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Transcriber: Sophia Maier

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

Helen Siegel (HS): Well, my grandmother, of blessed memory, who I call Oma — that's the southern German word for grandmother — she had a half brother, same father, different mothers, that came to America, maybe around 1910 or 1920. And they gave my grandmother, my grandfather, my mom and my aunt, the visa to come to America, because they really didn't let Jewish people in during the war. And so the visa stated very clearly that the people they were bringing in would not become wards of the state. In other words, the state wasn't going to help them financially in any way. So my mom came in 1936 with my aunt, and my grandparents on my mother's side, they came in '38. My grandfather's sisters, two of them died in the concentration camp. And I was born in 1945. So that's basically how I got to live in the United States.

SM: And where was your family living when you were born? Or where did you grow up?

HS: In the Bronx, the whole time in the Bronx. We lived in a four story walk up in the West Bronx, about a mile away from Yankee Stadium, which, oddly enough, I have never been inside Yankee Stadium. I'm an only child. I was born prematurely, so I guess I got a little pampering, you know. Lots of TLC. Then I went to all the schools in the Bronx, Public School 64, Junior High PS 117, Taft High School. At that time, Taft High School gave you three different diplomas: there was an academic diploma, which is the one I got, that was leading toward college, and then was another diploma where most people went like to secretarial school, and then there was the general diploma with people that their grades weren't too great. I graduated, let's see, what was it? I think in 1963 from Taft High School. And I, at that time, City College required a very high average to get into. So we had no money to go to private school or anything for college. So I went two and a half years at night on the subway, with minimal amount of paying for whatever. And then I was able to get a higher average, and I went to daytime for two and a half years. So it took me five years to get my bachelor's. And originally, I was not — how should I say it, I don't like to sound negative — there was very little... help. That's not exactly the right word. There wasn't anybody really to guide you. Because I had the German background, and I didn't speak much German because my mother and grandmother wanted me to learn English, so that was kind of on the back burner. So I had an idea to become a German teacher. And I wasn't advised — that's the word I want to use — I was not advised to the fact that there were very few schools that taught German anymore. Most of them, I think, were in Queens or Staten Island, so nobody ever clued me into that. I took the exam. German is a very difficult language. I took the exam and I passed the written, and the written is very difficult, but when I had the oral, somehow I must have diverted to a little dialect, southern dialect of German speaking, so I didn't, you know, pursue that way. And I'd always wanted to be an elementary school teacher. I had a fourth grade teacher named Miss Brunelli, and we used to joke,

