ABA Senior Lawyers Division

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

FLORENCE WAGMAN ROISMAN

Interviewer: Mary Wolf

Dates of Interviews:
December 15, 2005
December 19, 2005
July 26, 2006
July 27, 2006
March 30, 2007
June 19, 2007
June 21, 2007
June 26, 2007
January 7, 2009
ORAL HISTORY OF FLORENCE WAGMAN ROisman
SESSION 1
DECEMBER 15, 2005

It is December 15, 2005 and we’re at the law school clinic office and I’m beginning the oral history of Florence Roisman. My name is Mary Wolf. And with that I feel I need to start. The first thing to do would be to just ask about your family. Who was in your family?

[LAUGHTER] What do you remember about when you were young?

Ms. Roisman: When I was young. A long time ago. Well, the immediate family was my father and my mother and a younger sister. I grew up in The Bronx and lived there until my junior year in high school. The Summer before my junior year in high school, we moved to Mt. Vernon, New York. I went to public school in The Bronx. I had my first year of high school in The Bronx and then the last two years of high school in Mt. Vernon.

Ms. Wolf: Where did you fit in the family?

Ms. Roisman: I was the older of the two children.

Ms. Wolf: So two children total; yourself and a sister?

Ms. Roisman: Right.

Ms. Wolf: And how much younger was she?

Ms. Roisman: She’s five years younger.

Ms. Wolf: And when you were born, how old were your parents?
Ms. Roisman: Oh, I don’t know. I’d have to try to figure that out. They weren’t particularly old. I was born in ’39 and I think my father was born in 1912. I’m not sure. And my mother was a year or two younger than he was.¹ I’d have to try to figure that out.

Ms. Wolf: When you lived in The Bronx, what type of home did you live in? Were you in an apartment or house?

Ms. Roisman: We lived in an apartment. [LAUGHTER] You’re really interested? This seems so not interesting. We lived in an apartment; for most of the time, we lived in an apartment right across the street from Bronx Park, on Bronx Boulevard. My sister and I shared a bedroom. My father’s parents lived near us. My mother’s parents lived in Montreal. My mother’s from Montreal.

Ms. Wolf: Were you a child in the same neighborhood you were born or did you move while you were . . .

Ms. Roisman: Yes. No.

Ms. Wolf: You always lived in the same house?

Ms. Roisman: No. But we always lived in the same neighborhood when we were in The Bronx. We lived in -- when I was born, we lived in another apartment but basically in the same neighborhood, and then when I was quite young we

¹ My sister says that our mother was born in 1914 and my father in 1912.
moved to this apartment on Bronx Boulevard, and we lived there until we
moved to Mt. Vernon.


Ms. Roisman: It was very stable. It was very stable and I went to public school nearby. Then
to junior high school. I was in what they called the rapid advance or special
progress class in junior high school.

Ms. Wolf: [LAUGHTER] [overtalk] that's [inaudible] beginning.

Ms. Roisman: Well, no. This is in junior high. So I did three years of junior high in two. So,
7th, 8th and 9th grades I did in two years. And then went to 10th grade, at
Evander Childs High School in The Bronx. And then 11th and 12th grades in
Mount Vernon.

Ms. Wolf: I'm going to go back a little bit to preschool. Do you have any memories?
What's your earliest memory?

Ms. Roisman: Probably when I was in grade school. I don't think I have any memories
before grade school.

Ms. Wolf: Okay. I know sometimes . . . .

Ms. Roisman: Well, that's not true. That's not true. Well, I don't know if this is a memory or
a story that I was told. Before my sister was born, my mother had a
miscarriage, probably when I was about three, and whether this is a memory or
a story, I don't know. But I have an image of my father ironing because I used
to be dressed in these little dresses that needed to be ironed. And either the memory or the story is that my father would iron. And another memory of when I was quite young was that my father was on the verge of serving in the military. He, and I don’t know what the details were, he was exempt. He had at least one child and maybe a second child. I think my sister had been born. She was born in ’44. But nonetheless he was going to go into the military. He was a condemnation expert. He was a lawyer, and he was going to go to Burma to do condemnation work. That seems bizarre but that’s my memory. And everything in our house was packed because my mother was going to take the two kids back to Canada to be with her family and then at the last minute he didn’t go into the service. That’s because . . . .

Ms. Roisman: The war ended.

Ms. Wolf: What happened?

Ms. Roisman: But I do remember the house being all packed up. The apartment being all packed up so that he could go into the service. And I also remember when President Roosevelt died. So that was April of ’45, April 12, 1945.

Ms. Wolf: Not that I remember the date . . .

Ms. Roisman: No . . . . But I do think that is when he died . . . .

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2 My sister believes that my father’s military service had been deferred when my mother became pregnant with my sister, and then the draft age was lowered so that he did not have to serve. This explanation seems to be inadequate to explain why everything in our apartment would have been packed.
Ms. Wolf: So how old would you have been at that time?

Ms. Roisman: In '45, I was six years old.

Ms. Wolf: That's [inaudible].

Ms. Roisman: Well, it was a very powerful moment.

Ms. Wolf: The moving or Roosevelt dying?

Ms. Roisman: Roosevelt dying. That was very powerful.

