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Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Rochelle Ballin

Brian Purnell: For the record can you please say and spell your first and last name

Marian Swerdlow: My first name is Marian, M-A-R-I-A-N. My second named is Swerdlow. S
as in Sarah W-E-R-D-L-O-W.

BP: And your date of birth?

MS: November 8, 1949.

Mark Naison: Ok we start this interview as we start all interviews by asking to tell us a little bit
about your family. How did they come to the United States and how did they come to the Bronx?

MS: Ok. My father's parents emigrated from Russia in the first quarter of the 20th century. And
they lived on the lower eastside -- I don't know how much detail to go into --

MN: As much as you would like to.

MS: My father -- my paternal grandmother died very young and my father and his brother ended
up in the Hebrew Orphans Asylum. Eventually he met my mother and -- after World War 2,
instead of going back to his foster family, he moved in with my mother. And they lived together
several years before the got married -- in the Bronx. My Mother was from the Bronx. Her family
moved to the Bronx from the Lower Eastside probably in the 1920s and they had a candy store.
A little bit west -- I'm sorry east of the Grand Concourse. And my mother went to Hunter
College. She met my father at a dance that was given jointly by the Communist Youth Group of
Hunter and the Communist Youth Group of City College, where my father was. As I said after
he got out of the army after world war two they moved in together not far from where my
mother's parents were. Then when they got married, they moved to a small house in Morrisania.

MN: What was the exact address?

MS: 3660 Park Avenue.

MN: Is it still there?

MS: No, it's not unfortunately. It was torn down for a housing project.

MN: Right, for the Claremount Houses. Now your parents were both active members of the Communist Party?

MS: Yes. Yes.

MN: Were they active members when you were born?

MS: Yes they were. I was not aware that they were political until I myself radicalized during the Vietnam War. When I was 16 and I very hesitantly told my mother that I was against the war. I expected that she would kill me. Then she said 'Oh your father and I were in the Communist Party' and I nearly died because I had no idea.

MN: So growing up you had no idea?

MS: I had no idea and there's even an interesting story. I'm sort of jumping in the middle, but when one -- this is on the no idea thing -- when we were still living in Morrisania one morning I woke up and went to my parents bedroom and instead of my parents being there in the bed, where I loved to wake them up early, there were two black bed in my parents bed. Now this didn't upset me. I said 'this is interesting I wonder where mom and dad are.' And I went walking around the house and I eventually I found them in the living room and they were so happy to see me and everything and we for about -- I really don't know how long it was because children don't really have a sense of time -- but for a while we had a bunch of young black men staying in our house. And I was just in heaven because I had all these uncles to pay attention to me and play with me. I was just -- and then they left. And --

MN: Now --

MS: Wait, that's not the end of the story. Years later, probably around four or five years later when I was about in third or fourth grade I said to my mother 'Mah, do you remember those guys who came and stayed with us?' And my mother says 'Don't you ever discuss that! Don't you ever say anything to anyone about that! Never talk about that!' And I got terrified. And of course I didn't until many years later perhaps when I was in my 20s and I asked her the same question. She said 'those were leaders of the Communist Party in the South who came to the North for a conference and it was very, very secret.' No one was supposed to know-- who they were, that they were here or anything.

MN: Wow. Did you have any recollection of the FBI --

MS: No

MN: -- following your parents or being around the house?

MS: No I have no recollection of it. They may have been. I don't have any recollection.

MN: Right. So you grew up without any sense that your family was different than others?

MS: No sense that my family was different at all.

MN: But you were -- one of the things that was different was that you -- your parents chose to live in a virtually all black neighborhood.

MS: Yes. It never occurred to me that it was strange.

MN: Now your father was a civil engineer--

MS: Yes

MN: -- and he worked for the city?

MS: No he worked for a private architectural firm. Wise Carpenter Work.

MN: He never had any problems with getting harassed or fired?

MS: You know I don't know. I wish I knew.

MN: So what are your earliest recollections of childhood? And especially the street life in your neighborhood.

MS: Well, there was an alley that went from Park Avenue a little bit east. And I don't even remember the name of it, but every evening when the weather was at all clement, we would -- I would go the alley and play with the kids. And at the dead end part of the alley there were two houses that had black families and one of them was the Ferguson family and they had probably about seven kids. And Anna --

MN: Hold up the picture.

MS: Anna was the closest one to my age. Anna Ferguson and --

BP: If you could just hold it steady. I just want to zoom in.

MS: And she was my best friend because she was closest to my age.

MN: Anna Ferguson.

BP: Can you move your left hand a little?

MS: Oh, Sorry.

BP: So who is in the picture? Anna and --

MS: This is Anna Ferguson and myself and Arty Martin, who lived on Park Avenue and his little sister Cecilia, who we called Bootsy.

MN: This is another picture, which is very good. This is you and Arty and do you remember the name of Arty's dog?

MS: No I don't. I wish I did. I don't remember the name of the dog, but I guess I was fascinated by the fact that he had a dog. I'm sure I probably tortured my mother to get me a dog.

MN: Now was there -- you played in the alley --

MS: Yes

MN: -- was there a lot of in and out of one another's houses on you block?

MS: People were in and out of my house, but we didn't go so much to other people's houses. I think I was in the Ferguson house once.