“Miss Brunelli with the big fat belly.” Now I'm the one with the big fat belly [Laughs]. The German courses were really very, very difficult, very intense. We read a lot of the famous authors of the early German periods. And I had a marvelous teacher, Mr. Lika. I did the student teaching, actually, in the school, at PS 64. Unfortunately, the teacher, who happened to be Jewish, doesn't matter, but she kind of didn't really give me anything, any really good information, or let me handle anything really. She taught me how to cut out letters to make signs, which is a stupid thing. I wasn't going to, you know, contest that with her. So that was kind of a waste. I taught, my first school was PS 11, one of the oldest schools in the whole city, on [Ogden Avenue near] University Avenue. And it was a depressed area, a lot of burnt out buildings. I taught fourth grade for three years in that school, then they were building another school, PS 126. And so all the upper grade teachers were kind of pushed over to that school. So altogether, I taught fourth grade for 15 years. Then I had — it was health of the family and my health and various things. I think it was when I was in that school, where I had to take a leave of absence. My mother had a breast removed from breast cancer. And I had other little things. So the principal was kind of ready to oust me. She did not give me — I didn't have the union fight for me — she did not give me the form that you needed to request your next year's level of grades you wanted. So basically, I landed up in PS 104 on Shakespeare Avenue, and I landed up with a second grade, which I had never taught. And in those days, they didn't give you a mentor or anything. They gave you the keys to the classroom, and they gave you a metal box with the students' records, and they threw you to the wolves basically. Very little help. And there were very little supplies. And I taught for 11 years in that school. They had six different principals, so the school was not run very well. And the year that I retired, was the first year that the Board of Education ever lowered the age if you took a cut in your pension. If you had your years in, your total of 25 — the magic numbers were 25-55 you were supposed to have 25 years teaching and be 55 years old. So I was 50 years old. So I took a 25% cut in my pension. And the year that I taught, that last year, was very difficult. I had a student who stole my money. I still remember his name, Darrel Haynes, I was surprised I didn't see him in the newspapers somewhere. So I ran down to the principal, and she was at a meeting, and I said, “This is the last day that Darrel Haynes is going to be in my class.” Well, he got taken out of the class. I did report him to the police. I went to the police station, because they weren't gonna help me with anything. So I did get the money back. He had it in his fist, about to put it down his pants, and I grabbed his fist and got the money back. Anyway, that was how I retired. And I didn't want to have — I figured, if I work another five years, I'll have a heart attack, a nervous breakdown, or get an ulcer. So I said, better take the cut in the pension. That was that. And while I was in my last year, I also took the training to be a mentor for new teachers. So I did that part time for a couple of years, and I had to go to different schools. One teacher in particular, she happened to be white, but she was in love with me. I gave a big unit, in her second grade class, or first grade, I forget which it was, about Abraham Lincoln. And they gobbled it up. We learned a song. We did some arts and crafts, made a little log cabin with pop sticks from Denny's. Then I did that for a couple of years. And then I also became the volunteer principal of this little Sunday Hebrew school we had. But I had gone to various Jewish education classes at night, so that I wouldn't come in just knowing nothing, but actually the students, the other students from yeshivas, they were the teachers. And so every couple of years, they left to get married or go to college or whatever it was. I did that for about maybe 20 years. From

'99 to — no, it was about 10 years, but it was 20 years ago [Laughs]. At the same time, I also was the organizer, director of a Jewish singles group that met, I think, once a month on Sundays. I did that. I also volunteered for the Passover outreach for the Russians that came over through the Jewish board of Family Services. So I did my volunteer work for that, and also for another project where you filled the shopping bags with food for Passover. I forget what organization that was, but I did that. And that's basically my life's story [Laughs].

I never married and don't have children. Years ago, if you say you never married, they would automatically assume that you didn't have children. But nowadays, that's not the case. So I always make sure to make it very clear. I lived at home, and I took care of my mom and grandmother. They had 27 hospitalizations between the two of them. So that, plus my own hospitalizations, kept me busy. When I was in the beginning of teaching and everything, I tried to get to Europe several times. So I enjoyed traveling. I went with this auto book at that time, I think it was five or ten dollars a day in Europe. I was in Spain and in France and in Germany. They took me — oh yes, that was a big highlight — when I was 20, my grandmother wanted me to go and see where she was born. We went to Germany to the small little village where she was born. People there still knew her, and they made little parties for us. And she had sent them, I don't know if it was food or clothes or money during the war, even though she didn't know if they were Nazis or not. So that was one of the trips I took, that was my first trip to Europe when I was 20 years old, and I got the travel bug at that time. So have I bent your ear enough? [Laughs]

SM: [Laughs] Well, not nearly enough, but it's wonderful. That was a great, that was a fantastic overview. Do you have time for a few more questions?

HS: Yes.

SM: Yes or no? Sorry, I didn't hear you.

HS: Yes.

SM: Okay, great. So I guess since we were just talking about your parents and your grandmother. What did your parents do for a living?

HS: Well, my mother, during the Nazi time, they did not allow the Jewish people to go to higher education. So she never finished her high school. And my father, who was born in America, he had, I think, four other siblings. So he had to help support them, because his father flew the coop. He never finished high school. I got a bachelor's and a master's, and I have really the equivalent, almost, of a doctorate with the amount of credits that I have, but I never pursued a doctorate. I felt I didn't need it for the job that I had. Was that answering the question, or do you want to repeat the question?

