Miriam Frank interview transcript

MF=Miriam Frank

TSW=Timothy Stewart-Winter

KS=Kristyn Scorsone

MF: …and I did. I put it in the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives so they had to consent to have it in the archive.

TSW: Right.

MF: And the archive is of course open to any researcher who comes in. So one or two people didn't do that for me but most people would say "I have nothing to hide." That's really where I got a lot of…

TSW: So I'm Tim Stewart-Winter and this is Kristyn Scorsone**,** who's a graduate student in the Masters Program in History, and is interested in your area. We're here with Miriam Frank on November 11th, 2015. Do you want to start or…

KS: You could start, sure.

TSW: Could you tell us when and where you were born?

MF: I was born February 26th, 1947. I was born in New York City at Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospital. My birth certificate gives the address of my aunt. My mother had been a nurse at Flower and Fifth Avenue. She married…

TSW: At?

MF: Flower and Fifth Avenue. Today it's the Cardinal Cooke Pavilion of Mount Sinai Hospital.

TSW: Got it.

MF: Flower and Fifth Avenue. It's an old line New York hospital. And she'd been a nurse there, I think she worked maternity, and she was determined to give birth to her child among her coworkers because she had gotten married and she wanted to produce the baby among her coworkers. It was a baby-boom baby. I mean everybody was giving birth that month and for the next 12 or 13 months. I mean it was really, you know. So I mean it wasn't that great a birth.

But anyway, she then spent I think a week with her sister and then she went back to Newark where she lived with my father in an attic, a garret apartment with Mrs. Simon somewhere around 11th Street and Clinton Avenue at the top of the hill.

TSW: Mrs. Simon?

MF: She was just the landlady. They had a place and then Mrs. Simon said "no, it's too noisy with the baby," and they moved to my father's parents' apartment on Belmont Avenue near Runyon Street and that was very crowded. It was very jammed up. And it was especially crowded and jammed up when my brother was born 11 months after me.

And at that point they got their own apartment. That was… I don't know how far away it was from my grandparents' house but it wasn't very far because we would walk. We lived on Runyon Street and Peshine Avenue.

TSW: Can you spell the second?

MF: P-E-S-H-I-N-E, Peshine.

TSW: Great.

MF: And Runyon. And the school district was Bergen Street School, which is today, the building still stands. It's a charter high school, I think.

TSW: And so you lived in Newark from birth until…

MF: 1957.

TSW: 1957.

MF: Ten and a half, fifth grade.

TSW: Got you. And then, where did you move then?

MF: We suburbanized.

TSW: You suburbanized.

MF: Yeah.

TSW: But you stayed in New Jersey?

MF: In Essex County. We moved to Maplewood.

TSW: Okay.

MF: And the part of Maplewood we lived in was about two blocks away from the border with Irvington. It was the part of Maplewood where the people who had little stores or were policemen or were… it was not glorious rich verandas Maplewood, but we had a nice little school, it was the Seth Boyden School District.

And I just went to my 50th high school reunion and saw, I had the warmest feelings about the girls who were there who were from Seth Boyden. It was weird. I mean I never talked with them in high school. We went to a different junior high school and I went to South Orange Junior High School. It was horrible. In high

school I just hung around with the elite clique, because I was in the AP courses clique and those girls were not… I don't think I had very many conversations with them.

[00:05:00] But here we were, I just fell into their arms and then, it was quite crazy. We had the reunion in this I don't know, Florham Park. It wasn't even a town then. There was no Florham Park, it was just a swamp, and Livingston was just a bunch of farms.

KS: What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in Newark, like when you were younger?

MF: I remember the iceman walking through the alleys of the houses. We lived in a six-family flat, a six-flat house. It was a frame house and there were about six or seven houses like that. And the iceman would come by, I don't know how often, but he'd come by and he'd go "Iiiiiiiii, Iiiiiiiii." I remember that. So we had an icebox. I remember that the streets were very rough. They were cobblestoned. I mean there was no tar over them.

I remember that there was a horse drawn fruit man who came by in the afternoon. So this was old stuff. This was really old stuff. This was…

TSW: Horse drawn!

