

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL AARON ROCKLAND

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

and

DANIEL RUGGIERO

and

KRISTIE THOMAS

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSICA ONDUSKO

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Professor Michael Aaron Rockland in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on September 21, 2009, with Shaun Illingworth ...

Daniel Ruggiero: ... Dan Ruggiero.

Kristie Thomas: ... Kristie Thomas.

SI: Okay. Professor Rockland, thank you very much for sitting down with us this morning.

Michael Rockland: My pleasure.

SI: Okay, to begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

MR: I was born July 14, 1935. I was born in the Bronx, New York, and I spent my first twenty years in the Bronx.

SI: What were your parents' names?

MR: My father's name was Milton and my mother's name was Bessie. My father was also born in the Bronx. My mother was born in Norwich, Connecticut, and they were both the children of immigrants. All four of my grandparents came through Ellis Island.

SI: Starting with your father's side, what do you know about their lives in the "Old World," to begin with, where they were from?

MR: Essentially, nothing. Ellis Island really cut off my background, and, when I would ask my parents about their parents; ... my parents were of the generation that wanted to be a hundred percent American, and so, this was before the notion of multiculturalism or anything like that. ... Every time I'd ask them, "Where did my grandparents come from?" both sets, they would say, "Oh, I don't know, Minsk, Pinsk, somewhere like that." Also, I think, quite apart from their having no interest in the past, and I had a lot of interest in the past, but they had virtually no interest in the past, there was a tendency among Jewish immigrants in the United States to not be able to tell you exactly where they came from, because Jews were restricted to the so-called Pale of Settlement. [Editor's Note: The Pale of Settlement, an area on the western frontier of the Russian Empire, was created by Catherine the Great in 1791 as a means of excluding Jews from Russian society by prohibiting all but a few Jewish subjects from living beyond its borders.] They were ghettoized. That's why it made it so easy for the Nazis to kill them, in 1939 and subsequent years, those who remained behind. I've often thought about that, you know, what if my grandparents hadn't immigrated, but, then, again, that's such a hypothetical. I wouldn't have been me, so, it doesn't matter, [laughter] but it does matter. ... They were restricted to this area on the Russian-Polish border, and so, whether my grandparents came from Russia or Poland, or one from Russia, one from Poland, I simply don't know. There's a joke, which I used in one of my books. She says, "Well, has it been determined yet whether we live in Russia or Poland?" and he says, "Yes, it's finally determined. We live in Poland," and then, she says, "Thank God, I never could have stood another Russian winter." [laughter] That, basically, tells the story of my

pre-Ellis Island origins. I really have, essentially, [little information]. I did, however, very recently, find a picture of my great-grandmother, taken in wherever this was, along with my grandmother, who was then a young woman, and three of my uncles and aunts, who were little babies, and that picture was sent by her to her husband. It was very customary, among immigrants, ... in families, that the man of the family come over and find a job, and then, he would send money back to bring the family over, and that's exactly what happened, ... certainly with my mother's side of the family, and I think with my father's side of the family, also, though many of my uncles and aunts were born before emigration to the United States. Both of my parents were born here.

SI: Did you grow up knowing either set of grandparents, or any of your grandparents?

MR: I principally knew my paternal grandparents, because they had a little candy store in the Bronx. My maternal grandparents, my grandfather died just before I was born and I was named for him. In Judaism, you name for people who have died. It's funny, because, in other religions, you name for somebody who's alive, you honor somebody who's alive, but, in Judaism, you don't name for somebody who's alive. It's as if you're suggesting that they ought to die. So, I didn't know my grandfather on my mother's side. He had died young. I know what he did for a living. ... I don't know that I really remember my grandmother on my maternal side, but I have pictures of her, so, I know what she looks like, but I did know my grandparents quite well on my father's side, though they were both dead by the time I was fifteen. So, I didn't know them long.

SI: They never shared any stories, even just about what life was like growing up there.

MR: They never did, and I think that my [inclination was not to ask]. In those days, it wasn't something I asked. Their English wasn't very good; they mostly spoke Yiddish. It was later that I was really interested. I mean, I remember them very well. ... [Typically], my grandfather was a peddler. They got a little money together, bought a little candy store. A candy store, in those days, was an institution which you don't see too many of anymore. It was really almost a community hangout. It didn't just sell candy, it had a soda fountain, it sold magazines, cigarettes, that sort of thing. Condoms were then illegal, and so, they sold condoms, under the counter. You didn't buy them in drug stores. [laughter] I always thought they were selling matches and I didn't know what those things were, because people would come into their store while I was sitting on a stool and my grandmother would be making me ... what was called an egg cream. I don't know if you ever had one. It was basically a dash of chocolate and a whole lot of sprits of soda and a little bit of milk, and it was a delicious drink. I think it cost, like, two cents, or something like that, and she'd always make me them. ... I remember being there as a kid and I remember that the bookie, the neighborhood bookie, ... was a man of great repute. I've always felt that it was absolutely ridiculous to put bookies out of business and arrest them and put them in jail. Instead, society then took over being the bookie, off-track betting, lotteries, which, it seems to me, is disgraceful, that we have lotteries, that we raise money [that way], and who do we get it from? mostly poor people. ... So, then, the bookie was a neat guy, and he would hang out, in the candy store when the weather was bad, just outside of it when the weather was good. I have a novel coming out, came out, this past Wednesday, excuse me, and the scene I'm

describing, with the bookie and the candy store and stuff, is very much in the novel. Even though it's true, it's very much in the novel.

SI: What is the title of the novel?

MR: The novel is called *Stones* [(Hansen Publishing Group, 2009)], and it's my most recent book, as of last Wednesday, [laughter] my twelfth book.

SI: Congratulations.

MR: Thank you, thank you. Yes, it's a good time for me, as a writer. I had a book come out last year on the George Washington Bridge, [*The George Washington Bridge: Poetry in Steel* (Rutgers University Press, 2008)] which you may have heard of, and then, the novel's coming out now and I'm writing yet another book, under contract to the University of Valencia in Spain, as a kind of a memoir of my four years with the Embassy in Spain, when I was in the Diplomatic Service. So, it's kind of fun to switch back and forth between history, or memoir, and fiction. Of course, I really shouldn't call memoir history. I'm not sure I know what history is. Memoir is what you choose to remember. What you choose to remember, maybe, tells as much about you as it does about what you're talking about. So, yes, and my grandfather, my paternal grandfather, ... this is very fresh in my mind, because ... it's fiction, but I've placed this in the novel *Stones*, what I remember about him is, he played Enrico Caruso records all the time, ... and [I] heard this shattering, unbelievable voice very much when I was a kid. ... Then, I also remember that he smoked a pipe and I also remember that he rolled his own cigarettes. He didn't buy packages of cigarettes. He rolled his own cigarettes, and I remember him rolling them and giving me one, and I loved it. I loved that I had this cigarette, and, when I went back to where I lived, elsewhere in the Bronx, I was carrying this thing as a token of achievement, to show all my friends that I had a real cigarette and my grandfather had rolled it. I remember visiting my paternal grandmother in a kind of a nursing home-type place just before she died. I remember that I was fifteen when she did. So, by fifteen, I didn't have any more grandparents.

SI: Do you have any idea how your parents met?

MR: I think that, yes, I'm pretty sure about this, they met at a summer camp. My father was a high school teacher, my mother was a nurse, and my father was a counselor at the camp during the summer and my mother was the camp nurse. ... I believe they met either at Raquette Lake boys' and girls' camps or at Greylock, which was another camp, and I'm not sure which one they met at, but I believe they were married in 1929. ... I think they went back to the camp for a second season and I think they were married after that second season.

SI: It is interesting that both your parents have, for their time, rather high levels of education. Did they ever tell you about why they went to college or what their college days were like?

MR: ... That's a very interesting question, because they were the only; well, on my father's side, he was the only one who went to college, of all his siblings. On my mother's side, one sister also became a nurse, but the others, I think, did not go to college.

SI: Were they towards the younger end of the siblings?

MR: The ones that did or didn't go?

SI: Yes.

MR: It was both, I think. There were siblings, of both of them, younger and older, who did not go to college. So, it was rather extraordinary that my father had that ambition to go to college. I'm not sure exactly where it came from, but he did go to college, and then, he became a high school teacher. He taught for awhile at Theodore Roosevelt High School, on Fordham Road in the Bronx, but, then, he moved to James Monroe High School and spent most of his working years at James Monroe High School. ... One of his students, by the way, was former President Edward Bloustein, [laughter] so that when Ed came to Rutgers, as President, we were fast friends, immediately. [laughter] It was kind of nice that the President [had] been a student of your father's, yes. ... My father basically did that until he retired. [Editor's Note: Dr. Edward J. Bloustein served as Rutgers University President from 1971 until his death in 1989.]

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in, in the Bronx?