SM: Yes. What did they do for a living?

HS: Oh, okay. So my mother became a waitress. That was her career her whole life was being a waitress. And she was a very sociable lady. She liked that very much. And then, at that time, right at the beginning, when she came, she had two or three jobs. And she would walk from one job to the other to save the nickel for the subway. Before I was born, my grandmother, she worked in a handbag factory. And then after I was born, she received work to do at home that they used to call piece work, I guess it was with material or whatever. And then she worked also for a hat factory. My father worked in the post office. And when I was 11, he left to move to Florida, but we always had contact with him. My grandmother made sure, phone calls and letters, and also occasionally we had a trip or two down to Florida. So I always had a connection with my dad. And he worked for the post office for the whole of his career.

SM: And a lot of people that I've spoken to whose parents were born abroad say that they had different experiences growing up than people who had American born parents. Was that your experience?

HS: Well, being an only child, I didn't have too many friends. I was like grandma's baby. So I was very shy when I was young. And also, because we went to visit my dad, sometimes they pulled me out of school. They'd signed me up for a couple of weeks or a month in schools down there. So we actually tried to live in Florida when I was in sixth grade, the second half of the year. I graduated sixth grade in Florida in Miami Beach. We went back to New York, we had kept the apartment, and so I didn't have that many friends. As I said, I was rather shy, which obviously I'm not now [Laughs]. Most of my other friends were not — I didn't have too many friends, I used to go with my grandmother to her friends who lived in Washington Heights, three elderly ladies. And, you know, we'd go to the Cloisters up in Washington Heights. Then when I was a teenager, I used to go to the Cloisters because I liked the Gregorian chants. I'd sit there with a book and it'd be nice and quiet and everything, so that was one of the things I liked.

SM: What other things did you like to do for fun when you were growing up?

HS: Well, because I was a premature baby, they kind of over protected me, so I didn't go bike riding or stuff like that. My oma, we would cook together, and so I learned how to cook and bake. And also, we did embroidery together. Cross stitch work. She made one or two tablecloths for me, and I did a small little table cloth too with that. And later on, I learned how to crochet and I made granny square blankets. And as I said, I like to travel, so I would get the auto book and decide where to go and make all the plans. But I never usually used a travel agent, I just made phone calls and wrote letters to where I was going, and that's the way it was done years ago.

SM: And were you able to travel particularly more because you had the summers off?

HS: Definitely. I also took Spanish when I — I had a sabbatical leave during my college career, I had a sabbatical leave, and I took Spanish. So I did pretty well when I was in Spain, and I also had been to Mexico. When I was a little older, maybe around 30, I got a car, because no one in the family drove. So I was the first one that had a car, and that's the way my life went.

SM: And you mentioned that you like to cook with your grandmother, what kinds of things did you like to eat? Or what would you cook or bake?

HS: Well, she had these relatives down south that had been given the visa, and she was in connection with them. Now, in retrospect, I realize it was really futile to bake them cookies, because I figured by the time they got from New York to Montgomery, Alabama, they were probably all crumbled. But we spent time making that. She taught me how to bake cakes. I was still able to bake when I was older, not as much, not her baking, because we didn't keep the kosher rules at that time. And then when I moved here, where there's more orthodox people, I'm a little more tuned into that. So you can have milk or butter products when you're having meat. So consequently, if I do bake, it has to be what they call *parve*, P-A-R-V-E, which means there's no milk product in the cake. So it's either margarine or oil. And so it's different tastes, you know? And also, she taught me how to cook. But she mostly cooked the German way with a lot of sauces and things like that, but I don't do that. You have to try to watch your cholesterol and things like that. There were two things that were really, really delicious, and unfortunately, I never — she showed me how to make them, but I never got to make them. And one of them was like something like a puffy English muffin, then she would make a caramel cream sauce to go with it [Laughs].

SM: Oh, sounds great.