MF: Horse drawn fruit wagon and iceman was… you know with the blocks of ice. My mother obviously must have bought ice from him and you know we had an icebox and that's where she kept the milk. And she had two babies within two years of each other, within one year, well, less than a year of each other, and so she had her hands full.

TSW: Did you get a refrigerator when you moved to Maplewood?

MF: No, we got a refrigerator in Newark. We lived in… you asked me what it was like… earliest memories?

KS: Yeah, early memories.

MF: We moved to that apartment when I must have been three, and I remember my mother telling me that I was going to have another brother or sister. I remember what she smelled like when she told me this. There was a very particular smell which, you know, when women are pregnant they have a certain smell.

I remember wanting very much for the baby, if it's a girl can we call her Mary? And my mother said, well, we'll see. I mean under no circumstance was she going to call her baby Mary. [Laughter.] She and my father were refugees from Nazi Germany. One of the things that Nazis did is that if you didn't have a Jewish name they gave you a Jewish name and if it was… and the Jewish name was always Abraham or Sarah. So they said, we're going to give our kids their own damn Jewish names. So it's never going to happen, and everyone is going to know that these kids are Jewish. So I'm Miriam, he was Joe, and my sister was named Judy. She was four and a half years younger than me.

There we were, the flat we lived in was… my parents had a bedroom in the front room. There was sort of an everything room, a living room, and a kitchen with a table and a coal stove. We would shovel coal in there, and it was a very… we were very poor. I don't know what they paid rent. I mean maybe it was thirty dollars a month or something like that, but whatever that meant at that time.

TSW: And I should know where that intersection is but I don't.

MF: What? Peshine and Runyon street?

TSW: Yeah.

MF: I think the house doesn't exist anymore. I'm sure it doesn't. It is near Bigelow and Hunterdon Street and it's Bergen Street. Bergen Street would be a main drag and Clinton Avenue would be a main drag.

TSW: Got it.

MF: Runyon Avenue was a few blocks… is it east of 280, but there was no 280 then, there were just more neighborhoods.

TSW: All right.

MF: It was… somewhere along the way we got a gas stove and a refrigerator and we got rid of the coal stove. At one point the floor fell… the floor above us fell and I remember waking up one morning and the kitchen was full of the contents of the apartment upstairs.

[00:10:00] My mother did the laundry and hung the wash out to dry. When my sister came along, I mean I became… that's when she enlisted me as being junior mother. She had been trained… in Germany she had begun to study medicine in university.

TSW: Your mother had?

MF: Yeah. And she had had a year of university. She fled the University of Vienna because there were anti-Semitic riots and she ended up in Freiburg and it wasn't so great there either and she said this is ridiculous and she became involved in the Zionist movement. She had already been, she was a Zionist, and she

became involved with the movement to make aliyah,[1] to immigrate.

She met my father in this movement and he never attended… he was a year younger than her. He did not attend university but both of them had received… had taken Abitur,[2] the exam that admits you to university. When the German government started making restitution in the late 1950s to survivors and refugees they calculated a pension for everyone who made a claim, that they would receive during their working life.

So they got a very good pension because the German government calculated, well, had we not been such assholes and all that stuff you would have had a university degree and a career and you would have been making, this is what you might have been making. She got, not that amount but she got a percentage of that, and so did my father, until they retired from their jobs, which were not fancy jobs. And then they got a German pension added on to their Social Security.

TSW: Wow!

MF: Which is why…

TSW: I didn't even know this happened.

MF: Well, all the Germans know this happened! We all know it happened, and it was one of the reasons… there were a couple of things. Also my grandmother was able to reclaim the house that her family owned and resell it to the people who had bought it for nothing. She sold it at the market price, and that was in the town

[1] A term for the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel.

[2] A term for German university entrance exams.

of Mainz, and then she divided that amount between her two daughters.

So with that there was the down-payment, and with that there was also enough to pay the mortgage on this little house in Maplewood, on the edge of Maplewood. I mean this was not high living that we were doing, and my father worked in… well okay, some other other memories of just early Newark things.

KS: Did a lot of Jewish families live in the area?

