RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT W. SNYDER

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Professor Robert Snyder on October 25, 2012 in Newark, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth and …

Paul Clemens: Paul Clemens.

SI: Okay and thank you very much for having us here today.

Robert Snyder: Thank you.

SI: To begin, can you tell us where and when you were born?

RS: Yes, I was born May 27, 1955 at Royal Hospital in the Bronx, New York.

SI: Okay. What were your parents' names?

RS: My father was Max Snyder. My mother is Mildred Snyder, maiden name Mildred Ossman. My father was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who came to the United States early in the twentieth century. They settled in Connecticut. His parents met in Hartford, Connecticut and he was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1914. His mother was fairly well off in Russia and had a substantial education with tutors. She grew up in the city of Odessa. She was well off and still at the same time of where pogroms where she grew up, and then, grew up with some fear of that. [Editor's Note: Pogroms were attacks on Jewish civilians in the Russian Empire in the 1800s and early 1900s.] There was discussion always, in the family, what that was like. My father's dad was from Kiev, not quite as well off I think as my grandmother's family. His father was involved in a number of things; two of them were sort of illicit. One was he sort of made booze in some capacity and the other one was he would smuggle people out of Russia, mostly Jewish guys that didn't want to serve in the czarist Army. When my grandfather's time to be in the czar's Army came, he didn't show up for induction. Soldiers came to the house, started searching for my grandfather, according to the story. My great grandfather tried to mollify them by giving them stuff to drink. They got drunk. They still didn't find him. They were getting drunker. They were looking for the guy, and then, they found my grandfather and it was very tense for a few minutes there. They put him up against the wall. According to one family story, they had bayonets out and at that point, as the family story goes, my great grandfather bribed the soldiers to let him go. Soon after that my grandfather left for America. He wound up in all the small industrial cities of Connecticut looking for work--Bridgeport, New Haven, Hartford; settled into Hartford. Worked at the Remington Arms factory, my grandmother worked at the Remington Arms factory, and they lived in a Jewish neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut.

SI: Were they alive when you were growing up?

RS: Yes, yes.

SI: So, you heard this directly from them?

RS: I heard these from my aunt, my father and my grandmother. My grandfather died when I was very young. I was no more than five I think, but I was aware of his death, but my

grandmother I talked to a lot about life in Russia, and my aunt and father both talked a lot about their parents' lives and stories in Russia. I think it's fair to say that from my father and his sister, who had a heard a lot of the family stories about Russia, there was no sort of nostalgia about the old country. They're glad they got out. They were very glad to be in America. They thought it was much better than the life they would have had if they stayed in Russia.

SI: What about your mother's side of the family?

RS: My mom was the descendant on one side of her family of Dutch settlers who came to the Hudson Valley in the seventeenth century, the Van Alstynes who settled in a place called Kinderhook in upstate New York. To that early branch there were also ancestors, one of whom was a captured Hessian mercenary who was paroled after either Saratoga or the Revolution and stayed in upstate New York and lived on happily as a minister and farmer for the rest of his life. [Editor's Note: The American Revolution occurred from 1775 to 1783. The Battle of Saratoga occurred in 1777 in Stillwater, Saratoga County, New York.] Other relatives were from England. My mom's maternal grandmother was from England. Her paternal grandmother was an immigrant from Germany. So, my mom's family was Dutch, going way back to the seventeenth century, then English and German and about those admixtures.

My maternal grandfather was a transit worker on the New York City subway system and my maternal grandmother was a young working woman in New York City. She worked in department stores. She worked at a candy factory. I interviewed her for a Livingston College oral history class once and she confided to me, that she had once been fired because she was working delivery in packages at a department store and she couldn't afford a new pair of shoes, so her feet hurt all the time. So, she sat down to ease her feet and the boss came looking for her and she wasn't around so he fired her on the spot. She was quite poor when she grew up, but sort of very respectable at the same time and I think these were sort of tense elements in her life.

My grandparents on my mom's side met at Coney Island. My grandfather and his buddies were walking up the boardwalk one way and these girls were walking up the other way, and according to the story that they both told, he spotted her and said that's the girl I want to meet and they met. To make a long story, married and lived in the Bronx, and my parents met right after World War II in New York City.

SI: Was your father in the service?

RS: Yes.

SI: Okay.

RS: My father grew up in northern Manhattan, the Bronx, with occasional moves into Brooklyn. The family moved from Hartford to New York City in the early 1920s. According to the versions that I've heard from many relatives, my grandfather felt stifled in Hartford. He felt he was supporting too many relatives. He thought if he struck out on his own and he went to New York, he'd make it really big. He never made it really big. He never made a lot of money. He was

basically a painter in a one-man contracting firm. He would fix up apartments. He dabbled in real estate, never made any big money on it and I think this was sort of very hard on him.

My father was, I think, poor growing up. He had a very vivid memory that he described to me of watching his mother go knocking from door to door in the apartment building where she lived, trying to mooch pennies from neighbors so she could buy a bag of potatoes to make supper for everybody that night. They often lived on credit and they could never pay back their debts, so shopkeepers would get tired of giving her credit because she could never pay up. So, she would walk ever further out into distant neighborhoods to get credit from the new shopkeeper who didn't know her. The end result was she was running up this string of bills that she couldn't pay and walking ever farther every day to buy groceries.

SI: Did you get a sense that that was related to the Great Depression?

RS: When I talked to my dad and I interviewed my dad, and when I talked about the chronology of his life, it seems to me that some of the poverty would have preceded the Great Depression, but there's no underestimating the impact of the Great Depression on the way my dad viewed the world. He was from a family of ardent New Deal Democrats. My grandfather was probably a socialist and I know that from my uncle, my dad's brother, who once said that he had been a sort of Norman Thomas type socialist, but firmly not a communist. [Editor's Note: Norman Thomas lived from 1884 to 1968. He was a Presbyterian minister and socialist. He ran for President six times for the Socialist Party.]

My uncle remembers, as a kid, making a big mistake. My grandfather sent him out to buy a Yiddish language newspaper, a specific newspaper, and when my uncle got to the newsstand it wasn't there. So, he said, "Alright, I'll buy another Yiddish language newspaper," and he brought that one home. And my grandfather was furious that one way or the other, this was the wrong newspaper to darken his door and he was furious that any son of his had paid money for such a rag.

My father was very much a New Deal Democrat. [Editor's Note: The New Deal was President Franklin Roosevelt's package of social and economic programs to assist Americans during the Great Depression.] He said, "If you want to call that socialism, you can call it socialism." He would say, "I believe the government has an obligation to help people when overwhelming economic crises harm people and put them in jeopardy, the government has an obligation to step in." I asked him as a child, in '64, when Lyndon Johnson ran for President, "Dad, why are we Democrats?" He said to me, "Because Democrats believe in putting the money where it will help people first. If people are out of work, Democrats will use money to put people back to work, immediately. Republicans will give money to rich people, hope they'll invest it, and then, hope the money trickles down to the rest of us. I think that's a terrible idea. We're Democrats. I learned that in the Great Depression and that's it. I can't imagine a Republican doing anything worthwhile."

My mom was not poor growing up. Her father was a transit worker. The hours were incredibly long. He worked six days a week, often twelve hours a day with no holidays, endless work schedule, often worked nights, but they had money. They were economically secure. She

remembers that at one point in her life, when she's figured out the Great Depression, they had no whip cream on their Jell-O anymore and she's concluded that that was probably a sign that money was tight in the household.

My mother also had a grandmother who was an astute small business woman who ran a delicatessen, a candy store and other things in the Bronx. She brought in some money. My maternal grandfather was also a good card player. That brought in some money too. The end result, she was economically comfortable and I would guess towards the end of the Depression, beginning of World War II, she actually moved into a free standing single family house in the Morris Park section of the Bronx with a combination of her father's money, her grandmother's money. So, she was, economically, comfortable in a way that my dad was not.

My mom went to Christopher Columbus High School, and then, Hunter College. She started at Hunter in 1942. She said her father would vastly prefer that she went to work right away and brought in money for the family, but her grandmother encouraged her to go to college and by living at home, working, and going to Hunter when it was free, my mother got a college education.

For my dad, college was never on the agenda. He worked with his father for much of his teen years and early adulthood as a painter, as a small contractor.

He said that growing up in the '30s was a difficult time. He said, when you looked overseas you could see fascism rising in Europe. There was a depression at home and as he would say pointedly, "Until Roosevelt, there was no safety net for anybody." He said to me that you could see war rising. He knew of guys in Brooklyn who had joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. He did not. He didn't know anybody first hand, but he knew of them from the neighborhood. [Editor's Note: During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the XV International Brigade, also known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, fought for the Second Spanish Republic. Approximately 2,800 US citizens volunteered for the brigade.]

He said, "Throughout, as the '30s progressed, you looked at Europe," he said, "and thought, 'Will there be another world war? Will the United States get involved in that war?'" When the draft resumed in '40, he said the only question in his mind was when. He thought it was so obvious that the war was coming.

SI: Did he ever talk about any encounters with the German Bund when he was living in that area? [Editor's Note: The German term "*bund*" translates to "association" and was used by a number of German-American political, social and cultural groups. The German-American *Bund* (based on the earlier Friends of New Germany) operated from 1936 until December 1941, when it was outlawed as a pro-Nazi group.]

RS: No.

SI: Okay.

RS: He lived in northern Manhattan, Washington Heights where there was the Christian Front and Christian Mobilizers were active. [Editor's Note: The Christian Front and Christian Mobilizers were American anti-Semitic groups active during the 1930s and 1940s.] He remembers walking along streets and seeing big rallies and hearing one Irish American guy in an Irish accent say, "And other day my friend was saying, and the other day my friend was saying." There's a lot of innuendo. It was very sort of right wing, as I understood my father, as he related it, tinged with anti-Semitism and my father wanted to shout out, "So, sure, who's your friend, Adolf Hitler?" But he didn't, he just listened.

There were a lot of street rallies. There was street violence of Irish Catholic street gangs against Jewish kids in the neighborhood at that time. My father and my aunt and my uncles never talked about that. I don't think that touched their lives. I don't think they saw it.

My father was aware of tensions. There's no question about that because he saw the street rallies, but my Uncle Tom's best friend was Irish. They would follow sports events together. My Aunt Helen hung out with a crowd of kids in Highbridge Park who included an Irish kid; one of her best friends married an Irish American guy. So, as much as they were aware of [anti-Semitism]--my dad was certainly aware of anti-Semitism and my mother could talk at length about anti-Semitism in the New York job market, even though she wasn't Jewish--they did not see that as a violent threat in their day to day lives. The Bund was not something he talked about.

My mother on the other hand talks about job hunting in the '40s in which she would go with some of her girlfriends who were Jewish. My mom's last name was Ossman, which is a German name, but it could sound Jewish to somebody. And she remembers filling out a job form and they would ask you for your religion. She puts down Protestant, and then, the guy calls her back in and he grills her and says, "Are you sure you're Protestant?" She said, "Yes."

RS: She remembers what girls would sometimes do is they would wear a cross on the way into an interview because that would sort of fend off the question. My father said there were just places where you would never look for work. He said it was understood they would never hire a Jewish guy.

PC: Was your mother Catholic?

RS: No, Episcopal actually.

PC: Episcopal.

RS: Episcopal, yes, yes.

SI: Did you get a sense that on either side of the family, religion was very important? Were they devout?

RS: No. They weren't religious no. I mean, my mom went to church. My grandfather was a vestryman in an Episcopal Church, Saint Martha's in the Bronx. They were sort of an anomaly in New York City, statistically, in those years--working class, Protestant, Republicans. I mean, this

is sort of unusual. I talked to my grandfather about politics a few times and he saw Democrats as crooks who will always get you into a war. He said, "Every time there's a Democratic president there's a war; World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Democratic presidents all." She was a Republican growing up.

Her best friend, my Aunt Tessie, a fictive-kin aunt, was Jewish and Tessie was an ardent supporter of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, but my mom was a Republican until she met my dad.

Religion did not matter a lot to my mother. She was Protestant, I think sort of philo-Semitic in a certain way. Skeptical about the Catholic Church, she thought it was a conservative institution. Only later, years later, I would say like in the last two years, I took her for her drive in her old neighborhood and she described to me how she had a Catholic boyfriend for about a year when she was a teenager. She went to a dance with him and the priest asked her what church she belonged to and she said, "Saint Martha's." He said, "That's not a Catholic Church." My mom was completely taken aback, and then, the romance was off soon after that.

So, my mom lived and moved in a circle that was fairly diverse. She had a number of friends that she made in high school and college that she remained close to the rest of her life--my Aunt Tessie, who's Jewish, her parents were immigrants; my Aunt Inez, whose parents were immigrants from the border of Northern Italy and France; another woman who was Italian American; and another woman who was Swedish. So, my mom's crew was fairly mixed.