HS: And the other thing is like a flat piece of dough that was sour cream and sugar and cinnamon. That was also very, very delicious. But I didn't get to make that either. But I have various cookbooks, so every now and then I try something new. But not that often, I have other things to take care of.

SM: And so a little bit more about the neighborhood that you grew up in, in the West Bronx. Was it predominantly Jewish at that time?

HS: Yes, it certainly was. On 167th or 169th, I think, in that area, there were maybe five different synagogues of various denominations. The big one, on the Grand Concourse, Temple Adath Israel, I think it's now a Baptist church, if they haven't changed it to something else. And that was more like conservative, we didn't go there too often, we didn't go on Sabbath, we went on the major holidays. Then we celebrated holidays at home. But they had a Sephardic synagogue and a small synagogue that they call a *shtiebel*, which had very few people, and I never got into what they were doing in those synagogues. The Bronx in the 50s and 60s, mostly even before the 50s when I wasn't born, was really predominantly Jewish. I remember when I was in third grade, there was a little black girl in the class.

And I said, "Mommy, can I invite her to my birthday party?" And she said, "Well, of course." So there wasn't that kind of problems going on at that time with what kind of friendship you had. But I didn't have that many friends because I was very cloistered.

SM: And so what kind of shops or other amenities did you and your family frequent in the neighborhood or in the Bronx generally?

HS: Between Jerome Avenue and Walton Avenue on 170th street, they had mostly a lot of Jewish run businesses. The fish store — well, it was more than a fish store, one side was the fish department, the middle was like fruits and vegetables, and the other side was the meat department. And in the fish store, we had the lady that looked like a fish. She had those bulging eyes, and a bloodied apron. That was very memorable. And then there was a pickle store. And people said, a nickel for a pickle. And they had a kosher bakery. And I guess there was a kosher butcher, but I don't remember going to that one. That's basically what the neighborhood was like. And in high school, the majority of people in Taft High School, they graduated with an academic diploma. And, I would say also, probably more than half of them went to college. Maybe more than that. In junior high, I took French, which was a disaster. As I say, in college, I took Spanish and German in my undergrad work. And so that was the way it was.

SM: I remember you saying that your Spanish came in handy in Spain. Did it also come in handy later in your teaching career? Did you have more Spanish-speaking students?

HS: Of course, a lot of students were Hispanic. And most of them that I had were pretty fluent with English. But when I had occasion to write to a parent, if I wrote to them first in English and got no response, then I wrote to them in Spanish to try to get them, you know, to do various things. And in high school, I belonged to the future teachers club. I also worked with the blind students. I forget the title, what they called that, but I did volunteer time for that. And also, let's see what, I think it was three things. Oh, I worked on the yearbook. Yes, organizing the yearbook.

SM: And are there any other memories from school, whether from public school or up through high school that stand out to you or that are important to you?

HS: Well, not too many, but I know in my senior year I wanted to go with one of my girlfriends and cut class, and go downtown to Chinatown. And I called my mother and she said, "You march yourself right back to school," and it was harder to get into the school, back into the school, than it was to get out of the school. I was obviously caught doing that, and I had to carry around a piece of paper that the teachers had to sign that I attended class. "We were very surprised about that, Helen, we didn't expect something like that for you." [Laughs] And now they have to worry that they don't bring a knife and a gun to the school.

SM: Yes. We have scanners, metal detectors at the school to make sure they're not bringing anything in.

HS: And I never went to any prom or anything like that. You know, that was a little disappointing. But it wasn't earth shattering. I wasn't Miss Popularity. You shuffle along, you do what you have to do when you follow your goals?

SM: And did you feel that you got a quality education from growing up in the Bronx public school system?

HS: Well, at that time there were no computers and stuff like that. And you had to, when I went to college, you had to go and really do research. When I went to college, you had to go down to 42nd street and do term papers and look up information and the card catalog to get which book you needed to take out. It was pretty rigorous. When I was in Florida, I had a very good teacher there. The public school, I don't have bad memories, but nothing standing out, so to speak at that time. I'm pretty sure I got a pretty good education.

