Oral histories of individuals active in public education, in teacher unions and on the left necessarily reference many different people and organizations, and this can make understanding their narratives a challenge for those unacquainted with the full historical context. To assist in reading for those newer to the subject, we have annotated the narrative with hyperlinks and footnotes that can provide quick reference information.

Readers may want to consult Deborah Meier's books, several of which contain descriptions of different events and ideas discussed here:

- *The power of their ideas: Lessons for America from a small school in Harlem*
- *Will standards save public education?*
- *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization*
- with Ted and Nancy Sizer, *Keeping school: Letters to families from principals of two small schools*
- with Brenda Engel and Beth Taylor, *Playing for keeps: Life and learning on a public school playground*
- with Emily Gasoi, *These Schools Belong to You and Me. Why We Can't Afford to Abandon Our Public Schools*

Other writings of Deborah Meier are available on her personal website. Her papers are in the collection of the Lilly Library at Indiana University; a number of documents in the papers, such as Meier's heavily redacted FBI file, can be directly accessed from the Library's web site.

Readers may consult the following historical texts to aid in understanding the events discussed in the oral history. Maurice Isserman's *If I Had A Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* provides background on the evolution of the Shachtmanite political world that Deborah Meier entered in the late 1940s. Isserman's biography of Michael Harrington, *The Other American,* as well as the memoirs of Harrington (*Fragments of the Century*) and Irving Howe (*A Margin of Hope*) provide insight into two of Meier's political collaborators, as well as the political world that all three inhabited from the late 1940s forward.

The annotations (hyperlinks and footnotes) in the transcript are the work and responsibility of the interviewer, Leo Casey. Casey and Meier have known each other for close to forty years; they have worked together in politics, as leaders of Democratic Socialists of America, and on various projects in education. In the

fall of 2014, they dialogued over some of the issues discussed in this oral history on *Education Week*'s Bridging Differences blog. As a result, there are points in the oral history where they discuss together issues of organizing, unions, education, and democracy.

LC: Today is Thursday, December 22nd, 2016. This is Leo Casey (in transcript, LC), and I am interviewing Deborah Meier (in transcript, DM) for an oral history, and we are in Deborah's house in Manhattan.

LC: Deborah, I thought we could start with your family, when and where you were born, and what sort of background your parents had.

DM: Well, my father came over to the US from Poland when he was eight years old.[1] He always joked about: "it depends what year it is, what country it was." He came with his younger brother, and they lived on the Lower East Side (of New York City). His father was a peddler. My father had relatively little respect for his father – his father was an intellectual, and he liked to sit in the park with other men and talk rather than peddle. My father's mother took in laundry and so forth to help support the family. His family eventually moved up, into East Harlem, I think, which was apparently a step up from the Lower East Side in those days.

DM: My father went to City College.[2] For a summer job, he got a job at the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies when it was a very young organization

[1] Deborah Meier's parents were Joseph and Pearl WIllen. Her brother, who is also mentioned in this oral history, is the architect Paul Willen. Additional information on her parents can be found in this obituary and this encyclopedia entry for her father, and in this encyclopedia entry for her mother. The American Jewish Historical Society has the papers of Joseph Willen in its UJA-Federation collection, as well as an oral history of his second wife, whom he married after Pearl passed away in 1968. The Howard Gotleib Archival Center at Boston University has the papers of Pearl Willen.

[2] City College was known as the "Harvard of the proletariat." Until the 1975 fiscal crisis, it provided tuition-free higher education to New York City residents, and generations of poor and working class New Yorkers – with a heavy concentration of immigrant Jews – received a top notch education. It opened up vistas for students like Joseph Willen that were unknown to most other poor and working class Americans.

The City College student body was a center of left wing radicalism during the 20th century, with famous alcoves that featured political debates between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists and gave birth to the New York Intellectuals. In addition to her father, a number of other figures discussed in Meier's oral history had been City College student radicals – most importantly, the American Trotskyist leader Max Shachtman, the literary critic and editor of *Dissent Magazine* Irving Howe and Herman Benson, the founder of the Association for Union Democracy. Howe, of course, was among the better known of the New York intellectuals. →

and had no paid head. (The President was a volunteer.) My father worked for the President in the summer while he was in college, and then got a full time Federation job when he graduated. For the rest of his life, he was the Executive Director of the Federation.

DM: And somewhere along that line he met my mother. She was from Saint Louis, and also came from a Jewish family. My grandmother on that side of the family came over in the 1890's all by herself.[3] They were, I think, from the Ukraine. First, she went to Canada and then from Canada to New York and from New York to Chicago, where there were some relatives, and then to Saint Louis, where someone gave her a job. In St. Louis, she married someone who was distantly related to her and had five or six children. She was really quite a remarkable woman. I have a marvelous tape of an interview that my cousin did with her. She really felt that life had treated her very badly because if only she had had the advantages that her children had, she would have done much more than they did with her lives. She had a rather high regard for herself, and she felt that her life had been wasted raising children.

DM: But all her children did quite well: my mother went to Washington University, and then came to New York to become a social worker on a scholarship paid for by the Jewish Federation in Saint Louis, with the understanding that she'd come back and work in Saint Louis. And on her first week here, the Federation held a dinner in honor of the people they were giving scholarship to who were working in social work. My father saw her there – this is his story and my mother doesn't contradict it – and decided right there that she was the woman for him. And so, he changed places at the dinner table, and about three months later they got married.

DM: I don't think that my mother ever finished her degree from social work school, but I don't think she would've practiced anyway. My father was

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For accounts of the City College alcoves and the New York intellectuals, see Seymour Martin Lipset, "Out of the Alcoves" in *The Wilson Quarterly*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1999); Irving Kristol, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist" in the January 23, 1977 *New York Times*; Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*; and Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in their Own Words*.

[3] Meier's maternal grandmother discussed here was Sarah Larner.

against having a wife earning any money, and so she instead was a volunteer in various political organizations. She helped start the American Labor Party in New York.[4] Then when there was a split later on between pro-Stalinists and anti-Stalinists in the ALP – she was anti-Stalinist by that time – she helped form the Liberal Party. I think she was a vice chair in both. She also was one of the founders of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID).[5] During the summers, we sometimes went down to North Carolina where she taught at the Southern School for Workers.[6] She was involved of an effort in 1946, led by A. Philip Randolph and John Dewey, with Walter Reuther's participation, to create a labor party. In the late 1930s, my parents left my brother and me in summer camps while they went to Russia, and two summers in Russia made them into anti-Stalinists. My mother said the second summer most of the people she knew from the first summer were unavailable. When she came back most of her friends were still very sympathetic to Russia and she had bitter fights with them.[7]

[4] The American Labor Party was founded in 1936 as a fusion party in New York, with the strategy of ensuring that the most progressive candidates were elected by cross-endorsing pro-labor candidates on the Democratic and Republican Party lines, as well as running its own candidates. The ALP main founders were democratic socialists and social democrats in New York City's needle trade unions, especially the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and Garment Workers unions, who wanted to find a vehicle for their socialist minded members to support President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal without having to vote for the Democratic Party. There was a close relationship between the American Labor Party and Sidney Hillman, the long-time president of the Amalgamated and an important leader in the CIO who had a great deal of influence with President Franklin Roosevelt. (Roosevelt was known for saying of proposals, "Clear it with Sidney.") Given the dominance of the Tammany Hall machine in New York City Democratic Party politics, some of the more progressive New York City politicians in the first half of the 20th century, men like Fiorello La Guardia, ran as Republicans, so the ALP would cross-endorse with either major party, depending upon the candidate. By the mid-1940s, the Communist Party had taken control of the ALP, leading a number of the needle trade unions (and Meier's mother, Pearl Willen) to leave the ALP and start the Liberal Party. By the late 1940s, the ALP was hemorrhaging support; a decision to follow the Communist Party lead in endorsing third party candidate Henry Wallace for President in 1948 was disastrous. By 1954, it polled insufficient votes to maintain its ballot line, and dissolved shortly thereafter.

[5] The League for Industrial Democracy was an institutional vehicle for education on behalf of democratic socialism, labor rights and civil rights. It operated within the broad Socialist Party milieu. Well-known socialist intellectuals, such as John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr, and socialist leaders, such as Norman Thomas, were prominent in its work.

[6] The Southern School was a residential school in Asheville, North Carolina, part of the worker's education movement dedicated to unionism and worker empowerment that developed during the 1920s and 1930s. It was not as well-known or long-lasting as other institutions in the movement. For an account of this movement, see Richard Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s*.

[7] For a period of time during the 1930s, criticism of Stalin and the Soviet Union was muted across the broad liberal and left community in New York City, as left unity was prioritized in the face of the rise of fascism →

LC: Had she ever been in the Communist Party or just around their milieu?

DM: She didn't join the Communists. She didn't even join the Socialists. My father hung around socialists in City College. He was a very good friend of Jay Lovestone.[8] He and my father studied together.

DM: There is an interesting tale here, involving the (Mexican painter) Diego Rivera. When Rivera was a Trotskyist, he painted these murals for Lovestone's New Workers' School. When the school was closed, Lovestone tried to give the murals to the Garment Workers Union, but it wouldn't

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in Europe and threats at home. During this time, journals such as the *Nation*, the *New Republic* and even the *New York Times* published glowing accounts of life in the Soviet Union and arguments that the Moscow Trials were based on actual crimes. In 1937, John Dewey had to conduct a commission of inquiry to demonstrate that the incredible accusations made against Trotsky in the trials were false. It was not until the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact that the broad liberal and left opinion began to turn resolutely anti-Stalinist.

[8] Jay Lovestone was a controversial figure of the 20th century American left and labor movements. While he was a student at City College and a good friend of Meier's father, during the years 1915 to 1918, he was a Socialist. However, as this period came to a close, the Russian Revolution occurred, and Lovestone became a leading figure in the "left wing" that split the Socialist Party to establish what would eventually become the Communist Party. This turn commences a period that Meier describes in her oral history as Lovestone beginning "to do some things that my parents were very upset about."

The early Communist Party was riven with factionalism, and Lovestone played a central role in internal in-fighting. When Communist Party National Secretary Charles Ruthenberg died unexpectedly in 1927, Lovestone succeeded him as party head. He did not last long in that position, however, as Stalin had Lovestone and a group of his chief associates purged from the U.S. Communist Party in 1929 because of their connections to the 'Right Opposition' in the Soviet Union led by Nikolai Bukharin.

In political exile, Lovestone established an organization of dissident Communists. In the little more than a decade of its existence, this organization – known on the rest of the American left as Lovestoneites – would go through four name changes, as its ideology gradually evolved into a form of democratic socialism. The Moscow trials and execution of old comrades such as Bukharin, as well as the Stalinist assassination of their comrade POUM leader Andreu Nin during the Spanish Civil War, turned the Lovestoneites irrevocably against Stalin and the Soviet Union. In January 1941, they dissolved, unable to reconcile differences over World War II, as Lovestone supported war preparations and American entry into the war, and his long-standing lieutenant, Bertram Wolfe, took a pacifist position. (Wolfe had been a student at City College together with Lovestone and Meier's father.)

With the dissolution of their organization, a number of Lovestoneites followed Ben Davidson, a New York City school teacher and union activist who had served as an unofficial organizational secretary for their group, into the newly created Liberal Party. Davidson would serve as the Liberal Party's Executive Director for nearly a quarter century. In that context, the former Lovestoneites worked closely with Meier's mother. Lovestone himself entered into the labor movement, where he came to direct the international work of the AFL-CIO for a number of years. Now a fierce anti-Communist, he would ally with any and all opponents of Communism, even those who clearly lacked democratic bona fides. (On Lovestone's career at the AFL-CIO, see Anthony Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad: From Deep Freeze to Détente, 1945-1970*.)

take the center one which said "Workers of the world unite!" and had Marx and Lenin and Trotsky and everybody. And they're all clasping hands. (A photo of this section of the mural can be viewed here. – LC) And so we took it. It was in our house when I grew up. And then when my parents died, neither my brother nor I had a place we could put it, so it was in storage and would travel occasionally. No one wanted to buy it. It was amazing. It finally was sold to a town in Japan – Nagoya – and that's where it is now.[9]

DM: I don't know what in my mother's growing up years made her a leftist. I can see how my father hung around either very, very wealthy Jews or the intellectual Left. He was the fundraiser for Federation (of Jewish

[9] The Diego Rivera mural that graced the family home while Meier was growing up has a fascinating history at the intersection of artistic freedom, politics, and patronage. By the 1930s, Diego Rivera had become a renowned modern painter. He was widely lauded for his Detroit industry murals, and the New York City Museum of Modern Art had hosted a retrospective of his work shortly after it opened its doors for the first time.

Rivera and his lover Frida Kahlo, a significant painter in her own right, were early members of the Mexican Communist Party, but Rivera had been expelled from the Soviet Union in 1928 and thrown out of the Mexican Communist Party in 1929 for suspected sympathies with Leon Trotsky, a leading opponent of Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Rivera and Kahlo would prove to be key in getting the Mexican government to grant political asylum to Leon Trotsky in 1937, and they provided one of their residences, La Casa Azul, to Trotsky and his family to live for two years. Kahlo and Trotsky carried on an affair during this time. In 1939, shortly before his assassination by Stalin's agents, Trotsky would leave this residence as a result of a political falling out with Rivera. (In 1948, Kahlo rejoined the Mexican Communist Party, and in 1954, following Kahlo's death, Rivera was readmitted to the party.)

Lovestone's lieutenant Bertram Wolfe and his wife Ella developed what became a life-long friendship with Rivera and Kahlo during the 1920s, when the Wolfes had fled to Mexico during a period of political repression that followed the founding of the US Communist Party. Wolfe would write two books on the Mexican painter, a 1939 text *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* and a 1963 tome *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*. Wolfe was the leading intellectual in the Lovestone group, and he directed its New Workers' School. In the late 1940s, he would write a best-selling anti-Communist tract, *Three Who Made A Revolution*.

In the early 1930s, the Rockefeller family, scions of the Standard Oil robber baron John D. Rockefeller, had embarked on an urban renewal project in mid-town Manhattan in what came to be known as Rockefeller Center. In 1932, they commissioned Rivera to paint a mural, "Man at the Crossroads," for the lobby of the main building in the project. When Nelson Rockefeller, future Republican governor of New York, discovered that the mural contained a portrait of Lenin, he ordered Rivera to paint that part over. When Rivera refused, Rockefeller had the mural covered up and destroyed, to a public outcry from the city's arts community and intellectual class.

Rivera decided to use the remaining money from his commission, $7000 ($125,000 in 2020), to reproduce this work for other settings. He immediately retired to the Lovestoneite New Workers School of his friend Wolfe, where he produced the 21 fresco work, "Portrait of America." The central panel in this fresco, "Proletarian Unity," was the piece that ended up in the Meier home when the New Workers School was closed. In it, Rivera included representatives of Communism's many different factions: internationally, Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Stalin and Zetkin; in the US, Ruthenberg, Lovestone, Cannon, Foster, and Rivera's friend, Wolfe. Rivera would also repaint a smaller version of "Man at the Crossroads" in Mexico City.

Philanthropies) and so he hung out with very rich people.[10] He had very mixed feelings about them because they had power over him. It was an odd combination…

LC: Were your parents religious at all?

DM: No.

LC: So, it was a secular Jewish family.

DM: Yeah. I think their parents were observant: they certainly kept kosher. During Yom Kippur, when one is supposed to spend the day fasting and going to the temple to pray, we used to go sit with my grandmother for a while. So, I don't think she was religious, but she was…

LC: Like there are Christians who observe only Christmas?

DM: Yeah. And I think she made her own separate compromise between kosher and non-kosher. And my father's parents died about the time I was born, so I never knew them. My father had a younger brother who he had a break with. His brother was unsuccessful, and my father was successful and apparently there was a lot of tension between them, but I'm happy to say that this brother (who was a postman and lived in the YMCA all his life) gave us some money when he died, and that's how I bought this brownstone. He gave my brother and me each $50,000.

DM: My brother was born in 1928. We were both born in New York City, but after I was born in 1931, we moved to Westchester. And I don't know which town we lived in, but when I was about one-year-old we moved to a house that was on the border of Larchmont and New Rochelle.[11] And I think there's a lot of good there for a long, happy childhood. But actually, we

[10] While he never joined the Socialist Party, Joseph Willen was active in the Workers Defense League, which was founded by Socialist leader Norman Thomas in 1936. Willen served on the board of the WDL, which provided legal aid to workers and African Americans denied their rights.

[11] Larchmont and New Rochelle are northern suburbs of New York City, adjacent towns in Westchester County.

moved back in 1939 because my father wanted us to be in New York City, so he didn't have to commute.

LC: So, you started elementary school in Westchester.

DM: Yeah. Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade in a school that I think was in New Rochelle. I've gone back to visit it. It was, you know, a somewhat idyllic childhood. My brother and I were very close. I was a "whatever he did, I did" relationship. And my parents probably thought we were too close, so they tried to break us up by sending us to a summer camp where you lived with somebody's family, and my brother and I lived with different families. We could've lived with the same family, but they thought this would be an opportunity to make us more independent. I think it was an act of cruelty.

DM: When we moved back to the city, we lived at 140 Riverside Drive. And my brother was very bitter about the move. Of course, he was older; I don't think I felt one way or the other.

LC: Where did you go to school?

DM: I went to Ethical Culture. We took the bus, my brother and me. I think it was partly my mother's own ideology. When my brother was young, she was a Watsonian (a follower of John Watson) who felt strongly that children should not rely on adults, that you shouldn't respond to children crying, that you shouldn't keep the same nannies for long if you had nannies. I think she was a firmer Watsonian when my brother was born than when I was born.

LC: Was this an articulated philosophy?

DM: Yes, it came out of a behaviorist philosophy, like B. F. Skinner, but the man's name was Watson. He said you shouldn't respond to children's crying, and you should always keep the bedroom a little cold because it'll strengthen them, and you should not have anybody that they cling to, because they should learn to be self-sufficient. They shouldn't have to be entertained but should develop on their own entertainment.

LC: And how do you think that influenced you?

DM: I don't know. It probably had some negative influence, some positive. I don't think it was as true for me, because most of the stories my mother tells about this are sort of negative stories about herself and my brother, so I have a feeling that somewhere along the line she relented. I think if I cried, I'd get attention. Although I still have that viewpoint. I get very annoyed at meetings, and it's usually women who do this, if somebody starts crying in defense of their position. I have said to some of the female colleagues of mine, "If you want to cry, go out on the roof." It's not fair, because we all don't want you to be sad, and then it changes the whole conversation.

LC: So, you would have started at Ethical Culture in the late Thirties?

DM: The fall of '39, and you know what that fall was like.[12]

LC: Yes!

DM: We had a housekeeper named Carla whose father was a musician on a German boat, and she came one summer with him and took a job with my family and then stayed on. Now, the whole thing is as odd to me that I would love to know more about what motivated her, but she lived with us. But she went back to Germany some summers and on one of those summers she got married to a German man, and he came with her back here. And I guess they didn't have a policy then that husbands could stay. I don't really know exactly what happened, but he was called back in the fall of '39, in August of '39, and there was a stir in the family as to whether he should go back or not. Apparently, my father advised him to go back because if he didn't, he would never be able to come back to the US or

[12] 1939 marked the launch of World War II in Europe. A famous W. H. Auden poem written on the day of Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland, "September 1, 1939," captures the darkness of the historical moment. The fact that the German invasion was immediately preceded and enabled by the Hitler-Stalin pact, and that the American Communist Party turned on a dime from militant anti-fascism to attacks on Roosevelt and war preparations after the pact was signed, led to a decisive transformation in sentiment on the American left. Liberal opinion became anti-Stalinist, and dissident Communists – both the Lovestoneites and the Shachtmanite brand of Trotskyism Meier will join – were moved to an increasingly anti-Communist stance.

something like that. He went back and she never saw him again, because she died at the end of the war. But her father, mother, sister, brother, and husband all lived through the war. They lived in Bremerhaven.[13]

DM: She was very affectionate. She was another important influence in my early life, but mostly not an intellectual influence. She much liked popular music; my parents scorned it. My mother even scorned opera in the beginning because – no, she probably did not. I mistakenly thought she did, because Carla played me some Mozart music – vocal, lieder[14] music – and because she played it I thought it was popular music and was stunned when I discovered that opera belonged in the classical world. Anyway, I was always trying to… part of me wanted to please one and part please the other, and pleasing my parents meant that I read 'good books.' And there were such things as 'good books' and 'junk books,' and Carla read the junk and my parents read the good stuff. So, I would have to check out when I got a book: "is this a good book or junk?"

LC: In '39, how aware were you of what was happening in the world?

DM: Not that aware. It's a very interesting question because my father was very involved in Jewish policymaking during those years, but he never discussed it at home.[15] Maybe he wasn't supposed to. I knew my parents were very worried about war and later times. They were going to have a third child, but when they saw what was happening in Europe they decided not to. So, there was – but on the whole I was pretty out of it. I enjoyed soldiers,

[13] Bremerhaven is in the north of Germany, a port on the North Sea.

[14] Lieder music is German romantic music, typically a solo performance accompanied by a piano.

[15] As the full scope of Nazi policy and practice toward German Jews became evident in the 1930s, there was a major effort from the American Jewish community and its allies to assist Jews fleeing Germany. These efforts were hampered by anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant prejudice, and American immigration law, which had been changed in the 1920s to be severely restrictive. The Jewish community had supporters within the Roosevelt administration – Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins urged Roosevelt to sign an executive order prioritizing the admission of refugees – but its efforts were largely unsuccessful. The story of the failures of the United States has been told by David Wayin's *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* and *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945.* In addition to his Federation of Jewish Philanthropies work on behalf of Jewish refugees, Joseph Willen was active in the American Jewish Committee, where he served on its Executive Committee; Nathan Schachner's history of the American Jewish Committee, *The Price of Liberty*, discusses his role in the AJC's work on behalf of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.

marines; they were heroes and all that kind of stuff. But even after the war, my father never discussed what had happened. Apparently, he was involved with trying to convince Roosevelt to do various things, which Roosevelt didn't do. But I don't know how that influenced him, but I think it did influence us a lot because it was kind of a non-subject, not to be discussed.

LC: Was any of his work covered in the histories of this work?

DM: Not that I know of. My father was not a Zionist, probably in part because he hung around German Jews, although by the time the war was over and Israel was founded, he was very pro-Israel.

LC: So, you went to Ethical Culture through high school?

DM: Yeah, then I went to Fieldston.

LC: Did you know, did you run into Joseph Jablonower?

DM: No.

LC: He was very active in the Teachers Union, and then one of the founders of the Teachers Guild. He taught at Ethical Culture for a long time after the Board of Education gave him a punitive transfer for opposing World War I.

DM: I was there for third, fourth, fifth and sixth grade. My brother was only there for one year, and then he, too, went to Fieldston. And what I was saying before is maybe I thought of my parents as bad parents because we had so much independence. We went to school by ourselves from Riverside Drive to Ethical Culture (about 25 city blocks – LC), and we walked home. And I don't know, we took our dog out for walks by ourselves in the Riverside Park…

LC: And you lived.

DM: I survived. My parents didn't seem aware that there was danger. The same was true in the country, so we had enormous freedom, and we have the

same kind of freedom wandering around New York City. And so, I raised my children the same way, and I was with my daughter and a therapist: she wanted me to come to her therapist once and I asked her, "did you think that we didn't, you know, care about you?" She claimed "no." Who knows, because certainly the same was true with me.

LC: Having done all sorts of things that I'm sure worried my parents, like getting myself hit over the head while I was working for the Farmworkers Union and ending up in the hospital, and traipsing around Africa by myself and what not, what's most remarkable to me now is how tolerant my parents were of all of that.

DM: Well, you know, it is true I'm not even aware that my parents were scared. I don't have any idea. They never said anything when my brother was about seventeen years old, he and his friend had driver's licenses by then – my grandfather died, and my brother had his car – and they took off for the summer in their car. And, you know, my kids hitchhiked all around, went to South America – in any case, it was as though they had unwarranted trust in our capacity. In other words, they simply assumed that morally and otherwise we would never do any wrong, and we would always be safe, because we were. That's a little frightening, you know.

LC: But isn't that also our theory of education, that young people need to be given the freedom to make mistakes, to learn from them.

DM: Yes, but one of the things you want is some control over what you put in the classroom, so you don't put in sharp knives. Nothing in the room can be too dangerous. The blocks may fall over on your foot, but it is minor. My parents seemed to know no boundaries, and I think I had very few boundaries. And I am thinking I'm not sure about what happened with my grandchildren.

LC: So, at what point, do you become a political activist, as you go from Fieldston to Antioch College?

DM: Well by the time I'm in Fieldston, I'm somewhat political. And I have politics that nobody else has, because this was during the war years, so a lot of

people were pro-Russian because we were on the same side of the war, against the fascists. Whereas my parents, you know my parents' history, we were not pro-Russian.

LC: You are anti-fascist, but…

DM: We were anti-fascist in my family, and we were sort of anti-capitalist. I mean in a soft way, my parents were socialist in their beliefs. So, I was to the left of most of the students. Fieldston's clientele are largely well-to-do Jews; compared to most of my classmates, I was poor. I wasn't really in any way poor, but just by comparison.

LC: Just being middle class put you at the bottom.

DM: They were more sympathetic to Stalinism, just because of the war, but less sympathetic to socialism. I was a debater and somewhat alienated politically. I didn't think there was anybody in the whole school who shared my politics, except my brother. And it's my brother who discovered somewhere – maybe it was when he went to Oberlin College – the Shachtmanites.[16] While I was still in high school he took me to the meetings on 14th Street, and I was at first completely bewildered by the discussions. As I say, and it wasn't a joke, I came out of the first one and said to my brother, "why is everybody going shopping?" They were talking about going

[16] The Shachtmanites were an organization of American Trotskyists who took their colloquial name from their main leader, Max Shachtman. Shachtman was one of a small group that had been expelled from the U.S. Communist Party in 1928 because of their connections to the 'Left Opposition' in the Soviet Union led by Leon Trotsky. Over the next ten years, this small group used various tactics, including entering into the much larger Socialist Party with the intention of gaining adherents and splitting the party, to build their own small political party, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). But in 1940, right before the period Meier is discussing, the SWP would suffer a major split: in the wake of the Moscow Trials, the executions of Stalin's opposition in the USSR, and the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Shachtman organized a faction that took a position much more critical of the Soviet Union than Trotsky and his more orthodox followers in the SWP, who still argued for the "unconditional defense" of the Soviet Union. Shachtman's theory was that the rule of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union had become a new form of class rule, bureaucratic collectivism. Based on this critique, he argued that the correct stance of socialists should be to support neither the 'eastern bloc' led by the Soviet Union nor the 'western bloc' of capitalist powers such as the United States, but to form an independent 'third camp.' Like the Lovestoneites, the Shachtmanites would become anti-Communists and gradually evolve into democratic socialists and social democrats, changing their organizational name. Meier was a member over this period of time.

into the "shops."[17] But I was impressed by their seriousness, and here are people who like to argue and were anti-Stalinist and socialistic in a different way. So, I found them attractive. And when I went to Antioch College, I invited one of their leaders – I can't remember whom – to speak there, in opposition to the Korean War, which we were against.

DM: I graduated high school in '49, I stayed at Antioch for two years and then I decided I wanted to go to the University of Chicago. You could go to the University of Chicago, and if you took an exam after you graduated, you could go directly into the graduate program. That was because they had a sort of funny undergraduate program. So, I went to the History Department.

DM: My friends think I went to Chicago because I wanted to meet some more interesting men. And within six months, I got married to an interesting man. But it was I think, in part, that this was a period in which I think there was a lot of pressure on women, including women on the left, to marry young. And most of us – I was 20 when I got married, almost 21 – most of my friends were married by then. Every time you met an aunt or an uncle they would say, "oh, you're getting married soon?" I don't think today – you didn't just live with someone in those days – I would have gotten married.