MF: No. I mean, when we think about Jews in Newark, we think about Philip Roth's Newark. That's where the rich people lived as far as we were concerned. They weren't rich people either. You know, they owned a pharmacy, and people like that owned a pharmacy or worked for Prudential or something, and I went to Hebrew school with those kids, and they were more well-off. And they weren't born to refugees, they were born to people who had been in America for a couple of generations. But no, we weren't Weequahic, we were in the South Ward. This is in the South Ward.

Other landmarks… you know the movie Troublemakers? Whit does

TSW: Whit does. I haven't seen it. He has a copy which he has yet to loan me.

MF: Well he will, and I will see it with you. The corner where the SDS people were meeting, they had like a little storefront where they met with community people, that was about a block from where we were living. Very poor neighborhood. There were black people living, "Negroes," who were living on the end of the street, one end of the street on Bigelow Street. Runyon was white.

KS: Yeah.

MF: And the whites were Jewish. I mean there were a couple of Jewish families. I knew some Jewish families. There were a lot of Irish families. There was a family called the Okies and they were from Oklahoma. So I don't know where they, they might have taken that name in their travels. There was a Lutheran church in the middle of the block and sort of everything to the west of that was black.

[00:15:00] And we all went to Bergen Street School. So that's the landmark really. It's the bottom of Clinton Hill. There used to be a railroad track about a block and a half away from… I don't know if that railroad track is… I can't believe that it's still there.

KS: How do you describe like your sexual orientation?

MF: I was a baby.

KS: No I mean now.

MF: Now I'm a lesbian. I'm a lesbian who's been married to a man, who's had a background in heterosexuality. I came out for *sure* in 1974, and I knew I was lesbian before that for a long, long time. But not in Newark. I had no idea there was such a thing. I had no idea. So I can't really say that that's anything to do with my… I wasn't in the life. At all! I was in the life I was having, and probably in high school in Maplewood I probably started gettin' the news. Actually it was Girl Scout camp. It was Girl Scout camp that did it for me.

KS: That's how it, goes, yeah!

TSW: Where was that? That was during high school?

MF: Well I started with Girl Scouts in Seth Boyden School. Actually I started with Girls Scouts in my synagogue. We had a troop from the synagogue.

TSW: What was the synagogue?

MF: It was a brownie troop. I'll tell you about my… I'll tell you about the congregation in a moment. I just want to get out of the Girl Scouts first.

So I started with brownies and when I came to Maplewood there was a Girl Scout troop. I loved it. I just loved it. I loved the merit badges, I loved the knots. I loved the handbook. I was a sincere American.

MF: [To KS] You were a Girl Scout.

KS: Of course.

MF: I sold the cookies, I mean, the works, and my mother who was with three children, when my sister was about six and she could go to kindergarten… actually she went to a Jewish nursery school, at that point my mother went to work as a night nurse. So she worked the night shift at, starting at Irvington General Hospital and then at Beth Israel and my father was… so I want to tell you where my father worked.

KS: Yeah.

MF: He worked at a place that at the time was called The American Platinum Works. It later became… it was owned by a man named Charles Engelhard. Is that a familiar name to you? Well, he was the dealer in precious, he had a business in refining precious metals. The film Goldfinger, the guy who puts the gold into the mast of the yacht, that's what Charles Engelhard did. The film was

based on his exploits. I mean it was embargoed gold from South Africa.

TSW: Wow.

MF: And he did, they refined silver, platinum, gold. It was all German workers.

KS: So was it like a manufacturing job?

MF: Yeah, it was on Frelinghuysen Avenue, his factory.

TSW: In Newark?

MF: Yeah! Frelinghuysen Avenue is when you leave Newark airport and it's this really crummy neighborhood and after you drive while you get to the edge of Weequahic Park. Am I correct?

KS: I think so.

MF: I think so. I mean I can see that bridge. And I knew that daddy had a job in that shop under… just like if you looked over the bridge you could see where he worked, except he was driving so he wasn't working that day.

TSW: What did he do?

MF: He worked a circular saw. He mostly cut silver. He rarely worked…

TSW: With a saw?