My father was from a more Jewish world in that when he names the guys that he knew most of them were Jewish, but he was very active in a working men's canoeing scene on the Hudson River. On the northern end of Manhattan there's a string of boathouses north of what's now the George Washington Bridge and he said he knew there were certain boat houses you couldn't join if you were Jewish, so he wouldn't join. He would join boathouses that he knew accepted people of all religions. His two main ones were Sinclair's Boathouse and DeGeorge's Boathouse. In the long way, that's how he met my mother, down there, but in those boathouses you would get guys of all religions. He knew a guy who was German American, probably an immigrant from Germany or the son of German immigrants, who went back just before the war, and then, never came back. The understanding was that he had to join the German Army and that was it for him.

SI: What did your mother study at Hunter?

RS: She studied business subjects. She was very concerned, at the time, she said, that she'd be able to get a job when she got out. So, she studied business subjects and the teaching of business subjects. So, she assumed that way she could get a job teaching, steno, typing, bookkeeping or she could go to work as a secretary and a bookkeeper. It was clear to me in conversations that my mom valued her education very highly. She was very proud of it. It was very rigorous.

Only when I was really an adult, I would say at least fifty years old, that she started to explain to me how hard she found it. She thought that her first year at Hunter was incredibly difficult. She could've attended Hunter High School, but she backed off. The commute was long. It was raining the first two weeks so she attended a regional high school in the city in the Bronx,

Christopher Columbus. But she valued her Hunter education very highly. Among my aunts, she had the reputation of being one that always studied for exams, who was always ready to take the test. She was not much aware of a political scene at Hunter College in the sense that I've read memoirs by people like Bella Abzug which will lead you to believe that everybody was in the Young Communist League. [Editor's Note: Bella Abzug lived from 1920 to 1998. She was a lawyer, women's rights leader and a socialist. She served as a US Representative, representing New York, from 1971 to 1977.] That was not my mother's world. My Aunt Tessie knew people like that, who was very much a New Deal Democrat, but my mom didn't. My mom belonged to a group that sort of raised money for good causes, was a kind of sorority without being a sorority and admitted everybody. And again, that was very important to my mom that everybody be included.

She remembers a faculty that had some very interesting people--one young woman from Spain, who had probably fled Spain after, or during the Spanish Civil War. And she spoke very highly, for years still, of a German man who had fled Nazi Germany and wound up teaching law at Hunter College. I think my mother has always had a bit of frustration, like many women of her generation, that her career never brought her the intellectual and professional rewards that her tremendous intelligence and work ethic should have yielded. So, she was a secretary for lawyers, basically, for a lot of her life, or a secretary for a judge for a lot of her life.

But she still goes back and she talks about this professor at Hunter who was a good guy. She said he told a lot of stories about how he escaped from Nazi Germany, which was sort of off the point, but he was interesting, she said.

Once she made some point in class and he pulled her over afterwards and he said, and she always does an imitation of his accent, "Ah, Ms. Ossman, you have ze good legal mind" [she always imitated his German accent]. My mother, fifty years later, sixty years later, tells this story. Clearly this praise from a legal scholar from Germany still meant something to her to the end of her life.

SI: I wanted to go back to your father for a few minutes.

RS: Sure.

SI: He was working with his father in this small painting contracting business. Did any of the jobs that they worked on, were they related to the New Deal programs like the WPA, or was it all private or individual jobs? [Editor's Note: The New Deal was President Franklin Roosevelt's package of legislation to assist Americans during the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration, or WPA, employed millions of Americans in public works projects.]

RS: It was all private work. It was very much the world of sort of small scale Jewish contractors and real estate developers in the Bronx. So, for example, they would rehab apartments. They would paint apartments. What my grandfather would do often--it was sort of a very dog eat dog world, so everybody's broke, nobody has any money--was approach a landlord and say, "Look, if you let me live rent free in your building, I'll do all the painting and rehab work." And that was

good, but then two things would happen. One is tenants were always moving in order to get a month's free rent because in some neighborhoods there was gluts on housing, right. So, you could always finagle a landlord to give you incentive to move in, like maybe a month's free rent or a stove, or a paint job. So, there was my grandfather getting free rent by maybe agreeing to paint the place. But while he's the super, other tenants were there saying, "Well, we'll pay the rent in a month. We'll pay you the rent in two months. We'll pay the rent in three months." So, they run out without paying the rent. So, then there's not enough money to maintain upkeep and it becomes harder and harder and harder. Its poor people all trying to sort of get by and there's just not enough money in the neighborhood, right?

They sometimes moved more than once a year. I mean, I once asked my father, "Where'd you live?"

He said, "Everywhere," like utterly exhausted, it showed in his voice.

I said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, you could get a month's rent free to move in and we would do this again and again and again."

It never really pans out that well for you after a while because you're not bringing in enough money yourself. You're living rent free, but you're not making money. So, they were broke a lot when he was a kid.

At one point he found some money at a park buried in a can and he dug up the can and he brought it to the police station. And he told me the story very pointedly, how he brought it to the police station, and he brings it to one guy who's like a lieutenant or something, a policeman of some rank, and he pointedly says to me, "And I know he was Jewish." And he goes, "They open up the can, it's got money in it." My dad says, "I want to turn this in. I want to be a good citizen." The officer says to him, "Okay, let's put it in the safe in the back of the precinct, but I'm going to give you a receipt."

As they head in the back of the precinct, there's this bunch of guys playing cards around a table--my dad assumed were detectives--and the officer in uniform says to my dad, "Don't let them touch this money until I give you a receipt for the full value." He gives my dad a receipt and the can money goes into a safe. He goes home proud of being a good citizen and his parents are furious that he didn't bring the money home. [laughter]

So, he gets written up in the newspapers and the accounts vary so widely from what really happened that he was eternally skeptical about journalism for the rest of his life. Eventually, nobody did turn up to claim the money and the family got the money and his mother could pay off some of the bills and he was sort of pleased with that.

My father lived an economically tight existence. I think that started to ease by the end of the '30s because he was doing things with his friends that suggested he had a little money. By then--by '39, '40--he was doing a lot of canoeing, a lot of skiing. He was actually one of the first people to

take up downhill skiing in his generation. He clearly had some discretionary income by the end of the '30s. What did he spend it on? He spent it on skiing, ice skating, canoeing. He made a skate sail, things like that.

SI: How did he get involved in skiing? It is not really a sport associated with urban dwellers.

RS: No, it's not. [laughter] It's not at all. I think there were two things going on. He loved to read. He would go to libraries. He said as a child he would go to public libraries and spend whole days there just reading books and he read a lot of Jack London. I was very amused to learn that generations apart we read a book called *Runners of the Forest*, which we both enjoyed. It was about young American frontiersman on the frontier.

When my father lived in Washington Heights there was a lot of park land. I'm writing a book about Washington Heights now so I know its terrain well. There was a lot of park land on the east and west sides of the neighborhood, overlooking the Harlem and Hudson Rivers. He would swim often in the Harlem River with a kind of odd stroke, one is like a crawl overhand. The other hand goes sideways to clear the garbage out of your way; you learn to swim that way. [Editor's Note: The Forest Runners is a 1908 novel by Joseph Altsheler. It is the second volume of his *Young Trailers* series. He lived from 1862 to 1919.]

Then, the Hudson--you could take a ferry across the Hudson to the Palisades and you would do that a lot, and then, he and his friends would climb and hike up and down the Palisades.

Then, when he was about sixteen, he really got into the idea of canoeing. Where the idea came from, I don't know, but he and a guy in his neighborhood scrounged a lot. So, my dad was sixteen, it would have been about 1930. He and a guy in his neighborhood scrounged a lot of lumber and built a boat, and they brought it down to the Hudson River and they pushed it in, and it immediately sank. So, they had to do better, but they did do better and, eventually, by the late '30s, was doing a lot of paddling out of these boat clubs and canoe clubs along the Hudson River.

He picked up skiing before he joined the Army. It had to be around '39. So, clearly his economic circumstances were better by then. He was out of high school. He was living at home with his parents. He gave his paycheck to his mother. He was always emphatic about that, but he must have had a little money left over at the end of the day to buy stuff, so he bought himself a pair of skis and he and his friends they would ski in Massachusetts. They often drove to Pittsfield and skiing was like in its infancy. He remembers places where you would walk--you would climb the mountain with your skis over your shoulder, and then, ski down. He remembers another place where a farmer would load you into his truck. The farmer would drive up the back of the mountain, let you off at the top, you would ski down. Then, the farmer would drive down, put you in the truck, you'd do this again and again, but Pittsfield was the place that he talked about most.

He also, I suspect before World War II, had bought a pair of speed skates--racer skates, long blades--and then built a skate sail, which is kind of looks like a triangular kite with a clear panel in it. You throw it over your shoulder and you got on a lake which is frozen and you become a

human ice boat. My father built an extra-large skate sail so he'd go even faster. So, you could easily hit the speed of the wind, quickly, on it. And he loved it. He did that a lot.

In downhill skiing, the joke among his friends was that, and he said himself, his favorite thing in downhill skiing, at the end of the day, was to wait until everybody had cleared out and point yourself down the mountain as fast as you could possibly go until you hit the bottom, and then, you had to stop. His friend at the bottom would watch him coming down and say, "Boy, look at that guy coming down. Oh, my gosh. He's either awfully good or he just don't give a damn." That was my father's skiing style.

So, for my father, I think he was sort of underemployed in a lot of ways, but took tremendous satisfaction in the life he had in the outdoors. With his friends, their idea of a good time was they would, on Friday night, get off work, go down to the boathouse, load a lot of gear into a canoe, and then, paddle up the Hudson River and camp out in Croton. I mean, for them--there was a big peninsula with a camp site there--that was an ideal weekend. As they got older, they would drive up to Lake George. They would camp out on the islands on Lake George. So, that was where he also developed a fondness for public parks. Between the Palisades Interstate Parks on the Hudson River and Lake George, he really saw public parks as a godsend and public parks and public libraries were enormously important to him that way. For my mom, the key thing was the public college system. She said there was no way she could have gone to college without Hunter's free tuition and she thought it was vitally important that the city. … In some ways, she thought free tuition was more important than open admission at the city university as she reflected on it years later.

SI: Any of these places your father would go for recreation, did he ever say that they were turned away because they were Jewish, that there was any anti-Semitism?

RS: Well, there was a boat club in northern Manhattan. He said, "It's understood. You couldn't get in there if you were Jewish." I mean, he knew guys that had belonged to it. You could just see it. It was not a separate world, but you just knew it, that you wouldn't get accepted. So, he would never try to join there.

SI: Are any of these areas in upstate New York?

RS: I mean, now I know looking back a bit, knowing a little history of the Adirondacks, that was an issue there at times. On the other hand, and this would have been right after the war, my mom and my Aunt Tessie remember going up to Lake George for weekend together. And they went to a travel agent in New York City to book a hotel, and this would have been like '46, '47. The travel agent said to them, in complete candor as if she wasn't saying anything weird, "Well, at Lake George we have hotels for Jewish clientele, Christian clientele, and a mixed clientele. What would you ladies like?"

My aunt and my mom go, "Oh, mixed, mixed." I mean, they were shocked that anybody would say this to them.

PC: I am too.

RS: Yes, but this is after World War II, but my mom says in retrospect--I've talked to her a lot about this--was aware of religious prejudice because she had a lot of Jewish friends and she'd hang with them and she'd just see what was going on, right.

She said, "Race was a different matter." In retrospect, she says, its mind boggling that she didn't think more about the fact there were no African American employees in any of the offices she worked in. She walked through New York City as a grown woman, a mature woman, in the '90s and she said she'd see white and black secretaries having a drink after work together. She said, "This is a really big change, never would have happened in my world--the New York City of the 1940s. There would've been no black secretaries." She just remembers once being on the job at one office and an African American man came in, formally dressed, clearly a really smart guy, eager to get a job and he hands off her resume and he's looking for work and my mom just thinks to herself, "You're never going to get a job here."

In all my conversations about it, the fact that there was anti-Semitism directly towards her friends was something she was very much aware of. Racial prejudice, which she said is clearly apparent in retrospect, was something she didn't think about as much at the time. She's embarrassed by that.

My father knew a little bit more about black people. He knew a black kid in his neighborhood. Harlem bleeds off into Washington Heights in a very ragged way. My uncle talked about once being up at this spot called Coogan's Bluff that overlooked the Polo Grounds and they were watching Joe Louis fight in the Polo Grounds and I mean, they were watching from a great distance, right. Louis wasn't doing very well and my uncle and his buddy look around, like we're the only white guys here and if Louis loses it could get tricky, getting nervous and Louis wins and there's like jubilation.

My father remembers driving down the street with a bunch of his buddies in a car. Louis had just won a fight and they're stopped on a street by a crowd of black guys and a guy shouts, "Who's the greatest guy in the world?" There's one only, obvious one answer, right. "Joe Louis." They waved, and cheered, and waved them through.

Anti-Semitism in different ways loomed larger, both in my parent's live than any kind of sort of racial prejudice that they could talk about. [Editor's Note: Joe Louis lived from 1914 to 1981. He was an African American boxer and, during his lifetime, the longest reigning heavyweight boxing champion in history. He held the title from 1937 to 1949.]

SI: Well, tell us a little bit about what your father told you about his time in the service?

PC: Can I add one question?

RS: Sure, yes, sure.

