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Oral History Interview with Harry Schwartzman
Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.006
Interview conducted by Becky Amato on December 15th, 2011 in Brooklyn, New York.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: OK.

BECKY [AMATO]: Recording. All right, um, this is Crossing -- an interview for "Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations," for Brooklyn Historical Society. It's December 15h, 2011, and this is Becky Amato, as the interviewer.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: And I'm Harry Schwartzman, as the interviewee.

BECKY AMATO: Um, so Harry, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself? Where were you born? What age are you? Things like that, just basic information.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, I was born in Roosevelt Hospital, in Manhattan, and I'm about to be thirty -- 35. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Um, and so tell me about growing up in Manhattan.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um...

BECKY AMATO: Or did you grow up in Manhattan?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I did grow up in Manhattan, and you know, I don't know what to tell you about it. I mean, I think to many people, it seems very exotic and different, but that was what I grew up in, so it seems just normal, I don't know. I mean I had a very, what I think, was a very conventional upbringing.

BECKY AMATO: So talk about it, describe it.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Uh, well, I was born in Roosevelt Hospital. My parents, not long after that, moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan, so they moved to 83rd and Madison, and I guess I grew up there. Um, ate the lead paint off the walls, um, and uh, went to Park Avenue Synagogue Nursery School, and I guess the pertinent part of that, about that, is that I didn't speak English until I went to Park Avenue Synagogue Nursery School. I spoke Yiddish with my father, and Japanese with my mother. I don't know how I dealt with that as a kid. I was told it wasn't a problem, and it worked out fine, but I have no recollection of any problems, or anything, whatsoever, my language, or frankly any recollection of my childhood (laughter) prior to nursery school, and I have very few

recollections of nursery school, except for uh, I think we used to have a Shabbat, and I think I remember that, but I'm not even sure I actually remember that. It's probably a construct in my mind. Uh, but from there I went on to PS 6, the Lillie Devereaux Blake School, um, for my elementary school, and then my parents took my out of PS 6 in the fifth grade, and sent me to Riverdale Country School, which is a prep school, private school, and from there I went to McGill University, and uh, Montreal, and uh, really enjoyed my time there. Tried to stay in Canada, but that didn't quite work out. Um, went to San Francisco for a bit, um, and then basically came back to New York. Oh! And I lived in Vancouver for a bit too. And then I've uh came back to New York, uh, with my heart set on never leaving. I guess I'd defined myself geographically. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: I'd actually like to go back to your parents, and speaking different languages.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Mm, hmm.

BECKY AMATO: Um, what did the families speak together?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: You know, I mean, when I got older, we would all communicate in English. Um, my brother and I always spoke in English. Um, you know, my parents obviously made a concerted effort to teach us other languages, besides English, um and uh, they stuck to it, and then it's a wonderful thing, because now I do speak other languages, and I don't think I have a faculty for languages. In fact, I had, you know, I didn't do well in high school, in my French classes. Um, I learned more French just being in Montreal, than I did from I guess four years of French study in high school, which was tortuous, but yum, yeah, I grew up speaking Yiddish and Japanese, and a lot of people find that exotic and different, and I guess as exotic and different as growing up in New York, um, but again, to me, it's normal. I mean that's what I -- I grew up doing, and um the fact that I guess I spoke to my mother in Japanese, and my father in Yiddish, and my brother in Japanese, or in English, sorry. In English, and my friends in English, um, it is just normal. So, it doesn't seem strange [05:00] to me at all. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Um, how did your parents meet?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, my mother had ah come from Japan, in I think around 1971 or so, um, and she had been previously married, uh, and then came to America, and uh, I

mean as far as I can tell, seems to be enjoying her life here quite -- quite a lot. (laughter) And, met my father on the beach at Fire Island, and my father's opening line was, are you Chinese? And, uh, (cough) and then uh, they got married eventually, and here I am very quickly after they got married, and um, yeah. They're already older. I mean both my parents have been older, so I think that the choices that they made for me were very well-considered, and you know, a big thing for them. Yeah, um, yeah.

BECKY AMATO: How much do you know about your mom's life in Japan?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Oh, um, I guess I would imagine as much as anyone would know about your mom's life before they had you. Um, I mean, you know, one of the reasons that my mother taught me Japanese was because I can speak to my relatives, um, and you know, just communicate with my family. Um, so we would go to Japan a lot, particularly when the yen was, you know, cheap. (laughter) You know, my mom has lived in New York now, for uh, I guess almost 40 years, if not actually 40 years. Uh, you know, she's still convinced of the superiority of Japan in many things. Uh, it's certainly the, uh, quality of their consumer products. So when we used to go to Japan, we'd come back with boxes of stuff, like clothing, dishes, things like that, but we used to go to Japan every, uh, every second year. So, and uh, we've bringing back boxes and boxes of things, and so as a kid, I grew up with a lot of Japanese things, and (cough) excuse me, sorry. (cough) In New York, uh, you know at the time, I guess it translated into me having toys that other kids didn't have, and uh, that was very cool. You know, there was, um, Japanese television on cable at the time, and so we would watch that, as a big fan of a cartoon called Ikkyu-San, which was about a boy monk, (laughter). Doesn't sound very exciting now, but did at the time. Yeah, so we got into all kinds of trouble, and um, and then, um, OK. And then, (laughter) um, uh, and uh yeah, and then uh, you know, in terms of the Yiddish stuff as a kid. Uh, Yiddish is a weird language. It's a murdered language. It doesn't exist like it used to. Um, it's not something that someone my age can find people easily to talk to. Um, my dad taught me Yiddish. He didn't have to. He uh, he certainly didn't need it in his day-to-day life, except to speak to his parents. Um, maybe they could've spoken English too, I don't know. Um, but um, uh you know, my dad made an effort to find other young kids who spoke Yiddish, and put together a play