MR: Sure. The Bronx has gone through three reputations that I'm familiar with. The Bronx I grew up in was a perfectly safe and nice place. It was a lower middle-class place. Indeed, with my father being a high school teacher, we were almost like aristocrats, in my neighborhood. I grew up in a mostly Jewish neighborhood, which also had a fairly large contingent of Italians and of Irish, and it was a very safe place. It belies the image of the Bronx ... which it got in stage two, and so, for example, I lived on a street called Bronx Park East. Bronx Park East is just what it says; it was the street just to the east of Bronx Park. ... Bronx Park was my playground, and that of my friends, and we would play all kinds of games in there, hide-and-go-seek, or whatever, cowboys and Indians, whatever, you know, and we would run around in Bronx Park, feeling very free and very safe, never had any kind of problems whatsoever, and then, ... there was this critical moment that came along. I think of it as "the Robert Moses moment." Robert Moses was really the master builder of New York City and he never saw a road he didn't want to build, or a car [he did not want to see on it]. The funny thing is, he didn't drive himself, but, nevertheless, he built roads all over the place, which, in a sense, did great damage to the city. The city was turned over to the automobile, and specifically, the Cross Bronx Expressway, coming off the George Washington Bridge, which I have mixed feelings about, since I've written [about it]; my last book was about the George Washington Bridge. The Cross Bronx Expressway went west to east, and then, worst of all, he built the Bronx River Parkway, which went right down the middle of Bronx Park. I mean, it was really, from today's environmental protective, ecological perspective, an absolute crime. In a sense, the Bronx was crucified by these two highways; one, east-west, the other one, north-south, and the north-south one, the Bronx River Parkway, really affected my life, because there wasn't very much Bronx Park to go into anymore. Bronx Park was quite long, but not that wide, a little bit like Central Park in Manhattan, and imagine building a huge highway right down the middle of Central Park, what it would do to Central Park. You could come in from the east, you could come in from the west,

but you couldn't walk across the park, and so, it was really a shame. At the time, I didn't think anything of it; only in retrospect do I look back at it as something that shouldn't have happened.

SI: In your household, what kinds of traditions were kept up, perhaps what you might call Old World traditions? You mentioned that your parents' generation really wanted to Americanize.

MR: Yes.

SI: Did they retain anything, though?

MR: Well, my parents were, technically at least, Orthodox Jews. I'm so Reformed, [laughter] I'm way off to the left somewhere, almost out of sight, but they were technically Orthodox Jews. I don't think they retained any Old World ideas. Oh, well, the only one that they retained, I guess, is, my parents both knew Yiddish, but they only used it when they didn't want we kids, and I had an older brother and a younger sister, and they only used Yiddish when they didn't want us to know what they were talking about. So, I grew up thinking that Yiddish was a language which had to do with sex and going to the bathroom, and nothing else. [laughter] I didn't know it was actually a full language. Yiddish is basically Medieval German. It's eighty-five percent Medieval German, about ten percent Hebrew and about five percent whatever country you were in, in this case, English. ... Growing up when I did, and being so aware of the Nazis and stuff, I used to hate Yiddish, because, ... when I'd hear it, I would think people were [Germans], these were Nazis speaking, which, ... of course, they weren't, but I didn't like the guttural sound of Yiddish, because it was [similar to German]. It was a little softer than German, but, I mean, very much, I grew up hating the Germans, and, even as a little child, being very aware of this, especially, I think, by the end of the war. When the war ended, I was ten, and then, you really began to find out about the concentration camps, and so, that was a big part of my youth and my politics, certainly, that, I mean, it took a long time before I came to recognize that Germans were people and that there actually were some good ones, and, today, of course, that you can't hold a young German responsible for what his father or grandfather did, but [it] took a long time for me to get to [that point]. In fact, a novel I'm going to write, I have the book on Spain that I'm writing right now, which the University of Valencia will publish, and then, I'm going to do a memoir on my time in the US Navy, and, after that, I'm going to go back to a novel called *Married to Hitler*, which I started years ago, about a person, almost like myself, who grew up unable to relate to Germans as human beings, and the struggle that this person goes through and this woman he falls in love with, who happens to be German. So, then, what does he do with himself? and how he overcomes his hatred of Germans, and that all began when I was a kid.

SI: That leads in to something I wanted to ask about in general. You said it was mostly a Jewish neighborhood with some Irish and Italian population.

MR: Yes.

SI: How did those three groups get along? Also, were there any Germans, either in the neighborhood or in contiguous neighborhoods, that you had to contend with?

MR: ... I was very much aware of German Jews, but I was not aware of Germans as such, German-Americans as such. I can remember my parents not exactly liking German Jews. [laughter] There's a long history in America of German Jews being very much more successful, let's say, than Eastern European Jews. I mean, there were really three Jewish immigration stages, at first, there were the Sephardic Jews, who came from the Spanish/Portuguese tradition, who mostly lived in the Arab lands after the Inquisition and the expulsion from Spain and Portugal. They were the first Jews to come here, and they came, you know, in the seventeenth century, even in the sixteenth century; no, no, seventeenth century, excuse me. ... In the mid-nineteenth century, German Jews came, and German Jews became immensely successful and they all tended to be much more Reformed, much more liberal, and they were ... the founders of all the great department stores, I mean Macy's, Ohrbach's, Bamberger's, Stern's, Lord & Taylor; I don't know about Lord & Taylor. That doesn't sound very Jewish, but, anyway, all of the department stores, practically, of this part of the world, were founded by Jews as little stores, and then, got to be bigger, Epstein's, in this part of [the East], in Jersey and stuff. ... Then, I'm part of that great ... third wave of immigration. The third wave is when the *pogroms* [violent, lethal attacks on Jewish communities in the Russian Empire, many directed by the Czarist regime] are coming along in Russia, Russia and Poland and whatnot, and so, three million Jews emigrate to the United States between 1880 and the 1920, in the early 1920s, when the immigration laws, new immigration [laws went into effect]. [Editor's Note: The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Law of 1924 both sharply curtailed immigration by instituting nation of origin-based quotas.] It was free immigration to the United States until the 1920s. So, anybody could come and be admitted, as long as they were healthy. They were examined at Ellis Island, and, if they weren't healthy, they were sent back. ... My grandparents, all four grandparents, were part of that, and it was always just a little bit of feeling that, "Oh, those German Jews, they think they're superior to us." I think it had something to do with the fact that they'd gotten here, and gotten established, earlier, but, no, ... I did not know Germans as such; that is, I did not know non-Jewish Germans as a boy, growing up.

SI: Your feelings mostly came from what your parents said or what you saw in the media, or just a general sense from the war.

MR: ... Well, certainly, ... yes, I mean, obviously, my general sense of Germans came from World War II, the Nazis and the Holocaust. That was my general sense, and a deep prejudice against all things Germanic, so much so that I always swore I would never buy a German car, even to this day. ... The funniest thing is that, one time, I had a Volvo, was in some terrible crash, it was totaled, and we could only afford a used car then and I bought an Audi. [laughter] ... It was only about a year later that I discovered an Audi was a German car, but this didn't totally surprise me, I think, at the time, because it was the worst car I ever bought. Audis are good cars now, but this particular Audi, nothing worked, and I only had it for a year or so. ... This seemed to be, I don't know whether this confirmed feelings about Germans or this proved that I shouldn't have bought a German car, because it was cursed or something, but, otherwise, I've [been prejudiced against Germans]. ... That's why [I have] this novel I want to write about this prejudice in myself, in a sense, though it'll be fiction, and the title will be *Married to Hitler*, because the idea will be that you grow up, when I grew up, and you're glued to, it's difficult to escape from, your own prejudice, and it's the struggles of somebody, which, to some extent,

mirror my own struggles. I mean, I've had German students here at Rutgers that are the most wonderful people in the world. I mean, ... what do you do about that? and is it possible that, if you're prejudiced against Germans, ... are you being a bit of a Nazi yourself, you know, if you're being prejudiced against Germans in general? ... Yes, I would say, growing up, there were two very powerful things in my early years which remain, still, powerful with me; one was the Holocaust, World War II, the Nazis, etc., and the other one was the rebirth of the State of Israel. ... The UN created Israel in '47 and Israel declared its independence in '48, and then, I was very much aware, because, by '48, I was thirteen, and I was very much aware that my people were now, again, under attack. ... I mean, there are things here that are almost like blood, that you feel, they're not rational, and I'd say the two irrational things is the feeling I had about the Germans and my unequivocal support of Israel, that is, I know Israel is wrong sometimes, intellectually, but [not in] my heart. Every country is wrong, sometimes. ... We Americans are wrong a lot of the time, [laughter] but I'd say those two, those were the two immense political facts and feelings of my life, at a very young age, and they came one on top of the other. In '45, you're really learning about the concentration camps; in '48, Israel is declared, five Arab armies attack, and so, I grew up with very strong, not so much religious feelings as ethnic feelings. ... I'm much more of, I think, ... a cultural, ethnic Jew than a religious Jew.

SI: Was religion, in terms of, say, going to synagogue, an important part of your life growing up?

MR: Yes, it was pretty horrible. [laughter] I didn't much like it, and I think my parents made a great mistake taking us to an Orthodox synagogue. In fact, not only was it an Orthodox synagogue, [but] down the street, a few blocks from our house, was a kind of a hospital nursing home place. ... I don't know if you've ever seen the movie with Robin Williams and Robert De Niro called *Awakenings*, which is about Oliver Sacks, the great writer-doctor guy. That's really him that it's about. He worked in that hospital and that hospital was actually called the Beth Abraham Home for the Incurables. [Editor's Note: In the mid-1960s, British neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks worked with victims of the "sleeping sickness" (*encephalitis lethargica*) epidemic of the 1920s at the Beth Abraham Hospital. He wrote about his experiences there in his 1973 memoir titled *Awakenings*, which was made into the 1990 film of the same name.] ... [laughter] It's funny, inside the Beth Abraham Home for the Incurables, ... they had a synagogue, but half the people who came to the services were the incurables. These people were in the hospital, ... and what a terrible name for a place. It doesn't give you too much hope, if you're there, if you're one of the incurables, and so, in addition to the fact that; ... why my parents didn't take us to a Reformed temple, where most of it was conducted in English, and then, you had, maybe, some prayers in Hebrew, but, here, almost everything was in Hebrew or Yiddish, and I didn't understand what was going on, and these people, all these incurables, were surrounding me, you know, with all sorts of horrible diseases. ... So, I grew up, I think, feeling that the religious side of it just was a real pain in the butt, I think, ... the way I felt about it, and then, when I studied for my *bar mitzvah*, my parents were not very creative in this. They got some Hasidic guy to be my tutor for my *bar mitzvah* and, you know, he had a long beard and long hair and didn't smell too good, and so, my early Jewish training, shall we say, was not very attractive. Later, when I grew up and started to have children of my own, I always took them to, I think, much more

attractive Reformed or Conservative synagogues, and they got a much better Jewish education than I did.