PC: It seems to fit better with what you just talked about. When and how aware were they about what was going on in Germany under Hitler? To what extent did that affect their lives? To what extent did they know about it? Did they lose family in Odessa and Kiev? They must have.

RS: My father said they had--according to my aunt, my father, and others--relatives in Russia who they corresponded with into the '30s. Then, in the '30s, that correspondence stopped. Now I once brought this up with a Soviet dissident who I met when I was a journalist and he said, "Look, by the '30s, under Stalin, it was really dangerous to write to somebody in America." They could very well have been alive, but fearful of the implications of writing to somebody in the U.S.

Years later, at an exhibit on [the] Holocaust, I came across the names of people who shared family last names [with me]. I have no way of knowing if they were relatives at all, but it happened in one of the towns where I think my grandmother lived. My grandmother's maiden name was Slatnick. The father and sons were like already away in the Soviet Army, but the Germans roll into town and the family tried to hide and they were turned in by neighbors, and then, shot by the Germans. One of them was left alive and they told her to bury the family members, but the family members weren't obviously dead yet. She said, "How can I bury people who are not dead," so then they shot her.

I have no way of knowing if they were my relatives or not. It's just the last name in the same town, like one of my grandparents came from, but I always found the story utterly harrowing, but having said that, neither of them [grandparents or adult relatives] knew anybody in specific who suffered in those years.

My Aunt Tess on the other hand, my mom's closest friend, her parents had immigrated from Russia and made their way, eventually, to the United States and my Aunt Tess remembers her parents listening to the radio, and then, looking at the map and tracing the advance of the German Army and then, when they figured out the German Army had reached their hometown, just sort of shaking their heads with expressions of total grief, you know, this is going to be awful, but they didn't know anybody who was in a concentration camp or who was a survivor or anything like that. Neither of them talked about that. My uncle, my father's brother, had a girlfriend who was a refugee or had been in a concentration camp, now that I think about it, who made her way to America, but that was about it. Not before the war, they did not know anybody who was a refugee before the war.

My mom knew that teacher from Germany at Hunter during the war and even for the fact that my father lived in Washington Heights, which had a large German Jewish community, he was not much aware of that, didn't talk much about that. Yes, he said German Jews have a reputation for being very German. He remembers after the war there was an argument in a place where he worked. The war was over now, people knew about Hitler. There was this one German Jewish guy saying nice things about Germany still and some of the guys he said were apoplectic, like, "How can you say nice things about Germany? We just finished a war with them." My father sort of shrugged and he said, "Well, German Jews tend to be very German," but that was about it. They [my parents] were not touched by the Holocaust or the rise of fascism in Germany directly in their circle of friends and family that I can recall.

So, my father told me that after the draft came back it was sort of obvious. He said the United States was going to war, the question was only when. He was really skilled as a mechanic. He was a brilliant mechanic. There's no other word for it. He was a genius with machinery. I am not. He was also very good with small boats. He had spent from about '30 on tinkering with small boats, so he thought, "Well, I'll join the Coast Guard. That'll be sort of obvious."

So, he goes down to the Coast Guard and he gets turned down, and the guy that turns him down has only four fingers on one hand. He said, "I don't get it. Why are you turning me down?"

The guy says, "Well, I think you're overweight." My father was 5'6" 160 pounds, incredibly muscular. He looked like a middleweight boxer, basically, and he's like, "This is weird. Why are they? Strange."

He then decides, "I'll try to join the Navy." The Navy says, "Well, if we take you in the Navy, we're going to send you to the South Pacific. You've had this infection of something in the past, like this pilonidal cyst, it's going to act up. I can tell. We don't want you in the Navy."

In retrospect, it's really hard for me, given the reputation of the Navy for anti-Semitism in the 1940s, to think that they weren't just sending him away. It makes no sense. It makes no sense. He was a guy who was really skillful with small boats. He was a really great mechanic. He's the guy you want running an engine room. He had imagined that he would captain landing craft and small boats and it's just like a natural extension of what he'd been doing all his life. So, he said, "Well, screw this." He was kind of disappointed.

He was involved in some kind of program to train people for what to do in the event of an air raid. He said there was an anticipation of something tied up with civil defense. He took training for that. He liked it very, very much. They learned how to rescue people and the lesson he remembers best is this veteran fireman getting up in front of the class of guys and saying, "Alright, look, here's the ax. I know you all joined because you want to knock down a door with an axe. It's truly exciting. The bottom line is, in New York City, most apartment doors are open. Try the door first. It's much faster." But he learned all sorts of knot tying and things like that, and rope work, and enjoyed it very much.

Then, eventually, his draft notice and came. It's funny. It was like my bedtime stories as a kid. He would repeat to me this story of [the] letter coming from the draft board. He would recite it to me and say, "The letter ran something like this, 'Greetings from the President of the United States. Our country is at war and we need soldiers. You are hereby ordered to report to your local draft board for induction into the armed forces of the United States of America.'" He describes going down to Whitehall [the induction center on Whitehall street] and swearing in, down in Lower Manhattan. Then, going back to the Bronx and getting all his stuff together, you know, toothbrush, and then, going off to basic training, and then, he was in the Army. He had two brothers who were also in the Army with him, in different postings, at the same time, and then, a sister, my Aunt Helen, who was at home.

PC: The turndown by the Coast Guard and the Navy, was that before or after December 7th?

RS: Before.

PC: Okay, so he was trying to get in before …

RS: He was trying to get in before Pearl Harbor, yes. [Editor's Note: Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, thrusting the United States into the Second World War.]

PC: Okay.

RS: He remembers Pearl Harbor. He remembers getting the word about Pearl Harbor and what he remembers was a very interesting range of reactions. A lot of the guys said, "The Japanese, cheap lightbulbs, shoddy consumer goods, we'll lick them in no time." This war was going to be over in a day. I mean, that was a very common reaction. It was not universal, but a very common reaction, he said. "We'll lick them in no time." He said, "When you thought about Japan," he said, "you thought about cheap goods, shoddily made, that would fall apart in a minute."

My mother remembers a similar reaction. Only my Aunt Tess, who knew somebody who had some direct experience with the war in Europe, was really shaken because she saw the prospect of a long, grim war.

I asked my mother about those early days and she said to me that she had no doubt that it could be difficult, but she also had no doubt that the United States would defeat Japan. Her feelings were, "Okay, Japan has attacked the United States. It's obvious what's going to happen. The Army and Navy will fight their way across the Pacific. They will defeat Japan and they'll surrender. It's going to happen. It'll take a long time." She wrote a prize winning essay about this in her high school which ended with the line, "We can, we will, we must." She had no doubts.

My father, his memories were less about my mother's sense of certitude than all the guys around him saying, "Oh, the Japanese, knock them over no problem. They're just cheap." I mean, it was clearly tinged with racism for sure, right, but they saw no threat from Japan. It would be over. It would be taken care of.

So, my dad went into training. He trained in a variety of places around the United States--in the South, where he was shocked to encounter Jim Crow, as was my uncle, who also did time training in the South; utterly shocked to find Jim Crow in southern base towns.

My dad was also shocked by the way black GIs got treated. Over time he became a sergeant and he was in charge of a barracks. A group of African American GIs were in transit and my father had space in his barracks. It made no sense to make them travel all night to their ultimate destination, and he remembers saying to the officer in charge of the unit, "You guys can sleep in my barracks tonight, and then, continue the journey tomorrow morning. That would be fine." When the officer above my father found out about this he was furious at my dad and told my dad

to get back to them and tell them under no terms were they going to sleep in a barracks with white GIs. My father was angry. He was sort of mortified.

They put the guys up either in shabby conditions or made them keep travelling and I remember my father watching really carefully. "Okay, so they're going to screw the enlisted men. What are they going to do about the officers in this outfit?" Whatever they did, he thought they treated the officers shabbily too. He was really angry about it.

He did an infantry training course. It made a big impression on him. He said you got to crawl along, crawl across this field where they're firing bullets over your head. He had to learn how to deal with tear gas. You go into a tent that's filled with tear gas with your mask on, learn to breathe with a mask. He remembers getting done with the course and he did a lot of active maneuvers with your gas mask on, and then, he remembers at the end of the course he took off the gas mask and he poured out sweat. He had accumulated like a cup of sweat. It accumulated in his gas mask and he poured it out.

He was tickled to find out that he was a good shot. At one time, his unit was in some sort of competition for some marksmanship award. It came down to him. He hit the bullseye. He was very proud of that. At some point he said they said to him, "What could you imagine doing more, working in an office typing or fixing machinery?" He said, "Yes, fixing machinery, obviously."

So, he was put in an ordnance company. He was really older than most guys in his outfit. He was born in 1914. He was twenty-eight by the time he was really actively in the service, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. He was one of the older guys in the outfit and so he served in an ordnance company. He, eventually, shipped over to Britain. They landed in Scotland.

He remembers violent sea sickness on the way over to Europe. A couple anecdotes he told me, one was, he got so seasick that he thought to himself, "You know, if I die over there it's not so bad. I don't have to get seasick on the way back. It'll spare me that ordeal." He could be eloquent describing the amount of vomit sloshing back and forth in the hold where the guys slept. You just keep throwing up, tiers of bunks of guys throwing up left and right. His last view of New York City was not the Statue of Liberty which my Aunt Tessie assumed it would be, but rather the parachute jump at Coney Island and he said he looked over the boat and he saw the parachute jump at Coney Island sort of fade into the distance.

He once said to me, I remember years later, he was giving me advice on life and he said, "The one thing he learned in the Army is don't volunteer for anything." He said, "Let them choose you, but don't volunteer for anything. On the other hand, don't shirk your duty." I said, "What do you mean by that?"

He says, "Well, on my way over to Europe I decided maybe I'm going to get killed, like maybe I'm never going to get back to New York City but,"--I remember he said this very seriously--"I won't have it said at the end of the day that I didn't do my duty as a soldier and if it comes down to it, I'm going to do my duty whatever that turns out to be."

He was, at one point, in charge of making up dog tags for guys in his outfit. He was working with that and involved making up dog tags for his outfit and he said, "You had to punch it." It would be punched with a sign that indicated your religion and he insisted on having "P" for Protestant put on it. I was somewhat shocked when he did that and he said to me, "How do I know they're not shooting Jewish prisoners on the other side."

PC: Is that something that you've heard before?

SI: Yes, there would, some outfits would give Jewish soldiers the option to either put it on or have something else put on.

RS: Yes, he'd put "P" on it.

PC: I just, I'm not surprised.

RS: Yes, I was taken aback by that because I thought it was his lack of Jewish pride, but then it was an exhibit on the Library of Congress. There were cases of Jewish American GIs being taken to concentration camps; prisoners taken in, and then, killed.

PC: So, the reason for doing that was because if they died on the field, you wanted to know which chaplain.

RS: Which kind of chaplain do you call? My father's reaction was, "Well, forget the chaplain, man."

PC: Yes.

RS: I mean the plain fact is if you put "J" on my dog tag and the Germans capture me, it could be a death sentence, screw that.

PC: Yes.

RS: I want to live, if I'm captured, I want to survive. So, he had already thought that through.

They landed in Britain. He was in London for a while. At one point, he remembers being in London when there were V-2 rockets landing on other sides of the city and he was staying in some kind of hotel. I said, "What did you do when you saw the rocket hit way up ahead?"

He goes, "Well, I went back to my hotel room."

I said, "You didn't go down into the basement?"

He goes, "No, I had been sleeping with a hundred guys for like more than a year now. The last thing I wanted to do was sleep with a hundred people. I was going to stay in a hotel room down, and if I died there, alright, I was going to die there, but I'm going to have a room to myself tonight."

He eventually went over to France and he was stationed in Paris for a long time. He ran a repair depot. He would repair mostly halftracks and armored cars. He was very good working on both. He had a lot of southern guys in his outfit and he talked a lot about learning to work with southern guys.

He was something of a rarity. There were not many Jewish guys in the outfit. Most of the guys were from Virginia, he said. He said, once they got to know you they were actually very good soldiers, but there were a number of things, he said, that surprised him. One of the guys was basically illiterate. He had made his whole living running moonshine before the war and he couldn't read or write. One day he got a letter from home and he said, "Sarge, could you read this to me? I can't read the letter."

My father reads the letter and it's a letter reporting that his brother has died. He said, "Look, this is something really serious. I think you ought to bring it to the chaplain. Let the chaplain talk to you about this. This is something you should hear from a chaplain."

I remember my dad said the guy learned to read and write in the Army and he was impressed because the guy had the most beautiful handwriting imaginable, once he learned to write.

He remembers one time in the Army he was fixing up these parts to a halftrack. The parts come shipped over from the States in something like a thick heavy gelatinous petroleum fluid.

SI: Cosmoline?

RS: Cosmoline.

SI: Yes.

RS: Like Cosmoline. So, you strip to the waist, you pull these things out of these crates or whatever and you put them in these solvents and you get them clean. You're filthy. You're covered with this slimy awful stuff. He's doing it with this one southern guy who my dad remembers was quite tough. At one point he was banging with a hammer and he missed with the hammer and he hit himself in the chin with a really heavy hammer. Instead of dissolving in pain, he goes, "God damn." He spits tobacco out of the corner of his mouth and goes back to work.