group called "Rebbe Chick," which was named after a nursery song, (inaudible) put the chick, a Yiddish song, and um, so we always used to get together in a basement of the synagogue, and uh, you know, the thing about Yiddish, is that it's impossible to extricate Yiddish from Judaism. Uh, but, you know of course my parents, my father, but both my parents, you know, what you'd called bagels and lox Jews, I mean not particularly religious people. Certainly Jewish, and aware of being Jewish, and what have you, but not practicing in any way, except I guess that we spoke Yiddish. But, um, I guess we never see this religiously, but anyway, the rebbe chicks were always in synagogue basements, because where else are you going to have a Yiddish play group I guess. But the, the whole point of "Rebbe Chick" was that it was secular experience. Um, and so I would go to these play groups every Sunday, and I would go to Japanese school [10:00] every Saturday, and I don't think I had a real weekend ever. (laughter) Um, for a very short time, possibly in junior high school, but then I started working on the weekends, anyway. So, uh, and uh you know, the part of learning language is being educated in it, and uh, or to be good at it, um and so you know, I hated it, uh, and I still probably resent it or something, but it's probably been good for me. (laughter) And uh, I hated Japanese school for instance, and really didn't pay attention. Uh, I didn't care, I just really resented being there, and now I've lost an opportunity to have learned how to read and write Japanese, which I can't do, um, and "Rebbe Chick" was not as academically focused, so that was just an opportunity to speak Yiddish, and that was great, um. But I don't have any regrets about it, to tell you. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Did you make friends in any of these situations?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: There's still some people I speak to, um, or if I see around, you know, I'll say hi to. I was at a wedding recently, and I ran into someone I had gone to Yiddish school with, which is weird, and but again that happened. Um, but yeah, I mean I made friends. Japanese school is tough. I mean, Japanese people are very -- uh they're not open to difference, uh so, being a white-looking kid who speaks Japanese, you know, those were not great uh in a weekend Japanese school. Was really not great in a real Japanese school in Japan, uh, which had to go to every, you know, when we'd go in the summer sometimes. Um, I really hated that, did not want to do that. Um, you know,

Japan's not an open society. So, that was weird, but you know, again, like I grew up in New York, and it's like to me, I have friends who are half black, half white, friends who spoke -- God knows how many friends who spoke more languages than I could ever learn, um, and that was normal to me. The notion of like interracial, or I don't know, like inter -- you know, bilingual, trilingual, whatever it is, is not that weird in New York. I mean there's tons of people who speak Spanish and English. You have to, to survive here, you know. Tons of people who speak Chinese and English. I mean, that's normal. It's not abnormal. It's only when you leave New York, that it seems abnormal. So, uh, you know, even the other kids that you know here, they know of other people, like me, it's not that weird which is why I love New York. (laughter) Never going to leave. Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: Um, tell me more about Japanese school in Japan. Like -- why --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Oh it's terrible.

BECKY AMATO: I know you said it was terrible, but --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: -- just --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I mean you have to wear a uniform. I'm not a uniform guy. So, I don't want to do that. Did not want to do that, but I don't think we had to do that actually um because we were summer, it was during the summer, although they don't really get a summer. I mean it's terrible, I mean for a kid it sounds awful, um you know I hate gym, and they're really big with like calisthenics. I hate calisthenics, always have. Um, it's just a miserable experience, and then, you know, there's this (inaudible) that we go a lot. So it was -- it was -- you know, Japan was a well-off country, but it wasn't as international as it is now. I haven't been in awhile, so actually I don't really know what it's like now, but um at the time, it was -- you know, we were in, even if we were in Tokyo, we weren't in like downtown Tokyo, but it's still, we were very different, and it was very obvious all the time, and I didn't like that. (laughter) But I never felt that here, ever.

BECKY AMATO: Impressing you a little bit, this.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: OK.

