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Oral History Interview with Monica Elias

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.051

**Interview conducted Abigail Ettelman at the narrator's home on August 13th, 2013 in
Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn.**

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: So we're recording now. And it is August 13, 2013. We are at [address redacted for privacy] in Brooklyn Heights. It's 6:15 pm, probably. My name is Abigail Ettelman, and I am interviewing Monica Elias. So, thank you for coming in and letting me take over your home. But what I would like to have you start out with is just by introducing yourself, telling your date of birth, and something like a story from your childhood, or a memory that you have. Very low key.

MONICA ELIAS: OK. I was born [date redacted for privacy] at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. And a story about my childhood. I have a very vivid memory of going shopping with my mother when I was about six or seven in Bloomingdale's. And I remember the music that was playing over the sound system. And it was "Downtown" by Petula Clark. And that song has entered my life at various parts thereafter. But that was one vivid memory.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: That's very nice. Thank you. So could you tell me a little bit about your parents?

MONICA ELIAS: Sure. My father grew up in Calcutta, India, and I could tell you a lot about him, but essentially met my mother on a business trip to New York City. And she is a German-Jewish refugee and moved to New York when she was five. And they had an

unusual courtship, and eventually my mother went to London, where he was living at the time, and they decided to get married.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So did you say unusual?

MONICA ELIAS: Yes.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Could you give me an example?

MONICA ELIAS: My mother was married to another man when they met. And my father came and they met at a dinner party, and he was dating a friend of my mother's. And then he went back to London. And a few months later, he came back to New York and called up my mother's friend to go out again, and she said, "You know, I've gotten married in the meantime. And my friend, Renate, is divorced in the meantime. So why don't you ask her out?" So he did ask her out, and that's when they started seriously going out, and got to know each other. And he would go back and forth to London, and she was working for the airlines, in the airline industry, and eventually followed him to London, and that's when they decided to get married.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very interesting. So you said your father grew up in Calcutta. Was he -- was his family from there?

MONICA ELIAS: He -- my father is Jewish from Calcutta. His family had been in India for about three generations. And prior to that, they had been in Basra, in Baghdad. And they went down south; they were traders, settled in Calcutta. There was a pretty vibrant community, Jewish community, in Calcutta at the time, and Jews in various cities in India. And they -- everybody in the community knew each other. And during India's drive for independence in the early 40s, which culminated in 1947 when they did attain independence from England, there was enormous amounts of violence. And being

Jewish was difficult, because Jews -- a lot of the Jews in India aspired to be European. So they weren't really Indian, and they weren't really colonial either. They were sort of in this nebulous area. So it was an uncomfortable position for a lot of Jews to be in. And basically, most of the Jewish community left at that time. And he was -- they had a big family business, and he sold it, and they all left. And they all moved to London, basically.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: This is actually something that you might not be able to answer, but it's always interesting to me. Do you -- did your father identify as Indian? And his family had been there for some time.

MONICA ELIAS: I think they identified as being Jewish more than Indian.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very interesting.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How did that influence the way he -- his relationship with your mother, the fact that they were from different places?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, that's interesting. He -- his family was not that excited about my mother, because she had been married before. And I think, in those days, [5:00] divorce had a different kind of stigma, and I think the Jewish community from which my father was from was quite -- I don't know how you would say it, but he would -- they were very conservative about their views. And so that bothered them. But I don't think he would have married out of faith at all, at that point. He probably wanted to, from what I've heard of various girlfriends that he had. But he wouldn't have done it.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: So when they were -- so when they were settled in New York City, and they began to have children, can you tell me a little bit about that time of your life? Their life?

MONICA ELIAS: Sure. My mother -- it was really important to my mother to raise family here, because America had saved her family's life. So even though my father's business was mostly in Europe at the time, he would go back and forth. So there were long stretches when my father wasn't around, two, three months at a time. And so I really grew up with my mother being the strong one in the family, and -- and sometimes the only one in the family. My father was often like a grandfather. There were very few times where I felt reprimanded, or he was disappointed in me, or anything. And we grew up on the Upper East Side. I had a brother and sister. I have a brother and sister, and they -- and we all went to local public school. And then we eventually all went to different private schools. My mother really believed that not every school is right for every kid. So we were lucky enough to have that choice. And I loved growing up in New York. There's a lot of freedom. I think as soon as you are able to walk around and use the subway and the bus, you really had access to an enormous amount of things, culturally. And I loved it. I was always interested in art, and the museums, and the people here were always really interesting to me. And just walking down the street and seeing different faces, I always loved it.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: Your parents' and siblings' names?

MONICA ELIAS: My father's name was Stafford. Stafford Elias. And my mother's name is Renate, R-E-N-A-T-E, same last name.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: What was her maiden name?

MONICA ELIAS: Vogel, V-O-G-E-L.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: And your siblings?

MONICA ELIAS: Jennifer and Michael.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: Now, when they were going -- when you were going to different schools, what were the differences in the schools that you went to?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, first my mother thought we needed to be able to run around a little bit, because we grew up in such an urban environment. So she sent us to Riverdale, and my sister to Horace Mann. My brother misbehaved, and was really bored, and got suspended and kicked out a couple of times. My sister liked it. I didn't like it at all. And then we moved to London for a year, so we all had a different school experience in London. And when I came back, I said, "I would like to go to a girls' school, please," because I had had a good experience in London. And so she put me into a girls' school, which was quite small, on the Upper East Side. And I loved it; I was there for six years. But prior to that I had been in a lot of different schools. I think I had been to five or six schools altogether by the time I was in 12th grade.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: Did faith -- did your religion have any influence on the decisions that your parents made on where to take -- where to send you to school?

MONICA ELIAS: Absolutely not. In fact, at the school I went to, there were a lot of Jews at the school that I went to. But I had no idea, until years after -- unless they had a particularly Jewish name that you would know -- but at various reunions, I remember thinking, "Gosh, there were actually a lot more Jews than I remember," but this was a very WASPy school, a very traditional school. Well, it wasn't a traditional school, but it

was an old school, and it was a girls' school, and it was just -- nobody wanted to admit that they were Jewish.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's really interesting.

MONICA ELIAS: And it was an odd situation.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Will you tell me a little bit more, like, about the -- what made people not want to admit they were Jewish, and why it was odd.

MONICA ELIAS: Well, I don't really know why. I wish it wasn't. But I think, in high school everybody wants to belong, and I think the school has a history of being very blue-blood, very -- very WASPy, [10:00] and the -- and very preppy, and I think everybody wanted to fit in. And assimilation was a big deal. They had matzo at Passover, and you know, my friend and I were definitely openly Jewish. We'd -- you know, we didn't only eat matzo during the Passover week, but people looked to us to -- you know, to explain it or whatever. And the school was really -- you know, there was never anything anti-Semitic, but it just, people felt more comfortable not displaying that. And many of the kids, many of the girls had one -- one parent who was Jewish.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How did you feel personally about your Jewishness, however that came out?

MONICA ELIAS: I didn't -- well, it only came out with Hebrew school a little bit, which I didn't enjoy very much. And my brother had a bar mitzvah; I didn't. And I was perfectly fine with that. And I guess I just identified with it with -- we always celebrated Passover, like Thanksgiving. You know, we had our -- our traditions. I didn't feel overly Jewish. And you know, Manhattan, everybody's Jewish. Everybody had Rosh Hashanah

off from school. It wasn't a big deal -- you know, I didn't feel, "Wow, I'm Jewish," I just felt that I was part of everybody else, but I went to the school where everybody was not.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very interesting. So that gets you up to high school, right?

MONICA ELIAS: Uh-huh.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So what --

MONICA ELIAS: Through high school.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Through high school. What happened after high school?

MONICA ELIAS: After high school I went to college. And I -- what would you like to know about college? There's just the --

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Where did you go, and when you were there, what did you do?

MONICA ELIAS: I went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut. I was always very interested in painting. Didn't want to go to an art school, because I felt that that was narrowing my education. I loved painting, and I figured if I found one teacher I could paint with, I could last four years in one place. So I found somebody at Wesleyan, and I -
- I enjoyed it. I -- I wish I had gone to college 10 years later. I would have really gotten my money's worth. But I think coming out of girls' school was difficult for me. I had a -
- I have a brother, but it was still really difficult for me to have boys, men, in academic classes. I -- they were very sure of themselves, they were -- there's a lot of posturing. And I was used to an environment that was a lot more supportive, extremely competitive. We were ranked in high school, and we knew our rank, but it was not -- there wasn't so much posturing and macho behavior. And when I encountered that in classes, as liberal as it could be, it was tough for me to participate. So I spent a lot of time not talking. And in high school I had. So in a way, I had -- I had a lot of girls' experiences in high school,

but in a way, college was a time where I really wasn't blossoming. It was sort of the opposite. I was really into my painting, and I took a year off and I painted in -- in Rome, which was a tremendous year for me. And I just enjoyed so much living in a city that had such history, and reading about it. So that was a great year. But other than that, I think college for me was just sort of less of a -- an opening of avenues than it was for other kids.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's interesting. So what was your -- can you give me an example of your -- let me think -- not your favorite class, but a class that had the most meaning for you.

MONICA ELIAS: In college?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: If there are any.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, my gosh, I can't even remember. I really don't -- there was a contemporary German literature class that I enjoyed. But I really don't recall classes that really changed me. I think I was interested in art and painting when I started, and I was when I finished. I learned a little bit about different things as I was there, and I came out still wanting to be in a creative field. And that didn't change, and -- but my experience living abroad was huge. It -- it really changed me a lot.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How did it change you?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, I had grown up going to Europe a lot, but I had never really lived there, except for the year in the England, where you speak English. [15:00] So it was a whole language thing. And I learned Italian, and it was wonderful for me to -- to interact with Italians, and feel independent. And it was a challenge, and it was something I overcame. And the painting was fantastic. I was with kids who -- it was an art school

year abroad, so I was only with artists, and that was incredibly exciting, to see people who are so passionate about their work. And also the art history component, they had wonderful professors there who took us all over Italy, and had incredible connections and access to things. So it was really unlike anything that I had experienced before.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Did that have any influence on your life after college?

MONICA ELIAS: I think the -- the classes that I took there, when you asked me before, did college -- do I remember anything, I only remember the classes there. I -- the history and art history courses were really wonderful, because they took art, and they put it in the context of history. And I think that taught me something. An approach to learning about everything is everything has a context. And it's actually had impact on what I do now, which is a whole different career from when I started. Context is key.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So you're sort of tapped -- tapped on something that we should talk about later, but so you're talking a lot about your school and your time in college. Could you tell me what you did immediately after?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, I wasn't very employable after, so I -- but I had done summer jobs where I was working in design, and I loved design. And I loved graphic work. And as a painter -- I came out with a painting major -- I had to sublimate that. So if I was wearing my painting hat, I didn't talk about design, and when I was working as a designer, I didn't talk about my painting. Because as a painter, design work is commercial, and it's looked down upon, at least at the time. And if you're a designer, and you paint, that's just something that you do on the side. So now, it's a whole different thing, and even though Andy Warhol had already passed, and to bridge that connection, it was not something that was really kind of acceptable, if you were serious at one or the other. So

I'd work at night, and I got a job in a typesetting studio from 4:00 to 12:00 at night. And that allowed me to paint during the day and work at night. But it was difficult, because I never got to see my friends. And painting is a very solitary pursuit. And so I realized that. I was pretty young, and I hadn't had a lot of life experience. And there really wasn't a whole lot to paint about. And I didn't feel that passion to paint so much anymore. I was just kind of lonely. So I stopped painting, and I never really started again. I mean, in fits and starts, but I kind of stopped, and I decided, let me pursue design. And so I did that, and eventually worked in different publishing companies, became a book cover designer.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: You mentioned that you weren't at the same -- you weren't able to spend time with your friends, and you -- led to you feeling very lonely. Can you talk more about your social circle?

MONICA ELIAS: My social circle, I'm just trying to think. Well, mostly some -- mostly from kids who -- my social circle comprised mostly of kids who I'd gone to college with. And maybe one or two I'd gone to camp with, or knew through -- they were kids whose parents were friendly with my parents. But I'm never super social. I was never somebody who went out every night. I really loved, and still do love, spending time by myself. And I'm slightly agoraphobic after a while, too. And I'm a bit of a misanthrope, so if I let myself not be too social at all, then I go into those areas, it's not good for me. So I really -- I realize that if you're going to pursue a career where you do something independently, and you're not interacting with anybody, like a painter, then you really have to be pretty social and you've got to take care of yourself emotionally. And since I had this tendency anyway not to really like to be around a lot of people all the time, it

wasn't a great -- it wasn't good for me. So working in design, even though it is a solitary pursuit, you kind of have to interact with people. And so -- so that was a better fit for me. And all through my life, I've had -- I enjoy solitary sports, I like skiing, I like running, I like -- [20:00] tennis is about as interactive as I get. And my husband is similar, so we've had two children who are kind of similar.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Spreading it to the world.

MONICA ELIAS: Yes.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's how it works.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's really interesting. So you have these solitary tendencies.

And going off to college where you don't know anyone is basically one of the scariest things you can do, even if you aren't a solitary person. So how did you find the people in college, and even afterwards?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, the first thing I did is, I asked to have a roommate. And Wesleyan at the time, that was an unusual thing. They didn't have many rooms for room -- with roommates. Everybody had their own room, which was pretty amazing. So I had a roommate, but after a week, she decided -- she and the resident advisor became an item, and I never saw her again. So I had a huge room to myself. So I had tried to be living with someone and being more social, but it didn't work out. And I met -- I met people just because you meet people in your department; it's really hard not to. However, Wesleyan did not even have a campus center. There was no one place to congregate. And I think if I had known that before, and been more aware of my tendencies, I wouldn't have chosen Wesleyan at all. I would have chosen a place where there was a

little more togetherness that was structured. So -- and many people lived off campus.

And even though it was in the middle of nowhere, it was hard for people to congregate.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's really interesting, actually, talking about the social aspects.

Like, structured social life, because one of the biggest parts of structured social life -- not even just in college but in life, is, like, faith, your faith community. So I'm going to go a little bit further back and say, when you were with your family, living in Manhattan, did you guys go to temple? If you did, tell me about the holidays, the rabbi, the community from there.