MN: Right.

MS: Mr. Ferguson was a house painter, but mostly we didn't go into their houses -- not that much. The Colons had a party had a party every time the father came back. He was a steward on a ship and every time he came back they had a big party in their basement--

MN: Is this Colon, C-O-L-O-N?

MS: Yes --

MN: And where they --

MS: They were Puerto Rican.

MN: They were Puerto Rican. Ok.

MS: Yes. But mostly you didn't go into people's houses. I had one memory about Anna. Its kind of fragmentary and it also brings in my parents and what they were trying to do. They gave me gifts all the time. I had so many toys, it's embarrassing, but they gave me a box with piano keys that you could play little songs on and attached to the top there was a songbook. It had little symbols that were also on the keys so that you knew which keys to play out songs, but my parents had done something strange with it. They had taped down the last pages for some reason. Taped it down with lots of tape. Now, of course, I had to see what that was hiding. That was very much more interesting than anything else. So everyday, I worked a little bit and finally I got it up and I saw that there was a song called "Old Folks at Home". So not understanding that there was anything negative, I asked my mother and my father, why was this taped down. And one of them explained to me that this song was written by a man that thought that Negroes liked to be slaves.

MN: Wow.

MS: I was just -- I was just like -- it was just like a bolt of lightning for me. I could conceive that there could be people like that. Of course, I ran out to my friend Anna and I remember grabbing her by her arms and said 'Anna! Anna! I have something to tell you.' And I said 'there was a man who thought that Negroes liked to be slaves.' And she said 'oh sal!' I don't know if she understood what I was saying, but she caught my mood and its one of my memories of Anna and my parents --

MN: Did you parents ever talk to you about race when you were growing up?

MS: Not that I remember.

MN: Or say anything about where you were living?

MS: No. Never.

MN: It was -- so you --

MS: There was a taken for granted-ness about it. And it never occurred to me until years and years later that there was anything interesting or different or curious about where we lived or the way we were living or why my parents would live there. It never occurred to me.

MN: Now you showed me these wonderful pictures of May Day celebrations. Could you hold them up for us to show? When did you realize that this was a May Day celebration that was your mother's kind of protest against the McCarthy era?

MS: Oh my goodness. Years and years afterward. Maybe even -- I probably forgot all about this until after my mother died about ten years ago and I went through the photographs, I probably found these and that was the first I sort of thought about it, but I think it was because there were probably no more May Day parades. No more ways of celebrating it openly, so she went back and went to the more traditional manifestation of May Day, she invited all the kids from the

neighborhood and set up a maypole, and I'm sure none of them had had any experience with a maypole and yet they looked like they got into the spirit of it. I was showing a picture of it to someone at work today and they said 'look at how nicely dressed all the kids from the neighborhood came.' My mother must have told them that this was a celebration and they came, probably this was their church clothes.

MN: Right. You had mentioned before we started the formal interview that your parents had a circle of friends in the neighborhood who were also leftist.

MS: Definitely.

MN: Who were some of those people that you remember and what was the context in which they socialized?

MS: Well -- let's see -- first of all we'd visit each other's houses constantly. I'd play with their kids. Their kids came over to my house. I went over to their house. There were birthday parties. Also the adults went out together at night and left us with babysitter. I don't know what they did.

MN: And this was a racially mixed group?

MS: No. I think it was the white people hung together. My -- but I think. I'm thinking of it now for the first time -- I think that my mother, my mother hung out a lot with Negro women. That she visited them. I think that this was her. She visited Beryl Robinson and she would come over to Beryl's house and the two of them would sit in the kitchen and I would hang out with Beryl's kids Karen and Eric. And my mother and Beryl would sit in the kitchen and they would yakky yakky yakky. And the same thing with -- what was her name -- Jean Hooper, who had two boys. I would play with the two boys and we would tear up the house and my mother would sit in the kitchen and talk to Jean.

MN: Now were these people who lived fairly close by?

MS: Yes very close by. All walking distance. All these people, the white people were the Lipskys, the Grants, the Bogouls, the Hoopers, the Robinsons and they were separate from the families on the block. These were, in retrospect, clearly people who were had political affinities.

MN: Now do you recall going to any demonstrations in your youth?

MS: No

MN: Or marches?

MS: No but there are picture of my parents at like May Day before things got really bad. Like maybe 1950.

MN: Now what about -- did you go to any of the communist summer resorts or camps?

MS: Yes, but they weren't -- we went to the left wing ones. We went to Wingdale --

MN: Camp Wingdale?

MS: Yes.

MN: Now Camp Wingdale was for the whole family or for the kids?

MS: When it was still for the family --

MN: Right.

MS: -- we went to Wingdale. Wingdale on the Lake it was called. I don't know that we went to any other leftist resorts. My father died in 1955 or '56 --

MN: Wow.

MS: -- and after that we didn't go to resorts for a while. Then we went to a place called Chate's.

I don't think it was particularly leftist. So -- but I don't -- I didn't go to world -- what are they called -- I didn't go to --

MN: Kinder Loom

MS: I didn't go to Kinder Loom or anything like that.

MN: So you didn't grow up with an identity as a Red Diaper Baby?