MF: With a saw. They shaped industrial silver. He was not a jeweler. He didn't have, they refined industrial silver and it was very important in the aeronautics industry. Engelhard gave a lot of money to the Democrats. He was a big one for the Democrats and so when LBJ was the president and there was a new minting of the

quarters, Mr. Engelhard, Engelhard Industries got the contract. So my father had all this overtime. And all he was doing was making the cylinders that then would be sliced into quarters. **[00:20:00]** He was like, I made this.

TSW: They were actually made with silver.

MF: Quarters are made of silver.

TSW: Still?

MF: Yes. I mean there's more alloy in them now.

TSW: I would assume.

MF: But they're, no that's silver.

TSW: They're silver, okay.

MF: Silver plus an alloy.

KS: Did his work experience inspire your book at all?

MF: Hell yes. Oh, yeah. He was a big guy in the union. He wasn't a big guy in the union because it was a small union, but he was a union leader. He was a very smart guy. He was… I guess both my parents were radicals in their day. I mean they had been in this socialist Zionist thing. They were both… they've been in this group that was going to make aliyah to Israel and how come they ended up in the US is, they went to their parents and said now we're all going to go to… I mean they didn't do this like as a team but he went to his parents, she went to her parents. They each said to their parents okay we're all going to go to Israel and in both cases these bourgeois parents said the hell we're going… you know we're not going to *that*!

So they figured out, they had relatives in the United States and they found a way to come, and they managed to get out in time. My father left Germany in '37, got his parents over in '38. My mother and her parents didn't leave until early of 1939, my mother not until 1940. They went to England first.

So my father's parents ended up in Richmond, Virginia. They were working in a little store in the black neighborhood and then he found my mother's name in a death notice for her father in the German refugee newspaper, got in touch with her, courted her, moved north.

TSW: So he had known her in Germany.

MF: Yeah they'd been comrades in this movement.

TSW: Got it.

MF: And they moved to Newark.

KS: Why Newark?

MF: I think there were relatives in Staten Island who said, move to Newark, and also he got a job in a defense plant in Newark. I mean Newark had all of these small manufacturing operations. The first plant he worked in made cigarette lighters from metal, the Ronson company.

TSW: Is that a defense plant?

MF: It became a defense… yeah, yeah, yeah, because they gave cigarette lighters to the GIs. No one was walking around in the muck with book matches. It was the Ronson lighter and the family was the Aronsons.

TSW: Oh, Aronson, they shortened it to Ronson.

MF: Yeah.

TSW: I see.

MF: No they changed the name of the company. The family kept the name but they sold the lighters with a different name, sort of a different name. He went then to Engelhard Industries. He was the first Jew that Engelhard hired, and then he got a bunch of other Jews in.

TSW: Engelhard was not Jewish?

MF: No. He was an immigrant in the 1920s or something like that.

TSW: But German?

MF: German immigrant making it big, hiring German workers. These were all men who had been in the United States since the '20s or '30s. I mean not refugees. Werner comes in and starts, you know, advises some of his buddies in Newark, the other Jews, this is a place to get a job during the war. The union that represented these workers was the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers union, which was one of the red unions. One of the unions that was, the eleven unions that were kicked out of the CIO for not signing non-communist affidavits.

I mean at one point I figured this out I said hey daddy, you know, what about that? And he told me that in fact when they were, that basically the feds came around and just told Mr. Engelhard that the union was communist and Engelhard didn't want it anymore. He didn't want the union. Well he didn't mind the union at all, but he said you know, they made a terrible fuss and my father had to finally agree, and also some of the workers were really upset that they were communists. I mean this was '51.

So the union went into the jewelry workers union. **[00:25:00]** That union was investigated for corruption, and then it was independent. Daddy knew that that was a bad idea and then there was a choice between going to the United Autoworkers or the Teamsters. And his buddy Johnny O'Grady who was the president said we're going to the Teamsters and Werner said no we're not.

TSW: Who is Werner?

MF: My father.

TSW: Your father, okay.

MF: No, we're not going there.

TSW: Why?

MF: Because they was being investigated for corruption too. There was already issues, and Johnny O'Grady said no Hoffa's really strong and my father said I've got my eye on Walter Reuther [she pronounces the name in a German accent].