LC: So, while you are at Antioch College, did you do co-op jobs?[18]

[17] During their entry into the Socialist Party discussed in the previous footnote, the Trotskyists had succeeded in winning away much of its youth section, the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL). In New York City, these converts included the YPSL branch at City College, which had a number of individuals who would become prominent New York intellectuals, most famously the 'two Irvings,' Irving Howe and Irving Kristol. (For more on City College Trotskyists, see footnote 2.) In the 1940 split among the Trotskyists, almost all of these young intellectuals went with the Shachtman faction. The Shachtmanites developed an intensely intellectual, one might even say scholastic and Talmudic, organizational culture. The discussions of "going into the shops" that Meier references would have been efforts by the Shachtmanites to develop roots in the labor movement by sending former college students into factories where they would get union jobs. In this process, known in this era on the American left by the unintentionally revealing term 'colonization,' the Shachtmanites particularly targeted jobs in plants represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW). They would support Walter Reuther in his battles with Communists inside that union and came to be influential in his administration.

[18] Antioch College had a long tradition of being a progressive college, going back to its founding by Horace Mann and its admission of women and African American students in the mid-19th century. During the Depression years, Arthur Morgan, a college president sympathetic to socialist ideas, developed an innovative co-op program in which students studied for six months a year and worked in jobs related to their studies the other six months.

DM: Yes, yes, that was the main reasons I went to Antioch. One year I worked at the newspaper in Harrisburg, the *Harrisburg Evening News*.[19] The Salvation Army of Harrisburg called me last week. They would like me to come speak on education in October. The city is predominantly black and Latino, and the schools are maybe 3% white according to this woman.

LC: Did you know I spent an Antioch co-op in Harrisburg for the Defense Committee for the Harrisburg Seven, which included Phil Berrigan?

DM: Amazing.

LC: What did you do in your other co-op jobs?

DM: I spent one semester at the Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in New York, something to writing checks for pensions. It was not an exactly interesting job, but I thought it would be fun to see New York as an older person, to really explore New York. And I worked at a day care center one semester in Indianapolis, because I had an uncle there I loved, and some cousins there that I loved. And if there was one thing it convinced me of at the time was, it was that I didn't want to work with young children. And I spent one semester in Washington, DC working for the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). That was fun because I used to go over to Congress, and I found Congress exciting and interesting… the seat of power.

LC: And at this point was the ADA still pretty much the founders who had left the Socialist Party?[20]

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[19] Meier's contemporaneous reflections on this co-op job can be read on-line in her Indiana University papers.

[20] As fascism came to power in Europe and became increasingly aggressive, with World War II eventually taking shape, a group of American socialists who had been associated with the Militant tendency became increasingly dissatisfied with the Socialist Party's pacifist and isolationist stance toward American involvement in the conflict. A secondary, but not unimportant, issue was the Party's doctrinaire opposition to supporting progressive New Deal Democrats and participating in New York's American Labor Party. Led by Reinhold Niebuhr, this group formed the Union for Democratic Action, which would evolve into the Americans for Democratic Action after World War II, when it would unite with a number of leading figures of the New Deal left, led by Eleanor Roosevelt. Tellingly, this project would take with it most of the leading Socialists in the labor movement, →

DM: My mother was active in the ADA.

LC: She was the connection?

DM: Yeah. The ADA were sort of the non-Communist left. And I think they didn't think of themselves as socialists, but a lot of them probably had socialist roots. And during this period, I also traveled in Europe a good deal. I was active after the war in doing some political canvassing for the Labour Party in England…[21] I went to Paris and such things.

LC: So, you took advantage of all this freedom.

DM: After World War II the troop transport ships that they took men to Europe during the war were not converted right away, and it was a cheap way to get to Europe. You slept on hammocks, double-decker hammocks. When I went to England, we were an American Youth Hostels (AYH) group. I don't know if they still exist.

LC: When I was a student, they were still around.

DM: For many people in Europe, we were the first Americans they met who weren't part of the military, and so people treated as extraordinarily nicely. We were biking, and they would bike with us out of town a ways, you know, and then wave goodbye to us. And it was also then still rationing.

LC: So, you're in University of Chicago and you go into graduate history program.

DM: Yeah. I pretended that one of the reasons I left Antioch was that I thought University of Chicago would be more intellectually stimulating, which

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including the Reuther brothers and other UAW leaders, leaders of the needle trade unions, leaders of the American Federation of Teachers and African American trade unionists A. Philip Randolph and Frank Crosswaith.

[21] The post-war period Meier is discussing was when the Labour Party was in power, and enacting major economic reforms, including the nationalization of major industries and utilities, and the establishment of an expansive welfare state, including the founding of Britain's National Health Service.

wasn't true at all, probably because at Antioch you had serious relationships with faculty because it was a small college. But the intellectual life Chicago was very interesting, because it was the center of a lot of radical groups of the time. There was a Communist group on campus. What did they call themselves? The Young Communist League (YCL), maybe something like that. And then we had a campus club called the Politics Club, which was very active, and the Politics Club was a recruiting ground for the Socialist Youth League (SYL), which was the Shachtmanites. And I found the intellectual life of the radical groups much more stimulating than the History Department. Did you have such an experience?

LC: Yes, my political involvements in the socialist movement were the most intellectually interesting and formative experiences for me.

DM: I mean I read more, you know. Anything that came up I didn't know about when you were arguing with other people, I had to find out, so I read more history that way than the lectures at Chicago. I became active in the civil rights movement in Chicago.

DM: And, oh, my kids: I had children. I got my master's degree, and then I had children. I was going to go on for a doctorate. I didn't get a Wilson Fellowship, which would support you while you were studying for the doctorate, because they didn't want to give it to a married woman; they thought married women would not be able to become history professors because you had to stay with your husband, and so you have to take a job wherever he is in the country. I don't remember being angry. Even though I'd say I was a feminist, I didn't then call myself one. I don't know if anybody called themselves that at the time. But I was always the woman in most situations that spoke up for the women, and the older women would say "oh, that was so brave of you," and I would say "well, let me show you how you do that." The leadership of all these organizations was entirely male…

LC: On that count, I was going to ask about the Shachtmanites, because my impression was that they were a very male organization…

DM: Yes, there were only a few active women, and they were never in the leadership posts. I was one of the first women in the SYL to be on the Executive Committee. And years later, by the way, when I was asked to join the *Dissent* editorial board, Irving (Howe) said, "we thought that you could be the secretary; we lost our secretary." and I said "No." He said, "Well, that was our plan." I said, "Well, then, I won't be on the board."

LC: He conceded.

DM: He conceded.[22]

LC: At this time, politics are generally male dominated.

DM: Yes, and most of the left-wing organizations were like most other organizations in this respect, maybe more so because they were very ferocious. I think women were not supposed to be ferocious.

LC: Yes, there's certainly the tradition of fierce polemics on the American left, and a sectarian narcissism of small differences with those one or two paces to your left or right.

DM: Yes, a sort of ruthless argument. It was as though class warfare was not with the capitalist, but between each other. Our hopeless, helpless anger at the system was directed to each other, by each other. And so, I really didn't get deeply involved: I had children and that was nice, and the civil rights movement was starting, and it was very handy because our house became the center of activity. It was a brownstone, in Kenwood, but between the South Side Black community and Hyde Park.[23] It was the beginning of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality).[24] James "Jim" Farmer, who was the head of

[22] *Dissent Magazine* was founded in 1954 as a journal of the democratic left by Irving Howe, who had just left the Shachtmanites, and Lewis Coser. In this venture, Howe and Coser had the support of others who had left the Shachtmanites, particularly Stanley Plastrik and Manny Geltman. It was in existence for nearly twenty years before women were added to its editorial board. Meier was one of the first, added in 1974.

[23] There has been an historic tension between the University of Chicago, located in Hyde Park on Chicago's southern lake shore, and the nearby African American south side of Chicago.

[24] CORE was founded as a project of the faith-based pacifist organization, Fellowship in Reconciliation. In 1941, FOR Executive Director A. J. Muste recruited three young socialists – Jim Farmer, George Houser and Bayard →

CORE, was someone I had known from my parents. My parents were involved in CORE. They knew a lot of people of the civil rights people, from the NAACP and such, people like Roy Wilkins.

DM: And so, I got active in CORE, and we did the usual protests; I went south on one of the marches. It was the march from Selma to Montgomery, but it was not the first one. It was the one that was "successful" (after Bloody Sunday.) Oh, and I remember when I told Fred (Deborah Meier's husband – LC) I was going with friends to demonstration in Chicago downtown, and I said, "you know, I might get arrested and you'd have to take care of the kids, Fred." And fortunately, he didn't need to, as I wasn't arrested. I agreed to be in the front of the demonstration – you could agree to be among those, you know, who were willing to be arrested – and I said "yes." But they didn't arrest me, and I considered that a great defeat. I wanted to be arrested so I could put that on my résumé.

DM: And I was writing about the civil rights movement and campus protests for *Labor Action* and for a magazine – I don't remember the name.[25] And I was

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Rustin – to do racial justice work for the FOR, and CORE was established as a vehicle for their organizing. In CORE, Muste and his associates would adapt the 'direct action' tactics of labor syndicalism to non-violence, building the tool kit of tactics that would be used by the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s. For example, it organized 'Freedom Rides' in 1947, known as a Journey of Reconciliation, that were the model for its better known 'Freedom Rides' of 1961; these later rides played a pivotal role in the civil right movement. For more on this process, see Leo Casey, *The Teacher Insurgency*. Chapter Five: "Protest and Politics: Syndicalism and Labor History."

[25] *Labor Action* was the official Shachtmanite newspaper, published on a weekly or bi-weekly schedule. After the interview, we were able to establish that the magazine in question was *Anvil and Student Partisan*, probably the most influential American radical student publication of the 1950s. It was not an official Shachtmanite publication, but it was effectively controlled by them, as leading Shachtmanites from Julius Jacobson to Michael Harrington edited it. It had been the product of the merger of *The Anvil*, founded by the Shachtmanite organized New York Student Federation Against War, and the *Student Partisan*, the publication of the Politics Club at the University of Chicago that Meier had previously referenced as the main forum for the political work of the Shachtmanites on campus; it was oriented toward intellectually minded students and academics.

Meier usually wrote under her own name, both in the youth supplement to *Labor Action*, called the *Student Socialist* and the *Young Socialist Challenge* at various points, and in *Anvil and Student Partisan.* In *Labor Action*, one can find an article on the right of University of Chicago students to have speakers without administrative approval; an article on a new political group at the University of Chicago; articles criticizing a pro-Franco liberal and commenting on political life at the University of Chicago; an article on University of Chicago student elections; an article against legislation which would impose a "loyalty oath" in Illinois; an article on how Cold War attitudes impacted student politics; and an article on careerism on campus. In *Anvil and Student Partisan*, there is an essay on campus conformity, an essay on "urban renewal" and race on Chicago's South Side and →

very active in the Shachtmanite group in Chicago. There was a man named Saul Mendelson in Chicago, and we were close friends and close politically.[26] So a Meier-Mendelson tendency developed. And in the early 1960s, there was an argument about whether we should go into the Democratic Party or not, whether we would support Democratic candidates, the Meier-Mendelson position was "it depends."[27]

LC: Presumably Hal Draper was leading the charge against your position?[28]

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an essay on racial integration. Writing under the party name "Dora Miller," Meier co-authored a *Labor Action* report with George Rawick (writing under the party name "George Rawlings") on a Madison student conference.

The SYL had an internal discussion bulletin, which Meier edited for a period of time. She contributed under her own name on the questions of socialist unity, as the Shachtmanites prepared to merge into the Socialist Party in the late 1950s. See pieces here, here, here and with Saul Mendelson (writing under his party name, Saul Berg), here.

[26] Saul Mendelson was part of the cohort of YPSL college students in New York City that had been recruited into the Trotskyist movement during their entry into the Socialist Party, although he was at Brooklyn College rather than City College. He moved to Chicago to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago, where he – like Meier – obtained a master's degree in History but did not complete the doctorate. Mendelson taught Social Studies in DuSable High School, a Chicago public school, for 14 years; he was a union activist, and served as Vice President of the High School Division of the Chicago Teachers Union. He then taught in the Loop College (later renamed Harold Washington College) for 20 years, and he was head of the Strike Committee of the Cook County College Teachers Union through five strikes. In addition to his activities in the socialist movement, Mendelson was a participant in the 1961 Freedom Rides and the 1961 campaign to integrate Rainbow Beach in Chicago, and helped organize the Chicago contingent to the 1963 March on Washington. He was a leader in the Americans for Democratic Action and in the anti-machine Illinois Independent Voter – Independent Precinct Organization. In the latter organization, he played an important role in the election of Harold Washington as Chicago mayor and getting Barack Obama his start in politics. Meier discusses her relationship with Saul Mendelson here.

[27] This debate occurred after the Shachtmanites had merged into the Socialist Party in 1958, and it was over the "realignment" thesis that it was possible to realign American political parties so that the Democratic Party would expel the Dixiecrats and become the unambiguous party of labor and the left. Up until the late 1970s, both the Democratic and the Republican parties were ideologically heterogeneous, with liberal and conservative wings. The Meier-Mendelson position was generally supportive of the idea of realignment and work on behalf of progressive Democrats, but they thought that the position put forward by Shachtman was too unqualified in its support of Democrats and too focused on electoral work to the exclusion of other work. In general, they opposed the organization taking rigid, inflexible lines that ignored actual contexts and local realities.

[28] Over the course of the late 1950s and 1960s, a three way division developed among the Shachtmanites, roughly along the lines of left, center and right.

On the left was a group which held to the original politics of the Shachtmanites, described as either 'revolutionary socialism' or 'socialism from below.' Prominent in this group were Hal and Anne Draper, Julius and Phyllis Jacobson and Joel Geier. In 1964, Draper and Geier split with their former comrades, resigning from the Socialist Party and starting the Independent Socialist Clubs, which would evolve into the International Socialists (IS). Until it dissolved in 2019, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), a split from IS, was the largest organization emerging from this tradition; others with this politics found their way into the organization Solidarity. The magazine *New Politics* is also in this tradition. A defining stance for this tendency was the →

DM: Yeah. Joel Geier also took that position. There were a lot of nice young Draperites, and I liked Hal and Anne (Hal Draper's wife – LC) a lot, but I wasn't a purist like they were.

LC: And who wanted to go completely into the Democratic Party?

DM: Shachtman. I remember we supported a candidate in the primary, it was a labor guy (I don't remember his name), and then when he won, we couldn't support him in the general election because he was running as a Democrat. I personally thought that was kind of silly. If we're going to support a good guy, why wouldn't we want him to win? So that's my "it depends" position.

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insistence upon "independent political action" and a refusal to support candidates running on the Democratic Party line. In trade unions, this tendency has pursued a "rank and file strategy" of opposition to established leadership, an approach most closely associated with the network around the journal *Labor Notes*.

On the right was a group which came to be consolidated in Social Democrats, USA, which had evolved into a conventional, strongly anti-Communist brand of social democracy. While Shachtman had been the initial leader of his group, he died as the Socialist Party broke up. Prominent leaders of this faction were Penn Kemble, Tom Kahn and Bayard Rustin. SDUSA cultivated ties to union leadership, and had particularly strong connections to the AFL-CIO under George Meany and Lane Kirkland, as well as to the AFT under Al Shanker and Sandy Feldman, who was a member. It was these labor ties that led to a break with the centrist Shachtmanites over the issue of whether to endorse George McGovern's presidential run in 1972, which SDUSA was reluctant to do in the face of Meany's opposition. A small number of this band – most prominently, Carl Gershman and Linda Chavez – were so single-minded in their anti-Communism that they became neo-conservatives and took positions in the Reagan administration. The death of Kahn, and the aging of a membership that was attracting no new recruits, led to the dissolution of SDUSA in the late 1990s. An unsuccessful attempt was made to resurrect it in 2005 when Kemble was dying.

The Shachtmanite center took shape in the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), which was founded by Michael Harrington after a 1973 split with SDUSA. DSOC accepted the realignment strategy of working to support Democrat progressives and move the party to the left, but it pursued a coalition strategy of uniting progressive unionists with civil rights, feminist, LGBTQ, and environmental activists. Deborah Meier was part of the DSOC leadership, as were many of the people she had worked with in Chicago and New York City, including Carl Shier, Irving Howe and Bogdan Denitch. In 1982, DSOC merged with the New American Movement, a grouping of former New Left activists and former leaders and members of the Communist Party who had left the party over its undemocratic stances, to form Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). NAM brought figures like Dorothy Healey and Barbara Ehrenreich into DSA. In its early years, DSA had strong ties to progressive union leaders in the UAW, AFSCME, SEIU and the Machinists. As well, a number of elected officials, including Congressmen Ron Dellums and Major Owens, became DSA members.

While DSA went through the same fallow period as the rest of the American left at the turn of the 21st century, it grew rapidly in the period following the 2016 election victory of Donald Trump, quickly becoming the largest socialist organization in the US in nearly seventy years. Its support for the Bernie Sanders campaign, and the galvanizing elections of young DSA members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, were pivotal to this growth. As a result, DSA has become a "big tent" organization on the left, with many young people new to politics and the left. As well, a number of activists who had been active in left Shachtmanite organizations joined DSA.

LC: I recently read documents from the Social Democrats (SDUSA) side in the 1973 split of the Socialist Party. One polemic -- it is not clear who wrote it, but I would imagine that either Penn Kemble or Tom Kahn had a hand in it – is an attack on Harrington for resigning from SDUSA and forming the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, and they condemn him for allying with the Meier-Mendelson tendency, which apparently was considered a sign of political wrongheadedness and a lack of principle of some sort. What struck me about another polemic was that it went on about how Michael Harrington wouldn't return their phone calls. It was almost a self-parody of a sectarian screed, you know.

DM: We took ourselves quite seriously. On the other hand, at meetings that were held at our house we often ended up playing, and there was one that was a game in which you keep – it's dark and one person hides and then if you find them you hide with them – and other such detective games. I thought here's this bunch of people who are going to make the revolution work running around the room like little kids.

LC: Was Carl Shier also active in the Shachtmanites in Chicago while you were there?[29]

DM: Now he was in the adult section and so was Saul. And there were a number of UAW people. So, a part of me was screaming that I would go into the shops and be a labor leader, and that seemed very…

LC: But you didn't.

DM: No. I had these three children and…

LC: Going into the shops certainly would have been…

[29] Born into a socialist family, Carl Shier had become a follower of Albert Goldman in a tiny, obscure Trotskyist sect before he became a Shachtmanite. Starting as a shop floor activist in an International Harvester plant, Shier would join the Shachtmanites in participating in the Reuther administration caucus in the UAW, eventually joining the staff of the union. He was a mainstay of the Shachtmanites in Chicago, and later played a major role in the DSOC and DSA chapter in the city.

DM: Fun. And doing whatever I felt like. And I thought I was going to get a doctorate, but my other person who was working with me went to Harvard and died. So, I was doing the history of an individual in the Civil War, a Connecticut boy who died in the Civil War, and who left a lot of letters he had sent home.

LC: And that was a project never completed.

DM: No, although I do have the first draft, because the first draft was written for my master's student paper. I loved history of that sort. I loved being a detective, digging into things. So, I found theory hard to…

LC: That's what I love about doing the history of teacher unions. I'm finding all of the little pieces that have been lost.

DM: Yeah, I know, that's the part I like, and this guy who died was big on oral histories and he was the only one in the department, so it wasn't as though when there was someone obvious who appreciated that labor.

DM: There was a professor and he studied French history. So, when we took his course, he gave everybody an assignment to find out why we think something is true. So, my assignment had something to do with "did Napoleon send warships to the Caribbean?" And your job is to try to figure out whether that was true. And what I concluded that I mostly believed that it wasn't true, but that it gotten into the history textbooks at a certain time, and the next person who wrote a textbook just copied it, so it became official "truth." And so if I had wanted to study French history that might have been fun.

LC: What was your impression of Max Shachtman over this period?

DM: First of all, I was fascinated by him. He was very easy to listen to. I mean, he was very… you know, he talked very long. They used to tell a joke that he would stay with Carl Shier in the North Side and that Carl would say, "Start the speech now," and so that by the time Shachtman got to the South Side to give the speech, he only had the second half to go. But I found him fascinating. I also found him infuriating. First of all, I'd grown up in a family

of skeptics and of 'put-her-downs'. My father, no matter what your opinion was, he took the other side. When I sent my kids to public school, he attacked me for sacrificing my children for my beliefs. And when my brother sent his kids to private schools, he said my brother was a hypocrite: he was a left-winger and here he was sending his kids to private schools. Anyway, I was not disposed to "worship" anybody, so I had a feeling that half of the things that he said were… he was like my father in that he would make up things… My father would be in an argument and say, "Well, look at the page 13 of *The New York Times* on November 5th and you'll see."

LC: And it wasn't there.

DM: It wasn't. On behalf of a good argument, he would say anything, and I recognized that in Shachtman.

LC: An intellectual provocateur.

DM: Yes, but I didn't think that his lies were terrible. They were like my father, on petty questions. I felt it was a certain inability to stick to the bare truth. Bogdan Denitch was like that, too. It was more fun to make up a story than to tell…

LC: To tell the simple truth. It's the art of embellishment.

DM: Yeah. Anybody can tell the truth, but it takes some imagination to make up a good story and have other people believe you.

DM: But I didn't disagree with him, until this issue of working in the Democratic Party came along. Even then, I didn't completely disagree. I just thought, it depends on the situation that you're in, who the characters are, what the Democratic Party is like in that location, and so forth.

DM: And the other thing was that Shachtman became less and less of a third-camper, and more and more for the defense of America. And that was our group.

LC: So, by "third camp," you mean that originally, the defining question of Shachtmanite politics which differentiated it from orthodox Trotskyism was support neither for the Soviet Union nor for Western capitalism. Over time, Shachtman became more supportive of Western capitalism.

DM: Yeah. It was seen as the "lesser evil."

LC: There's an interesting political trajectory here. In some ways the Lovestoneites go through the same sort of evolution. They move from a Leninist politics within the family of Communism, if you will, to a more democratic socialism, but a number of them like Lovestone seem to have a problem ending their journey with democratic socialism as the destination. They just keep on going until they support anyone who is anti-Communist, and they are no longer democrats or socialists themselves. Not all of them, but some of them.

DM: I'm not sure that Shachtman and his closest associates became democratic socialists. You could start as a Trotskyists and defend the Leninist position that you may need a dictatorship at some point in the future. So, you weren't quite democratic socialist. And then you became so vigorously anti-Communist that you became pro-capitalist.

LC: So, they skipped the democratic socialist stage?

DM: Yes, I think they skipped. I think they went from Trotskyism to pro-capitalism.

LC: Shachtman goes through these transformations in his politics. Does he ever really explain this, or does he just pronounce a new view of the world?

DM: Well, I felt it was too much that he pronounced, and then everybody else changed their minds. That infuriated me, because what I was attracted to about the Shachtmanites was that they were intellectually sophisticated, interesting people. So, I resented the idea that he thought we should all change our mind because he did. Somewhere along the line Irving Howe left the Shachtmanites and started *Dissent*, because he felt that the

Shachtmanites were no longer interested in a good argument.[30] They had a party line, and the thing he found attractive, he said, had been, "Well, we didn't have a line."

LC: And Shachtman was unrelenting in his attack on Howe at that moment.

DM: Yes. "He's dead." In fact, he referred to Howe as, "the late Irving Howe." That was the kind of thing I was disturbed by.

LC: It's almost like the Amish shunning people who won't hold to the one true faith.

DM: Yes, and we weren't supposed to read *Dissent*.[31]

LC: So, you obviously maintained a relationship with Howe through all of this.

DM: And I think all of the youth did, too, by the way.[32] I think we did read *Dissent* from the beginning. I mean, there was that Communist position, that centralized style that Shachtman held onto, that if we take party position, then everybody has to follow it. What's it called? Something centralism?

LC: Democratic centralism.

DM: Undemocratic centralism.[33]

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[30] In 1952, Irving Howe and Stanley Plastrik wrote a joint letter of resignation from the Shachtmanite ISL. The letter can be found in Howe's FBI file. They wrote: "The one major role the ISL could have played in the past period – that of a center for free socialist discussion – it has rejected."

[31] In the pages of the Shachtmanite newspaper *Labor Action*, Hal Draper wrote (p. 5) that the new-born *Dissent* was "a temporary halfway-house for backsliders from the struggle." Howe's response (p. 7) was biting: "Except for a handful of ISL trade unionists, who command my respect, what struggle is the ISL conducting? What struggle does Draper have except the very real one to fill the pages of *Labor Action* every week?"

[32] By youth, Meier is referring in part to Michael Harrington and Bogdan Denitch, who were the main leaders of the Shachtmanite Socialist Youth League at this point.

[33] Democratic centralism was an organizational practice first developed by Lenin for the Bolsheviks, and it has been employed by Leninist parties of various stripes since then. It maintains that once the party has made a decision on some question, and adopted a 'line,' all of the members – including those who disagree with the →

LC: I was looking through the Shachtman papers for something on Ely Trachtenberg, and I came across this letter that Rachelle Horowitz had written to Shachtman and a bunch of other people, complaining bitterly that she was having to do too much of the organizational work for the tendency.[34] I was sharing it, and one of my colleagues said to me, "What's a tendency?" I said, "A tendency is what Shachtman calls his faction when he promised Norman Thomas there wouldn't be any factions when they merged into the Socialist Party."[35]

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majority decision – are required to support it and to advocate for and implement it outside the party. In practice, democratic centralism often devolves into the leaders of the party deciding a position, and then imposing their will on the rest of the organization. And when it is employed by Leninist cadre acting in a disciplined way inside other organizations, it tends to hijack democratic processes, as cadre are under discipline to promote and adopt a position decided in advance of any discussion in the larger organization. Meier's phrase "undemocratic centralism" is meant to indicate that she believes the practice is, in fact, undemocratic.

[34] Ely Trachtenberg had joined the Trotskyist movement as one of City College YPSL who were recruited as a result of the Trotskyist entryist split in the Socialist Party. He was one of group of young Shachtmanites who went to Buffalo and took a job in an UAW represented plant, where he became active in the union. Eventually, Trachtenberg would return to New York City and become a public school teacher. In the early 1950s, he drew upon his experience in the UAW as he assumed an important role in the transformation of the Teachers Guild into the United Federation of Teachers. Central to his work was a legendary focus on building the union through school based chapters. Trachtenberg would die suddenly and tragically of a heart attack at the young age of forty. The novelist Harvey Swados also participated in the Buffalo Shachtmanite group, and he wrote a novel, *Standing Fast*, which drew upon his experiences in it. In *Standing Fast*, the character Sy Glantzman was based on the life of Ely Trachtenberg.

Rachelle Horowitz was a young recruit to the Shachtmanite milieu in the 1950s. She was part of a cohort of young Socialists very active in the civil rights movement, as part of CORE and in support of the work of Bayard Rustin. This group included Tom Kahn, Sandy Feldman, Genie Kemble, Norm Hill and Velma Hill; Michael Harrington playfully nicknamed them "The Bayard Rustin Marching and Chowder Society." Horowitz provided Rustin key support in the organization of the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, the 1963 March on Washington, and the 1964 boycott of New York City schools on behalf of school integration. She would later become the Political Director of the AFT, overseeing its electoral and governmental relations work. Paul Le Blanc and Michael Yates provide one of the fullest accounts of the Socialist Party Shachtmanite circle that were immersed in civil rights movement work as a result of their involvement with Bayard Rustin. (*A Freedom Budget for all Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today*. Chapter Three.)

[35] Norman Thomas, the long-time leader of the Socialists, had good reason for being wary of the intentions of the Shachtmanites when they dissolved into the Socialist Party in 1958. Shachtman had been a central figure in the 1936-37 Trotskyist entryism maneuver in which they garnered new recruits from the Socialist Party and then split it, and only four years before, Bogdan Denitch and Michael Harrington had led the YPSL to disaffiliate from the Socialist Party, and merge with the Shachtmanite youth group in the Socialist Youth League (SYL). One of the conditions of the 1958 merger of the Shachtmanites into the Socialist Party was that Denitch had to leave New York City.

DM: Yes, he said, they were a tendency. She probably ended up with the organizational work because she was a woman.

LC: Yes, she was working for Bayard Rustin during the regular workday and doing this organizational work on top of it.