Ms. Wolf: How so? At the age of six?

Ms. Roisman: You know, that's a very interesting question, Mary, because my father was a Republican. But they must have been Roosevelt supporters. Isn't it funny? Because as a six-year-old I wouldn't have had any independent political views. It would have been the family view. So they must have been Roosevelt supporters, even though my father was a very active Republican.

Ms. Wolf: What makes you remember the incident? Can you think of anything . . . ?

Ms. Roisman: Well, we were listening to the afternoon radio programs. There were children's programs—like Tom Mix. And the programs were interrupted. "We interrupt this program with a news bulletin. President Roosevelt has died." I do remember that.

Ms. Wolf: So you think you were listening to children's programs?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, I'm sure that's what I was doing.
Ms. Wolf: What children’s programs did you listen to, do you remember? Well, you’ve already told me two...

Ms. Roisman: Tom Mix, the Lone Ranger. I can’t remember now. But there was a regular series of programs in the afternoon...

Ms. Wolf: And if you were six would you have been in school yet?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, I’m sure I would have. Kindergarten. I didn’t go to any kind of pre-kindergarten, but I went to kindergarten in public school and then first grade. I was probably in first grade because I started... I was very young. I was always young for my class when I was in school. And then, particularly, well you don’t want to get to junior high, but when I did the three years in two in junior high that just made me even younger. I was always the youngest one in the class.

Ms. Wolf: When were you born? What month?


Ms. Wolf: Okay. That is interesting. Because you’d be like the beginning of the year.

Ms. Roisman: Yes. But, you know I was young and I was short, so.

Ms. Wolf: You remember that even from your grade school years? Your grammar school years?

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³ My sister says that I was 4 when I started kindergarten.
Ms. Roisman: Oh, probably not. Probably .... No, you're right. That's probably in junior high school.

Ms. Wolf: I was going to go back again and ask you about the whole thing with your Dad and packing up to move. Would that be about the same time as Roosevelt? About the age of six, or do you think it was before that time?

Ms. Roisman: No, I think it was before that. I'm sure that my sister had been born. So, she was born in April of '44, so. I don't remember. I can't.

Ms. Wolf: It's just interesting because you were under the age of five so what kind of awareness that you already had concerning your Dad's occupation and where it might take him.

Ms. Roisman: But I don't know that I knew back then.

Ms. Wolf: Okay, so in terms of why you were moving . . . .

Ms. Roisman: I don't know if I knew that then . . . .

Ms. Wolf: You just . . . . No. When do you remember having awareness of your father working or your Mom working?

Ms. Roisman: Well, my mother did not work outside the home during my childhood. So, she didn't work, she didn't do that. I think, as long as I can remember I was aware of my father's --- he was, indeed when I was a child he also worked on Saturdays. He was a lawyer for New York State and he was an assistant
attorney general for all the years of my childhood. He was away at work every
day and afternoons on Saturdays. So, I was very aware of [inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: Did you have much interaction with your paternal grandparents who lived
nearby?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. Yes. We were very close to them. And in fact after my grandmother
died at some point my grandfather came and lived with us in Mt. Vernon.

Ms. Wolf: As a child, did you have awareness of what your grandparents?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, my grandfather was a house painter and he used to paint our apartment
and the apartments of people I knew. So, yes, I was aware.

Ms. Wolf: And were they from -- born in the in the States?

Ms. Roisman: No, no. They were both immigrants.

Ms. Wolf: And where were they from?

Ms. Roisman: They were from Russia, Poland, probably pieces of land that changed hands
between Russia and Poland. My father’s father -- and I think maybe also his
mother -- came from Bialystok, which was in Poland.

Ms. Wolf: This is your father’s father?

Ms. Roisman: My father’s parents. I think they both came from Bialystok. Certainly, his
father.

Ms. Wolf: Your actual immediate grandparents?
Ms. Roisman: My grandparents.

Ms. Wolf: And did they speak English in the home?

Ms. Roisman: They did, but they also spoke Yiddish. And my parents also spoke Yiddish. So whenever they didn’t want us to know -- they didn’t want the kids to know what was going on -- they spoke Yiddish. [LAUGHTER]

Ms. Wolf: Did they ever speak Polish, or anything else, just Yiddish?

Ms. Roisman: I suppose my grandparents did speak Polish, but I was not aware of their speaking Polish.

Ms. Wolf: But Yiddish was . . . .

Ms. Roisman: Yes, they spoke Yiddish.

Ms. Wolf: Do you have an awareness of when you realized they were speaking a different language?

Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: No? Because I was just thinking as a child you also begin to pick up on those languages.

Ms. Roisman: I didn’t. No, I have no facility for languages, and I never picked up on Yiddish. But my father’s family was very close. My grandparents lived near us. There were four children who had survived into adulthood. One had died. I never knew the one who died. But the oldest brother was Meyer. The oldest
child was Meyer. Then my father. Then a daughter, Rose, and then the
youngest was Julie. They all married. They all had children. They all were in
the New York-New Jersey area, and they were all very close. So, when we
were children, a typical Sunday activity would be to drive out to the home of
one of my two uncles or my aunt or have them come to us and spend time with
them. That’s what we’d do.