MONICA ELIAS: We went -- so my parents have different Jewish backgrounds. My father is Sephardic; my mother is Ashkenazi. My father went to a different synagogue than my mother. And my parents were very different. They -- they really reflect the stereotype of where they're from. My mother was -- is very punctual, and everything is just so. And my father is from Middle Eastern descent, and he's more easygoing, and time is fluid, and so on. So they went to different synagogues. And I went to my mother's synagogue, since she was really both parents, often. And it was a really -- I mean, the synagogue that she -- that we -- I grew up in, is very different today, but at the time, it was a Conservative German Jewish synagogue. All the action and the prayers are on the bimah, and you are the audience, and you participate in responsive reading and so on, but there is -- participation is a very structured thing. And it's -- it's verging on performance. And so the melodies are extraordinary, and they're beautiful, and I grew up with them, and the singing was beautiful. But there was a choir, there was an organ. To me it was -- I never felt that comfortable in that environment. And that particular congregation is completely different now. It's much more participatory. But at the time, it wasn't something I felt

particular connected to. I liked the ritual of going, up to a certain extent. I was incredibly bored. I used to play with my sister in the hallway a lot. Like, you know, we - - we -- it was just something you did.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What was the name, again?

MONICA ELIAS: Of the synagogue? It was Congregation Habonim.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And how long did you go?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, we were basically High Holiday Jews. So we would go for the High Holidays, and that was it. And the Hebrew school I went to was a different Hebrew school from -- I don't even know if they have one. I went to Park Avenue Hebrew School.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What was Hebrew school like for you?

MONICA ELIAS: It was boring. I didn't really like it. And eventually my parents said, "You don't have to go."

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How long did you end up going?

MONICA ELIAS: I think I went until I was about 11 or 10.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Exactly the same age as my mom. [When] she refused to go to any form of religious holiday.

MONICA ELIAS: There you go.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: It's the age. That's really interesting. So --

MONICA ELIAS: The age of defiance.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Yeah. Pre-teen. So that's really interesting. So then, when you were in high school, didn't have to go to Hebrew school -- Hebrew school, you didn't always go to temple, then you graduate, you go to Wesleyan. Tell me about that.

MONICA ELIAS: Well, when I went to Wesleyan, I met a friend -- I met somebody who knew a lot of people I knew, but I had never met him before. And he grew up on the Upper West Side. Different synagogue, everything. And he was into going to services and so on, and he used to pick me up at the art studio and we would go to [25:00] whatever Passover service, whatever it was. And that was nice, because it was the first time that it was not a parent-driven exercise.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Did you ever go to your dad's synagogue?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What was that like?

MONICA ELIAS: It was beautifully -- beautiful aesthetically, but I -- I had no -- the melodies, to me, were -- were not so interesting. And it was even less accommodating for women. Women sat separately from men; it was very patriarchal.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What was that one called?

MONICA ELIAS: It's the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York. Still is that way.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So that's great. So after you graduated from college, how did -- did you go to a temple?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, then I went back to my mom's temple. So even when Roy and I were dating, and that was -- you know, I was 35. Even up to the years, I guess, until I was 40, 42, 45, I was still going to my mother's temple. And it was just -- it was just sort of wrapped up in having dinner with my parents, and then going, or breaking the fast, or - - it was -- and as I had kids and became more entrenched in this neighborhood, we started. And I'd say in the past eight years or so, we've stopped, and we are more

involved in our local synagogue here, and it's -- it's a better fit for us, and of course it makes more sense that it -- you go to your local synagogue, or some place that's close.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So how long did you go to your other temple, in all?

MONICA ELIAS: Probably from birth to 42. Forty-two years is a long time.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's a really long time.

MONICA ELIAS: Yes, it was too long. It was too long, because it symbolized that -- to me, that I hadn't had my own life. When I stopped going to that synagogue and I started going to the synagogue here, I felt that we -- I had sort of grown up, that this was my community, that I was going to be part of this community. And even though I -- I didn't -- I was never part of the community at my mother's synagogue, I was still going there. I was still going into the city every high holiday to go to that synagogue.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So we've jumped into your life here, which is great. "Here" being Brooklyn. Can you tell me a little bit about the transition? How did you get here?

MONICA ELIAS: To Brooklyn? Well, Roy and I were dating, and I have a tendency to ask really important relationship questions in public places. So we were on the subway going to work. We -- he lived in Brooklyn, I lived in Manhattan. Work was in Manhattan. We were on the subway going to work and I said, "Don't you think maybe we should live together?" in a crowded subway. And I think I did that because there was safety in public, in the public. And he said, "This is major and we have to talk about this later. We'll have lunch." Which to me meant no. So anyway, I asked him, and I put the seed in his mind, and I think we decided we would go on a big trip together. We both -- we loved to travel. And if we could stand each other for the long trip, then we would live together. And so we decided to live together, and Manhattan was too expensive, and Roy

had lived in Brooklyn many times in different places, and was living in Brooklyn at the time, and we found an apartment in Cobble Hill that was big enough for both of us, and had a studio, and it [was] great.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So how did you meet?

MONICA ELIAS: We both worked in the same company. And Roy was married to somebody -- Roy was married to another woman, and when I started there ... And he was married. And I was -- then I dated somebody who worked for him, and I -- the possibility of dating him just never arose, because he was married, and I was dating somebody else. And then we broke up, and then Roy, I heard that he was separated, and I -- I started to talk to him more, and I really liked him, and I pursued it, and I -- I invited him to go to the movies or whatever, and he was very thick and didn't get it at all. I had to really throw myself at him. But eventually he understood.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very funny. Typical man. So, what had your romantic history been [30:00] prior to that? You said you were dating this other gentleman.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. You know, I dated a lot of guys, but not for very long. I really -- as I said, I really enjoyed my own company a lot, so it would take a lot for me to want to go out with somebody. And I dated a lot of guys that I just didn't feel that special about.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: When you were in high school and college, this was your pattern?

MONICA ELIAS: Pretty much. In high school, I -- I -- I don't think I dated, but I really enjoyed this one guy who was much older, and he was -- I really liked him a lot; I thought he was great. But then I went to college, and he went on. And in college, I -- I don't know. I never found the right person. So I mean, it -- I -- I was single for a really long time, and it really upset me, because I wanted to get that part of my life taken care

of, so that I could feel confident doing other things. And my sister has completely the opposite view of marriage. But I really felt, once I married Roy, that I was so happy being married and having -- not that, "OK, it's done, I'm married, that's finished," that was something to create and build upon, but that I -- I felt that I have to spend energy going out and dating people and finding love, you know, I had it. And it was -- that was a great thing for me. And it took me a long time until I found the right person, and it was just kind of a waiting game.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's heartening.

MONICA ELIAS: It is. It's a waiting game, but it happens.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So how did your parents feel about this pattern?

MONICA ELIAS: I think they were -- oh, you meant my marrying Roy?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That, but also just in general, did your parents really care about your dating life?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, well, my parents wanted me to get married immediately after college. I mean, I think they really just wanted grandchildren, and they -- they didn't have huge expectations for a career for their girls. They were much more traditional. They had expectations for my brother, but not for my sister and I. And so they just wanted me to get married. And I had gone to -- even though I had gone to a girls' school, girls' school was very progressive in a lot of ways, and it -- it was -- had one of the first computer systems in the city, and they really inculcated in me, and the kids there, that you have -- you will have a career, and you will support yourself, and you know, you'll be independent. And so I always felt that way. I always wanted to work. I didn't make a lot of money. I just -- I -- and I wanted family, too, it's just that I didn't want a family at

the expense of work. And so they just wanted me to get married. So they would introduce me to any Jewish guy that they found, and I went on many blind dates that were really unpleasant, and some that were OK. But after a while they didn't even care if the person I was married to was Jewish or not. They just wanted me to get married.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So how old were you when you did get married?

MONICA ELIAS: I was 35.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And how long had you two been dating?

MONICA ELIAS: I don't know. I guess three years. Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What was the wedding --

MONICA ELIAS: No, wait a minute. Roy?

ROY WALTER: Yes?

MONICA ELIAS: I got married when I was 37 or 35?

ROY WALTER: Ninety-eight.

MONICA ELIAS: Ninety-eight, that's 36 or 7. Yeah, sorry. So we just started dating when I was 35. We got married when I was 37 or 8, and then I had a child right away. And soon after had another one. So we dated, we moved in together, and Roy was still not technically divorced. He was separated from his wife, so even when we were living together, he was separated. So it was a big deal that he got divorced for me, because I wanted to move on. And there was huge pressure. And he was really good about his divorce, and he and his ex-wife had a really amicable parting. And so it was a difficult position for me to be in, and I was really pushy, and I'm sure that wasn't very comfortable for him, but it wasn't comfortable for me, either, to be in this relationship, living with somebody who wasn't technically divorced. So it was -- it was difficult. And

then when the divorce finally happened, Roy came home, and he gave me an accordion card that he had made, you know, that has a lot of folds. And on each little panel, he had printed -- he had done this on his computer, was an image of one thing [35:00] of a pair, like one glove, or one sock. And I didn't really get it, because I was being really kind of thick at the moment, but -- and then at the end, I don't know if he wrote something like, "I'm no longer a pair." And it was really sweet. And so -- so then, literally like two days later, we were walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, and I, in a very weak, wimpy way, asked him to marry me.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Can you describe the weak, wimpy way in which you proposed?

MONICA ELIAS: I -- I -- we were walking to Manhattan, and I said, "You know, Roy," -- we were talking about real estate and apartments to live in, and he said, "I'd really like a garden." And I said to him, "You know, I don't think I could -- we can't move into another apartment until we're married." And then I said, "Would you conceive of ever marrying me?" And there was a long silence. And he said, "It's been a really difficult year, a really rough year." So I said, "That's what you're going to tell me?" And he said, eventually, by the time we got to the Brooklyn side -- got to the Manhattan side, we were going from Brooklyn to Manhattan -- he said, "Yes, I could conceive of it." And I said, "Does that mean yes?" And he said, "Yes." And then I was really excited. And we had just walked across the bridge. And we were both going to go work. We worked at Rockefeller Center at the time. It was on the weekend, and we were going to work just to get some stuff done. And we walked all the way up to Rockefeller Center. And on the way we went to a few jewelry stores. And I said goodbye to him on Fifth and 49th, because he was going into the office building, and I was going on somewhere else. And

he turned around and he said, “I can’t go to work! We are going to get married.” So walked all the way up to Central Park, and we had a really nice day. And we were in the park, and we had lunch or dinner, and it was just an epic day. So it was a great day, and then I -- I -- for some reason, we didn’t tell anybody. I don’t know why. He’ll tell you why; I can’t remember. We didn’t tell anybody, and I -- I kind of didn’t believe it really happened, because when you don’t tell anybody something, sometimes you just don’t believe it’s true, especially if it’s something so monumental. And then, I went -- I think I was working at the time -- I was working at the time near a cake decorating store, and I got one of those cake toppers with a plastic bride and groom, and I just kept and I -- as sort of a symbol of, yeah, it’s going to happen.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Well, that does not sound weak or wimpy. It sounds lovely.

MONICA ELIAS: Well, my proposal wasn’t -- wasn’t the most direct.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: But it worked.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, it worked. It worked.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So can you tell me a little bit about the wedding itself?

MONICA ELIAS: So because it was an interfaith marriage, I really felt that I didn’t want a Jewish wedding. So what we did is we found somebody from Ethical Culture, and Roy came up with this brilliant idea that we would get married on the Brooklyn Bridge, because that’s where it started. And he arranged the actual marriage, the whole thing; I didn’t really do anything. So he could tell you more about that; that might be better. But it was really magical and it was lovely. And it was funny. And then what I arranged was the party, which was a month later, two months later, which was really fun and wedding-like in a way, and it had good food, and music, and dancing. And it was not religious at

all, and people just gave some speeches, and we ate, and it was really nice. So it was not religious at all. And I think we didn't offend anybody, so that was good.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So your parents were just happy that --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, and my parents were just happy. But I knew that if I did some sort of Jewish thing, they would say, "No, it should be this way, or you didn't do that, or you really should do this," and I knew that I was going to get into some realm of Jewish issues that I didn't really have a strong opinion about, and then it would be all to placate them, and I just didn't feel that strongly about it, so...

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Sounds like a happy ending.

MONICA ELIAS: It was. It was.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Happy middle.

MONICA ELIAS: It was a happy beginning, in a way. Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So you said that, like, basically immediately after you had your first child.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, then we went on honeymoon, and then we got pregnant soon after, I guess. And then we had Erik [40:00] in '99. So...

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Sorry, I just had a moment where I realized that I met him.

MONICA ELIAS: Yes.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: He's, like, not a baby.

MONICA ELIAS: No, he's 13.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Wow, '99. So he's 13.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Did he -- how -- obviously, you had to have the talk about how you'd raise your kids, probably, earlier than 13. But how did -- how did that conversation go, and how did it come about?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, you mean, how to raise the kids Jewish or not Jewish, or whatever?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Uh-huh.

MONICA ELIAS: I don't know if we had that conversation. I have to talk with Roy about that.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: He can tell me.

MONICA ELIAS: He can tell you. Yeah, it was important to me. It was important to me because of my background, and my mom, and it was important for me that my kids know who they were and where they came from. And it was all -- I think Roy's really different from me. Like, I, being the kid of refugees -- immigrants, refugees, to me, whenever I meet somebody, I ask -- I ask their name, and then I know -- I might have an inkling of where they're from, and then I want to know where they -- where they come from, what city they come from, where their parents came from. It depends how long the conversation is, clearly, but if I'm getting to know somebody, I need to know where they came from, where their families are from. And Roy doesn't need that at all. So for me, it was important for my kids to know who they are, and that they have this history. And they have history on Roy's side, too. But it was important for me that they be raised in a Jewish way.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So what Jewish way has that -- has that been?

MONICA ELIAS: So we joined a Reform synagogue, and the kids --

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What's it called?

MONICA ELIAS: It's Brooklyn Heights Synagogue. And our rabbi is the man who told us about this project, so it's a local Reform synagogue, and it's really great, and we really love it, and it's very inclusive, and most of their members, or a huge part of their members, are interfaith couples. And they do a lot of community work, and it's so close, and they have Hebrew school, and Erik had his bar mitzvah a few months ago, and it was terrific. And so we're really happy with it. And Roy's really -- I -- you know, you'll ask him, but I -- Roy's become involved and was -- was even asked to be on the committee to find the new school director, and -- which I had thought was really funny, because I -- now I'm in education, and I -- and I said to Roy, "I can't believe they picked you. They just picked you because you're not Jewish."

ABIGAIL ETTelman: The token.

MONICA ELIAS: The token, right.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very funny. So has that been a smooth journey of figuring out how to honor both sides, or show him that history, then?