BECKY AMATO: Question, like in what ways did you feel different? Did people treat you differently? Did they --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah. Yeah, I mean it was, you know, the way that kids treat kids that are different, which I guess I got here too. I mean, I'm a nerdy dude, but um, uh you know, you get ostracized from the social situations, um, you know, you get picked last, although I mean that might have been my terrible, physical coordination problems like that, (laughter) but um, uh you know, kids talk about you. They don't want to be friends with you. They don't want to play with you. They don't want to hang out with you. Um, you know, and then there's always that kid in your class, and it sucks to be that kid all the time. That's basically it. I mean, you know, [15:00] in Japan, like conformity is the norm. And it's not here, and uh, or not to the same extent I guess, as it is in Japan. Um, but, yeah, when you come from a place where non-conformity is the norm, and you go to a place where conformity is the norm, it's very tough for a kid. You know, so it just wasn't a pleasant experience. I wouldn't do that to my kids. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Do you know what your brother's and dad's experiences were like then going to Japan?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Well, my dad wouldn't come for -- he would go for like three months, for summer vacation, and then um, my dad would work, I guess, it was like the Catskills thing, when he'd go, but international. You know, my parents were all into, like immersive experiences, I guess. Like we went to France, we lived in France for the summer, in a country house in Normandy, which was awesome, but of course my parents then had to roll us in like a French day camp I guess, so we'd have the immersive French experience, and of course like me and my brother not speaking any French, (laughter) and all these kids in some French day camp, uh, and having to like stick together, because we spoke English together, and didn't speak any French, but the difference is, in France, like everyone was pretty nice to us, and tried to help and stuff, and that wasn't necessarily the case in Japan. Of course we made friends, and great people there too, but just as a whole, it wasn't as welcoming, and not to say in France. I mean we had problems too. I mean, uh, it wasn't, you know, I mean it was weird to have a Japanese mom, and two white kids, and things like that in France sometimes, but again it wasn't as uh -- there wasn't as

much of a notice on conformity. You could do whatever you wanted I guess. And then other people could do that too. But um, you know, Japanese school, you wear uniforms, you're not allowed. You can wear one kind of backpack, that's it. Um, it's really long. It goes on, from like seven thirty to nine. (laughter) I mean just crazy, it's terrible. So I mean, I hated that part of going to Japan. Um, but um, my dad, I don't -- I mean he'd come for a month, and you know, I mean then we wouldn't be in school. We'd do tourist stuff, and that was good. My brother and I would have to bond. You know, like we were the only kids like that, and so we'd hang out with each other a lot, which we don't do anymore, I don't know why. (laughter) But yeah.

BECKY AMATO: What was your relationship like in general when you were growing up?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: With my brother?

BECKY AMATO: Yeah.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I think it was fine. We played together a lot. I mean, you know, I mean you grow up in New York, so a lot of times, I guess, we were probably indoors compared to most kids I guess. Um, but you know, he's my little brother, I used to beat him up a lot, then one day he beat the crap out of me, and we stopped doing that. Um, stuff we did, we'd go to the school yard, and play ball, whatever. Um, we used to drag all our stuff down to the street and sell it, um, and just fun, really fun. Um, and then you know, just kid stuff. Yeah. I mean, again, very unremarkable childhood, which is weird right, because like, and then like, you know, like we're bilingual, this is why we're having this interview, uh, and then like um, we're bicultural I think, and um, like we had an article written about us, the New Yorker, there's a book that came out in the '80s, called Bringing Up Baby Bilingual and my family's like a whole chapter in there, and again it's like all these people are like oh it's fascinating, we want to write about this. We want to tell the world about it. And I don't see what the big deal is. (laughter) I fight with my parents, you know, same thing as everybody else, it's the same thing. I guess, it's more my [English] is involved, but it's still the same thing, and it's not -- you know, this is a global international world, and there's like international people, and you know, I mean, living bi-culturally, or tri-culturally, or million collect culturally, whatever it is, that -- that should be the norm. You should be conversant in how to be polite in

every culture in the world. If you can do that, you're probably a good person, and you know, if you get a head start with a couple of them, that's great. So, uh, yeah again, I just don't see it [20:00] as a special thing. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: When you went to these other places, you mentioned Canada, San Francisco, Vancouver I think. Um, um, you mentioned that you came back to New York, and you were going to stay. Tell me about those other places.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, like -- well Canada just wouldn't have me. I mean, I, you know, you're not going to get -- I didn't qualify for any sort of specialties or anything. Um, but Canada's awesome. I think they've actually figured out the cultural issue. I mean, well, in their like major cities, there's a lot of their, I mean, their major cities, and people from all over the place, and stuff. Um, Canada's great. I just -- didn't -- I couldn't stay there, or (inaudible) or, (laughter) but um, yeah, you know, I just couldn't -- couldn't stay. Um, and California's great, beautiful, it's wonderful, it's just full of Californians, and they're like the worst people on earth. So take that California. (laughter) But um, you know, that certainly, whatever -- the reason I came back to New York is for the bagels and lox, I think, more than anything else. I don't know. New York's the greatest place on earth. Anyone who's born here, knows that, doesn't -- well that's not true because I know people who will refute that despite the fact that they were born in New York, but that's just, they miss something. I don't know, it's a great place. It has nothing to do with my culture, bi-culturalism, or whatever. I mean, I just think that -- well it does, I guess, because New York does have a lot of like cultural people and all, but it's certainly not -- it's just you know, like a -- ah. You know, it's just a -- just a -- it's just a byproduct of having so many different people in one place, and the reason for that is because New York is, you know, a major industrial, cultural, so everybody comes here anyway. I mean, if you go to Paris, or London, I'm sure it's the same thing.