Ms. Wolf: And your grandfather was a house painter?

Ms. Roisman: Right.

Ms. Wolf: And your grandmother a homemaker?

Ms. Roisman: Right. Right.

Ms. Wolf: And so by the time your grandmother died were there any children still in her
home?

Ms. Roisman: No, although her youngest child, my uncle Julie, was only ten years older than
I was. That’s right. So, he and I -- he used to baby-sit for me when I was
young.

Ms. Wolf: So he probably was still living with them then when you were born?

Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: No?

Ms. Roisman: No. I don’t think so.
Ms. Wolf: So he’s ten years older than you?

Ms. Roisman: That would make sense. But I don’t remember. Yes, you’re right, of course, he would have been. But I don’t have a memory of that.

Ms. Wolf: Did you ever get stories concerning your grandfather’s and grandmother’s travels into the United States?

Ms. Roisman: No, the only story I remember is that when my grandfather came to Ellis Island his real name was a very complicated name. And so he gave the immigration authorities the name of his cousins, which was Wagman. That was my grandmother’s name and then he ended up marrying her.

Ms. Wolf: Oh, no!

Ms. Roisman: Right. So.

Ms. Wolf: So he gave the . . .

Ms. Roisman: He gave her name --

Ms. Wolf: of the one he married.

Ms. Roisman: Right. Exactly. But that’s . . .

Ms. Wolf: But they weren’t . . .

Ms. Roisman: I don’t think they knew each other. Well, maybe they did. He knew the family. He knew that that was the family name.
Ms. Wolf: Right.

Ms. Roisman: So, that’s the end of the story.

Ms. Wolf: Do you know how old he was when that happened?

Ms. Roisman: No. I don’t know.

Ms. Wolf: How about your grandma?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t know.

Ms. Wolf: With respect to the children of your grandfather, your father’s siblings . . . . Your grandfather was a house painter . . . .

Ms. Roisman: Right.

Ms. Wolf: And, was he an outside or inside house painter.

Ms. Roisman: Inside, I don’t know, I think it is completely different. He painted inside.

Ms. Wolf: You don’t know how old he was when he came over, whether he got a trade from where he . . . .

Ms. Roisman: I don’t know.

Ms. Wolf: Did your Dad ever talk about how he became interested in law?

Ms. Roisman: Well, my Uncle Meyer, the oldest son, had always wanted to be a doctor, and ended up a pharmacist. They were poor; my grandparents were poor. They lived in Harlem and so the oldest boy couldn’t go to medical school; he went to
pharmacy school, which I think he always resented. My father went to law school, but went at night. He was working full-time, went to Fordham at night, then got a Masters from St. Johns at night. My aunt, Rose, never went to college because she was the girl, which she always resented. There’s a lot of resentment in this family. And the youngest, Julie, also went to law school.

Ms. Wolf: Did he borrow [Inaudible] . . . ?

Ms. Roisman: I think he probably did.

Ms. Wolf: Was your grandfather alive to see his children?

Ms. Roisman: Oh yes, my grandmother died young, but my grandfather lived until -- I think I was in college when he died.4

Ms. Wolf: How about your grandmother?

Ms. Roisman: She died, oh, I can’t remember exactly when she died. It was in the early ‘50s, I think.

Ms. Wolf: So you were somewhat older then.

Ms. Roisman: No, I was ten or eleven, something like that.

Ms. Wolf: Do you have any memories of doing stuff with your grandmother?

Ms. Roisman: I have memories of her, but not particularly doing stuff.

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4 My sister reports that my grandfather died after my father had died, which means I would have been out of law school. My father died in 1963, at the age of 51.
Ms. Wolf: You said that they were poor and they lived in Harlem. Do you get that from stories?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, that’s from stories.

Ms. Wolf: So by the time you became part of the picture, where were they living then?

Ms. Roisman: They were living in an apartment in the Bronx.

Ms. Wolf: So they also were . . .

Ms. Roisman: Right, they were very close to us.

Ms. Wolf: What about your Mom’s family?

Ms. Roisman: They also were immigrants; her parents were also immigrants. I think from Russia, and I think that my grandmother had trained as a nurse when she was in Russia. Actually, I have the samovar I think my grandmother brought with her from Russia, which seems really weird, but I do have this samovar which has Russian writing on it, so maybe that’s true. And they ended up in Montreal. They met in Montreal and my grandfather owned a grocery store, a pretty big grocery store right near the Jacques Cartier Bridge, and my grandmother worked in the store. She didn’t have a formal position. They lived in an apartment above the store. We used to go Canada, I think every Summer. My mother and the kids. My father would come up for his vacation; he probably had a two-week vacation. And there, too, there were four adult children. I’m not sure I know the ages exactly right. I think the oldest was my
Aunt Bessie, who is still alive; she is 92 years old, I think. Then my Uncle Joe, then my mother, and then my Uncle Abe. They all lived in Montreal; all the other siblings lived in Montreal and raised families, and I had tons of cousins.

Ms. Wolf: It all sounds like you had stronger memories of Montreal than you do of the grandparents in New York.