MONICA ELIAS: Roy will talk to you more about how he feels about religion, but he is very anti-religion, organized religion. And I think that sort of grew out of his experience of religion. And so I've been kind of -- I've been trying to be kind of ginger about religion with him, and I never expected him to convert, or -- you know, or anything like that. But -- but he's been really amazing about learning about our tradition and incorporating what elements in our life, and he's been really terrific. So we've met some really nice people at the synagogue, so we feel pretty well grounded.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Is there -- it's been sort of a -- from what you've been telling me, it's been an interesting journey, figuring out where -- where you can be, and be happy

with your Jewishness. That's obviously just my analysis of what you've been saying. But how has that been in sort of -- switching the roles, now, being the one that's being the Jewish mother to this interfaith child?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, I mean, I consider my children Jewish. I'm Jewish, so by Jewish law, my kids are Jewish. So I really don't feel that they're interfaith kids. I think they're in a household with a Jewish mom and an not-Jewish dad. And they're really a -- they know that, and they know that Roy was -- grew up with a different tradition, but they haven't been exposed to it. And that actually never came up. So that is what it is.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: [45:00] That's interesting. So they know that he grew up in a different faith, but they just don't know anything about it. Has there -- had -- did they ever have this sense of wanting to be something else, or they -- like you were describing, is it in your childhood, based on your school -- schooling, or did they ever have similar feelings?

MONICA ELIAS: I don't think they've ever had those feelings, that they're in an environment where they're separate and different. I had that a lot. I mean, in school in London, I was separate and different. I had friends and had a nice year, but I wasn't of them. And I always felt that in life, that I was a little separate and different. But I don't - I -- you know, Erik does, my older one does, because he has learning disabilities, and I think that definitely -- his whole perception of the world is different from most people. And so, I think he feels that often, and I think that he loves the idea of Hebrew school, and synagogue, because it's a structured community, and he's going to belong, and he feels like he belongs. And school -- I always feel it's good to have many communities. You have your school community, you have your religious community, you have your

sports community, or whatever it is that you -- music community, whatever you like to do. It's great to have as many communities as you can. But I -- but the nice thing about the religious community for him, I think for Erik, is that he -- I think he feels like he belongs, and that's important to him, because he can feel so separate.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Obviously, your younger one is younger, but he doesn't have the learning disabilities that you've talked about. But have they -- this is something that you might not know -- but have they talked about this amongst themselves, or is this sort of just something that is parent to child?

MONICA ELIAS: You mean about the belonging. I've seen it -- you mean, how is my younger child feeling? I think -- I'm not sure my younger child is -- values it so much as my older child. But I think that he enjoys going to a place that he feels comfortable in, he doesn't have to get dressed up to see his friends. I think, going to Hebrew school each week is kind of a drag, maybe he doesn't want to go. But I think there's so many events that we go to the synagogue for that he -- he actually really enjoys. So I think there is a sense of belonging, but I don't know if he's so conscious of it.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And he's also younger.

MONICA ELIAS: And he's younger.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: He has more time to figure it out.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So the -- your oldest was born in '99.

MONICA ELIAS: Uh-huh.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: When was your youngest born?

MONICA ELIAS: In '01.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Oh-one, 2001.

MONICA ELIAS: Right, right before 9/11.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Oh, that's interesting. How did that affect them?

MONICA ELIAS: It was very intense. I mean, especially being here. Jason was two or three weeks old, and Roy was going to work, and I had -- there were painters in the house, and I had a baby nurse, and it was just a lot of people in a small space. And Roy ended up not taking the subway, which was good, because the first plane had crashed already. And he can speak more about this, but -- but in a way, it was a nice thing for me to have a baby at the time, because I was so completely focused on my child. And though the magnitude of what was happening was so unlike anything we had experienced, there was something very needy and distracting. And so I think it helped us cope a lot. But at the time we had rented an apartment literally on the other side of this wall, in the building next to here, because I needed an office, and Roy needed an office. And -- and I remember afterwards, when Jason was still quite little, just -- just having this emotional wave -- these emotional waves come over us about what had happened and what we had -- what we had seen from the promenade, and how horrific it was, and what kind of world our children are going to be -- were born into. So it was tough. And we considered leaving, and so on, but we didn't.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What made you decide to stay?

MONICA ELIAS: I think it wasn't a conscious decision. I think we just -- just didn't. You know, my parents live here still, and that's really important for me to stay here, for my parents.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Something that's interesting, you just mentioned your parents, but you talked about how your father traveled a lot when you were a child. So has his relationship changed as he's gotten older [50:00], and changed jobs or stopped moving around so much?

MONICA ELIAS: Our relationship, my relationship with my father? It really didn't -- I mean, he's 90 now, so he's not doing a whole lot of traveling. But he -- he was always sort of like a grandfather. Like, he really cared, provided for us, was really so sweet, and you know -- but didn't do the nuts and bolts and heavy lifting of bringing up the kids. And I feel really close to him, but I have more of a visceral relationship with my mother.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So since they're in the city, if they still are, how -- how often do they see your kids? How close is the family you have?

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, I take them every week. So I took them this morning, I take them every week, because they're elderly and they -- they're struggling, and especially my father. So I take them every week, because they are -- they're really a light for my parents, and they really look forward to seeing them. And it's just -- it's great for me, too, because it's all about my kids. They are not focused on me so much anymore, and I had that a lot in my twenties and thirties. So I was so happy to have children, because it was -- their attention was all about my -- my kids now. And they're great, grandparents, so -- and then my kids like going there, so it's -- it's all around a good thing. And I think it's important to have grandparents and for them to see -- and to ask. My older son is really into history, so it's nice for them to know their grandparents.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That is really important, speaking as someone who doesn't have any living grandparents, and is also interested in history.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's more valuable than he knows right now. That's really interesting, though, because -- so where are your siblings in this picture?

MONICA ELIAS: They left New York. They were never into New York like I am, so they never had that real strong feeling about the city. And we grew up in the '70s; the city wasn't that nice, and not that accessible. But I still loved it. Jennifer left to go to San Francisco, and Michael lives in London. He -- he got a Marshall scholarship to go study at Cambridge, and then he came back here to get a PhD, but he never really liked it, so he just moved back to England, and he never left. So he's been there for a very long time.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And are they all married?

MONICA ELIAS: My sister is not married, and is not interested, and never really has been, which is the opposite of me, of course. And then my brother is on his second marriage now.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And how has faith played a role in those relationships?

MONICA ELIAS: Well, strangely, my sister who's really anti-religion like Roy, she is in a long-term relationship, and has been for many, many years, I mean, practically married without being married, to a man who is Orthodox Jewish. Modern Orthodox.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Interesting.

MONICA ELIAS: So really interesting. And then -- and they don't live in the same -- Jennifer doesn't want to live with anybody. And my brother, both his wives were non-Jewish and not converted.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Does he have any children?

MONICA ELIAS: He has three kids who are older, like college and beyond. And -- and he has two very small kids from his second marriage.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And has he -- maybe that's flipped. He's male, and he's married to non-Jewish women. So are -- is he raising his kids Jewish, or are they mixed, or --

MONICA ELIAS: No. In fact, he has really little interest -- though his -- his first wife was so lovely, and she -- is so lovely, and she made sure that the kids went to synagogue on the High Holidays, and she was the driving force between -- driving force in making sure that her girls knew something about Judaism, and my brother didn't really care. So she really took that on, and it was pretty amazing. And now his kids are so little, I don't know what he's going to do. But I suspect he won't really care too much. Though he -- you know, he did come over with all his kids for Erik's bar mitzvah, and he was really into it, and he took part in the ceremony, and I think he really enjoyed it.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's really interesting.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Just -- I forgot to ask. How -- what are the ages with you and your siblings?

MONICA ELIAS: We're all three or four -- Jennifer is three years -- four years younger, and Michael is three years older.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Gotcha. [55:00] All right, do you think you two will have any more children?

MONICA ELIAS: No. (laughter) Do you have to ask that of everybody?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: No, but I don't know how old you are, but --

MONICA ELIAS: I'm 51.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: My mom had me when she was probably about the same age as you were when you had them.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And she -- I don't know, she wouldn't have wanted another child, but she could have, if that makes sense.

MONICA ELIAS: I wanted another one. I just -- when I was making babies, I felt that that was my new job, making babies. And I would have just made more and more and more, but Roy said no. And -- and I didn't want to push it. And, you know, Erik already was -- I knew there was issues with Erik. So I feel like, when they were little -- they were 21 months apart -- when they were little, I really felt like I had six kids. I felt like they were just -- it was just a lot. So -- so I think in retrospect, I'm glad. I mean, I think if I had another kid, I would -- you know, of course, it would be amazing. But I was -- I'm really happy with two. And I think it's allowed me to work more and have an otherness to the family, which it -- I think is really important, and my mother didn't always have.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Absolutely. That's really interesting. So what do you see happening in the future?

MONICA ELIAS: Religious-wise?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Religious-wise, kid-wise, family-wise?

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, who knows, you know? I mean, I'm a big planner, but who knows? I don't -- you know, I'm hoping they'll be changes in career, and that will keep growing. And I'm hoping that my kids will eventually go to college and find happiness in their work and in life. Like, I -- I'm just plugging along. There are no huge goals but just trying to make it work.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: When they go to college and hopefully -- or whatever when they go and find happiness in life, does it matter to you if they find happiness with a Jewish partner, or --

MONICA ELIAS: No, it really doesn't -- I mean, it would be nice. But I feel like, just going through the process with Erik and his bar mitzvah, I think he really has a sense of who he is, and he's so incredibly interested in history and knows so much. He was doing his D'var Torah, which is the explanation of his Torah portion to the congregation, and he just knew so much about ancient history, that I'm always amazed, It's sort of an amazing thing that he can do, but I just was so happy that he knew that -- where he came from, and that it gave context to his life.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And your other son?

MONICA ELIAS: My other son is very different. My other son is -- in terms of religion, I think he'll -- he likes being part of the synagogue, and I think he will be have -- having a bar mitzvah. He's kind of like on the fence about whether he really wants to. I think he'll like it, and I think the fact that Erik went first is great. He knows what to expect.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Do you see yourself staying at Brooklyn Heights Synagogue?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, I do. I really like it. I really do. I like the congregation. You know, there's always things to gripe about. The more you are involved in any organization, the more there is to gripe about. But basically I -- whenever I have had any minor issue, they've really come forward. And the rabbi's really been great. So I -- I'm really happy with it. And it's a whole different relationship for me with the synagogue, than what I grew up with. So that's nice.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's fantastic. We are at 59 minutes.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, my God! OK.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Perfect, so --

MONICA ELIAS: So can I say goodbye?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: You can, if you want. I'll put -- I'll pause it. All right. So, this is
a continuation of --

END OF AUDIO FILE

Oral History Interview with Roy Allen Walter

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.051

Interview conducted by Abigail Ettelman at the narrator's home on August 13th, 2013

Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn.

ROY WALTER: -- lots of things.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: Always happens, all right, and it's going. So this is a continuation of the earlier interview; it's August 13th, 2013; we are at [address redacted for privacy] in Brooklyn Heights, it's 7:50 pm, and I am Abigail Ettelman, and I am interviewing Roy [Allen] Walter. So, the thing that I always like to start with is saying -- is for you to introduce yourself and tell me where you were born, what your birthday is, and just a little memory about your childhood.

ROY WALTER: My name is Roy Allen Walter. I was born in Huntington on Long Island, on the north shore. [date redacted for privacy] And my siblings -- let's see, I have three siblings; two others were also born in Huntington. My sister was born in, I think in Roslyn, and I lived in Northport my entire childhood, until I went to college. And in the same house. So I kind of feel I was very closely tied to that neighborhood, to the house, to the environment, to the water. And I always, somehow, took pity on the kids I knew who had to leave, or who moved in all -- you know, changing schools, all that kind of stuff, but it turned out that my, one of my biggest passions, even from childhood, was traveling. And now I think about it, and I kind of, somehow I kind of wish I lived somewhere else. So, of course now I live 45 miles away (laughter), and have for virtually my entire life. So, I haven't done a lot on that front.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Maybe travel's only really good when you get to come back to somewhere you love.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, could be. I love New York, so.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Absolutely. So you mentioned your siblings; as I started out before, could you tell me a little bit about your parents?

ROY WALTER: My dad was second generation New York, Manhattan, Lower East Side, born. His, his grandfather came here from Germany, from the Black Forest. He was a wood carver, as was my grandfather. And my mom was first generation. Her parents came from Yorkshire, England, and she was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, and moved down here after nursing school. I guess -- well, she moved down here after she met my dad, being a nurse at a camp in Pennsylvania. And they started dating at that point, and I don't actually know if, when they got married, she already lived in New York, or what happened -- actually, this makes me think I need to find out.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: It's amazing how the little details can just -- somehow never get told --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- you can do this to them --

ROY WALTER: Yeah, well.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- sit them down and make them talk for three hours.

ROY WALTER: Well not him anymore.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Hm.

ROY WALTER: But we did talk to him quite a bit and record some good stories.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's great. So your three siblings; could you tell me a little bit about them?

ROY WALTER: I have an older -- all my siblings are older, I'm the youngest. My sister is seven years older, very much a '60s kid, and my brother is a year younger than she, and they, I guess, sort of cleared the path for my other sister, who's three years older than I, and myself. So at that point, they had broken our parents (laughter), and we were able to sail through somewhat unscathed -- or at least I was, I won't talk for my, my sister.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: What were their names?

ROY WALTER: Amy was the oldest; David; and Leslie, who has subsequently changed her name to Neu, N-E-U.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Oh, and what your -- were your parents' names?

ROY WALTER: Muriel. Holmes was her family name. And Frank Walter [00:05:00].

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So I'm really impressed that you know those details about your father's family; you know that they were from the Black Forest and they were wood carvers. How did you come about knowing that?

ROY WALTER: They, well, the fact that they're wood carvers was -- we had always known about, and I never met my grandfather; he died the year before I was born. But my dad was an artist and a teacher, an educator, but he was a painter and photographer, and he really did -- he was somewhat of a Renaissance man. Our house, the basement had everything, from kilns to a woodshop to a metal shop, a color photo lab. Etc., etc., etc. (laughter). And so the -- and we lived with our, my grandfather's wood carvings. There's some up there on the shelf. There's some hanging on the wall behind us, and -- but he did ornamental carvings and estates, and he worked in the Library of Congress,

doing some of the woodwork in there, Vanderbilt's, and you know, the Gold Coast of Long Island kept him pretty busy, apparently, and his father as well. And they were part of the guild. But I never met them. My father had a falling out with his sister, my aunt, so I knew her as a child, but then I didn't see her for 30 years or so. My mother's -- so I'll come around to the answer. My mother's family, my grandparents came from Yorkshire through Southampton, Ellis Island, and went up to my great uncle, who had a job for his brother in Worcester, and so my mother's family is very New England oriented, and they are -- we were sort of always the black sheep New Yorkers. And so they were very nice, and we spent a good amount of time with them every year, but they were definitely very different, and such, and we didn't really see eye to eye. There were certain people, certain cousins, and aunts and uncles and such, that really connected with -- but I didn't have a sense of an extended family; I didn't have an extent, a sense of any particular ethnicity or anything along those lines. I had friends who were -- most of my friends were Catholic, I guess, so I was used to these big, extended families they had, and I never experienced that, until a cousin of my mom's landed in New York and had looked her up in 1981 and called her out of the blue. And I happened to be there, it was a summer, so I was -- I guess I, I don't know, I was living there or something, or visiting -- oh, she was getting ready to move, so I was out there helping. And my mom didn't know her name, wasn't familiar with her name. And so once the woman on the phone had talked her into, having her come out to Northport and visit, and get to know her distant relative. My mom, when she hung up called her mom and said, "Who is Brenda?" And my grandmother would say, "Ah, she must be one of Harry's daughters." And my mom was like, "Well, who's Harry?" She's like, "Well, he's my brother" (laughter). She

never knew there were nine kids in her family; we only knew of eight. So Harry, not sure you want to go into --

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Continue.

