was a trip. It didn't matter. And the Science job, I knew I was a finalist, and so was a good woman teacher at the school. She eventually got it, which I thought she would, but I was given a fair shake. And the only other position I tried for was at a very, very good high school across the street from where I live. It's one of the few high schools for which there's a test. Hunter College High School.

SM: Okay. Yes.

MW: It's right across the street. It's not that I wanted to escape Midwood. Midwood was a good school, but, heck, if I can get a school that's right over there, I can get up for an eight o'clock class at 7:45, come home for lunch, kids are great. So, I got an interview. I was given a teaching test. Everything went very well, but there was a woman ahead of me who I knew was very good. In fact, they'd gone on the summer program, but she got the job. So, I couldn't complain. I was treated fairly. So, that was the only other time I was interested in something else, only for transportation, really, and good schools. Music and Art also had an opening. I tried for that, but they had picked somebody already. So, I'm giving you a lot of facts.

SM: I know. No, that's great. I guess the only other kind of area that I would be interested to hear about is more about your experience with Jewish life. Like, was your family religious when you were growing up, and how did you get involved here, at Temple Emanu-El?

MW: Okay. Well, up until I was married, I had gone to, I told you, this Orthodox school. I was bar mitzvahed in Young Israel. My family, we weren't observant, but holidays were special, and one ironical thing in my family was this: my father's father was — what's the person who certifies kosher?

SM: Oh, yes.

MW: He was a — it starts with an S, I think. Well, that man, that grandfather, was a black hat. Very strict. And my father wasn't so observant. Ironically, my mother, whose family came from middle Europe, Budapest and Vienna, were much more typical twentieth century European Jews of a liberal manner, if you will. The irony was that, in my growing up, my mother was the more — what should I say — observant than my father. Her background was not like you think it is. She was the — I mean, she wasn't kosher, but she didn't like pork in the house. It's that kind of thing. My father would have it, it didn't matter that much to him. It was very striking. So, judaically, we were like many Jews. On Rosh Hashanah I was always in the synagogue.

A big change — well, a big event was I married my wife, grown up in Manhattan, a Manhattan girl. Queens could have been Mars. It wasn't snobby, but she lived in the 90s where I live now, and everything she needed in life was right here. She went to Emanu-El, the religious school. One of six kids. And so, we got married in December of '64. I knew her parents were involved in the temple. In fact, they were — this building went up in the '60s, in the Lowenstein Lobby there's a list of donors. Her parents were one of the donors there. So, she had roots here. She and her five young siblings all went here. And so, as a public high school teacher, and many of my friends, we wanted extra income. I mean, lawyers want extra clients. So, she thought, why not try to get a job here? So, this was in the spring of '65. Got married December of '64. Spring of '65, I contacted the head of the school then, and I went for an interview, and he hired me. I taught in the fourth grade on the fifth floor, and that's how things began. At that time, there were only three rabbis, none of whom was a woman. The rabbis wore black episcopalian robes. No yarmulkes. It was a very — well, you know what a Yekke is?

SM: No.

MW: A Yekke is not a derogatory — it describes German Jews. Like, we see a lot of Yekkes who used to live in Washington Heights, like Henry Kissinger. This congregation was founded by Yekkes in 1845 by Chrystie Street, and it's moved ever since. So, got a job and came in Sunday morning. There was no mid-week school. Taught the fourth grade. I started in September of '65, so I'm in my 59th year here now. And, by now, of course, I have kids whose parents I had. A kid says to me, "Mr. Willner, you had my aunt and my mother."