SI: I do not want to monopolize all the questions. Do you have any questions at this point?

DR: Yes, I would like to go back towards World War II. You were pretty young while the war was going on; you were, I guess, ten when it ended.

MR: Right.

DR: You said that you learned about what was going on in Germany; how did you find out about this? Was it a topic of conversation at home? Did you see newsreels or read the paper?

MR: I don't really remember, but I know that it was so immensely, yes, in the newsreels, ... if you went to a Saturday afternoon movie, which I would. My friends and I would all go to the movies, and, in those days, when you went to the movies, it was like a five-hour operation. There was a double feature, there were about twelve cartoons, there was a chapter from *Tarzan* or *Buck Rogers*, and there was the newsreel, because there wasn't television yet. ... I don't know this, but I suspect, I certainly saw newsreels, that I think I can remember President Eisenhower, who was then General, the chief in Europe, going to [concentration camps] Dachau and Buchenwald and Auschwitz and places like that, and insisting that journalists be with him and that people take footage of it, because he said, "Nobody would believe it if you didn't take footage of it." So, I suspect that's [what happened]. I mean, it was everywhere, it was in the newspapers, it was in the newsreels, it was in books. I guess I must have spoken about it with my parents, but I don't remember speaking about it with them, but, yes, it was, like, I'm not sure just when ... during World War II I might have heard of this. I don't know that the United States was absolutely, totally aware of this. I think the government was aware of it, but the people were not aware of it, but, when I became aware of it, it was really a staggering experience, because I realized there were these people in the world who wanted to kill me. [laughter] You know, when you're about ten years old, you ... discover people want to kill you just because you're you, that was maybe the most powerful, well, one of the most powerful, political experiences I've ever had, as an impressionable child. "These people just want to kill me, and they killed two out of five of all of us? Wow, that's; they could have gotten me, but they didn't get me." So, I very much grew up [despising Germans]. We used to play a game, my friends and I; there were still a lot of vacant lots in the Bronx. In addition to Bronx Park, we'd play in the vacant lots. The vacant lots were more fun, because you could do whatever you wanted to in the vacant lots that hadn't been built on. You could have rock fights and set fire to them and do all kind of good things like that, [laughter] and we used to play this game, and I suspect this may have been during World War II. I suspect it was during World War II, maybe I didn't know about the concentration camps yet, but you would get a cardboard box, and then, you would put a stick in it, in the box, standing up, and then, you'd set fire to the box. ... This stick figure, the stick in there, was Hitler, and you were getting your revenge, you were setting this box on fire, and, sometimes, we would put Mussolini and Tojo in there, also, but, mainly, we put Hitler in there. ... Then, we would all, it was almost like a kind of a pagan celebration, we'd all, you know, jump up and down with glee that we were burning up Hitler. ... I can remember another thing, as a

kid, constantly having dreams, or fantasies, ... which were renewed, by the way, when I saw the movie *The Pianist* [(2002)] a few years ago, that takes place in the Warsaw Ghetto, the only surviving Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto, in that movie, these fantasies of mine, which were that I wanted to be there with a machine gun. As a kid, I wanted to kill Nazis. It was like [that], and, by the way, oh, my comic books, all my comic books were nothing but, you know, Superman was killing Nazis, Batman was killing Nazis, and so, that was a very, very important part of my formation, that I wanted to kill Nazis, too.

SI: Would you have any way of knowing how common that was among your peers? Did they also express desires to kill Nazis? What you said earlier was very interesting, about feeling that there was somebody out there that wanted to kill you because of who you were.

MR: It was scary, yes.

SI: Yes. Did anybody else express those thoughts?

MR: I can't recall whether they did or not, but I do remember they were present with me, my friends, when we would burn up this box, which was a regular ritual, and, also, I remember, at the time, thinking; it's a little confusing, because of this novel, *Stones*, that I've just come out with. There are some scenes like this, and so, I'm not sure what's true and what's not true. [laughter] You know, I'm not sure how much I'm making up, which would even be true if that was a memoir, you know, all the controversy in American life about memoirs, you know, "Did they tell the truth?" well, and that guy who appeared on *Oprah* who made it all up. [Editor's Note: Professor is referring to James Frey's 2003 memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, which contained fabricated portions.] I certainly don't make it up, but, when you write a memoir, you remember what you choose to remember. ... Again, I think it tells us as much about you as what you're talking about, but I don't remember having [a conversation about it]. I think it was just understood, among my friends, and you asked about how much interchange there was between Italians, Jews and Irish. The Irish were very few in that part of the Bronx, Italians much more, ... but the predominate population was Jewish. ... In fact, when I grew up, I had no sense that Jews were a tiny minority, because I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood and I thought everybody was Jewish. In fact, when I first heard about Christmas, I thought, "Wow, that's kind of weird. What is that thing?" [laughter] You know, I mean, that was my first reaction to it, because it was so foreign to me, so strange to me, and, when I found out Jesus was Jewish, that was even stranger. All these Christians beating up on us, yet, they believed this Jewish guy was God. I guess I thought Christians were strange people, not as bad a Nazi, but pretty bad.

KT: Did you have any family abroad, in Europe, during the time when you were hearing about the war? Did you have any connections to Europe?

MR: No, I had none, that I was aware of. I certainly did have family there, who must have been murdered by the Nazis, but I was not aware of them.

KT: Right.

MR: I don't even know whether my parents ever heard from any of them, but, no, none. My life changed, my whole future, in a sense, changed, at Ellis Island, and I should mention something about that. I don't know what my original family name was. I mean, I have this WASP last name, [laughter] and so, and I'm sure that was not my grandfather's name, I mean, reasonably sure, but Ellis Island was a wonderful place from the point of view of that we were a nation, then, that admitted all immigrants. You know all the controversy today over illegal immigrants in the States, and mostly Latinos; in those days, anybody who wanted to could come into the United States, become an American citizen, after awhile. I know we can't take the entire world in here, but, at the same time, I do have some sympathies for illegals, only because my grandparents just came here and nobody said boo. So, it's a different world today.

SI: You might have been too young to know this, but, in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor, did anybody come into the community who was a refugee from Europe, any Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler?

MR: Oh, yes. As a matter-of-fact, ... among my friends, I was virtually the only one whose parents were native-born, and most of my friends, their parents were immigrants. Just when they immigrated, I don't know. I think they immigrated before the Holocaust, or before the Nazis really took over Europe, because my friends ... were essentially born here, but their parents all spoke with thick accents, spoke Yiddish most of the time. ... I can recall that while, on the one hand, my parents didn't like German Jews, because they felt the German Jews were snooty, with regard to the Eastern European Jews, my parents also didn't like the immigrants; not so much they didn't like them, they felt superior. They felt that the Germans were being superior to them, but they, in turn, I think, acted superior to my friends' parents. I can remember, and this was something I didn't like in my parents, because I felt that they should have been welcoming to these people, but they looked down on them, because they were immigrants and my parents were native-born. ... I didn't like that, and, as I got older, I liked it even less. ... So, my friends didn't feel all that welcome in my apartment. Now, we're talking about apartments here. My brother, sister and I all grew up in the same room. You know, you think of New Jersey and the suburbs and kids often have their own room. We had a two-bedroom apartment; my parents were in one bedroom and me and my sister and brother were in the other bedroom. ... I always had this kind of feeling that, when my friends would come to my house, that they weren't entirely welcome, because they were viewed by my parents as, somehow, a lower form of life, because they were the children of immigrants. I, on the other hand, was very welcome in their houses, maybe welcome precisely because I was not the child [of immigrants]. I mean, their parents may have had a favorable prejudice. Both prejudices were absolutely stupid, but I think their parents were eager to see me, because I was more of an "American" than their kids were, ... "more American" in quotes, than their kids were, as they viewed things. I mean, that was the sort of sociology of the neighborhood. It wasn't something I thought about a whole lot, but I've thought about more in recent years, about the injustice of it and the wrongness of it.

SI: Did your parents have any problems with you associating with non-Jews, the Italians and the Irish?

MR: No, I don't think they had [any]; well, I think they had [their problems]. Growing up, I think my father got beat up a lot when he was a kid. Anti-Semitism was endemic in the United States. Anti-Semitism is a crazy word, by the way. I wish to heck we'd get a better word, because the funniest thing is that ... when Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans, those Jews they didn't kill, they took throughout the Roman Empire. That's how Jews got spread around the world. Only a few were left in Israel, always were in Israel, for the last two thousand years, and I forgot what I was talking about. [laughter]

SI: Anti-Semitism and how it is a bad word.