LC: Herman Benson, was he someone you worked with?

DM: Oh, yes.

LC: He was older.

DM: Yeah. Almost nobody was my age. Because who joins the socialist movement at the time I did? So, they were either older or younger. Ten years younger or ten years older, and that remained true when I started teaching. Everybody was either older or younger than me.

LC: When did you meet Herman Benson?

DM: Well, first of all I used to come to New York sometimes. And at one point I spent a month in New York, brought my children with me and brought them down to the 14th Street office, because of a faction fight. I wanted to strengthen our side. I went to the main headquarters to see what was happening and to support our side. I had only one child then, so it must have been between '56 and '58. We arranged to take Becky (Meier's daughter – LC) on the subway and she would be having conversations with everyone. They would sling in the front, and she would start up conversations behind me. I would hear laughter behind me, and goo-gaas behind me. People were sort of shocked because when we got down to 14th Street, and she would crawl all over the floor there and entertain herself.

LC: They viewed it as undisciplined.

DM: Especially some of them. I would get that from a number of the wives of labor comrades in Chicago. We had a lot of meetings at Carl Sheir's house, and (his wife – LC) Marian didn't approve of my child-rearing practices.

DM: So, I met Herman somewhere in there, but I'm just trying to think, was he still in Detroit? I associate him with Detroit.

LC: He was in Detroit for a number of years. When the Shachtmanites did industrial 'colonization' and sent members into factory jobs, as I've been able to follow it, there was a group that went to Buffalo, another group to Detroit and a third group to San Pedro (near Long Beach in southern California).

DM: And the guy who wrote a book.

LC: Yes, Harvey Swados, who wrote the novel *Standing Fast* based on the Shachtmanites in Buffalo. He, Ely Trachtenberg, Eddie Gray, Donnie Slaiman and Dick Wilson: they were all in the Buffalo group. It's very interesting because a number of these figures who go on to become leading trade unionists come out of the same City College YPSL cohort as the New York Intellectuals, and there's been all of this attention paid to the intellectuals, but virtually none to this other cohort of trade unionists.

LC: Herman Benson was in Detroit. He appears to have been responsible for the Shachtmanite work inside the union movement, and especially inside the UAW. There are numerous articles in *Labor Action* and the *New International* where he is assessing developments inside the UAW, writing under his own name and the pseudonym/party name Ben Hall.

DM: That's interesting, but not Chicago. I don't think so. I think the older people that I knew in Chicago were not from New York…

LC: No, they weren't sent out to Chicago. The people there were native Chicagoans, like Carl Shier?

DM: I think so.

DM: I thought of them all as Midwesterners. You know, there was a Workman's Circle, a Jewish left community, that had a number of places in the country where we would go for our summers when we were young. The socialist summer camp was at one of these social democrats' place. They were not

even political, but they were the old Socialists, who bought this land on the lake.

LC: Would it have been the Social Democratic Federation? They were descendants of the 'Old Guard' Socialists from the 1930s.

DM: Well, I don't know the exact history of this place, but my feeling is, whatever it had been, it was now just Jews, who had some connection with politics in the past, and who had bought homes there, and then – but I think it was a different crowd. My mother laid down a law when we were young, which was that she wouldn't approve of our going to an Eastern college. We had to go to the Midwest, where "real Americans" were.

LC: Well, Antioch and Oberlin weren't such bad choices.

DM: No, but the notion that there were "real Americans" at Antioch and Oberlin…

LC: It's like folks taking "party names" that, you know, didn't sound quite so Jewish.[36]

DM: Yes. I had a party name, what was it? What did I write under?[37]

DM: And of course, Herman (Benson) had a print shop, which is sort of a working-class occupation.

[36] Adopting a pseudonym as a "party name" was a practice begun in the Bolsheviks when they were an illegal, clandestine party. Lenin, for example, was a party name for Ulyanov. Despite the fact that American conditions were quite different, many parties that considered themselves Leninist retained that practice. For a group like the Shachtmanites, who were predominantly Jewish, a party name became a way to appear "more American." An Irving Horenstein could become an Irving Howe, and a Harold Dubinsky could become a Hal Draper. Moreover, for a small group like the Shachtmanites, "party names" could make it appear that more people were writing for their publication than actually were, such as when "Michael Harrington," "Edward Hill," and "Eli Fishman" – the latter two pseudonyms of Harrington – would be by-lines of different articles on the very same page of the newspaper. As Harrington was not Jewish, he took delight in poking fun by using a Jewish-sounding alias, Eli Fishman.

[37] We were able to establish after the interview that Meier wrote most frequently under her own name, but on rare occasions used a party name "Dora Miller."

LC: Wasn't it that Benson set up this shop so there would be a place where Shachtmanites could be trained to be machinists, so they could 'colonize' industrial jobs?[38]

DM: Yes. Before the print shop, yes. Yes, that's the meeting when I went to where they were all talking about who's going to go into the shops, how important it was to go into the shops.

LC: If you're also thinking of the print shop, you're probably thinking of Don Chenoweth.

DM: Yeah. Oh, Chenoweth, what an interesting character he was.

LC: My introduction to Chenoweth was in 1982 when DSA was founded, and I came back to New York City to be the National Field Director. One day, Maxine Phillips says to me "You have to have this experience, you don't have this experience and it's an essential experience."[39] And she gives me the galley proofs for *Democratic Left*. So I brought them over to Chenoweth's print shop near Union Square, where he was still using linotype printers. I walk in and he says, "Here comes the red-headed Oehlerite."[40] (In those days, my beard was quite red.) It was designed to find some piece of 'sectarianana' which he thought I wouldn't know.

DM: But you did know.

LC: Actually, at that point, I had only started to delve into the history of American socialism, and the reference was obscure enough that I did not know who the Oehlerites were. But I thought it was pretty damn funny.

[38] 'Colonization' was a euphemism of the era for what is now known as salting – having a person hired in a workplace with the intention of organizing it or becoming involved in an existing union.

[39] Maxine Phillips was another full time leader of DSA, with responsibility for editing the main publications of the organization, including its sometimes bi-monthly, sometimes quarterly journal *Democratic Left*.

[40] American Trotskyism has had a penchant for splits and the multiplication of tiny sects. The Oehlerites took their name from their main leader, Hugo Oehler. They split from the other Trotskyists over their opposition to entryism into the Socialist Party, from an ultra-left position that they should have nothing to do with the "reformists." Since Trotsky himself had advocated this maneuver, the Oehlerites denounced Trotsky for being insufficiently Trotskyist.

DM: As I remember, when we were electing delegates in New York for some convention, each one got up to speak and in the discussion a number of people made an argument about having delegates having an independent mind. Then he got up he said, "That's the only thing I'm not interested in… We should not elect anyone who has an independent mind. I want to know what they think and what I'm electing." He was a provocateur, and he enjoyed outraging people.

LC: He was famous for typing commentary into your articles when he disagreed with them politically, so you had to have an eagle eye when you proofed the mock-ups. He stayed in SDUSA after 1973, and he was always interjecting some criticism of what Harrington wrote into the DSOC and DSA publications he typeset.

LC: When Benson founded the Association for Union Democracy (AUD), did you provide him some support in that work?[41]

DM: Yes. In fact, that was still when my mother was alive. I think she was part of AUD.[42]

LC: Herman's still alive.

DM: Yeah, but it's amazing that Benson is still alive. He must be 100.[43]

[41] In 1958, at the point of that the Shachtmanites merged into the Socialist Party, Benson began a second career – which would last nearly six decades – with his work in union democracy. As the Shachtmanite point man on trade union work, he had exposed in the pages of *Labor Action* cases of organized crime takeovers of building trades unions and of violence against those who opposed corrupt union leadership. He now made that focus his full-time work. Together with Yale professor Clyde Summers, Benson was instrumental in the 1959 passage of the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act, or Landrum–Griffin Act, which included a "bill of rights" for rank-and-file members of unions. He started a newsletter *Union Democracy in Action*. The newsletter grew into the Association for Union Democracy, which provides legal aid to union members under attack when they exercise their democratic rights. In the 1973 split of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) from the Social Democrats (SDUSA), Benson went with DSOC – and Michael Harrington and Meier. He remained a DSA member after the 1982 merger of DSOC and NAM.

[42] Both Meier's mother, Pearl WIllen, and Meier herself served on the board of the AUD.

[43] After the completion of this interview, Herman Benson passed away on July 2, 2020, at 104 years of age.

LC: I am interested in him because he was pretty central for the trade union work of the Shachtmanites, wasn't he?

DM: Yeah.

DM: So, as I said, I was involved with the civil rights movement, and we were part of CORE. I was going to help open a settlement house in the area where we lived, which was then a neighborhood of the Black bourgeoisie.[44] It was going to be a place where CORE could send people for internships, they would help man this place, which would provide legal help and services for people, but also bring in interesting speakers. It would be to a place where the civil rights movement would both be providing a service, and also politicizing. It was just around that time that CORE decided they didn't want white members. I was also involved at that time in housing issues around gentrification of the neighborhood, and so I became a mild expert on housing and wrote a lot about housing.[45]

LC: During your work in Chicago with CORE were you involved with Norm Hill and Velma Hill at that point?[46]

[44] Chicago was the site of the most famous settlement house in the United States, Jane Addams' Hull House, which combined social services for the immigrant population in its community with educational programs with a social and political reform orientation.

[45] In the *Student Anvil and Partisan*, Meier had written an essay on "urban renewal" and race on Chicago's South Side. The gentrification issue involved efforts of University of Chicago to encroach upon the predominantly African-American neighborhoods adjacent to it.

[46] While attending the University of Chicago to pursue a master's degree in Social Work, Norman Hill became involved in the civil rights movement and the Shachtmanites. The Chicago chapter of CORE had been its first and strongest, and he quickly assumed a leadership role in it. In Chicago, he would be central to area mobilization for the Youth March for Integrated Schools and 1963 March on Washington, both organized by Bayard Rustin. Hill served as Chicago secretary of the Negro American Labor Council, an organization of Black trade unionists founded by A. Philip Randolph that played a pivotal role in organizing for 1963 March. He played a key role in the campaign to integrate Rainbow Beach in Chicago. In 1963, Hill became the national program director of CORE, where he organized the Route 40 freedom rides, the campaign to compel the Waldorf-Astoria to hire Black workers, the protests at the 1964 World's Fair, and the civil right demonstration at the 1964 Republican national convention. Hill met his wife, Velma Murphy Hill, in Chicago civil rights work: she was the president of NAACP Youth Council for Chicago's South Side, and they worked side-by-side in civil rights movement work for many years. At the end of the 1960s, she led the organization of New York City's paraprofessionals – overwhelming poor and working class Black and Brown women – into the UFT.

DM: Oh, very much. But you know what's amazing is that someone was doing history of CORE maybe 10 years after and they called me up to get some details. They wanted to know that there was a fight between the national office and Chicago CORE about something. I remember it was a very vital fight. We were very heated about it.

LC: Was James Farmer the head of CORE at that point?

DM: I'm not sure. I mean, I don't think so because I had a history with James Farmer because he was a friend of my family. So, I don't think so. I cannot even imagine what it was about, that's what's so frustrating.[47]

LC: You remember there was a big fight, though?

DM: Yes. I was on one side. So, I thought, "Goddamn oral history." This was a central part of my life for a few years and if I can't remember enough to know if I was right and they were wrong… That should be a lesson.

[47] In their definitive history of CORE, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick discuss a conflict (pp. 314 ff) that would appear to involve the battle Meier half-remembers, given the cast of leading characters in it. In 1963, Meier's comrade Norman Hill had been appointed CORE's program director, and conflict between Hill and CORE National Director James Farmer developed. There was growing criticism of Farmer within CORE, with many questioning his leadership and his management of the CORE staff. As director of programs, Hill began to advocate a strategic turn for CORE, from direct action and street protests to grass roots community organizing and partisan electoral politics, along the lines laid out by his close friend Bayard Rustin in a now classic February 1965 *Commentary Magazine* article, "From Protest to Politics." (The Chicago settlement house described by Meier above had been an experiment in grass roots community organizing associated with that turn.) Farmer became convinced that Hill was angling to force him out and install Rustin in his place. The conflict came to a climax when Hill sought to appoint the young Socialist Tom Kahn, an up and coming star in Shachtmanite circles, as his assistant. Farmer saw Kahn's appointment at part of an effort to remove him and vetoed it. Hill brought the matter to the CORE Steering Committee, which voted 9 to 3 to overrule Farmer. Kahn decided, however, that it would be untenable to accept the position over Farmer's opposition. At the same time, Hill, with his socialist commitment to racial integration, had become a lightning rod for criticism from an emerging separatist current within CORE, perhaps best represented by Brooklyn CORE. In August of 1964, Hill resigned his position in CORE, and became the legislative representative and civil rights liaison in the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO, then under the leadership of Walter Reuther. In 1967, Hill would move to the A. Philip Randolph Institute, an organization of African-American unionists affiliated with the AFL-CIO, where he would remain for the rest of his career. Hill's departure would mark the beginning of an organizational decline for CORE. Farmer would attempt to accommodate the separatists within CORE, and going so far as to support their candidate, Floyd McKissick, as his successor in 1966. McKissick would call for strike breaking in the 1967 strike of the UFT, which is discussed later in Meier's oral history, before becoming an advocate of "Black capitalism" on behalf of President Richard Nixon.

LC: Well, we could go back. I'm sure there are histories of CORE that would discuss it. We could also interview Velma.

DM: In fact, Velma called me recently, maybe five years ago. I say recently, it's a very hard time for me to know what is recent, because she wanted to remember something about what happened then – a demonstration about a beach.

LC: Yes. She and Norm have written an autobiography together, and I've read it in manuscript.[48] The opening chapter is this 1960 demonstration they are involved in at a segregated beach in Chicago, Rainbow Beach. The demonstration is attacked by racist vigilantes, and one of them throws a rock that hits Velma in her head. Norm rushes to her side and gallantly rescues her. There is a major gash in the head that requires a whole lot of stitches to close, and her injuries mean she can never have children.

DM: I know that at some point, we've switched our attention to the NAACP and housing issues. Tim (Timuel) Black and a group of Black radical left, socialists and we had the illusion we were going to be able to take over the NAACP.[49] What we didn't realize was that the leadership could mobilize whole church memberships just like that, suddenly they are all members of the NAACP, and they are all on a bus and march together into a meeting.

DM: I was the chairman of the NAACP's Housing Committee, and an advocate of desegregation. But there were, as you can imagine, those in the African-American community and the NAACP who had a different view about segregated housing. They were not against it. I think even at that time, I understood that there were – I wouldn't think of them as positive – but features of segregated housing that could be of political use. If you wanted

[48] Norman Hill and Velma Murphy Hill, *Climbing the Rough Side of the Mountain: A Movement Marriage through Five Decades of Activism*. University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming in 2022.

[49] Timuel 'Tim' Black was a legendary figure on the Left and in the African-American community in Chicago, with a reputation cemented by decades of activism as a union organizer, civil rights activist, and intellectual and political force. During the period Meier discusses, he was a teacher in the Chicago public schools and an activist in the Chicago Teachers Union. Among many other accomplishments, he was a mentor of Barack Obama. See his published oral history, told to Susan Klonsky, *Sacred Ground: The Chicago Streets of Timuel Black*. He died after the completion of this oral history, on October 13, 2021, at age 102.

to be sure you could elect Blacks to office, solid Black housing projects could provide a political base. We didn't get very far.

LC: So, while you were in Chicago, you started teaching at some point.

DM: I thought that I would substitute in Chicago schools, because there was a lady on my block who did that, and she made $100 a week. I think you got $50 a day, maybe it was $25. I thought it would be an easy way to make some money, and my youngest kid was in nursery school, and so naively, since I had never been in a public school in my life except when I was in suburban kindergarten, first and second grade, I decided to take it on. It was an eye-opening experience. It intrigued me politically, that when kids spent 12 years in this kind of world, why did we think they would grow up to be small 'd' democrats? It was the most authoritarian system I had ever run into, and I was treated in a more humiliating manner than I had ever experienced as a child or as an adult, so it was an opening to another world that I hadn't known.

LC: This was an inner-city school?

DM: South Side schools.[50] Elementary and junior high schools. So, after working as a substitute teacher for a year, a school across the street from where we lived needed a half-time kindergarten teacher, and they asked me whether I might be interested in that.[51] I had subbed there a few times, so they knew that I was looking for jobs, and I said yes, because it would be very convenient. My kids were going to that school. It was a predominately Black school, but it had some middle-class black families as well as poor ones, and it was an interesting population, with some very interesting

[50] Chicago was a deeply segregated city by race and class, as revealed by Martin Luther King's 1966 campaign against segregated housing in the city and metropolitan area. The South Side was the area of greatest concentration of African Americans and of poverty.

[51] The school was the Beulah Shoesmith Elementary School, named after a Chicago mathematics educator.

teachers. Some of the Hyde Park radicals became teachers in the school.[52] So anyway, I said yes, and I fell in love with being a kindergarten teacher.

DM: Being a kindergarten teacher was a complete shock and not at all like my reaction to being a nursery school teacher in Indianapolis, which was probably influenced by having my own children, whom I thought were brilliant. But this was a totally different experience. I just want to say that what's striking about this experience is that it confirmed something I wanted to believe, that these children had plenty of language, that they were quite capable of being intellectuals of their own sort.[53] We loved them dearly, partly because the playground that my children had been to across the street was also used by the other side of the park, and so I knew these children. I didn't start off in that kindergarten with the assumption that was very prominent at the time, and has come back, that children are seriously damaged by being raised in ways that aren't white and middle class – that they don't have language, or their language is totally inappropriate, and they don't have experience with the world, or if they do it's completely inappropriate, and they're not curious, they're used to being told what to do and if you don't tell them what to do, they don't understand that you're serious. I wasn't the only one in that school who was rejecting that view. The principal was supportive; he wasn't an early childhood person, so he didn't have particular theories about how to teach young ones. In those days in Chicago, you started as a principal in small elementary schools and then – because your salary was based on the school size – you would move up to high schools. And he would say to the faculty, "Listen, you know more about this stuff than I do, so you tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." He was Japanese American, and in terms of me, he just would compliment me. Every time he heard anything nice about me, he'd come and say, "I heard the nicest thing about you." So, it was completely different than all these other schools that I had subbed

[52] The University of Chicago is located on the South Side of Chicago, in the neighborhood of Hyde Park. It is surrounded by African-American neighborhoods such as Woodlawn and Kenwood. Hyde Park radicals are those who came from the university milieu.

[53] In a 1968 *Dissent* essay, "Learning not to Learn," Meier would elaborate on this insight.

in, and I began to play with the possibility of sticking with it for just a little while.

LC: So, before we move our conversation to Philadelphia, did you meet Ann Cook and Herb Mack when you were in Chicago?[54]

DM: Yes. They were running this after-school tutoring program out of the University of Chicago I'd heard about, Student Woodlawn Area Project (SWAP).[55] I was curious about it and I was very impressed when I went there, at how serious and well-done it was, because I had a certain prejudice that sometimes volunteers didn't run things well, and this was meticulously well-run, and so we became friendly. I mean, we weren't close, but we were friends.

LC: So why did you move to Philly?

DM: Because just as the Wilson Fellowship thought, Fred got a job there. First, we were going to leave Chicago for New York. He had a job offer in New York, at Columbia, which he liked. And then on the train to New York he met a man who persuaded him that he had a wonderful job for him in Philadelphia that paid better. I don't remember, it was in public opinion, I think, but connected with *Reader's Digest* or something. So, he called me and said "I got off the train in Philadelphia and had an interview and was hired. We're going to Philadelphia instead."

LC: Did you know anybody in Philadelphia?

DM: No.

[54] Ann Cook and Herb Mack would work closely with Meier later, when they were all in New York City, and had become leaders of different schools they had founded – Urban Academy for Cook and Mack, and the Central Park East schools for Meier. The project to transform Julia Richman High School which Meier discusses later in the oral history was part of that work. Cook has been the main organizer of the New York Performance Standards Consortium that for two decades has brought together a cohort of schools which use performance assessments as an alternative to the New York State Regents exams.

[55] For a description of the SWAP program, see "That They Might Learn" in March 1965 *Ebony Magazine*.

LC: What year was this, roughly?

DM: 1965. Head Start was just starting.[56] It was called "Get Set" in Philadelphia. It was its first year, and I ended up working in it.

DM: My kids went to the neighborhood school in Philadelphia. It was a diverse school in the West Mount Airy neighborhood, but their kindergarten teacher… oh, she was awful. She was obsessive about the children coming to school with clean hands, so she made them show their hands and if they were dirty, whatever she did, she completely scared them. So, Becky took my son to school – the three of them went to school together, as it was about two blocks away – and he kept wanting to stop to wash his hands because of this teacher. It was so terrible that I finally took him out of kindergarten, and he came with me to Head Start, and had a good time.

DM: I was assigned to a Head Start center in Germantown, which was then already a largely Black community.[57] It was only available to mothers who weren't working, because it was based on the assumption these children have no language or experience, so we need to get them away from their parents for half a day. It was an amazing experience because of the woman who ran it. For half of a day, we'd go to this auditorium and we'd sit in the auditorium while she entertained us from the front. She made us sing little children's songs, you know, "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and so forth, and her husband who was a pianist, so she brought him in, and he played piano. It was so embarrassing, that all these intelligent women are sitting here, learning to sing children's songs, when they could be back at their sites doing real work.

DM: And then there were all kinds of fights I had with them because of rules they created. When the program started, our site had five students, and so they said, "You can't start until you have ten." So, we thought we were being told to turn these five children away. There were several of us in the same church, we were operating out of a church. We said one of us can

[56] Head Start was a Great Society program designed to provide quality pre-K instruction to children living in poverty. It began in 1965.

[57] Meier contemporaneous account of the Philadelphia Head Start program can be found in this *Dissent* essay.

stay with the five children, and two can go out in the community and try to get five more. We would eventually be 45, because 15, 15, and 15, but I mean we weren't supposed to do anything with kids until we had at least one class of ten.

DM: But on the whole, they left us alone. They didn't have much idea what they were doing. I had an absolutely spectacular assistant teacher and 15 kids, and I'd had 30 kids in the kindergarten in Chicago. So, I thought I'll do what we can do.

LC: When you start teaching in Chicago and Philadelphia, did you have to take any formal training, any education courses?

DM: Well, yes, I had to take courses. I took some courses on television, the equivalent of what they're now doing with distance learning, right? You just came to the campus to take an exam. You had to go to Chicago Teacher's College, and you had to do things like a class on writing and reading in which they just showed you how to write on the board. All kinds of very important skills. The class on children's literature was the only one that I found interesting. It was my first experience in an academic setting with people who had not had a good education. The other students in the class had no idea how to summarize. She had them all read a children's book and then we were supposed to share with each other what we thought was interesting about it, and they would tell the whole story. "This book starts with a child who…" and go through it. So, she would try to have me go first so that I could show them how to summarize and discuss a book, not tell the whole story.

LC: You were modeling.

DM: I liked her, because she was interested in children's rhymes and children's spontaneous culture, and she had us read a lot of stuff about that. That was, to me, fascinating.

LC: But would it be fair to say that, insofar as you brought a conscious philosophy of education to your teaching, it was from your own schooling

and from your own reading. Principally, you had read Dewey and… who else?

DM: Yeah. That year I read John Holt. A book called *How Children Fail* or something like that. It was a powerful, wonderful book. I still recommend it to people, because he was observing a good teacher in a progressive school, how much this teacher thought he was helping kid be independent thinkers, but they were guessing, trying to figure out what he wanted them to say. Some kids could be quite clever at getting to what was the "right answer," even though this teacher didn't want that. Anyway, I was fascinated by that, because it made me even think about my own education, how much of that was present.

LC: So, you had to jump through certain hoops to get a teaching license, but it was not especially formative or useful.

DM: No, it wasn't. I remember when I got the license to be a sub, one of my kids who wasn't in any school yet came down with me – I guess it would have been Roger – and we were told to get in line. Oh, we were supposed to pee into a little container and then get in line. We were each holding our little urine samples, and at some point, Roger says, "I have to go to the bathroom," so I say to the lady who was in charge of keeping us in line, "My son has to go to the bathroom so can you hold my place?" She said, "No, if you leave the line, you have to get into the back of the line." So, I said very loudly to Roger, "Well, you just have to pee right here." Then they say, "Alright, go." But I'm just struck by the amount of passivity that we all had about being treated so…

LC: Poorly?

DM: Yes. I used to think at the time it was a purposeful rite: you'd get rid of the people who were too feisty and wouldn't put up with this, and that therefore, I was going to fool them. I was going to stick with it. A somewhat conspiratorial theory, but there was a certain truth to it.

LC: Well, there is a logic to bureaucratic rule, you know…

DM: But it was just stunning. Now I want to tell you – just to get off the subject for a moment – that I think you sometimes feel the same way when you go to the union with a problem. There are a number of people I know who didn't fight for their salary because they said it was so unpleasant to go downtown and deal with the bureaucracy.

LC: There is a challenge for the union here. Insofar as you're going to fix problems for your members, you need to have a structure that can access the district and state bureaucracies, and that structure can create its own bureaucracy. No question about that.

DM: And it breeds the bad traits of a bureaucracy, people sort of lording it over you, purposely making you wait longer while they do something else, and not even looking up and saying, "I'll be with you in a minute."

LC: So, part of the problem is, I think, that there's a balance here that a lot of folks find really hard to maintain. You have people who have these ideological commitments who'll come into the union, and they become oppositionists…

DM: Well, you also have the clerks who come in.

LC: You have both. You have folks for whom the responsibility of governance and making things happen is something they don't do; they are permanent revolutionaries and perpetual critics. No matter what the issue is, they will find some reason to find fault and be in the opposition. And then you have folks who could just as easily have been in a superintendent's office as at the union, and the capacity to actually have a mission and to see the union as a tool of collective empowerment and as a voice for teachers is missing.

DM: Yes. Your job is to make teachers not feel humiliated.

LC: Establishing and maintaining that sort of balance, between having a mission of collective empowerment and solving the everyday problems of individuals, can be challenging.

DM: Yeah, it's hard. And right now, there's my friend who's been out of job now for over a year, and hasn't yet had a hearing…

LC: We'll talk about that not on tape, alright? We don't want to get into anybody's details on the record.

DM: Yes, you're right.

LC: So how long were you in Philadelphia?

DM: One year. We bought a nice house, and I was actually going to stop teaching Head Start. The school that my kids went to, they wanted to start a kindergarten, and had arranged with the church on the corner to house it. They asked me whether I would teach it, and I thought that would be nice to go to school with my kids and teach across the street, and it would be especially nice that I would be in a separate building, so no one would know what I was doing. But then we moved to New York in the fall of… I think it was 1965 or 1966, because it was before the 1967 strike and I was already working in New York City by that time.

LC: Why did you move to New York?

DM: Because Fred Meier lost his job.

LC: So that job that diverted you to Philadelphia didn't…

DM: Work out.

LC: And you went to New York after all.

DM: That summer we moved to New York.

LC: And you found a job teaching right away?

DM: Right away. I was in a deep depression because I was never enthusiastic about coming to New York, actually. Partly because it was like going home, and Chicago was my town, I'd made it my place. Whereas my parents were

very influential in New York and in many ways I didn't want to get back into their world. Which was a perfectly good world, but...

LC: You hadn't created it. It was their world, not yours.

DM: Yeah. And I was just beginning to love Philadelphia. It was a more beautiful place. We had a house like a brownstone, with beautiful bushes and trees and a garden. The offer I had for the kindergarten job in my neighborhood school in Philadelphia was exciting… it was an interesting, integrated school. So, I was feeling very bereft at leaving.