When I taught fourth grade, I got the Hammond Paper Atlas to teach them longitude, latitude, they'd memorize the oceans of the world. I taught them about the peninsula, what's an island, what's a peninsula. I have a fuzzy feeling that nowadays, that's not really taught too much, that geography. There's a different slant or whatever. But I think that the public school system at the time that I went was a pretty solid one, because as I said, most of the kids who went to high school at Taft, most of them did pretty well, they went on to college and other jobs. I was very happy in later years when I went into a bank, and one of my former students was at the bank. "Hello, how are you," you know. And then another girl, Daisy Rodriguez, who was kind of like a tough guy, a girl but a tough guy. She's like a guard in one of the supermarkets or somewhere else. And she remembered me also. I said, "Daisy, I'm so happy that you're an upstanding young lady." And she says, "Well, I don't have any children, and I'm not doing any drugs." I had to give her a hug and kiss. That's thankfully the way things went.

SM: Did you feel like that changed over your time as a teacher also, like that high quality of education? Or would you say that it was pretty consistent throughout your time there?

HS: What happened was that, when I went to school, you learned phonics and you learned how to read. Hello?! They had at the beginning elementary school, the first or second grade, a book *Fun with Dick and Jane*. And that was the book that most of the kids had in schools. And then when I was teaching, what they did — when I became a teacher, I should say — there was a lot of politics going on. Every five years, they had a different reading program. One reading program was ridiculous because they had big books and you were supposed to read the big books to the children and, maybe by osmosis, they were supposed to learn how to read, which was ridiculous. So I scrounged around for the old books and tried to use the old books to teach them how to read, because the big book had three quarters or more of the page as pictures, and maybe four sentences on the bottom. It went into somebody's pocket that every couple of years they changed the program. When we went to school, the desks and chairs were one unit,

they were screwed into the floor, so you couldn't move around very much. And then they had all the movable stuff, and they had you sit in groups instead of facing the teacher. You had to have corners, where you were supposed to have a science corner and a this corner and make little sheets of paper with questions that they were supposed to work on independently. I mean, I had kids coming to me in second grade, they still hadn't even learned how to read really. And when one Hispanic parent — you know, I was her third teacher, and one of those sweet little girls, shy and a little chubby. And she says, my daughter learned how to read more in the few months that she was with you than the whole of last year and the other half of this year. And then I had a student that I was his third teacher also, and he was a problem person. And he was almost as tall as me in second grade. Caleb Hooker, I still remember his name. So I greeted him at the door, I shook his hand, I said, "Caleb, you know you have a name from the Bible? That's very special. And I hope that whatever happened before, I don't want to know about it, I hope that you're going to do nicely here." And of course, I knew he'd get in some kind of trouble and, you know, be a little noisy here and there. But when he did do something good, I wrote a note to the parent. A good note, instead of a bad note, and she remarked to another teacher or whatever. She said, "Miss Siegel was the only one that ever wrote a good note for my son." I had a student, his name was Poe, I forget his first name, and he was a good artist. And I directed the parent to go down to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see if they had any art lessons for children, and she was very appreciative of that. And then I went on my own, which was not really a cool thing to do with my car. And I would take some of them on my own time up to Tarrytown, where they have these three — I think it's three, but at least two — they had Sunny Side and another place, I forget the name but all together, and they had ducks, and they showed how life was in the colonial times. Sunny Side is the home of the person who wrote —

SM: Is it Sleepy Hollow?

HS: Right, Sleepy Hollow, right. But I took them to the other place more because they had the milk. They showed how corn is made, how wheat is made into flour and all of that. But I took them on my own time. That could have been dangerous if there would have been a car accident, they would have sued me up the kazoo. But *baruch Hashem*, as they say in Hebrew, thank God that everything went all right. But I took the students not necessarily who were the smartest, but who were the best behaved. And most of them weren't always the smartest. So I'm glad, I'm sure they had good memories of Miss Segal.