BECKY AMATO: Was that your experience in Paris or London?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, I've only spent short times in both. So, I don't know. I don't know what it's like to live there at all, but I can't imagine -- I mean why wouldn't it be any different? I can't imagine. It's uh, I mean -- or maybe it isn't different, I mean -- well look, I mean the reality is it all depends on like your money. All right, like, you

know, I grew up well off. I mean, you know, I can't -- I don't know. Well I -- I don't know (inaudible). I don't know what it has to do with it, but I guess if you're like poor or black in France, it's not so good, but I guess here, if you're poor or black it's not so good, but I don't think that the poor and black person is going to like, you know, they have no reason to look down on you for being bi-cultural or whatever, I mean again, I think they're exposed to all sorts of people too. So I don't know. I think -- yeah, I think London and France is the same as New York, I can't imagine -- or Paris, whatever. I mean I'm sure there's quirks, and I'm sure, the experience of growing up, like straddling different cultures, and different worlds, I guess, would be the same in those places. That's all speculation. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Well let's go back to something you know something about then. Canada, you said --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: -- Canada's great.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: But it sounds like you felt comfortable up there, and --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: -- wanting to stay if you could have --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: -- the ability. Tell me more about it.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I mean, basically, they feel like east coast cities. Well, Toronto and Montreal. Montreal is a bi-cultural city. It's French and English, um. I -- I mean, the great thing about Canada is that it's America, except with socialized health care, so I don't think it's any different, and it's 51st state, they just hate to hear that. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: How did you decide to go there?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, I went to college there, and um, uh, I don't know how I ended up going there. I was looking for a different place to go, than my peers, and Canada seemed very exotic, and far away, and they spoke French, and it's actually not far away, and it's actually not exotic, and they do speak French, and um, [25:00] the 18 year old drinking age didn't hurt, it was cheaper than SUNY. It's a world-renowned institution.

Uh, it was a win-win, I highly recommend it for all future generations. If this interview gives anything to future generations, it's look to Canada for college, much cheaper. (laughter) And there's an 18 year old drinking age. (laughter) Um, but, I mean, you know, you know, in Canada, there's tons of multi-racial people. Um, you know, any city, I mean that's the whole glory of cities, is that it brings everyone together, and we all live on top of each other, and eventually going to do each other, and eventually going to make kids, and eventually these kids are going to grow up, and speak different languages, or be conversant and see culture, and whatever culture they're growing up in, and you know, I guess I was lucky because I grew up with the Yiddish culture, which was really New York now. I mean it's not Vilna, it's not Warsaw, it's New York, so you know, I guess I kind of had a foot in the culture here, the secret culture. But um, yeah, I think it's a metropolitan thing, you know. That's what more urban, that's what we do. If you live in a house with nothing around you, you're only going to meet people like you. You're only going to have kids that are like you, and that's that. That's going to continue on for years and years and years and years. It's never going to be like that, in the city. Never. That's why cities are the best. And I (inaudible).

BECKY AMATO: Well have you had experiences outside of cities that made you -- that helped you kind of refine this idea?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: No. I --

BECKY AMATO: You never left a city?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I don't have a driver's license, so it's really hard. (laughter) And it's not like it's obvious when I walk out of a car, if I'm being chauffeured somewhere. Um, that you know, like I'm not a black dude, so it's not like really obvious who this guy is, you know, I mean I'm just some white dude. Um, I've experienced some anti-Semitism outside cities. Um, I guess I look more Jewish than anything. Um, I don't know, what do I look?

BECKY AMATO: I --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I don't really know. I think I look more Jewish than anything else. Other people have told me I look more Asian, but I think they always say that after they know I'm Asian, um, or half-Asian. Um, I think that, yeah, so like if anything, I've

experienced maybe some anti-Semitism, but again, like who cares. Um, you know, I don't leave cities. (laughter) You can't get restaurants. (laughter) So I did go cross-country on bicycle, and I never had -- I had one bad experience with a dude who turned out to be a New Yorker, in Montana. And that was about it, I really only had pleasant experiences with the rest of America. It was actually really wonderful.

BECKY AMATO: Well tell me about the anti-Semitism.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Oh God. Um, you know people making Jewish jokes, or something like that, or you know, cheap like the Jews. I don't know. Who knows how much of that is actual anti-Semitism, or just some like ignorant stereo -- I guess that is anti-Semitism, bringing stereotypes, but you know, perhaps -- I mean I don't think anyone who's ever said anything not, you know, anti-Jewish to me, I've always had the impression they never actually met a Jew. They don't really know what it is. Um, people in New York who I've met, who are anti-Semitic in New York, of course I have, um they just seem to be angry people in general. Um, I don't think that like the gentlemen's agreement-style anti-Semitism exists anymore. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know, but I don't think so. Um, you know, I come from pretty benign minorities when it comes to anti-Asianism, or Semitism. I mean I'm not black or Hispanic or something. I can imagine that's worse, or you know, those -- that would invite more response from people than I get. I don't really get much responses. I think they just think that's (inaudible). (laughter) Um, but I don't think they're reacting to my ethnicity, if I get negative reactions from people.