SM: Oh, no. [Laughs]

MW: It happens. There's a few this year. So, I began, and I taught fourth grade. There was a fourth grade teacher who was also here for a while who was very experienced. And I got to like it, and it was enjoyable, and sometimes — and I live on 94th and Park Avenue. Sometimes, I'd walk home, 30 blocks. I liked being here. Kids got along well. I got to know the parents. And then, some time — I began in '65, some time the next 10 years, I don't know when it was — the rabbi in charge of religious school, always the lowest-ranking rabbi in the hierarchy would be in charge of the school, asked me about if I'd like to go to the sixth grade. I said, "Alright." And then, he put forth the idea of teaching about the Holocaust. Now, my curriculum up to that point was famous figures in Jewish history, American and European. And I said I'd think about it. This was some time between '65 and '75. I felt I knew enough about the Holocaust to teach it. Not as much as I know now. But the real issues I felt were this: are sixth graders ready to learn about the Holocaust? Secondly, what would parent reaction be? And then, third — a very pragmatic consideration — is there a book for this? A book for sixth graders? Well, I talked it over. Anyway, we started the course. We found a book that I'm still using, in a newer edition. And, like everything else, it kind of evolved. I was pretty much free to make up my own curriculum. I followed the book, which I still do, to a degree, except the book to me, now, it's like a platform I stand up on. The book isn't a frame that I work in. I go beyond the frame. So, I looked at certain chapters, I decided which ones to teach, and I was given a lot of free hand. And things went all right, as much as they could for a course like this. Kids took to it. Sunday school, we had larger enrollment, in fact, we had seventh, eighth, and ninth grades with full-time classes. This school had a couple hundred kids. We had a yearbook. It was a different situation altogether.

So, I began taking some courses at the Jewish Museum. I began to involve myself more in Holocaust studies. I went to Israel on a Holocaust studies program that was concerned with Jewish resistance, not what was done to Jews, how did they react. There's a group that still exists, American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. I got involved with them, and there were two people who survived the Warsaw Ghetto that helped run this group, Vladka and Benjamin Meed. Vladka Meed could pass as Aryan, and she smuggled things into the ghetto. So, they led this program in 1985 on the Holocaust, but again, not what was done to Jews, how did Jews react. And the program centered on a kibbutz in the north, in Nahariyya, Lohamei HaGeta'ot, which I think, after Yad Vashem, may be the biggest repository of Holocaust archives in Israel, or maybe next to Hebrew University. But this kibbutz was founded by Warsaw Ghetto survivors. We lived in Nahariyya. We'd take a bus to the kibbutz, Kibbutz Lohamei HaGeta'ot. We took courses there, and that was a great spur to me in Holocaust studies. I got to know this woman, Vladka Meed, a survivor, very well, and I took more courses and then got into websites on the computer and did readings. So, I became more and more immersed. As a result, I can tell you the course here got better, because I knew more, not just in substance, but in pedagogy. And the course was well received by parents. I didn't discuss medical dissections or anatomy procedures, you know, but we talked about issues, and, basically, it was a social studies course. So, I even do things now, which, even if kids didn't do don't do the homework, I still try

to get them involved in speaking. When I was going to ed courses, we called it the socialized recitation, where you try to promote critical thinking issues, and I still do it, and I get some fantastic responses. I'll give you one example. We're going to have a lesson on Polish physician Janusz Korczak. You ever hear that name?

SM: No. I saw it in your curriculum, though.

MW: All right. I'm not testing you. I just –

SM: Yeah, no. Yeah. [Laughs]

MW: Okay. Korczak was a well-known pediatrician during the German occupation. He had a clinic for orphans, and the chapter of the book has a good title, "Father of Orphans," and I start the class by saying, "That's the wrong chapter. How could orphans have a father?" So, imagine it's 1942, the Germans come to the orphanage, and, "Raus, raus! Out, out!" He knew what was going to happen, so he had the kids dress up in their best clothing. They marched to the Umschlagplatz, the station right nearby, and he said, "We're going on a picnic." And they had the yellow stars, and in the book, there's an eye-witness testimony. It says this woman looked out the window, and she knew what was going on, but she said those kids looked like gleaming stars with their gold — I mean, I tear up at this. He and the group get to the train station, and we go over this in class. And then, there are two real, they're kind of good social studies pedagogical questions. The first one I ask the class — and I must tell you, if you ever see — you may want to come and see this. Korczak, I tell them, lied to his kids. He didn't tell them where they were going. Should he have told them the truth or not? Sophia, you should hear the responses from these kids. They can handle this. And kids come up with arguments both ways. Then, I say, "Well, Korczak was a liar. Would you want Korczak for your teacher?"