Ms. Roisman: I don’t know that that’s true, but we did go up there every Summer, so I do have vivid memories of it, but I also [had] very good memories of the family, my father’s family. I think I was closer to my father’s family. I always identified much more with my father and my father’s family than I did with my mother and my mother’s family.

Ms. Wolf: They were in Montreal. Were they French speaking?

Ms. Roisman: Well, everybody up there speaks French, but no, their principal language was English, and they also spoke Yiddish. They probably spoke Russian, too.

Ms. Wolf: And both sets of grandparents met in the United States?

Ms. Roisman: Yes.\(^5\)

Ms. Wolf: Nobody came over, as an adult?

Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: Did your Mom work in the store when she was growing up?

\(^5\) Not true of my mother’s parents, who met in Canada.
Ms. Roisman: Yes. She probably did, actually. I think she did. She must have. I think she did. She probably worked as a cashier. She would have done that.

Ms. Wolf: When you would go off in the Summers, what would you do?

Ms. Roisman: I would play in the store. I didn’t get to work in the store. For as long as I can remember, when we went up in the Summers, we spent most of our time in the country. My grandmother had a house in the Laurentians. And we would go there, and the cousins would be there too. So we would spend time in the country. We would go to Montreal, we’d spend a night or two in Montreal, but then we would go up to the Laurentians.

Ms. Wolf: It sounds like they were really well off.

Ms. Roisman: They came to be. Yes, they were. I always thought of them as wealthy. I don’t know that they were really, really, wealthy.

Ms. Wolf: And what about the siblings, what do they do?

Ms. Roisman: Let’s see, my uncle Joe worked in the store. And then after my grandfather died then, he ran the store. And my aunt Bessie married somebody who was a butcher and a grocery store owner. I don’t know that she ever had a job outside the home. That’s what she did. And, my mother, I think my mother had a teacher’s certificate in Canada but I don’t think she ever worked as a teacher. And the youngest of those siblings, my uncle Abe, I think trained as an engineer, but ended up working in the store, which he very much resented. That’s my recollection.
Ms. Wolf: And who’s still alive?

Ms. Roisman: Well, my aunt Bessie is still alive.

Ms. Wolf: That’s your father’s sister?

Ms. Roisman: No, no. That’s my mother’s sister. She’s the only one of those siblings who is still alive.

Ms. Wolf: She’s the one who is a nurse?

Ms. Roisman: No, I don’t know if she ever had a profession. If she did I don’t know about it. And of my father’s siblings, none is alive, they’re all dead. The only one who’s alive is my Aunt Bessie.

Ms. Wolf: You said somebody was the nurse and I forget who that was.

Ms. Roisman: My grandmother. I think my grandmother trained as a nurse.

Ms. Wolf: Okay. So that your Mom’s Mom?

Ms. Roisman: Right. Trained as a nurse.

Ms. Wolf: And your Dad’s Mom was pretty much [inaudible]. All right. What is your first memory of Canada, of Montreal?

Ms. Roisman: I used to buy comic books from the stand that was located outside my grandfather’s store. It was a big event. My grandfather would give me a dime -- and well maybe he’d give me a dollar -- and I would go and buy comic books.
Ms. Wolf: [Inaudible] . . . I would say more than in English?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. I actually learned a little bit of French because my grandparents always had a maid. And it was always a French-speaking maid.

Ms. Wolf: Your grandparents had a French maid?

Ms. Roisman: In Montreal, at that time, that was quite common.

Ms. Wolf: Where did your Mom and Dad meet?

Ms. Roisman: I have forgotten the details of that story, but I think my father had gone to Montreal with some friends and either somebody fixed him up with my mother or they were at a party or something. I don’t remember. You have to get my sister. My sister remembers all these things. I don’t remember. But that’s how they met, something like that. And then, they would go back and forth and ended up getting married and she came to live in the States. 

Ms. Wolf: So, basically she left Montreal . . .

Ms. Roisman: And she left her family to come down here.

Ms. Wolf: Well, because she didn’t have any relatives in New York?

Ms. Roisman: No, no. But I mean not, no close relatives. Cousins. Oh, there were cousins; there were cousins.

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6 My sister says that my mother had gone to New York to visit cousins, and had a blind date with my father.
Ms. Wolf: Do you know how old she was?

Ms. Roisman: I think she was probably about twenty. I think she was fairly young. She was pretty young.

Ms. Wolf: And how old was your Dad at that time?

Ms. Roisman: I can’t remember. I think early twenties, both in their early twenties.

Ms. Wolf: Because I was just thinking that he was working and going to night school to become an attorney. That probably came after they married?

Ms. Roisman: I kind of think, yes. That he was already ______, but I’m not sure.

Ms. Wolf: Do you know what he was working at when he was in law school?

Ms. Roisman: I’m sure at one time I knew, but I’ve forgotten. But I know he would study on the subways. That’s why I’m always especially sensitive to the evening students. I like to teach evening students, because of how hard it was for him to do that.

Ms. Wolf: So you would have remembered your father studying?

Ms. Roisman: No, no, no. No, no, no. I just heard stories.

Ms. Wolf: About your father studying.

Ms. Roisman: I wasn’t there until after he was finished with law school.

Ms. Wolf: How long? Was it quite a while after your parents married, then?
Ms. Roisman: I don’t know. I know when I was born, in 1939, but I can’t remember.