ROY WALTER: -- into this. As I understand it, Harry went to war in World War I, to France, engaged to my grandmother's best friend, and came back married to a French woman. And so the family kind of cut him out, to the degree that my mom never knew that she had another uncle. Until 1981, when Brenda showed up. And there was an immediate bond and attraction; we just got along really, really well. My mother, myself, Brenda, her partner. And so a couple years, a number of years later, I, my mom had never been to Europe, and had never been to her parents' hometown. So I took her on a tour, I guess it was a two week trip, and we did a car trip around England [00:10:00], and we visited our relatives in London and Southampton, and up in Yorkshire. And Brenda's -- Brenda put together a picnic party at her house, and there were 45 relatives that we never knew existed. And they were just tremendously welcoming, entertaining, very fun, very unlike (laughter) the family that I had known. So that was just a really wonderful -- but at that party, one of my distant cousins gave me a packet of the family tree as far as they had gone -- his son had prepared it to a certain degree, and they had worked it out, and so that was my first insight to the extended family tree. And it got me really interested in genealogy -- not the science of genealogy, but learning about my heritage and my roots, and that sort of thing. So I started putting that in to a website, building the family tree, and my sister Leslie sort of started looking at the German side, for which we knew far less. My dad was, like, a good Lutheran, I guess; nice and quiet about things, and of course, he and his sister didn't speak and, even though they lived 10 minutes

away. So she started asking questions and poking around, and she traced it back to the homeland. We knew he was from the Black Forest, but we didn't know the town, we didn't know the years, and all that sort of thing. So she found out a lot on the German side, so that helped to kind of fill out the picture a little bit.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: It sounds like you've put a lot of work into this. How do you -- what do you see as the next step?

ROY WALTER: It's something that goes in a, you know, starts and stop -- I pick it up when, I guess, a new -- either new information, or new tools, or new something, or just get inspired again. So yeah, it has been a lot of work. I work in -- media asset management was my profession for the last 30 years or so, digital asset management, media asset management. So archiving is very much a part of that. And we've, I think, you know, everybody has a collection, personal collection of photos and things; either you inherit it or you've been gifted or whatnot. And most of them are lovely and kind of warm and fuzzy because it's your relative and such. And again, not knowing the details, or not knowing enough to be able to retain, exactly, the context of a lot of pictures and stories and things. They're just that; they're just -- you know, that's my grandfather or that's my grandmother, or these are people I actually knew or know, and that's a lot easier of course. So my dad died a couple years ago, and we really, you know -- and it wasn't a surprise, we, he was quite old, and he was very open about this, as is his wife -- my parents are divorced, and he remarried. And so we did do a certain amount of interviews and talking, and going through photos and things to help identify and retain, you know, what we could, and he was happy to help. But we did -- and we reconnected at his sister's funeral, who they eventually did reconcile, thanks to my dad's wife.

Slapped him and said, you know, "This is ridiculous!" So when she passed away, we reconnected with a bit of the family there, and my cousin gave me -- lent me a box full of photos that my grandfather had, and postcards. The Kodak -- what are they called? -- the expansion cameras or whatever; little tiny bellows. And the film, the 120 film that you could bring in and have it printed directly onto postcards in the -- by the [00:15:00] 1910s, I think they came out in 1905, and I've learned a lot about that stuff as well. So I scanned all of those, and I have a background in digital imaging and such, and I scanned them at high resolution, and started building an archive of anything I could get my hands on, and I bought a nice digital SLR camera to photograph my dad's work, and the carvings, and his house, and my mom's house. So I started putting together archives of my dad's family, my mom's family, you know, I've done Monica's family as well. And we've, you know, to try and identify everybody and everything in them. And be able to, not only pass that down to our kids, but to relate it to others and -- so the next step is to start to facilitate relating it to the others. I'm just fascinated by that, and so I have a certain amount about my grandparents' journey from England to Massachusetts, maritime subjects are extensively documented, so I know the boat, I know the date, I have copies of the manifest from Ellis Island with their names on it and how much money they carried and where they were going and where they came from, and stuff. But I'm certain there were people on that very same trip with cameras, and my grandparents apparently didn't, but I would love to be able to someday associate what I know and what I have with some other unrelated person out there in the world, who has a shoebox full of pictures that can show me what it was like for them to cross the Atlantic in 1920 and land

at Ellis Island, and maybe even what it was like to stand on line, you know, as they came into their new home.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's amazing.

ROY WALTER: So, that's kind of where that's going.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Do you think your sons will be involved?

ROY WALTER: I, I hope so. Yeah, they're fascinated with our family's -- I mean, for many reasons that Monica probably talked about, I don't know -- their, her family, I'm just, you know, super fascinated by, and they're, they love that. You know, they loved her grandmother, who they did meet and get to know before she passed away at 104 years old. And that, her parents come from, well Frankfurt isn't necessarily exotic; the situation is intense and of great interest to them, but you know, India is definitely very exotic and they've, they're really fascinated by that. So I hope they'll be a big part of it.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Absolutely. Maybe I should come back in a couple years and interview them.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, certainly!

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So we got somewhat away from ourselves --

ROY WALTER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- but that was great. I'm really interested and glad that we got that. So could you tell me a little bit more about growing up with your siblings, with your parents, like, just a little bit more of what family life was like?

ROY WALTER: It, it was (pause) -- there are two phases, there's -- and I experience things very much differently than my siblings, especially the two older ones. And my -- the other, Leslie was probably caught right in the middle of things. So there was a phase

when I remember we were just a really busy family, and my dad was driven to, you know, he had his teaching gig -- it was a long term teaching thing for, so I kind of assume, by the time I was conscious of it, it was, he was just on autopilot. And he was well-respected, his students loved him. My mom wasn't working when I was younger, when I was very young, and my dad was also an outdoor educator -- or today we'd call it earth science -- and so we did a lot of travel. They, when I was three years old, they bought property in Vermont, and we spent a lot of time up there. Him being a teacher, we spent the summers up there -- you got to sneeze (laughter)?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: I was going to; I was like, "Nope, nope!" Sorry, continue.

ROY WALTER: We skied, from when I was very, very young. So they found an old, non-functioning farm in Vermont, beautiful [00:20:00] piece of land, and they purchased it, and we just went out -- you know, if it was a three day weekend or more, and sometimes even if, even on two day weekends, before all the interstates were built -- you know, we drove up local roads to get there; it was crazy. We had two horses; he was a member, I think a leader, in the 4H club, the agricultural club kind of like scouting, but without the religious overtones (laughter). And so we raised a bull, and we would somehow get them all into trailers on the pickup truck, or in the back of the pickup truck, and drive to Vermont with our three cats and a dog, and the four kids and everything. So it was -- and my dad planted tons of trees. The house that I grew up in was built in a potato field, and so there's nothing; it was just flat, and there's a house. And by the time my mom sold it, when I was 20, it was a forest, and it was, and it had, you know, three kinds of apple trees, three kinds of cherries, pears, all sort of fruit. And, and we always had a vegetable garden, and all sorts of things. So he also decided that it would be a good idea to sell

Christmas trees, but of course not grow trees only to be cut down and sold, but he would sell live trees. So we would dig them out of the ground and ball them with burlap bags, sacks, and tie them up and sell them to people who would water them through the Christmastime and then plant them in their yards, and then they would have a beautiful blue spruce or whatever it was. So that was a lot of work, with the horses and the bull and every-- so it was just a very nonstop; he was really driven, somehow, and it was great. So there's that phase, and then I think my two oldest siblings hit puberty, no doubt, and then all hell broke loose, I think. A couple things happened; my mom really wanted to go back to work; she was a nurse, and she missed that, and she wanted to, you know, pursue it. He apparently really didn't like that idea, and they argued a lot over that, and she was strong willed and went back to work against his desires. And so that, I think, started something, and by the time I was 10, it was sort of rough, and there was a lot of tension, and arguments, and difficulty in the house. So when I was 12, I think I was 12, maybe 13, just in time for me -- my dad moved out, and moved to Vermont and lived in the cabin up there. He had retired. He was older. So he retired and moved to Vermont, and things -- and my two older siblings pretty much left the house, because they were in college. Or my brother, actually, wasn't -- didn't go straight to college. But so my sister and I were in a big house alone with my mom, and my mom was very supportive and very tolerant, and such, and we had a great relationship with her. And then she left to college, and then it was myself. So. And I was a musician and very busy with friends, and very active, playing in jazz band and rock bands and things. And very independent at that point, as a young teenager. Mid-- you know, 14, 15 years old,

through high school. So I guess they were the three sort of phases of living, you know, with my siblings and then without.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How, what holidays did you celebrate, and how did that change when these two phases changed?

ROY WALTER: We celebrated Christmas and Easter pretty much [00:25:00]. And Christmas was the, you know, for me it was cliché; it was magical and high stress. And so, you know, there are a number of movies that use that, and capture it brilliantly, but all the lead up was just insane, and then Christmas day was just magical. You know, just tremendous stuff. My parents really liked that. We would go to, we were high holiday Presbyterians. We went to see the bell choir and the chorus sing. My sister, my older sister was always in the chorus, and such, and Easter we went to service. You know, we went to church regularly when I was really young, but those were the two, you know, church holidays. The other ones -- I've always loved New Year's for whatever reason, and Thanksgiving was always a big celebration of the harvest, sort of thing. And it was...Fourth of July was touch and go.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Depending on the year?

ROY WALTER: Yeah, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So you were Presbyterians?

ROY WALTER: We went to a Presbyterian church; I'm not even sure, to this day, what it means to be Presbyterian (laughter)! Uh, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: And you mentioned that you were surrounded by a lot of Catholics.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, I don't know if "surrounded" -- there were just a lot of -- Northport was a mix, there were a certain amount of French heritage, I guess? A lot of Italians. A

good deal of Poles. So there were a lot of Catholics around. The big churches downtown were Catholic. I guess three out of five were Catholic churches. I had a couple Jewish friends who -- I didn't know much about Judaism, and they weren't, it wasn't as evident in other, outwardly, in other ways. And then I guess Protestant and -- my, my parents were interesting, and I don't really know who drove this; my dad was certainly into it -- they took us to Baptist churches, they took us to (pause) a lot of different denominations, just to go, just to exper-- I remember going to the Baptist church in Elwood, and the preacher -- we, they would have baptisms, and they were full immersion baptisms. They had this Plexiglas pool and steps, and they would, he would lead them down in their gowns, and it was wild. And he played trombone with his foot! I mean, it was, it was entertainment, and it was wild, and a lot of fun, and we enjoyed that. We had good friends who were Japanese, and they were Christian, but I don't recall what the church was, or who -- but we went with them a number of times. Actually, she was Japanese; he was Hawaiian, I think. So it was interesting that he exposed us to a lot of -- they exposed us to a lot of different places. I don't know what the motivation was, really. They weren't outwardly, tremendously religious.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: As an adult, can you look back and sort of see if, think that there was an effect on you because of all this, sort of, exposure to different faiths?

ROY WALTER: Certainly. I had, I think I overheard Monica talking about it. I had an aversion to organized religion, and so when I was eight, I, you know, another year of going to Sunday school, which was on Thursday, I think (laughter) -- and I just, finally, it's early, you know, like September or whatever, and I just said, "I'm not going to go anymore." And my mom was taken aback. My dad didn't fight those fights. I think he

felt hurt or something, but I just said, “I can’t do this, it doesn’t feel right,” and such, and she said, “OK, we’ll get the workbook in; we’ll go to [00:30:00] church on Sunday, and then I’ll sit with you with the workbook.” And so I agreed to that just to get out of going to, you know, the religious school, and then probably within a couple weeks, I just said, “I’m not going to do the workbook either.” And I was pretty certain about my convictions, and I think I called myself agnostic for lack of, I don’t know -- wanting to be open, or something -- not lack of wa-- for wanting to be open to something, but it wasn’t, you know? I was pretty certain about being, that there wasn’t anything there. As far as a spiritual being. But I really liked the cultural stuff, and the memories of going to those different -- especially the Baptist church made a big impression on me, that these people were living, they were alive, something was happening. And that was always really good to see. I kind of liked that.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So after that, that was late 10s, so take me through your high school years. Like, early high school, or -- into high school and further.

ROY WALTER: In what aspect?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: In the way your family interacted, and in the, in what you wanted for yourself.

ROY WALTER: Hm.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Basically.

ROY WALTER: So, mm-hmm, all right. So that was the early and mid ’70s. I was very independent. I lived alone with my mom; my mom worked nights. So we had -- I had breakfast with her. She had dinner. I didn’t see her a lot; we would just cross paths in the evenings and in the mornings. I -- my dad was, I traveled with him in the summers a

lot. So in '74 or '75, when I was, you know, I was still in junior high, we drove across country the second time, or the third time...I forget. And went, kind of recreated a trip he took by himself in the early '40s with a bicycle and trains for the most part. So he went across Canada, took, built a boat by himself, went down the Yukon River for 900 miles into Alaska, rode to Fairbanks, hitchhiked to Mt. McKinley, well, Denali Park now, it's called. Camped out there, you know, and did this loop, and then got back down into Washington State; took a ferry from Alaska down to the islands. And so he took me on pretty much the same thing; so we drove, we always drove. We canoed in Saskatchewan. We spent 16 days on the Yukon River, doing the same route he took to Klondike, and to Mt. McKinley. That's their washer upstairs. And so we did that; previously, I'd driven across country with my brother and he, and another time with my dad, and we had gone up and down the east coast, I don't know, three times to Florida, to the Keys, to Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia to camp. And, you know, it was all car camping, too. And then we would backpack or canoe once we got to different places. He wanted to see every national park he could. You know, he really loved the outdoors and loved the national park system, and that sort of thing. So my summers were on the road, and in the springs, we went to Washington, DC, to visit Congress and stuff. I was a (laughter) aspiring senator. Which is completely out of the realm of possibility now. And then we went up to wa-- up to Maine, I mean, I spent a lot of time in Moosehead Lake and on the Moose River, and in [Soulin?], and such, again, canoeing and camping. I did the Allagash River, we did the St. Croix River. We did a lot of white water, as well as lakes. And so he wanted, he wanted us -- but I did most of this with him -- to really experience [00:35:00] the world in that way in nature. And that sort of thing. In, once junior high, I

just started playing music a lot. I started when I was eight, I started learning guitar. I just got into jazz and rock, and in high school, everything revolved around music. My friends were all infatuated with, whatever, you know, prog rock at the time, and fusion jazz, and 20th century classical stuff we really liked. So we went to clubs, and a lot of my friends were older, so I was very independent, and when I was 14 or 15, we were going into jazz clubs and stuff in New York. And just very comfortable doing that. So that was a -- that was kind of it. We camped out a lot, locally. We went sailing. I, you know, where I grew up was becoming suburban. It was quite, downtown was very suburban -- I grew up in a field; you know, it got built up while I was there. So there were still dairy farms; there were still sod farms. It was rather rural in a way. Now it's, they just, you know -- while I was there, actually, they would take out an orchard and build 12 houses and then call it Peach Orchard Drive, and plant a peach tree there, even though it was an apple orchard originally, or some-- (laughter), you know, it was real estate boom. And high school, it was a really big school, so my graduating class was something like 980 people or something. So it was easy to find your crowd and not meet most of the people there, and so I spent my time in the music wing, and we played and recorded and studied and did stuff, and didn't really worry about the other parts (laughter).