SM: Push them.

MW: Tremendous responses. The other issue, another tough one. The Nazis told him he could stay in Warsaw, not going with the kids where he knew where. So, I said to them — I don't put kids in the spot in terms of a person. I don't say — some teachers would say, "So, if you were Korczak, what would you do?" No. I get around that. I pick on two kids in the class, and I say — well, here's what I do. I say, "I want you to know there are some books by Janusz Korczak, and I can't believe it." I pick two kids' names, who I know are talkers. Let's say Howard Berkowitz and Susan Sam. "Guess what. Howard and Susan are in the room today. How lucky we are." And, of course, they're blushing. And I say — I calm down — "I know you two are very busy. You have an author's stand to go to. In your book, Howard, Korczak decided he would not stay in Warsaw. You think he made the right choice? Sally, in your book, are you the same as his book? By the way, Sally, is your book in hardcover or paperback?" "Mr. Willner, it's

paperback." I said, "Well, if I teach Sunday school at Temple Emanu-El, if my kids came and bought your book, would you autograph it?" I mean, that's what —

SM: Yeah, really go. That's wonderful.

MW: And then, of course, after they talk, I'll say, "Oh, wait a minute. Freddy Rosenkrantz is here. I know you read the book, didn't you? Freddy, which one of the authors did you agree with?" They get pulled in. That's what I wanted, and these kinds of issues get kids talk — and I know which kids to call on, but even some of the quiet ones, anybody can answer because there's no right answer. Another one that's very good, then I'll stop talking. In Simon Wiesenthal's, I think it's *Sunrise* book. Anyway, there's a true story of a grandson whose grandfather was murdered in a concentration camp. I don't know which one. So, it turns out the commandant of that camp is dying of cancer in a German hospital, and a meeting is arranged between this grandson whose grandfather died there and the commandant. Nothing bad happens. They meet with an orderly, and the commandant whose gonna be dead in, let's say, two months, says to the grandson, "Can you forgive me for what happened in my camp?" So, I will not say to my class, "If you were the grandson, what would you do?" This one I turn around a little bit. "Well, let's say the grandson is a good friend of yours and comes to you for advice. What do you think the grandson should do?" So, the kid is sheltered from having to do everything. That's what my class will go on, and kids respond, and some of the responses, I tell you, I'm knocked off my feet. When parents come to me, even now, and say, "How do you teach this course?" I mean, those are the issues I make it. So, what else? I did get an award for Holocaust teaching from the Anne Frank. The Anne Frank — not school. The Anne Frank Academy? There's some Anne Frank association in New York that gives an award. I got an award from them as a teacher of the year for Holocaust studies going back X number of years.

Oh, something else. I'm going tell you something that sounds contradictory. I did something that's very unique, and I wish it wasn't unique. I'm going to say it again, not to fool you. I wrote something on the Holocaust that was very unique, and I wish it wasn't unique, but it still is. I wrote a textbook. As a matter of fact, I'm a published textbook author in both history and also for the scholastic aptitude, AP achievement test in US History, but that's — Barron's Educational Series, which is known mainly for review books, wanted to do some textbook publishing. So, I got the contract. I didn't want to write the whole book myself because there's certain — this was a European history book for global history, and, for example, I have a friend who's an Orthodox Greek who knows more about Byzantine history than I ever knew. I have a friend in PhD in Latin Studies, so — and the whole book is too much. I did most of the book. I then did something which was unique then, and it's still unique, and I wish it wasn't. It was a book, just a chronological history, as we said, from Plato to NATO. Okay? And I decided I wanted to write a chapter on the Holocaust. A regular chapter. They let me do it. I'll show you the book one day. The chapter's about 35 pages, and it was a monumental task. The

chronology's accurate, but I did two things that were unusual. First, I have 35 pages. I don't think there's any book right now in America, a general history book, that has — It's like three or four pages, really. I mean, you're a social studies educator, do you have any contact with books being used?

SM: They're not using textbooks much anymore.