So, he's standing there and the guy says something how he doesn't really like Jews. My dad says to the guy, and they're covered in this slimy garbage, "Well, what's your problem with Jews?"

The guy goes, "They're businessmen. They don't like to get their hands dirty."

He says, "Well, let me tell you, I'm Jewish." The guy's taken aback because my father is covered in this gunk, doesn't fit the stereotype, right.

Then, later on, [he] talked about one guy who he liked very much. He was a really good soldier, a southern guy, but when he got in a fight, picked up a rock and started pounding the other guy

with the rock, hitting him. He had to pull him off. He said, "They were good guys." When they got to know you, they could actually be really good soldiers and it was a little tricky getting to know them because he was Jewish, but he didn't hide that fact.

Years later as a child, probably in the mid to late '60s, we were on a family trip to Virginia, visiting Civil War battlefields and things like that. We were driving through a town and we're stopped at a light and we had, I think, a northern family sense of the South as a violent and somewhat strange place. Suddenly a car swings around, turning at the light and as it passes it suddenly stops and the guy starts shouting and we got really nervous. We started rolling up the windows and hitting the buttons to lock up the car. My father starts to peer through the side window. Suddenly his face breaks into this huge grin and he shouts a name and we pulled over, and it's one of the guys from his outfit, who he hadn't seen in more than twenty years.

My mother and sister went off for a walk. I stuck back to listen because I just was so fascinated and I wanted to hear what they had to say, but it was so obvious to me that this guy had enormous affection and respect for my dad. I was just so touched by it. They talked for a long time about the war and what they had done, and then, what had become of all the guys. A lot of the guys were still living in that part of Virginia. It was a family trip, and then, that was really the end of it. We didn't stick around any longer after they spoke for about an hour-and-a-half, but I was quite moved. It was obvious to me, the affection and respect the guy had for my father.

So, he kept working in Paris and he was billeted in a barracks in Paris and they went to Alsace-Lorraine. They were billeted in Strasburg. He continued to run repair shops. He would often have French mechanics working for him. He had picked up enough French in high school that he could actually oversee French mechanics. He was tickled to see that French mechanics would always have a bucket of wine in the corner of a workshop. This is something he had never seen in the United States and they would take a dipper of wine throughout the day.

He was on the edge of the border with Germany. He would sometimes go into Germany to trade with German farmers. It astonishes me that he would have oranges. He would bring oranges over the German side of the line and the German farmers had potatoes, and for some reason my father said they didn't have any good potatoes. So, he'd give them oranges and the Germans would give him potatoes, which in retrospect struck me as a sense of the abundance of the American Army in World War II, that it had oranges to trade. I asked him how he talked to the German farmers and he said, "Well, I speak Jewish in a German accent and they more or less understand me."

He said after being in the Army for about a year or two, it was getting boring. He volunteered to work on clearing a harbor in southern France. It would have involved sort of diver training, blowing up scuttled ships. The guy in charge of his outfit said, "No, I don't want to transfer you, you're too valuable here." Another time, in what he now says, in retrospect, was the Battle of the Bulge. [Editor's Note: The Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Von Rundstedt Offensive or Ardennes Offensive, was the failed German attempt to break through the Allied lines in the Ardennes Forest in Luxembourg and Belgium launched on December 16, 1944, and which lasted into late January 1945.] They had fixed up a number of vehicles and they were supposed to take them north to Patton. The understanding was, if you drove trucks up to Patton, Patton would

keep you and you would never come back and the guy in charge says again, "Max, we need you to run the depot. Don't get on this load of trucks," and he stayed there.

He often said to me he wondered what would've happened if he had been in combat. He was obviously not in combat. There's a piece of him that always wondered how would he have handled it and there's a piece of him that also thought he was very lucky.

His brother Tom was in combat and clearly it was a rough experience for him. When they got back from the war, they shared a room in the Bronx, and when he got home my uncle called on the phone and my dad picked up the phone, and my uncle broke down and started to cry. At night, he would have nightmares. My father would hear my uncle saying in his sleep, "We're surrounded, we're surrounded; they're all around us."

He was well aware what can go wrong. He had two friends who were killed in the war. One was a guy who was a merchant seaman. His name was, I forget, David. I'm blanking on the name. He was a Jewish guy. He was a merchant seaman, and then, was the gunner on a bomber over Germany. He was killed. Another guy was a buddy from my dad's canoeing and outdoors world--the classic ninety-eight pound weakling in the crowd of very brawny guys--who was mortified that he couldn't get into the Army because he was too skinny. So, he lifted weights and drank milkshakes every day to build himself up and he got into the Army and then, he was in the infantry and at Grenoble, as the report went, they asked for volunteers to attack a German machine gun and he volunteered and because it's not Hollywood, he was killed. We were once having dinner at some place and there was a poster for Grenoble as a tourism destination and he said, "Oh, Grenoble, that's where Dave Siegel was killed." I said, "Who's Dave Siegel?" He told me the whole story then. He said after the war, guys tried to have a chapter of the American Vets, [I have always assumed he was referring to the "American Veterans, or AMVETS,] in Dave's memory, but it didn't really stick and eventually, it broke up.

SI: Was your uncle in the Pacific or Europe?

RS: My Uncle Tom was in the Pacific.

SI: Okay.

RS: He saw some sort of very difficult stuff.

SI: Okay.

RS: My other uncle was on the west coast in intelligence, but to my knowledge, never outside the continental US, but my Uncle Tom was in the Pacific and had a rough time of it.

SI: Did your mother get involved in any kind of war related activities?

RS: Very much so.

SI: On the home front?

RS: My mother had started Hunter College in 1942. There were all sorts of Hunter programs that she was involved in. She would knit mittens for merchant seamen who were crossing the North Atlantic. She would wrap bandages with her friends too. That was another project they would do in their clubs. She once had a job, where she had to get a security clearance, typing. She thinks they were shipping manifests, but to her they were huge lines of figures that she had to type up, but it was obvious that they were really classified information. So, she would type that up.

She often went to dances at Hunter, where she said in retrospect, the guys were going to a dance before they shipped out. Although she said, "You could never ask them what they were doing because they couldn't tell you," right, "because of security on convoys." … She remembers going to dances and meeting soldiers. She remembers sometimes the soldiers would meet her friends, the first time they ever meet a Jewish girl would be at one of these dances.

Well, Aunt Tessie talked about how they were quite surprised to once meet some British sailors at this dance and they didn't like Winston Churchill because Americans thought everybody worshipped Winston Churchill in Britain and they were stunned to meet these sailors who did not like Winston Churchill at all.

My Aunt Tessie remembered that kind of thing much better than my mother. My mother also would talk in retrospect about how easy it was to go out and meet sailors and soldiers on leave. "If you wanted to date," she said to me, "in New York City, during World War II, and you're a woman, if you couldn't get a date, there had to be something really wrong with you." So, she and her friends would go to Coney Island and they'd walk up and down the boardwalk with guys. They'd ride on the parachute ride. She said it went like no further than an ice cream cone and a goodbye at the entrance to the subway station. You could have a remarkably good social life in New York City during war time.

I remember as a kid, once she was cleaning out the attic and she found this picture of an Asian scene and I asked her, "Where's that from?"

She goes, "Oh, a boy sent it to me during World War II."

I said, "Well, where did he get this picture with a pagoda and a palm tree?"

She said, "Well, you know, he was stationed out there. He was a pilot." I said, "Really? You knew a pilot in World War II?" She said, "Yes."

Then, I said, "Well, what happened to him?"

Then, she just said in this very flat voice that was meant to shut me up, she said, "He was shot down."

My Aunt Tess had a good friend who was killed in the war too, a guy that she knew. In her eighties, I was interviewing both of them about this for a short forward I wrote in a book about

cartooning in New York City in the 1940s. I interviewed my aunt about this world and she's in her eighties and she remembers going to this dance with a boy and she said, "Well, he never came back." That was a phrase they would use for guys who died. You would never say he was killed. He went away to the war and he never came back. She sort of muses on it for like a long second and she says to me, "It was such a nice night. He took me dancing to a rooftop garden." She goes, "I should've kissed him," and that's the end of the reminiscence.

My mom said that wartime New York felt like a place where everybody was all together. She was emphatic about that. You felt like you were pulling together for a common goal and she said, "There's really nothing quite like it ever again, in anybody's life."

SI: Did you say if she ever considered ever going into the service?

RS: She said she was bored. After her second year at Hunter she was a little bored. She thought about joining the WAVES. She didn't. I think she sort of regretted that. She had a friend, a woman she befriended years later, who was in some press office with some branch of the service who really had a wonderful exciting experience writing press releases in New Guinea for the United States Army, or something like that, but she did not. She did not. She did charity work wrapping bandages and knitting mittens and things like that. Although she thought about going overseas, she did not join at that time, no. [Editor's Note: The Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES, was formed in 1942 as the female sector of the United States Navy.]

SI: Alright, so your father, after he came back, did he go back to work with his father or did he do something else?

RS: He came back from the war. It was interesting. He might have worked for his father a little bit, but he picked up on a series of jobs. One of them was designed to provide employment for returning veterans, but my mother used to sort of used to speak of it somewhat critically, because basically, my father was like a really senior mechanic, was basically like cleaning up after somebody, which makes no sense whatsoever. He worked in a print shop for a while.

He ran into one of his commanding officers, who was by then a buyer for a department store. My father had never liked him in the service because he turned my dad for a leave once. At some point in the war, my father had a leave scheduled. He was set to go to Chaminox. [Editor's Note: Chaminox is tourist area in southern France.] He was in seventh heaven. He was going to go skiing in the Alps, and then, the guy cancelled his leave. He was very angry about that.

He worked in a series of print shops and in one of them, he remembers, the owner wanted the printers to print a leaflet in support of the communist party and the guys in the shop rebelled against doing that. They didn't want to do that. So, the boss took back the leaflet and said, "Alright, you don't have to do this," right. One way or the other, he, eventually, wound up working for the Mosler Safe Company as a mechanic. That's what he was doing when my parents got married in '52. That's really what he did for the rest of his life. He was a safe cracker. He specialized in vaults, bank vaults, he could open them when they were busted, things like that, and night depositories as well. He was very proud that he had to get a very high clearance

from the FBI to do that. He said they went back to his elementary schools and checked on him and he did fine. He one time came home from work when I was a kid. He was ripping up these pieces of paper into little shreds and tossing them in the trash. I said, "What are those numbers on the pieces of paper?"

He says, "Not really any of your business."

I said, "Come on, dad, what are the numbers on the pieces of paper?"

He goes, "You want to know?" He goes, "They're the combination to every safe on the Garden State Parkway toll booths between here and the Raritan River." I said, "Okay, dad." [laughter]

My mom, only in later years, would confess to me that she was quite scared by some of the work that my dad did because she always figured it would be really easy to lure him into a situation where somebody would then sort of muscle him into using his talents to do something illicit. It's funny; she only said that to me when I was really well along as an adult.

Yet, as a child, I remember this vividly, sometimes we would get calls in the middle of the night that they wanted my dad to go to a bank and do something, and I would just get scared to death. I just remember one night, it was awful. I just didn't want him to leave the house. I was just scared. I was just scared, scared, scared. I thought if I only cried hard enough there would be some way around it. He wouldn't leave the house and I was just crying as hard as I knew, but he had to go. He left the house. Nothing ever happened to him.

He would come in after break-in attempts and he was hilarious, sights of safes that somebody had tried to open and failed, and then, his job would be to sort of open them properly, get the valuables inside out so the owner could at least get their money, and then, replace it with a brand new safe. He was a very skillful mechanic, I mean brilliant, brilliant mechanic. He worked at Mosler from, I would guess late '40s, early '50s, through his retirement, and he retired about 1980. He had cancer and it was sort of obvious that he couldn't work anymore, so he retired, died probably six months after that.

SI: You mentioned earlier that your parents met in a roundabout way through the canoe clubs. Do you remember what they told you about that?

RS: Sure.

PC: Can I go back just one second?

RS: Yes, always.

PC: He died of cancer, was he a smoker?

RS: No.

PC: Okay. I was going to ask you if he was a smoker in the military.

RS: No, he's not a smoker. No, he's not a smoker, never a smoker. He had colon cancer. My dad was in great shape. I mean, he would also credit my mother for that because my mother was always sort of watching his diet for him and things, but he was in great shape. When he was diagnosed he was getting into his mid-sixties and he was going to take up downhill skiing again for a retirement project. [laughter] He was going to use the skis that he bought in 1940. I said to him, "Dad, if you show up at a ski resort with those skis, which don't have release bindings--your foot is firmly locked to the ski with that kind of binding; it's a fascinating binding, but it's not a safe binding by modern standards--they're going to tell you, you could break your leg and first of all they might not even let you ski on the mountain because of insurance, you know, you fall with that ski on you could break your leg."

He looks at me like with a degree of sort of scorn and contempt. He can't believe his son just said that. He looks at me and he says, "Look, you're afraid to break your leg? You shouldn't go skiing," [laughter] as if that was the choices, right--breaking your leg with an old binding or not skiing at all. The thought that he might buy a new pair of skis, you know, violated his sort of sense of frugality, right. You have a forty year old pair of skis, why not use them.