MR: Oh, yes. So, it's such a stupid word, ... since Jews lived in Europe so long and mixed, so much intermarriage, so much rape of Jewish women, also; you know, you have a *pogrom*, all the women got raped, and some of them got pregnant, which is why Jews are matrilineal, that is, the child of a Jewish woman, whoever the father was, is a Jew. The child of a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman must become Jews, ... which is interesting, because I have five kids and three from my first marriage, and my first wife was Jewish, and my second wife ... was born Irish Catholic, and so, [laughter] when our children were born, we had to go through a kind of a conversion of these infants. ... They were about the same age as the Catholics get baptized. It was quite a thing. [laughter] It was a lot of fun, and really kind of silly, but, so, ... I think my parents didn't really have many non-Jewish friends. It's funny, because, in the world I live, probably most of my friends aren't Jewish. I mean, I live in just a much more cosmopolitan world, and my wife being Irish Catholic, her whole family, she's one of eleven siblings, so, her family is immense. I mean, they have Thanksgiving or Christmas, something like this, and just the immediate family's fifty-two people, you know, her parents, her brothers and sisters, and their spouses and their children, fifty-two people. I'm not quite sure of some of their names. So, there's really a division in my life, in terms of, yes, if I look at who are my best, say, male friends, none of them are Jewish, my best friends, I'd say. Some of my lesser friend are. It's just the way it happened. I don't know that I sought this out. They probably find me interesting because I'm different from them and I find them interesting because they're different from me. ... In a way, it's kind of a reflection of my marriage. My first marriage was a failure, my second marriage is wonderful, and she's so different from me. My first wife was not just Jewish, but very much like me. ... Maybe this is an advertisement for opposites attract. "Don't marry somebody like you," is what my lesson would be. [laughter] I mean, that's silly. I think everybody's got different chemistry with different people. ...

SI: To go back to the Second World War, do you remember Pearl Harbor? Does that stand out in your memory, or were you too young?

MR: Well, I was six when Pearl Harbor happened. I don't have a distinct memory of it. I do have a very distinct memory of the end of World War II, V-J Day, if that's what it was, V-J, Victory in Japan Day, I think, yes, in August. It was in August '45, so, I had just turned ten the month before, and I remember that very, very clearly, because my uncle owned a hotel up in the Catskills, otherwise known then as the "Borscht Circuit." Jews weren't allowed into other peoples' hotels, and so, ... that's how the Borscht Circuit got going. Jews started their own hotels, and that's indicative, also, of the extent to which Jews have assimilated or become

comfortable in America, that the Borscht Circuit essentially doesn't exist anymore. I mean, Jews no longer wanted to go to, you know, all Jewish institutions. They wanted to go to the Caribbean in the winter, they wanted to go to Paris, they wanted to go to Cape Cod. ... This had a lot to do with, I mean, you know, ... part of America's story is, new groups that come over are always discriminated against, and then, eventually, they're not. I mean, Catholics were immensely discriminated against in the mid-nineteenth century. You know, John Kennedy, ... when he ran for President [in 1960], had to prove to ... all these Protestant ministers that he really was not taking orders from the Pope, you know, and so, it was interesting. I mean, Protestants were here first, they founded all their own institutions, wouldn't let the Catholics in. So, the Catholics founded their institutions. Then, the Jews came over and the Catholics wouldn't let the Jews into their institutions. Jews founded their own institutions. Well, in many ways, these Catholic institutions, and these Jewish institutions and these Protestant institutions, have begun to disappear as such, and there's much more merging of people, really, in this country. I think that's a great thing. ... On the other hand, the extent to which you merge is the extent to which you assimilate, the extent to which you assimilate is the extent to which you lose your ethnicity. I'd always rather have a society where everybody loves everybody else, regardless of what their background is, but it is sad, because, although we go through periods of ethnic revival, ... [in] the long term, and we constantly have new immigrants, especially Latinos and South Asians, but the long-term prognosis for the United States is that we will slowly become more and more like each other, which is good and bad, I think, both, yes, but, no, I don't have any memory of Pearl Harbor as such, except reading about it. When the war ended, my uncle had a hotel in the Borscht Circuit and we'd go there every summer, I remember, because my father, then, would work for my uncle as the office manager of the hotel, because he was a high school teacher and he would run the office in the hotel. ... I was the newspaper delivery boy of the hotel, when I was ten, or maybe even earlier, I don't know. I would ride into the town, with the chauffeur, ... the hotel chauffeur, who would pick up people who came up by train or whatever, or bus, to this little town up in the Catskills, and we'd pick up the newspapers, and then, I would peddle them in the lobby of the hotel. ... I remember that's exactly what I was doing when, suddenly, people started to yell and scream all over the hotel in joy that the war had ended. It was a very powerful moment for me.

SI: You wrote on your pre-interview survey that you had uncles in the service.

MR: Yes, uncles on both sides, yes.

SI: Did you correspond with them? Were you constantly trying to keep up with where they were?

MR: No, I didn't. I was just too young. I mean, the war, when the war ended, I had just turned ten, so, I don't know ... how much you're corresponding when you're nine and eight and whatever. My father was older than this, my mother's and his siblings who went into the war, and so, he was not drafted, and he had three children as well. So, he did not go into the service.

SI: What about other ways that home front changes affected your life, like rationing? Do you remember rationing?

MR: Yes, I remember rationing, very much. I remember that we didn't have a car, and, for one thing, we didn't have a car partly because they were hardly being made. All of Detroit was producing tanks and things like that, but I remember the air raids. I can remember, oh, we didn't have air raids, but the air raid; I don't know what you call those.

DR: Drills.

MR: Drills, yes, drills, where we all had to turn out all the lights in all [the] apartments in my building, just pitch dark, and you had to close all the windows. ... Mr. Gold, who lived on the first floor, was our air raid warden and he was very officious about it. ... He was also the first guy in our building who got a television set. I remember him. He was like the mayor of this apartment house. He was the air raid warden during World War II, he walked up and down outside, [would] yell up, "Hey, turn out that light up there in 3G," you know, "Close the blinds." ... Then, again, I also remember his getting, ... as I say, the first television set, which was really fantastic. The dial looked like a radio dial. It was small. It was about two inches by three inches, that was a TV set, and it was only one channel and all of us in the building were desperate to be invited to the Golds' apartment to see this new wonder, this new miracle, and since his son, Lawrence, was a friend of mine, luckily, I got invited regularly. I had to give Lawrence a lot of comic books to get invited, but I did, and you'd have, it was just amazing, you would have, like, thirty people sitting around the Golds' living room, watching this tiny [TV set]. You could barely see what was going on. It would usually be wrestling. I remember "Gorgeous George" versus Antonino LaRocca, and you could barely see it, but it was such a miracle, and then, if you were there, still, at midnight, the American flag would wave and *The Star-Spangled Banner* would come on, and then, it would go black, and then, everybody went stumbling back to their apartments. It was really quite an experience, I mean, the early years of television, you know. I mean, you guys have grown up with color television, plasma TVs and flat TVs, you know, and the huge TVs and the fidelity is magnificent, you know. For us, we could barely see anything, you know, but it was still, it was a miracle; television was a miracle, ... for me.

SI: It was during the war when you started going to elementary school.

MR: Yes. ... Well, yes, I guess you started kindergarten when you were five, so, that would have been in 1940, I guess that would have been just before America's entry into the war.

SI: Okay. In general, tell us a little bit about your early education, but, then, also, if the war impacted your schools at all.

MR: Right. Well, I don't remember going to any kind of a nursery school, or a preschool school, because my mother was a stay-at-home mom. When she started to have her first kid, she stayed home from that point on, never went back to nursing, which I thought was such a bad mistake. I mean, you know, Betty Friedan got my mother just right with *The Feminine Mystique*, and all the other books we've had since. I think my mother would have been a happier person had she continued with her profession, but, ... in those days, you know, if you were a teacher in school, and teachers often resigned when they got married, let alone pregnant, and, if they got

pregnant, they were out of there. It was the most ridiculous thing, and, when you think of it, a pregnant woman, what better lesson could you give kids than watching a woman get bigger and eventually have a child, maybe bring the child to class. I mean, what a great thing to teach kids, but that isn't the way it was, and then, I remember being in kindergarten, and the thing I remember most about kindergarten was that you were supposed to share, and I didn't dig this share thing. I remember, they had these huge wooden blocks and I was building this thing. ... The teacher came over and said, "Well, Michael, you have to share with the other kids." "I don't want to share with the other kids. It's my blocks," you know. I'd never thought of this before. I guess I would have learned this had I been in preschool, but I hadn't been in preschool. There was a kind of a children's playgroup across the street from my house, in Bronx Park, in a playground, and I can remember, at least this is what maybe I choose to remember, I was the fastest kid. I was a skinny, fast kid, and we'd play this game all the time. One person would start out "it," and then, once they touched somebody, they were also "it," and you got to the point where you had twenty-five kids who were "it." ... They never could catch me, and, sometimes, they would give up, even all those kids trying to trap me, and I was very proud of being so fast and that's what I remember from the play group and kindergarten, the collaborative thing. ... I do remember one thing that happened in the Spring of 1945, which I've been eternally ashamed of ever since. ... Oh, in those days, by the way, you skipped all the time, they had this skipping thing. If you were bright, you skipped. When I got out of college, I was only nineteen years old, you know. I just kept skipping, which I think was unfortunate in some ways. I got out of college at nineteen, I was captain of my university swimming team, and, you know, if I'd been in it until twenty-two, I would have been a hell of a better swimmer, I think. So, I was a jock, you know, ... through college, but getting back to elementary school, in 1945, I believe it was April, ... I was put in a special class, which was called the IGC class. I mean, look at the presumptuousness of this; IGC stood for "Intelligent, Gifted Children." We had this IGC class, and the kids in the IGC class, we didn't learn anything, because we already knew everything, or so they imagined. I never learned the "three Rs." ... I mean, reading, yes, every one of us could read well, but writing and arithmetic, we just didn't do that, that was for "dumb kids," ... call it in quotes "dumb kids," or not IGC kids, and so, to this day, I can't write script. I can sign my name in a scrawl, but I cannot write script. I just didn't learn. Anyway, in 1945, our teacher, Mrs. Russ, I remember her very well, because her daughter, Joanna, became a terrific science fiction writer, who still very much writes books and I see her name here or there. Anyway, Mrs. Russ came into class one day, crying. ... She stood up in front and said, "Children, I have very, very sad news to tell you," and we all said, "What?" She said, "President Roosevelt has just died." There was kind of a hush in the classroom, and I raised my hand. She says, "Yes, Michael?" and I said, "Does that mean we don't have to stay in school today?" [laughter] I got thrown out of the IGC class, [laughter] which was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was put into a regular class for my sixth grade. That's where I learned to read, the "three Rs," and I went into that class, I was the dumbest kid in the class, and, by the end of the year, I was the smartest kid in the class, but, when I first went in there, it was terrifying. It was like everything was [in] a foreign language, because, in the IGC class, all we did was discover, discuss things, like ... E equals MC_2 , and we would make musical instruments out of cigar boxes and rubber bands and we would go on trips all the time, to museums, go to art museums, but we never went to school. We were above school and, therefore, we never got school. I got that ... in the sixth grade. So, that's what I remember, ... mostly, from those years, and not only was I put into the sixth grade, but I