MS: No. I was an unwitting Red Diaper Baby. And I think that's why I'm such a big lefty today. Because it was never fed to me. I was given the values and I came to--

MN: What about the music? Was there --

MS: Oh the music. I think if anything indoctrinated me it was the music. Of course the was Paul Robeson. I mean that was practically the music of our lives and --

MN: Are there any songs from Paul Robeson century that maybe --

MS: Oh God -- Four Rivers -- You know the Four Rivers? That was a big, big one. I didn't know what it meant. I had no idea. I couldn't have told you, but I heard it everyday. Of course the Russian songs that he sang. Yes.

MN: Do you remember the Pete Baulk Soldiers?

MS: Oh gosh, yes. Yes the Pete Baulk Soldiers with the- -

MN: Todd Henry?

MS: Yes and the Spanish Civil War songs, yes --

MN: With Joe Hill?

MS: Yes. I Dreamed I saw Joe Hill Last Night. Sure all of that. Yes and my father used to sing all of these songs to me at night.

MN: He sang those songs?

MS: Yes he used to put me to sleep at night. After he read me 60 books he would sing to me and sing to me and sing to me and sing to me.

MN: Did you recall getting -- people singing together when they socialized? This was just in your family?

MS: Yes.

MN: Did either of your parents play a musical instrument?

MS: No.

MN: Ok. Now what other artists other than Paul Robeson were the soundtrack of your childhood?

MS: Well -- let's see -- I -- Oscar Brand, [inaudible] --

MN: Oh yes. Oh Yes.

MS: But my mother also listened to a lot of classical music. So we had WQSR, WNYC, Masterwork Hour and a whole lot of that.

MN: Do you recall music coming out of the homes near you that made an impression

MS: Well I have to say it was the Spanish music.

MN: The Latin Music?

MS: Yes, which I still like every much. [laugh]

MN: Any particular artist?

MS: No, I didn't know the names of the artists. I just knew that it sounded great.

MN: It made you move--

MS: Yes. More than the Paul Robeson stuff.

MN: Right. Now I want to jump ahead before jumping back -- when you were in high school and college did you become a folkie?

MS: I never liked folk music. The causes that came with Phil Oaks, but other than that, I never was big on folk music. I -- and part of it was absences of the left in my life as I got older I liked rock and roll --

MN: So you liked the rock --

MS: -- Motown. I liked the Beattles. I was a very mainstream kid.

MN: Right. Were there any singing groups in the neighborhood that you every heard harmonizing --

MS: No.

MN: -- on the street corner? Was that every part of your childhood? Any -- especially guys?

MS: You know its funny, I do have some memories that I can't really -- I remember -- I think I remember some guys -- there was a song 'Silhouettes on the Shade' --

MN: Oh yes. I know that song.

MS: -- some of the guys would sing --

MN: [humming]

MS: Yes and they would harmonize on it --

MN: [sings song]

MS: Yes. Yes. They -- I don't really have very strong memories of that.

MN: So let's think way back to elementary school--what are your earliest recollections of elementary school?

MS: Well -- I started PS 2 in kindergarten. My mother was very involved in the Parent Teachers Association and I think that was the focus of her work. I think -- I found that she had copied this out [handling a piece of paper]. I guess its from an old party program or something. *Excerpts from PEA Report*. Maybe Political Education or something report and its about -- gosh its hard to read -- but it about Negro and Puerto Rican children are concentrated in certain schools. *The education opportunities are not equal to those offered on other schools and it's like a political group --*

MN: You have to preserve this. This is like another priceless document.

MS: And this -- I think this was the work that she was in. Insofar as this was her assignment -- to work with public school education and to be active in the Parent Teachers Association. One of the struggles that they were involved with was getting a kindergarten for the public schools --

MN: Right. At PS 2.

MS: At PS 2.

MN: So they were trying to make sure that Black and Puerto Rican children had equal education?

MS: Right. Yes.

MN: And that was an extension of their political work?

MS: Yes. That was probably my mother's political assignment.

BP: What was her name?

MS: Tess Swerdlow. T-E-S-S Swerdlow. And she was active in the PTA --

MN: Now in those years she was not working?

MS: Right she didn't have a job. Yes. -- She was active in the PTA and another thing they were trying to do -- PS 2 was on split session, so none of the kids had a full day of school. It was like a half day. They were trying to get more facilities built so the kids could go to school all day.

MN: Now was it your sense that this was a crowded neighborhood?

MS: Yes. Yes. I think the school is definitely over crowded. One of the PS 2 buildings -- there was a new one and an old one -- the old one was in terrible condition. It had been a hospital during the Civil War, that's how old it was. I wasn't in that building when I went to school, I was in the new building. But I remember they took us to an assembly in it once and in the auditorium the floor boards were rotting and your foot could go through the floor and I was this little kid and I could see how bad it was. So they were trying to get a new building to replace that. Those were

some of the goals that I knew about. They would have fundraisers. One of them was in our backyard one warm night. They had a big fundraiser and the principal of PS 2 came to it and I said 'Oh my gosh, Mr. Huttner is in my house.' So those were some of the thing that they were trying to do.

MN: These sound like pretty good memories --

MS: Yes.

MN: Were there any things that you remember as being disturbing or scary about those days?

MS: Yes. When some of my black friends tried to convert me to Christianity by telling me that I was going to go to hell.