BECKY AMATO: How did your dad's family react to your mom, and vice-versa?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, you have to keep in mind that they're both like older when they got married, so I think that both of them, you know, on my mom's side, [30:00] this is her second marriage, so I imagine that both of them are just kind of -- the four of them, were relieved that my parents had gotten married, and were going to have a kid. Um, you know, I don't -- I don't know. I know that when my dad married my mom, and then they had me, and then they went to Japan, uh, among other reasons, I was in a Shinto-naming ceremony, and apparently my grandmother who doesn't -- you know, my family's (inaudible) doesn't speak English the most part, he just doesn't speak English, um, and

uh my uh grandmother told my mom that my dad's was like almost Japanese, and that was like the highest place you can think of for a gaijin, for a foreigner, which rankled my dad, and still does I think. Um, but um, you know, uh again, I think -- well I don't know. I mean I think the human aspect of it, the fact that, you know, their 40 year old kids were getting married was more important than who they were getting married to. (laughter) Uh, and that they were going to have kids, I guess, but I mean, I don't know, maybe they don't tell me stuff about -- about when they met, or that whole positive side. I don't know what the reality is, that's all I've been told. Yeah. Um, I think, you know, my grand -- my American grandmother and grandfather, um, as I understand it, they liked my mom, I mean, but they're first-generation immigrants, my grandfather, from Russia. I never knew my grandfather, and my grandmother was from Poland. Uh, I can't imagine that they ever thought that their son would marry an Asian woman, and I can't believe my mom's parents ever believed my mom would marry an American guy. I don't think they had any idea what a Jew is. I don't think that was an issue. Uh, so, but I've never heard of -- or maybe I have, but I don't remember any stories of anything crazy happening, or family blow ups, or anything like that. And then, you know, then we came, and we were really cute kids, and so everyone loved us. (laughter) My brother and me, that is. (laughter) Um, but again, there was no problem with the families at all. I mean, we saw my grandmother all the time. Maybe my grandmother, and my mother, didn't really communicate very much because my mother's been here for 40 years, but her -- you know, her English is good, but um, and my grandmother's English was OK too, so maybe they weren't communicating, I don't know. I'm not sure. No but they communicated actually. Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: Do you remember those interactions when you were in Japan? Your mom and her family, and...

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah, uh, the weird thing is, by the time I was going to Japan from when I can remember, um, both my grandparents had had strokes. So they were hard to understand anyway. Um, so, you know, and I think that it probably was difficult for them to communicate and stuff, you know, paralyzed them, whatever. Um, so you know, my grandmother was very nice to me. Um, she would cook for us, I remember that, um take

us out. Took us to Tokyo Disneyland, the only Disneyland I've ever been to. Um, my family never goes to California, but we went to Tokyo. And never been to Florida. And um, yeah, it was, you know, besides the fact that we were in Japan, it's like having a grandmother anywhere else, I imagine. Um, and uh, my grandmother here who lived in the Bronx, and uh, lived up on Bainbridge Avenue, um, so we'd go up to the Bronx. That was very exotic, and a brief side visit. We'd get on the liberty lines, and go up to Grand Concourse, um, and uh, she's probably one of the last remaining whites in the area until it became, and then it went. So yeah, I don't know, we'd go up there. Um, so it used to be a lot of Jews in the Bronx. Uh, so, and you know, we'd come from a family of Jewish scholars. Although I think all Jews seem to come from families of scholars. (laughter) Um, but uh, yeah, and so knew a lot of old people in apartments, but cleared out in the Bronx, and stuff. [35:00] But, yeah I don't know.

BECKY AMATO: When did your grandparents come to this country?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Uh, in the '20s I think. Um, circuitous roots. My grandfather came through Argentina, apparently, and my grandmother came through Canada, actually, Montreal. Um, and uh, yeah and apparently my father -- my grandfather that was here before, and then went to Canada, married my grandmother, because he had never, somehow, in Warsaw, and uh, came back after having married her to (inaudible). I think it was much easier for my mom. She just flew here (laughter). Actually, my mom wasn't a Japanese -- was a Japanese citizen until very recently. She just became an American citizen, which is weird to me, but um it was her choice. So I don't really know. I think it had to do with inheritance stuff with my dad, and stuff, more than anything else, but you know, that's the funny thing, is that she lives here, my mom, and my grandmother too I guess. They both lived here, lived in American, and dealt with American stuff, but also were very much able to create their own little worlds, like they didn't have to speak English, you could live with people who are, you know, who grew up like they did. Um, you know, and made their own little world here in New York, which is cool to me. I think that's cool.

BECKY AMATO: Does your mom have a network of Japanese friends?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Oh yeah, yeah. Um, there's all kinds of networks out there. She's in a Japanese chorus, and only sings Japanese songs. You could very easily spend your whole life in New York, and not speak English, that's obvious, whatever language it is, you speak. Um, you know, except for the fact that I guess she married my dad, my mom wouldn't have had to have spoken English. Um, I think early when she got here, she only spoke, um, Japanese, and uh, I guess, yeah. So that's yeah. I mean, I guess, like really though, when I grew up, I grew up like Jewish. That to me is like how I grew up. Um, maybe it was -- I guess it was important for my dad, that that be the case, you know, and so in New York, on the Upper East Side, in New York, PS 6, at Riverdale, that was the norm. (laughter) You know, like tons of kids were Jewish, so that's just the way I felt, I guess.