DM: I was supposed to take the exam you had to take to become a teacher in New York. And I left the house to go to the exam, but I just couldn't face the idea of doing it. I walked up Broadway and went into a movie house on 95th Street, not the Thalia, but the one on the other side. It's now called Symphony Space. I was watching a lovely movie about happy families and so forth, and I couldn't stand it. I left and saw a poster that said that there was some meeting about schools going to take place at Goddard Riverside, which is a community center in a public housing project up in the 90's. I thought, "Oh, that's where I'll go instead of a movie." I realized that what I needed was to be a place with a lot of angry people because compared to them, I would feel sane. Compared to most people, I felt I was just desperate. I went into that meeting, it was full of angry people and they were yelling and so forth, and I got up and I spoke about the fact that I was shocked at the New York schools because they still tracked students. I had gone over to a school to find out how to register my children. They put my kids in the top class, sight unseen, and I was shocked that the schools still tracked students. The schools I taught in in Chicago and in Philadelphia had no tracks. I thought, "Here we are on the liberal West Side and without seeing my kids or their report cards or anything, the school knew they belonged in the top track." I told them, "I think we should be fighting that."

DM: Of course, there were not a lot of white kids in the West Side schools at the time. This was the urban renewal era. There was a certain amount of radical activity. When I sat down, the man behind me tapped me on the shoulder. His name was Joe Elias. I had mentioned that I'd been a teacher, so he said, "Do you have a job in New York?" I said, "No, I only want to

work mornings," which I had been doing up to then. He said, "Well, I know just the job for you. We're looking for a half-time kindergarten teacher at PS 144 in central Harlem, which is in the same district." He told the name of the principal, Anne Spero, and he said, "Call up tomorrow or go up there and tell her I sent you." I did and she was really quite a wonderful woman. She was an older woman, and she told me she had once been a YPSL. From the start, she treated me like we were equals.[58]

DM: So, I started working at PS 144 in January of the first year we came here. I was elected as union rep (for the United Federation of Teachers – LC) almost instantly, which shows how much competition there was for the position. The teachers were on the whole either very old or very young. I was in my thirties, and a lot of the teachers were in their twenties. The younger teachers would come to me to ask me to bring up something at the weekly meeting with the principal, and I'd said, "Come on, try doing it yourself." They'd say, "Please…" Well, I'd make them promise me to say something themselves which they sometimes would keep and sometimes wouldn't. I discovered that if I spoke first, they would say that they agreed with me. The principal already knew, I think, that I was not expressing my own opinion. She could be an intimidating principal, but somehow or other she never tried to intimidate me. There were quite a few black teachers in the school, but the most intimidated were the young white teachers. I was discouraged: how many places was this happening, where the teachers felt this cowed, as to be afraid to speak up? The older teachers weren't as cowed, but they had fewer complaints. They just wanted the meeting to end.

LC: So, did you become involved in the union.

DM: Yeah. I was in the Unity Caucus.[59] That's what we were called, right? And I had some friends that were involved, the Gelernters who I knew from the

[58] YPSL is the acronym for Young People's Socialist League, the name the U.S. Socialist Party had used for its Youth Section for most of its history. "A YPSL" would have been a member of that youth section.

[59] Caucuses are best understood as the political parties of the union in its internal political life. The Unity Caucus has been the caucus of the leadership of the UFT; UFT Presidents Charlie Cogen, Al Shanker, Sandy Feldman, Randi Weingarten and Michael Mulgrew were all members of Unity, and elected with its support. The Caucus was formed in the early 1960s, shortly after the UFT was founded, when Roger Parente, who had been a →

West Side… Blossom Gelernter and her husband, but I forget his name, but he was very active in the union at that time.[60]

LC: There are a whole group of people who are connected to the Shachtmanites who are involved in the UFT at this time.

DM: Yeah. Yes, and I knew those people. I knew Sandy (Feldman) and I knew Al (Shanker). I primarily knew them.

LC: Yetta (Barsh) Shachtman, Max's wife, was Shanker's secretary, but did she come to that position later?

DM: I think so. I disagreed with Shachtman on the strikes because I thought the UFT handled both of them badly. At my school, everyone voted for the (1968 – LC) strike, including Black teachers, and there was quite a few of them at my school. But when the strike came, the Black teachers went in.

LC: So, let's start with the '67 strike, because that set the stage for the '68 strikes.[61]

DM: I think of it as the one about the difficult children.

LC: That's an interesting take, because in my reading of the '67 strike, there are actually two sets of issues, once you move beyond the standard questions of

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leader of the High School Teachers Association that had merged with the Teachers Guild to form the UFT, opposed Cogen over the 1962 contract and unsuccessfully ran against him for UFT President. Opposition caucuses in the UFT have often been associated with left wing organizations of one sort or another; the Teachers Action Caucus was closely tied to the Communist Party, with many in its ranks having been former members of the Teachers Union; other caucuses were tied to different brands of Trotskyism.

[60] Blossom Gelernter's husband was Sanford 'Sandy' Gelernter. Like Meier, both of the Gelernters were socialists, and would join her in Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) after the 1973 break-up of the US Socialist Party. For many years, Sandy Gelernter was on the UFT Executive Board, a leader of the union's educational arm in Queens (then known as Quest), and a member of the Unity Caucus. He broke with Shanker over the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes and the Vietnam War, and was expelled from Unity as a result. Together with two former UFT officers, Richard Parrish and Martin Lobenthal, Gelernter ran unsuccessfully against Shanker's Unity Caucus in the 1971 union elections.

[61] Meier's contemporaneous reflections on the 1967 strike can be read here (in the journal *Midstream*) and here (in *Dissent*).

salary and such. One is how to handle "disruptive children" and one is expanding the More Effective Schools (MES) program. I find the MES piece particularly interesting.

DM: Yes, Blossom Gelernter taught in one.

LC: The MES schools were an effort to create community schools, and they are a descendant of, among other things, settlement house theories. The strongest advocates within the UFT for MES come out of the socialist movement. They saw addressing the inequities among schools, and promoting community schools, as essential to pursuing racial integration.

DM: Making school a welcome place for students and parents…

LC: Si Beagle, who is particularly important for the MES work, was a socialist and old Lovestoneite[62] who taught… You didn't know he was an old Lovestoneite?

DM: I didn't.

LC: He taught at Leonard Covello's Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, which was in many ways the first community school, and that experience helped inspire his work in the MES program.[63]

DM: Was that the (Vito) Marcantonio school?[64]

[62] On the Lovestoneites, see note 8.

[63] Together with teacher union leader Layle Lane and Principal Leonard Covello (a member of the Teachers Guild, the predecessor organization of the UFT, and a Socialist), Si Beagle had been a central figure and organizer in East Harlem's Benjamin Franklin High School, the first real 'community school' in New York City. Franklin HS incorporated the insights and methods of the settlement house movements, found in Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago and Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement on New York City's Lower East Side: it made the school into the center of the community. It made itself into a vehicle for its students and their families to become an active force for change in the community: it published an East Harlem community newspaper, fought for better housing and the improvement of slum conditions, ran voter registration campaigns and during the Great Depression, opened little community centers in unused storefronts. It provided students and their families with social services and adult education they could not find elsewhere. Franklin HS pioneered anti-racist education in New York City public schools.

LC: It did have Marcantonio's support. Covello had taught Marcantonio when he was a high school student, and Covello and Benjamin Franklin High School had his support and (Mayor) Fiorello La Guardia's support. The school was founded when there was a large Italian American community in East Harlem which had been the political base of LaGuardia and Marcantonio.

DM: Have you ever read Vito Perrone's book (*Teacher with A Heart*) on Covello?

LC: Yes, it's a very good book. There's also a wonderful book, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education As If Citizenship Mattered*. If you haven't read it, you definitely should. I'll send you a copy of it.

LC: So, my reading of the More Effective Schools initiative is that the UFT says, quite correctly, that if we try to integrate public schools in New York City by sending middle class kids to under-resourced and struggling inner city schools, it's going to create white flight. We need to have a program that actually addresses the inequities between schools and that provides to inner city schools the resources – class size, social workers, guidance counselors, literacy specialists, pre-K programs – they need to provide a quality education.

DM: You know, when I came to New York, the kindergartens were much smaller than we've ever had since then. I think 18 students were the largest they could get then, and you had a para-professional. Today we have 25 to 30 in kindergartens.

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[64] Vito Marcantonio was a member of Congress representing East Harlem for seven terms. The campaign manager of Fiorello LaGuardia's Congressional runs in the 1920s and early 1930s, he was LaGuardia's choice as successor when LaGuardia was elected New York City Mayor. Originally elected in 1934 as a Republican, Marcantonio was defeated in his first try at re-election in 1936. When the American Labor Party was formed in 1936, he switched his affiliation to it, and was elected for six successive terms. (For more on the ALP and its history, see note 4.) Marcantonio was not only on the left, like his mentor LaGuardia, but went much further in allying himself with the Communist Party, both inside the ALP and in politics more generally. When many of the ALP's affiliated unions and founders, including Meier's mother Pearl Willen, left the ALP in 1944 over the issue of Communist domination and formed the Liberal Party, Marcantonio remained and assumed the leadership of the ALP. From 1936 until he was voted out of office in 1950, Marcantonio followed the twists and turns of the Communist Party line, as it changed to meet the shifting demands of Stalin. As the McCarthyite Red Scare began to heat up, he was defeated for re-election in 1950 by a fusion Democratic-Republican-Liberal candidate.

DM: I don't remember that this was part of the '67 strike.

LC: Oh yeah, it was.

DM: Okay.

LC: It was a central piece, and the Board of Education was like, "This is a management prerogative. We don't like the union telling us..."

DM: What kind of schools we should have.

DM: I may have had the same problem with this strike as I had with the next one, and that is that it had both good aspects and bad ones.

LC: Yes.

LC: The "disruptive child" question is a complicated issue, and I think the UFT recognizes at a certain point that they lost control of the issue, that it has gone off in directions that they didn't want it to go and their position is being misunderstood, even misrepresented by some. In the '67 strike, Martin Luther King was still alive, and he supported the union along with Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph. With some backstage choreography, King sends a telegram to the UFT giving them a path out of this problem, because it was being portrayed as the union saying that inner city Black and Brown kids are disruptive...[65]

LC: That's clearly a problem, but the other thing that's going on – and I'd be interested to see what you think about this – is that the Board of Education which doesn't want more MES, resents the union telling them how schools should be organized, goes to what is a growing black nationalist force and

[65] The King telegram began: "I enthusiastically endorse the efforts of the teachers of New York City to improve their living and working conditions, and the quality of education dispense." It went on to urge the UFT to clarify its demands around the disruptive child issue "to avoid misunderstanding and confusion." The UFT published the King telegram in the September 16, 1967, *New York Times* (p. 12), together with a reply from UFT President Al Shanker that thanked King for his support, stated that the union shared his concerns about the disruptive child issue and appointed a special committee of "teachers, child behavior specialists and community leaders" to assist it in developing a "comprehensive and constructive program" to address the issue.

says, "We will give you community control if you come out against More Effective Schools." And the nationalists agree to it, so back in '67, you have H. Rap Brown of SNCC and Floyd McKissick, who had taken over CORE when Farmer left and soon after became a big advocate of "Black Capitalism" and campaigned for Nixon – the two of them are advocating strike-breaking in '67. This is all before the '68 strike. The Black teachers in the school you taught: where did they stand in the '67 strike?

DM: I think in the '67 strike most of them went out with us, but I'm not sure if some went in because I'm not sure you could go in in '67. Did they try to keep the schools open in '67?

LC: What was important about '67 was that it was a long strike. The earlier strikes had been one- or two-day strikes, the ones for union recognition and the first contract. '67 strike went on for fourteen days.

DM: But they did try to keep the schools open? I remember that in '68, but I don't remember it in '67.

LC: In '67, the schools were shut down in the entire city, except for Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the demonstration district in East Harlem.

DM: In East Harlem there was a demonstration district?

LC: There were three components of the community control experiment. There was Ocean-Hill Brownsville, there was the Two Bridges district on the Lower East Side and there was a middle school in East Harlem, IS 201, and its three elementary feeder schools.[66]

[66] By 1967, IS 201 had had a brief but troubled history. The school building had been constructed in the early 1960s in East Harlem, near the Triborough Bridge, in the hope – which would prove vain – of attracting white students from Queens and the Bronx. In 1966, a controversy developed when a group of African-American and Puerto Rican parents demanded that the school's white principal, Stanley Lisser, be replaced with a person of color. Upon request, Lisser announced his resignation, and the Board of Education appointed an African-American Assistant Principal in the school, Beryl Banfield, as his replacement. But the entire staff, including African-American teachers and Banfield herself, rebelled against the process, forcing the Board of Education to retain Lisser as principal. The UFT played a major role in supporting the staff of the school. This controversy had led to the inclusion of IS 201 in the community control experiment.

LC: So, your experience of the '67 strike, you're already beginning to have some feeling of unease about the direction?

DM: Yeah, I just think we handled it badly. I thought the demands would give teachers in the schools unilateral power to define who was a "bad kid," and since I'm on this subject, I knew that I held a different view about who were being called "bad kids." In the school I was teaching in, I think they were pretty good on this subject. You know what I mean?

LC: Yes. I am looking at the time and your appointment, so we'll finish today and do another session, because you've obviously got much more to talk about.

LC: It is February 25th, 2017. This is part two of an oral history with Deborah Meier, and we are in Deborah's house in Hillsdale, New York. Deborah, let's start by talking about your experiences in PS 144, which was the first school you taught in when you came back to New York in 1967.

DM: I was teaching half-time, but I asked the principal if we could set up in a wing of the building an experimental pre-K and kindergarten cluster, rather than having the usual configuration of classes. In this cluster we would approach education differently. She agreed, but she said I would have to go work full-time. Not because we would have full-time kindergarten, but because she wanted me to have time to organize this cluster. I had planned to work full-time when my youngest, Roger, was in junior high school. So, this was a little earlier than I had intended, and Roger played games with me for years, blaming all his problems on the fact that I started working full-time before he was out of elementary school.

DM: Anyway, I was really enjoying myself in this cluster. The pre-kindergarten teacher, I liked, and she stayed in there. The other two kindergarten teachers who didn't want to do this, they agreed to move. Anyway, it was really fun. We had our own little school within a school. I was a little less popular with the rest of the staff when I did that, because they felt that I was...

LC: Saying you were better.

DM: Yeah. And I sympathize with that because it is true. We had enormous freedom and fun. And I wanted the other teachers to be able to do the same things in other grades. I said, "Why don't you set up a 2nd grade cluster up there?" Anyway, that's when I met Lillian Weber,[67] because I was also active in District 3, this community, where my kids were going to school.

LC: Is this the district on the Upper West Side?[68]

DM: Yes. I was active as a parent in my neighborhood, and we got rid of a terrible principal in the school across the street and got a wonderful one.[69] That was a lesson to me too, because the overnight change in the climate of that school when one principal, this bad principal, was removed. He was mad at me for having my daughter in the school. When I went in to complain about a problem that she was having, he said, "Well, your daughter shouldn't be in this school. This school wasn't meant for kids like her." That was the final straw, so we organized parents to get rid of Mr. Kohn, and brought in a guy named Luther Seabrook from Boston.[70] He stood out in front of the school every morning and chatted with people as they came in. His office was literally always open. He enforced that teachers shouldn't lock their doors. They were locking their doors, because they felt intimidated by kids who would come in and yell at them and go

[67] In 1967, when Meier met her, Lillian Weber had just begun her tenure as a professor of education at the City College of New York (CCNY), the Harlem branch of the City University of New York. Weber specialized in early childhood education and espoused a child-centered view of education that shared much with Meier's educational views. She was one of the foremost advocates of the 'open classroom' and 'open corridor' models of elementary education that were popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and she established the Workshop Center for Open Education at City College. Over the years, Meier and Weber would collaborate in a number of different projects and worked together in the North Dakota Study Group. Weber's educational ideas can be found in her book, *Looking Back and Thinking Forward: Reexaminations of Teaching and Schooling*.

[68] Organizationally, New York City public schools are divided up into 32 smaller school districts. Community School District 3 is located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, ranging from 59th Street in midtown to 122nd Street in Harlem.

[69] The school in question was M.S. 44. It was closed in 2011 by the New York City Department of Education and was replaced with three smaller schools.

[70] Seabrook was a veteran of the civil rights movement, having been active in CORE and Mississippi Freedom Summer. In this oral history, he recounts his experiences in the school Meier is referencing (staring at p. 26).

out. This was in '68, I think, or '69. And the teachers loved him. They'd go out to drink on Friday afternoon; they went to a bar on 79th Street. Not everybody, but some of the staff. And the place became calm and pleasant. He wasn't an educator. I mean, he didn't get into the educational part, but there were some strong teachers in the school who did, and a lot of good things went on there. He started something called the pilot school, where four teachers tried to figure out how they could integrate the school. It had been a very highly-tracked school, and they worked on a one-track program. Seabrook went on to become a superintendent in District 5, and it didn't work out, so he went back to South Carolina. But he showed the power to create not necessarily great teaching, but a place where people were not frightened.

LC: So, it's more that he created a space in which education could flower as opposed to generating good teaching himself.

DM: Yes, he was a principal who didn't see his job is teaching people how to be good teachers, but who sees himself as someone who buffers for teachers and kids, to create a safe place. And then the teachers' job was to figure out how to teach, which they could do if they felt safe.

DM: And you know, there's so many things that being both a parent and a teacher helps you understand. Before this pilot program at MS 44, my daughter had a teacher who was just terrible. I wanted to get her out of that class, so I asked the principal at PS 144 where I taught, did she know the assistant principal at MS 44, and she said, yes, she knew the assistant principal, who was a real difficult woman. I said, "Could you call her and tell her that…" I think I knew exactly who I wanted her to call because that's the assistant principal in MS 44 I was going to have to see, and I wanted her to tell the assistant principal that I'm not crazy, I'm a sensible woman. Don't tell her I'm a great educator or anything, just that I'm a sensible woman, because what I'm afraid of is I'm going to lose my temper. Parents were petrified when they went into the schools. I was so scared about going in there, because I was afraid that if they were mad at me, they would mistreat my daughter at the same time, and I couldn't stand being so helpless about my daughter. I knew the principal was not going to be helpful. It probably worked a little bit, but then I asked that my daughter's

class be changed, because I thought this woman was really out to get her. And she said, "Oh no, we couldn't, because that's the only top-track class we have." So, I said, "So put her in a different track." She said, "Oh no, that would be a terrible thing." So anyway, I finally got her to agree to put her in a different track. But you know, the top class was mostly all white. The second class had some white kids in it. The third track had none, and the fourth track was mostly Hispanic.

DM: There is a real dilemma on the neighborhood school question, you know. It's part of my ambivalence about even public school choice. That it divides communities.

LC: We debated the question in the union because the idea of a neighborhood school has different inflections: for some people a neighborhood school is one rooted in the community; for other people, it's a way of keeping "those people" out of your school.

DM: But given that politics is geographic, the school is an organizing base. When you read Vito Perrone's book (*Teacher with A Heart*) about the East Harlem educator, what's his name?

LC: Leonard Covello.

DM: Yes, Covello. And you realize how they used that school as an organizing tool.

LC: Yep. Were you that aware of Covello's Benjamin Franklin High School when you started your East Harlem schools?

DM: No, no. I didn't know much about it until Vito wrote that book. I'm not sure what year that was.

DM: In any case, I met Lillian Weber as a parent, really. She was speaking at PS 75, which was where the district office was, and she was talking about the Revolutionary War, the reason the Americans won. I'm sure she said other impressive things, but this one stuck with me: the Americans won because they knew how to fight in the territory they were in. Somehow she made

that analogy to education, that we're still running education as though we were in another historical period.

LC: She was already at City College then?

DM: Yeah. She started something called "The Workshop Center" for open education. She had been a nursery school teacher in the Bronx, Riverdale, or something. She went to England for a year or so and made an unedited film showing one of the more progressive elementary schools in England. It was very impressive. She began to work with us. She started something called the "Open Corridor Program." She went into a Harlem school, and convinced the principal to put four or five teachers who thought alike on one corridor, and she would work with them and they would open up the corridor so that teachers could see each other.

DM: Her basic principles were that school teaching should be collegial, that teachers should be sharing their work, that they should enjoy being with adults, not just children. And that they should know each other's children. It was quite successful, and so she wanted to spread. Her hope was that if you started that work inside a school, it would become the whole school… which, unfortunately, with the exception of PS 84, didn't work.[71]

LC: Why do you think – I have my own ideas about this – but why do you think that theory didn't pan out?

DM: Well, if the principal wants to make the changes, it might happen, which is the case of PS 84. But I think other teachers in the school resent that group. They're easy to resent because they think they're better.

LC: They're the fair-haired ones.

DM: They also tend to be a little arrogant sometimes about their work. They're easy to isolate. Also, there are teachers who simply don't agree with them about their educational approach. I thought it was a terrific idea. As an

[71] PS 84 is a preK-5 school in Community School District 3 which employs the principles of Lillian Weber's vision of open education. It is now known as the Lillian Weber School of the Arts.

idea, I thought it got at the basic question. Could you convince teachers that working together this way would be more fun? Literally more fun, not just better education, but a nicer way to work as well as better education. Any case, she worked with us in this little corridor we had at PS 144 in central Harlem. Then she asked me to come to work for her as one of her advisors, to work in other schools. This temptation to leave has been the thing I most regret about my life. Anyway, I did. The person who replaced me in that community didn't keep it going.

LC: About what year did you go to work with Lillian?

DM: This was about probably '70. I was only at PS 144 for a few years. I went through the two strikes there. I wasn't the UFT chapter leader, I was the union rep.[72] It was an interesting experience because, in fact, the whole school voted for the two strikes. I would have more ambivalence about the '68 strike. But I was their rep, so I followed their wishes and voted for it. Then when the strike came, about half the staff went in. I was so furious.

LC: In '67, they all stayed out.

DM: Yes.

LC: Presumably, they felt that…

DM: It was the racism in '68. It was primarily the Black teachers who went in.

LC: There were two main issues in '67, one being the More Effective Schools and the other being the disruptive child. Those two issues they felt comfortable

[72] The UFT chapter leader is the equivalent of a shop steward in other union settings; she is the main leader of the union chapter in the school, responsible for its meetings, implementing the contract and communications between the rest of the union and the school. There is another leadership position known as delegate who represents the school at the union's central legislative body, the Delegate Assembly. Meier was a delegate. She is saying here that in the Delegate Assembly vote to go on strike in '68, she voted in favor despite her own ambivalence, because she believed she should represent the sentiments of the teachers in her school. Her anger was that many of the teachers who had supported the idea of going on strike would then cross the picket line.

with. And the '68 strike takes place because teachers who participated in the '67 strike in Ocean-Hill Brownsville were being dismissed.[73] But in '68…

DM: I don't think they met about to discuss it. I was very friendly with the people and I was in the union. They never met to decide to change their minds. I think it was one by one, or three by three. I didn't start immediately. None of them came in right away.

LC: It was over time.[74]

DM: I think the principals were required to come in. But I don't think Anne Spero put any pressure on the teachers to come in. I think she was essentially friendly or neutral to the strike. I don't remember. But during both strikes, after the picketing was over, I met the kids about two blocks from the school. Some parents came with me, and we went to Central Park or we went to museums. We spent the morning together, just like it was morning kindergarten.

DM: And then in the afternoon, I went down to where my children were in school, PS 87, to be supportive of the teachers there. Our house on 77th Street became what was called, by the teachers across the street in the junior high, a 'freedom school.' A number of teachers opened up their houses. And invited kids in after the picket lines were finished.

[73] In May 1968, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board had summarily dismissed nineteen educators. The teachers included a UFT chapter leader and others who participated in the '67 strike. By the end of the 1966-67 school year, the majority of the teachers in the district were on strike over these dismissals. For the UFT, this was an existential issue: if union activists could be dismissed without even the pretense of due process, the survival of the union would be at risk. Moreover, the UFT believed that this initial group was a test case, with the objective of creating a precedent that would allow the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board (and the rest of the New York City Board of Education) to establish 'at will' employment in which they could dismiss any teacher for any reason. If the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board was successful, the UFT believed, many more firings would follow; Rev. C. Herbert Oliver, head of the board, had explicitly spoken of targeting hundreds of teachers in the district.

[74] What is commonly called the '68 strike was actually a series of three strikes. When it would appear that there was an agreement with the central Board of Education to restore the teachers that had been dismissed by the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district, the UFT would go back to work; when the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district refused to abide by the agreement and the teachers were kept from their jobs, the UFT would go back on strike. All told, this process went from the start of school in September to the middle of November, when the teachers were finally restored. The longer the strikes went on, the more the initial union issue of due process was submerged in a battle of political wills, and the more polarized along racial lines New York City became.

LC: Is this true in '67 or just in '68?

DM: I think it was '68. That's my memory.

LC: Yep.

DM: But I said I wanted to talk to the parents about why we're on strike, and the black teachers arranged for me to come in at a PTA meeting to explain my position. Some parents at the meeting were against my speaking, and the black teachers of the school said we're going to go on strike, too, if you don't let her speak. They were very supportive, which was surprising. So, it didn't cause the same kind of rift in our school that it did in other places in the city. I think in fact the black teachers who went in were feeling some small measure of guilt about it; I think they were ambivalent, much like me. And I think some of the white teachers who went in with them did so to be in solidarity with them.

DM: I was on the board of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), where we tried to intervene in the '68 strike.[75] We tried to create a pro-decentralization, but pro-union position. I should remember more about that. You know, you find things… I know that was true, but I haven't run across that in documents that tell me more about what happened. In the end, LID didn't take that position, and I resigned from their board. I wanted them to support the strike with…

LC: With qualifications?

[75] As referenced in note 5, the LID was a long-standing institutional vehicle for education on behalf of democratic socialism, labor rights and civil rights, and had operated within the broad Socialist Party milieu. Meier's mother, Pearl Willen, had been a founder of the LID, and a long time board member. Once the Shachtmanites merged into the Socialist Party in 1958, they poured energy into the revitalization of the LID; Michael Harrington became its chair, and Meier herself would become a board member. (Not all of those efforts ended well: the relationship with the LID's burgeoning youth section, Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], ended in an infamous, messy break up that Harrington would later regret.) There is a brief allusion of the efforts to win the LID to a more qualified position on the '68 strikes in Maurice Isserman's biography of Michael Harrington, *The Other American* (pp. 282-283), but there appears to be no complete account. Meier's resignation letter probably has the most complete rendering of her reasons for resigning. With the departure of Meier and others, LID would come under the control of those who led SDUSA, and it would fade with it in the 1990s.

DM: With qualifications.

LC: So, let's talk for a second more about the '68 strike because a lot of your old Shachtmanites comrades are in the middle of it – and not just the ones in the UFT. Michael Harrington is organizing public support for the UFT.[76] Herman Benson is carrying on a battle inside the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) over its opposition to the strike.[77] Are you still active with the Shachtmanites at this point?

DM: When I first came to New York, yes.

LC: So, what kind of conversations were you having?

DM: It was the beginning of the split for me, because I was definitely hostile to the direction of Shachtman and those around him.[78]

LC: Did your hostility have anything to do with their position on the Vietnam War?

DM: Yes, but I think it was more related to the school issues, because I was ensconced in an all-Black school, and there were a lot of Black teachers,

[76] Together with Tom Kahn, Harrington had organized an Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the Right to Teach that placed a pro-UFT ad in the September 20, 1968 *New York Times* (p. 29), with a number of prominent liberal and left intellectuals signing, including Daniel Bell, Robert Heilbroner, Irving Howe, Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. This ad drew Harrington into public conflicts with the *Village Voice* journalist Nat Hentoff and Dwight Macdonald, who had signed the ad but then publicly accused Harrington of misleading him. In his reply to Macdonald, Harrington described the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis as an "Antigone like tragedy" with an "antagonism of two rights," and explained why he thought that the defense of the due process rights of the teachers was essential. (See Maurice Isserman, *The Other American* [pp. 282-283] and Richard Kahlenberg's biography of Al Shanker, *Tough Liberal* [pp. 102-103].)

[77] As result of his work around the rights of rank-and-file union members, Benson was active in NYCLU. The then head of NYCLU, Aryeh Neier, weighed into the '68 strike very heavily on the side of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board, publishing a report, *The Burden of Blame*, which portrayed the UFT as being solely responsible for the divisions of the strike and standing in the way of good schools for students of color. (As he makes clear in his memoirs *Taking Liberties*, Neier had long-standing grudges against Bayard Rustin and various Shachtmanites, dating back to his days as a LID student organizer. [pp. xviii-xxi, 9-13.]) Benson, who saw the defense of the due process rights of the teachers as paramount, was the main organizer of opposition to Neier inside the NYCLU.