Ms. Wolf: I was just thinking if they were young when they met and married and he hadn’t done his career yet. Then, there would have been a period of time between the time they married, and came to the United States, and she, and your Mom came to the United States and you were born.

Ms. Roisman: Well, I think he was already a lawyer, and I don’t think there was a long period of time between the time they were married and when I was born. Two, three years.

Ms. Wolf: I guess the other question would be, you said you were five years older than your sister?

Ms. Roisman: Uhuh.

Ms. Wolf: Do you have memories of when your sister was born?

Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: Because a year later you had clear memories of an incident which happened when you were six.

Ms. Roisman: Well that’s true. That’s true. No, I don’t think I have any memories.

Ms. Wolf: So, like, when somebody else, when your sister is born, and then there was another person in the house, like having, giving recollections of when you and your sister began to interact with each other?
Ms. Roisman: Yes, we interacted when we were young, but I don’t have special memories of it.

Ms. Wolf: Because your sister was still a toddler when you took off for school, though.

Ms. Roisman: Yes.

Ms. Wolf: And you said that you started school early, so would you have started when you were five?

Ms. Roisman: At least five, yes.

Ms. Wolf: And the school you went to is near where you lived in the Bronx?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, right. PS 13.

Ms. Wolf: And you were at PS 13, first grade?

Ms. Roisman: Kindergarten, I think.

Ms. Wolf: Oh, kindergarten.

Ms. Roisman: Kindergarten through sixth grade. And then I went to PS 113.

Ms. Wolf: So you went from 13 to 113?

Ms. Roisman: To 113, no relationship, for two years, for junior high.

Ms. Wolf: So when you started school, thinking about going back in to PS 13, was it a large school?
Ms. Roisman: No, it was a small school.

Ms. Wolf: So classes would be somewhat smaller?

Ms. Roisman: I’m sure they were, yes.

Ms. Wolf: What’s your first memory of school? [STOP IN TAPE] Just to know we’re back on tape and Prof. Roisman has just returned, and this is side two and says she is beginning to remember things.

Ms. Roisman: Well, one thing I remember. Now, this would not be a memory, but obviously I was told this story: that when my father would wheel me in my carriage when I was a little baby, people would say, oh, this is the little lawyer-kin. Because everybody assumed that I going to . . . .

Ms. Wolf: The little lawyer-kin?

Ms. Roisman: Lawyer-kin, right.

Ms. Wolf: So they were planting the [inaudible]?

Ms. Roisman: Absolutely, absolutely. Okay. In grade school, PS 13, the Bronx. I remember the librarian because both in grade school and in junior high, I was very close to the librarian. And the librarian in grade school was Miss McGuinness. The librarian in junior high was Mrs. McGuinn. I think I might have reversed those two.

Ms. Wolf: The fact that their names are so similar.
Ms. Roisman:  I can’t remember if I’m transposing those names. And I used to come home from school every day for lunch.

Ms. Wolf:  Would you be able to go to school on your own or did somebody take you?

Ms. Roisman:  Well, I’m sure that when I was in first grade or kindergarten, my mother probably took me. But when I was older, I would just go by myself.

Ms. Wolf:  Were there other children in the apartment building you were living in?

Ms. Roisman:  Yes. And I was very friendly with a little girl with whom I went to school.

Ms. Wolf:  Because sometimes other children, older children, take the younger children down, if there’s a . . . .

Ms. Roisman:  I don’t remember that. I don’t remember going back and forth to school. Although I’m sure I did. And I do remember that as I was finishing grade school, my teachers wanted me to take the test for Hunter Junior High, which is a special admission. To my memory, my mother wouldn’t let me do it because she didn’t want me to have to travel. It happened again when I was in junior high and the teachers wanted me to take the test for Bronx Science and my mother wouldn’t let me do it because she didn’t want me to have to travel to Bronx Science. Both decisions that I deeply resented, deeply resented.

Ms. Wolf:  So did you take your mother to issue for those?

Ms. Roisman:  I’m sure that I did and I think it would be fair to say that I never forgave her.

[Inaudible].

- 23 -
Ms. Wolf: How long a trip would it have been? Subway or?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, subway. Lots of people did it.

Ms. Wolf: Was it, you would have been only twelve or thirteen?

Ms. Roisman: Lots of people did it, lots of people.

Ms. Wolf: Younger than twelve at the time.

Ms. Roisman: Yes.

Ms. Wolf: I think. I think you’re still angry; what’s the matter?

Ms. Roisman: No, it’s, it’s, you know, something I very much resented.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember your father being involved in these conversations?

Ms. Roisman: Well, you know that’s a very interesting question because I once was discussing my family structure with somebody, and I said that my father was the dominant person. And that definitely seems to be true. My father was a very strong person. And the person said well, if your father was so domineering how come your mother got to make the major decisions about where you went to school? And the truth is she got to make those two decisions. Perhaps he just deferred to her. But I didn’t grow up resenting him because of those decisions. I grew up resenting her because of those decisions. And it ultimately decided where I went to law school.