BECKY AMATO: Just as a point of clarification.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: Your mom converted, didn't she?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: My mom converted to Judaism, yeah, but it's always a weird thing to me, because Japanese people don't -- religion in Japan is not the same thing as religion here. It's different. Like, there's um, you know, if you're Japanese, you're Shinto. What is that? I don't know, I don't even think that Japanese people really know, you know, but it's um, you know, I don't really know, but what it is, is what is said to be the, uh, ancestral religion of the Japanese people who were descended from the Sun God, and um, that's Shintoism somewhere, and then there's all sorts of stuff around there, I don't understand. You know, so when we would go to Japan, as kids, you know, carrying Harry Daniel Schwartzman, would always go to the shrine, we'd always go to the Shinto shrine, and pray, but the Japanese are very pragmatic people. You know, we'd go with my grandmother, and she'd say, pray that we get the washing machine fixed. Pray that your uncle gets a job. Whatever it is, you know. Very pragmatic. It wasn't like, pray that your soul gets fixed, or something else. We get stuff done. Um, and then I guess, Japan is also Buddhism, um, and Confucianism, but those aren't religions, it's just how you do stuff. It's the way people understand the world, which I guess is what religion is here, but here we also have deities, which obviously they don't have deities, but they

don't have deities in the same way that we have a monotheistic religion. Um, so we were in both worlds, I mean I guess. We never -- I don't know if I ever believed in Judaism's god either. You know, to me it's all the same, and I think -- I think my mom may see it that way too. I mean my mom believes in God, I think, but I don't think she believes that there's [40:00] -- she believes that you can take God as you understand it, and I think that that's a very Japanese way of looking at it. Um, I think my dad is probably more, you know, there's a Jewish guy, and every other guy's wrong. (laughter) You know, and that's -- that's -- that's the standard, right? So um, so yeah, I mean so my mom is Jewish, although it turns out that she had a conservative rabbi do her conversion, which apparently is according to the Law of Return in Israel, not good enough for me to qualify as Jewish, which is a whole other world, I mean you know. So, you know, and then I've been assured by Israelis it's no big deal, and you know, I don't know, if there's like another Holocaust here or something, I can run back to Israel and then they would accept me, but apparently, as I understand it, that's not the case, um, and then that's not cool to me. You know, and only serves to reinforce my belief that New York City is the place to be. (laughter) I don't need to go -- I certainly don't want to go to Israel, um, and I don't particularly want to go to Japan either. I like being here.

BECKY AMATO: Could you just talk a little bit more about your relationship to Judaism?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Um, I don't know. I mean, you know, Judaism as a religion? I don't think I have much of a relationship to it.

BECKY AMATO: Well let me try to clarify it a little bit.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: Um, I mean you described yourself as being bagel and lox Jew.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Yes.

BECKY AMATO: But at the same time, I know that you're, you know, you went and you learned Yiddish, and Jewishness is kind of a part of who you are, and now you've mentioned this experience of not being able to return.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Right.

BECKY AMATO: Um, so it seems complicated, and then your mother, I mean, was converted in a conservative temple, which --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Right.

BECKY AMATO: -- is pretty conservative.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Well I think it was because the rabbi spoke Japanese. I don't think there's many of those. I think there's probably one guy at the time. Maybe there's three now. (laughter) Um, but yeah, I mean, I think that was more, because he was Japanese, rather than he was conservative, or he wasn't Japanese, but this guy spoke Japanese. Um, I think he spoke Japanese. He was definitely the rabbi at the only synagogue in Tokyo, which was a conservative synagogue, and uh, yeah, I mean so therefore, I mean, you know, and Yiddish is not a religious language. In fact, the reason it existed was because it was not a religious language, it was the everyday language. You know, that changed with Zionism, and Israel, you know, and then six million Yiddish speakers were killed at once, basically, so that kind of put the kibosh on Yiddish, as the Jewish language. Um, you know, my grandfather, my grandmother, on my father's side were, respectively, a communist and a socialist, [Boongist]. Um, you know they weren't religious people, although they did keep kosher. I don't think they ever eat pork, but I think it's more because they have to [ingrained]. I mean it wasn't for religious reasons, but then it was what they were used to. Actually, I think my grandfather did eat pork, but I'm not 100% sure about that. I think my dad told me that. Um, but um, you know, religion, Judaism as a cultural-like attachment, I feel very strongly about. I speak Yiddish. (laughter) You know, and then that's the major connection. My father made that happen. Um, I believe strongly in bagels. I believe strongly in lox. I believe strongly in Isaac (inaudible) stories. Identify wholly with the, um, New York Jew paradigm. You know, I like bitching and moaning. I hate being retail, all that kind of stuff, and, and, yeah, I mean, it's what I grew up in. It's what I knew, what I know still. It's -- that to me is what Judaism is about, and I think to most people I know, I mean, I'm not friends with many religious people. I don't know if that was a --I mean I don't think it's a conscious [45:00] effort on my part, but, um, so I think you can be culturally Jewish. Um, and I am, but I'm definitely not religiously Jewish. Yeah.

BECKY AMATO: So I wonder if, and this is bringing up a shared story, but um, it's interesting in that context, um, our experience at high holidays.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Right. Even I got escorted out of the synagogue by the cops, yes.

BECKY AMATO: So could you talk about that?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: OK.