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Sounds very nice.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, I can't complain; it was really great.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So what happened after high school?

ROY WALTER: My, my brother had gone to the army, and he returned when I was a senior, I guess, and my sister had gone to college, but she had then moved to California. My other sister was in college, I guess, and I went and spent a year at Potsdam State,

upstate New York, right on the St. Lawrence River, almost -- for music. My dad would support whatever I wanted to do. I wanted to study music, and he felt it important to be, to get an education degree, like, he did -- to fall back on. And so I went to a school that's really good for that, but just wasn't really good for -- otherwise, the way, the things that I wanted. And it was also just in Siberia, out there! It was really, really cold, and everybody was nice, and I met good friends, but I knew almost immediately that I was going to transfer out. So after a year, I transferred to Brooklyn, and went to the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College, and studied music performance and theory, and graduated there, from there. But it was a very -- it, it was, you know, very different experience, and then I was -- I just felt at home the moment I got back to New York.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How did you feel -- no. What were the differences from where you grew up to where you went to school in Brooklyn, and, slash, did you like it better?

ROY WALTER: It, it had -- I was, I'm always really stimulated by New York City, and we had come in so much as a kid. My dad would bring us in frequently to go to museums, and we'd park near where he grew up in Jackson Heights, and get on the subway, and we would ride in, and we'd go to the Met or we'd go to Lincoln Center, or we'd go to Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. And these all became very familiar places, and so riding the subways and walking the streets was easy enough [00:40:00]; of course, the '60s and '70s, some places you didn't go, but it just, it just felt great. And so when I came in, when I transferred there for school, I had a close friend who had gone there, who was a year older, so he was going into his third year, I guess, when I was going in to my second there. And it was...so he and I were really close friends, so it was great knowing somebody, and that's how I knew the college, that I wanted to go to the college.

Brooklyn in the '70s -- well, this was 1980 at this point -- and Brooklyn College, right at the crossroads of this, you know, Midwood, and manicured lawns in the Jewish neighborhoods and such of Midwood, and then across Flatbush and Nostrand was Flatbush. You know, very inner city kind of feeling and, well, very inner city. And it was a bit of a mess, still, the '70s lingered, and -- but I love that, I loved the diversity. I got an apartment alone for a while in the basement of a Hasidic family house in Midwood. And then a good, another friend who had gone to Massachusetts, transferred half a year later, and we got an apartment together, actually, in Flatbush. And it was walking distance to school as well, and we just, you know, it was intense; we spent a ton of time in school, and practicing and playing, so we were just involved with that, but then I started gigging and teaching, and I just went everywhere on the trains. I loved it. I, I loved, you know -- fortunately I never got mugged, but I just got to, you know -- I didn't feel fearless, but you know, use your head, but it felt easy to go anywhere, and so we got to know that there was good Spanish food to be had in people's houses in Fort Greene, and you know, walking through there and being able to go in and have a home cooked meal that some really wonderful Caribbean, or Mexican -- and all sorts of stuff. And you know, a lot of friends just had very diverse backgrounds and stuff. It was fun. I loved that. So, but I've always -- my childhood memories were always great. Like, I loved where I grew up and I had really good experiences, overall.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So that has you into your early 20s. When did you meet Monica?

ROY WALTER: I met her in 1991 when I -- so I did the music thing; I worked in the midst of -- I was a classical guitarist and I worked very closely with the classical guitar world. And I kind of got sick of it, and I decided to go back to graduate school for computer

programming, which I'd done as an undergrad and really liked, and it was obvious it was going to change music and art and all sorts of things. So I kind of wanted to -- I didn't know precisely how, but -- so I went back to graduate school at Brooklyn College, and that led me, when I was working for a music journal magazine, I just naturally -- things started happening, and I transformed their layouts to be digital and use typesetting services that had just started becoming available. And building a database for their subscribers and that sort of thing. And then I got a job at Time Inc., and had studied at New York Institute of Technology for digital imaging, because I figured that was also one of the next things to go. And after working at Time Inc. for a couple years, in their video, book and video division, they were going to shut that down and merge it with another group down in Virginia, and so I was one of the last -- there were four of us, I think, in the end. They whittled [00:45:00] down from 200 people, and we had to, you know, facilitate all of this. And they did a tremendous amount of outreach to try and offer us training and interview skills and resume and placement, and all this kind of stuff, which was, you know, tremendous! It was a great company. Turned out there was an opening at Book of the Month Club for publishing technologists, basically; take over the network, they had just landed, I think, 10 Mac computers, and they were starting to design on them, and they had two consultants that wer-- that had done that, but they knew that they needed to really build that out. So they hired me to do that and take over that role. And Monica was there, she was a designer, making the transition, and that summer -- I think I started in June, or May or June; no it must have been April or May -- that June I got married to my first wife, and the -- but I worked there for six years, I think? So total of almost 10 years at Time Inc. And during that time, my -- you know, it was a major

career shift, and my life really opened up; it was a great thing. My boss was wonderful; it transitioned, and my next boss was even better. You know, it just really changed my life and my ambitions, and my career became really solidified. And that wasn't really aligned with my wife's (pause) with things there as well. And so we separated, and -- which was, you know, we did our way, like we did everything -- and that took forever, but Monica jumped on me the moment (laughter) the divorce -- well, the separation -- and then, after the divorce. And I think you heard this story of the --

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: You can tell it to me again!

ROY WALTER: (laughter) OK, so. So I separated, and even though it was amicable and -- well, after we got over the initial craziness, it's, you know, it's a tough thing, and we owned a house together, and you know, lots of things had to happen that took a long, long time, but once I moved out, and such, I think I dated one other woman at the time, once, and then somehow we decided to try to watch Wimbledon together, and we started dating pretty soon. I think I moved out in May, and we started dating in late June. And that just kind of took on a life of its own pretty much immediately. And mostly because she -- you know, I'd known her for years at work. She was really the only person that was into tennis, skiing, hiking, and travel, and those were pretty much my four favorite activities. So we talked a lot about -- you know, she would be in Colorado during a blizzard and come back, and we'd talk about the skiing. And she spent a lot of time in Switzerland, and I had done a couple tours of Europe. And I'd done a lot of backpacking; I think she kind of exaggerated the backpacking bit of her past (laughter), but -- for conversation's sake. So it was just, it just felt really great. I didn't really consider dating her until then. Especially, I guess -- I just really liked being with her and talking. Well, plus, she was

dating a guy who worked for me at the time, so it was kind of awkward. But then it just took on. And I think we kept it secret for about a year. Because it was odd; I, we didn't work directly, I -- I had built a team, and at some point, I had about 35 people working for me. And we supported her and her -- the graphic artists [00:50:00], and everything. She didn't work for me or anything, but it just became a challenge after a while to us, to, let's see how long we can go without anybody knowing -- and made it almost a year, I think. And then it was just kind of fun in that regard.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: Did her -- the fact that she has a different religion than you, or a different faith, change anything?

ROY WALTER: No, I always felt Jews were far more inclusive than a lot of people. But I felt, I've met people of all persuasions and ethnicities who were just tremendous. You know, maybe being in the arts, and certainly in New York -- but it was just really easy. She didn't question why I was atheist. She was, I guess, tolerant of my criticisms, and probably inappropriate remarks at times. But she was just open; she really focused on living and doing stuff. And I really liked that a lot. So it wasn't, no, it wasn't -- never an issue. When -- I think the more I found out about her heritage, the, it, the -- I didn't get concerned, but I, I, maybe I worried a little bit. Especially when I find out the background, her mother's background and stuff. That, you know, it wasn't a religious thing; it was cultural and -- ethnicity gave it much greater depth. You know, they weren't religious Jews, and that certainly made it a lot easier. And the more I got to know Judaism, and those aspects, the better it felt. It felt inclusive; it felt warm and, you know, there were, there was, there were cause-driven events, and not dogmatic-driven, you know, sort of things that go on. But I think that, the most, the biggest thing was just, it

just, it was just so stimulating; it was so, you know -- you're always part of the family; you're always part of the discussion. There was a lot of discussion; it got heated, it was just -- everything was out in the open. And again, that was not something I experienced in my family life, or, you know, before. So it was really neat (laughter) there.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Did anyone ever ask you about conversion?

ROY WALTER: No, that was never a concern. I mean, it would never have been a reasonable request either, but...

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Did it influence anything in your decision to marry her?

ROY WALTER: I don't think so. We, you know -- I guess I was concerned -- and not for very long, because I think we had a pretty good understanding of each other by then, that this wasn't going to be a traditional wedding. I wasn't going to go for that, and I don't think she wanted that, and so I -- it was never really an issue. I think it came, you know, it comes up when, you know, your mother, future mother-in-law being so influential and so, I want to say charismatic -- she was a dominant -- she is a dominant personality. You don't know how much -- I didn't know her that well yet. It was, it had been years, but, yeah, when you get down to that kind of thing, things come out, but surprisingly, it was not an issue. She was ecstatic. It seems, you know. So we, we liked to celebrate both her parent's backgrounds and bring in my family as, you know, as much as possible. But it was easy to stay kind of simple, on the bridge [00:55:00] and such. I mean, I, I got the wedding, the planning for the wedding; she planned the party, I planned the music, she planned virtually everything else. And so I just felt that the bridge meant so much to me, and the symbolism, whether it was, you know, really labeled after the fact or whatever. It doesn't really matter, but the idea of being between these two islands -- I grew up on

Long Island, and this is Long Island -- and she grew up on Manhattan. And my, probably my favorite icon of New York is the Brooklyn Bridge; it just couldn't be any better. So that's where we got married. But in the party, with the music, I just really wanted to have Indian music; that's always been really close to my heart since junior high and high school, when I studied Indian music, because of a fabulous music program there. And that her dad was from India, and we listened to it a lot, and you know, it just -- that was very important. So it was good.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: How do you think about, now that you've had this successful marriage, and you have two children, how do you sort of balance the teaching of culture and religion?

ROY WALTER: We talk about everything with our kids. And they're curious, as kids can be. I, you know, I think Monica was as surprised as I was that Erik wanted to go through the bar mitzvah and stuff; it was really curious. Maybe she wasn't as surprised as I was, but (pause) it really, you know, at that point, I had an appreciation for Judaism that I never, you know, had before. And certainly the environment and the community at the synagogue here -- they have been, you know, as inclusive as I could ever imagine. The -- you know, I sat on the board to get a new head of education there, a new rabbi -- process, which was, you know, flattering and interesting and challenging, so I got to know the inner workings -- I never realized that, you know, hiring a rabbi is no light matter. And it's almost as if somebody makes it for you, but fortunately -- and I bet, in much of the country, it is -- because there aren't that many, but in New York, of course there's many opportunities. And the people I've gotten to know have been just really interesting and wonderful people. And my kids have -- you know, it was a neutral place for them, that I

think they've just -- you just feel safe and familiar, and then the fact that it was Hebrew school, it's -- there's a certain amount of religious studies, certainly, but the cultural studies that they do, and the language -- you know, the focus of that was tremendous. And for Erik especially, it was a tremendous way for him to really touch base with something that -- I don't know where else we could -- you know, hopefully it would come from somewhere else, if not there, but it was really tremendous. So I had little to do with it, because I don't know much about it, and I probably would not be very good with being unbiased in, you know, pursuing it. But it was a tremendous experience, and so. With them, you know, we relate things, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Druid -- you know, and such, and I'm very open with my feelings, and I think we're all pretty much on the same page as far as that is concerned. But the cultural and the community stuff has been really great, and I never really expected that. So with the kids, it's been interesting. There are things [01:00:00], you know, I question, and I don't know about, but it's been really interesting.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Well, you already talked about the little, like, my last real, big question, which was your relationship with BHS, the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue. So I mean if there's any more detail you'd like to go into about that, that'd be fantastic, but no pressure if you're done.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, I mean, I have to say, it's -- going, working up to the bar mitzvah, and I'll keep this short, was intense. And I wanted to be involved, and so me, myself, and my other son played music, and I took care of the music for that and such. I -- there's so much else that we get those things out of, and such, that there are certainly times when it's overwhelming for me to go to another service. You know, especially

during the, what I call the, sort of the rush hour, the September, October season. You know, I've mixed feelings, sometimes, about it. But surprisingly, out of context I do. During it, I, I don't really. And so the, the synagogue is something, you know, I don't attend religiously. But you know, I never, I don't regret it or anything, and I'm happy to be -- the rabbi's a neighbor of ours; I see him on the street and talk, you know, with him a lot, actually. And I'm happy about that. And he's been tremendous. When my dad was ill and passed away, I mean -- it's just, you know, and I guess you expect that out of any clergy, but it was, it was nice. It was really, really, really nice, and to be able to relate to someone --

END OF AUDIO FILE

ROY WALTER: -- openly, in a way that I wasn't accustomed to was really good. So they're, they've been really great -- environment. And the musical things that we've taken part of separately, also, have been really good. And we learned to play bridge there (laughter).

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very funny.

ROY WALTER: So.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: (sighs) Well, do you have any stories or things that relate to something that I either didn't let you get to, or we didn't ask a question about?

ROY WALTER: (pause) I, I'm sure there are tons of things --

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Billions.

ROY WALTER: -- you know, because neither of us are, are very religious, the, that's not been an issue. I think it's been helpful that I, maybe that Judaism has influenced me, probably more than the other way around. And the central tenet that really resonates with me is the discussion, the conversation, you know, that the Torah doesn't have vowels. That you can interpret things and they're completely valid; there's no right or wrong, you know, multiple ways -- really appeals to me. I studied some Eastern philosophy and some French, Gurdjieff and J.G. Bennett, a British man who, you know, talked about revisiting your dogma and shedding it and re-questioning yourself. And I find it refreshing that Judaism really supports that. And in fact, it's baked in. And so, and that I really liked.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's fantastic.