Ms. Wolf: How so?
Ms. Roisman: Because my mother had prevented me from going to Hunter Junior High. She had prevented me from going to Bronx Science. My parents didn’t let me go to college where I wanted to go to college. And when it was time to go to law school, I said, screw this, I am going where I want to go. So, it all tied together.

Ms. Wolf: So by the time you got to college, you get your own way, law school, you got your own way?

Ms. Roisman: Right, right.

Ms. Wolf: But up till then?

Ms. Roisman: Up till then I got pushed around.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember growing up, before all these things started to happen with respect to schooling, having chores in the house? Responsibilities? Like as a young girl?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. I’m sure we washed dishes, and cleaned; yes, I do. I remember dusting, vacuuming and making beds, doing dishes, sure.

Ms. Wolf: Because sometimes I was ahead of my mother for those things, too.

Ms. Roisman: Well, do we have to do this? When do I get to ask the questions?

Ms. Wolf: Homework. Do you have recollections of homework when you were in grade school?
Ms. Roisman: I’m sure I did homework. I actually remember. This would have been in grade school. But I don’t remember what grade. I remember changing all the answers in a workbook because people had teased me for having all the right answers.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember what grade that would have been in?

Ms. Roisman: No, but I’m quite sure it was in grade school. It was a problem -- being too smart.

Ms. Wolf: Now, when you were in school, structures of schools may have been somewhat different than they are now. Do you remember anything about how classes were set up, or if you stayed in one classroom for your classes?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t remember grade school. In junior high we moved around to different classes. One had a home room and then moved around. But I don’t remember grade school, particularly.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember your sister starting at school? Would you have been . . .

Ms. Roisman: We would have been in the same school, but I don’t remember.

Ms. Wolf: Of taking her to school or anything?

Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: Any memories of any special teachers in the grade school? The librarian we know about, and somebody obviously took an interest if they wanted you to go
on to the accelerated Hunter Junior High School. Do you remember who that person was?

Ms. Roisman: Hmmm.

Ms. Wolf: No. Were you generally all around good in all your subjects?

Ms. Roisman: Probably.

Ms. Wolf: Math too?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. [Inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: [Inaudible].

Ms. Roisman: I’m sure they did.

Ms. Wolf: In terms of things like around the house, like after school stuff, when you were younger. You had a lot of family around the neighborhood, at least your Dad’s family.

Ms. Roisman: They weren’t, except for my grandparents. They weren’t in the neighborhood. They were a drive away.

Ms. Wolf: Okay. What about parties, like birthday parties or holidays? Do you have recollections of birthdays, how they were celebrated?

Ms. Roisman: I’m sure they all were celebrated [inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: What about religion? Did that take much place in your household?
Ms. Roisman: It did. I went to Hebrew school. Not in the household, particularly. My parents were not very observant. But I did go to, I went to Hebrew school. I went to Sunday school. I went through a religious period. I remember one of those. [inaudible]. I thought of something . . .

Ms. Wolf: About the Hebrew school or home? About religion at home?

Ms. Roisman: Nobody was, oh I know what it was. Neither of my parents was very observant, but both my parents were very active in philanthropic groups. My mother was very involved in Hadassah, which is a social service agency for Jewish woman. My father was very active in the UJA, United Jewish Appeal, which collects money for charitable purposes. [Inaudible] My father was an air raid warden, I do remember that, during the war. They were very engaged in their community.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember how old you were when you started going to Hebrew school or Sunday school?

Ms. Roisman: No, but I’m sure it was in grade school.

Ms. Wolf: Because your parents weren’t observant, I was wondering whether or not your grandparents were?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t think they were.

Ms. Wolf: Or how you ended up going to [Hebrew] school?
Ms. Roisman: That’s a good question. Because I don’t even think my father or mother went to services on the high holy days. They might have; I don’t know; I don’t think so. I don’t know why I did want to go to Hebrew school and Sunday school, but I definitely did want to [inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: Would the neighborhood have been strongly Jewish or was it pretty mixed...?

Ms. Roisman: Not exclusively. It was a mixed neighborhood.

Ms. Wolf: Because I was thinking we’ve talked about the other young person in the building that you were friendly with, that’s what [overtalk], Jewish.

Ms. Roisman: Yes. They were Jewish, but I don’t remember their going to services.

Ms. Wolf: Did your sister follow you and go to Hebrew school and Sunday school?

Ms. Roisman: You know, I don’t remember. Probably, but I don’t remember.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember going to any high holiday services yourself?

Ms. Roisman: Yes.

Ms. Wolf: As a child?

Ms. Roisman: Oh yes, definitely.

Ms. Wolf: So in those memories would you be by yourself or would you be with someone?

Ms. Roisman: It seems improbable but I don’t remember being with anyone.
Ms. Wolf: The Jesuits?

Ms. Roisman: The Jesuits, right. There was a lot of anti-Semitism. I don’t remember particularly experiencing it, but one was aware that that was a problem. When definitely it was a case of anti-Semitism. And my father’s position on the high holy days, for example, which is a position I adhere to now, is: I don’t go to services, but I will not go to the office because I don’t want to make it uncomfortable for those who do observe. I don’t want anybody to be able to say that Roisman’s working. So I’ll work but I’ll work from home. [Inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: It’s interesting because you said that, your family, particularly, your father didn’t observe them, but in some respects it sounds like he did observe them.