SM: I'm sure.

HS: When we made the Easter eggs at Easter time, I told them about Passover. I put in the matzah. And I said, "You know, at home, some of you have a big picture with Jesus sitting with his friends. And guess what? Jesus was Jewish." [Laughs] So, I mean, I don't know how much they tuned into all of that. I gave them a Christmas party and an Easter party. And I had them line up and say, "You must say please, may I please have — and then don't point — tell me you wanted a Coca Cola or the orange soda. Do not point. And then when I give you the cup, make sure to say thank you." [Laughs] So I tried to

give them some manners. I also taught them to write in cursive. In those days, especially in fourth grade, you taught them cursive. And now they don't do that in most schools, but I think they're starting to do it in some places again. And now guess what? It's four o'clock. [Laughs] I have to sweep my floor.

SM: No problem. Look, I was glad to go as long as you could.

HS: So if you want to continue another day, we'll have to set up a time. I think I must have answered a lot of your questions, and basically you got a good idea what was going on?

SM: Yes, definitely. I only have a few more questions. We went for about 40 minutes, so it should only be another 20 minutes or so.

HS: So the next time, we'll finish up. Am I the first one you have been interested in interviewing?

SM: Oh, no. I actually —

HS: Co-op City, excuse me. Freedom Land was a big resort, like an amusement park, but that didn't last for very long, but I remember going there. But when they opened up, Co-op City with all those high buildings, a lot of the Jewish people moved there. The other apartments, I always liked my old apartment better than my house. I liked the rooms better, they were larger. That kind of killed the Bronx, as far as the Jewish population. They moved up there, and then other people coming up from Harlem and from the South Bronx, coming up in the areas, and there was a lot of fires and bad things happening. So that's why I had to move up here, where I live now. Alright, Sophia. And they stayed on their jobs, went till they retired. They didn't change. Like now young people have five different jobs, doing this, doing that. They leave one job, they leave to go to another job. In those days, the stability was very important in everybody's life.

SM: I'm very interested in talking to the two of them. And I'm gonna work it out with David since he's been working on them for me for a bit. But anyone else, you can put in a good word for me that I'm not terrible to talk to. [Laughs]

HS: Okay, so have a good day and good luck with your research. Other people have other experiences, but mine was first generation here. Okay, take care, bye bye.

START SECOND SESSION

SM: So something I had just wanted to follow up on was, were you in school or teaching during the teacher strikes in 1967 and '68?

HS: Well, I started teaching in '68. So I might have been involved with that. Yes.

SM: Do you have any memory of them?

HS: Not really, you know, it was so long ago.

SM: Okay. It's something I like to ask about. So something we didn't talk about last time was Jewish life. Was your family religious growing up?

HS: Not at all. We didn't keep kosher, and we went to synagogue — the biggest synagogue on the Grand Concourse was Temple Adath Israel, and that was a conservative synagogue. We went there for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I don't recall going there for Passover. I know we celebrated the Passover at home, we did the Seder. And we observed the business with the matzah and everything. So we did observe certain things. And my grandmother, my Oma — oma the southern German name for grandmother — my Oma would light candles on most Friday nights. There were some Jewish things going on, but not a terrible amount. My mother worked as a waitress, so she couldn't be off on a Saturday. My grandmother's friends were not, you know, religious Jews. So that was the way it was. We were very secular.

SM: Yeah. I mean, I know we met at the synagogue. So have you gotten more religious over time? Or more involved?