[78] Meier is referring to the 1973 split between the Social Democrats-USA and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, discussed in note 28 – LC.)

and I think I was sympathetic to them and understood why they would come to oppose the '68 strike.

LC: I remember reading pieces you wrote after the '67 strike on this theme.[79] Would it be fair to describe you as somewhat conflicted at the time?

DM: Yeah. I had no doubt that we had to hold the line on the teachers who were dismissed and protect the union. Without the union, it would be much worse for teachers. I had no question that we had to have a union. But I was angry at the union for having placed themselves in the position of opposing decentralization. I was for decentralization.

DM: I thought schools and teachers didn't have enough power. Having power because you had a union was not sufficient power, by itself. My going to the union's Delegate Assembly once a month was not really adequate for democratization of the life of the school. Even with a good principal, the degree to which teachers treated the principal like their mother… I was horrified by the relationships between teachers and authority. I thought the union didn't do enough to change those relationships.

DM: And I was embarrassed to be in the company of such easily cowed people. I felt they responded to the union the same way they responded to the administration. They were intimidated by both. This included older teachers who were less easily intimidated about what they did in their classrooms, but certainly didn't want to speak up in any way.

LC: So, the original issue of the '68 strike, which is due process for the teachers who had been dismissed, you thought the union was correct.

DM: Yes. But I also sympathized with the intense anger that existed in the Black community. It was easy to arouse the black community because their kids were getting a raw deal. And the teachers… there was a lot of implicit racism among teachers, which wasn't being…

[79] Meier's contemporaneous reflections on the 1967 strike can be read here (in the journal *Midstream*) and here (in *Dissent*).

LC: Addressed?

DM: Addressed.

LC: And so as the '68 strikes go on, you're not convinced that the union is handling it correctly.

DM: Right. Although I was in personal relationships with a number of the people running the strike, I thought they were making serious mistakes. I felt that a lot of people from my political background really didn't respect teachers or the union. They didn't. And I felt the union was disrespectful to teachers.

LC: In what way?

DM: Well, they were disrespectful for what they didn't do, that they were not interested in raising the consciousness of the membership. They were interested in winning their loyalty, but not developing their consciousness. There was no intellectual life that was pro-union. Centralization meant that there was no place to go, for teachers to go, to argue about issues in their own school. They can't all be the school rep at the union's big meetings. There was no place for them to experience a democratic life.

LC: And you thought that the union should be in place where there was more democratic intellectual life.

DM: People were intimidated, you know, when you had to go down to the union because you had a disagreement with an administrator, or you had a concern about your pay scale. A number of teachers that I'd run into, didn't go to the union, because they felt intimidated by it. They saw going to the union in the same way they saw going to the Board of Education. They were people behind the desk who would treat them disrespectfully and act like they had been stupid.

LC: So, your theory of the union is that a lot of this consciousness raising should have been happening in the school.

DM: Yes, or if not the school, in the district. In other words, they had organized a union, but they hadn't changed the mindset of teachers. And I hoped that this would happen with decentralization. I thought if we were decentralized, there was a shot at creating some more democratic structures, for both parents and teachers.

DM: I was very involved on the parents' side during this period. I was active in the Parents Association of the school my kids were in, and I helped find a new principal for it. The main thing I liked about him was he treated teachers with such respect and collegiality, and that literally changed the climate at school. He was Black, which made it even more successful. But the collegiality in the school was essential for working with children and families. You know, you can have a great teacher who gets along with parents, but that doesn't change the school.

DM: I used to say at the time, that the teachers had just been organized, and so in a sense they see the parents as the threat – a threat to their new status, to rights they just won. Rather than seeing the parents as having the same fight that they were having, needing to have a voice.

LC: So, I have a theory about this, which I will share with you. There are actually competing, partial views of democracy at work here. Both of them are based on a very thin concept of democracy, which is simply: the majority rules. So, you have community control, it is a majority of the community; whatever its representatives decide, is democracy. And then you have a sort of syndicalism in the union, that whatever the representatives of the majority of the teachers decide is democracy. The two conceptions end up in conflict, because both are making absolutist claims on the power to make all the important decisions by themselves. What is lacking, in both cases, is a richer concept of democracy that has substance to it.

DM: That's still my problem. You said it in a nutshell. And not only that, but we teach that to children from the time they enter a school. The only thing we call democracy is when they make a stupid vote about which our class color will be. It's just a question of if you could put your hand up. And so, of course they were always some trivial questions, as you've demonstrated. And I didn't think teachers had a much greater concept, of what it meant to

live in a democracy. And that we had a double purpose in the schools, to teach democracy to the young and to learn it ourselves. And that was where I felt the union came up short. We could have had schools for democracy.

LC: Having spent most of my adult life in the union, I think it's a doable thing for the union to try to create and support a richer intellectual life for teachers. And I do…

DM: And being more democratic means teachers have a greater voice, so the intellectual life is not just the intellectual life of we read books together. But a powerful force in schools.

LC: Yeah, but when you start talking about raising consciousness it begins to get a bit nebulous for me. It hints at Leninist notions of moving beyond trade union consciousness, where the vanguard knows what is good for the masses.

DM: But I think as soon as people have to meet and decide about issues in their schools, they learn about democracy. I mean, I can't tell you in the schools that I have run that have been democracies, how incredibly similar the issues that came up in school are, and connected to the larger social issues that come up in society. Like, should the custodian have a vote? Should the student-teacher have a vote? I mean you have to argue all these questions. So, if you have more power, consciousness comes out of the struggle. It's not that you would implant intellectual discussion that creates consciousness, so it wasn't really that I wanted schools to be intellectual centers in an academic sense. I thought they should really have the power to make decisions. And as they bring up issues, that will have broader repercussions. That will make them think: well, if this is true here, what happens there. It did that for me. I mean, I became much more understanding of the nature of democracy when I tried to run a school. Even the phrases: "I tried to run a school." When you begin to think about phrases like that, you realize how our culture is imbued with norms or assumptions that are really authoritarian.

LC: I think this goes to questions of representative democracies and direct democracies. What you describe is a direct democracy, in which people are able to make all of the important decisions that impact their lives in that context. That is only possible on a small, face-to-face scale. On any large scale, you need systems of representation, representative democracies. There are 70,000+ teachers in New York City, there are 300+ million people in the US: to make decisions that will impact all of them, you need a representative democracy. Representative democracy in the US is now under attack, and precisely at this moment when that it hangs in the balance, it absolutely needs to be defended. The question is, is there a way for the union as an institution to sustain some richer forms of democracy, which include institutions of both representative and direct democracy. I think that the key is not to pose them as antagonistic choices, but to see that you need forms of representative democracy and you need forms of direct democracy.

DM: You need both, yes. And if you've never had an experience with direct democracy, it's much less likely that you'll understand indirect democracy. You won't understand the compromises that your representatives have to make if you've never been in a position where you had to make compromises.

LC: In the schools where I was a union leader, and certainly when I was a union vice president, there were things that I could do into terms of having fuller discussions about strategy, and actively involving people in decision making. Definitely, there can be a tendency, if you want, to devolve toward bureaucratic governance. The question of how one builds and sustains a participatory democracy over time is a difficult and challenging one: it requires more than good intentions.

DM: Yeah, and I think that the one thing we could have done that we didn't do was more democratic decision making within a school about matters of the school, not just matters in the contract of the union. Give teachers greater voice. You know what I did in the period we have yet to cover is try to figure out what would that look like if you had democratic life in a school, and the school was operated democratically, but still faced the dilemma that there's a lot of knowledge that you don't get inside the classroom

about what the other problems are in the school, and so forth. How can you create a school that coheres? It's not just a question of leadership, but there was a point at which Al Shanker said principals should be elected by the teachers. And I think that there's a need for the community and parents to have voice in the running of the school, but essentially that's what we did in Boston.[80] We had a formal arrangement in which the three groups – teachers, community, and parents – had to agree on the principal.

LC: So, let's shift back to your work of establishing democratic schools. We left off in the early seventies when you went to work for Lillian Weber. How long does that last?

DM: So, it lasts until I started Central Park East (CPE). I spent a year working with her in the schools and district where I lived, especially in PS 84, where a man named Sid Morison was the principal and he wanted transform the whole school. The other place was PS 87, which was next to where I lived; there was a principal that I liked a lot, Arthur Block. Lillian asked me whether I'd be willing to go into District 2, you know where that is?

LC: On the East Side.

DM: The East Side and the West Side below Lincoln Center. With the exception of District 1, which is on the Lower East Side. And there was a superintendent there, Rhoda Lansky. She said I didn't have to go into the district office – I didn't want to go to the district office. I said if I'm going to work with schools, I don't want to have to get involved with the district. I want to figure out what we can do in the schools. She sent out a general memo to all the schools saying that I was available to work with a school where, if there were at least five teachers in the school who would like to work with me and a principal was sufficiently supportive to put them in the following year put them on the same 'open corridor' together. So, I did that with about four schools.

[80] This is a reference to the school Meier founded in Boston in 1997, the Mission Hill School. She discusses the school in later sections of the oral history.

DM: On Fridays we went up to City College and we all met together, all of the Workshop advisors, to talk about dilemmas and issues. And even there they said "democracy is not a natural instinct in people." So, if Lillian wasn't available on Friday, we didn't have a meeting. And at one point I said to my fellow advisors "Why don't we meet when she's not here." They all looked sort of askance and said "Let's do it next time. But let's not meet up here because I don't want to hurt Lillian's feelings. We need to meet in someone's house." And I thought, God, here are these brave people going out trying to work in schools, and they're afraid to confront Lillian by saying "Why should we call off the meeting because you're not available?" But she had said that we weren't supposed to be in schools on Friday, so in other words, when she wasn't free, we should hang out at home or something else. And I think Lillian went along with us meeting in our homes, but I don't think if we'd been confronted, she would have entirely agreed with what we did. I think she would have been insulted. But who knows?

DM: In District 3, there was a woman named Blossom Gelernter.[81] She was one of the people from the More Effective Schools. Her husband was very active in the union, although he was eventually pushed out of leadership because they were against the Vietnam War. I hired Blossom, and she joined me as an advisor in the Workshop program. She eventually started a school on the Lower West Side, PS 234, the Independence School. It was in a new school building on the Lower West Side, right off the West Side Highway in Tribeca. But she came out of this work with Lillian Weber. She had brought together a group of teachers and she eventually suggested that they start a school.

DM: And at another point during this period where I was working in District 2, parents in Greenwich Village decided they want to start a progressive school. It's now PS 3, the Charrette School. And they asked me to apply to lead it. A lot of my friends thought "Oh that would be wonderful, we could work with you and that would be fun." We had all kinds of dreams. We would make the first floor for artists, and not as teachers, but any artist who is willing to let kids just sit and watch her work alongside them. In any

[81] Meier had discussed the Gelernters in the first session of the oral history, on page 45 above. See note 57 for a brief description of them.

case we had fun thinking about it. And then I applied for the job. I got to the final round, and I saw a major problem. This school had been a parent idea, they thought it was their school, and I wasn't sure if the teachers would have a lot of voice in the school. And they apparently sensed my reservations and chose a guy who was from New Zealand, John Melser, who was very oriented toward the parents. On reflection, I wasn't that disappointed because I realized first, that I would not have been very good at dealing with Village parents. Who knows for sure, but I don't think so. But second, since I had a special interest in civil rights issues, there would have been conflict, because this was going to be a predominantly white school.

DM: It was just shortly after the PS 3 process, that I got the offer from Tony Alvarado, who was Superintendent of District 4 in East Harlem which led to the creation of Central Park East (CPE). A friend of mine, Bonnie Brownstein, was working for him as a science coordinator. She had been at PS 84, and I knew her from there, and she was now in this East Harlem district Harlem and put him in touch with me. Alvarado was about thirty. He had virtually no teaching experience, and didn't have the slightest idea what he was doing, which was why he was so terrific at this point – he didn't know what he was not supposed to do. Once he figured out what he wasn't supposed to do, he wasn't quite as good. The one thing he had decided was to create some life in the district – some controversy, some experimentation should be going on. So, he wanted some interesting people to start schools. Now, he was influenced also by the fact that he was married to a woman, his second wife Ellen Kirshbaum, who was a fusspot and a very good educator. And she wanted to start a school in which the arts were a vehicle for teaching everything.[82] And so, I used to kid him that he needed me because if he'd done it just for her, it would have looked like nepotism.

DM: But he actually made it clear that he was prepared to have educators start new schools, so even when people got mad at one of us, he would say, "if you want to start a school, start one of your own. Come to me when you have an interesting idea and a plan." He said, "I don't know that I've turned

[82] Kirshbaum founded and for a period of time led the East Harlem Performing Arts School.

down anything yet." It did create a sense that teaching was an interesting occupation in which people had ideas, and that if teachers had good ideas, they would be better teachers. If they thought they had some power over their schools, they would be creative. Most of the schools weren't as fully democratic as CPE, but they were collections of teachers who wanted to work together and found a teacher to be director. Eventually, they were required to become principals, not just directors.

LC: So, these experimental schools were sprinkled throughout East Harlem?

DM: Oh, around East Harlem, these little collections of people who had an idea.

LC: In what year do you actually start CPE?[83]

DM: The fall of '74. We started planning it in '73. And in the summer of '73, I went and spent a month in England. Their school calendar ended in July, so I went there in June and spent a month at Brunswick Park Primary School in Camberwell, South London that friends of mine, Ann Cook and company, suggested. Lillian Weber gave me marvelous advice when I went. She said, "Do not spend your time thinking about how this is going to be in your school." She said, too many people visit a place and say, "I couldn't do this because my sink is over here, not there." She said, "Just experience it." Just move into it totally and then when you start your own school, it'll have an influence.

DM: The principal of the school was a woman named Wendla Kernig, who I have stayed in touch with ever since. Back when we started Central Park East she came over and did the most spectacular professional development project with our school. She was a rebel, although she was actually seriously religious. She wouldn't do all the things of a religious nature you're supposed to do in English public schools; she said, I take my religion too seriously to trivialize it this way. And apparently she got away with it. This was one of the things that always amazed me about teachers: how few of them realized how much you could get away with.

[83] Meier tells the story of Central Park East from her point of view in her book *The power of their ideas: Lessons for America from a small school in Harlem*.

LC: Never ask for permission, just apologize if you get caught: that was my mantra.

DM: When people would complain to me the school won't let me do something, I said, how do you know it won't? You don't know whether you could do it, so try doing it. And then if the time comes where they're going to threaten to fire you, that's when you can make the decision, do you need this job enough and is it really worth being fired for this, but you don't have to make it now. Believe me, it's unlikely that anyone is ever going to try to fire you.

DM: This issue came up because a music teacher at one of the CPE schools said that someone had come into her classroom and told her as a new teacher, what songs she's supposed to teach in each grade. And they made a big point, it was very important not to teach the fourth grade songs in the third grade because then the kids would be bored when you introduced it in fourth grade. I said, so how often do you think that woman's going to come visit you? And she said, not very often. I said, it's absurd that you're worrying about that. If you want, you should keep doing it, and have a line ready for a visit, such as "oh, this was just an unusual day, some child brought this up and I thought we would just do it today, normally we…" Even if you can't have democracy in the school, you can at least not start censoring yourself. Kids have grown up in the schools where they've learned about being a grown up, from grown up teachers, and they follow in their path.

LC: So, you start the school –

DM: Well, not by myself; it was with colleagues. So, we went with people at Lillian Weber's Workshop Center who were open to doing this, plus one person, a Black woman, who came from Hunter College. She was part of some other project, and I had met because she was working in District 2 as a supervisor of student teachers in District Two. And when she heard I was starting CPE, she said, "Oh, I want to go back to the classroom. Can I?" I made a concerted effort to make sure we had a racial mix of colleagues,

and I said yes. Six of us started the school together. We were all in the classroom.

LC: How did you start? Did you phase in grades?

DM: Yes, we had planned to start off with kindergarten, first, and second. We started a third, which I taught, because when we were recruiting parents there was enough younger children who had siblings in the third, to justify a class in that grade. We had mixed classes, K-1s and 2-3s. It was the first time I taught anything but kindergarten. We had a machine in the office that said, "We're sorry all the adults in the building are busy with children, please leave a message and we'll get back to you when the children leave." Now of course, some parents had good reasons to object to that message, so we ended up taking it out and we'd check the message box regularly, in case they wanted to call to say, well I won't be able to pick her up today, or something. And we spent some time going around the neighborhood to Head Start centers and public housing recruiting and encouraging people to come. When we started out, and by the end of September we only had about 50 or 60 kids. We wanted to be at 100 kids to start, as that would make 4 classes of 25 students each. By the end of November we were up to almost 100. At this point, the word had got around the Head Start Centers that we were doing a school, and I think some of the Head Start teachers some, primarily urged parents with kids who were somewhat rambunctious. So the reputation of the school at the beginning was that we were a good place for misfits. And principals from other schools would call and say to me, "I have a wonderful child here, wonderful family, and I think they would do much better at your school." And I would have this little conversation with them, "Why not at your school?" "Well they need a larger space." I'd say, "We don't have any more space, classrooms are regular classrooms." And I'd say, "Listen, as a principal, you can't send a child here, but any parent who wants to can apply, so you are perfectly welcome to tell her that she can apply." But it was clear that we were thought of as a place you could send kids to…

LC: Get rid of your problems.

DM: It didn't mean that all of the kids were like that. I mean, some people just were impressed with teachers who came out to their living place, and talked respectfully, and understood some of their race issues, and educational problems, and were in a school with a mixed race staff.

DM: Now, Lillian Weber was opposed to starting CPE.

LC: Why?

DM: Well, she has an argument that I realize I now sometimes use against charters. She said, "You know, you create an ideal world in your school, and they don't have to address issues in other schools."

LC: Create a pocket of innovation that doesn't spread to other schools.

DM: So, we lived happily ever after. Actually, in the third year of the school, which was when the 1975 fiscal crisis hit, we had problems. Our first intention was to have our own building. There was a Catholic school closing at 117th Street or thereabouts, and the initial idea was that we would rent the space and move in there. One of the teachers who were going to join us was a woman named Kathleen Maloney – she was a nun or former nun who no longer wore the habit. She loved the idea. She said, "Oh, I'll become a teacher there and in the morning I'll put on my habit and stand out front and that will safeguard the school from any vandalism." But when Alvarado heard rumors about the cuts that were coming as a result of the fiscal crisis, he said, we are not going to be able to afford to rent the space. A lot of schools in the district were underutilized.

DM: And I think they already had to close one school under Alvarado because the neighborhood population was getting older and there were fewer children. So, then he found this public school building (PS 171) to move us where the principal, whose name I've forgotten, was friendly to our educational vision – she had come occasionally to the Workshop Center. She hadn't been principal very long and liked the idea of CPE being located in her building. Unfortunately, a year later, she left to go back to Puerto Rico to start a school, and a woman with different educational views replaced her, and we had fights forevermore.

LC: From the beginning, were you independent?

DM: We reported directly to Alvarado. At some point he hired Sy Fliegel (as Director of Alternative Programs and then Deputy Superintendent – LC), but we were never responsible to the principal in the building.[84]

LC: She was of the mind that the principal was the captain of the ship?

DM: Yes. She felt invaded. She had been dreaming all of her life, she later on explained to me, of being a teacher, becoming a principal and having her own building. For her, it was a kind of castle. So, the notion that she was going to have to put up with me… I think she may also have felt that I was treated more favorably. That wasn't true. Tony (Alvarado) may have liked me better than he liked her, but I don't think he played favorites. In fact, in some budgetary ways, I think we were cheated. Then another school, started by a woman named Maryann Marripodi, moved into the top floor of the building. They were a middle school with seventh and eighth graders.

[84] At this point, in the mid- and late-1970s, there was a sense of common purpose among Alvarado, Fliegel and Meier. By the mid-1980s, their views had begun to diverge. Alvarado rode the success of his East Harlem experiments into the position of Chancellor of New York City public schools, but after a very short tenure, he was forced out due to revelations of financial improprieties. He had a second act as a Community School District Superintendent, this time for more than a decade in District 2, where another cohort of small experimental schools was created. But unlike District 4, District 2 was in the wealthiest parts of the city, and many of these schools became enclaves for the children of white, professional families. In 1998, Alvarado moved to San Diego, where he garnered controversy with the introduction of highly prescriptive instructional methods. Meier's earlier comment that Alvarado "wasn't quite as good" once he had been around for a while is a reference to this trajectory.

Fliegel started the Center for Education Innovation in 1989 as an affiliated program of the conservative Manhattan Institute, and CEI was one of the organizations working with Meier in the NY Networks for School Renewal discussed later in the oral history. Fliegel was an avid supporter of the top-down, market reforms of public education enacted by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. He wrote a book on the District 4 experiment, *Miracle in East Harlem: The Fight for Choice in Public Education*, which promoted a market vision of the experiments in the district.

At the same time, Meier was moving in a very different direction, one which was increasingly critical of the growing role of standardized testing in schooling and of various market-based reforms of public schools. She was opposed to what she saw as the market reformers misuse of the small schools movement which she had helped start. In 2005, Meier joined Ann Cook, Michelle Fine and others who had pioneered the 'small school' movement in a special issue of *Rethinking Schools* dedicated to discussions of how that movement had been hijacked by corporate philanthropy.

LC: Is this the Jackie Robinson complex?

DM: No. This is before we moved to Jackie Robinson. It was 103rd Street, right off of Central Park. The Museum of the City of New York is on our corner. We were right behind the museum and across the street from Mt. Sinai Hospital. Jackie Robinson was a middle school (IS 13) that was being closed.[85] And we moved there when we wanted to start the Central Park East Secondary School and they wanted to close IS 13. That was, maybe, ten years later.

DM: We had so many applications, still mostly from East Harlem. So, we started Central Park East 2, another elementary school. I was the director for a short while for both schools; CPE 2 was located in another building east of us on 99th Street between First and Second Avenues. Then we hired co-directors. It wasn't as expensive then because you hired a teacher who was called a director.

LC: At what point did this become an issue? That you couldn't have directors, and they had to become principals?

DM: The problems came from CSA, the supervisors union. I objected to becoming a principal, and it didn't affect me. It happened while Jane Andrias was director of CPE 1, and she had to become a principal. I think it happened sometime around '81.

LC: So, you were never a principal?

DM: Not until we founded CPESS (Central Park East Secondary School), and New York State required principals for high schools. And, of course, being a troublemaker, I made an issue that the alternative high school principals were being paid less, and not on the basis of size of the school, which I could've understood. When I was in Chicago, the principals were paid by the size of the school, so every principal started as an elementary school principal and worked his way up.

[85] Jackie Robinson is a few blocks over from PS 171, on 106th Street and Madison.

LC: That's true of custodians in New York City schools. That's why a school can never keep a good custodian, because the way a custodian would get more money was to move to a bigger building.

DM: I said, "I'm not doing this where you are purposely going to make me take an exam so I can get paid less." They had a different exam for alternative school principals, too. That was later. At this time we were still connected with Lillian Weber's Workshop Center, and we became involved with an amazing cluster of people from the Educational Testing Service (ETS). It was the last place in the world you'd think we would find allies. We had become somewhat hostile to early childhood testing. Testing was much more optional for me. But New York City started testing at second grade. It wasn't a state test; it was a city test. I got some funding – this was actually before I started CPE – and we did a study of students in central Harlem, of why kids give the answers they do. It came out as a little booklet. It was an eye-opener for me.

DM: I'm at the point of telling a story about you, Nicholas. (Meier's son Nicholas is now in the room, having just entered to ask if we want lunch. – LC) When he was in third grade, the first year we lived in New York, I got a notification, this is before I was teaching, that he had failed the reading test and he needed to have remedial reading class. And I said, "Nothing could be more absurd. He reads everything he can get his hands on. He's a bookworm and he stays up at night reading and I have to go in and grab books away from him." And they said, "Doesn't matter." And so on. I said, "I refuse. He's not going to take remedial reading." And what I didn't know was I was therefore put into the record that used to be sealed. They didn't let parents see the cumulative records. It said, "Mother a troublemaker." When I got friendly with Seabrook, the principal that we helped bring into MS 44, he showed it to me and said, "Good for you."

LC: That's funny.

DM: Any case, when I started teaching, I got a copy of the test. These tests were not exactly secret. But any case, I got a copy of the next year's test and I tried it out with him. This was more like January, November, or something. And his answers were brilliant. I mean, they were wonderful. They were

wrong, but they were wonderful. He even knew what he was supposed to say. He'd say, "They probably think I should say 'D' but 'B' really is better." I said, "I know, but how will they know that?" He said, "Oh, I write a little note next to it." He had his own theory for doing the test.

DM: At the same time a book came out by a Nobel Prize physicist who had gone through the same exercise I had, and he thought that ETS had misidentified wrong answers in standardized exams of physics, that there was more than one correct answer. The ETS people explained to him that, yes, he was right. You'd have to be quite sophisticated to know that he was right. They found in their sampling of the test that the kids who were brighter kids gave 'C' as the answer, and only the extraordinarily bright kids would give 'D'. But most of the kids who gave 'D' as the answer were doing it for the wrong reasons. And so on and so forth. The physicist was enraged by what they were doing. He thought at least if they're going to give alternatives to a correct answer, they should make sure they were really wrong. But he was more upset by discovering how they chose the right answers: they did so based on which test takers were supposed to get the answer right. If those test takers got the answer wrong, then the item was a bad item. They had to have levels of difficulty to differentiate among test takers, and they knew which test takers were supposed to pass at each level. I found this unbelievable, and I got involved with this guy Ted Chittenden at ETS who I began to go to conferences with and I would always have him sit next to me.[86] And I'd say, "If I make a mistake here explaining this nudge me. I'm having a hard time explaining this in a way that makes sense." I got involved in the testing issue and began to be a speaker on testing issues. New York City actually did drop the second grade reading test at some point or another; the tests started in the third grade then. My relationship with ETS at that time was much more sophisticated than what was wrong with this or that test. I had a source. I'd always say –

LC: You had an authority.

DM: Yes. You may think I'm stupid, but here is a man who's employed full time by ETS. He's a psychologist and a testing maven. Ted began to work with us,

[86] See Meier's comments on Chittenden's passing here.

in a way on assessment issues, but he was trying to think himself about kids' answers and the underlying reasoning, and what we mean by right and wrong answers. He did some marvelous work in our school around science education. He was eventually released by ETS part time to work with the Museum of Natural History on their education department. The realization that even ETS was filled with people who knew better about standardized tests was striking. He then did a study on children learning to read. Not on teachers teaching, but on how students learned. He had a number of schools that were not all teaching the same way, and he had teachers who were interested in the study each pick two kids who they thought were fairly typical. In other words, they weren't kids who had already learned to read on their own or kids who seemed to have serious problems. And he tracked how they were learning to read. Ted wrote a book on the study, *Inquiry into Meaning: An Investigation of Learning to Read*, which is a marvelous book; it is about what he discovered through this research. There was a range, from kids who learned systematically, piece by piece, to kids who learned globally. The global learners were actually very interested in what each word meant but were willing to skip lots of words. They got involved in books that were over their head but had figured out how to read the same way we most of us learned to talk. We're surrounded by it, and pick up pieces of it here and there, and make sense of it. We develop theories – unconscious theories – about what's happening. We abandon some of those theories and pursue others. If you interrupted the process of the global learners, you were making it more difficult for them to learn how to read. And they were the systematic learners who if you didn't give them some rules, so to speak, would have a hard time learning to read. And there were a lot of kids in the middle. It didn't matter too much how we taught them to read, because they'd learn to read regardless of the approach.