ROY WALTER: So.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Well, since everyone just got back --

ROY WALTER: Good timing!

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Perf--

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Oral History Interview with Monica Elias and Roy Allen Walter

Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations, 2011.019.051

Interview conducted by Abigail Ettelman at the narrator's home on August 13th, 2013

Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: All right. So it is August 14th, 2013. My name is Abigail Ettelman, and I'm interviewing Monica Elias and Roy [Allen] Walter. We're at [address redacted for privacy] in Brooklyn Heights, and this is for Crossing Borders, Bridging Generation. And this is the second of technically three. (laughter) Or the third of technically three. Anyways. So, thank you for letting me come back after our very late talk yesterday.

MONICA ELIAS: Of course.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: So what I'd like to talk about first is -- as you said, this is where you get to actually talk to each other, as opposed to before when I talked to each of you individually. So I know that you were able to overhear a little bit, and so for both of you, we sort of ended on you two meeting, marrying, having children, building a life together. So what I'd like you to really talk about first is maybe the process of meeting, and how maybe -- I -- (laughter) I remember very clearly one of you said that he might, you know, think differently of this. But -- and you did have semi-- semi-different stories. So I'd like to have you talk a little bit about meeting, your thoughts, and how you -- what priorities you had when you were building this relationship. And whoever wants to can go first.

ROY WALTER:(laughter) Well, as you know, I was -- I had just come out of a marriage -- I was going to say "relationship" -- a marriage. And so I was in a very different place, and

frankly not really looking for much of anything, except a lot of space, (laughter) and -- and diving into my -- my job, as I tend to do. So I think that was probably in contrast to Monica's head at the time.

MONICA ELIAS: Right. I -- I was not coming out of a marriage.

ROY WALTER: (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: I wanted to have fun, and I wanted to -- to have a relationship. So I always got along with you, and I thought you were really a cool person, and wanted to get to know you better. And I knew you were in that space. I remember -- remember I asked you to go see a movie at the Metropolitan -- no, it was at the Museum of Modern Art, which wasn't far from where we worked. And it was maybe a five o'clock movie, or a six o'clock movie of --

ROY WALTER: It was a Beatles movie.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, it was the Beatles' Help!, which is a terrible movie, but I thought, you know --

ROY WALTER: (laughter) Hey!

MONICA ELIAS: -- it has importance. So what -- and you were -- you're interested in music, so we went --

ROY WALTER: I was in the play in sixth grade.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, OK. (laughter) So we went to the museum to see the movie, and they were sold out. And Roy looked at me and said, "OK, I'm going back to work."

ROY WALTER: (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: And I thought, "Wow, really? It's all about the movie? And the movie isn't even so good." (laughter) So I --

ROY WALTER: (laughter) [I'd] seen the movie.

MONICA ELIAS: -- I was persistent with you, because you were really nice, and you didn't give me any hints that you didn't like spending time with me. So eventually, I think you -- you realized I liked you. And we had our first date with the Wimbledon Final. And it was really fun. It was very hot that day, and -- and you said, "Let's get out of the city." And we took the train up the Hudson to Tarrytown, and we explored the graveyard there, which is so interesting. So, it was a good beginning.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, it was. You know, well, that was -- and then because of work, and our both being, I guess, deeply embedded there, we decided not to be too public with it. And plus, you had dated a guy that worked for me. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: And you were still married. I mean, you were separated, but you were still married.

ROY WALTER: I was technically still married. So we kept it secret, and we'd sneak out during lunch and meet a few blocks away, and go to the park, and whatever we did, and go to the museum because we had free entry, because of our -- our employer. It was lovely. And shared some of the things that we liked to do.

MONICA ELIAS: Right. But I think after we dated a while -- I think we had this conversation over dinner once, and I said that children were definitely in my future, and that I wanted to have children. I knew you had been in a marriage for a couple of years, and I wasn't sure that was a priority for you, because you didn't have children. So I thought it was important to put that out early on. And [05:00] you seemed OK with it. You -- you weren't overly enthusiastic. (laughter)

ROY WALTER: (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: But I think you were OK with that idea.

ROY WALTER: Yeah. My -- my first wife and I were decidedly not into having children.

And we -- and so that was -- it wasn't something I was terribly -- (laughter) I was looking to pursue at the time, and another long-term girlfriend prior had come up, and under different pretense. It was actually under a more religious pretense. (laughter) And I just wasn't into it. And -- but talking with you then, I think -- I think I came up with something what -- that was, like, "Well, is it OK if right now I don't need it?" Or something along those lines, so a acceptable way to just keep going without committing (laughter) at the time. Because I -- I didn't know, and I really liked you, so that was -- it - - you know, that -- I was open to new adventures. So I didn't want to close that off.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. Well, I was already -- I think I was already 35 when we started dating. So it was definitely in my mind. And I think we were far along in the relationship that -- that I could actually bring this up without sounding insane, being the first or second date or something. But by that time, we were pretty serious with each other. We probably had planned our trip already, and so --

ROY WALTER: Yeah, I don't remember when that was, but --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Was this the trip that you decided to go on to make sure you could live together?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: Yeah. Well, first she went around the world -- well, halfway with her dad and sister, and then alone the last portion. And we almost broke up (laughter) at that point. I don't know what happened.

MONICA ELIAS: No, we -- we were going to meet, and your father had a heart attack, and unfortunately -

ROY WALTER: No, no, no. Prior, when you -- we were in the park, and --

MONICA ELIAS: Oh yeah.

ROY WALTER: -- and it was kind of odd, but I guess the children thing was af-- long after that. So...

MONICA ELIAS: I thought it was before. But it doesn't really matter.

ROY WALTER: [No]. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: I mean, I think -- I think what it -- what that illustrated is that I was really feeling uncomfortable being serious with somebody who was still married, and had met my parents and so on. And it was clear that this was going to be an important relationship, and that we didn't know if -- we didn't talk about marriage, but it was just getting more and more uncomfortable for me the closer we got. So --

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Actually, if we could pause on meeting the parents event. Could you talk a little bit -- could you talk a little bit about how [it was] to meet her parents?

ROY WALTER: I got -- I think she tried not to have (laughter) me meet her a few times. We went to the beach, and we borrowed their car.

MONICA ELIAS: You (inaudible) -- you didn't see them then.

ROY WALTER: And I didn't see them then. And it was like, "Oh, well, this is awfully nice. But they're right upstairs." (laughter) I didn't see -. When was the first actual -- I don't recall.

MONICA ELIAS: We were going to opera in the park at Central Park, and I think I had my mom come over to my apartment first. And you and I were going to meet her, and I loved that idea, because it was just a finite amount, and then we would be leaving.

ROY WALTER: Right.

MONICA ELIAS: And I could whisk you out of there. And I remember saying, "OK, Roy, it's time to go." And you were rushing, and you were putting on sandals, and you were -- you were out the door, and it was a very quick meeting.

ROY WALTER: OK.

MONICA ELIAS: My parents -- my mother is really a force of nature, and she's really -- has a very strong personality, and she's very strong-willed. And I was nervous about this meeting. So I wanted it to as brief as possible.

ROY WALTER: And before you had kids, you were very --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, I was very tense around my mother.

ROY WALTER: -- uncomfortable with her. Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. I'm -- (laughter) my parents are the parents that -- when I saw them, I remember seeing them when I was in my 20s, Roy, in SoHo, and I was with a girlfriend, and I said, "Oh my God, those are my parents." They were across the street, they were going to some event. And she said, "Oh, let's go say hello to them!" And I said, "No, no, no. We must turn around right now."

ROY WALTER: (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: And we turned around, and we went down another street. And my parents are s-- my mother was so vivacious, and so full of life, and so -- you know, everything was [10:00] always revolving around her that I felt very much in her shadow. And so it

was hard. I -- my personality accommodated her personality, so it was very hard for me to be my own person around her. And I didn't want to be overwhelmed when she met my friends. I didn't want my friends to see what happens to me in her presence.

ROY WALTER: But as it turns out, they were tremendously welcoming, and sweet, and inclusive, and -- and overwhelming and intense. (laughter) But just from day one, it was really easy for me. Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's a lovely story. That was a really nice story, though.

(laughter) That was a really nice story. So you've described sort of your apprehension as to that meeting, but then you describe it going very well. So that's one of the nicer ways that stories can end. But you men-- and you mentioned how that changed after you had kids. Could you talk about -- a little bit about how you got to the point where you were like, "Yep, we're having kids." And this is on both of you, because you haven't said that you really wanted to have kids, and it was going to happen, and you were kind of going, "Meh, it was going to happen." So how did you two come together on that decision?

MONICA ELIAS: We didn't. I think -- I think we got married, we went on our honeymoon, and on the plane, I told you I was off of birth control, and I think you had a really hard time on that plane ride. And -- but that was it. (laughter) I said, "I'm -- I'm done. Finished."

ROY WALTER: (laughter) Can you imagine if I told you something like that on a plane?

MONICA ELIAS: I know, I'd have a heart attack.

ROY WALTER: Yeah. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: But I -- (laughter) it was not very well done, I admit that. But --

ROY WALTER: (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: -- I felt that -- wrongly, that -- that here I was, at this age, and we decide to get married, which was a public acknowledgement that we were going to spend our lives together, and that we knew that we were going to have kids. And OK, now it's time.
So...

ROY WALTER: But I think the gamble that -- had it not happened that way or some way like that, it would never have happened. It was probably worth it. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: You think so? (laughter) Roy -- yeah. I mean, I do think if I hadn't proposed, it would have gone on for a very, very long time.

ROY WALTER: Well, I don't know about that.

MONICA ELIAS: Really?

ROY WALTER: Well, it would have gone on longer, but I --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: -- I was very interested in you.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. Well, I think --

ROY WALTER: Kids is another thing.

MONICA ELIAS: -- in all fairness, coming off of another marriage, I think you wouldn't have jumped into this readily.

ROY WALTER: Right.

MONICA ELIAS: So...

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Fair enough. (laughter) You seem to have something about big life decisions on public transportation.

MONICA ELIAS: Yes! (laughter)

ROY WALTER: We talk about this all the time.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Bridges, planes.

ROY WALTER: Subways.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: (laughter; inaudible)

ROY WALTER: We bought a house on a cliff in Ireland. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, it's true.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's very funny.

ROY WALTER: I mean, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So then you had your honeymoon, pro-- you said very soon after you got pregnant, had your first. How did you figure out -- one, how did the conversations go about, like, raising this baby? And two, the shared faith -- or not shared faith, as they were -- as it were. And then also, how did -- after that, like, how did you handle holidays?

MONICA ELIAS: Do you want to respond to that, Roy? Because I don't really remember having a conversation about this.

ROY WALTER: (laughter) There wasn't much to discuss. Enter the mother-in-law. No. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ROY WALTER: I -- yeah, there -- there -- certain elements of the Jewish birth and circumcision and all of that were not really on the table for discussion. I was curious, and -- and whatnot, but I think I had confidence in the environment. I am, you know -- I can see where a lot of -- lot of stereotypical (laughter) (I joke?) -- yeah, you know, paranoia comes in, and, you know, the whole thing about the bris. But beyond that, the discussion of -- of how far things would go. We had a couple, you know, talks about -- I don't know

how to even phrase it, you know? Judaism, or Hebrew school, or, you know, things like that. I don't think it was an overbearing, [15:00] like, issue. Her family's not super religious by any means, and they're a High Holiday family. And so it wasn't, like, you know, being in a more intense, or either conservative or other sect of any faith-based community, I guess. So I wasn't really worried about that. Some of the particulars were a little foreign, and -- and odd, and irrational in the way that those things are. But tradition -- I think it was more driven by -- my sense was that this was more driven by tradition than specific beliefs, and I was more comfortable with that, I guess.

MONICA ELIAS: Right. I remember you -- I remember saying "You should call the mohel. And you -- and you said to me, "Yeah, he said Wednesday would be a good day." And of course, it's eight days after the birth of a child, it's always eight days. And I just thought, "That guy knows what he's doing," (laughter) because there must have been some really nice conversation where he said, "Oh, how about Wed-- when was he born? OK, how about Wednesday? How's that for you?"

ROY WALTER: (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: And you probably said, "OK, it's fine. We're not really doing anything on Wednesday." (laughter) But I think you were shepherded into some of the stuff like that, rather than -- being say -- said, or told, "It has to be on this day."

ROY WALTER: Really, this is Christmas Eve?

MONICA ELIAS: I don't know. I don't -- I don't know.

ROY WALTER: That seems odd. Yeah, anyway.

MONICA ELIAS: Anyway.

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: Were you there at the bris?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, it was right here.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, and our -- both our families were here and took part.

MONICA ELIAS: My father held both -- both boys, I think.

ROY WALTER: Annie held the pillow until he came -- you know --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: -- there was some pageantry involved --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: -- to get everybody involved. I don't know that my dad and Karen were here.

MONICA ELIAS: I don't think your dad and Karen were here.

ROY WALTER: I don't think they were. My mom was here, and Annie was here. So that -
- you know, and then I had been in a job a year and a half at that point that was not very good, at Bertelsmann. And -- and now, I had a newborn kid, and I'd been looking for a job. But things were kind of intense. [You?], it started right from the -- the day we got home, where it was pouring rain, and we were alone, (laughter) and we didn't have a crib, and all sorts of things. And then the job was just not real fun, and -- but it was fun coming home to -- to Erik and Monica. And we had -- what's her name? -- Pearl, I guess.

MONICA ELIAS: So I said, "Go quit your job."

ROY WALTER: Yeah, so she says -- she tells me to quit my job as -- and know you're -- "You know you're going to do it anyway." I'm like, "Look, but I don't have another job, and we have a kid now." You know, and so it turned -- a few days later, I resigned. And it was kind of fun. It was kind of --

MONICA ELIAS: Well, you came back, and you said, “I quit your -- I quit my job.” I said,
“You what?” (laughter)

ROY WALTER: (laughter) Yeah, and then she goes all... (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: How could you do that? You have a new kid. “But you told me!”

ROY WALTER: “But you told me!”

MONICA ELIAS: “Oh, right.” Well, it worked out.

ROY WALTER: Yeah. And then I got another job in a month.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. It was fine.

ROY WALTER: Everything was good.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So you had some paternity leave.

MONICA ELIAS: Right, he took it. (laughter)

ROY WALTER: Exactly. I -- I --

MONICA ELIAS: Well said.

ROY WALTER: -- grabbed it.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So how was that period of time for you?

MONICA ELIAS: Having a newborn?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Having a newborn, organizing the bris, going on into future things.

MONICA ELIAS: It was hard. I think having -- like, it wasn't the easiest motherhood I had.

And Erik was a difficult baby. There was colic, intense colic.