MN: How old were you when this happened?

MS: I guess -- my father was still alive so I was pretty young. I was probably about five years old.

MN: Really? And you were scared you were going to go to hell?

MS: Yes. They were pretty convincing. 'If you don't believe in God you're going to go to hell.' And I said 'but nature made everything.' [chuckling]

MN: So you had this --

MS: Well, my parents explained this to me, my father, who was even more impressive than my mother. My father said -- what happened was, I think it was Bootsie, who showed me a picture of God, he looked like a nice guy. He was Negro, by the way.

MN: Wow.

MS: He had a seed bag and he was scattering seeds. It was a very positive image. And she showed me his picture. I said ok I see. It wasn't a photograph. It was a drawing or a painting. Then My father explained to me that we don't believe in God in our family. 'The Swerdlows

don't believe in God. You know how some people believe in Santa Claus. God is like Santa Claus. Its just a story and we don't believe in it. So then I knew I could go back to Bootsy and say that 'We Don't believe in God!' 'Well who made the world?' 'Nature! Nature made the world!' I said. But it wasn't Bootsy who tortured me. I was in a summer program, a summer camp program in a near by school and they tortured me.

MN: Oh so you -- how -- they sort of identified you as the Atheist?

MS: Well I think the asked what church I went to or something like that and I probably came out with the family line and that was it. It was open season.

BP: Did people mark you for not believing in God more than they marked you for being white?

MS: I don't ever remember being marked as white until, I think it was, the fourth grade. The fourth grade was the first time I was marked as white. Belinda Green who was standing next to me there. She was the first person to inform me 'I can't be your friend because you are white.' And I said 'what -- what -- I don't see the connection Belinda. I don't understand it.' But she was the first one and that was the fourth grade.

MN: How did she explain that? Was that something that her parents told her?

MS: No she didn't explain it. I couldn't get an explanation from her. She just stuck to her guns and it was because I was white. No explanation was forth coming and I was just completely baffled.

MN: You were baffled --

MS: I was totally baffled.

MN: Was that experience repeated in --

MS: No, because that was the last year I lived in the South Bronx. After that we moved to the North Bronx and everyone was white and they still didn't want to be my friends and that was --

MN: Right.

MS: [laugh] So -- but --

MN: What was the education like at PS 2?

MS: Well the first year was interesting. The first years was right after my father died and I couldn't get through a day without crying. The teacher dealt with this alright. She put me into the slow class because obviously any kid that cries everyday has got to be slow. So there I was in the slow class. I'm the only white kid, but I was the only white kid the whole time I was in grade school there and the teacher doesn't teach us anything. Her name was Mrs. Wiesbart and she just had us do busy work. She would write a sentence across the top of a piece of line paper and our assignment was to copy it onto the bottom and turn over the page and copy it again. It was just like that every day. Then one day, when we were being dismissed, my mother came up to Mrs. Weisbart 'why isn't my daughter being taught how to READ?' And Mrs. Weisbart said 'there isn't any student in that class who is capable of learning how to read.'

MN: This is first grade?

MS: First grade. My mother went ballistic and screamed and yelled. Mrs. Wiesbart thought the commendation to this, was the next day to call me up to her desk. She opened up the pre pre pre primer and she said 'your mother said that you are capable of reading.' I just started to read and I read the whole thing from front to back and after that I got little tutoring lessons with Mrs. Weisbart.

MN: So these other kids were --

MS: She did -- actually she began to tutor a couple more of them, but basically the rest of the class she never even cracked a book --

MN: So there were kids who were written off from the first grade --

MS: Written off! And I could have been -- I would have been written off too if my mom hadn't come up there and --

MN: Now is it your sense that this was a pattern in the New York City public school system or was it a pattern with New York City public schools where the kids were mostly black?

MS: I don't think that -- I went on to PS 96 where basically everyone was white. I don't think they ever treated me -- and then the first place I went in PS 96 was the slow class and --

MN: PS 96 was in --

MS: Pelham Parkway. Yes. And even the slow kids were being educated in a school that was predominantly white. So, no I think it had everything to do with the students being predominantly black.

BP: Was Mrs. Weisbart --

MS: White? Yes. I only remember one black teacher at PS 2, but I didn't know all the teachers. The one I knew was Collimore. She was a regular classroom teacher, but she also did the music program. Her husband, Mr. Collimore, sold my family the World Book Encyclopedia. So we had association with them outside of school.

MN: Were there after school programs at PS 2.

MS: Yes. Yes.

MN: Did you go to them?

MS: I don't really remember. I don't think I did much, but they were there. Yes

BP: How old were you when you moved to Pelham?

MS: I was about ten.

MN: So you went from PS 2 to PS 4 --

MS: And then to PS 96

MN: And so how many years did you spend in PS 2?

MS: I was there kindergarten, first and second grade. I was in PS 4 [for] third and fourth grade and then I went into PS 96 the last month of fourth grade and I began fifth grade there.

MN: Now did father die suddenly or --

MS: Yes.

MN: -- it was a heart attack --

MS: No. He was killed in an accident.

MN: Did your mother eventually have to go back to work to support the family?