TSW: And so they joined the UAW?

MF: They flipped into the UAW. That was in about '56 or '7. That's when we bought the house in Maplewood and my father said I'm going to be active through the end of the contract and then I'm not going to be the secretary or treasurer anymore. I mean he wrote the best grievances. He wrote these, he had a German typewriter and he wrote up the grievances. His English was better than anybody else's in the shop because he was a literate guy. He had a classical education.

So he told me about a gay man among the Jewish refugees long after the guy died. So yes you know there was always… I'm forgetting his name but there was always [the following spoken in

German accent] "Hans, you know after we retired, he and I used to go out to the track and then sometimes he would want to do something with me but I wasn't interested." My mother said well when I was in nursing school there were these girls who always kept the door closed. I never felt that way myself, she said.

Most mothers I think when you come out to them they go, how can you feel that way? And my mother didn't say that she just said I never felt that way myself. I never heard of any mother saying that.

KS: When did you come out to her?

MF: '74.

KS: Yeah.

MF: Yeah. It was kind of safer then.

TSW: Safer then than now?

MF: No, no, no. It was safer then than '67 when I was feeling it.

TSW: Sure, right. It makes sense.

MF: I married someone, a man in 1970 and broke up with him in '73 and we were in Detroit and that's where I came out, far away from my family.

TSW: Right.

MF: So are you gettin' some stuff from Newark here?

KS: Yeah.

MF: Gettin' some good Newark stuff?

KS: I think so.

TSW: So your school was… your Bergen Street School, how many Jews were there?

MF: I have no idea. I don't think the teachers were Jewish. There was a teacher named Mrs. Frisch, but I had no sense of anyone being Jewish there. I mean my brother was Jewish, I am Jewish.

TSW: You would have been close to the only one.

MF: And Debbie Goss was Jewish, and maybe yeah Jonie Rackenberg.

TSW: Who were the, what was the makeup of the school?

MF: It was getting more and more black.

TSW: Okay.

MF: But it was still, I mean I never, went like that, counted.

TSW: Sure, of course, of course.

MF: But there were a lot of black kids.

TSW: There were, Catholic?

MF: It was working class.

TSW: Working class, mixed?

MF: Well all kinds of… you know Newark was, everybody came to Newark, and there were Italian neighborhoods and there were Irish neighborhoods, but this is the bottom of Clinton Hill and the quality of housing wasn't very good. So people were just there.

TSW: And what about your congregation?

MF: Okay. So this is kind of cool. My father and his father, my grandfather's name was Adolf. You know Jews name their children after a relative who dies? That name we never used again.

But his name was Adolf Frank. Anyway, he and my father were part of forming a burial society. That's the first thing the Jews do when they settle in a town is that they buy land and then they form a burial society and they build a Mikvah, a ritual bath. I don't think there was any Mikvah building but they did form a burial society.

My grandfather had been a trade butcher and also a kosher butcher and he sometimes did some business with meats but he never had a store. I mean he just would get stuff and he would sell it or I don't know what he did with it. It was weird, but we always had meat and it was always kosher I am sure.

So he made my father promise, my father was a rebellious guy when he was younger. **[00:30:00]** He made my father promise one thing when, you know, with his three children, that he would, that Werner would make sure that the children had a Jewish education. He knew that he couldn't get it from my mother because my mother was not very religious but she did keep kosher for her in-laws so that they could come and visit.

TSW: For your father's relatives?

MF: Yeah.

TSW: But not for your father?

MF: No, no, no. We would go on vacations to Vermont and he'd get into the bacon right away. So the religious thing is that among these refugees, they were all old and there weren't a lot of children and they weren't going to establish a Hebrew school, and so my father went to the big synagogue that wasn't too, it was walking distance from where we lived but not an easy walk, B'Nai Abraham which was at the top of Clinton Hill. The building I

think still stands. It's a rotunda building, beautiful curve, sort of like the Pantheon.

The rabbi was a refugee from Berlin. He'd been a radical rabbi. He had denounced the Nazis. He was on the list in 1933. His name was Joachim Prinz.

TSW: Oh, sure. You went to that synagogue?