HS: Yes. Well, when we moved to this neighborhood here in Pelham Parkway, we had to move out of the old neighborhood in the West Bronx, because there were fires and rioting and bad things. What happened is, it just happened that I live around the corner from the synagogue. When my mother passed away, and I have no men who were gonna say Kaddish for her, so I decided that every Shabbos, I'd go to synagogue for the first 11 months, and then it became a habit to go every Saturday so that I could say Kaddish for her. That's how I tiptoed into being more religious. And then, eventually, I met my other half, Mr. Sam Solomon, and I thought that maybe a marriage could come about. So I kept going to shul, which I was used to anyway, and lighting candles every Friday night, became also a good habit to have. You know, a religious thing. And I bought separate pots, and the dishes that we decided upon using were not used for more than 20 or 30 years. They were from Germany, and a cabinet that hadn't been used, so he accepted that. And for the first two years, I tried to see if a marriage could come about, but that didn't happen. We're still not married for other reasons that I found out about, but I did become more religious. And then there was a wonderful Rabbi Zuckerman, and he would have religious lectures. So I would have started to attend those. And then he left for various reasons. Once I retired, I became more involved in doing Jewish things, working for the Passover outreach. One of the Jewish organizations that dealt with the Russians at that time, and also packing up paper bags with Passover items. I did that and delivered some of them. And I went to the Jewish Teacher Institute up in Westchester, because I became the volunteer principal of the Sunday Hebrew school at the Pelham Parkway Jewish Center. So I felt, well, I have to know what I'm doing [Laughs], so that was part of the equation. I usually try not to use the car on Saturday, but that's not a 100% situation. So I would say I'd

become more observant than when I first moved in. There was just the celebration for Israeli independence at the Riverdale synagogue over there, which we attended last week.

SM: And I'm just wondering because obviously the Bronx used to be more Jewish than it is, do you find that going to synagogue still allows you to be part of a more Jewish community?

HS: Well, there are very few observant Jews. In other words, the majority of people who go to Rabbi Pewzner thing, which is around the corner, Bronx Jewish Center it's called now, I would say the majority of those people had been congregants at the Young Israel on Barnes Avenue. And once that was sold, and became a school, they kind of shifted over to the Pelham Parkway Jewish Center when it became more orthodox. In other words, we've had several rabbis in between who were more orthodox. And unfortunately, all three synagogues in the area here — there's the Bronx Jewish Center around the corner, on the north side there's a congregation over there, Cruger Avenue, and then Rabbi Fuchs' shul, which was mostly for the Russians. He's a very astute, intelligent, kind hearted rabbi, who, we'll say, captured the Russian Jews. Of course, most of them were not observant when they were in Russia, but he's done a big mitzvah by helping them in many ways. So there's still three synagogues here, but when I moved in in '79, it was very, very predominantly a Jewish neighborhood. There was a Jewish butcher, a Jewish bakery, and now there's none of that stuff here. So it's unfortunate people pass away, people go move in with their children, or they go to Florida, or assisted living. And again, there are still Jews in the area that do not go to shul. I'm not the religious police. They're there, but they're invisible kind of.

SM: I wonder because a lot of people — it's very rare that I get to speak to someone like you who still lives in the Bronx, like you said, a lot of people have left or they've passed away. And so why have you chosen to stay when so many others have left?

HS: First of all, I have to minimally correct you, because I have to say that in the West Bronx, in the Riverdale area, it's very heavily Jewish.

SM: Oh, yes.

HS: And there are many synagogues of different denominations, and a lot of Jewish stores with kosher food and kosher restaurants. So there is an enclave over in the West area in Riverdale. But I have a private home. And that's the main reason I'm still here. And I also belong to a congregation, an orthodox congregation in New Rochelle where I'm a member of the sisterhood. So that shul has a lot more Israelis now coming to them. There are several synagogues in different parts of New Rochelle that are viable shuls, you know?

SM: Because you've been there, I think you already began to touch on it, but what changes have you noticed over time living in the Bronx?