MS: Yes, but she was in no hurry. Part of the problem was -- she had planned to be a teacher, then there was the Fienberg Amendment that said you had to make a loyalty oath and she couldn't without committing perjury, so she was stuck in private schools and they don't pay very well and she worked part time in them -- we didn't have much money for a very long time.

MN: Did you have other extended family support networks to help out?

MS: A little bit, but my grandparents didn't have much money either. What happened was we went to court around my father's death and we got a wrongful death suit that we won and we got some money and that's how I went to college. That's how I went to graduate school. That supplemented the family pretty much.

MN: Now, your first move is from 169th and 70th street to 172nd and Fulton.

MS: Yes.

MN: What does that move seem like to you?

MS: The end of the world. Park Avenue to me was like this little paradise, this Garden of Eden. Then we moved to an apartment building that was horrible. It fallen down. It was full ok cockroaches. It was dirty. It was smelly and it was like the end of the world.

MN: Was this a five-story walk up?

MS: Yes. Yes.

MN: Were they classic Bronx tenements with the fire escapes and --

MS: Yes.

MN: What floor were you on?

MS: Second floor.

MN: So this was a step down?

MS: Yes. I felt devastated. I lost my backyard. I lost my front yard. I lost my friends. I lost my community. I lost everything and it was on top of losing my father. I remember when a friend of my mother's told me that we were moving. She said 'and when you move.' I said 'no we're not moving. What are you talking about?' 'Oh yes you're moving.' Then I asked my mother and my mother said yes and I felt totally betrayed.

BP: What was the reason for the move? Was it --

MS: I think a lot of it was my mother didn't feel secure there without my father because it was a house and I guess it was [that] there was really nothing. The door was just panes of glass. It was just completely vulnerable, but also that they were going to tear it down eventually for a project.

MN: So there was talk already that this whole area was slated for urban renewal?

MS: Yes. It was going to go down.

MN: What's interesting is that you have very positive memories of this neighborhood, which now has become one of the most dangerous housing projects in the city.

MS: Yes, but it was a wonderful -- it was -- this area, my immediate block was not that poor. These were maybe lower middle class, but they were middle class people. There was a wage earner in the house. This wasn't welfare and poverty. These were lower middle class people, like

the Ferguson, he was a house painter and it was a nice, for me, it was bliss. Friends -- kids all over playing in the alley -- the backyard -- the front yard. It was really great.

MN: Now the new neighborhood that you moved to--did you make friends there or--

MS: Not so much. I really didn't have as many friends in the new neighborhood. I don't know exactly why, but some friends but not like the first and there was no -- I don't think there was a political community. I think that that was a political thing. I think that McCarthyism had done a number at that point --

MN: By the middle '50s --

MS: Yes. This was 1957, '58, 59 and my mother, also, after my father's death, was a wreck. She was difficult to live with. Pretty non-functional and she left the party after he died.

MN: Did people look in on you to make sure you were ok or were you pretty much you and your brother on your own?

MS: I think after we moved--I think a little bit, there was a woman upstairs who was a lefty -- Claire [inaudible] -- and she used to take an interesting in us, but where things were -- now we are talking family pathology. My mother just gave up. She just --

MN: Did you guys get enough to eat?

MS: Food we got. You can see I'm a chub --

[laughter]

MS: Food was the one thing that was in supply, but I gave up bathing because there were roaches on the bathtub all the time and I couldn't take a bath. I didn't want to sit with the roaches floating around me so I stopped bathing. My mother was too out of it to notice. I had dirt caked on my arms and I got head lice and I had it for months and months and finally the teacher, Mrs. Golden, had to call in my mother, and say you know your daughter has head lice. I remember my

mother took me home after that and she began looking through my head and I fought with her because I remember that I was embarrassed. I began to fight and she got me down and she got the special shampoo. We were in terrible shape. Also the teacher sent me to -- ordered me to go with my mother to the nutrition clinic because I was over weight. So the school kind of stepped in a little bit to try to watch out a little bit. But the support network was gone. All those -- we really lost touch with all those people. The Hoopers, the Robinsons, the Grants, the Lipskys -- the scattered to the four winds.

BP: Moving to this new neighborhood which wasn't that far --

MS: It wasn't that far but in social terms and emotional terms it was like moving around the other side of the Earth, but it was really that the political situation had changed. It wasn't -- but I didn't understand that.

MN: What prompted the move to Pelham Parkway?

MS: We won the lawsuit and we had some more money and also the crime situation began to get bad.

MN: Now this is the late '50s, early '60s --

MS: And it became dangerous --

MN: What were the manifestations? Was it heroin? Was it gangs? Was it --

MS: No I couldn't -- I don't really know. All I know is that when my mother went out after dark she took a baseball bat with her.

MN: So she was afraid to walk the streets --

MS: She was afraid --

MN: This is in the early '60s.

MS: No this -- no. It must have been '59, 60.

MN: At Fulton Avenue and 172nd near Crotona Park

MS: Right. Right. Where never before had I--had there ever been any idea that anything was dangerous. Park Avenue--we used to go out at night. We would sit on the porch at night. It was totally -- it just -- I never had a feeling that there was any place that wasn't safe. And then after we moved to Fulton Avenue, maybe the second year we were there, there began to be a sense that it was dangerous.