Ms. Roisman: He observed it, in that he wouldn’t go to services, but he wouldn’t work. We had family members who had been caught in the Holocaust. One of my mother’s cousins -- I’m not sure I can recreate the family relationship. I think this was my grandfather’s sister’s family, I’m not sure about that. But my grandfather brought a niece to Canada. This is a cousin with whom we’ve always been very close. We’re still close to the family. Except for one brother, everybody else in the family was killed. This was something that I knew about her family. Brought to Canada, she didn’t speak any English, she was a teenager. And then years later she found a brother and his wife in a Displaced Persons camp and was able to bring them to the United States.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember when you became aware of these things?
Ms. Roisman: No, but my feeling is that I was always aware of this.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember any conversations about the war? Do you remember things about your Dad being, your parents, being Republican?

Ms. Roisman: Off hand, I don’t remember anything in particular.

Ms. Wolf: But you had strong . . . .

Ms. Roisman: I remember VJ Day. Big celebration. Two of my uncles were in the service. I have no memory of that, but I know that that was true.

Ms. Wolf: But your father was never in the service then?

Ms. Roisman: Although he did some work for the War Department, he was never in uniform.

Ms. Wolf: And then you say you have two uncles who were in the service, would they have been your father’s . . . .

Ms. Roisman: My father’s older brother, Meyer, who, in fact, was at the Normandy invasion . . . .

Ms. Wolf: He’s the pharmacist?

Ms. Roisman: The pharmacist. And he was at the Normandy invasion. And then my Aunt Rose’s husband. My uncle by marriage, but very close.

Ms. Wolf: What did Rose’s husband do?

7 This may have been VE Day.
Ms. Roisman: Rose’s husband sold carpet. He was in the service.

Ms. Wolf: Talk about religion which is kind of interesting that you were kind of like alone within your family, in some respects.

Ms. Roisman: Yeah, it didn’t [inaudible] . . . . It didn’t take.

Ms. Wolf: When did it stop?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t know. I mean, I know, I pretty much stopped going to services, but I was observing high holy days. Many, many years later, when I was in Washington and working with homeless families, I had gone out to so called “welfare” motels on the afternoon of a high holy day. That’s probably not the last time I’ve ever been at a service, but it was pretty much the last time.

Ms. Wolf: So we’ll go back to the end of junior high. And get you out of junior high now.

Ms. Roisman: Get me out of Junior High.

Ms. Wolf: So most of your memories in junior high, the librarian and doing well, too well and . . . .

Ms. Roisman: No, I did too well in grade school. Junior high . . .

Ms. Wolf: I’m sorry, getting you out of grade school is what I meant. And then that’s when they wanted you to go to the special school?

Ms. Roisman: To Hunter Junior High.
Ms. Wolf: Hunter?

Ms. Roisman: My mother said no, so I went to the neighborhood junior high, but I was in the SP class. Special Progress class. I did three years in two. So everybody who was in that class was smart.

Ms. Wolf: Among the few?

Ms. Roisman: Including me.

Ms. Wolf: Many women or basically men? Boys and girls, I mean?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t particularly remember, but I remember one good friend who was a woman so, I think there were. In fact, probably there were more women than men because girls tend to be smarter than boys, right?

Ms. Wolf: Yes; they just don’t always get . . .

Ms. Roisman: I don’t remember gender as an issue. I have no memory of gender being an issue for me until I went to law school and people thought it was weird that I was in law school. And I thought it was weird that they thought it was weird.

Ms. Wolf: Well, because when you were in the buggy, they were telling you you were a lawyer.

Ms. Roisman: Yes. I thought this was a perfectly normal thing for people to do.

Ms. Wolf: When you were young and you said your Dad worked on Saturdays, did you ever go with him to the office?
Ms. Roisman: Yes, not often. But I would go in his office at times.

Ms. Wolf: What would you do?

Ms. Roisman: I played with his dictating machine or something like that. I don’t remember. I liked to be in his office.

Ms. Wolf: You know how old you were? Before school?

Ms. Roisman: I think that I was in school. Although maybe, but I don’t remember.

Ms. Wolf: But when he would go to work, did you take the subway?

Ms. Roisman: Uhhuh.

Ms. Wolf: Big building?

Ms. Roisman: Well he worked at 80 Centre Street, which is where the Attorney General’s offices were and I think still are [inaudible]. Old building, high ceilings, very old fashioned.

Ms. Wolf: That was after your memories when you were a child or your memories when you were an adult?

Ms. Roisman: No, no. It’s as a child. I don’t think I was in that building as an adult. And, in fact, I remember, the Attorney General I remember was Louis Lefkowitz. Jake Javits had been the Attorney General, and before him it was Nathaniel Goldstein. I don’t remember Goldstein.

Ms. Wolf: You think [inaudible]?
Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: We were just going through the litany of all the people who were the Attorneys General in New York, and we know everyone back to I don’t know what year.

Ms. Roisman: No, no, well, I don’t know. That goes back a long time.

Ms. Wolf: Okay, so you’ve just been reciting those because we were talking about going to work with your Dad.