DM: By the way, somewhere during this process, a funder at the Exxon Educational Foundation was interested in the issue of SAT scores and race. He gave us a small amount of money – $25,000 or $50,000 something like that – to do research on what happened to our kids after graduation. They wanted us to see what effects a different approach to education might have. It wasn't a very scientific study, but we hired a guy named Arthur Tobier to track down kids who had left CPE, how things were going for

them 10 years after we started with the first classes at CPE. He found those students and looked at how they had done in high school, and if they'd gone to college at all. It was nice for us because we had been amazingly successful. Although a large number of kids went on to college, at that time it was too early to see whether they would finish college. But very few of them went to colleges that required SATs, so we couldn't address the issue, of whether using SATs mattered. In the end the Exxon guy said to me, "We're very interested in the study, but it doesn't change the world." And I said, "You thought for $50,000, you could change the world?" Later we hired David Bensman to look at our graduates in a more systematic way, and his study was published as *Central Park East and Its Graduates: Learning by Heart*.

LC: So, you begin to institutionalize a culture at CPE, and develop frameworks like the 'Habits of Mind.'

DM: Actually, that came later. The Habits of Mind started with CPESS, and then we found ways to migrate it downward to the lower grades. In the early days of CPE, having outside affiliations was very important. It begins with Lillian Weber's Workshop, then the ETS connection. They were directly involved with the school, and were very influential for us, involved in interviewing students and providing insight into what was happening. We had a lot of stimulus from outside. Interesting people who would –

LC: Including Ted Sizer?[87]

DM: Ted was later, when we started CPESS.

[87] Ted Sizer was a leading 20th century American educator. After a stint in the US Army, Sizer earned a doctorate in education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1961, where he taught and served as Dean. After an exhausting period in leadership at the end of the 1960s, Sizer and his wife decided in 1971 that they wanted to teach in an urban public high school; unable to find a position due to licensing issues, he ended up serving for close to a decade as the headmaster of the elite prep school, Phillips Academy Andover, where he honed many of his ideas about high school education. He then wrote a book for which he is best known, *Horace's Compromise*, which provided a critical lens on the organization of the American high school, and returned to academia at head of the Department of Education at Brown University. Based on the principles elaborated in *Horace's Compromise*, Sizer founded the Coalition of Essential Schools, with Meier playing a leading role in the organization. He also founded the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, which supported a number of school reform efforts, including efforts in which Meier was involved that are discussed later in the oral history.

DM: On one hand, we were very careful to be clear that we in the school made the decisions. But we were not of the belief that we knew all the answers. So, we tried to find a balance. We need to be accountable for finding out, are there other better ways to do this than what we are now doing. But the decision on what to do always remained in our hands. We were accountable for the decisions, so we had to have the power to make them. There's a principle in the Catholic Church that you might know… Leo Casey, do you have a side of your family…

LC: I was raised as a Catholic.

DM: Maybe you hadn't heard of this principle, but it's called subsidiarity. You can look that up. It says decisions should be made by those who have to carry them out and are closest to implementation. Now I've often wondered what it has to do with Catholicism.[88] All my Catholic friends, like Peter Steinfels, well they all immediately know what I am talking about when I mention it. "Oh, yes. That's very important," they say.

LC: Not in the Catholicism that I remember. But my introduction to politics was through the Berrigan brothers and the Catholic Worker – the Catholic left, not the mainstream church.

DM: They probably agreed with that idea. They had to make the decisions. But in any case, we lived at a time when a lot of people were criticizing us and testing other assumptions, you know, so that it was important to stay alert. You know, you had to know the arguments.

LC: Did you start the advisories in CPE?

DM: No, because in the elementary school, students were always with one class. When we started the secondary school, CPESS, and students were taking different subject classes, so the advisory became important.

[88] Meier's sense of puzzlement may come from the fact that in its own internal governance, the Catholic Church is usually rather hierarchical. But subsidiarity is more a doctrine on how secular government, rather than the church itself, should function.

DM: We started CPESS because the kids who graduated from CPE and their parents were complaining to us about –

LC: Having to go to regular schools.

DM: It wasn't that they were doing so badly, but that they just find it boring. They had interesting classes at our schools, and then suddenly it was not so interesting.[89] Parents complained that their kids were coming home, and they'd say, "What did you do today?" and the kids would say, "Nothing." At our schools, the kids would come home with interesting stories. It was about our ninth year, and we were planning for the tenth year celebration of Central Park East. We did a lot of things for the schools together: we held retreats for all three schools, together. And in the early years parents applied to all of the schools together. The district started banking our schools in the admissions process, so if a family had a special reason for wanting to go to one of them, like where they lived, we would take note of that. (In those days, River East was part of our little group: the woman who started the school, Shelly Price, unfortunately got married and moved to France. She would have been wonderful.) So, we began to think about this secondary school question, and we didn't like the idea of just adding seventh and eighth grades. We agreed that a good solution might be to add seventh through twelfth grades. I had a history of that, the school I went to as a child, a private school, had elementary school and a secondary – seven through twelve – school.

DM: So, we started thinking about how to organize a secondary school, and I read an article Ted Sizer wrote, which was, I think it became a chapter in *Horace's Compromise*. And I thought, "My God, this is a high school person who's talking like a progressive elementary school teacher. Kids aren't being challenged, learning to think deeply, and so forth. He was also aware of class and race: he talks about how you can tell within five minutes of walking into a school, what social class the school students are. And he was saying that even the best schools are not intellectually very stimulating, but

[89] Meier is referring to three public elementary schools in East Harlem that came out of Central Park East, and shared a common mission and pedagogy: Central Park East 1, the original school Meier founded in 1974; Central Park East 2, founded in 1981; and River East, founded in 1982. Over time, River East would become less institutionally intertwined with the two CPEs, even though it remained committed to progressive education.

when compared to the schools we send our least privileged kids, they are stimulating. He seemed to have all the right prejudices.

DM: I did notice, however, that he came from a very WASPish background and as someone who's very nervous about WASPs, it made me hesitant. It took me a long time to really trust Ted. And occasionally there would be something he would say that would show to me that WASP background. So, I called someone I knew in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, and I told her we were thinking about starting a secondary school and asked her about him. She said, "I'm going to talk to him tonight," and then she called me back within ten minutes, "He said you should call him directly. He'd love to talk to you about it." And I called him and he said, "I'm just starting to think about forming an organization of schools, and I am interested in working on your idea."

DM: And so, we conspired, and Ted came to our ten year celebration, and at the end of his speech, he said "This school is wonderful, why don't you just keep it going through high school?" I reacted as though it was, "What an interesting idea." And there were some officials there from the district, and so we then pursued it. We met with Tony Alvarado, who was then the Chancellor. Somebody else was the superintendent in District 4. Steve Philips was Superintendent of Alternative Schools in the High School division.[90] There was a plot between them. Ted met with all these people and got their agreement. We could start CPESS with the approval of the district, because the first two years would be the seventh and eighth grades. But for grades nine through twelve, we would be under the alternative high schools. With these structures, initially we were not official schools. Not only did we not have principals, but we weren't official schools. Our students were on the roster of some other school, and our

[90] Under the 1969 school decentralization law which governed New York City public schools at this point of time, K-8 schools (elementary and middle schools) were governed by the 32 local community school districts, while high schools were governed directly by the central Board of Education through a Division of High Schools. As a result, the CPE elementary schools could be established by Community School District 4, but grades 9 through 12 at Central Park East Secondary School had to be established by the central Board. This is why to start CPESS Meier needed the cooperation of Tony Alvarado, who had moved on from District 4 to become the Chancellor of the entire school system, and Steve Phillips, who was in charge of alternative high schools in the Division of High Schools. Since Alvarado's tenure as Chancellor was short due to a personal financial scandal and subsequent resignation, the founding of CPESS bled over into the tenure of the next Chancellor, Nathan Quinones.

teachers were on the rosters of other schools. So, if you called the Central Board and said Central Park East Secondary School, most of them would have no…

LC: …idea what you were talking about. So, Ted Sizer.

DM: So, Ted Sizer was organizing the first meeting of the Coalition of Essential Schools. And I meet some of the other people who are planning to start schools there, like four or five of us. Ted had some ideas, and I was trying to find some way that we could have a set of intellectual premises that held the school together and that were good for any subject area. Few enough so that kids could remember them and begin to be comfortable with them. And so, we talked about it at first, as we planned CPESS. We started off with something like the question, "What do you want kids to know?" I don't remember the exact words, but everyone would answer it for the subject they taught. But as the fifth person who taught physics got to the board and wrote down all the things in physics that students should know, and we looked at the boards, we realized this is absurd. The English teacher doesn't know what the physics teacher thinks everybody should know by the end of their time in high school, and the physics teacher doesn't know what the English teacher thinks everyone should know. There's something wrong with this approach if we ourselves find that a lot on this board are things, we ourselves don't know.

DM: So, we started to think about it in a different way. We approached the problem with hypotheticals: if you're having dinner with somebody, how do you know whether they're well-educated? Formally or informally educated? And that brought us to the questions, "what's the evidence?" and "how do we know what we know?" And that became the first phrase in what we called the "Habits of Mind." [91] We decided to keep it to five habits,

[91] The 'habits of mind' were an overarching framework developed within CPESS to guide study in different subject areas, approaching it as intellectual labor. They were organized around five questions:

- How do we know what we know? (Evidence)
- From whose point of view is this being presented? (Perspective)
- How is this event or work connected to others? What causes what? (Connection)
- What if things were different? (Supposition)
- Who cares? Why is this important? (Relevance) →

and never to have more. And if we found another one, we would figure out a way to squeeze it into the ones that were already there, or replace one of them with it. And once we established them, Ted Sizer said, "they are totally worth saying." So, it was nice.

LC: Is this a framework that grew out of teachers discussing their classroom practice?

DM: Well, no, this all happened before we opened the school. We were all experienced, very experienced teachers. But the questions we asked in fact were not what you'd expect your students to ask. After we went through the exercise of thinking about our different disciplines, we realized that we needed a more general framework. And so, these 'habits of mind' grew out of that discussion, and then it was very nice that it fit every discipline, that it was true for physics as for history and English, and that it was true for life in general. So, I would use them for when the kids had a disagreement about something or other. I would ask those questions, like "how do you know what you know?"

LC: So, do you think that the 'habits of mind' which you had acquired over your political life have had any influence here?

DM: Yeah. I could say, I went to the University of Chicago. And I have a lot of respect for that – abstractly, people do – but the fact of the matter is that I got my graduate education from being a member of a radical socialist, largely Jewish movement.

DM: Leo Casey, how did you get into this radical Jewish movement?

LC: I went to Antioch College.

DM: …which was full of radical New York Jews.

Brent Duckor's and Daniel Perlstein's essay, "Assessing Habits of Mind: Teaching to the Test at Central Park East Secondary School," provides a thorough and insightful account of their use in CPESS.

LC: Yes. I don't know that I wouldn't have found my way to the socialist movement even if I hadn't gone to Antioch – I was an anti-war radical in high school – but it was my connection.

DM: My roommate at Antioch was from Pennsylvania and she was a devout Christian. She was there on a church scholarship. I think her parents thought Antioch had something to do with the Bible.

LC: The Bible?

DM: And she said to me, after about a month of being roommates, she said, "You're the first Jew I've ever met, and I just am still trying to figure out… I don't want to insult you; I like you a lot." She was just trying to find a way to say to me, "You don't have horns."

LC: So, it is interesting, because when I think about having a similar political education and having spent my graduate school years in a certain sense working my way through Marxism, ending up as a post-Marxist, but still quite radical and democratic. What's left intellectually after that experience? And for me, it's certain 'habits of mind': analysis that looks at the whole, finding the interconnections, seeing things as dynamic relationships, always looking at the role of power and organizing…

DM: Yeah, I was thinking about this recently. I was talking to someone about the events in the United States, and they were saying whose fault this or that was, and I said, "it's good to remember that this is happening around the world, which means that there's some part that is not just the United States." It's deeper. That is one of the 'habits of mind,' which is "Have you seen this before? Is there a connection?"

LC: So CPESS starts in '85.

DM: And we started with just seventh grade, and grew out, year by year. We started with 80 kids, four classes of 20. We were very big on keeping class size small, which I think is an enormous issue. In a room, there should be 12 to 15 students, which was our advisory size. You know I was an advisor myself. The next year we decided to keep the same advisory together, for

seventh and eighth grades, so advisor, the students and the families all knew each other well. We decided that a big issue was that once kids get to seventh, eighth and ninth grades, people thought that families didn't matter anymore. And in some ways, the kids encourage that. Yet they actually need parents more than they did earlier, precisely because they're struggling with consequences for their actions that are much graver. All the adults need to be working together to protect their lives and futures. And so, we made a big point to parents: "We need you more than you were needed before. We will keep no important secrets from you; you may keep secrets from us, but we promise not to keep secrets from you." And we had a policy with the kids, in telling them that "If you tell us something, you have to trust our judgment, whether we think it's a secret that has to be shared with family. So don't tell us something that you don't want shared, and don't tell it to someone whose judgment you don't trust on this question." We got involved with Mount Sinai's adolescent clinic, and we said, "If you have a secret you want to keep from us and your parents, go there, because their obligation is to keep your secrets." And I think it mattered a lot; it was a very helpful approach. We could then have honest conversations.

DM: We also had started the practice in the elementary school of having the kids and as many members of the family who wanted to come at family conferences. So, instead of teacher-parent conferences, we had become family-school conferences. And they lasted 30 minutes to an hour. And we did that in the high school, too. So here, the report card was written by the advisor, who had to consult with all of the other teachers. But he put it together and held conferences about it. And if there was one of those other teachers who may felt needed to be at the conference, family conference, they arranged for the person to be there. So, we could address problems with kids present, always with the kids present.

DM: That's something that came out of the elementary schools, not out of Ted Sizer's book.[92] I think that the school was a combination of the insights that

[92] The intersection of Sizer's *Horace Compromise* and the founding of CPESS and similar schools led to a set of common principles for schools that guided the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools:

- Schools should focus on helping young people learn to use their minds well.
- Less is more: schools should prioritize in-depth learning over broad coverage of subjects. →

Ted brought us, plus the experience we had had in the elementary schools. We had one other elementary school teacher on our first CPESS staff. And we were in the same building with the elementary school, and that was very important, as we had the high school teachers go down and look at what the elementary school teachers were doing, the way the rooms were arranged, and son. And how different they looked than high school rooms, and what does that tell you about how learning is organized.

LC: The attempt to learn across the levels can be done so poorly. When (then New York City Schools Chancellor) Joel Klein first decided to throw the high schools into the community school districts, you had these superintendents who had no high school experience in charge of high schools. And they would go into a classroom and say things like "Where's your word wall?"[93]

DM: Might not have been a bad idea!

LC: You would not have won yourself any friends among high school teachers with that suggestion. The idea drove them insane.

DM: But most of the time, people go to the elementary schools to look for the foundation of what the kids were expected to know in high school. That's one way of thinking of the issue. But we first wanted to think about "why can't you have a classroom that looks like that? They're all such attractive rooms; most high school rooms are very bare." We realized how much of that has to do with the way the high school is structured. The elementary classroom teacher teaches all of the subjects, stays in the same room with

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- The school's goals should apply to all students, while the means to these goals will vary.
- Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent.
- The governing practical metaphors of the school should be "student-as-worker" and "teacher-as-coach
- Teaching and learning should be documented and assessed with tools based on student performance of real tasks.
- Schools should be defined by a tone of decency and trust.
- The principal and teachers should perceive themselves as generalists first (teachers and scholars in general education) and specialists second (experts in but one particular discipline).
- School resources should be dedicated to the central work of teaching and learning.
- Schools should practice democracy and equity.

[93] "Word walls" are a common technique for expanding children's vocabulary in early literacy acquisition.

the students, and has ownership of the room; that wasn't the case in high school. In any case, we began to explore what practices in the elementary school should be continued. With the 'habits of mind,' it was the other way around, and we said, "why don't we do something like that in elementary school." And "why didn't we have a graduation process for the sixth grade like the portfolios we're using for the twelfth grade?" So, it went both ways.

LC: Let's talk about the portfolios and the graduation process.[94] How did they evolve?

DM: Well, first of all there's Ted Sizer's idea that a student should graduate not when they have completed certain credit hours, but on the basis of showing a mastery of a subject. Sizer didn't think you could show that with a standardized test, but there was another kind of examination process, not so different from the defense of a doctoral dissertation. For serious intellectual work, they don't give you a test.

DM: You know, we make very important decisions this way. In fact, employers make important decisions this way: an employer doesn't hire you on the basis of a test that you take, but interviews, documents, calls with people who worked with you and so forth. As we started to develop the Senior Institute (grades eleven and twelve), I hired Haven Henderson to look at ways to graduate students where they demonstrate mastery.

DM: We heard of a school in Wisconsin called the Walden School. It was a public high school and that was the only school that we could find in the country that was graduating this way, using portfolios. So, we went out there and visited the school at a time they were giving some of their graduation performances, and essentially adopted their plan. We made some changes – a major one was focusing on the 'habits of mind' – because we were designing a system in which we wanted to be able to see whether the students were actually using these habits in their work. We had the students defend their written work in the portfolio, with a committee to

[94] For a description of the CPESS portfolios and graduation, see Linda Darling-Hammond and Jackie Ancess, "Graduation by Portfolio at Central Park East" (NCREST: December 1994.) See also the 1993 documentary on CPESS, "Graduation by Portfolio."

review it, which was part of the plan they had in Walden, but we were judging kids not only on their written work, but also their response to questions we asked them and dilemmas we posed to them. We were properly judging them on the basis of their using the 'habits of mind.' Did they present evidence? Did they weigh the evidence, explaining why they felt this evidence was better than that evidence? Did they see the connections between different things?

LC: Is it during the time of creating CPESS that the relationship with Urban Academy and International High School develops?

DM: I knew Ann Cook and Herb Mack (co-founders of Urban Academy – LC) from Chicago. I knew Ann from Civil Rights movement work, but I was also impressed with this project they had with University of Chicago students tutoring students from predominantly Black schools in Woodlawn.[95] What impressed me most was that it was well organized. Every tutor knew what their job was, and every student knew where they should go. Lots of tutoring programs have good intentions but didn't use the volunteers well. I knew about their politics; we weren't close friends, but we were friends. Then while I was teaching at PS 144 one day who walks in but Ann and Herb, with some visitors. They just got back from England where they had done a lot of work and was entering into the New York education scene, and for some reason someone sent them out to this school. This is when we had this open corridor experiment.[96] And we looked at each other. So, we picked up our friendship, and became good friends.

DM: I'll tell you a side story. At some point, we became well known for the work we were doing at PS 144, and Anne Spero would often bring visitors to see our classes. One day, this visitor comes over to me at one point, and she says, "those kids are playing cards in the corner." They were actually flipping cards. And she wanted to know why they were doing that. I looked over and I thought they're fooling around, but I said, "It's a very important

[95] See prior discussion of this project on p. 37 above. Cook and Mack were active in SNCC at this time.

[96] For a description of this experiment, see p. 51 above.

– it's a famous Piaget experiment that they're playing."[97] Oh, she said and went back and told the people and they all nodded their heads. So, there's a certain 'con'nery that helps when you're going to experiment.

LC: When did you meet Eric Nadelstern (founder of International High School – LC)?

DM: I met Eric when he became involved with the Coalition of Essential Schools.[98] We spent a good deal of time together because he knew more about high school than me. A number of people were very helpful to me in starting CPESS, because my most recent frame of reference for high school was my children's experience, which was not very good. His experience with International High School was very helpful.

DM: But I think I ended up borrowing a lot from my own schooling at Fieldston. I was told that it would not work with the kids that attended CPESS, that it was only for upper class kids. That I think was one of the biggest motivators for me: the idea that our kids were incapable of intellectual work.

DM: We found we should regularly revisit what we were doing to see how well it was working. What was helpful, what studies like David Bensman's did, was remind us to not drop certain practices. You know sometimes you think "oh well I think we need to focus more on this, so maybe we should drop this."

[97] Jean Piaget was a Swiss child psychologist who became well-known in the 1960s for his work on the stages of cognitive development in children. He was an important figure in progressive education circles, with his work being widely cited as a basis for a constructivist pedagogy which sees children as active creators of their own knowledge.

[98] For approximately a decade and a half following the founding of CPESS, Meier would work closely with Cook and Nadelstern on education issues, especially in common cause against a growing wave of standardized testing, as all of their schools used performance assessments for student promotion and graduation. All three of their schools were involved in the Coalition for Essential Schools. In the Coalition Campus Schools project that began in 1993 to replace Julia Richman High School discussed by Meier below, the small schools that anchored the transformed campus were Urban Academy and a replica of the original International High School. In the 1990s, Nadelstern was outspoken in his opposition to the plans of then New York State Commissioner of Education Rick Mills to require the performance assessment schools to use the Regents exams, at one point mounting lawsuits over the issue. But at the turn of the century, the once implacable critic of the NYC school system left International High School to take a series of positions inside the bureaucracy, culminating in becoming a Deputy Schools Chancellor under Joel Klein in 2009. Nadelstern's positions on issues such as standardized testing changed significantly, and he would end up on the opposing side of Meier and Cook in a number of key battles during the Klein years, as Meier indicates further on in the oral history.

When you read those interviews with kids, you saw how important some things were that you hadn't thought were important. and one of them was in the high school was this practice we began in the sixth grade and seventh grades of sending kids out to work in the community for half a day a week.

DM: Over time, the students had more of a choice on what to do. In the elementary school, we just assigned them. We didn't care what their occupational interests were, generally speaking; we just thought they should be out in the world. One funny repercussion was that we had a big fight over wearing hats in school when teachers said, "But you have to get ready for the real world." A number of the kids said, "a lot of people in my job placement wear hats." So, it kind of undermined our theory. They should know what the real world is like, and how it compares to schools: they chew gum and they smoke cigarettes. But we first did this so the teachers could have a half a day a week every week to be together. When she was at Teachers' College, Linda Darling Hammond was an advisor to CPESS, and she said teachers really should have ten hours of professional time a week. And we ended up with five hours. Some weeks everyone met for those five hours, sometimes it was meeting time for the teachers who taught the same subject, and other times it was meeting time for the teachers who taught the same kids. So, the issue was what to do with the kids in order to create this professional meeting time. We had this great idea, we'd send the kids to do community work, and we found a woman who was willing to organize it. Eventually, we needed two people. So, we would have a full morning of school one day a week, and after lunch, the kids would go to their community assignments.

LC: And so that's important, because without that time, teachers can't really be meaningfully involved in the governance of the school.

DM: And be responsible for each other's classes, because unlike the elementary school it wasn't "teach your own thing." We did have a curriculum plan. It was more of an outline, so there was enough space for teachers to play with it and approach it in different ways. We had teacher teams and each team consisted of one social studies teacher, one literature teacher, one math teacher and one science teacher. But we actually divided it up so that the English teacher taught both history and English, and the science teacher

taught both math and science.[99] But they planned it together, so there was subject matter expertise on each team. And in some meetings, the science teachers would meet with other science teachers to talk about what the science portion should be and the math teachers with other math teachers, and both together to talk about how you could integrate math and science. People had an easier time thinking about how English and history could be joined, but math and science was more of a challenge. It was time that was spent together with your colleagues, plus lunch times and anything else.

DM: And some of the faculty just recently, about four years ago, wrote a story about what the school meant to them. It was hard to find teachers for CPESS, unlike the elementary schools. There were progressive elementary school teachers all over the place; they weren't necessarily in one school, but they were in many schools. Many had their teacher education in schools that focused on progressive education, such as City College and Bank Street. But it was much harder to find high school teachers who had a different conception of how to teach. For example, most of the high school teachers we hired for CPESS found the advisories particularly intimidating. For me, the idea of having twelve students and no curriculum was like whoa! Wonderful! For them, twelve kids with no curriculum, no report card and no grading were completely out of their realm of experience. They ended up, I think, almost all of them, loving it. At one point about the second or third year of CPESS, the staff said they wanted to cover specific topics in the advisory. So, we gave two of the teachers some extra money to develop a curriculum for the advisory over the summer. Everybody was very grateful, they thought it was very good, and nobody ever used it. It was kept in the office.

DM: I still think it was worth doing. Even though at the time, I didn't think so. We were much more formalized in our democratic process in the high school. We had started more informally in the elementary schools, with people who knew each other well, and grew from that basis. But in CPESS, we were bringing together people who didn't know each other. At this

[99] The logic of this arrangement is not just to better integrate the different academic disciplines. Since a single teacher is teaching both math and science, or both social studies and English language arts, a teacher has fewer students to teach and is able to provide more attention to each student. This is an important part of the Coalition for Essential School's principle of personalization.

point, I was officially the principal. So, we decided we needed to formalize, and so we wrote a document. It included a portion that had to be voted on – either reaffirmed or revised – by the faculty. And this document was in some ways our sub-contract. We had a part of it that talked about who makes what decisions. We had an hour every week where everybody in whole school got together.

DM: When I was at Mission Hill, we formalized the school meeting by saying, "If you make an appointment, if you had to see a doctor, do it during the school day and not during that meeting."[100] Someone can substitute for you during the school day. At Mission Hill, I was the substitute. You can be replaced during the school day, and you can't be replaced at the meeting. Only you know what you think. And only you know what you are going to implement and understand how we got there. It's not possible to really translate that.

DM: We didn't have that policy in CPESS. But it was understood that the whole school meeting was the most important. When the school got much larger, I felt that I needed some intermediate way of making some less important, daily decisions. Something would come up, and I would go to people who I trusted and so forth. I thought, it probably wasn't a good idea that I pick who I go to. So, maybe we should have a small executive board that is the people that I go to when the issue is not important enough to call a special meeting of the whole faculty, but it's still important enough that I don't want to make it without consultation. So, we formed an executive committee which was elected by the divisions. It was a little bit larger than I hoped. And then the problem was that the executive committee were annoyed if the larger body disagreed with them and wanted to reverse something. So, there was a certain tension. "We spent hours on that!" And that's about the time I left the school. I think we never did quite figure out how to delegate.

LC: When you say the school became "much larger," what do you mean by that?

[100] In 1997, Meier would found Mission Hill, a public K-8 school in Boston; it is discussed later in the oral history.

DM: We had grown out with all of the seven through twelve grades, and we had close to fifty faculty.[101] In the elementary schools, we never had more than twenty faculty. My idea of how to make decisions was, we could all sit in one room around one table or in one circle, and you could have time enough for everybody to speak for three minutes, not that everybody had to speak for three minutes. But if ten people speak for three minutes, you've used up most of your time. And then there is often the one person who wants to speak for ten minutes. When you have fifty faculty, it is harder and harder to use that method for all of the decisions. I just felt we were too large to have a sensible, thorough discussion with the whole faculty on all the issues. As the school's leader, I was trying to figure out what are the most important things to bring to the entire body. Which decisions do I feel like somebody should be a check on me?

LC: Do you leave CPESS at the point at the point you start the project with Julia Richman and James Monroe High Schools, the first generation – if you will – of efforts to transform large high schools into campuses of small high schools?[102]

DM: Yes. I think you're right. You know, there were two distinct projects. There was the Julia Richman project, and there was the Networks for School Renewal project with the Annenberg Institute. They were separate, and the Annenberg project came second.

DM: After some discussion, we went to the Chancellor with a proposal, or to the high school division with a proposal to create campuses of small schools.[103]

[101] CPESS added a new grade each year until it had the full complement of grades seven through twelve.

[102] These projects began in the early 1990s. Julia Richman began to phase out in 1993, when it did not take an incoming ninth grades; at the same time, five of the six small schools that were initially slated to replace it were launched with a ninth grade; the sixth started the next year. There was a planning period of a year that involved Meier and the new school leaders working full-time on designing and preparing for the schools that preceded the actual launch.

[103] The proposal would have come from the group of NYC schools clustered around the Coalition of Essential Schools, including CPESS, Urban Academy and International HS. Meier, Cook, Mack and Nadelstern were involved. Joe Fernandez was NYC Schools Chancellor during the period when the proposal would have been submitted, but since Fernandez was dismissed in 1993, most of the implementation took place under Ray Cortines.