MF: Yeah.

TSW: Really?

MF: Yeah.

TSW: So he what, he spoke at the '63 March on Washington.

MF: Joachim Prinz was, he was the opening, he gave the opening speech before "the speech." We had Mahalia Jackson, we had Joachim Prinz and then we had…

TSW: He introduced Martin Luther King.

KS: Wow.

TSW: Yeah.

MF: He introduced Martin Luther King.

TSW: Nancy Cantor talks a lot about him actually.

KS: Yeah.

MF: Was she in his, was she in the congregation?

TSW: No, but she thinks of him as an icon of the best version of Newark, or something. You know what I mean?

MF: That's true! He was the greatest. He was quite something. And all these guys he was hanging out with including Bayard Rustin, I mean they were all big, black guys. He was this little guy. He was their Jew, you know. They *loved* him, and King was very close with him.

KS: Wow.

MF: And he had been in Deutschland, in Berlin. He'd been the assistant rabbi to Leo Baeck who had been the chief rabbi of Berlin. Leo Baeck was just trying to keep the population together and Rabbi Prinz at the same time, when he got into the pulpit, he would be denouncing the Nazis. So he was on the list. He left early. He left in '34 [actully 1937]or something like that with his skin.

My parents knew him because they would travel, all these Hachshara people. The Hachshara was the Zionist group. The Hachshara people would travel to Berlin if they knew he was going to speak, or if he came to their town, he would make speeches. This was in the '30s before he left and my father knew him then. My mother knew him.

So they were very attracted to the temple, they couldn't afford it and they got a scholarship for us. I'm sure, I know the rabbi had something to do with that. He would put his hand on my head in this just loving way. As like, you know, "you're proof that we beat 'em." And to Joe too, my bro. He had this sort of, he was great. He was a great orator. I have no idea what his relationship with God really was, but he was a man of the world. He'd been an art historian before he became, before he studied theology.

TSW: And you went to temple there regularly?

MF: And Hebrew school three days a week.

TSW: And Hebrew school. So those kids didn't go to your elementary school?

MF: No they were all in Weequahic.

TSW: Right. Did you ever go to downtown Newark as a kid?

MF: Oh yeah. I went to Bamberger's. I'd save up my, well this was when I was a teenager, I'd save up my babysitting money and head to the basement. And we would go to the Mosque every once in a while which was the, I think it's called the New Jersey Art [Symphony Hall, on south Broad St.] , it's the arts center. It's that beautiful auditorium. It's right across the…

TSW: The Mosque Theater?

MF: The Mosque Theater, oh the Mosque Theater.

TSW: Yeah.

MF: **[00:35:00]** It's still there. It's the New Jersey Center for the Arts [Symphony Hall] or something.

TSW: Is it still a theater?

MF: I hope so because it was a perfect auditorium.

TSW: I think that might be where the symphony…

MF: Yes.

TSW: Yeah.

MF: Yes, yes.

TSW: I haven't been in it but I've…

MF: I went on a date there once with a boy in high school.

TSW: It was a movie theater.

MF: No. No, no it was a performance theater. Arthur Rubenstein played. Leonard Bernstein would conduct the New Jersey Symphony, I mean it was, and then sometimes great singers, and so, I think some pop acts too. But it was an amazing place. How did we get on that?

TSW: Well, I was curious about your memories of places in Newark other than where you lived.

MF: B'nai Abraham, you know. B'nai Abraham had a swimming pool, it had a men's club. It was a full-service synagogue. Eventually they moved it to South Orange [Livingston]. Rabbi Prinz didn't like that part, but he lived there, so he liked it. And the teachers were really sweet.

TSW: At Hebrew school?

MF: Yeah, they were really nice. It was more fun than *school* school. I want to tell you about some things about that school and about the Negro kids and my relationship to the blackness of Newark, which was not a word we used. Nor did we ever use the word that you're not allowed to say, *ever*.

Once I said it. Once I said it. I did "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe" and was showing my brother and sister how to count at it, and I said it because I'd gotten it from Barbara Burke across the street or something. And my father said you said *what*? You said *what*? I said "….by the toe." He grabbed me and he took me to the bathroom and he washed my mouth out with soap.