ROY WALTER: Well, there was the Caesarean, and then there's --

MONICA ELIAS: C-section, there was colic, he had -- you know, there -- right away, there were things. And we used to -- because the apartment sort of divided, we used to take turns. So I would put dinner on a tray for Roy, I would put all the things that he needed,

and the TV, and everything was in one -- Erik's section of the apartment. And that -- then I could sleep, and then the other section, and then we would switch off because we were up all night. And --

ROY WALTER: Yeah. Somebody was up all night.

MONICA ELIAS: It was really tough, because there's -- the -- that sort of crying of your child in pain, and there was nothing you can do. It -- [20:00] and the lack of sleep is -- is really, really tough. So it wasn't the easiest, you know, love-- lovely time that I look upon it. It was really a trial. It was hard. And I loved him, of course, and we'd do it all over again, but it was tough. Tough, tough.

ROY WALTER: We spent nights, 2:00 am walking around the neighborhood in the stroller, in the carriage or whatever.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. And it was wintertime, and --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- I didn't know many families here. It was tough.

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So in that case --

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter) What's your next question?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- why did you have another kid? (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: I -- I must have had amnesia. I -- no, I had another kid partly because I was getting older and I didn't want an only child. And also, partly, I knew stuff was up with Erik, and I kind of wanted him to relate to the -- I thought it would be really good

for him to have a sibling to, like, be in his face all the time. And so we had them pretty close. They were 21 months apart.

ROY WALTER: Yeah. Some of that obviously mellowed out. The colic stops after --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: -- a couple months, and things. But I -- my new job, I was traveling, so I wasn't here during the week. And that was a whole 'nother thing.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, that was later on. That was tough.

ROY WALTER: No, it was right then.

MONICA ELIAS: Really?

ROY WALTER: I was in Massachusetts right away.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, right. I blocked -- I block out a lot of things that aren't very happy.

ROY WALTER: Five days a week in Massachusetts.

MONICA ELIAS: Yes. (laughter)

ROY WALTER: Then I went to Germany for five weeks, then I came back to Massachusetts, then I went to Japan, and then I -- you know?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: It was like -- and -- and then a few months after that, I was down in -- in Washington --

MONICA ELIAS: Right.

ROY WALTER: -- doing the same thing for a year until Jason was born.

MONICA ELIAS: Right. Well, I was kind of used to being in the family where the father leaves for chunks of time. But -- but was -- what was really great for me is I was

working through this whole thing. Like, I started working from home, and I had my own business. And so --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- work was really solace. It was wonderful. I could just go off to my home office, and the babysitter would be with the kids during the day, and then I'd be on in the evening. So that was really great.

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: You mentioned that you didn't know many people in this area. So --

MONICA ELIAS: Right.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- when did you start meeting people and how? For both of you?

MONICA ELIAS: I think --

ROY WALTER: Oh, the kid. (laughter) Right?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, I think having a kid -- what do they say? Having a pet and then having a kid --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- are the two things that make you (laughter) --

ROY WALTER: Well, having a dog, yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- have -- get a lot of new friends. So -- (laughter)

ROY WALTER: [We] joined the mother's group.

MONICA ELIAS: I joined the mother's group at Grace Church, a local church. It was the first mother's group in the neighborhood, now there are tons of them. And I met some moms through there, and when they start preschool -- well, Erik started really at one and

a half or two, like, daycare-slash-preschool. And then I met more families and parents. And I think as they get -- get older and go to different schools, our social circle has expanded because of that.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: And -- yeah. I was just saying to Roy the other night that being -- it's weird. It sounds odd, but being a couple, and then socializing with other couples with kids, you know, people who are single find this incredibly boring, because they talk about their kids, or school, or stuff that's just incredibly boring. But for -- there's a need to do this, because it reinforces your -- that you're in the same boat, and that you're in this community, and you have similar challenges, and it's a huge information network too. Like, when you don't know anybody, you don't know who the good pediatrician is, you don't know -- you know, you can -- now you can go on the internet and anything. But you really just don't know what -- what the right way --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- to do something is. And the mom network, or the mom and dad network, is hugely important when you have a kid. It's just necessary.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Absolutely. Where -- when did Brooklyn Heights Synagogue come into the -- the play?

MONICA ELIAS: I think they had a Tot Shabbat. So really --

ROY WALTER: Right.

MONICA ELIAS: -- from when they were two or three. And then they're really open to your babysitter taking your kid. But I don't think -- I think we only did it a couple times, but I

think they were really open, and I think Rabbi [Serge] Lippe was doing them at the time.

I don't know if he still does. And very open, very nice. That's how that started.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Could you talk a little bit more about the Tot Shabbat, and what that involved?

MONICA ELIAS: It was really a lot of preschool kids in a circle with their caregivers, trying to keep them in a semi-small space. (laughter) And when there was --

ROY WALTER: So ba-- basically all these West Indian women (laughter) with these little kids.

MONICA ELIAS: So- There's a lot of parents, too. And the rabbi would be in the center with his guitar, sitting on the floor, [he's] on the floor, and then he'd had [25:00] a stuffed Torah and a stuffed alligator -- I don't know why -- and a stuff matzo, I don't know what else. Everything was stuffed. And the kids would play around --

ROY WALTER: Yeah, (I'd forgotten that?).

MONICA ELIAS: -- and jump on them, and they would sing songs, and the kids would clap, and then the kids got used to the songs. And, well, it was really like any other preschool activity, except it was -- it had Jewish songs, and it was about the Shabbat. So...

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: And then you had some grape juice, and everybody ran around like crazy, and that was it.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That is the most adorable thing I've ever heard. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ROY WALTER: And he's -- he's -- he has a real -- a lot of people in his position do, but he has a real ability to relate to people of all ages. And he really charmed the kids, and he was a good singer, and a good guitarist.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: You know, I think they created a nice [space]. The synagogue has grown a lot since even we were doing that, [so in] the past 10 years.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. It has a preschool of its own. Yeah.

ROY WALTER: It's -- it's much larger, as far more families, people you don't know, whatever. So it was less of a competitive space back then.

MONICA ELIAS: yeah.

ROY WALTER: Like -- oh, it's not competitive, but --

MONICA ELIAS: No, I wouldn't say "competitive" is the right --

ROY WALTER: It's not as busy.

MONICA ELIAS: Busy, yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: How many families were there when you first --

MONICA ELIAS: I have no idea.

ROY WALTER: Probably around 250 or so. But, you know, they -- they're never all active at once. And now there's close to 500.

MONICA ELIAS: Is that right?

ROY WALTER: I mean, it's -- it's almost doubled. Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: Wow.

ROY WALTER: Because I -- I'm -- I was on the board. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: I know, because, of course, you know these things. (laughter)

ROY WALTER: And that's why we bought the building next door, and they're expanding, and all this kind of stuff.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So you said you -- you've just noticed the changes in the business?

MONICA ELIAS: You know, I don't really notice it, because we -- the great thing about the synagogue that I love -- and it's my age, and using it as a resource, but it's also that I think synagogues in the city have changed since I was a kid. And instead of just offering the sisterhood, and -- and religious school, there are book groups, and there are groups to learn bridge, and there are cooking groups, and there's a film series, and there's discussion.

ROY WALTER: It's like a community center. Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah, it's like a community center, and there's -- and Rabbi Lippe's great with history. I went to one of his lectures about Israel. And so -- so but we kind of just dip in and take part in what we feel we want to. It's like this --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- platter of things that's presented to you every week or two. We'd get their newsletter. And we'd just, you know, pick and choose, which is really nice. So I go in for those things, and I go in for the High Holidays, and we go in for Shabbat every now and then. But basically, I'm not just, yeah, hanging around.

ROY WALTER: And -- yeah, and if our kids are involved in the services, or...

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: And they have a music night, and the boys and I played -- or Jason and I played, and that sort of thing.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So you do -- sorry. So you do similar things when you go in? Or do you go in less frequently than Monica?

ROY WALTER: Less frequently. Not that much. But yeah, it's not --

MONICA ELIAS: We had a really funny learn-to-play-bridge class, which was hysterical.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, we did that together.

MONICA ELIAS: And then (laughter) we had -- we go in together for Shabbat.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, for the events and the High Holidays we --

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: -- go together. You've gone more frequently to some of the -- I guess, services, that I can see.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. And you go for music stuff. I mean, we --

ROY WALTER: I even go on my own.

MONICA ELIAS: -- it's a -- mixture. Some stuff we go together --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- some separately.

ROY WALTER: I went to a couple they had, relevant to this discussion.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh right, being a goy in a synagogue or something like that. (laughter)

ROY WALTER: Yeah. So I went to a couple of the meetings. And, you know, it just -- I wasn't looking for that. I didn't need a vow for relief. You know, my home life is not crazy. We don't run a Jewish household. And, like, our kids, you know, whatever. And so I went to two, I think. And it just didn't appeal to me. I didn't need to share the -- the pain of --

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ROY WALTER: -- (laughter) with others. So I didn't do that. But they do -- you know, they do try to program stuff, and have things --

MONICA ELIAS: Relevant things.

ROY WALTER: Yeah, that -- that different people would -- it would appeal to different people.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So was that -- the -- how -- (laughter) how to be a goy, was that a one-time thing? Or is that running?

ROY WALTER: No, it's -- I think it's in every spring for six weeks or eight weeks, they -- they do it. Or maybe it's every other week. (laughter) I forget. But -- and they had a [30:00] -- a woman come in, I forget where she came from. She was from a mixed family, and, you know, it -- it -- I can see where there are places. A lot of -- a lot of people talked about when one or the other converted, and, you know, stuff like that. And I was -- were never near that kind of level, that dynamic. And so it didn't -- you know, it didn't -- I didn't need to go much more. But, you know, it was fun, a bit. It's -- it's a very -- we talked about this. It's a very inclusive place, and there's a lot of people there for different reasons, I think.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: [I mean, if] --

MONICA ELIAS: And I think you feel really comfortable there. Like, there was --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- one night where we had friends who invited us to this incredible evening, where we went to this bakery, and the bakery was -- there was a baker there to help us all learn how to bake these different kinds of bread. So there were eight of us,

and we baked this enormous load of bread, which was delicious. And so we really didn't know what to do with it. There's only so much we could freeze and keep and eat. And you -- you knew it was one of the nights that they were having the shelter, so you --

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: -- just dropped a whole bunch of stuff off, and you'd worked at the shelter before, so you knew --

ROY WALTER: Yeah, I cook for the -- there was a women's shelter, now it's a men's shelter. So I've cooked there, I don't know, four times or something, and -- and I've slept there twice and things. So I felt that was a good thing. And we were getting out of the subway a couple blocks away. I was like, "Well, let's just drop -- they -- they would love some fresh-made French -- French bread. (laughter) You know?"

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ROY WALTER: So it's -- there are -- yeah, I think it's part of -- well, anyway. It comes up.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So this is actually -- I don't want to label you. Yesterday when we were talking, you also mentioned -- you called yourself an agnostic, you called yourself atheist, sort of interchangeably. But whatever you are --

ROY WALTER: See, when I was a kid, I called myself an agnostic because I didn't -- you're a kid. And I knew -- I knew that was noncommittal. (laughter) And as I've done in other phases of my life, I was noncommittal. Soon enough, I -- I was comfortable with calling myself atheist, which I still do.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So in calling yourself an atheist, how does that feel being in a place that, while it has the sense of being a community center, is explicitly a house of worship?

ROY WALTER: There's no -- there's no assumption that you believe in God in the synagogue. And the rabbi -- you know, there's even not necessarily the assumption in much of the writings. You know, and so that's not really -- it's an issue (laughter) -- it's an issue at very few times. One of them is Passover, and it's not so much the belief or faith part of it, it was always sort of this -- the presentation of historic, mythical events, and the reiterating them to young kids that I had a hard time with. The lessons are fabulous. The myths themselves are fabulous, the whole deal. I didn't feel it related enough to the contemporary events and contemporary interpretations. But that's -- it's -- you know, again, that's a tradition, and it's a -- it's sort of this one time when you focus on those things, as opposed to, you know, what I now see more clearly, overwhelmingly a sense of awareness, and again, inclusiveness, and sensitivity in the -- the other -- all the other messages that come through. So it's -- it's not, you know, nearly as big a thing. I think when we first joined, we went to a dinner across the way. And it was -- I forget what his role. It was on the board, the trustees, or I don't know who he was. And, you know, major participant. I mean, he was atheist. (laughter) And I was just thinking, whoa. You know? What's that about? You know, and it just -- it's never an i-- talking to other [35:00] people there, it's just never an issue. It's not the -- it's not -- it's kind of, again, how you -- how you live, or the things you believe in. You know, how you conduct yourself, and not --

MONICA ELIAS: I would think that this synagogue, really, like, welcomes you to question things. And I -- there was -- I can't remember the High Holiday, that usually they read the -- the story where, you know, Jacob and -- that whole --

ROY WALTER: Abraham's (inaudible).

MONICA ELIAS: -- Abraham, and, yeah, and sorry. And Isaac. Sorry, not Jacob.

ROY WALTER: (laughter) Let me tell you something about the Torah. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: Abraham and Isaac, and -- and almost killing his son. And, you know, how this is such a difficult passage, and, you know, what is -- what is this really about? And is this -- this a passage we really wanted to read on a day where people come to synagogue who don't usually come to synagogue. And I -- I remember the rabbi talking about that, and -- and -- and I thought, wow, this is really contemporary and important, because this has been a tradition all along. And it is a really tough passage. And what are you going to tell your congregation about this? And -- and the rabbi -- and -- and the -- the Torah has these epic stories like this. And his job is to make this important for the community, what he's going to say up there. And he really questions its viability in that context. And I think that that just symbolizes how he conducts the feeling of the whole synagogue, that it's -- it's about questioning, and doing the right thing.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: That was a really good answer. I lost my train of thought just listening.

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: I was like, "Yes, interesting." That is very good to hear. (hums) Have there ever -- have there ever been times where either of you feel -- actually, no, pause. I'll tell you a little story. One of my cousins was at a bar mitzvah once, and I think the rabbi started talking about -- I can't remember. Just sort of very anti-intermarriage. Whatever he was saying was basically -- can be summed up in that way. And my whole family was just sort of appalled, A, because that's inappropriate, and B,

because the boy whose bar mitzvah it was was also the product of intermarriage. So it was just like one of these ridiculous --

MONICA ELIAS: Oh my goodness. Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- like, it's some kind of fake story, because it's so stupid.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: But -- yeah, it's fine. (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: OK. I have to turn off my potatoes.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Oh, yes.

MONICA ELIAS: OK? So -- OK. (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: They smell good.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, thank you. (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Oh, now you can probably actually hear me. I mean, on the recording.

MONICA ELIAS: Sorry, (inaudible).