So, he was getting ready to start skiing again. He was doing a lot of cross country skiing with my mom. I used to lend him cross country skis and one day I ran into him skiing up on the Palisades Interstate Park System in the winter and it was funny. I was out with my buddy, we were skiing and we're skiing behind two people and I saw this one guy and I watched him ski. I said, "Gosh, that guy is really good. He's got really heavy old school mountaineering skis on, but he handles them really well. Not only does he know how to ski, but he must be incredibly strong to sort of weave so nicely on a heavy pair of skis." Then, when I passed him and I looked back over my shoulder, it was my dad and I got a big kick out of that. I told him that later. He was quite tickled to hear that.

He did a lot of canoeing. We had a really good Old Town canoe. We would paddle a lot on the Hudson River; junior high school, high school. The river was not as large a presence in his life after 1960, partly because the boathouses he belonged to were destroyed in a hurricane, partly because all the guys had moved to different parts of the suburbs, but we still did a lot of canoeing down on the Hudson River on weekends and things like that all the way through the '70s.

When he was about sixty-four, sixty-five, he was going to start skiing again and my mom insisted that he get a checkup because there had been a history of heart disease in his family. This would have been about '78. They did some very routine tests. They thought there was the possibility that he had colon cancer, although the doctor said, based on the tests, I think this is almost elective surgery. I think we'll have you in and out. You have ninety-nine percent chance you're going to be fine.

So, there's a lot of anxiety in the family. I remember I was working at a small town newspaper then and I remember the day progressing and thinking, "You know, dad is supposed to be out of surgery by now. Nobody's calling me. Good news travels fast, what's going on?" Then, I remember I said, at the end of the day, it was by then like five or six o'clock. I said, "I better go home and figure out what's going on. Let's go straight to the hospital."

The janitor needed a lift home. It was pouring out and I said, "Dad would want me to give the janitor a lift home." So, I gave the janitor a lift home and I drove to the hospital and I just walked in the hospital. I could see the expression on my mother's face that it had not gone well. She said in turn that she had been waiting for the surgeon and when the surgeon came out into the hallway where my mother was sitting, she just looked at him and his whole body posture was bad. His shoulders were slumped down and his head was down, and then, he just got up and said, "I'm really sorry. The cancer has spread throughout your husband's body. There's nothing we can do." So, they said, "You got six months to two years."

They went to Hawaii on a trip. He declined in stages. The first year was okay, but the second year you could just see a decline. He'd plateau and he'd decline and he'd plateau. One of the doctors said to him that, "You're condition is surprising to us because one, you've got very advanced [cancer] without any sign; two, aside from the fact that you have cancer, you are in great shape. You have the physique of a guy ten years younger. The only thing we can think of is occupational in some sense, but truth to be told, as far as I can tell, colon cancer is not something you get as an occupational illness."

I'll never forget one day, when I was home while my dad was sick. I walked down into the basement. There was a whole line of paints and solvents and thinners. He's got them lined up on the table in front of him. I see him, and he's picking them up and he's reading the label and he's putting them down and he's picking them up and he's putting them down.

I said to him, "So, what are you doing?" He says, "I'm trying to figure out which one of these did this to me."

My thought was, "That's very brave." My second thought was, "Boy, courage and intellect like that. I wish we could've gotten to apply it to some other things instead of this awful tragedy."

We had talked about becoming a letter writing team to the *Bergen Record*. That we would work together writing letters and try to write columns even together. He had well developed views on a lot of things, but he didn't think of himself as a writer. By then I had certainly worked for newspapers and I had an idea about how to write for them.

To the end, then, he identified with guys who had occupational illnesses. He felt very strongly that this was at least a possible explanation for how he had gotten this disease and I remember him being really angry at the thought that anybody would pay with their health or with their life for their job. I remember him looking at a book about a miner in Appalachia who lost a leg in a mine. You could see a deep sense of anger and injustice.

He was not a leftist in the sense that he was part of any organized left wing movement. He was in fact an anti-communist. He thought that the Soviet Union was a bully of a country under the czar. He thought it was a bully of a country under communism. He thought that Joe McCarthy was a rotten son of a bitch. [Editor's Note: Senator Joseph McCarthy's accusations of Communist infiltration in the US government led to a nationwide witch-hunt in the 1950s to unearth alleged Communists.] He was always pleased that he once bumped Joe McCarthy off the

train underneath the Capitol with my mother. They jumped on the train. There was no seat for Joe, and then, Joe had to wait for another train. My father got a good kick out of that. So, he was very much like a New Deal Democrat.

The story, I'll never forget, in '72, I was the high school organizer for the McGovern campaign in my high school and I asked him if he could put a McGovern sticker on the car. [Editor's Note: George McGovern was an American representative and senator. He was the Democratic presidential candidate in the 1972 election and lost to Richard Nixon.]

The car really didn't belong to our family. It was a company car. Mosler gave it to him to drive to jobs, but he could use it on the weekend. So, the car was always loaded down with tools in a way that made the front end of the car rise. It was kind of hilarious sometimes, but it was a company car. He said, "Yes, put a McGovern sticker on the bumper." So, he comes home from work one day and he's sort of grinning like a kid who had done something mischievous. He said, "You know your McGovern sticker almost got me in trouble today."

I said, "What happened?"

"Well, I came out of the bank after doing a job and the bank manager looked at the bumper and said to me, 'Hey Max, what are you doing with a McGovern sticker on your bumper?' So, I said to him, I'm a working man, not a bank manager." [laughter] I always liked that story.

SI: So, going back to how your parents met.

RS: Okay.

SI: Was that in the late '40s?

RS: Yes, yes. So, after the war my dad went back to the world of the boathouse and started canoeing again; did a lot more trips up the Hudson and a lot more trips up to Lake George. One of his friends was a Swedish American guy named Herbie Cedarblade. My mom met Herbie Cedarblade when she was up at Lake George with my Aunt Tess. Somehow they met around Lake George. Anyway, my mother and Herbie started dating.

To show how dangerous it is to have people interview their own family members, I could only, in the last two years, really work up the courage to find out how serious a boyfriend was Herbie for my mom and I never asked my mom. I could intuit it from what my mom said, but I called my Aunt Tessie and said, "So, Aunt Tess, would Herbie count as a boyfriend for my mom?" She goes, "Oh, yes, he was a boyfriend."

Herbie was Swedish American and had sort of risen in the world, had a white collar job and gave it up, and went to work building smokestacks for factories. It bothered his mother a lot. My mom would do this imitation of a Swedish accent where the mother would say, "He used to go to work like a gentleman and he came home like a gentleman with a suit and tie, now he builds smokestacks." He was building a smokestack one day with another guy. There was an accident, the scaffolding collapsed and he died.

So, all the guys in the boathouse felt very sorry for my mom because they liked her. They knew her through Herbie. So, a bunch of the guys would take my mom out to cheer her up. They'd take her canoeing. They'd taker her skiing, things like that. Then, one thing led to another and my dad's other buddy had like two girlfriends at once. Eventually, my parents hit it off as an item, and then, they married.

Interestingly, my father, although he spent most of all his life as a mechanic, for one brief period moved up into management and he absolutely hated it. He loathed it. He did it for six months. My mother described it as the only period that she would ever describe as difficult in their marriage. I asked him about it, years later, when I was in high school and he said it was awful. The phone is constantly ringing. You have to put people off. He said with total disgust, "You have to lie to them. You have to lie to people when they call you with their problems because you can't really solve them. You've got to put them off somehow." Couldn't stand it. So, I said, "What'd you do?" He said, "I told them if they didn't make me mechanic again, I would go to work as a mechanic for their competitor. It was their choice." They made him a mechanic again.

[He] vastly preferred being a mechanic to being a desk worker. He said that the flexibility you have, you could stop for coffee between jobs. He said, "This means the world to me." He said, "Sometimes my work is intellectually challenging. A lot of times it's pretty routine, but once in a while I do a job which really challenges my mechanical ability."

He just said that as a mechanic you have room to work. He was emphatic about this. He would say this again and again. When a person does a job, give them room to work. Don't hover over them. Tell them what you want done, and then, step away and let them do it, and if they're competent, then everything is going to work out fine."

The other thing he said, and this was his years as an Army sergeant, he said, "If you've got praise for somebody, say it in public, say it really loud. If you got a criticism, say it quietly and private. You'd be amazed at how many problems that will solve." I've tried to actually carry both of those philosophies forward within the managerial dimensions of my own career. [laughter]

SI: You said you have one sister?

RS: Yes, Ellen, yes.

SI: Okay, was she older or younger?

RS: She's younger than me, three years younger than me. Also went to Dumont High School, and then, went to the University of Massachusetts where she majored in art and English literature and did an undergraduate senior paper on Puritan Election Sermons. Then, went on to be an intern at Historic Deerfield--the first UMass student to go to Historic Deerfield in the history of the program, even though UMass is what, ten miles down the road from Deerfield. They've seemed to not bring anybody from UMass before her. She went from there to the Winterthur Program in material culture and became a museum professional and has had a great career as a curator and an author ever since.

SI: Did you have any other siblings?

RS: That's it, just the two of us.

SI: Alright. So, I think before the end of your story you said you were maybe five when your family moved to Dumont?

RS: Yes, five years old, yes.

SI: Yes, okay. Do you have any memories of growing up in the Bronx?

RS: Well, I was born in the Bronx, spent the first year of my life in Washington Heights, barely the first year.

SI: Okay, alright.

RS: One of my earliest memories was going back to Washington Heights with my mother. I was probably three-ish, maybe a little older. I was utterly baffled by it. I remember she took me. She said, "This is where we used to live." We went into what was obviously the lobby of our building, 550 Fort Washington Avenue. It scared the living daylights out of me. If this was once where we lived, who lives there now? Is this legal to walk into this place? I don't like this. I heard a police siren behind me. I remember being really scared, really unnerved.

It was sort of strange that I found it so unsettling because I had one grandmother in an apartment building in the Bronx and another grandmother, who I knew better, my mom's mother, who had a freestanding house. I was scared of the city then. It seemed like a strange and scary place and I was glad we left. I was glad that she got me back in the car with my dad and we drove on to my grandmother's in the Bronx. So, my first trip back to the city, my first conscious trip back to the city, I was scared of it and I didn't like it.

I liked growing up in Dumont as a kid. There were woods near our house. I mean, it was the suburbs. The reason they chose it, it was the last bus stop on a line that ran directly into New York City and my dad would go into work at first on the bus. He would take the bus from Dumont to 42nd Street, then take the subway across to Astoria, where his office was. Then, later his office was in Irvington, New Jersey which was actually an easier commute for him. It's one of the reasons we moved to Dumont because it would be an easier commuting life for him, to his work.

As a kid in Dumont, I loved the fact that there were woods. It's strange, it's a suburban town, but along the railroad tracks and the town adjacent to us there were forests I could play in. I loved it. I just loved it, playing in the forests. We'd take cat tails and throw them like spears. To me it was great. We would refight World War II in the dirt and stuff like that. It was great.

I loved the study of history as a kid. That was really clear to me. I always read books. A series of books, I read the *Landmar*k books and I read *We Were There*, and these were young adult fiction

books that would put young people in great historical episodes. I found them utterly engrossing. My parents got interested in history because I was interested in history. I would always ask them to stop to read the historical markers when we drove past them and that became a standard part of family trips. We visited places like Fort Ticonderoga, Gettysburg, battlefields in Virginia like Chancellorsville; Saratoga, the Revolution.

By the time I was a teenager, I was starting to chafe at Dumont, certainly in junior high school and high school. I felt like I somehow didn't fit. I kidded with one of my friends and I said, "My historical task in high school was to convince the Irish and Italian guys that I was tough and the Jewish guys that I was smart, and once I had accomplished that it was time to leave," and I thought I more or less accomplished both.

I was on the wrestling team my first two years. I was a good wrestler. I got injured, so I sort of fell behind in my training compared to other guys and I just started to think by my junior year, is this what I want to be doing for the rest of my life? No. I just remember in my junior year, I just said, "I got to put my life on a new course. It's not working out. I'm not enjoying what I do enough."

So, I quit the wrestling team and I joined the student newspaper. Started taking up skiing again. I got a date for the junior prom. I felt like I had completely turned a 180 in two weeks. It was just a delightful experience and it really felt good, and I stayed active in those kinds of things through my high school years. I worked on the school paper. I was the high school organizer for the McGovern campaign in '72 and I knew that my life was heading on some kind of new course.

I wasn't a distinguished student in high school. I have to say that. I was the weakest student in the honors science class which gave me the false impression that I was a weak student. I was a good student in honors English and a good student in history courses. I figured out pretty quickly that history and English were my strong points and I knew that math was not. I desperately wanted an education that built on my strengths. I also wanted an education that got me out into the world.

One of the things that troubled me about growing up in Dumont was it seemed a very small place, very inward looking. There would be gang fights after basketball games, between kids from Dumont and kids from Cliffside Park; kids from Dumont and kids from New Milford.