MW: That, I know, but if you saw — if you went to a book fair, look up the Holocaust, there's maybe two or three pages. In this chapter, I put two things. I have about four or five pages just on resistance, and that stems from this trip to Israel in Lohamei, where I learned about resistance, and I have two pages on the Warsaw Ghetto alone. The other thing, which I think was the most challenging topic, was the role of the Vatican. You want the book to sell and you've got to be careful, and only now are some of the Vatican archives available, but this book came out in 1990. There wasn't much to go on, but I felt the topic had to be addressed somehow. I just have maybe two or three pages. I shortly mentioned two or three clergymen who helped Jews, but I also raised questions about the role of the Vatican. And, evidently, the publisher liked it, so it's published, so the book was on the market. I then did a rewrite. And then, Barron's sold out to Stanley Kaplan. So, the Stanley Kaplan company has the book now, but I think they decided not to publish it. But, for a number of years, for, I don't know, almost 30 years, that book was available. So, the unique thing is that it's the only general Plato to NATO book with a chapter on the Holocaust. You know, all these publishers know what the other guys are doing. I wish that other publishers would have seen the book and said, "Maybe we should have one too." It hasn't happened. So, I'll get back to the way I tried to fool you. I said I did something unique but I wish it wasn't unique.

SM: Yeah, that's great.

MW: In terms of my Holocaust studies involvement, I think that's really about it, giving the in-service course, the teaching here, the Anne Frank award, the textbook. Yeah, that's about it.

SM: Yeah, that's great. And so, I usually like to end these interviews by asking, when you think back about your time growing up and living in the Bronx, teaching in the Bronx, what kind of memories or emotions do you associate with it?

MW: Well, I think — let me just get some water. Well, they're all very positive, I'll tell you that. The main things were, to reiterate some of the things I mentioned earlier, a sense of safety and stability. Stability in the sense of you knew what to do, what not to do. There were never any family tensions. My parents were very good to me. I can't think of any time — I may have come home late once or twice, but, I mean, there was never tensions. I simply knew what to do, and I liked my neighbors. The community was well run. There was a sense of order to this, and

community, and you knew what was expected of you, and there were never demands that could not be met, and you were recognized for who you were, and — I mean, these sound like such standard things, but they were part of what — you did what was expected, and you were rewarded. You showed people goodness, and goodness was returned. And any time I was about to do something new, like when I got my car license. My parents let me drive, but they were very careful about wanting me to observe certain rules. Come home a certain time. Where to park. You parked in the street, then. And I had good neighbors. So, it was a very satisfying childhood. And then, also, I mentioned, with the number of relatives, there was safety. There was acknowledgement. There was a sense of being important and knowing your place without trying to go beyond it. So, those are basic things. Parkchester, to this day — haven't been there in a while — has changed a lot. I don't mean for the worse, but there are incidents now. Every now and then, you hear something in the Parkchester area, but I think the community is still there. I think there'll still be a Macy's. I'm sure it's still well kept. It's clean. And it's not that the fact I'm not living there now is because I wanted to escape. I married a woman from Manhattan. She wanted to live in Manhattan. I said, "Okay," more or less, and we have a very nice apartment. It was a rental, and we converted to co-op, which we are now. Have a four and a half room apartment, which is plenty. Oh, and the fact, of course, her family was Jewish. I mean, there was no question I was gonna marry a Jewish woman. No question. In fact, can I tell you one story?

SM: Yeah, go ahead.

MW: I met her in school. When I was going to law school in '61, the law school at NYU began late in September. So, I had a teaching license, and I was subbing in the school, in the South Bronx, the way it turned out. And she was teaching there, and we met, and she invited me to a party, and I wasn't sure if she was Jewish. Her name was Pakter, Sheila Pakter, P-A-K-T-E-R, and I figured, oh, probably Pakistani. But I saw nothing — I mean, I was going out, and this was 1961. I was 20 years old. And she was dark-featured, black hair. She lived at Park and 94th, where we live now, by coincidence. I picked her up, and I think you'll like this story. It's one of my favorites. The party was canceled, so we thought we were going to a movie on 86th Street, but she asked me if I wouldn't mind, she wanted to stop off to see her grandmother. Her grandmother lived two blocks down with relatives. So, I was a little wary. The first date meeting her grandmother. Give me a break, I hardly know the girl! But I go along with her. I go along with the program. So, got to the apartment. Very nice apartment on Park Avenue, and we come in, and the grandmother greets us. The grandmother, most of her life, was in Europe, and she spoke English fairly well, but a real homey grandmother. And we come in. My wife introduced me, and the grandma starts hugging me.