KS: Wow.

TSW: Wow.

MF: I can still taste it. I mean it's weird because he did not, it wasn't like he talked politics. It wasn't like he took anything. But there was some things that he really was you know, kaboom. My mother was very excited about King. She loved him. She was very, very interested in what they were doing. I think she knew about the sit-ins. I think she knew about the bus boycott and stuff like that. I mean I think she followed that stuff a lot.

KS: Were your parents aware at all of like when Stonewall happened or did they react to that at all or anything?

MF: They were in the suburbs. No, no, I mean I certainly didn't talk… I mean I was living in New York then. I wasn't talking to them about anything at that point. I think I've said what I needed to say about the union. Well my father's union became UAW. My sister…

TSW: You wanted to say something about the Negro kids.

MF: The Negro kids, okay, and then ask me about my sister, all right?

TSW: Yeah.

MF: Cause, oh, we don't have very much time.

TSW: We can just talk about your sister.

MF: No, I want to talk about the black kids too. Bergen Street School was sort of like a pre-apartheid kind of a scene. The teachers praised me and they would say, "look at Miriam, every day she wears a clean dress, you don't."

TSW: Oh.

MF: I was a very good reader. I was very smart. I could have learned how to read if I had my head in a pillow for three years, I was going to learn how to read. And I was reading, and I was reading very well. One teacher in the fifth grade sent for the best reader in the class to come up to the fifth grade and she wrote words on this blackboard and she said Miriam read those words and I read them.

And then she turned to the class and I hadn't really been looking as I turned to the class and it was like these big kids, the fifth graders, and she said see, this little girl is in first grade and she can read those words and you can't. And it was a much blacker class than my first grade class. She said wouldn't you like to come and be in my class Miriam? And I said no. And she said well why? And I said oh, the chairs are too big. (I mean you know these kids will beat me up in a minute.)

[00:40:00] I was in the hallway, I went down to, this is again in second grade. I went down to go to the bathroom downstairs and a boy came up the stairs and he saw me and he pulled up my dress and pulled down my pants. And I don't think he did anything else and he ran off. And I went to my classroom and I was crying and the teacher asked me what happened and I told her. All of a sudden the vice principal was there and someone else was there and they took me around to every classroom in the building and they made all the, I guess I described it as a Negro boy who… and they made the boys all stand across the room and I had to point out if I saw him.

TSW: Well did you see him?

MF: Yes. I saw him, he saw me, neither of us said shit. Can you believe that? I mean I can believe he *did* that. But what a terrible thing, to put him up, you know he would have beat the shit out of

me if he, you know, or, and his friends. It wasn't that I was thinking that, I just was terrified that I saw him.

I think the black kids were treated very differently. I didn't really understand that I was being treated well at their expense.

KS: Right.

TSW: Hmm. And you figured that out later.

MF: I figured that out later and also when I moved to Maplewood there were no black kids at all. There were none. It was so boring. It was so boring, there was no street life, there weren't people playing in the alley.

TSW: Were there Jews?

MF: Oh yeah. They were boring! They were better than the rest, but you know, it was boring. It was really boring. Junior high school was horrible. I found the theater crowd in junior high school and it helped. It helped a lot.

I want to tell you about my sister and then let's end. My sister… my brother was mathematical. He was as shy as I am bold. He went to University of Chicago. He was just a very studious and very sweet and very ethical person. And he's one of my best friends on the planet. He lives in Oregon.

My sister was mentally ill. It started happening when she was 12 or 13. With my father she had a terrible, terrible relationship. It was violent. And my mother drove her nuts and they didn't know what to do and they made some very bad decisions. I mean she was subjected to the, you know, Overbrook Hospital, which is the mental hospital, Greystone. I don't think she went to Greystone,

but I mean, she was, shock treatment. A lot of bad, bad, bad, bad, bad things.

She ended up being a sex worker. That's what you call it now, being a sex worker, she wouldn't have called it that. She would say I'm a hooker, that's what she would say. And having, sometimes having pimps, sometimes working Atlantic City. When she died it was from breast cancer. I almost never talk about her, and in my life I sometimes do, and I decided when I was going to talk with you I was going to talk about that. Because her exploits were with black men. That's who her boyfriends were.