These really used to sort of disturb my father because in the city he was aware of kids who got in gang fights, but they always had a racial or ethnic tinge to them. In Dumont he said, "There's no difference between kids in Dumont and kids in Bergenfield. So, I don't see what they have to fight over." I didn't like it either.

I remember seeing one fight after one basketball game in Dumont. I was probably a sophomore in high school. I think it was the game against Cliffside Park which is one of our big rivals, but this I remember vividly. The students came pouring out of the gym and cops were standing with their backs to the parking lot, where the students were milling around watching the entrance to the gym. That means they're not watching where the majority of students are.

Then, suddenly, a bunch of guys from Dumont grabbed these guys from this other town to beat them up. They took them and they threw them back on the hood of a car that was parked there and I heard a, "Woomp, woomp." Those two guys' bodies hit the hood and dozens of guys were like pounding on them, punching the living daylights out of them. The cops then turn around; pull the guys off them and the one guy just slides to the ground unconscious. He's just lying there and his girlfriend just drops to her knees and is bent over him crying.

My feeling was, "This is like really crazy." I admit to having a kind of morbid fascination as it started to unfold, but the thought of ten guys beating up on two guys and this guy unconscious and his girlfriend there just crying. This is like sicko. This is like a weird world. There's something wrong here. I didn't want to be part of that world. I wanted to have a way out of it on my own terms.

SI: This violence, do you think it was characteristic of the period you were in high school? Or had you known about things like this beforehand?

RS: Dumont was a funny place. Growing up in Dumont you can have very different experiences within the town. I have good friends who describe it as very different terms from me. So, I don't want to generalize for everybody, right. If you were around the world of sports like football--and I tried to make the football team and couldn't, but I had been around it enough to know how it was, football, at least in my years--was sort of like combat with other towns. One guy used to say, "You can't beat them on the field, beat them off the field." We just had ideas that kids from another town were like another tribe.

Now, kids from Dumont would always talk about how they were like unoffensive, nice kids, and other kids came to Dumont and caused trouble, but when I got to college, I would tell kids I was from Dumont and the reaction that I got more than once was, "Boy that is a nasty town. We didn't like to play sports in Dumont. Kids would spit at us. Kids would get in fights with us."

I mean, I remember one guy was so proud that the cheerleaders from another town were driving out of Dumont. He ran up to the bus and he grabs a pom-pom that the cheerleader's hanging out of the bus and yanks it away from her and spits at her.

Who cares? I mean, I didn't get it, right? It made no sense to me. By that point I thought it was a really strange parochial, nasty, small place. Not everybody there was that way, but that was a significant enough strain that I knew that I didn't want a part of that.

I found my own ways of trying to break with that. I would go to the library. Dumont's library was okay. We had a regional library system, Bergenfield's library was much better. I remember the summer of my sophomore year at high school, I would just go to the Bergenfield Library and I'd wander. Junior year, same thing, and I'd just wander around the stacks until I saw a title that seemed interesting, and then, I'd pull the book off and read it for the rest of the afternoon. To me it was really great. One of the books that I'll never forget that I pulled off--I passed the title, it said, "*Irrational Ravings*." I said, "What can a book called *Irrational Ravings* be about?" It was a collection of columns by Pete Hamill from the *New York Post* who was a kind of working class

Irish American guy from Brooklyn who was largely self-educated, but very literate and politically liberal in his own unique way.

I liked Pete's columns because I thought Pete had figured out how to write about working class life, which is certainly the world I had grown up in, without being reactionary or xenophobic, or nasty, the way so many people around me were.

That book made a big difference in my life because I remember thinking, "Okay, who is this guy Pete Hamill?" Okay, writes for the *New York Post*. I'm going to start reading the *New York Post*, reading his columns more. This is the kind of journalism that you can do. That's the kind of journalism I want to do.

I also started going into the city, sometimes with my parents' permission, sometimes just sneaking off. The first time I went to the city would have been about '66, '68, they let me go to the Cloisters in Washington Heights. It was a carefully choreographed visit. I think it would have been '66. Take the 86 bus across the George Washington Bridge, walk north up Fort Washington Avenue, went to Fort Tryon Park, keep going, you'll see the Cloisters, go inside the Cloisters, look at the museum, turn around, walk back, stick with that path, nothing will go wrong. [Editor's Note: The Cloisters is the medieval art museum of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.] It was great and I started going into the city on my own, sometimes to the Cloisters.

I was quickly fascinated by Greenwich Village, the idea that it was a sort of Bohemian, politically active world, a bus and a subway ride away. It was really interesting to me. I was active on the student newspaper in my junior year of high school, would go in for this Columbia Scholastic Press conventions. You're supposed to go to all these earnest panels about high school journalism, held at Columbia University. Well, my friends and I would do, go with our adviser, Mr. Barragato, and then, wave goodbye to him, and then, sneak off and ride the subways for the rest of the day, playing a game that we called "Subway Roulette," which is you would ride random subways and change to another subway, and then, surface with wonder to discover where you really were. This is really stupid in retrospect, but it was really fun to do and I liked it.

I started to think of New York City as a place that where I could live some version of a life that I wanted to live. So, by my junior and senior high school years, I was definitely looking out from Dumont a lot and I found trips to museums in New York City, in to theatre in New York City, just to be really rewarding.

I remember one time it just felt like the dream weekend of my life. I went to a good basketball game on Friday night, but then I went to see a matinee of *The Crucible* on Saturday, and then, Sunday I went skiing and I just thought this was like the best of all possible lives, and the proximity of New York City to me was like a god send.

The fact that my parents had really good feeling about New York City was great. I mean, they were guarded about me going to the city. I know that because I was sneaking off sometimes. I wouldn't tell them always, but they were also emphatic for example and said, "Do not wear your varsity wrestling jacket to New York City."

I said, "Why?"

My father just looks at me like I'm stupid. He said, "Wrestling suggests you're a tough guy; you walk down somebody's block in New York City he's going to see you. What are you going to do when he says to you, 'Hey you wrestler, tough guy, want to prove how tough you are? C'mon, let's see how tough you are?'" They made me wear this cloth coat from Robert Hall that was so embarrassing, you had to wear, but it kept me safe, right. [Editor's Note: Robert Hall Clothes was a retail store that was in operation from 1937 to 1977.]

We would go to the Evergreen Cinema, this sort of avant-garde film house in the Village. We went to see the film *Monterey Pop* once and because we were guys from Dumont, although we were smoking grass by my junior and senior year of high school, we didn't have access to a great supply. Our big idea when we got into New York City was to buy cigars and walk around smoking cigars because we thought that made us look sophisticated. I shudder to think of what we looked like, but were sitting in this art house cinema and a sign flashes on the screen and it says, "No smoking." Everybody around us erupts in laughter, and then, lights up marijuana. All we've got is Tijuana Small Cigars and we just felt so uncool. I mean, I was not going to smoke a cigar while the people around me were smoking joints, right. To us, New York City was another world, to me and a crew of my friends, New York was a place that we started to look to increasingly by our senior year of high school.

SI: To step back a little bit in your life, can you kind of characterize the neighborhood you grew up in, economically and ethnic makeup as well?

RS: Cape Cod houses, brick, built after World War II, part of the suburban expansion of post-war suburbia. Dumont was an older town. It had been a military base in World War I, Camp Merritt. It had suburbanized a little bit in the '20s, but that really took off after World War II.

The people around us were sort of skilled workers basically, like the guy next to us worked on elevators. The guy two houses over worked on the subway system. The guy across the street was an electrician. It was sort of economically secure working class, basically. Had a friend whose dad worked in a printing plant. The other one, the other friend, his dad was a merchant seaman, and then, became an engineer over time on merchant ships.

I was aware of unemployment in the '70s, but as a kid it was not on my radar screen. In the '70s I remember my father being really shaken to see guys out of the neighborhood out of work. It really troubled him a lot.

It's interesting what my friends said about where I grew up in retrospect because we were trying to figure out the demography of Dumont and why my experience was very different from my friend's experience. My friend lived in a newer part of suburban Dumont. It was much more Jewish. Mine was much more Catholic and Protestant. Dumont was a town with a lot of what would get called Reagan Democrats and a lot of Republicans for sure, right, but clearly Reagan Democrats and I knew that because in '72, when I worked on the McGovern campaign, we were troubled to see a lot of local Democrats deserting us and running off for Nixon. They would take the party's money to run their campaign, and then, they would run off and never put a McGovern

sticker up on their car. So, I had a sense of it as a pretty conservative place. I look back, kids I grew up look back, with great fondness and there are things that I did in Dumont that I really enjoyed, but by the end of high school it was time to go. I felt that really strongly. This is not where I was going to stay. It was time to go.

SI: It sounds like early on you were pretty aware of the larger world. You had that conversation with your father about Johnson.

RS: Yes, I was politically very aware. I was thinking a lot about the Vietnam War. It's interesting, I certainly thought down to my freshman or sophomore year in high school that I would probably apply to one of the service academies and that would likely be West Point. I thought about it. I wasn't sure I'd do it, but I thought about it a lot. We used to go to West Point on family trips. I was fascinated by the West Point museum. I had grown up on my father's stories of World War II. That started to change under the Vietnam War.

I remember vividly being on a Boy Scout hike and hearing about, over the radio that somebody was playing while we were camping out, about reports about the My Lai Massacre. My first to response to My Lai was, "Well, if a guy lost control of the situation like that, he must be an incompetent and immoral commander, and he shouldn't be in charge of anything. Maybe the Army needs better officers, in which case, maybe I'll have to go into the Army." I mean, it was not an anti-war reaction. In '66, I had debated it. I had taken the pro-war side in a class debate about the Vietnam War in '66. In '68, that was my reaction, "Okay, maybe guys like me are going to have to go into the Army so there are no guys like William Calley machine gunning kids." [Editor's Note: Editor's Note: On March 16, 1968 Army soldiers from Company C of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade of the 23rd Infantry Division killed more than three hundred civilians in the South Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai. Of the twenty-six soldiers charged in the incident, only Lieutenant William Calley was convicted.]

Then, I vividly remember a couple things and one of them was I read Dalton Trumbo's book, *Johnny Got His Gun*, and a bunch of us read it. [Editor's Note: *Johnny Got His Gun* is a 1938 novel written by Dalton Trumbo about a soldier who becomes a quadruple amputee in World War I and his life after the war.] It would scare the living daylights out of us. It scared us and we looked back on it and I read it today, and there were scenes where I didn't fully understand what was going on because I didn't want to even face the reality of what he was describing.

I don't know if you know the book, but it's a novel of a World War I veteran. His limbs are blown off and his face is blown off, and he's kept alive in a VA Hospital. A film was made about the book and I reviewed the film for my high school newspaper. In my review I remember saying … I might have co-authored it with one of my best friends that I'm still in touch with, but we said the movie gets horribly sensational in ways the book does not because in the movie, basically, the nurse jerks him off so he gets some sexual relief in his life. I didn't think that happened in the book. I reread the book years later and she does. I didn't even want to deal with that as a fifteen or sixteen year old guy. I clearly read it and it never remotely registered on me when I read the book. The book, in itself, faceless guy with no limbs, kept alive in a VA Hospital was terrifying enough for me.

We looked at the draft, I remember, I was a weird kid, I remember learning, thinking about the Vietnam War when I was in fifth grade, when I was ten, and then, the draft would come along in eight years I thought to myself and I said, "Well, eight years is a long time off. On the other hand, this war has been going on for a long time. So, it's entirely possible that in eight years I'd have to get drafted. Better not think about that now."

By the time I was a sophomore in high school it was much on our minds. There was a real split in my high school about the Vietnam War. One of my best friends on the wrestling team was like four years older than me. He was very liberal and left wing in his views. He was really opposed to the Vietnam War. He had an older sister who was really anti-war and he said, "Other towns have a hippie movement. We have a Red Scare. What's weird about Dumont?" That was a good joke. It wasn't entirely true. We did have hippies. They were often working class kids who did drugs, worked on cars, played rock music. There were also sort of more liberal artsy kids who were opposed to the Vietnam War too.

My own place in this world was really weird. On one hand I knew all these guys from the wrestling team who are like pro-war. I knew I wasn't a pacifist, as I say, my first reaction to My Lai was, "Well, maybe I'm going to have to join the Army."

Then, the more I thought about it, my first thought was, "But this is like so unlike dad's Army. This is not World War II. You know, this is not what American troops are supposed to do." And then, I started to read history because I was concerned about this stuff. So, my first impulse as like a junior in high school, "Okay, where does this war come from? Why are we fighting it? Why are we stuck here? What's going on?" I came to see, through reading about the history of the war, that one, the war was unnecessary. Two, we may have even backed a regime in the South that's illegitimate for a host of reasons, and if we got out it'd probably be in everybody's best interest.

So, in my senior year, I was active, I worked on the McGovern campaign. I remember over the summer, between junior and senior year, calling around and finding somebody to get a contact about a guy named Jimmy Farrell who I liked very much. He worked at the Bendix plant. He was a New Yorker. He was sort of a liberal. He was like a liberal union guy, went to the real life high school that the movie *Blackboard Jungle* was based on and I liked him a lot. [Editor's Note: *Blackboard Jungle* is a 1955 film about a teacher in an urban school.] He really was an admirer of Cesar Chavez. He was a town councilman, an isolated, working-class Irish American, liberal guy on a very conservative town council. I liked Jimmy a lot. I worked on the McGovern campaign with him and I would do leafletting and all sorts of things like that. [Editor's Note: Cesar Chavez was an American activist and union leader. He cofounded the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta.]