MN: Now was this -- were there break ins in the building or was it more like muggings, break ins --

MS: I think that there were muggings on the street rather than break ins.

MN: Now did you -- were you at all conscious of people addicted to drugs?

MS: No

MN: Or winos?

MS: Yes. There was an -- I used to get up at night and there would be someone pounding on the door of our apartment. Pounding and pounding and pounding. My mother and I had a room -- we shared a bedroom at that time and my mother would be in her bed and she would smoke her cigarette and there would be this pounding and pounding on the door. It sounds very strange, but I never asked her or said what's going on or anything. I was just terrified, totally terrified. Years later I asked her about it and she said that the guy that lived in the apartment opposite ours would come home totally ripped out of his mind and mistake our door for his family's door and just bang and bang and bang.

MN: What was his name? Do you remember?

MS: No.

MN: Was he Latino or white --

MS: My impression was [that] he was Latino.

MN: And what out on the street? You never noticed down and out people. --

MS: Well there were always beggars --

MN: This is in Fulton Avenue --

MS: Even on Park Avenue. There were always beggars. There were always people asking for money.

MN: Now these were older people or --

MS: Adults.

MN: Adults.

MS: They would try to sell worthless items and try to get you to buy an old doll or an old shirt or something. So there always were -- well Brook Avenue was very poor. When we lived on Park Avenue, if you went on the other side of the railroad tracks, Brook Avenue was like -- it was very different. I remember once visiting a kid, maybe from school, who lived on Brook Avenue and being horrified at the squalor, the thread bareness of their apartment.

MN: That was real poverty.

MS: That was real poverty.

MN: Is there any sense that there was a correlation between the kids in that lower track class and kids who lived --

MS: I don't think there was. I remember one girl in that lower track class, Gloria Maddock and she was always so nicely dressed, so I don't really think there was. I think-- maybe it's just that anyone who was a person of color could fall into that regardless of --

MN: So Park Avenue was west of Brook Avenue?

MS: Yes. One block west.

MN: Now what was it like for you to move to Pelham Parkway?

MS: Oh I'm sorry, it's one block east. I was the direction---

MN: One block east.

MS: Yes, one block east. I'm sorry one block east, yes.

MN: Ok. You're now, what 10 or 11 years old when you move to Pelham Parkway?

MS: Culture shock. Complete culture shock. I go into school and-- for one month I was in the slow class. I transferred in May, so for one month everything felt normal. Then, I guess they got my test scores and they put me into the bright class. These kids were ten years ahead of me. They were squaring numbers, they were doing logarithms. They were like WOW. I hadn't learned to divide fractions and they were just light years ahead of me. On a more primitive level, I was still printing they were using cursive writing. I never learned cursive writing because I went from a school that was still printing -- PS 4 was still printing --

MN: Hold up that picture for us

MS: At PS 4 we were still printing using the block letters and then in fifth grade I zipped into PS 96 and they were using cursive writing and I couldn't write cursive writing. I didn't have a clue. I was --

MN: So the schools in Morrisania and Claremont Park were on very different levels?

MS: Yes.

MN: Even in the number one class?

MS: Yes and I was in the bright class.

MN: And you were in the number one class/

MS: I was in the number one class. When I went into 96, I was on par with the slow class at 96. Then when they put me in the bright class, I was lost. I was in really bad shape.

MN: What about socially?

MS: It was a debacle. In PS 4, we were still out there playing hopscotch, bouncing the ball. We were doing double dutch. At PS 96, they were having boy girl parties. Dancing close. I was like wow. I had to age like 5 years. All of a sudden at PS 96, it mattered what bag you had, what skirt you wore. I couldn't fathom that. That didn't make any sense to me. So that was a social cultural shock and I really didn't bridge the gap.

MN: Do you have anything, which kind of gave you a capacity to distinguish yourself in a positive way?

MS: [long pause] Not for a while. Not until 5th or 6th grade.

MN: Right

MS: I didn't make it. I was a -- [END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

BP: It sounds like when you moved to Pelham that you might have become conscious that you didn't have as much money as other people.

MN: Oh gosh yes. All of a sudden it became a big thing. I have to tell you I couldn't wrap my mind around it. I just didn't even feel bad about it because I thought these people were crazy. Why does that matter? What's the difference? My mother got me a plaid bag, so I took it to school. It's a bag. And everyone was laughing and whispering because my bag was plaid and I thought that they were nuts. I've never quite gotten past that.

MN: Did it matter to you that all of a sudden everyone here was white? Did that register with you or was it overwhelmed by all the other things? Was their whiteness less significant than all the other things?

MS: I think all the other things -- I don't think I really understood. I think what I thought was that these people--who are these people? Where did these people come from? What planet am I on?

MN: So you didn't come out of Morrisania with a developed race consciousness?

MS: No. No

MN: Which is interesting because you know 'this is my life'

MS: I was naïve. Yes. I was really naïve. I didn't realize how unusual my life had been. It just didn't occur to me. I just felt that these people were really strange and messed up and they needed -- They needed to figure things out --

MN: During all this time is there any --

MS: I still feel that way about people. [laugh]

MN: Is there any continuity with any of the things? Were there still Paul Robeson records in the house?

MS: Yes.