was put into Mrs. Guthrie's class, and Mrs. Guthrie was considered the baddest woman in the East. I mean, she was, everybody hated Mrs. Guthrie, but I didn't. I did ... initially, but I didn't later on, because she really taught me a lot of great stuff that I really needed.

SI: A lot of people we have interviewed, particularly who came out of the New York City school system, talk about the skipping and how it affected their lives.

MR: Yes. [laughter] I skipped once in elementary, once in junior high, once in high school and once in college.

SI: Wow.

MR: And I got out, well, I was nineteen, but I would become twenty two months later, and get married a month after that, married at twenty the first time, if you believe it. I've got kids almost older than I am. [laughter]

SI: One of the reasons seems to be overcrowding. Do you remember the schools being packed, or there not being enough teachers, anything like that?

MR: No. I would hate to believe that the reason I was skipped is because they were trying to get me out of there. I thought it had something to do with the fact [I was smart]. Well, you know, the IQ test was a big deal then. I remember taking the IQ test and being told that my IQ was 148, ... and then, kids going around saying, "What's your IQ? What's your IQ?" Everybody wanted to know what everybody else's IQ was, and it wasn't genius level, but it was pretty smart. ... By the way, we had another special class in that school, which was called the ungraded class. The ungraded classes were for kids who were, shall we say, slow, and we were the fast ones and they were slow, although I remember one kid in our class who must have been autistic or something, because, in our IGC class, ... I don't know what it was with this kid, but this kid ... was the kind of kid who could read the telephone directory and recite it back to you. [laughter] He knew the batting averages of every baseball player in history. It was like that, but ... his social skills were almost nil, almost nonexistent. I think he must have been autistic, you know, that "idiot savant" idea that you saw, let's say, in that *Rain Man* [(1988)] movie some years ago, with Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. I think he must have been like that, but I don't think he was recognized as such, yes.

SI: Then, when you went to high school, you went to Christopher Columbus.

MR: Yes, I went to Christopher Columbus, which was in the neighborhood, which was close by. ... I walked to high school, and that high school is famous for two people who went there. One of them was Christine Jorgensen, the first famous sexual ...

SI: Transgender.

MR: Transgendered, that we knew about. She had served in World War II, as a soldier, and then, she went to Copenhagen, had this surgery, to try to make her as womanly as possible, and

the other famous person from my high school was the "Son of Sam." I don't know if you remember who that was, this murderer who went around bumping people off all over. [Editor's Note: Serial killer David Berkowitz, dubbed the Son of Sam, committed a series of highly-publicized murders between the summers of 1976 and 1977, when he was arrested.] So, I don't know that we produced that many particularly distinguished people [in] my high school. The actress Anne Bancroft came from my high school. ... Was she the one who was married to Mel Brooks?

SI: Yes.

MR: Yes, yes. ... I didn't know her, she was before I was there, and, in high school, two things happened, I think, that were very important to me. I didn't really become a student until I got to graduate school. I mean, I was interested in only two things, sports and girls, and that was it, and school was something you had to put up with to have sports and girls. [laughter] I mean, I did all right in school, but, ... until I was sixteen, I did not care about learning in any way, shape or form. I was elected president of the student body. In those days, I think I really wanted to be President of the United States, and my career, my political career, began when I was elected president of the high school and of the student government, which was an absolute fraud. I mean, this was before any kind of student power movement that we began to see in the '60s, [in which] the students were actually human beings and that they weren't to be blown off. ... I remember that I discovered; I had a budget of about five thousand dollars. I think it came from each student having to give two dollars to this, and this, the five thousand dollars, supported all the teams, all the clubs, all the everything. ... When I looked at the budget, there was this one item in there for twenty-five hundred dollars, of the five thousand, and that twenty-five hundred dollars was for an accountant, a bookkeeper/accountant, and I looked at this, said, "Let me get this straight; we've got five thousand dollars, we're spending half of it on the guy who's keeping track of the money?" and that's exactly what it was. ... I thought, "Well, that's outrageous. Let's get rid of this guy. I'm the president, I've got a treasurer, let the student treasurer take care of the money, or I'll take care of the money," but, you know, I went to see the principal and said, "Look, ... I want this guy fired;" turned out it was his brother-in-law. I mean, talk about corruption. [laughter] ... It was unbelievable corruption. I once wrote an article, ... because I write for *New Jersey Monthly*, regularly have since the very origins of the magazine, in addition to writing books, and I wrote, once wrote, an article on corruption in New Jersey for the magazine. ... I interviewed a guy who was, at that time, ... a regular columnist for *The Star-Ledger*, but then with the *Daily News*, I think. Anyway, ... I interviewed him at the *Daily News* and he said, "Yes, I know we've got corruption in New Jersey," but he said, Jon McLaughlin, ... "The corruption in New Jersey isn't a pimple on the ass of the corruption in New York City." ... Sure enough, I had experienced this as a senior in high school, at the tender age of sixteen, I said to the principal that I protest. ... He said, "Well, you can protest all you want, but, if you want to graduate..." it was amazing, it was just like a *quid pro quo*, it was so corrupt that I just couldn't [believe it], you know, but I was just sixteen years old. I mean, he was threatening me that I would not graduate, and I'm rather ashamed of the fact that I didn't do something about it, that I was a coward, I guess. I don't know. It was quite a moment, [laughter] oh, and the other thing I wanted to tell you about, that happened in high school, [during] which, again, I was a politician, I was a jock, girls, that's all I really cared about. ... I had a teacher, in my senior year, Mr. Ames,

I'll always remember him, ... and I was beginning to become interested in literature and he was very aware, that I saw [this as interesting]. He said, "Michael, you're going to have to choose some day. You're the president, but you're also interested in literature," and we read Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and that was the most influential book I ever read. Suddenly, I fell in love with literature, and I've been in love with it ever since, and I write it, ... which is interesting, too, because there are so few people in our English departments who write literature. I've always thought that rather amusing and strange, not just here at Rutgers, but virtually anywhere, that scholars of literature are critics and they write stuff about literature and teach about literature, but they don't write it. I write it, [laughter] and it's interesting how ... being something of an artist is really disparaged in the University, unless you're in Mason Gross [School of the Arts], let's say. If you were, say, in the Art History Department at Rutgers and you painted, they'd think there was something weird about you, and I think the same thing goes for people who write literature. I think it's a doggone shame, because I think those of us who write it know some things about it that people who just teach it don't know about. We may not be as articulate and know all those weird, theory-damaged words, but, anyway, so, this Mr. Ames, we read *Winesburg, Ohio*, and I talked to him one time after class, because I had fallen in love. I had fallen in love with literature. ... It was the first book that knocked me out. I mean, I'd always been a reader, but, now, now, I was in love. That was the feeling, really, that I was in love, and he said, and this was to prove very much providential, or very much predicting my future, because I would reach a "Y" in my life, "The Road Not Taken" as Robert Frost describes it, where I really had to decide between the political side of me and the artistic side of me, and I opted for the artistic side of me. That was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. It was so hard. I was trying to hold on to both of these things and I decided for one. After I got over being deeply depressed for about ten days, I've been happy ever since, ... and that was really, I thought back of Ames. ... He said, "Look," because he could see that I really cared more about *Winesburg, Ohio* than anybody else in class. He sort of took me under his wing and we'd have conversations about literature, and he said, "You know, this being president of the student body," in effect, he was saying, "it's a lot of bull," you know. "Somebody's got to do it, but you've got to decide whether that's who you want to be or whether [you want to pursue literature]." He really turned me on to literature, he really absolutely turned me on to literature, and been turned on ever since, yes. Those are two important things, I think, that happened to me in high school, because running for office was just ... ridiculous, you know. I think I won because the other guy was kind of ugly and I won also because I had some semi-gangster like characteristics then. I remember, you know, these were the days when you had duck's ass haircuts and you wore pistol pocket pants. ... I never became a gangster; I was sort of a gangster manqué and, therefore, I was a faux gangster, and I think, I look at pictures of myself back then, [laughter] I looked like, you know, some kid who was really going in the wrong direction. ... Precisely because of that, I think I was elected, instead of him. He actually had a serious program of things he wanted to do. Maybe he, had he found out about the budget, would have had the guts to stand up to the principal. I was too busy being popular, [laughter] and that was part of the political side of me that took me many years to get rid of.

SI: Did they have gangs in your area? The leather jacket-and-motorcycle types, that is what I think of in the early 1950s.