We would go into the office in Hackensack and work. I admit to becoming sweet on one of the girls in the office, so I'd get my buddies to go in as often as I could and always find a way to drive her and her friends home at the end of the night. Started dating, it was great.

I worked really, really hard on the campaign. I remember, just before the election, I got a call from Jimmy and he said, "Rob, you said you were going to leaflet the northeast end of town, but I'm getting calls from people that there are no leaflets up there."

I said, "Gees, Jimmy, I put one of my best guys on it. Let me call him." So, I called my friend. I said, "Did you do those leaflets that you were going to do on the northeast end of town?" He said, "No." I said, "What do you mean, no?"

He goes, "Well, Rob, it's obvious we're going to lose, isn't it?"

I said, "I don't care if we're going to lose. In fact, if we're going to lose, what we want to do is deny him a mandate. In fact, what we're going to do is everything we can to win the election up to the minute. I'm going to do those leaflets; you want to help me out?"

He goes, "No, I'm not going to do it." "Fine, I'm going to come by your house. I'm going to get the leaflets. I'm going up there."

I go up to the northeast end of Dumont, and I put a McGovern-Shriver leaflet in front of every house on a couple blocks and called it a night. Saw the next day that we'd been beaten very, very badly. It seemed like the war was going to continue.

As an adjunct to the work I did on the student newspaper, I invented a magazine of sort of culture and politics with my friend Bill Martorelli. We called it *Snyderelli*. It's a bad name for a magazine. The cover was a fist. I got my girlfriend to do the cover art which shows a fist bursting through the roof of Dumont High School, holding a pen.

Now the great thing about the principal of Dumont High School, Mr. Ferry, is he didn't stop us. He said, "Look, you want to do this, go ahead and do it." It was sort of conceived in the spirit of underground magazines, which animated very much back then, but because of the enlightened principal ship of Joe Ferry, it didn't have to be underground and let us use the official mimeograph machine. We mimeographed it up and so you had this first bursting through the roof of Dumont High School clutching a pen, and then, beneath that it said, "Never let school interfere with your education." That was my big motto then, "Never let school interfere with your education."

At the same time I would argue with my friends because the big buzz word in education was relevance. They wanted something that was really relevant and that always struck me as what happened in the last two weeks. I would say things like, "Look at this Vietnam War. I mean, this goes back to World War II and the '50s. Unless you go back to World War II and the '50s, you're never going to understand the Vietnam War--which is obviously a historical perspective, which warred with some of my friends' demands for relevance. I put out *Snyderelli*. I remember doing a big article for the high school newspaper about war and the memory of war at Dumont High School.

I remember going to a homecoming for a long held POW who was originally from Dumont. I was taken aback about how the homecoming of the POWs always seemed to be turned into a

pro-war statement. I remember big arguments in high school student council meetings about whether or not we should be adopting POWs and wearing POW bracelets. I always sensed around the POW issue people trying to turn a bad war into a good war through framing the POW issue in a certain way.

At the same time, I knew friends whose brothers and cousins were getting killed. A boyfriend of the girl next door to us was killed. One of my best friend's cousins was killed.

I knew a guy that got drafted. I went to his going away party. It was really strange. He got wounded and he came back okay.

I registered in my senior year. By my senior year they were giving out numbers, but they were not calling guys up--which made a world of difference. I knew a lot of guys who didn't go to register and I was sort of surprised at them because I thought it was the law. I said, "You got to register, right?"

"No, no, no, let them come look for me." These are like big football heroes. "Let them come look for me."

I just thought it was bogus. You want to argue that you don't belong in the Army, argue after they call you up, but you can't run away from it.

I remember feeling considerable contempt for these tough guys who wouldn't register for the draft, because a lot of them had been sort of vocally anti-hippie, pro-war--the big phrase was communist puke, and they would beat up guys who they thought were communist pukes.

I remember once in gym class, one of my best friends, a guy I still like very much, kept calling me a communist puke. He was a really good wrestler. We had wrestled together a lot since junior high school and I remember just throwing a takedown on him, dumping him to the floor of the gym and his head bounced off the gym floor really hard, and I felt a little bit bad afterwards. I clearly rattled him and he's a hard guy to rattle, but I also thought, "He shouldn't have called me a communist puke."

By my senior year of high school there seemed to be an acute gap between the ideals I was raised on at home with my parents and the world I inhabited.

SI: Well, let me ask, did you, and your father particularly, but your parents in general, sorry. [TAPE PAUSED]

RS: Absolutely, absolutely, yes.

SI: Alright, so were you talking to your parents about your feelings? Were they trying to direct you in one way or the other?

RS: There was an ongoing discussion with my parents about the war and it was deeply felt on all sides and it was complex and very moving. I know they were pro-war as late as '66 because

when I was arguing the pro-war side in my sixth grade debate, they thought that was fine, but as time went by I know they started to have doubts. I remember watching the Chicago convention with my dad and as the cops attacked the demonstrators, I got the distinct impression he was rooting for the cops and I talked about that with my friend on the way to school the next day and he had the same feeling too. [Editor's Note: The 1968 Democratic National Convention was held from August 26 to August 29 in Chicago, Illinois. In the streets of Chicago, thousands of anti-war protestors clashed with police.] Yet, as it went on it just seemed to be heading in the wrong direction.

I remember in '68, two events, both the death of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. When King died, I was shocked. I was still peripherally active in the Boy Scouts. [Editor's Note: James Earl Ray shot and killed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee at the Lorraine Motel. Sirhan Sirhan shot Senator Robert Kennedy on June 5, 1968 at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Kennedy died the next day.] I was shocked because when I went to the scout meeting, some of the Scout masters were laughing, they thought this was kind of like, "Well, he got what he had coming to him."

My mother was crying at home and I go to a meeting and these guys are sort of chuckling about it and I said, "This is really fucked up." I remember one of those guys saying, "Well, if they're not going to obey the law, we shouldn't give them their rights." I'm not that old. I'm only thirteen, right, but I'm thinking to myself, "Rights aren't something that they give you for good behavior. They're things that you have because you're an American citizen and if black people don't have equal rights then they should have equal rights. It's not something you get revoked based on your whim of the moment." I remember being really angry at that.

Usually, my father would come in and wake me up first thing for school, and I remember coming he just came in and his shoulders were slumped and his head was down, and he said, "Come on wake up, some nut just shot Bobby Kennedy." It was clear he had woken up to that news first thing in the morning. I know that by the time Bobby Kennedy died, he thought that he was a good man. In my town, among people I knew, Bobby Kennedy was thought of as a dangerously long-haired radical among most people that I talked to. I remember, vividly, shoveling snow for somebody and my buddy and I were shoveling snow and the man who owned the house was talking to my friend about what a dangerous, long-haired radical Bobby Kennedy was. I didn't feel that way, I knew that, but I remember other people around me did.

Thoughts on the war changed, they evolved. I don't know that there was any one thing that moved them, but I can think of two conversations and they both took place before I got involved with the McGovern campaign in '72, which they fully endorsed. They thought it was great. So, clearly by '72 they had changed their minds.

At one point, it was me, my dad and my uncle; we were talking about the war in Vietnam. I had heard one of my dad's best friends who had been in combat in World War II say to my dad once, "You know, Max, maybe these kids are right. Remember what it was like being in the Army shitting in your pants, not knowing if you were going to be alive the next day or not. I don't think it's worth going through unless it's something really important." My father said, "Yes, I think, yes, you're onto something."

Then, we had argued about the Vietnam War and whether or not it was right to go and it quickly moved from an abstract discussion of whether it was right to go and be drafted to whether I should go and be drafted, and by that time it wasn't that far off--you're only talking about three years, right. I remember saying to my father with some heat, "Come on dad, you really want me to get sent off to Southeast Asia to die in the jungle because some president's on an insane macho trip?" He didn't say anything for a long ten or fifteen seconds and I was really scared, I couldn't believe it. He just looked down and he shook his head and he said, "No."

So, that was sometime between '68 and '72. Clearly his way of thinking about it changed, and then, in '72, in the spring of '72, I went to an anti-war demonstration in New York City. I went with a girl for the ostensible purpose to see the movie, *Concert for Bangladesh*. She's a girlfriend my junior year of high school. We got to the theatre, we saw these lines of people marching through the streets in an anti-war demonstration and I said, "Chris, this is so much better than going to the movies, don't you think?" She said, "Yes, let's join in."

So, we jumped in the line and marched and I remember we were next to this one group where this guy was singing, "Don't believe in evolution. Yes, we want a revolution." It was an old football fight song recycled with political lyrics, and we joined in and we sang along with John and Yoko, *Give Peace a Chance*.

I got home that night, and then, we went to have dinner at my grandmother's house in Bergenfield. My mom's mother and father had by then moved from the Bronx to Bergenfield, the town next to Dumont.

The protests came on the television and my grandmother said something like, "I don't know if this is a good thing. I think these protests are a bad thing. I think riots and demonstrations are a bad thing." Now, we hadn't been rioting or anything like that, but she clearly thought these protests were part of dangerous disorder.

My mother cut her off and said, "Oh, come on, mom, how else are we going to stop this war? This war has to be stopped. I think if young people want to do the thing, it's a good thing to do." She didn't just defend my right to dissent, but she knew I'd been to the demonstration, but she said really strongly, "This is what people have to do."

I guess the thing that bothered me the most was when I encountered demonstrations that were violent, because I thought that was pointless. We were against violence. We didn't want the war to continue. I didn't like it when people carried Vietcong flags because I knew people who were getting killed. I didn't see the point of carrying Vietcong flags.

I thought, from my reading of the history of the war, that the Vietcong and even the North Vietnamese were not the heirs to Adolf Hitler, which is the way it was often presented to us in school. We were showed a film once in sixth grade called *Why Vietnam?* which argued that if we didn't stop them in Vietnam we'd have to fight them in Hawaii, just the same as if we had stopped Hitler in Czechoslovakia, we wouldn't have had to fight him in France, the same logic, the equivalence was made to you all the time.

I felt that from reading, what I knew about the origins or the history of the Vietnam War, that you were not going to end up fighting them in Hawaii if we negotiated a peace to the Vietnam War.

There was always a rumor that trickled back through Dumont, through kids who had relatives, that "they" don't want to fight, meaning that the South Vietnamese don't want to fight. It would always come back, sometimes in racist ways. "They just care about who gives them the biggest bowl of rice and if the communists do, they're going to be loyal to the communists." There was a certain contempt for the South Vietnamese Army that trickled back and oddly, nobody said that about the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong, which I sort of found weird. Why are our allies the guys that nobody thinks are doing right? And whatever anybody said about the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese, they were widely believed to be good soldiers. I found this sort of baffling, but it was always in the back of our minds.

So, by '72, my parents had concluded that the war was wrong and that McGovern was right. It had to be stopped and I remember they were quite excited to go to a big rally in Hackensack where Teddy Kennedy spoke, and then, McGovern spoke. My parents long despised Richard Nixon since 1960. I know I mentioned that my mother was a Republican in her youth. It's true. She married my father, and then, she, by osmosis, became a Democrat and never looked back. I mean, she's sort of staunchly liberal ever since, for rest of her life.

SI: Were your parents more involved than just following the candidates or maybe going to a rally like the one you mentioned?

RS: That was an unusual thing for them to do.

SI: Okay.

RS: That was the one time that I can think of them going. My mother went to a rally for the nuclear freeze once with me. They were not like demonstrative political people, but they believed in being informed citizens. I mean, they would get the *Bergen Record* and the *Sunday Times* and based on the two of those they really both knew a lot. I mean, my mother once remembers being at an event where somebody sort of got in a discussion with my father and she was surprised at how much my father knew about this subject and he said, "Look, you read the newspapers, you learn something." They believed in being informed. They got very little from television. We did not watch the television news at all, frankly. They read newspapers and it mattered a lot to them and it made a big difference.

They were politically liberal and culturally not conservative [but] moderate and here's what I mean by that. They were very much in the tradition of New Deal Democrats. On what was discussed as moral issues and things like that were in favor of abortion rights. I remember my mother can be quite strong on her arguments on that. That's sometimes taken as a marker of cultural radicalism.

They were liberal across the board on political issues, but the way they lived their lives was very, very moderate. They dressed fairly formally. My dad always wore a hat. He was embarrassed to wear short pants. He just thought it just looked insane, even in the summer. He was very correct in his behavior. I was kidding somebody once and said I was raised in what the Victorians would have called the respectable working class, but I do think that's about where they were. They were very moderate in their habits. They were frugal. They were patriotic.

Example, during the war, we always used to fly the flag in front of our house on national holidays and I remember one point during the Vietnam War, I didn't do my job and put the flag out in front of the house and my father asked me why I hadn't put the flag out.

He said to me, "The flag's not out the way it's supposed to be." I said, "I know. You know what happens. You fly the flag people think you support the Vietnam War."