BECKY AMATO: And, and, and the aftermath.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Oh there's no aftermath. Um, so uh the story is, Yom Kippur, right? Yom Kippur, and uh, I was working at the tenement museum, and [after] my interviewer, Becky, a ticket to um, high holidays, Kol Nidre. Was it Kol Nidre? I think it was Kol Nidre, yeah. Um, because we -- my family is a member of Park Avenue Synagogue, it's a big synagogue, synagogue, you have to have tickets to getting in. It's not very easy on Yom Kippur. If you're Jewish in New York, you're probably aware of this. So my parents gave me tickets, and my brother, Becky, and me, went to Park Avenue Synagogue for Kol Nidre, and this is right after September 11th, and um, there's this back story that I wasn't aware of at the time, that the rabbi at the Park Avenue Synagogue was apparently a conservative, you know, um, conservative guy, and uh, gave a sermon, uh, that um, falsely accused Arabs in Jersey City of dancing and partying when the World Trade Center went down. That's right, right? I think yeah, and um, I don't know, (inaudible) if I remember correctly, and uh, I mean essentially was a racist-bating sermon that had no business in opinion, during a time of the repentance. Uh, perhaps in a bad judgment call, I decided to make my feelings known publicly in the main sanctuary of Park Avenue Synagogue during Kol Nidre, of I guess it was 2001, right? It was 2001. And then the cops came, and I got tossed. (laughter) Uh, which is not good, and um, yeah, but in light of how I feel -- I don't think anybody else in that room has very different opinions of God that I did. I mean, that I do, I mean, you know, this is one of the major conservative synagogues in New York City. It's fancy as hell. Um, well not as hell, I guess. There's no hell in Judaism, but um, you know, most of those people are culturally Jewish. They don't wear kippahs. I'm sure many of them don't -- most of them don't keep kosher. Ralph Lauren is a member. You know, I mean, we're solidly assimilated Jews, you know, but Yom Kippur's the big one. That's when everyone goes to the synagogue for it, so and I got yelled at by some lady for ruining her Yom Kippur. (laughter) You know, I thought the rabbi ruined my Yom Kippur so whatever. But, uh,

yeah, I don't think that like, I think I was -- well you know my dad's a lawyer, and he really likes being a lawyer. I mean he takes it very seriously, and he is eternally impressed by the majesty of the law. What does that mean? Well, you know, like we were always raised on stories of, oh I forget his name, is George something, Japanese-American guy in California, I think it's George, maybe it's George Decatur I'm thinking of. Anyway, it was a Japanese-American guy, um, second generation, an America, uh, it was like George Nakomora, something like that, and um, I guess on the west coast, they put a curfew on Asians, or Japanese people walking the streets after certain times, because they were afraid of the fifth column, and what have you, and this guy was walking the streets, and he got arrested, and I think got the case up to the Supreme Court even. Um, but you know, really stood up for himself, and uh, [50:00] that was an important story to me, and uh, you know, was -- there's no reason to be ashamed of who you are, and one of the great things about this country is that you don't need to do that, and that the law does not pertain -- or the law is not made to separate people, and I've, that was what I was raised to believe, I guess, and I've always believed that, and one of the, you know, of course the Holocaust was a terrible thing, and that was something that was very important growing up, and we read a lot about it, heard a lot about it, you know, a lot of my family was killed in it, and uh, that also began with a, you know, stories, insinuations, and just untruths that were spread about Jews, and in the same way, so was the detention of Japanese people here, you know. They were spies, and what have you, which was not the case in reality. So to hear that, I guess, maybe it did have something to do with who I am, um, although I would think that any American should stand up for them. It's really an American issue, more than anything else. Um, I guess that's changing now. But um, you know, that's -- I do very, very, very much believe in America, and I very much believe that this is a country where it doesn't matter who you are, and I know that's not always the truth, and that's not always the way things work out, but that's the ideal, and we have to stick to that ideal. If you don't stick to that ideal, then you know, there's no -- we don't have an identity. But we are a bunch of people from different places who hate each other, I guess. But that's not the case, I mean I love everyone, but you know, so yeah when that happened, I did think of that I guess, and um,

then I still (laughter) think I was thrown out of the synagogue, and escorted out by the cops. (laughter) That was a real bad decision, I shouldn't have done that, but I was very angry, you (inaudible), I just got super angry. I've never actually been that angry ever again, or since -- before then, never been that angry. I can't believe that someone in a position, and it was a fancy synagogue. It wasn't like some idiot on the street corner. I mean this is not something that you should take lightly, and to say things that implicate people in America, of not being patriotic in America, essentially, when it was not the truth even, is just ridiculous, and demanded respect. But I probably should've just written a letter. (laughter) I never would've gotten around to it. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Even though you've not been as angry as that, do you feel like that kind of, um, ideal of social justice, and American, you know, values for diversity and diversity of opinion or diversity of religion, do you think you've had other experiences where you've stood up for that?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: No. No. I don't think so. I mean, no -- I mean not directly. No. Um, no. (laughter) I, you know, I've never been. I mean, you don't -- that's ignorance, and I don't -- try not to hang around ignorant people. (laughter) I don't know, no. I've never -- I've never -- I've never experienced really, and even in that case, it wasn't racism directed at me, you know. I've experienced -- I've never experienced such direct hate of other people. I've experienced racists, people who say racist things, or anti-Semitic things, or whatever it is, but they never seems like, or they're not in a position to do anything, but if you're, you know, if you're in a pulpit, (inaudible), look here and there, an asshole, if you don't like blacks, fine, whatever, you're an asshole, you can spend your, the rest of your miserable life not liking blacks, whatever it is, that's fine, who cares. You're living your life. But if you're in a position of preaching to people, extensively, about sermon as a prescription, right, he should've be doing that. It's not right. It doesn't matter. [55:00] That's a community leader, and that's just not something that should be done, it's just wrong. That was completely wrong. I still believe that to this day. I definitely do not -- I regret the way I said it, but I don't regret having said it.