MN: So there was a [inaudible]

MS: Yes and I still liked them and listened to them. And then -- what a beautiful cat! My God, that's a beauty.

BP: [laugh]

MN: So your mother still kept the records --

MS: Yes.

MN: Was there a sense that you had -- that you had a place that you could retreat to as a little girl?

MS: Yes. I had a room. When we moved up to Pelham Parkway I retreated into it. I did a lot of drawing. I drew a lot and eventually I went to Music and Art high school.

MN: High school for the arts? So you found in art a way to --

MS: Found in art and a just losing myself in what I was drawing. I drew a lot of pictures of the way I conceived -- now I look back and I realize that the hills -- the views of Morrisania is like the views from the hills.

MN: Do you have any of these Morrisania drawings that you made?

MS: I'll look

MN: Were there --

MS: It was like a fantasy Morrisania. I'll look.

MN: Were there people in you drawings?

MS: No, it was just buildings. Maybe there were some people in the foreground. I'll take a look.

MN: Yes. That would be very interesting.

MS: It was sort of like my wish fulfillment.

BP: Were there any African American or Puerto Rican children or families in the new neighborhood you lived in, in Pelham?

MS: Almost none.

BP: What did some of these new children -- How did they talk about African Americans and Puerto Ricans?

MS: They didn't. They really didn't. It was like -- it was like an absent subject. They -- I don't remember really talking about it.

MN: There were Rock n' Roll parties in this school?

MS: I imagine. I wasn't invited to them

MN: You were saying they were slow dancing --

MS: Well, what happened was they had little parties in sixth grade, like the day before Christmas vacation. They would play a little music and the boys and girls would dance and I would just sit there --

MN: You remember the songs that they would play. Was it the Doo-Wop stuff?

MS: I don't remember.

MN: Because I used to - -we used to have parties like that in fifth and sixth grade.

MS: I don't remember. I wish I did. You would think that I would.

MN: It was the art that was the thing that --

MS: Yes. I think drawing and painting --

MN: Were there teachers who took an interest in you because of your art? Did any teachers take an interest in you at the new school?

MS: Well you just had your classroom teacher. In fifth grade, I had Mrs. Ross and she was into doing discovery learning, so it was kind of low key and I could kind of not run into a lot of problems, but in sixth grade I had this battle-ax Mrs. Klein. She just -- she had -- I'm sure she wasn't, but it felt like she was after me and all she wanted to do was expose me and humiliate me. I really wasn't on par with all the other kids, in terms of what my training was. I hadn't learned a lot of things and she -- she really seemed to have it in for me. But take an interest in me? I can't say that teachers --

MN: What about middle school?

MS: -- took an interest in me. [long pause] I was -- I was -- I had a lot of trouble in middle school with the teachers. I got kicked out of Future Teachers of America for conduct

unbecoming to a future teacher. I was kind of a rebel. I fell in with some ethnic white girls and they became my buddies, my pals.

MN: When you say 'ethnic white girls'--what--

MS: Italian, German Americans.

MN: What was the M.O. of your little crew?

MS: Well, they weren't as snotty and snobbish as the lower middle class Jewish girls who I had gone to elementary school in 96 with. They were more -- they weren't as snobby. They weren't as centered on what bag you had or -- and they sort of accepted me and weren't as critical and they didn't laugh at me and they didn't sneer at me. They liked that fact that I could draw.

MN: What did you all do together?

MS: We went to Alexander's and we bought records. [laughs] We --

MN: Alexander's?

MS: On the Concord.

MN: Yes. On Fordham Rd and the Concourse?

MS: Yes and we bought records. We met at each others house to study and then we didn't. We talked about boys and we talked about the Beattles or we listen to Beattles' records or we sang.

MN: So the Rock N' Roll became a bond between you?

MS: Yes. Oh definitely. Especially the Beattles we all loved the Beattles.

MN: When the Beattles came in, which was '63, '64 --

MS: Yes. I was 14. Yes. I have pictures of them too. They were maybe the best friends I ever had because they took me at a time when I had no social self-confidence.

MN: Now were they having parties?

MS: They went to CYO dances.

MN: At the churches?

MS: My mother wouldn't let me go

MN: She wouldn't let you to this --

MS: MY MOTHER WOULDN'T LET ME GO!

MN: Because it was the church or because it was they dance?

MS: Because it was a dance.

MN: So she didn't want you getting involved with boys?

MS: YES! [laughs]

MN: Did you find boys anyway?

MS: It took me a long time. [laughs] Yes.

MN: So these girls were kind of your buddies --

MS: They were.

MN: The first since Park Avenue?

MS: Yes. The first since Park Avenue. They really were. They accepted me instead of just sneering at me they said 'let me fix up your hair.'

MN: Did you get teased all the time?

MS: Oh yes

MN: Do you have any pictures of you from like--these were like Fonzy days and--

MS: Yes. Yes.

MN: So you looked like one of those -- the Debs?

MS: Yes. Yes. I had the little teased hair. Oh the hair spray. No matter how much hair spray you put on my hair, it does not stay up. But they gave it a good try.

MN: And the tight skirts?

MS: Yes. The short skirts, the tight skirts, the roll up your skirt. Yes

MN: Cool. What did your mother make of that look?

MS: Well my mother and I did not get along. We -- these friends which were saving my life and she hated them. She hated them. Not sure why.