My dad says, "We don't support the Vietnam War."

I said, "I know, but if we put the flag out people are going to think that we do."

He says to me, "I'm not going to let other people tell me whether I get to be a patriotic American, put the flag out. We're opposed to the Vietnam War."

I put the flag out. That was the way they thought about things. Yes.

SI: Okay. Well, I wanted to ask about a different topic. What role, if any, did religion play in your life growing up?

RS: That's an interesting question. My parents made a principled decision when I was a kid that I would be raised Protestant. My father's feeling was Judaism is matrilineal. He was not very religious at all. It had no big calling on him. He also said to me once later, he goes, "Look, I've been around in America. I know how things work. It's a Christian country. It's much better to be a Christian than a Jew in America. You'll get ahead much further as a Christian. They don't really have any disadvantages. Besides," he said, "the Jewish religion says you have to have a Jewish mother to be Jewish."

So, we went to Protestant Churches, me and my sister, when we were kids--first an Episcopal one, and then, a Dutch Reformed one. The Episcopal one was a perfectly very nice place. I felt slightly out of sorts. I didn't know any kids there. We switched to another church in Dumont, a Dutch Reformed Church, where I knew more kids. Oddly, what I liked about the Dutch Reformed Church was it was much more bible-centered, so you would actually read things and discuss them in a way that wouldn't happen quite the same way in the Episcopal Church, but I never knew what was going on. I was confirmed after much, much, much thought in high school in the Dutch Reformed Church, much, much thought. I all, but backed out on it. I all, but backed out on it. There was something, on one hand, that didn't click for me. On the other hand I couldn't put my finger on it. It was, to me, an enormous amount of soul searching that I went through. I was confirmed.

Over years, and it was a question of decades, it took about twenty years until, in my Episcopalian wife's memorable phrase, "I came out as a Jew." I concluded that I was Jewish, did this Jewish study course, made this public affirmation of Judaism just before we got married and, basically, I think of myself as Jewish. I mean, I'm Jewish with a more complicated ancestry than most Jews have and a much wider knowledge in people from outside the Jewish world than many Jews have. So, it was a long process of self-searching and self-discovery that I undertook to reach that.

SI: I mean, one of my questions, so maybe it does not apply, was going to be if you faced any discrimination growing up in Dumont.

RS: No, I was aware of anti-Semitism though. For example, I had a girlfriend who was Jewish and her brother was a really good guy. I mean, the stereotype in Dumont was that Jewish guys weren't tough, but Michael was plenty tough and he once got in a big argument with a guy in the hallway once and the guy kept shouting at Michael again and again, "How come you guys don't want to go to the Vietnam War?"--the implication being Jewish guys. It went back and forth, and back and forth, and then, all of a sudden, the pro-war guy, football guy, totally sucker punches my friend, hits him as hard as he can. Michael just grabs him, gets him in a headlock, gets him on the floor, and starts pounding the living daylights out of him. That was an example of that. Another time, I knew guys who sort of ransacked a party, football type guys, sort of ran rough shod through a party, run by mostly Jewish guys. You sort of sensed there was something in the air when they did that.

At a high school reunion, in my thirtieth reunion in 2003, I remember talking to one of the woman in my high school class who was Jewish who felt very strongly that there was a strong current of anti-Semitism at Dumont. On the flip side of it, the girl who had been the president of our senior class, was also Jewish, described it as a great place to grow up. So, I think that it was a town that could be perceived in many ways, right. I think one of the things that I've always tried to figure out was: What was it about me that put me in these different enough circles that I could become very much aware of what you would otherwise not know about? Do you know what I mean?

I mean, my friend who grew up on the other side of town in a mostly Jewish neighborhood was baffled at some of the stuff that kids who grew up on the other side town had to say. I said, "Well, let me tell you, this is what it looked like." So, it was a place that was quite divided.

I think there were many little different social worlds in it, even though it was sort of, basically, modestly middle-class and working class town. There were a lot of little different worlds in it, and if you were in one, you didn't necessarily connect with the other.

I, personally, didn't feel discriminated against in any way. I had a sense that Jewish kids were smart. I had a sense that Jewish kids were more middle-class. That was pretty much true at Dumont, but beyond that I didn't feel any sort of discrimination.

My grandparents, my mother's parents spoke, perfectly unaccented English. My father's mother, who I knew quite well into high school years, she clearly spoke with a Russian accent. So, as a kid it would take some getting my head around, listening to her and understanding her

sometimes. She always spoke clearly, but you're always aware that Grandma Snyder's accent is not like the standard American pronunciation. She's also very funny. She was really cool.

There was a huge fascination with African Americans shot through with racism in Dumont. People were always worrying what's going to happen when somebody sells a house. The big question, "Will they sell to colored?" That was the phrase. They didn't. The number of black people in Dumont was very small when I was in high school.

SI: Do you know if there was a neighborhood that would deliberately not sell?

RS: There would have been social pressure. There was a rumor. There was always a rumor that one of the high school teachers, an African American guy, and a track coach, left Dumont because he couldn't buy a house there. I don't know that for a fact. I actually tried to look him up and ask him that once and I couldn't track him down, but he was loved and respected by a lot of the kids, a guy named Roger Burbage and when he left, one of the rumors was Mr. Burbage left, because he couldn't buy a house here and he said, "If I can work here, but I can't live here, forget it." That was always in the back of people's minds.

The athletics leagues were in mostly all white towns and there was great concern among the coaches about what would happen when we compete with black teams. I'll give you two examples of that. A town was coming into our league that had a lot of African American kids. The wrestling coach pulls me over and says, "Rob, you know, I want your opinion on this. I think a lot of the guys are going to be panicked about wrestling black guys. I want to schedule scrimmages against black teams so they don't freak out when they get into a real league against a black guy." The guys believed that black guys were exceptionally strong, had extra muscles. These are utterly racist conceptions, but that's what they believed.

SI: Your teammates said that or the coach was saying that?

RS: Guys in Dumont had this.

SI: Oh, okay, alright.

RS: There was a rumor that went around one year. We did not have a particularly good football team. That speaks volumes about my abilities that I could never make it, but the football team was not that great when I was in high school. In my sophomore year, there was a rumor that there was a black guy coming who was a great running back who would've done wonders for our team. Guys talked about how they would break his leg before they play alongside him.

I was in a scrimmage once in my junior year in Northern Valley High School and there was a black guy on their wrestling team. After the scrimmage I was chatting with this one guy from the other team and he said, "Would you hold my laundry bag open for me?" "Sure, okay."

So, I hold the laundry bag open; with great ceremony he somehow finds a way to pick up his used towel, and drop it into his laundry bag without really touching it. I'm like, "So, what's the

matter with your towel?" He goes, "I leant it to him." He gestures to a black guy. He doesn't want to touch a towel that a black kid has used a minute ago, didn't want to touch it.

I remember one of my buddies in a wrestling tournament. I got knocked out in the first round. He lasted into the second round and he had a good match, but he lost in the end, and I was talking to him about the match, my parents were in earshot, and he said of the match, "Well, at least I got to knock a nigger around for six minutes." My parents were just taken aback. I was not shocked by what Joe said, but I was disappointed.

There was a famous game, our school against another school which had a lot of black kids in it, in which a lot of the people said that our team was just sort of thoroughly intimidated by the black guys, that they just couldn't even put up a good game. One of my friends was ridiculed for that and I remember defending him years later, but that was always on people's minds.

We were fascinated by African American culture. By my junior and senior year of high school, the Black Panthers, were the most interesting and compelling thing in town. I was listening to more and more sort of soul music and R&B. I loved the music of Jimi Hendrix. I was convinced that the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement was central to making America a just place. I read *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver.

I was also very interested in prison reform through the Fortune Society. My mom had heard of the Fortune Society on a radio talk show and I got involved with it. The Fortune Society came to my high school and talked.

There was a great deal of fear about black people in Dumont. I remember we had an assembly once where a band came. It was mostly black musicians. They played for us. I forget what the occasion was, but I really liked it. I was sort of bouncing around to the music and one of the guys I knew from the wrestling team said to me afterwards, "Snyder, you were bouncing around like a nigger in your seat."

It was much on people's minds, but they didn't know black people and this was the weird thing, it was an all-white town. My sister and I would kid. Ellen would say that she was friends with thirty percent of the African American population in Dumont High School. What did that mean? One friend. There were three black kids in Dumont High School; one of them was her friend. That was it. I mean, black people were an abstraction. They were two and three towns away. We didn't know them, but people's imaginations filled up with all sorts of things.

SI: Was there a panic in the town when the riots here in Newark or Plainfield broke out?

RS: People talked about them.

SI: Yes.

RS: There were disturbances in Englewood. That was the big thing people talked about, Englewood. It didn't take much to scare people. These were not major conflagrations in Englewood, as significant as they were in people's lives, there were no nearby blowups. Dumont

was remote from that. It was two or three towns away. It was gone, I mean, from our daily lives, but you read about it. You heard about it and people worried about it.

My dad worked out of Irvington and so he was aware of what was going on and he was aware of what happened in Newark. I remember in '72 he told me there were like forty-five guys in his shop. One, the vast majority have already owned guns. My father did not own a firearm. That gave me a sense of the possibilities of dangers of enough armed guys on all sides. The second thing was, of forty-five guys, I think my father was one of two people in his shop who voted for McGovern and as he would pointedly say, "And that was Jane the secretary and she's Jewish," as if that explained everything you needed to know about why Jane voted the way she did.

There was great fear about this. It was in the back of people's minds always, right, but it was not something in their every day, immediate, experience. That was always so strange about it to me. It was sort of like, fearing and hating people you've never met. You would've thought--to talk to people in Dumont--that life in black neighborhoods was one big party after another. I mean, the big line was, welfare cheats and Cadillacs. Then, as I sort of would argue with people about this, I'd say, "So, would you want to swap one day?" They'd say, "No." So, I said, "What's going on then?" That would be the end of the conversation.

SI: Alright, well I have one final question, and then, maybe we will stop and save the rest for the next time.

RS: Sure.

SI: These attitudes towards African Americans and also towards the Vietnam War, how much of that was contributing to your sense that you had to get out of town or was it more just personal growth and wanting to do different things?

RS: It was impossible to separate them.

SI: Okay.

RS: I remember the Fortune Society had a shop in the Village where they used to sell stuff and I used to go there when I went to the Village and they had a map showing episodes of American violence and the map's covered. I would take this home and I'd put it up in my room and said, "See, look, Wounded Knee, Alcatraz, look at all these things. American history is a history of violence. This is a violent country. We have to understand why this is the case and we have to stop it."

I remember having a poster up of John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Again, the idea that these guys have been martyred trying to make the country a better place. I was really fascinated by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. I thought this is, again, something that was going to make the world more just.

I was consistently drawn to the idea that America didn't live up to its highest ideals. I remember thinking that again and again. My brief involvement with prison reform was premised on that. If

prison is supposed to make you a better person and they make you a worse person, isn't this upside down and shouldn't we do something about it?

So, I knew, politically, Dumont was not going to work. It's not because it was too small for my ambitions. I just didn't see enough people like me there and I thought if I got to New York City, eventually, there would be enough people like me there. I also felt that I needed to understand the world a lot more. There were just limits to what I knew and I needed to learn more and college was going to be really useful to me in trying to learn about the world. I just wanted to get out. I just felt terribly confined. I remember that.

I remember being bored a lot. I'd always get on my bicycle and ride around town, thinking, "God, somewhere, someplace, something's got to be happening."

I remember nights, once we had cars we would drive around New Jersey, North Jersey, and we never got that far. We'd drive up into Rockland County maybe, in this deep belief that somewhere it was really happening. Like somewhere it was going to be really interesting. In our minds there would be like music playing and beautiful girls who look like Joni Mitchell, somewhere out there, but we had to find it. We knew for sure it wasn't in Dumont. That's what we would look for. Increasingly, in my mind, there was going to be outside of Dumont, someplace else.

I remember having a dream, right around these years, but around the time I was finishing high school. There was a big thing for going cross country. Kids a little older than us had gone to California and I very much wanted to do this and I did it the year after my freshman year of college. At the end of my senior year, a bunch of us piled in a van that one guy owned. He was a year or two older than me. We drove up to Canada and back.

I just remember having a dream where my friends and I were piling into a van again and we were going to go someplace. It wasn't clear where we were going. We're not leaving under any threat. It was a happy thing. It was like some sort of extended road trip and I kept saying to my folks, "Mom, dad, you want to go too?" They laughed. They said, "No, no, no, we're too old for that. You're young; you should do this, c'mon, do it." I said, "Okay, bye."

We jumped into the van with rock music playing, pulled out of the driveway in Dumont and headed off to wherever we were going, and it was a happy departure. I remember that so vividly. It was a very happy departure. It was bon voyage, have a good trip, but both of my parents said to me, I remember this as I got into the van, "Nah, we're too old. We're too old. This is for young people. You should do this," and I was gone.

SI: Alright, well, we are out of time for today's session, but thank you very much.

RS: Yes, sure.

SI: We will come back for a second session.

RS: Yes, sure. I'd be happy to talk right along.

SI: Thank you.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

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