SM: You're like, "Okay?"

MW: I don't know what to do, know what I mean? The grandmother probably figured — because I could tell right away there was a wonderful relationship between my wife and her grandmother, and the grandmother probably figured, well, this is Sheila's date. He must be a nice man. [Laughs] So, they talk about something, and silverware, and my wife had to bring supper to the grandmother's room. It was a big apartment, and I went with her, and went into the room. [Laughs] There, on the wall, was a beautiful, huge tapestry of Jerusalem with Hebrew. I knew I was home free, no matter what happened. I may never see this girl again, but she's part of the tribe, honey, and the rest is history.

SM: Yeah. Oh my goodness.

MW: But until that moment — and she hugged like a Jewish mother. So, we went out for a long time. I got to know her family very well. I liked her very much, and they liked my family. It was a wonderful match. And that helped me get to Emanu-El. So, you asked me, again, going back to things in my life, well, that's about it. I lived in the Bronx at that time, and I'd come down here to see her. I also, early in my life and now, am very much involved in the 92nd Street Y, so I would go there for gym. In fact, I was there yesterday. I have a personal trainer there, and sometimes, I'm at the Y four or five times a week at the cultural events and the gym, and it's three blocks from my house, so it's easy. And the world just was more orderly then. 1950s, alright, there was the Korean War, but that didn't affect me. No relative was involved. Eisenhower was president. It was a very calm, peaceful time, it was the '50s. A very nice, placid, uneventful time to grow up. And so, when I meet other people from that era in New York and the Bronx — I probably know some of the people you interviewed — I'm sure we all had this feeling about the '50s. Things began to change in the '60s. For good or for worse is open discussion, but they changed, and you live with the changes. So, that's about the extent of it. My brother's four years younger. Then, he got married. He moved out of the city, lives in California now. When my father died, and my mother was alone there, she moved into Manhattan, which is very good. It was a very good move for her. So, I look with fondness on Parkchester. It was a wonderful community. It was well developed. The playgrounds were there, and it was just a place you felt comfortable. And I know I said this four times, but you knew what was expected of you. There was a sense of shame. If you got into a bus or a subway, there may have been kids yelling and screaming, but you shut your mouth. Schools were decent. As I said, the principal's office, don't go near that place.

And then, when I moved out, it was kind of sad because my parents were both still alive. I got married in 1964. In other words, my parents liked my wife. They liked my wife's family. It was returned. We would go up to see them. They would sometimes come to Manhattan. There was continuity. And with family events with cousins, my wife became friendly with a lot of my cousins. My wife, to this day, is very close with my brother's wife. And, you know, I hear stories about families that were different, and it's not that I was surprised, but I always thought, as I

mentioned, that the relative comfort and safety I grew up in, I just thought it was like that for everybody. So, that was very much a part of who I am. The experience was very positive, and every now and then, I think of going back to Parkchester just to walk around. I'm sure the buildings are the same. Demographics could differ, but that's true of the entire Bronx, really, except maybe for Riverdale.

SM: Yeah, that's pretty much it.

MW: Even maybe going to the Grand Concourse was a big deal, a good distance from me. Even though I wasn't a Yankee fan, I got tickets to Yankee Stadium often. Pelham Bay Park was the biggest park in the city. It's bigger than Central Park, I heard. Was a bit of a subway ride, but you go there. There were tennis courts. So, it was a very ideal place to grow up in, no question about it.

SM: Yeah. That's great.

MW: Well, I hope I've tried to respond as best I can.