The original plan was to develop one campus in each borough, starting with Manhattan. We would demonstrate a way to use the existing high school building, and some of the ideas of the Coalition, in a way that was not creating a small school here or there but would re-conceptualize the whole enterprise. And we didn't particularly care what existing school it was, but we thought that because there a shortage of space at that time, we needed to repurpose some existing school buildings. We thought we could simultaneously solve some space problems by renovating some other spaces for small schools, and the small schools that would end up on the campus would be "hot housed" as they grew out, and only move into the old school building when they were fully grown.[104] The old school would go out of business year by year, but we wouldn't be in the building with them while they were going out. Since this plan involved a lot of space logistics, we worked closely with Stan Litow on it.[105] Unfortunately, in many cases the Board didn't buy space for schools; they rented it. I had a friend who was in the real estate business, and she was helping us find places. She would say "This is the time to buy. There's been a drop in the market, but these prices are not going to go down much farther. This is time to grab it." We did this at the best possible moment to buy, but the Board rented a lot of spaces, and then when rents went up, the school had to move.

DM: So, the Board of Education identified Julia Richman as the school in Manhattan. It was struggling and graduated very few kids.[106] The old school would be closed, and we would renovate its space to work as a campus of six small schools. We identified people who wanted to start small schools.

LC: As it turned out, only two of the schools ended up going into the Julia Richman building, right? Manhattan International and Vanguard? Urban

[104] "Hot-housing" was seen as important for the new schools to be able to develop their own culture, which was designed to be quite different from the school being phased out.

[105] Stan Litow was then Deputy Chancellor of the New York City public schools with responsibility for school facilities, among other things.

[106] At the point at which the decision was made to close the old Julia Richman, it was graduating only about one-third of its students.

Academy already existed and had been part of the planning process for Julia Richman; it moved to Richman to anchor the building.

DM: Yes, what were the other ones that didn't go into Richman?

LC: There was Mary Butz's school, Manhattan Village Academy, Haven Henderson's school, Legacy, Landmark and the Coalition School for Social Change.[107] They all were placed on sites outside of Julia Richman.

DM: And, in any case, a group of the faculty at the old Julia Richman created Talent Unlimited, and it stayed in the building. And then there was an elementary school, Ella Baker, which was started by one of the teachers from Central Park East. A Special Education middle school program for autistic students was added. Together, they made up the Richman campus.[108]

DM: And Herb (Mack), who I would never have picked for that job, turned out to be a spectacular campus leader for all of the schools.

LC: Why wouldn't you have picked him?

DM: Because I don't think he's especially warm; he can be a distant person. But apparently these qualities made him marvelous as a school manager. He doesn't get involved personally, so everyone feels they are being treated fairly. There were very few disputes between schools, and they managed that balance between the community of the whole and very independent, autonomous schools that have quite different viewpoints on many things.

LC: And in the next year, you started a similar project with James Monroe High School in the Bronx. But there, only one of the schools that were started –

[107] The New York City Department of Education phased out Legacy, starting in 2012, and the Coalition School for Social Change, starting in 2014. The other schools are thriving.

[108] For accounts and analyses of the creation of the Julia Richman campus, see the film documentary "The Julia Richman Education Complex: The JREC Story" and Linda Darling-Hammond, Jacqueline Ancess and Susanna Ort, "Reinventing High School: Outcomes of the Coalition Campus Schools Project" in the *American Educational Research Journal* (Fall 2002) Vol. 39, No. 3.

the Bronx Coalition Community School for Technology – went into the Monroe campus, while the New School for Arts & Sciences, started by Edwina Branch, Fannie Lou Hamer, started by Peter Steinberg, and Wings Academy all went into different spaces. The International HS that started that year was in Brooklyn.[109]

LC: So, some of these schools you created are exemplary, and the Julia Richman campus has been a great success, but other schools struggled. And after you left, the Central Park East schools have had their share of challenges. There is an issue here I find interesting, which is: the difficulty of sustaining these schools within the New York City school system. When I reflect on the history of experiments in progressive education in New York, going back as far as the early 20th century, I find that it has often been difficult to keep them going inside the school system. City and Country School (founded by socialist and feminist Caroline Pratt) and Little Red Schoolhouse and Elizabeth Irwin HS are examples: they started out as public schools and then went private because of the obstacles put in their way by the bureaucracy in the school system.

DM: Bank Street was one of those schools.

LC: Yes, Bank Street. Even Ethical Culture and Fieldston fits this pattern, in a sense. They find a way to sustain themselves, but they survive by becoming niche schools for the upper class. It's a real dilemma.

DM: Yes, schools for the wealthy. Every year at Ethical Culture and Fieldston we celebrated Founder's Day. Fieldston came down to the Ethical Culture Auditorium for a school assembly. The story was told fairly honestly, that it had begun as a school for working men's children, started so that they could learn how to build a cooperative world. They just never said anything about why there was not a single working man's child in that audience. We just skipped over that part.

[109] The New York City Department of Education phased out the Bronx Coalition Community School for Technology, starting in 2007, and the New School for Arts & Sciences, starting in 2005. The other schools continue.

LC: Obviously, CPESS and CPE 1 have had some hard times.[110]

DM: I think it's hard to go against the grain. A mistake is much more serious in our position, because the stakes are so high. I got away with as much as I did because I had some powerful allies. I have since told people "You need to find a godfather who is not connected with the school system if you can, someone who's in a powerful position, to protect you." I think I got away with certain things because (Fred) Hechinger loved our schools.[111] (Al) Shanker didn't agree with me on everything, but I could talk to him about things that were happening, and we would work issues out. The same with Sandy (Feldman) and Randi (Weingarten). I was on the boards at various organizations. I think people thought I was more powerful than I actually was.

LC: There certainly is the element of power here: you need to be a political actor to move an educational agenda and protect an educational institution, especially ones that go against the grain.

DM: And you have to have some style – not necessarily my style – for being a political actor. The principals who are just good leaders in their school can get killed politically. They may be well loved by their faculty, but when there is trouble, they can't buffer the school, because the only place they have loyalty is among their faculty. And in a very unequal society, schools that serve people without power are not a very powerful political force. It's harder than in an Ethical Culture and a Fieldston, where a lot of powerful people are invested in the school and will defend it.

LC: It seems that democratic and progressive schools, good schools, have a very delicate ecology, and that is easy to disrupt.

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[110] For a description of the troubled trajectory of CPESS after Meier left, see Diane Sutter, "Sustaining Change: The Struggle to Maintain Identity at Central Park East Secondary School" and the brief comment of Meier at the end of that essay in *Horace*, the Newsletter of the Coalition for Essential Schools. Volume 25, 2. (December 2009) As CPESS declined, Meier would offer to put a team together to restore the school during the tenure of Chancellor Joel Klein, but was turned down by Klein, who had no sympathy for the ideas of a democratically run school or progressive pedagogy. CPE 1 underwent a series of turnovers in leadership after 2000 that mushroomed into an existential crisis when the Department of Education appointed a principal at odds with the school's culture.

[111] Hechinger was the long-time – and very influential – education editor of the *New York Times*.

DM: And that's happened every place I've been. I'm not a success story.

LC: I think many people would be quite surprised to hear you say that. And it seems to me that you are being harsh on yourself. We can make the road, but we can't walk it for the people who follow us.

DM: Yeah, but my leadership issues… The leadership issue is not just whether a person is a good educational leader; it's also partly about anticipating what coming down the road politically. Is that a person who's good at running a school, good at interfering with, even knowing ahead of time, when something is coming down the road. I could bring up at the faculty meeting something that I'd heard in the district office, or something I knew from someone in the central board, or something you told me. And I said, "We've got to watch out because this is coming our way." I could usually find out when someone who had a bureaucratic mindset was going to visit the school and share it with people: "Be very nice to this person, woo them over, and don't do anything risky today."

DM: You know, people don't come into teaching with these skills. There's nothing in the education of teachers that teaches them those skills. And then when they get in a school, they personally rebel, and get into trouble. But that's what I'm talking about with the democratic culture that the union. I thought the union would be more effective for them than it was, creating a sense of solidarity in the school. So, all the teachers would be mad if they thought someone was mistreated. But unions only occasionally do that.

LC: Unions in schools do this work. You may not always see it, and I wouldn't claim that it is perfect by any means, but it happens.

DM: They do when it gets outrageous enough, and if there's a person there who is respected enough in the school, respected by the different factions enough to fightback.

LC: I find it interesting when people say "Well, you know, education should be above politics."

DM: That's because we've got this horrible use of the word 'politics.' They mean corruption, or self-interested, or something like that.

LC: Or they have an implicitly authoritarian model that they know what's right, and so they should be able to impose it, without having to do the democratic political work of persuading others, especially teachers. You find this attitude in a lot of 'ed reformers' – the Joel Kleins, the Michelle Rhees, the Eva Moskowitzs.

DM: It's also that the word 'politics' has a distorted meaning. There can't be democracy without politics.

LC: You cannot be a successful school leader without a set of political skills. Internally, you can't lead a school without a set of political skills.

DM: Yes, but they're different political skills than you need to protect the school externally.

LC: I agree. They are a different set. For protection, you need to know how to identify and leverage power, where the power centers are and how to access them.

DM: I didn't learn those skills in teaching, in education schools.

LC: Neither did I.

DM: And some of what I learned was bad. Some things I learned were not effective politically, were not such great political skills. Sometimes I enjoy an argument too much. I could achieve my goals better if I didn't open my mouth so often.

LC: That's something you share with Shanker. He loved arguments.

DM: Tony Alvarado did too, by the way.[112] Or up to a point. I don't think he did after he found 'the truth.' When Tony was at District 4, he made no bones about the fact that he knew very little about education, and he was looking for people who knew more than he did and were willing to invest themselves in exploring educational ideas. And then there was a period after he was forced out as Chancellor and entirely persona non grata. When they hired him as Superintendent of District 2, with the help of Richard Elmore and some people in Harvard, there was a major turnover of principals, and he decided that he could impose his will. And he did, but partly by picking principal replacements who he thought liked him and would go along with him, partly by his talent of getting outside resources and partly because he was now in a fairly wealthy district. Probably the wealthiest district in the city, even though not all the people sent their kids to public schools.

DM: And even in his top down way, Alvarado treated people with a certain respect that school people weren't used to. He'd have meetings in a hotel, while teachers are used to having to meet in shabby places, with bad lighting and no food. So, he provided a lot that made people like him. And then went he went to San Diego…

LC: And he went off the rails…

DM: Well, he said I'm going to impose what I now know works, and he forgot how to work with the union. He got along with the union in New York. I don't think he ever really had a fight with the UFT.

LC: That's right.

DM: I remember when we moved to Jackie Robinson (IS 13), and the old principal was still there for a while. He had nothing to do, but he was still there, and he had a secretary. In fact, he had a whole bunch of para-professionals. We finally persuaded the district that those people really should be assigned to different schools in the building, rather than just doing nothing. So, there was some tension. But the building secretary filed

[112] Here Meier is returning to a theme she discussed earlier, on p. 67.

a grievance with the union that teachers were going out of the building for lunch without signing out. Apparently, that's an issue: teachers were supposed to sign out in the old school, and I didn't know that. We objected, said it was up to the principals of the different schools, and that they didn't want to require sign outs. We're a faculty run school, so who is she to override our processes. The union took my side on that issue. They said she didn't have whatever they call it in the legal terms. She didn't have…

LC: "Standing."

DM: And somehow, she thought it was her job to monitor that teachers were following the rules of the old school.

LC: One of the side effects of the continual reorganizations of the Department of Education under Joel Klein was replacing one set of old staff with an entirely different set of new staff. The High School Superintendents used to have staffs that were the size of a faculty of a full school, with fifty people working for them. Under Klein, those offices are dissolved, but there is a vast expansion of central staff and new regional superintendencies.

DM: I once invited to a meeting of the High School division, after I became a principal and when John Ferrandino was heading it. (I actually liked him a lot.) They went around the circle telling me what they all did, and maybe all 50 staff weren't there, but there were at least 35. At my turn, I said – I thought in clear humor, good humor – I hope I never have to talk with any of you again. They didn't think that was funny.

LC: One of the things that Klein undermined with all of the reorganizations was the ability of schools to solve problems, like fix a teacher's payroll, so she is paid right – the little things that are very important to the people impacted. Schools were coming to the UFT for help with the issues that they used to be able to resolve with a call to the district office. Susan Moore Johnson has an essay on this subject, "Sometimes bureaucracy has its charms."

DM: And if you don't have it centrally, you have to have it in each school. That's what a private school's bureaucracy's does. They have to have someone who handles applications, a person who handles admissions, a person who

organizes the lunch service and so on. In other words, in the private school, bureaucracy per student is probably greater than in public schools.

LC: So, what is the process here in terms of your changing jobs?

DM: It was the Annenberg grant.[113] When we started the Coalition Campus Schools project, I still technically remained the principal of CPESS. But I was there less and less of the time, and they gave the school some compensation for my time. We got a big grant to do that project – Sophie Sa[114] saw to that – it was marvelous, and I was able to go full-time on it. She called a meeting of people, and she told them about the Campus Schools project. I was at the meeting, and she said – this was an old technique of my father's, he was a fundraiser – "We have to figure out how to raise…" I don't remember the exact amount, it wasn't tons of money, maybe a few hundred thousand. She had told a number of them ahead of time that she was going to do this, and they raised their hand, said, "Oh, we'll give this amount." Some people said, "Well, I'm sure we'll give this amount, but I have to go to the board and hopefully we can get this amount." When she got the minimum we needed, she wrote everything down, so instead of my going to different foundations to try to raise money, we did it in one fell swoop. That was for that Campus Schools project.

DM: Now the Annenberg Challenge – which was called the New York Networks for School Renewal in New York City – was complicated. First, because there were a number of other organizations who were part of that project – Sy Fliegel's group, whatever it was called at the time, New Visions, and ACORN, I think. We were the fourth.[115] I think it was a good idea, but it was

[113] The Coalition Campus Schools project at Julia Richman and James Munroe were part of a larger effort in New York City public schools to create innovative small schools, the great preponderance of which were secondary schools. This effort was supported with money by the Walter Annenberg, through the Annenberg Challenge, which had been organized in significant measure by Ted Sizer. (Walter Annenberg also provided the endowment for Sizer to establish the Annenberg Institute for Education Reform at Brown University.)

[114] Dr. Sophie Sa was executive director of the Panasonic Foundation, where she led its work in school reform.

[115] In New York Networks for School Renewal, four organizations were to be involved in the creation of networks of new small schools. They were: Sy Fliegel's Center for Educational Innovation (CEI), which had just been established by the conservative Manhattan Institute; New Visions for Public Schools, which had just been created out of philanthropic work on behalf of NYC public schools; the community organizing group ACORN; and Meier's Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), the NYC network of schools involved in the Coalition for →

a better idea than it worked out in practice. If it had worked, it would have been a progressive school victory. And not just a progressive school victory.

DM: (Walter) Annenberg, the philanthropist who was providing the money, was very close to Ted Sizer and to the President at Brown University at that time, Vartan Gregorian. Sizer told them that I should be the person who put together the project in New York City. With some friends, we created a design, and we showed it around to other reform groups and we got agreement. I was somewhat friendly with the president of the Board, Carol Gresser, at the time, and she was very enthusiastic about our proposal.[116] Ray Cortines was Chancellor, and he a marvelous attitude. He said, "Listen, I'm really basically a traditionalist, but I think we should try this. I'm all for it." He was saying that I'm not sure what I would have designed, but this makes sense. And the mayor – Who was that terrible mayor? Rudy Giuliani. – supported it.[117] The NY State Education Commissioner at the time was Tom Sobol, and he was my best friend. He supported it, and he got the Board of Regents to support it. It was only a New York City plan, but it was helpful to have state support. And the union was absolutely on our side. Sandy Feldman was president of the UFT, and she was very supportive.[118]

Essential Schools that sponsored the Coalition Campus Schools. The bulk of the schools that were created at this time were started by CCE and New Visions; ACORN sponsored only two schools.

[116] For eight years starting in 1990, Gresser was the Queens representative on the New York City Board of Education, which was then the governing body of the city's public schools. For a number of years, she was elected by other Board members as its President and was a powerful presence in New York education politics. However, after Gresser took on Mayor Rudy Giuliani over his efforts to control the schools and his forcing out of Chancellor Cortines, the Queens Borough President refused to reappoint her to a third term in 1998.

[117] Giuliani had just become mayor of New York City at the very start of the project, in 1994.

[118] During this period, Sandy Feldman and the UFT introduced a number of innovations into the collective bargaining agreement with the Board of Education that were designed to facilitate the governance of small, democratic schools like CPESS, Urban Academy and International, and to spread some of their innovations more widely in the school system. A "school based option" provision made it possible for a school, with a supermajority vote of the UFT Chapter and the agreement of the principal, to opt-out of certain Board regulations and contractual provisions in order to engage in educational experimentation. A school based staffing and transfer plan allowed a school to opt-out of the seniority transfer plan and select teachers who were a good fit with the mission and pedagogy of their school, provided that a majority of members of the hiring committee were teachers, elected by the UFT Chapter. (This model was based on a plan developed at International HS.) An effort resisted by school administrators was made to combine giving schools more authority over the decisions which impacted it with processes that shared decision-making power with teachers and parents. The underlying principle in these innovations was to trade detailed contractual regulations and →

DM: The idea was to create a zone that was the size of the average city of the United States, which was then about 50,000. So, our zone was going to have 50,000 students, so that we could say this was an approach on a scale that could be used in other places. We would somewhere between 100 and 150 schools, all small schools and all be part of a network. The networks would be self-chosen, but there couldn't be more than seven schools or less than four schools in a network. Each network of schools would be affiliated with one of four sponsoring networks. The money would come through the four organizations, though the Center of Collaborative Education – essentially the Coalition. Each of these networks of schools would have a certain amount of resources, which was intended to be used for accountability, to design an approach for accountability that the four to seven schools would agree to work together to hold each other accountable. They would involve parents and other outside people in the process. All of the networks didn't have to have the same approach; there could be different approaches, but there would be a board of well-respected educators, that Linda Darling Hammond was going to assemble, that would approve plans, not as being the best approach, but as being a reasonable approach. Their job was just to say this is or is not a viable, substantial approach to accountability. Working with the Board of Education, Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University would do a quantitative study of what happened. And NCREST at Teachers College, working under Linda (Darling-Hammond) and Jackie (Ancess) would do an ethnographic study, looking at a sample of schools, what their experience was, whether it needed more vision or replication.[119] They would issue reports. There were only three of us who would work on the overall project: me, a Black man named Doug White and a secretary.[120]

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rules for real teacher voice in decision making. Under Joel Klein, the school-based staffing and transfer plan was lost in a contract mediation process and the principal was given sole discretion in staffing.

[119] While this project was in significant ways never fully actualized, as Meier explains below, versions of these studies were produced for the school that were opened, here and here.

[120] Doug White is a graduate of Yale University Law School who has held several positions in New York City and New York State government. He was director of the Bureau of Labor Services and a deputy commissioner of Consumer Affairs under Mayor Koch and served as state commissioner of Human Rights under Governor Cuomo. After his participation in the Networks for School Renewal, he went on to serve as Deputy Fire Commissioner for the New York Fire Department, where he led efforts to integrate an overwhelmingly white and male service.

LC: Only three of you?

DM: Yes, only as the management of the overall project. The various organizations, such as New Visions, would have resources to provide support to schools, and they could assign their own staff. We were trying to see how much we could do with this approach; how much more effective a network would be if the resources were sent to the schools and as close to the schools as possible. It may sound superficially like some of Klein's ideas, because later when I was so mad at Joel Klein, Eric Nadelstern told me that he had given the ideas for the reorganization of the system "to the Chancellor" and that they came from our project.[121]

LC: That happens with many good ideas. It is a lesson in what can take place when you let ideas loose in the world, and somebody else with a whole different set of intentions gets hold of them.

DM: That's right.

[121] Several disruptive re-organizations of New York City public schools were carried out under Chancellor Joel Klein. Once the Mayor had been given direct control of the schools, a 2003 re-organization shut down the existing superintendencies in all but name, and centralized power in the central office and ten new super-regions. The small high schools had been largely affiliated with the Alternative High School Superintendency, which understood their mission and methods of operation; the 2003 changes forced them into a structure which had little understanding of their work. In 2005, Klein authorized Eric Nadelstern to begin an Autonomous Zone outside of the regions, and small schools began to join it to escape the regions. It was this Autonomous Zone that Nadelstern would claim was rooted in the ideas of the NY Network of School Renewal. In 2007, Klein attempted to privatize school management in yet another reorganization, but that effort was largely thwarted by a "Put the Public Back Into Public Education" coalition of the UFT, the Coalition for Educational Justice, NY Chapter of ACORN, the NY Working Families Party, the NY Immigration Coalition, Make the Road By Walking, Coalition of District 75 Parents, New Yorkers for Smaller Class Size, Time Out from Testing, and the Urban Youth Collaborative. However, the regions that had just been created a few years before were dissolved, replaced with School Support Organizations that had no governance authority and a central office that did nothing more than give schools their budgets and hold them accountable, based on standardized test scores. Renamed the Empowerment Zone, Nadelstern's Autonomous Zone became one of the School Support Organizations. In a final reorganization, the entire system was remade in the image and likeness of the Empowerment Zone. The end product – most schools were essentially on their own, without meaningful supports; the central office saw its role as enforcing a system of accountability based entirely on student test scores, which resulted in the closure of scores of schools an annual basis and the transfer of resources to charter schools; the UFT was portrayed as the enemy and principals were empowered to act as autocrats in their schools – bore only the most passing resemblance to the vision of the New York Networks for School Renewal.

DM: So we start the work, and (Mayor Rudy) Giuliani forces out (Chancellor Ray) Cortines, and Rudy Crew became the next Chancellor. At first, I thought Crew would be an ally because I was told that he was involved in a small school project in Seattle. Apparently, his main triumph was he got higher test scores, and I had my doubts about how he got them. In any case, he came into office, and he says he wasn't for the idea, period. We could have all of the money if we wanted to, but he was not giving the autonomy.

LC: So, everybody – the union, the state, the board, the old Chancellor – had approved and were ready to move ahead, but now we had a new Chancellor, and he says no?

DM: Crew says, "It's a new ball game. I'm in power now. I'm not planning to do this." We all sat around dumbstruck, with nothing to show for all of our work. I know that several people on the school board were very upset about it – especially, Carol Gresser who was the president of the board, because she was very involved in the work.

LC: Yep. And so, then you decided it was time to go back to a school.

DM: I decided that I didn't want to be in New York City anymore. I thought if I stayed in New York, I'll be reminded of this disaster every day. Ted Sizer offered me a position for a few years as a senior fellow at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. A senior urban fellow, along with Dennis Littky and somebody named Howard Fuller. Do you know who he is? He's a right-wing Black guy from Milwaukee…

LC: Oh, yes, I know of Howard Fuller. Do you know his full history?

DM: No.

LC: In the sixties, Fuller became a Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist; led a Maoist organization, the Revolutionary Workers League; and took on an African name, Owusu Sadauka. He was associated with the people who became the Communist Workers Party and had a number of their group murdered by the Klan in Greensboro in 1979. He had been a part of that group earlier. And then he went off to Milwaukee, restored his original

name, and became an anti-union schools superintendent. His long march to the right never stopped.

DM: Never stopped.

LC: He was a big supporter of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education.

DM: He was one of the senior fellows, and we went around the country. We accepted invitations where we would all speak and argue with each other. It was kind of fun.

DM: I'm working in the Coalition for Essential schools three days a week at Brown, and I spent more time in Boston than I had done before, because Brown is equidistant from Boston and New York City. I felt terrible and realized that I really couldn't stand the strain of doing this for much longer. One day I'm driving up to Boston, thinking I had to get back to a school, and when I get to my friend Brenda (Engel)'s house and Eleanor Duckworth and Vito Perrone are there, and I said to them, "I have to start a school. I have to go to a school. You must think of how we can create something up here. I have friends up here and we can do something."

DM: At which point someone from the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) called me, a guy named Bob Pearlman.[122] And he said, "The union has just proposed a project which is going to start next year – it is for pilot schools with a great deal of autonomy, and we'd love you to start one."[123] That weekend convinced me to take him up. The superintendent was Tom Payzant, whom I knew from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

[122] Pearlman was a Boston public high school teacher who became the Director of Research at the BTU and then, during the period Meier is discussing, the BTU Coordinator of Educational Reform Initiatives.

[123] Pilot schools were launched in 1994 as a collaboration between the BTU, School Superintendent Tom Payzant, the Boston School Committee, and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino. According to the Boston Public Schools website, "the pilot schools were explicitly created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools. Pilot schools are part of the school district but have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar to provide increased flexibility to organize schools and staffing to meet the needs of students and families."

(NBPTS).[124] So I went in to see him and he said, "Wonderful," and he got someone to show me buildings and possibilities. I said, "I want to be on a location which is predominantly Black and Latino." He sent me to a man named Bob Harrington, who was in charge of maintenance for the Boston Public Schools. They were all Irishmen; everybody I met was an Irishman. I felt a little nervous about that. I am not talking about Payzant, but all the people who did physical plants and so forth. They showed me various buildings. Everybody was very nice. The building we took was an old Catholic school with a big cross on top, which also made me a little nervous.

LC: Was Mission Hill a new version of Central Park East?[125]

DM: Well, it was a version of things I thought I had learned from CPE and from the secondary school. For example, we had a curriculum that was more like CPESS: teachers could create their own course of study within a general framework. And the faculty governance was similar, but it was, of course, smaller than CPESS. It was more like the elementary schools in that way.

DM: What were the other differences? Well, I didn't know any of the faculty. In New York, I knew everybody when I started CPE. We were all friends. And at CPESS, I didn't know everybody, but they knew something that I didn't know, which was the world of high school. This was different. And I had a reputation by this time, so the question of making this school democratic was more of a challenge to me because there were lots of reasons why the people…[126]

LC: Would defer to you.

[124] Inspired by Al Shanker and launched by the two national teacher unions, the AFT and NEA, the NBPTS is an endeavor to identify and recognize exemplary and accomplished teaching, in a way that is analogous to board certification of excellence in other professions such as medicine. Meier served on its national board for many years.

[125] Meier writes extensively about the Mission Hill School in her book, *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization.*

[126] In 1987, Meier had been awarded a MacArthur "genius" fellowship for her work with the Central Park East schools. There had been considerable media coverage of the Central Park East schools, and in 1995, Meier had published her book on them, *The power of their ideas: Lessons for America from a small school in Harlem*, which had garnered considerable attention.

DM: Yeah. So, the first person I knew I was going to hire was a very argumentative woman, a strong minded woman. She has to be somebody that can show the other teachers that you can disagree with me and win.

DM: It was very handy that I had some allies outside the school system there. The first professional development work we did once we were established at the school was having Eleanor Duckworth teach a course of hers in our school with ten students, ten parents and our ten faculty members. The focus was on how to teach scientific phenomenon, but you have to persuade each other without any appeal to expert authority, if you know what I mean. Knowing a lot of science can be a disadvantage, because you can't say, "I saw it in a book" or "I know this because of this theory." It was a wonderful premise because it put us all on the same level. It was an enormously egalitarian class: we were all trying to explain scientific phenomena while only being able to use evidence we could present ourselves.

LC: So, does the fact that you had a national reputation…

DM: And that I was a friend of Payzant's…

LC: Give you political leverage to protect the school?

DM: Yes. But at the time, I didn't need as much political power because the autonomy of the school had been written into the BTU contract. I thought this was so wonderful because the contract was pretty specific about our autonomies. Boston already had a Center for Collaborative Education, a Coalition for Essential Schools organization like we had had in New York City, when the pilot schools were started. They had been working with the same sort of alternatives as we had been doing in New York, and their staff advocated for us. They had a meeting once a month with the directors of the new pilot schools as we came on board, so they did the backroom stuff, and if there was an issue that obviously affected lots of us, they would go see Payzant or whomever in the bureaucracy and talk about it. So, that was helpful there.

DM: And you're right, I think I brought some political leverage with me. I was mad about an issue. The Pilot Schools actually started a year before I organized Mission Hill. I had applied, but two or three other schools were already in the pipeline and started first. One of them was in our building. When I saw that they had really been cheated on a number of grounds – funding and space and so forth – and when we decided that that's the building we should be in, I said to Payzant, "I'm not going in there, though, unless the other school gets everything you committed to us." That's the kind of thing, that if I had been an ordinary teacher, I probably couldn't have said it...

LC: And gotten away with it?