MR: Yes, yes. I grew up in "*Happy Days*," I grew up with "The Fonz;" not really, not literally, but, I mean, ... that came on television years later, but I was very much like "The Fonz." That's why I was elected president. [laughter] [Editor's Note: *Happy Days*, an American television series that aired on ABC from 1974 to 1984, centered on life in 1950s America, particularly the character of Arthur "The Fonz" Fonzarelli, who was viewed by the other characters as a "rebel."]

... Yes, you know, it was safe, it was safe. There was this one moment when I had a rather threatening experience. I met this girl, Joanne, I remember her name, good old Joanne, and, [as if to talk to her through the microphone], "Joanne, where are you?" [laughter] and I met this girl Joanne. ... I think she wanted to hang out with me because I was the president of the high school and a gangster, or, no, I looked like a gangster. Unbeknownst to me, she had a boyfriend who actually was a gangster. She never told me about this guy. I just remember that, being very shy sexually, ... Joanne constantly tried to seduce me. I think she wanted to seduce me because she wanted to have slept with the president, or have had sex with the president of the high school, I don't know. Anyway, I'd see Joanne once in awhile, and she was the leader, ... very much the leader, in our sexual adventures together, which never went very far, and one of the reasons it didn't go very far is, I had a job after school, even though I was president of the high school. ... Some of the jobs I had while in high school are not to be believed. The main one I had is, I worked in a bowling alley, and, in those days, they did not have these machines that set the pins. You know, now, you knock down the pins and the machine gathers the pins and sets them down again. Then, just beyond the alley, there was a pedal and you would push down on the pedal and that would raise up ten pins. ... The pins, the things you hit, had holes in the bottom, and then, you would set them on these pins, and then, you'd let the lever down. ... I'd be taking care of two bowling alleys at once and it was always very kind of scary, because these balls came hurtling down the aisle, hit the pins, [and, if] you didn't get out of the way, boy, the pins could really hurt you, and there was no place for me to be. I'd be sort of up above, but, sometimes, your legs'd be dangling down and the pins would hit you in the legs anyway. ... You're jumping from the two different lanes you're taking care of, and then, I had heard about a guy who was a gangster in the neighborhood, but I didn't know that he was Joanne's boyfriend, and here's a funny one, I think; his name was "Jersey." That was his nickname, that wasn't his real name, they called him "Jersey," because he came from New Jersey and he'd been in reform school. He was a genuine gangster, and I'd heard of Jersey. ... Everybody knew who Jersey was and what he looked like, because he, with his boys, would walk around the neighborhood, you know, and push people around and stuff like this. ... He came into the bowling alley with his boys and sent word down to me that, when I took a break, he wanted to talk to me. I was terrified. I mean, he was there with about three or four other guys, and it's so great that his name was Jersey, [laughter] because, in those days, New Jersey was "the country." When I wrote the George Washington Bridge book, Fort Lee was "Fort" Lee. I mean, it was, you know, Fort Lee was a Revolutionary War fort, and right across the river, on the Manhattan side, was Washington Heights and George Washington's name was part of that fort. [Editor's Note: The bridge connects Fort Lee on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River with Fort Washington on the Manhattan side.] The bridge stretches from one Colonial fort to the other Colonial fort, two very historic places, and, when I was writing the book, obviously, [with] all those high rises and all that stuff in Fort Lee, Fort Lee's a small city today, but, in those days, you crossed the George Washington Bridge into the country. My friends and I would walk across the bridge, that was one of the main things I did as a kid, my friends and I would walk across the George Washington

Bridge and camp out in Fort Lee, in the woods, and often stay overnight and watch the sun go down over our backs, in the west, on the bridge. You'd see the bridge turn colors, and we'd have a campfire in the morning. We'd wake up and, now, the sun was coming up over the bridge, from the east side. It was a lovely [image]. I wrote about that in that book, too, that lovely experience. Well, anyway, Jersey came from Jersey, when Jersey, for me, meant the country, and there he is, with his boys, and he sent word down. Some kid had ... run down the alley and said, "There's a guy back there named Jersey who wants to see you when you're on break." Well, I didn't want to take a break, I mean, but I had to take a break eventually, because ... we had one more pin setter than the two alleys each of us covered, so that one guy could always have his break. Now, it was break time. ... The guy came, took my place, I couldn't very well stay there, and I went back there and he said, "I hear you've been seeing Joanne," and I said, "Yes. Is she your girlfriend?" He said, "Yes. I don't want you to ever see Joanna again." I said, "Okay." [laughter] He said, "Okay?" I said, "Yes, that's fine, that's fine. She's your girlfriend? I didn't know that. She never told me." He said, "No kidding." "Yes." It was very interesting how the exchange of ideas occurred. He said, "You're a good kid." I said, "Thanks, Jersey," and he said, "Tell you what. Look, any time you need some help, you just let me know. Anybody's bothering you, from now on, I'm in your corner. Anybody gives you a hard time, you let me know, me and my boys'll take care of them. Don't worry about it, just let me know." He went from wanting to kill me to wanting to save me. [laughter] I mean, it was very, very strange, I mean, the psychology of bullies, that, ... when they stop being bullies, they sometimes swing to the other extreme. So, that was one of my [experiences]; I don't know if this is interesting or not.

SI: No, it is very interesting.

MR: Is it, is it really? Well, it's very sort of literary. It's very artistic, I guess, the things that you remember, the fun things that you remember.

SI: Yes, it goes to what daily life was like, and the interactions between different groups.

MR: Yes.

SI: The story you told about going over and camping in Fort Lee was interesting. How much freedom did you have to just go and do something like that, or go somewhere in the city?

MR: Yes, good question. I grew up at a time when, as a little kid, I rode the subways, by myself. There was never this sense of much crime. Now, whether, statistically, there was as much, if not more, crime is a whole other matter. I don't think people kept statistics. In recent years, we know that New York, statistically, is safer than it was in the '70s and '80s. We know it's safer statistically, less murders, less rapes, less brutality, less whatever, but I grew up in a world in which I simply wasn't afraid, and I'd hitchhike all around the country, for example. I always think kids growing up today don't have as rich a childhood as I had, because I was free. Kids today, their lives are so bloody organized, and I've seen it with my own kids, you know. My youngest son, who just graduated from Rutgers, ... everything was organized, soccer leagues, Little League, everything organized. ... There was no organizing when I was a boy. The only organizing was the Boy Scouts, and I didn't want to be in the Boy Scouts. I thought the

Boy Scouts were a bunch of wusses and wimps. I didn't want ... to have anything to do with the Boy Scouts, because I was trying to be a gangster, ... but it's amazing how much we did, because we organized a baseball team, for which I played shortstop. ... I was a great fielder, but I always had a wild arm. I would make the most impossible stops of the ball, and then, throw it over the first baseman's head, [laughter] anyway, but we organized our team, and other kids organized other teams, we organized our own league, and the kids did it themselves. ... Then, later on, I hitchhiked a lot, and we now have the perception that hitchhiking is dangerous; I did not have that perception then, and, for all I know, hitchhiking is less dangerous now than it was then. We have the perception it's dangerous, and I think what would make it dangerous today is that almost nobody hitchhikes, and, therefore, who picks up hitchhikers and who hitchhikes? You see somebody who's hitchhiking, you don't see them as a young kid who maybe doesn't own a car, you see them as some kind of loser or you see them as some kind of dangerous person, which is so unfortunate, I think. ... I had fantastic adventures all over the country. ... Every year, during college, ... I had a summer job. When college would end, there were about two weeks before my summer job and I'd go hitchhiking. I'm probably getting ahead of the story, but I remember, one time, when I was eighteen, I hitchhiked into the Pennsylvania Dutch country and I was in a little town called Columbia; should I tell the story now?

SI: Sure, go ahead.

MR: Yes, I was in the town of Columbia, Pennsylvania, right on the Susquehanna, near Lancaster, and there was a fair in the town and I was at the fair. ... I ran into a policeman there and I said, "Officer, could you please tell me what the cheapest place to stay in town is?" and he said, "Well, you could stay in the jail," and I started to back up. He said, "No, no, I'm serious, I'm not [kidding]." I said, "I thought you were suggesting I'm a vagrant." He said, "No, no, not at all. We do allow it, if you're traveling through Columbia and you don't have any money, and the cheapest place is to stay in jail. I mean, the thing is, we have to lock you in the cell at night, we can't let you out until the morning, but we don't even take your name. There's no record, no nothing." I thought, "That sounds neat. I've never been in jail," not before, nor since, but I've been in jail that one night, when I was eighteen.

SI: Wow.