ABIGAIL ETTelman: No, it's fine.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh yeah, fine. OK.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: So now you can hear my allegory. (laughter) It's not an allegory.

So my question was basically just have you ever had experiences where you feel alienated from the community, or the path that sort of things are taking? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MONICA ELIAS: The current Jewish community that we're part of?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That one, and also broader sense. Like, how do you connect yourselves, if you choose to?

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. Well, you know, I -- (laughter) there are Jews everywhere, and there are all different kinds of Jews, and there are so many different kinds of Jews now that do -- that practice their religion, and so foreign from the way I do. So I really don't see Jews as this unified group of people. You know, I -- I still feel awful when you read in the paper that something happened this -- somebody did something horrible and they're Jewish. Like, that still -- I still identify with the group that way. So that's something. And I -- and I identify with the history. I mean, we went to Israel together two years ago, three years ago.

ROY WALTER: A while ago.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. And, you know, and I went to Yad Vashem with Claire, my sister-in-law. And it was so intense. So, I mean, and my mom escaped Germany. And, you know, it's just -- it's that -- I feel part of that bigger picture a lot, in terms of my -- the little community that I'm part of. It's sort of like I pick and choose how I get involved. And -- and I think that'll change as we grow. And I think that's part of being in a community, like, your needs as a new parent are totally different as a retired person, and that just changes as you get older. And the great thing about a good -- good synagogue is that it -- it gives you something for all -- all those stages in your life. [40:00]

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Do you -- that's a fantastic answer, by the way. (laughter) Very --

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- thank you for sharing. Do you yourself connect yourself to a greater sense of Judaism? Or do you -- are you just, like --

ROY WALTER: Yeah. I think, you know, there's -- Judaism is unique among many of the religions in that it's part an ethnic thing, and it's part a religious thing. And, you know,

and there are dependencies on both sides, I suppose, that have made it that way. And it's -- it's curious. And so I've always been -- I've always, past 10 years, or 15 years, that I've been, you know, closer to it, I recognize things where there is this common, you know, commonality in not necessarily experience, but history, and threads, and such, that bind these folks together. And, you know, Hebrew itself is so fascinating in that regard, that people meet from different corners of the Earth, and they practice differently, and yet there's, you know, something that's, like, really there. And, you know, even the -- there's a Jewish kosher pizza place near our house in Crown Heights. And --

ABIGAIL ETTelman: (whispered) Where? (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ROY WALTER: Basil. What is it, Brooklyn Avenue?

MONICA ELIAS: I think it's Brooklyn Avenue. Go and visit. (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: (laughter) I'm going to have to.

ROY WALTER: (laughter) Brooklyn and Lincoln. And -- and you go in there, and mostly Hasids, I guess. And -- but a couple --

MONICA ELIAS: Lubavitch. Yeah.

ROY WALTER: Lubavitch. Yeah. And, you know, and it's definitely of the community. But you -- but people pass through there visiting. There's a lot of students, and, you know, young -- youth groups that are, I guess, crashing on people's couches and whatnot. And -- but you can tell, it's that same sort of thing. And there's a certain commonality that -- it's almost like when you go to a concert, and everybody's from different corners of the earth, but they're all really into Paul McCartney, or, you know, whatever it is. And it's just like, [uh?]. But the -- and so again, the things that I like about it are also a part of

that common thing. And the things I'm fascinated about it, the whole, you know, questioning thing, the fact that there are no vowels, and you can interpret things differently, and it's perfectly valid, and such, is really fascinating, and a really cool -- you know, philosophically, it's really cool and interesting. But then there are things about, you know, the Israeli state, and the extremists, like in every ethnicity and every religion, that just get out of hand. And -- and, you know, and there are some, I think -- just like all the others. You know, there are lazy folks who, you know, all they see is that that guy is Italian like me, or that guy is Irish like me, or he's a union worker like me, or he's an Israeli like me, or a Palesti-- you know, and blind to what really happened, just because there's this righteous pride thing. So it -- you know, and that's the main --

_ : (Boys in the other room talk, inaudible)

ROY WALTER: (laughter) That's the main, I guess, thing. And -- and just, I guess, when you join a new -- when you join a union, or you join -- you become sensitive to all these different sides of it that perhaps you weren't even aware of before, or would never have thought of before.

(Their sons Erik and Jason get ready to leave the apartment; inaudible)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Just going to not. Yeah, let's just wait until we're done.

MONICA ELIAS: They're going to walk into where? Did you stop it?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: No, but it's fine.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh. Can I just find out what they're doing?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Sure.

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: OK.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: (inaudible) OK. So we're back.

MONICA ELIAS: I just -- I wanted to add to that in being part of a community, the broader community, that that story about when I was traveling around the world and I went to Bombay, and I went to the synagogue there. There's one little synagogue, it was painted blue. And I went in there, and there are maybe, like, I don't know, 15 people. And this woman came and she -- I think she was the only woman -- she came and she sat next to me, and she said, "Who are you?" And I told her my name. And she said, "Oh, I know who you are. I dated your uncle blah-blah-blah." And she knew exactly who I was. I didn't [45:00] know who she was. My family was from Calcutta, she was in Bombay. She knew the entire family story, and she knew the extended family, and the communities and everything. And there was some -- (laughter) there was some sense of belonging. She said, "You have to come for breakfast tomorrow, because Freddy is our only bachelor, and you have to meet him." (laughter) And so I ran out of there, of course. But (laughter) -- but there was something really amazing about being in this incredibly foreign place on the other side of the peninsula of India, and having somebody know everything about you. It was cool.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That is great.

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter) Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's such a -- that's such a nice, like, note. I don't want to, sort of, make it sad, or unpleasant. But --

ROY WALTER: But -- (laughter)

MONICA ELIAS: But here I go! (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: -- but, you know. (laughter) So (hums). Oh. Something that's actually really interesting to me that you have sort of already touched on, both of you, is the idea of ambivalence with things that happen in the temple, the ways that people talk about certain things, presenting them in certain ways. But what I'm really interested in is how you -- if you have that sense of yourself -- that's an if -- and if you do, how do you talk about that with your boys?

MONICA ELIAS: Ambivalence about Judaism?

ABIGAIL ETTelman: The Judaism --

MONICA ELIAS: Or about the specifically that synagogue.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Well, either. If you have any sense of, you know, questioning. Like, it could be something as broad as the question of Israel and Palestine.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, OK.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Or something as small as like, "I don't really know if that story is really appropriate to tell," or like, "I don't really know if that story is appropriate to tell as -- no pun intended -- gospel truth."

MONICA ELIAS: Right, right. Well, I think what's made me really comfortable is that this particular synagogue condones the questioning, and condones the ambivalence, and -- and says that that's part of it. And that, you know, blind faith is not what it's about. And -- and so this is what makes this a vibrant community, is that we are always asking questions, and we have different opinions. And -- and it's got to be a living religion. It can't be resting on the liturgy that is really old, and -- and may not be applicable to this community. So I -- I don't have any trouble with that. And in terms of Israel, like, I think you just mentioned Israel. And when we -- when we were going to go to Israel, my

mother invited us, paid for us to go on this trip. It was important to her. And -- and I think it was Roy or I, or -- I can't remember. We'd mentioned, you know, how it's really difficult to go to a country where you don't really believe in the settlements and so on. And she said, you know, "You're going to be in good company, because Israel is as divided on this issue as you can imagine. And -- and it's a whole country of people questioning [everything]." (laughter) So, you know, you're -- it's not like you're going to a place where everybody condones that behavior. And -- and I thought that was true.

ROY WALTER: Yeah.

MONICA ELIAS: So I -- I don't really have trouble with the ambivalence, I feel. I think it's part of -- of being Jewish.

ROY WALTER: And with the boys, they -- they (laughter) -- sometimes they know a lot more than we do about some of these things, or they're more outspoken because it's fresh in their mind. They discuss it in Hebrew School, they discuss it among themselves, Erik reads *The Economist*. You know, it's -- we don't -- I don't censor much at all. I mean, there -- there are things we just don't want, you know, on in -- it's weird sometimes, but, you know, things happen, and you recognize that they happen. But the way the media is, the world is so small. And, I mean, Monica's made this point many times. You know, you -- you would just want to kill yourself if you worried about the fact that these -- you know, the 10 horrible things that happened all around the world had happened in your building, or in -- on your block. And that's what it feels like when -- with the media the way it is. So there are sometimes when we just have to shift, you know, our eyes, avert your eyes, [if you will].

MONICA ELIAS: But I think you made a point about mentioning children, because that ambivalence, or that gray area that you have towards religion, is hard for children, because --

ROY WALTER: Right.

MONICA ELIAS: -- they want to know what's right. And especially our older son, he -- he has difficulty perceiving the world the way that other people perceive them. So he really wants to know the rules. Like, he wants to know, what's right and what's wrong? And you can't. You -- there are sometimes there is no right or wrong.

ROY WALTER: Right.

MONICA ELIAS: And that's really tough for them.

ROY WALTER: Yeah. And --

MONICA ELIAS: They want to take a stand.

ROY WALTER: And I think the -- in [50:00] Judaism, that's less of an issue. In -- in Christian -- and others, maybe -- you know, (laughter) you didn't question it, and it was blind faith. And, you know, the -- the thing there is -- this is me -- but (laughter) the thing there is that it's black and white. It's presented that way, it's meant to be that way, and it's expected to be that way. And in Judaism, it's not. So it can be confusing, and, you know, why do people talk about it if it's not? And it took me a while, but the discussion isn't around whether it is or isn't. The discussion is around what's the implication? What's -- you know, why are these important ideas, or stories, or lessons? And, you know, in my -- you know, when I was young, you just didn't question that stuff. And you still don't, you know? It's -- you don't talk to a Christian, and, you know, and try to persuade them (laughter) in any way, you know? It's not going to happen.

ABIGAIL ETTELMAN: [phone rings] One second.

ROY WALTER: But about the kids, there's really nothing we censor from them. I think we try to stress the relevance and the -- well, especially things where, you know, issues are -- are made out of nothing, or, you know, rumor. And, you know, so much of what you hear is unsubstantiated. And the new cycle is so short that, you know, it comes out immediately. And -- and then, you know, a day later, it's revised, you know? And you -- so nobody really -- nobody has the patience to -- to wait for that. And it's hard when you're bombarded by these messages, and headlines, and [you know].

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. But that's not what they're reading all the time. They're not always reading the newspaper.

ROY WALTER: No, it's -- no, no, it's not.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ROY WALTER: I'm just saying, it's -- we -- I think we try to buffer them not from the content, but from, you know -- but to be reasonable about how -- what message you -- you take out of it.

MONICA ELIAS: Right. OK.

ROY WALTER: And there are things, I think, where, you know, overwhelmingly in our culture these days, you know, what are -- the things that parents are worried about, violence and sexuality. And -- and I think for the most part, for us, we're -- we're far more worried about violence. And -- and so they -- they see things, you know, well out of their age limit. And we talk openly about lots of things that -- maybe not. But yeah, so I -- it's -- I think it's more about how you process what you hear and how you present ideas than sometimes the ideas themselves.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: I think that -- I'm actually really fascinated that -- by this topic, just be-- like, the question being how do you talk to your kids about the things that aren't, as you say, so clear-cut, aren't so easy to answer? Because I think it really quickly goes straight to talking about issues that just, in general, like, (laughter) how do you talk to your kids about things that are hard to talk about? And so even though there might not be, like, a flat-out answer, it's -- it's good to hear sort of the -- the ways that you think about it, and the different ways you think about it.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. When Erik was little, he asked me a question. You were on a trip. And I said, "You know, I don't know the answer to that." I said, "That's why I'm going to school, to learn more." And so he said, "That's right. You don't know everything. Dad knows everything."

ROY WALTER: (laughter) And it really just shows you that they're really looking for somebody to know everything, because it is so much easier. And when you're a kid, you don't want to know that there are people who don't know anything. But -- everything, rather. But -- but I think we -- I think we're -- we probably expose our kids to a lot more than other parents in terms of the horrificness of the world. And -- but we try to keep our family pretty safe, and, you know, sheltered, and, you know, loving and whatever, as we can.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Tell me the truth. Did he pay -- did you pay him to say that?

(laughter) Because that's (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter) Probably.

ROY WALTER: I was out of the country. I don't --

MONICA ELIAS: I was -- I had to call Roy, and I said, "You would never believe this. They think you know everything." (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: But I think that's a pretty perfect point. Because you're right, they are looking for [55:00] that certainty.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah. But I guess what I'm saying is the safety is in your home, and your family unit, wherever that is. The safety is not in the world, and we know that, and they should know that.

ROY WALTER: Right.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: It sounds like you've found a really safe synagogue to be spending time in.

MONICA ELIAS: Yeah.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: It's not sitting there being like, "This is right, and this is wrong."

MONICA ELIAS: Right.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: "And you're wrong for doing it this way."

ROY WALTER: Yeah. And that's the other -- the -- that's the other thing I've found. Not reassuring, but that makes it comfortable to me, Judaism in general, is that you don't have to have all the answers, you know? It doesn't -- your beliefs don't answer the unknowns. There are going to be unknowns, you know? We're pretty arrogant if we think we're going to know everything, scientifically, et cetera, metaphysically, (laughter) or anything. So perfectly comfortable with the fact that we're not going to know everything. And I've told them in pretty much those words that, you know, there are some things -- strive to learn, strive to get there. And it -- and it's not a failure not to obtain that knowledge. It's

a failure not to try, not to learn other stuff as you go. And that's, you know, more important.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: That's really great. Well, I think I'm good with my questions.

Sorry, I'm, like, talking to my lap.

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter) No, I'm sure my microphone can hear you.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: I hope so. It's just going to be really quiet. Anyway, so I'm good with my questions, but what I -- the last thing I wanted to say would just be that -- to ask you if you have any stories that I haven't asked the right questions for about either your marriage together, like, funny times. Sort of the sitcom style.

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter)

ABIGAIL ETTelman: No. If you have any stories about your marriage, or meeting, or anything like that, or raising of your children that I haven't asked the right question to bring out.

MONICA ELIAS: Oh, OK. No, I think -- you know, we don't really reflect on this a whole lot, but I -- but this has been really nice to articulate the way that we have together approached raising a family, and -- and being a part of a synagogue. So I have to thank you for that, because it's in -- in your busy life, you don't stop and say, "OK, well, the synagogue is fulfilling this element in our life." But when you -- when you do use the synagogue, and you go there a lot, and you're having fun there, it's just implicit in how you feel. And I think that we both feel that way. So -- so thank you.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: Oh, thank you, both of you, for letting me take up so much of your time.

MONICA ELIAS: (laughter) Quite all right.

ROY WALTER: Sure, sure. Pleasure.

ABIGAIL ETTelman: [Very good, then we're good?]. All right.

MONICA ELIAS: You finished!

END OF AUDIO FILE