MN: Now, you go to music and art --

MS: Yes. Then I had to leave behind -- I knew I had to leave these friends behind. As much as I loved them, I knew deep in my heart I wasn't really like them.

MN: Music and Art in the mid 60s was some place.

MS: Yes.

MN: Did you get drawn into all that?

MS: Yes I did get drawn into all that and I became who I am. That's when I became anti-war and that's when I became a lefty.

MN: Now did your experience growing up in a black neighborhood emerge in that time as something you claimed and tried to understand?

MS: I think that was that time when I began to put it all together.

MN: And how did that happen? Did it come from making black friends at Music and Art or more from being --

MS: Well the Civil Rights movement was going on. You were reading about it in the newspapers everyday and I began to make these connections. I never realized these people were oppressed. It was like that.

MN: So you grew up in a Communist family, living in a black neighborhood with your mother working, fighting to have decent schools but I wasn't until you were like 16 that you were able to claim that because it was not presented to you in that way.

MS: I think that, yes, because it wasn't presented to me in that way. I knew that there was this guy who thought that Negroes liked to be slaves, but that was it. I have to say that I really didn't know. In a way my parents protected me from that too. They didn't let me watch *Song of the South* on television. They wouldn't let me see *Amos and Andy*. I used to at, Karen and Eric's house, they were black, watch *Amos and Andy*, but at my house I wasn't allowed. So there was a lot I didn't see. My parents protected me. They ran interference.

MN: What about something like Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball?

MS: I knew my parents were Dodgers fans. The Dodgers were God. I didn't understand why.

Years later I said wait a second, that's why they were Dodgers fans.

MN: So you put things together later?

MS: Yes. Later. Much later. But I think part of it was McCarthyism and the sudden code of silence where you don't talk about anything. Part of it was my father's death, which my mother just went into this tale spin. I think those were factors and maybe that if those things hadn't have happened as I got older I would have been told more and more would have been explained to me, maybe.

MN: How long did you stay in the Bronx after high school?

MS: Two months and then I went to Bard College and I never went to live in the Bronx again.

MN: And over the years, what kind of occupation or little niches did you have?

MS: Well, when I was a subway conductor I guess I was working on the Bronx again. Then I worked in the Bronx again for a year when I started working for the Board of Education.

MN: So how did you get into transit?

MS: [sighs] I guess in the fiscal crisis of the 70s, I saw the 1980 transit strike as a way to resist the austerity programs and this was like the front against capitalism at this time. I felt that I should take a shot at actually getting involved myself.

MN: So this was like an organizer --

MS: This was largely to do organizing. The Communist Party was very active in transit at this time and I had connections with those people. They were doing it and I wanted to do it with them. I also was excited about the idea of being one of the first women and I also needed to make some money. It was all of those things.

MN: Now --

MS: And that's when I began to work with African Americans again.

MN: So -- because you were in a very heavily African American, Afro Caribbean --

MS: Yes. Yes, exactly.

MN: Did you find yourself reconnecting?

MS: I thought I did. I don't really know, but I thought that the fact that my childhood was the way it was, it didn't give me a moments hesitation to into a room where I was the only white person.

MN: Was it easier for you than other white leftist who had a different background?

MS: I think on a gut level it was easier than someone like Steve Downs, who I think -- I guess I felt that the people that I worked with became my friends. They became the people I hung with. I think with white leftist, there's more -- the other people I worked with, there was more of a remove.

MN: We'll talk about that afterwards, but that is an interesting observation.

BP: Who was Steve Downs?

MS: Steve Downs, I guess, was probably the most important person in building and developing New Directions, which is the movement that Toussaint comes out of.

MN: Right

MS: And he's a brilliant organizer, but he never was comfortable with the people he was organizing. Where I was going to their houses and they were coming to mine.

MN: Do you still have any connections with Roger Toussaint?

MS: No, actually. The movement split. New Directions split and I went to the non-Toussaint side. He does not like me at all. He is very negative about me He calls me a bourgeois-intellectual, but he is entitled to his opinion.

MN: Do you ever go back to the old neighborhood?

MS: Yes. I do go back and I walk around and I cry. [laughs]

MN: Wow.

MS: Because I miss it -- because it meant a lot to me. I go back and I walk around PS 2. I walk -

MN: PS 2 is still there?

MS: Yes, but they took down, thank God, that old building.

MN: And they still call it PS 2?

MS: Yes, but the old building is replaced by a new building. And I just walk around and I see the little bit that I remember and much is new. Much has been torn down, but its good to go anyway.

MN: Ok Brian, do you have anything?

BP: Just one last question. How would you say, if you could just summarize in one way that growing up among African Americans and Puerto Ricans as a child, how did that shape the rest of your life?

MS: [sighs] I think it makes very hard for me to get along with most people of my milieu. I think it makes me very intolerant of the teachers that I work with and the stuff I hear them say. I can't take it. I feel like a Martian. I feel like an alien among the people that I have to deal with everyday. I think -- I wouldn't have it any other way. I rather feel like this than be like them. I think that that's it. Yes. I think it makes me very different.

MN: Ok.

BP: I'm going to turn it off. Thank You.

MN: Thank You.

[END OF INTERVIEW]