She lived in downtown Newark for a while too. One of her clients was an old Jewish lawyer and she was living in downtown Newark and the cops picked her up for soliciting.

TSW: When would this be? When she was how old?

MF: This was when she was maybe 25 and I was 29, something like that.

TSW: Okay.

MF: She wasn't a little child anymore.

TSW: Yeah.

MF: And she got her, this steady client of hers, because he was a very smart lawyer, to sue the Newark Police.

KS: Wow.

TSW: Wow. With success?

MF: She got a settlement!

TSW: No shit!

MF: No shit.

TSW: That's amazing.

KS: What did he argue?

MF: I wasn't in the courtroom. I have no idea. I have no idea what he did. He might have just made a deal with them: "listen, I know worse things about you so you know, you're going to have to settle up for this child." **[00:45:00]** I have no idea.

TSW: Your sister was born when?

MF: '51.

TSW: Okay. So this would have been…

MF: She was four and a half years younger than me.

TSW: '79 or so that this happened. You said she was 20…

MF: Yeah, '77, '78, something like that, yeah.

TSW: Wow.

MF: Newark was by that time a very different place. She ended up living in Elizabeth, New Jersey. My parents finally got her an apartment in Elizabeth. She continued having clients but they were all retirees from, who still were living in the Linden area of New Jersey, from the auto plant in Linden.

TSW: Wow.

MF: And that was safe. She didn't have a pimp and she was running her own business.

TSW: When she did have a pimp, that was in Newark?

MF: In Newark, yeah that was in her Newark scene.

TSW: And her…

MF: Never Irvington.

TSW: You said her boyfriends were…

MF: Always black.

TSW: Always black.

MF: Yeah.

TSW: And her clients were?

MF: White.

TSW: Always white or mostly, predominantly?

MF: I have no idea. I never met a one of them. I didn't want to meet them.

TSW: Sure, sure. Did your parents…

MF: My mother knew. I would say it to my mother and she would say stop talking about that. They saw her regularly. They saw her regularly. They gave her money.

TSW: Did she have an ostensible job or occupation?

MF: No she was mentally ill. She was on SSI.

TSW: She was on SSI.

MF: She was so smart too but she had no… I had an education to shape my mind around. I don't think in the context of the gay movement, of my work in LGBT studies, I don't think I've ever really talked about this. I think as a feminist I occasionally told very, very close friends. But you know, there's all this talk about sex workers and stuff; when that comes up I just shut my mouth. I

just go away from the conversation. Most people don't know what the fuck they're talkin' about, I have to say.

TSW: Because?

MF: Because they're not in the life and they, you know, it's an *idea*.

TSW: When you say…

MF: And the feminists who are in the life are not mentally ill, crippled, the way my sister was. They haven't had their lives… I know lesbians where I lived in Germany who would turn tricks three days a month and it would pay for their rent and their schooling. They became lawyers. I mean I know women do this. To me that was fine. I mean not for me but it was okay for them. But Judy was not, she was not in charge of it.

TSW: Yeah.

MF: Maybe Elizabeth, when she was in Elizabeth she was in charge of it, maybe.

TSW: Did that upset you?

MF: Hell yeah! You can hear from my voice.

TSW: Yeah.

MF: I have a different tone. It's upsetting me to tell you, but I just thought if I'm going to talk about this shit I'm not going to talk about it at this, at your…I'm going to give a formal talk you know.

TSW: Cool.

MF: But I wanted to do this and I wanted to put it on the record and I signed it away. Well, okay I'm going to do that.

TSW: Put your real name.

MF: Where does it say…

TSW: Right here.

MF: Oh, here. "May be released with my real name," and if you want to give me a fake name you can call me Miriam Manning, that's what I was when I was married. But okay, I don't think I want that.

TSW: Do you want me to sign yours?

MF: You're going to sign them, right?

TSW: You should also sign.

MF: Yeah, you're the historian in this case. Well, I hope I told you enough. Are we still live?

TSW: No, should we turn it off?

MF: Yeah.