MR: I had to show up at the local jail. He said, "You've got to be there before midnight. We can't let you in after midnight and, ... you've got to realize this, we've got to lock you in the cell. We can't let you out until six. So, if you think you're going to be claustrophobic, don't go." I thought, "I don't know. I want to experience this, it sounds like great fun, and, besides, it doesn't cost a penny," and he said, "Yes, in the morning, we open your cell, we give you a glass of orange juice and you go on your way." So, I showed up at the jail, and there was another officer on duty, "Yes, yes, Officer So-and-So told me you might be coming," he said, "Why don't you take number three there?" He said, "You know, I have to lock you in." I said, "Yes, I know." He said, "But, if you have any problem, just give me a yell," and so, he locked the cell door, and I wasn't feeling too bad, a little scared, "What if they don't really open the door in the morning?" It would go through my mind. So, I thought, "Well, I'm going to go to sleep." It was about a quarter to twelve, and there was a rack, a bed folded up against the wall and you had to pull it

down and get on it. So, I pulled it down, and your weight would hold it horizontal, it was vertical, and I pulled it down and I said, "Excuse me, officer." He said, "Yes?" "There's no mattress or sheets or pillow or blankets on this thing. It's just springs." He said, "Yes, we don't give you those things." [laughter] "Well, where do I sleep?" "Well, you sleep on there." "I can't," I mean, it's just springs sticking into you. I'd try to get up on there and it was just like an absolute agony, it was pure torture. I mean, ... boy, if you want to scare somebody straight, put them in jail for one night. They'll never want to go to jail, in that jail, with no bedding whatsoever. So, I lay there; I just couldn't sleep. I got out and tried lying on the concrete floor and that wasn't much better. That was a little bit better, actually, than the bed, but I just couldn't sleep, and then, about two o'clock in the morning, they had picked this very night to raid the local brothel, [laughter] and, about two o'clock in the night, when I thought maybe I was finally drifting off, all these women were brought in and put in the adjoining cells. They were all drunk and crazy and screaming at the cops and yelling and everything. So, I think I never fell asleep the whole night, between the women screaming for the rest of the night and the agony of how to try to get comfortable, but, sure enough, at six o'clock, they opened the cell, gave me a glass of orange juice, said, "Good luck to you, young man." I said, "Thank you, thank you very much for your hospitality, such as it was." [laughter] ... Then, I went out the door and I went down the street and got myself a nice breakfast, and then, I saw there ... were people going into a church. They were going into a Mennonite church, and I'd never been in a Mennonite church, and, I mean, they're not as strict as the Amish, but they are very, you know, private, and I went in there. ... Somebody said, the preacher up front said, "I see we have a visitor here. Young man, can you tell us about yourself? Is there anything we can do for you?" I said, "Yes, as a matter-of-fact, there is something. I've always wanted to work on a farm and I never have," and, when I was a kid, I wanted to be a farmer. I thought that was wonderful. So, I've ... always been and always have been a gardener, a green thumb and black thumb, whatever thumb, and so, the guy said, "Well, is there anything you want?" I said, "Yes, I always wanted to work on a farm. Is there anyone here who has a farm? I would volunteer to work on their farm for a week, and then, I'd have to leave. You don't have to pay me anything. Would you give me room and board? That'll be it." Some guy stood up, ... whose name was Amos Charles, and Amos and Emma, "Swell, what's ... your name, young man?" "Michael." "Well, Michael, if you'd like to come to our farm, we have eleven children," twelve, I forget, it was a huge family. ... I went and lived with them for a week and learned a little bit about farming, about eggs, and, well, mainly, he was a chicken farmer, and how you candled eggs. I don't know how to do it today, determine whether they're too developed, you know, the embryo or whatever, but none of that would have happened if I hadn't hitchhiked, and then, from there, I hitchhiked back to the Bronx. ... I had a lot of adventures like that, especially later, when I was in the US Navy, I used to hitchhike every weekend, and I sometimes think it's unfortunate that people hardly hitchhike today. One of the reasons ... people stopped hitchhiking is because we all became more affluent. However, at the time, we all know the economy's in the tank right now, but, in general, we became more affluent, and everybody had an automobile. ... Since everybody had an automobile, if you didn't have an automobile, "What was the matter with you?" but, ... in those days, many people didn't have automobiles, and I certainly didn't have an automobile. So, hitchhiking was a big part of my youth, a lot of other trips as well, but that was the most noteworthy, because I spent the night in jail, and I liked that a whole lot. I tell this story to students in my classes. They just can't believe

it. They can't believe I hitchhiked, they can't believe this, "Their professor spent a night in jail?" You know, it's funny.

SI: Let me pause for a second. ...

[TAPE PAUSED]

DR: I was just curious if your parents had any thoughts about you taking two-week trips. Did you keep in touch with your family while you were gone?

MR: No, I don't think. As I say, one grew up then in a freer world, and it's possible I gave my parents a call during that two-week hitchhiking trip, say, to Pennsylvania, but I don't remember doing that. It's interesting, because my younger children, from my second marriage, refer to my wife as "Safety Mom." [laughter] They call her "Safety Mom." She's always afraid something's going to happen to them. Well, everybody's always afraid something's going to happen to their kids, but, ... any time they do anything that's scary, she's very worried about it, and I'm generally not.

KT: When you went on these trips, did you go mostly by yourself or did you take your friends or your siblings?

MR: I mostly went by myself.

KT: Wow.

MR: Yes, went by myself.

KT: Was there any reason why you decided to go where you went, or did you just kind of say to yourself, "Hey, let me hitchhike and see where I can get?"

MR: Well, there was that trip in the Pennsylvania Dutch country. I wanted to see the Pennsylvania Dutch country, meet the Amish, ... the Amish and the Mennonites and all these folks. ... I mean, now, you can get in a car and drive there in an hour-and-a-half, but, then, ... it was "west." ... Later, when I got older ... and had a car of my own, I would normally pick up hitchhikers myself, because people would pick me up, and I never had any trouble with anybody, either hitchhiking or picking up hitchhikers. No, it was just that kids were freer. I mean, I don't know, you know, you see a ten-year-old kid riding the subway in New York here, "What's that kid doing here?" you know. "Why's that kid by himself?" you know, and I did it all the time; so did all the other kids. I wasn't the only one who did it. I mean, everybody did it. It was just the way things were. Kids were freer, which, maybe, was helpful to you in the long run. Maybe you developed some street smarts because you had to look after yourself. You knew that you had to; if you didn't do it, it didn't happen. I think it was good.

DR: Can you tell us a little bit about the transition to college from high school? You said you had just started with your love of literature. How did that direct your college career?

MR: Well, I always wanted to be a writer, from sixteen on, from that experience. I didn't do a hell of a lot about it. My first book came out in 1970 and my twelfth came out last Wednesday; ... in 1970, I guess I was thirty-five. So, I didn't do much about the writing. I was too busy building a career and being a father. I'm not sure if I answered your question really.

DR: What was it like to go into college?

MR: Oh, well, when I went to college, I'd say the main thing that happened to me in college was, ... in those days, phys. ed. courses were required. They were part [of the curriculum]; you had to have a certain number of phys. ed. courses. I had a course in swimming. [laughter] Sounds ridiculous, give somebody credit to swim, but I was swimming. ... By the way, this was at Hunter College in the Bronx, which, as such, doesn't exist any longer; it became Lehman College. Hunter College, 68th and Park Avenue in Manhattan, is, was then the main campus, it still is. ... So, I don't know where I went to college. Did I go to Hunter College in the Bronx? Did I go to Hunter College? Did I go to Lehman College? I mean, physically, I went to what's now Lehman College, and I was in the pool and I was swimming and the swimming coach came in and stopped me at the end of the pool. He said, "Where did you learn the breaststroke like that?" and I said, "I don't know. I always breaststroked like that." I had not swum ... in high school, and he said, "How'd you like to be on the swim team?" "I don't know, gee," and I think there's a little thing here that's interesting, in terms of the ... background and the prejudice I had against, in those days, ... some of which I absorbed from my parents, about the Old Country, about Europe, that I, too, wanted to be a hundred percent American, and, when I learned how to swim, I learned breaststroke. I never could swim crawl. I can now, but I couldn't then, and so, I swam breaststroke, but I always felt uncomfortable swimming breaststroke. I always felt that there was something European about breaststroke. This is ridiculous, I know, but that's what all the Europeans who came to my uncle's hotel [swam]. The refugees and everybody, they all swam breaststroke, and so, that's what I learned, but I always thought there was something vaguely un-American about breaststroke. [laughter] I also felt that there was something [improper], I didn't like to say, "Breaststroke," because it seemed to be referring to women's breasts, and, therefore, it made me kind of [feel], you know, I shouldn't say it. I would say, [whispering], "Breaststroke," you know. [laughter] It was ridiculous, but, even to this day, I think, when people are talking about chicken, they say, "What do you want, legs or breast?" "Legs, legs, legs." [laughter] So, I got to be a very good breaststroker, and then, ... I got on the swim team, and then, I became captain of the swim team. My junior and senior year, I was captain of the swim team, and then, butterfly came in. Butterfly came in while I was in college. It had not been a stroke in which you competed. I had to just learn butterfly, which I don't recommend. I don't recommend butterfly to anybody, just destroy your shoulders, and I've had shoulder problems in recent years, torn rotator cuff, and the other one ain't so great either. This one, I had operated on, my right one, and I don't know if it was the butterfly that did it, but, you know, it's a very unnatural stroke, butterfly. ... So, the main thing I did in college was become a swim star, and kept thinking, "Yes, I want to write." Yes, I guess I wrote. I wrote a kind of a novel, which never really went anywhere. I also wrote a one-act play that was produced by the college theater group. So, yes, I did keep writing a little bit, anyway, and then, when I graduated, and then, was drafted, and married, and went to Japan, all within a couple months or

so, I don't know; as a writer, my confidence grows with every year. I mean, I had a book come out last year, a book come out last Wednesday, and I'm working on a book that'll come out in late 2010 or early 2011, right now, and that's almost three books in a row, and almost in three-and-a-half years, three books. ... Beginning with my first book, in 1970, which was based on my doctoral dissertation, I had always thought there were two kinds of people, the people who published books and the people who didn't, and I was in the second category. ... I somehow imagined, "You published a book, you were special. You were better than everybody else," and then, I published my first book. It was published with Princeton University Press, as a matter-of-fact, and kind of made me here at Rutgers, but then thought, "I guess publishing books is not such a big deal. After all, if I could publish a book, anybody could publish a book." [laughter] I don't know that I still feel that way, although I do feel anybody *could* publish a book if they worked hard enough at it. They just have to work awfully hard, and some of us have to work harder than others, and I work very, very hard. I go through ten drafts. I mean, you know, I'm not a genius, I don't get it right the first time, almost never, and so, I work very hard. I'm not sure if I answered your question, Dan.