Ms. Roisman: Right. With Nathaniel Goldstein, Javits, Lefkowitz. And I remember going into the Attorney General’s office. I mean, that was a big thrill to go into his own office.

Ms. Wolf: And which one would that have been? Goldstein?

Ms. Roisman: It probably would have been all of them.

Ms. Wolf: All of them.

Ms. Roisman: And occasionally I would go to Albany with my father. He would go up to argue in the Court of Appeals. Although I don’t think I ever heard him argue in court.

Ms. Wolf: Did he go to court?

Ms. Roisman: He was the head of the Appeals and Opinions Bureau and he frequently argued in the Court of Appeals and he once argued in the Supreme Court. And we did
go to Washington to hear that. I don’t remember going to the Supreme Court, but we came to Washington, when he argued in the Supreme Court.

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember how old you were then? In grade school, junior high?

Ms. Roisman: I was pretty young; maybe I was ten or eleven or something.

Ms. Wolf: So before junior high?

Ms. Roisman: I think so. We have to look up the case.

Ms. Wolf: It seems like you had a lot of legal experience before the age of ten.

Ms. Roisman: Yes; right.

Ms. Wolf: That’s pretty interesting. Would your whole family go or just you and your Dad?

Ms. Roisman: No, no, no. To Washington, we all came, we all came.

Ms. Wolf: Was your Mom interested in your Dad’s business, his occupation?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t think so, particularly, I don’t remember [inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: It sounds like you have a lot of involvement in finding out what he is doing or going where?

Ms. Roisman: I don’t know if that’s true. It was fun to go to his office, but it was also fun to work in the cashier’s office at my grandfather’s store. [Inaudible].
Ms. Wolf: Okay, well then back to this thing of getting out of grade school and into junior high. Do you have, in grade school, basically the specific memory you had was about the librarian, and we know that there was somebody interested enough in your performance and wanted you to go to Hunter, because you definitely remember the controversy about not going. But when you got into junior high then in the neighborhood school, do you have any recollections of teachers?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. In junior high, yes. Again, the librarian and Mr. Good, a French teacher, and Mrs. Chad -- what did she teach [inaudible]? But I remember those two in particular and the librarian, and they definitely wanted me to take the test for Bronx Science. You don't just go to Bronx Science, you have to take a test. Same thing that's true with Hunter.

Ms. Wolf: Did she ever give any explanation?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. She didn't want me to travel and she thought it would interfere with my piano lessons. Trust me, I'm not a musical genius. It didn't matter if my piano lessons got interfered with. The world would not have been any worse.

Ms. Wolf: Do you still play the piano?

Ms. Roisman: No.

Ms. Wolf: Well, do you remember much about your sister being around you during this time when this was going on?
Ms. Roisman: Not particularly. She was five years younger than I was.

Ms. Wolf: So it wasn’t a matter of just keeping you close by for her?

Ms. Roisman: Who knows what her real reasons were?

Ms. Wolf: Okay. So, any experiences in junior high that stand out? Other than the wanting to take the test.

Ms. Roisman: The first time I ate Chinese food.

Ms. Wolf: Chinese food?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, the first time I ate Chinese food. Oh, no, no, no. It wasn’t the first time I ate Chinese food. It was the first time I ate hot mustard. No, I don’t think I remember anything in particular.

Ms. Wolf: What subjects did you like best? You don’t remember that, right?

Ms. Roisman: I liked school. I always liked school.

Ms. Wolf: And after school type of things, I know you took piano lessons.

Ms. Roisman: Yes; I took piano lessons. I don’t know. I was always a big reader. I had a friend who lived in Parkchester. I would go to visit her. [Inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: Do you remember the games you played?
Ms. Roisman: I used to play in the park a lot when I was young. Because we lived across the street from Bronx Park. And there was a girl scout troop. I rode a bike. Possibly, a very dim memory [inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: During this time, when you were very young, you remember that there were discussions of politics in the house?

Ms. Roisman: There must have been.

Ms. Wolf: You had enough awareness to know that your parents were somewhat Republican. During this part of your life, do you have any recollection of how politics played in your family or any memories of government, and your Dad was working in government to some extent?

Ms. Roisman: I certainly remember discussions about it. I'm not sure if I remember the details. And you asked about what work my father was doing when he was going to law school. But he had a job during the Depression. And I have a dim memory of his talking about how he got that job [inaudible].

Ms. Wolf: What the job was?

Ms. Roisman: [Inaudible]

Ms. Wolf: But you started talking about that in connection with memories of politics?

Ms. Roisman: Yes. I think he had gotten his job through some Democratic, Tammany Hall connection. And I think he had been doing condemnation work and I think he
then was asked to go to the Attorney General’s office because of his expertise in condemnation.

Ms. Wolf: And he would have been an attorney at that time?

Ms. Roisman: Yes, he was an attorney. But for many, many years, the Attorney General in New York was Republican. And I think that maybe that’s when he became a Republican, when he went to the Attorney General’s office. He started, I think, doing condemnation work. At one time he was a T-man. He worked for, he had a special appointment with, the Treasury Department. But I’m not sure where that, the beginning of which. [Inaudible]

Ms. Wolf: So, like in this era, who would have been President when . . . ?

[End of Tape #1 - side A and B]