BECKY AMATO: How did your parents react to this?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Well they totally thought I was an idiot at first, um, but actually, you know, they went and talked to the rabbi. I don't really know what happened there. Um, but they came back, deeply unimpressed by the rabbi, um, and you have to remember that my dad's a pretty conservative guy. He voted for Bush, uh, and in fact the way he votes is whatever's best for Israel, whatever the case, in quotes, um. I don't think he necessarily agreed with me, um, but I don't think -- but I think he didn't -- I don't think he thought -- I don't think he thought I did the wrong thing, per se, you know. I think he wanted to believe that Arabs were dancing around in Jersey City, when the World Trade Center went down, and I think -- I do remember, and I might be wrong about this, but I do remember that that was on the news, at the time. Like people were talking about it, as if it had happened, and then it was debunked, something like that. But, you know, I think that -- had it, yeah, I mean, basically, you know, once it got debunked like that, it was like, well then it's wrong, it's just not the case, you know. Even if you wanted to believe it, and uh, you know, I think he, you know, basically, I mean, he was like you shouldn't have yelled at him, in the synagogue. (laughter) And I was like, yeah, and then they stopped being members of the synagogue, and that was that. I think it was really expensive, and not worth it, to be in anyway, so (laughter) we all won, (laughter).

BECKY AMATO: It sounds to me like you have a pretty close relationship with your parents.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: No. Actually.

BECKY AMATO: You don't?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: No. Um, we don't, we talk like not much. Um, no, um, that's yeah -- that's a different thing, I don't know.

BECKY AMATO: Do you feel comfortable talking about it?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I don't think I know what's going on there, anyway. (laughter) I know that, you know, we don't talk about our feelings, or anything that like. It seems like some people's families get real close, they know what's going on, it flies well. My family seems to, we just try to keep each other away. Why that is, I don't know. You know, I don't know, family stuff, I don't know what it is. But we're not very close. We are close. You know, I'll give it to you (inaudible), but we don't talk. (laughter) We

talk about dumb things, or little things. We don't talk about our feelings. I never talk about my feelings about anything, so, you know? (laughter) Maybe it's my dad's older, my parents are both older, they'll kill me for saying this, but my dad was born in 1934, mom was born in 1942, and, uh, I think they have older values, (laughter) so you know, we don't -- I think part of that, you know, that's part of the -- we can't talk of our feelings with each other, so, but I don't think we're close. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Did you ever talk about mixed heritage at all?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Oh yeah, we talk about it all the time. I mean, we truly believe that we had done the right thing, as a family. My brother, I don't know as much, but I think he does actually, but yeah, I mean again it's just totally normal. I mean any problems that we have as a family have nothing to do with our bi-cultural or bi-lingual (inaudible). They are just, other problems with their personalities, or what have you, but they have nothing, and I'm very certain of it, have nothing to do with our cultural reality. I mean, I think that's a really rich part of my life, and I'm very happy I have, and I'm happy my parents exposed me to that because I think it's an important thing to do. But it's being in a weird position, because I have to figure out [01:00:00] what I want to teach my kids, or what I want to pass on, I don't know. My brother, he chose to try a path like that, but he's just (inaudible) tough for him, tougher than my mom, because she prefers to speak Japanese, both my brother and I prefer to speak English, but he's chosen to try it. He teaches his daughter Japanese, and it's a tough decision, like what do you choose? I mean, we always thought Japanese was a way better choice, because uh you can actually use it, but then the thing is, like, Yiddish is like, and even more and more it's going to disappear, or become like Latin, and we don't want that to happen either. So that's a rough choice, I don't know what to do. (laughter)

BECKY AMATO: Have you talked about it with anybody?

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Not really, no. I can talk about it with my parents, but uh, I don't feel like I'm going to be (inaudible), I mean I guess we're last-minute people anyway, so it's not something I'm to discuss until the very last minute. I know my brother didn't seem to make that decision until after his kid was born. So we'll put it off, (laughter) as long as possible.

BECKY AMATO: Well, I'm going to probably --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Sure.

BECKY AMATO: -- close this down, but I wanted to know if there's anything else you wanted to add about the things we've talked about, and I have other questions, but --

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: I probably say too much.

BECKY AMATO: -- we can have another conversation, another time.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: Too many, but no thank you.

BECKY AMATO: Thank you. Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

HARRY SCHWARTZMAN: No problem. (laughter) (inaudible)

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