SI: Had you always wanted to go to college? Was that always in the cards for you?

MR: Yes, I think that whereas in my parents' generation, going to college was a special thing, and both my parents grew up very poor, and that was before everybody; you know, not everybody, but one heck of a lot of, something like sixty percent, of high school graduates go to college in this country, which is extraordinary. I might have been the first generation where people, everybody did go to college. I don't know. ... I never thought that you didn't go to college; it's what you did. It wasn't, "Oh, I'm going to go to college," or, "I'm not going to go to college." ... I never gave it a moment's thought. It was what was expected of me, and I daresay one of the problems with teaching at the University is that, sometimes, you have students who are really here because they want to be here and they really are eager for an education, but, then, you have students who are here just because they're supposed to be here, and I was in college because I was supposed to be there. I did as little work as I possibly could and just worried about swimming more than anything else, spent about half my college life under the water. [laughter] It was ridiculous. ...

SI: Did you commute from home?

MR: It was in the Bronx. I could take the trolley there. There were trolleys, still; I miss trolleys. Trolleys were great, and, well, they didn't pollute. You know, the electricity was all made elsewhere. Of course, the pollution was being done somewhere, but I've always thought, for example, that it's a crime that Rutgers pollutes New Brunswick the way it does, just disgraceful. I mean, there are electric buses, and we should have them. We should be setting the tone, and, yet, we have this huge fleet of buses, the second biggest fleet in the State of New Jersey, after New Jersey Transit, and we pollute this whole town, riding around. I mean, we should have plans, at least for the future, maybe, to build a monorail or to connect our campuses, because we've got five campuses and no way to get to them. We should have bike paths, we could have roller-skating paths, we should have walking paths. ... We have some, but, I think, as a university, we're the State University, we should be setting an example, we should be

leaders, not followers, and one way we should lead is in our transportation. In some ways, it's a shame that we got all that land on the other side of the river for about a buck, you know. It was given to us by the Feds, the old Kilmer Campus.

DR: Camp Kilmer.

MR: Camp Kilmer, which, I understand, was the largest US Army base during World War II for transshipping soldiers. [Editor's Note: As a staging area for the New York Port of Embarkation, Camp Kilmer became one of the largest processing centers, with approximately 1.3 million men passing through on their way overseas, then, receiving over a million returning servicemen at the war's conclusion.]

SI: Port of Embarkation.

MR: Yes, and people coming back in, and New Brunswick, they tell me, in those days, was a wide-open town. This town was nothing but bars and whorehouses, is what I've heard. I mean, it was just a crazy place. There's nothing but soldiers, you know, they had a hundred thousand soldiers across the river, or whatever they had over there at one time, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand, at one time, and this was quite a place. So, I've often thought, you know, sometimes, when somebody gives you a gift, you shouldn't accept it. I mean, playing fields are fine over there, but we've got five campuses now. Well, if you've got five campuses, we've really got to be [planning to], when we have some money, [laughter] build bike paths everywhere, bike racks everywhere, safe ways for students to get to class by bike, electric buses, eventually, a monorail. This university is built for a monorail. It'd be a perfect thing to connect the campuses. I don't know if anybody's thinking about it, but they should, yes. I'm not sure how I got off on that subject. ...

SI: We were talking about how you got to college at Hunter College.

KT: The trolleys.

MR: Yes. Hunter, in the Bronx, by the way, was a place, after World War II, which let GI Bill soldiers in, and it had been all-women, and then, they let soldiers in, and then, the soldiers all graduated. I was in the first class of non-soldiers to go in there, and it had been all-girls, all-women, and Park Avenue, the main part, stayed all-women. Now, as I say, the Bronx Campus is co-ed and is Lehman College, and the Park Avenue Campus is co-ed, too. So, it's changed very, very much.

SI: I was going to ask if the veterans were ...

MR: They were the first, yes.

SI: Did they play any part in school life while you were there?

MR: No, they were gone by the time I got there. They were all gone. There were no veterans. We were in the first class with men admitted. Actually, I was admitted in January, I was admitted in the middle of the year. The first guys were admitted in September. I just graduated with them, because this was another skip. So, I graduated with them, in '55, ... I was two months short of twenty, and then, got married and got drafted and went to Japan.

SI: Did you see people coming in from the Korean War while you were there?

MR: That's an interesting question. I should have, but I have no memory of Korean War vets being there. No, I don't remember any of us being Korean War vets, but, of course, there could have been and I wasn't paying attention.

DR: Was there any concern about you being drafted into the Korean War before it ended?

MR: No, because I was too young. I wouldn't have been drafted. I mean, I got out of high school at sixteen-and-a-half, ... and then, I was in college and I never was facing a draft then. I faced it right after I graduated. ... By the way, I've always felt that, and I hope President Obama brings this into fruition, he's got a hell of a lot of other problems to worry about, which are more important, perhaps, but I've always believed that all of us should do national service, one year of national service. I think it would be good for the country, I think it would be good for students. I would have that one year happen right after high school or [at] eighteen, if you haven't finished high school, and you owe the country one year. ... You could do it in the military or you could do it in psychiatric hospitals, you can go clean up the landscape, you can do some kind of socially useful thing. I think one of the great mistakes this country has made is to have an all-volunteer army. I think it's absolutely wrong. I think an all-volunteer army is a recipe for disaster, and Iraq is that disaster. You could not have had the Iraq War if college kids were ... getting drafted, because you all would have been raising holy hell. ... To me, it's been very strange, because I was on campus towards the end of the Vietnam War and the campus was ablaze with ferment, and Iraq, to me, was even less something you could justify than Vietnam was and nobody said boo around here, and I think it was simply because it just didn't mean anything to you, and I can understand that. If I had been you, it wouldn't have meant anything to me, anymore than the Korean War meant anything to me while I was in college, but, yes, ... I believe in it very strongly. We have a mercenary army. You have a mercenary army, you're volunteers, you go where they send you, you don't complain. You don't have any say in the matter, you're not even a citizen, in some ways, ... when you volunteer and you're in a mercenary army. I think a mercenary army is a recipe for Fascism, and I think George Bush took, George W. Bush, ... very much took advantage of that. He had a mercenary army and he sent them into a war which was absolutely unnecessary, and not only is it unnecessary, which has brought disaster on this country; the main disaster it's brought on the country, which nobody, almost nobody, ever talks about is, you removed the bulwark against Iranian expansionism. The Iranians weren't going anywhere. They were afraid of Saddam Hussein. ... We backed Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War. Rumsfeld, who was Secretary of Defense then, went over, shook hands, gave a big hug, you know. [Editor's Note: Professor Rockland is referring to the United States' support for Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.] We loved Iraq and Saddam Hussein, [laughter] not that we should have loved them, but they were

the bulwark to Iranian expansion. You take that bulwark out of the way and the Iranians go crazy. That's exactly what the Iranians are doing. I mean, Bush, to me, is not only a war criminal, for creating a war that had absolutely no justification whatsoever, but, also, he should be tried for high crimes and misdemeanors, here in this country, for removing the bulwark to Iranian expansionism. Anyway, it has nothing to do with my life, it's just my views, yes.

SI: All right, it has been about fifteen minutes; let us conclude this session. We will come back later on and continue with your life, get into your time in the Navy in more depth and your time in the Foreign Service, and then, your time at Rutgers.

MR: ... Yes, and I had one year in state government, before I came to Rutgers. ...

SI: With the Chancellor of Higher Education.

MR: Yes, I was the Chancellor's executive assistant, a guy, Ralph Dungan, who was part of the "Irish Mafia" in the White House with Kennedy. [Editor's Note: Ralph Dungan served as Special Assistant to the President from 1961 to 1964, as Ambassador to Chile from 1964 to 1967, and as Chancellor of Higher Education in the State of New Jersey from 1967 to 1977.]

SI: Yes.

MR: And he and I had met and become friendly, and he hired me, when I came out of the Foreign Service, to be his executive assistant in Trenton, running higher education in the state. ... Then, when I came to Rutgers, by the way, the first three years, I came as a dean, ... and I'll probably have some interesting stories to tell about what it was like to be a dean for those years of immense ferment. I mean, I came out of the establishment and it was like going from the frying pan into the fire. Also, the reason why, I think you'll want to know this, ... I resigned from the Foreign Service, I had had a year in Washington, two years in Argentina and four years in Spain. I could now speak Spanish as well as I'm speaking English right now. I'd translated a book from Spanish into English, and where was I to go? Where would ... they want to send a guy with that kind of background? Vietnam. I was supposed to go to Vietnam as the US cultural attaché, and that was the insanity of Vietnam, I mean, that I could be so much more useful elsewhere and it was [the priority]; so, jeez, I'm sorry to go on so long. ...

SI: No, we appreciate it. This is exactly the sort of thing we want, and I hope that you will come back for two or three more sessions.

MR: Jeez, [laughter] what an ego trip, and you'll give me a transcript of this, you say?

SI: Yes, you will get a transcript.

MR: ... Well, I will, because especially if I get a transcript or I get a CD, or whatever, or both. ... In a way, I'm sharing my life with my children. That would mean a great deal to me.

SI: No problem. This concludes this session. Thank you very much, Professor Rockland.

MR: It really has been my pleasure. You got me hooked. I'm addicted to this. [laughter]

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Jessica Ondusko 2/24/10

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 3/22/10

Reviewed by Michael Aaron Rockland 3/31/10