HS: Well, obviously there's a lot of Muslims of various backgrounds. My block, for instance, is very multi ethnic. There's Afro-American, Africans that actually came from Africa, a couple of Afro-Americans on the block. And there's Dominicans. And there's also Filipinos and Chinese. And everybody on the block gets along very nicely. They all go in their own home and say hello and goodbye, for the most part. But if you go to Lydig Avenue, you'll see a lot of women in the burkas. You go a couple of blocks south on White Plains Road, and they have their own actual community in Parkchester, which is very predominantly from Afghanistan and India. There are not many white people in that area at all anymore. But mostly those people, they mind their own business. You know, I go to patronize a Chinese market to buy fish and different things. So what can I say, it is what it is. I have a call, we'll travel. If there's an event in the West Bronx that I'd like to go to or up in New Rochelle, a Jewish oriented event, I go. People who are still in this neighborhood who are Jewish and not necessarily shul goers, most of them are elderly. Where are they gonna go? If they move, an apartment anywhere is expensive now. Some of them are on rent control. So that's the reality check. When I moved in '79, like I said, it was a very, very Jewish neighborhood. On yizkor, they had two or three different yizkors going on, with people lined up down the block, waiting to get into the show. So that's not the case now. So everybody has to deal with the reality, you know?

SM: I was gonna ask, just generally, how does that make you feel?

HS: Well, I feel unfortunate, fortunate. I mean, I don't have children, people who have children and they see the neighborhood changing, who were observant, most of them moved away to an area where there's a yeshiva. The ultra-Orthodox. I mean, Lakewood in New Jersey, that's practically a city in itself. 99% Orthodox. So it's a different situation, the demographics do change, not only in the Jewish area, but like Arthur Avenue used to be predominantly Italian. And now there's a lot of Albanians owning stores and restaurants and living there. And they had the big Albanian festival this past Sunday, which I attended. You try to make the best of things. You can't bring back the past.

SM: Yeah, very well said. And so, when you think about your time growing up, and for you living in the Bronx, what kind of memories or emotions do you associate with?

HS: I was born after the war, but my mother and grandparents were from Germany. In those days, I would generally say that most children did not ask too many questions. And that goes for Italians and Irish. You know, most children were taught to just toe the line and do what you're supposed to do, and listen to mommy. Of course, there was no internet and there was no TikTok and computers to confuse your mind or whatever. In those days, children, more or less, were pretty compliant with whatever situation you were in. And being that we were poor, you didn't realize you were poor at the time, because everybody in the area, they weren't running around in Mercedes. So we never had a car. I'm the first one that graduated high school and obviously college. My mother wasn't able to because of the Nazi laws against the Jewish people going to school. And my father came from a family of five, his father flew the coop, and he had to go to work. So he didn't finish high school. But he worked for the post

office as an adult, so he wasn't in the poor house at that time. But as I said, children in those days, whatever was on the table, that was what you ate. And if you didn't like it, that was just too bad for you. I mean, I'm an only child, so I was kind of a little pampered. But my Oma was a very good cook and baker, so I had absolutely no complaints at all [Laughs]. But I would say the majority of children in those days, they didn't question, "Oh, I don't like this, I don't like that," because that was what they were served. Nowadays, it's a different story. People are spoiling the children too much these days, in my opinion. That's how it was in those days.

SM: Yeah. Well, thank you. That's all the questions that I had for you. Is there anything else before I end the recording that maybe — I mean, I know we already talked more extensively before — but that you feel that it's important or that you would like to share?

HS: Well, those people who want to be observant, there's no one preventing them from being observant in the Bronx. So it's a matter of personal choice, or how you're raised or whatever. And if you are interested, whether it's a religious event or a Jewish secular event, you want to go, there's no one preventing you from doing that either. It's dangerous times we live in. Most older people and smart younger people don't go out past a certain hour at night. Older people don't go clubbing at two o'clock in the morning. You don't go on the subway unless you have to. So it's a different feeling that you have to be a little more cautious and there have been anti-semitic events in Riverdale and Manhattan against synagogues and people. So it's different than 40, 50 years ago. It's very sad what's going on. And everyone, Jewish or non-Jewish, has to be very alert. Everyone has to try to get out the door in one piece and come home in one piece, so that's basically the scenario nowadays. Now your survey, how did you manage with the other people you approached?

SM: I'm gonna just end the recording.