DM: Or been successful. I could've said it, but it probably would have been to no effect. My speaking up helped the relationship between the two schools, because they suddenly got benefits rather than just disadvantages from sharing the building with us. The director of the school and I became friends.

DM: But we started at Mission Hill with the 'habits of mind,' and we started with a process where we had multi-age classes, but we divided the school year up into thirds and everybody in the school studied some theme in the social studies that we agreed on. So, in an election year it was about democracy and politics, and another year it was about the civil rights struggle, and one year it was about who's an American. Everybody in the school studied the same thing, but they did it in their own ways. And they would present to the faculty their approach. We had a retreat and each teacher presented how they were thinking of approaching the common theme. And other people would make suggestions. And so forth.

DM: We would again have several topics within that field that we all study, so that the hallway that we shared, that all the rooms were off of, was a workspace. And the walls were filled with whatever we were studying, as was the lobby when you came into the building. This winter we would study ancient, far away civilizations. And when we were studying ancient Egypt, the whole building took on the quality of ancient Egypt. We had a place in

the basement where we had a burial ceremony. That was a little bit more of what we did in CPESS.

DM: Graduation from eighth grade was exactly the same as CPE and CPESS, where they would present to the faculty their work and their approach. We had fewer presentations, however. We had freedom from counting credits, but we still started off at CPESS with fourteen presentations – because we looked at all the subjects that you got credit for, and we came up with fourteen different competencies we needed to evaluate. But we realized right away that fourteen was a hopeless number, so we narrowed it down to seven of the fourteen a student just did between themselves and their adviser. And the other seven, they went through the full process and defense. When I got to Mission Hill, we made it six full presentations.

LC: Let me shift the focus for a moment. There are a couple of underlying themes we have discussed that I would like to return to. One is that you're a woman who begins her adult life in a very male-dominated world, exemplified by the Shachtmanites as much as anything. Yet over the years, you develop a feminist identity. I want to understand how that happens, and what to make of the moves to Philadelphia and New York, which were obviously centered around your husband Fred's jobs, and not around what you wanted to do.

DM: I accepted that.

LC: Why?

DM: Yeah, it's amazing in retrospect the degree to which I had internalized the notion that my husband's career should take precedence over mine. I told you that the history department at the University of Chicago had nominated me to get a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, the purpose of which is to teach history in college. I was very flattered that they nominated me; I hadn't thought about teaching history, but I was flattered. And then they came and said that I had been turned down because I was a married woman. They explained to me that it was a completely sensible decision because married women had to go where their husbands work, and getting a job in history on a college level was very hard and you would have to take

positions in places where your husband might not easily find a job if you wanted to advance in the field. I'm amazed now that I wasn't in a rage. I thought then, oh, I guess that's true. I thought the same way about raising my kids – that it was my responsibility. In some ways, like with the raising of my children, I liked that. It meant that I didn't have to consult anybody else about how to do it.

LC: So, there's some cognitive dissonance here.

DM: Yes, and there was some in my mother's life, too. Now I had a very feminist mother. She may not have called herself that, but it's interesting how feminist she was, how she was taking leadership roles in all of this political work. She never held a paid job after she married my father. At the end of his life, I asked my father about it, he said, "Well I didn't want to be –" what's the word? A cuckold? He used some word which meant that you're being supported by your wife. And I said, "Well, you wouldn't have had to quit your job just because she had a job," and he really clearly felt that if she had a job…

LC: His masculinity was involved…

DM: His masculinity was invested in his wife not working. Now my mother led a very interesting life. She might have thought that she had much more important and prestigious positions than she would have had if she worked for a living. But even so she wanted me to be a working woman. That was certainly the message. Even though she had money, had prestige, did interesting work, she was not satisfied with it because she knew she got it partly because of who she was married to, through her husband.

DM: And I certainly came from a family that was very argumentative, my father more than my mother. In much the same style that was typical in some of the radical movement, like the Shachtmanites. So, I think that I had an advantage, in the sense that in the political world I was entering, I didn't need to learn a new language: this was the language of my family. My parents had a lot of people over who argued about politics with each other in that strong-willed way. In our family, if you talk to someone in a patient, patronizing way, that was the greatest sin. It's akin to what my mother

would say, that it's okay to yell at people who are more powerful than you, but you never yell at people who are less powerful than you.

DM: So, when people were tough on you, that meant they had a certain respect for you. And when people talked to you gently, that meant that they thought you were not on their intellectual level. These competitive verbal exchanges were not unfamiliar to me; I had been in a household that debated politics all the time. It never occurred to me to not bring those habits with me into my political life. I did notice that many other women did not do the same thing, and that women would come to me after a meeting and say, "Oh god, you have character." It was then that I first really realized to the degree to which what I was doing was unusual. I think that in my private high school, it wasn't much difference between boys and girls in terms of intellectual life. There probably was some of it, but I don't remember it being particularly so; I don't remember thinking that as a woman I shouldn't say this or that. So, the Trotskyist movement seemed to me unusually sexist. And there were some very smart and able women in it. Anne Draper, Hal Draper's wife, was certainly every bit as competent and strong-minded as Hal, but it was he who…[127]

LC: Who was always on the stage.

DM: It was also true that in the Shachtmanites you argued more about theory than about practical matters. So, women took care of a lot of practical matters that the men thought was trivial. And as a consequence, we had a lot of power in a certain way. You know this old joke about who makes the decisions in your family? The man says, "I make all the important decisions, my wife only makes the damn small ones." What decisions does your wife make? "Well, she decides where we're going to live, and how to raise the kids, and where we're going to take our vacation, and so on." What do you decide as the man? "Well, I decide important things like whether we should recognize Red China." So, in a certain way, that was the division of labor in the radical movement. The men decided what decision we took on China. But the women decided where we were going to hold the meeting, what

[127] Hal and Ann Draper were two of the main leaders of the Shachtmanite left. See note 28 for their place in the panoply of Shachtmanite politics.

the topic's going to be, what people are going to do what, and what notices we should send out.

LC: And there were some women in the movement, some we haven't necessarily talked about yet, like Ruth Jordan. Where did you meet Ruth?

DM: I'm trying to remember, whom I met how. Of course, I was in Chicago for most of the period we're talking about. So, I only knew people from the Shachtmanite movement from outside of Chicago in a general way, if they happened to be passing through and stayed at our house, or if I met them at conventions. Ruth's generation included Sandy (Feldman). I think was the same generation as Ruth, wasn't she?

LC: I think Sandy may have been a little younger, but not by much, pretty much the same generation as Rachelle Horowitz. They – Ruth, Sandy, Rachelle – all knew each other from Brooklyn College.[128]

[128] Sandy Feldman, Rachelle Horowitz, Ruth Jordan and Tom Kahn all met as students at Brooklyn College in the late 1950s. It was at Brooklyn College that they first became involved with the Shachtmanite Socialist Youth League (SYL), and after the 1958 merger into the Socialist Party, the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL). Together, they became involved in the civil rights movement, both in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and as part of a cohort of young Shachtmanites that provided critical support for Bayard Rustin in his organization of Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, the 1963 March on Washington, and the 1964 boycott of New York City schools on behalf of school integration. For more on this collective work and on the biography of Rachelle Horowitz, see footnote 34.

According to Maurice Isserman (*The Other American*, pp. 141-142), Ruth Jordan had been a leader of the Brooklyn College Students for Democratic Action (SDA), the youth branch of Americans for Democratic Action and had reacted against the "heavy-handed way the ADA pushed for the expulsion of SYLers from the SDA. She became romantically involved with one of the YSL's leaders, who she later married." But for a long time, she refused to join the SYL because she was repulsed by the Shachtmanite style of intellectual combat: "What I remember is the cruelty, the savagery of the way they went at each other."

After she graduated from Brooklyn College, Sandy Feldman became a New York City school teacher. She went to work for the UFT as a special assistant to Al Shanker. Shanker appointed her as the union's lead staffer in its work with the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board in the initial stages of the community control experiment, as she was a civil rights movement veteran who had been active in CORE and was arrested in the Route 40 freedom rides. (Her reflections on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville period are included in the interviews for the "Eyes on the Prize" film history of the civil rights movement. See *Voices of Freedom*, pp. 489-490, 499-500, 508.) Feldman rose through the ranks of the UFT, eventually serving as Chief of Staff under Shanker and then succeeding him as UFT President. When Shanker passed away in 1997, Feldman succeeded him as AFT President. Stricken with a recurrence of breast cancer in 2003, she stepped down as AFT President and passed away in 2005. Feldman was supportive of Meier in much of her educational work in New York City.

DM: I think Sandy was close to Rachelle. I didn't really get to know them both in a real sense until I came to New York. And at that point, the Shachtmanites were already beginning to split up. Ruth wasn't living in New York by then. I think she was already living in Washington DC. So, our friendship was slowly growing over the years because we went through so many things together. Of course, we were kicked off the leadership at the same time.[129] That was a bond.

LC: So, in terms of your political history, we had gotten to the point of the '68 strike, and at the same time there was the Vietnam War developing.

DM: There was a fight over SANE, as I recall, and on our nuclear policy.[130] I don't recall all the details of that, it was something about how categorical we should be in our opposition to nuclear war. If I remember correctly, Shachtman was opposed to taking an absolute position on the question.

LC: Is this before the Vietnam War question?

DM: Well, there's a sort of gradual estrangement from Shachtman. First came the break with *Dissent*, which happened while I was in Chicago. I was sympathetic to *Dissent*. I thought that the Shachtmanites were pretending that we're one kind of organization, revolutionary and Trotskyist, but the fact of the matter is that our politics have changed, and we're not discussing it because we're all waiting for Shachtman to admit it. We were not really having healthy intellectual discussions, which was Irving (Howe)'s issue.[131] He said this is no longer a place where I can have intellectually

[129] This is a reference to the 'vice chair fight' which took place in DSOC immediately before the merger with NAM, which Meier discusses on p. 122 below. While she lost on that issue, it did not actually result in Meier immediately leaving the leadership – she served on the post-merger National Committee of the newly merged DSA – but it did result in scars that would lead Meier to become largely inactive in DSA shortly thereafter. Since she was very involved in her education work, it was easy to transfer her energies to it.

[130] SANE is short for the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. It was founded in 1957 as a mainstream peace organization that would not be encumbered by the absolutism of the pacifist organizations. For a time in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it became the home of refugees from different parts of the left, including thousands of who had left the Communist Party in the turmoil that followed the 1956 Khrushchev revelations of Stalin's crimes and were looking for ways to be politically active. As a result, it was often subjected to red-baiting, but remained successful nonetheless. It played an important role in the early anti-Vietnam War movement.

[131] Meier is returning here to a theme discussed above on pp. 25-26.

interesting collective exchanges. We've got 'a line,' and we're afraid to question that line. I thought that Irving was essentially right.

DM: I was also furious at Shachtman for telling the youth organization that they couldn't sell *Dissent* because it was the enemy, and for the way he would speak of the "late Irving Howe." It would infuriate me the way he played manipulative politics in this tiny little organization, so that he could win an issue by putting it at the end of the meeting when people had to leave. When we had national meetings, and he knew that Saul (Mendelson) and I had a flight back to Chicago at three o'clock, he would move agenda items important to us so they would be discussed and voted on after we left.[132] All of this turned me against Shachtman.

DM: I had been attracted to the Shachtmanites because it was a fiercely pro-democratic movement that took the same position on democracy everywhere in the world, whether it was in the US or Russia. For me, socialism was just another word for completing the democratic project. But I began to see anti-democratic practices in Shachtman.

DM: And so, I eventually just stopped going to the meetings. When I came back to New York City, I went to some meetings, but I began to feel that this was not the place I was comfortable with. And I wasn't the only person who was drifting away. There were a lot of other things to do. I had gotten more involved in education by that time. I had three kids, and I had my neighborhood, where I was very active. I was elected to the school board. So, I had places to act on my ideas.

LC: Michael Harrington had stayed engaged with the Shachtmanites in the Socialist Party, while you and others like Bogdan Denitch had drifted away from active involvement. At the '68 convention of the party, he had been elected the party Chair, the successor to Norman Thomas, with Penn Kemble as Organizational Secretary. He is actively defending the positions you are finding problematic – on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes, on the Vietnam War, and so on.

[132] Meier discusses her political relationship to Saul Mendelson on p. 20. A brief biography of him is provided in footnote 26.

DM: I felt somewhat let down by Michael at the time.

LC: But then he reaches out to you, to Bogdan, to Irving Howe, Carl Shier and Julius Bernstein, among others. He wants to form a new caucus and have it out with the Shachtmanite right at the 1972 Socialist Party convention.

DM: I remember he wanted to go to one more convention, but I don't remember all of the details of this. He thought we shouldn't do something until we went to one more convention and posed the issue more sharply and then leave. Is that true?

LC: I believe so.

DM: In any case, once he contacted these people, we started to organize, and we hired Jack Clark as full-time staff for the caucus.[133] Jack lived with me while he was doing this work. He saved our lives when there was a fire in our house.

LC: The 1972 convention comes, the Harrington's Coalition Caucus garners about one-third of the vote. The convention takes a new name, Social Democrats USA (SDUSA), and as expected, the Coalition Caucus leaves and forms the Democratic Socialist Organizing Caucus (DSOC) – a deliberately modest name. How do these developments impact you?

[133] The caucus was named the 'Coalition Caucus' because Harrington believed that the Shachtmanite right which had come to control the Socialist Party didn't really believe in 'coalition politics,' but on a narrow reliance on George Meany and the more conservative unions in the AFL-CIO, and he wanted to make that issue the center of the fight. The key battle was over the refusal of the Shachtmanite right to endorse the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate, George McGovern, out of deference to Meany, who was adamantly opposed to the peace candidate McGovern.

When it became apparent what Harrington was organizing, the Shachtmanites responded with a merger with the remnants of the 'Old Guard' faction who had left the Socialist Party in the 1930s, the Democratic Socialist Federation (DSF). The merger shifted the Socialists further to the right, and brought with it a triumvirate of Chairs – Harrington, Bayard Rustin and Charles 'Sasha' Zimmerman, who had been the leading Lovestoneite trade unionist and a Vice President of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in the past, but was then the aged head of the DSF. This move was an unmistakable shot at Harrington, and he resigned his co-chair position shortly thereafter. The coming split was then inevitable.

DM: The split was personally painful because there were people who went with SDUSA whom I was very fond of, like Rachelle. I had a relationship with Rachelle that was rather strong. I have no idea why it was so strong. But when my mother died, I named Rachelle as the person who should take care of my children if I passed away.[134] I didn't want my father to have the power of raising my children. Rachelle is probably the last person in the world that I should have thought of to do this, although I think she's been a good stepmother to the children she has now. We were very fond of each other, and I felt terrible about being on the other side from her.

LC: Did you stop talking to her?

DM: Well, it was hard to talk. I didn't want her to think that I would stop being there for her. On the other hand, I was very angry. So, I think I found it best that we would just avoid each other for a time.

LC: I never really worked with anyone who had been in SDUSA until I was active in the UFT and AFT. I found a very wide range of people – some of the nicest people, very easy to work with, and some of the most sectarian and doctrinaire people imaginable.

DM: Yes. But Rachelle and I have become very good friends again. I mean, very good friends. I stay away from talking politics with her. We had a tenuous relationship for a while, and then I think I extended my hand, and we both decided to reconcile.

LC: What about Sandy Feldman?

DM: I don't think I ever had a quarrel with Sandy about any of this. But I wasn't as close to Sandy as I was to Rachelle. So, there was not the same intensity.

LC: I never found Sandy sectarian. When Harrington passed away, she asked me to get (his widow) Stephanie's information, so she could reach out to her. She said to me that Harrington would "always be my chair." And when Yetta Shachtman died, she asked my help in figuring out what to do with all of

[134] Meier's mother died unexpectedly in 1968 because of a vehicular accident.

Shachtmanite publications Yetta owned, as she had made Sandy executor of her estate. (We shipped them off to Tamiment.)

DM: The people from Chicago – Carl Shier and Saul Mendelson – were on the same side of the split as I was, so there was no conflict there. And there were people on the West Coast who were more estranged from Shachtman than me. Art Lipow, for example, who went with Hal Draper. And I remained friendly with them.

LC: The Draperites in particular seem to me to be drawn to this Trotskyist trope of betrayal, where every political difference is read as a surrender of principle by the other party. Disagree with me, have a different political strategy, and you are a traitor to the cause.

DM: Well, Shachtman was deadly in that regard, such as in the way he responded to Irving Howe. He used that language about people who left us.

LC: Draper could be difficult in this regard himself. He was the one who wrote the sectarian screed in *Labor Action* when *Dissent* was started.[135] He acquired a number of his habits from Shachtman.

DM: Oh, absolutely. My friendship was with Anne, not with Hal. But you know, I still had a lot of respect for him. I just was re-reading "Two Souls of Socialism." I still admire that argument, even if I quarrel with parts of it. Have you ever read it?

LC: Yes.

DM: I don't know that I ever formally resigned from the Socialist Party. I can't remember the different stages. And, I'm trying to think, did I go to any convention after I came to New York?

LC: But at Michael Harrington's initiative, you become involved in DSOC?

[135] In *Labor Action*, Draper wrote (p. 5) that the new-born *Dissent* was "a temporary halfway-house for backsliders from the struggle."

DM: Yes. I had a very close relationship with Mike, not with (his wife) Stephanie, but with him. He travelled a lot, and he stayed with us when he was in Chicago. And I still have a close relationship with one of his sons. So, I think I was sympathetic to Mike. I felt that there was an odd political ambition about him, as someone who came out of a very American setting. And I felt he wasn't used to being on the losing side, and he envisioned a socialist movement that would be a winner in American politics. As a Jew, I felt somehow that I was always used to being on the losing side. With my people, my tribe, there wasn't something so terrible about being identified with losers.

DM: For example, Mike would refer to the time he had a nervous breakdown.[136] I knew him through that period, and I'm not sure what he's talking about. He had some depression. Of course, that's what life is. Most people have some depression at times in their lives.

LC: It was always interesting to me that Harrington has one foot in the world of real politics and wanting to actually influence the direction of American politics and the other foot in this theoretical, very European Marxism. It's as if he could never quite bring theory and practice together.

DM: Yeah. You know, he wanted to run for Congress at one time. He wanted to be true to who he was, but also enter the political mainstream. And I felt badly that he never broke through into the mainstream. Some part of me felt "Go into the mainstream." When he first ran for chairman of whatever organization we were called then, a guy named Max Dombrow was the chair.[137] And I was opposed to Max Dombrow. Mike sent out the word that he'd like to be chairman and he was this big catch, you know – we felt impressed we got him away from the social democrats. And Mike had much

[136] Harrington wrote about his nervous breakdown in a chapter "Success" in his memoirs *Fragments of the Century*.

[137] In 1954, Harrington and Bogdan Denitch organized the disaffiliation of the YPSL from the Socialist Party, and led its meager ranks into a merger with the small Shachtmanite youth section, creating the Socialist Youth League (SYL). The SYL is the organization Meier is discussing. Max Dombrow had been the leader of the Shachtmanite youth section before this merger and was the first chair of the SYL, but Harrington run against him and defeated him in the next post-merger election. Getting Harrington away from "the social democrats" is a reference to the process of leading the YPSL into the merger of the SYL.

more of a reputation, so I decided I would be for him. I made some arrogant speech about how you're probably just here for the experience and once you've got it, you're going move on. You're exploiting us, but we're exploiting you, too. And then, he stayed.

LC: He did. There certainly have been folks who have moved through the socialist movement in the way you describe.

DM: And he was a perfect example of, it seemed to me, of someone who was going to do that. Instead, he stayed until the day he died.

LC: So DSOC is formed. And it becomes an experiment in a democratic socialist 'coalition politics' as Harrington had envisioned it: building ties to progressive union leaders in the UAW, AFSCME, SEIU and the Machinists, while reaching out to new social movements of civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation. It organizes the Democratic Agenda to advance the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. A number of elected officials become members.

DM: And then you guys, NAM (New American Movement) came up. That's when the Communist Party was breaking up and we had a moment of political change.[138]

[138] Meier is introducing the subject of the 1982 merger between DSOC and NAM to form Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Meier speaks of "you guys" because the interviewer, Leo Casey, was in the leadership of the NAM, and he became one of the full-time national directors of DSA after the merger. NAM was a democratic socialist organization that developed in the early 1970s out of the remnants of the 1960s New Left, and was a point of contrast to the late 1960s implosion of SDS and the proliferation and then disintegration of a number of 'New Communist' Maoist organizations. It emphasized the integration of feminism and other new social movements into its work and focused on local organizing projects and political education. Its strategic orientation was heavily influenced by the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Oral histories of several NAM leaders can be read in a special 2010 issue of *Works and Days*.

Meier's reference to the "break up" of the Communist Party requires some explanation. In a certain sense, the disintegration of the CPUSA was a decades long process, beginning with a massive wave of defections that followed the 1956 Khrushchev revelations of Stalin's crimes and culminating in the split of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism following the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. Here Meier is referring to the departures of a number of leaders and members in the late 1960s and 1970s, departures which were over a few interrelated issues: the CP's support of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, its hostility toward pro-democracy trends in Western Communist Parties (generally known as Euro-Communism), its failure to engage with the 'new social movements' of the 1960s and its own internal lack of democracy. A number of those former Communists, preeminently Dorothy Healey and Saul Wellman, had joined NAM in the mid and late 1970s, and would become members of DSA after the merger

LC: So, we are moving to the early 80's when NAM and DSOC start merger talks?

DM: That late?

LC: Yes, the very first overtures are in late 1979. I am sure about the dates, because I left graduate school at the University of Toronto in 1982 to serve as one of the first full-time national directors in the unified leadership.

DM: I remember we had a hell of a meeting on the second floor of my house. Were you there?

LC: I was at a number of these meetings, but I wasn't at all of them because I was still in Toronto until the merger.[139]

DM: I was trying to think who was against the merger.

LC: On the NAM side, the most prominent opponent of merger was Barbara Ehrenreich, but she went into DSA nonetheless, and was even co-chair of DSA with Harrington for a number of years. Others like Joanne Barkan started out as a skeptic but were won over during the negotiations. But the great bulk of NAM leadership was positive. Those in NAM who refused to enter DSA were basically Trotskyists, mostly left Shachtmanites and Draperites in their politics, and they went into Solidarity. They were opposed on principle to running for elected office on the Democratic Party line and to working with union leadership.

LC: Then on the DSOC side, Irving Howe was, let's say, a reluctant convert to merger. He was suspicious of the former Communists in NAM and worried about DSA's position on Israel. Harrington convinced him to go along. There was a small group of DSOC, some of whom were also members of SDUSA, who were opposed. In the end, the vote to merge passed both organizations by overwhelming margins.

[139] DSOC-NAM merger talks were long and detailed, as they involved both a lengthy statement of political perspective and discussions of how to combine the two organizations.

DM: Back then, was Bogdan Denitch for it?

LC: Bogdan was definitely for it, although he was somewhat disappointed with the results. He felt that he was the head of DSOC's left wing, and he believed that NAM would reinforce his position in the merged organization. The NAM women in particular were not having any part of that. There was definitely a clash of styles between Bogdan and the feminist ethos of NAM.

DM: I recently went to the memorial service for him at the New School in New York. It was quite nice. Two of the women he was involved with – I can't keep track of who he actually married – were there and they both spoke positively about him. And, I reminded them, when I finally spoke, that he wasn't as quite as much of a feminist as they remembered. And everybody laughed, including them. You know, it's remarkable and it's one of the sad things about life, that Bogdan was actually considered by a lot of us in the Shachtmanites to be something of an opportunist. Now, to remain in our little circle and still be considered an opportunist is already a pretty funny idea. But the fact of the matter is that he stayed true to his politics to the very last moment, and he stayed active and took risks on behalf of those politics. And I felt much more respect for Bogdan over the long term: I think his exaggerated personality made us harsher on him than his actual role merited. When I visited him in Yugoslavia, and I spoke to some of his comrades and his family there, I realized that some of his stories, which I had never believed, were actually true. I had taken a dim view of everything he said about his history because he was such a storyteller. But there was something to respect.

LC: When you have been in these struggles long enough, and understand what that takes, you acquire a respect for folks who stick with it over the long run.

LC: When the merger negotiations were going on, DSOC was embroiled in this huge internal fight over the vice-chair position.[140] Those of us on the NAM side found it inexplicable. We understood that personality conflicts develop

[140] DSOC vice-chairs were prominent members, such as Meier, whose names could be put on masthead to give credibility to the organization. The fight was over whether the DSOC vice-chairs would be ex officio members of the national committee or have to stand in elections separately for both the vice chair position and the national committee.

in any organization, but we couldn't understand why comrades of long standing would be tearing each other up over an issue that had no real political substance.

DM: It was a bit odd, wasn't it? You know I feel I'm back to being a vice chair, in a way. Maria Svart, the DSA National Director, and I were speaking, and I told her the story of the fight. She said, "Well, wouldn't you come back now?" I like her so much that I said, "Yes." I'll die as a member.

LC: So, when you look back on it now, what was it about?

DM: I think there were people, many of whom I thought were my friends and still think of as my friends, who felt that Mike took his counsel from the vice chairs, rather than from them, and that they would never get a chance to be in our place. And that really was an effort to leave Mike where he was, on a pedestal so to speak, but not let anyone else have more influence. At first, I felt it was very personal. There were people pushing this move who I had been close to, who my children had grown up with, and that hurt. And Mike didn't speak up in our defense, and that hurt.

DM: We were elected as vice chairs, but they said, "it's not really an election." There was this feeling that we were in that position because Mike had anointed us. There was nothing we could do to say, "we are willing to stand on our own merits." We were just there because Mike had chosen us. But they wanted us out of the picture, so we stepped out of the picture. Fortunately for Carl (Shier), he was in Chicago, and had an established reputation in the labor movement, so what happened in the national office in New York didn't really impact him.

LC: And I think that in Chicago, the NAM/DSOC merger was a positive one that had created a lot of synergy. The new DSA chapter was very much involved in the election of Harold Washington as mayor.

DM: I think the people in Chicago were never as sectarian as the people in New York. They didn't have Max (Shachtman) to give them a line. We were influenced by Saul (Mendelson) or by Nat Weinberg, or by Carl (Shier), who

all disagreed with each other on occasion.[141] And there was no anointed right position; we didn't have to choose between them. There were people in Chicago who still tended to still feel some loyalty to Shachtman, like Nat Weinberg, but it didn't have the same intensity. Carl Shier had started in a different Trotskyist sect; he had a different history.[142] Saul came out of the Shachtmanites, but he was such an independent intellectual. So, I think people came in there had a different perspective about what the movement was about. And they were all people who were very active in practical politics. Carl was active in the UAW, Saul was active in the teachers union, and also in the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and its local Chicago version, which has a different name.[143] Barack Obama spoke at Saul's memorial service.

LC: Yes, if you Google "Saul Mendelson" and "Barack Obama," you'll find all of these right wing conspiracy theories about how giving a speech at Saul's funeral proves that Obama was a secret socialist and communist.

DM: He gave a perfectly nice, but not unusual speech.

DM: So, Chicago was always less purist about Marxism or any isms. We were much about how we could influence this or get that done.

LC: So, I think there is only one topic I haven't touched on yet. Did you know Bayard Rustin and have any relationship with him?

[141] Nat Weinberg was an economist who worked in the labor movement. After a stint at the ILGWU, Weinberg became part of the 'socialist brain trust' of Walter Reuther at the UAW for many years, including a stint as the union's chief economist and the director of the research department. Like many socialists in the UAW who worked for Reuther, Weinberg was a Shachtmanite.

[142] The sect in question was the Goldmanites. See note 29.

[143] Mendelson was active in two different Chicago affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers, the Chicago Teachers Union (when he taught DuSable High School and headed up the CTU's high school division) and the Cook County College Teachers Union (when he taught at Loop College, later renamed Harold Washington College). The local Chicago organization referenced by Meier is the Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization (IVI-IPO), which for many years was the main anti-machine organization in Chicago. Mendelson ran unsuccessfully for State Senator and played an active role in Harold Washington's mayoral campaign. Meier discusses Mendelson earlier in her oral history, on p. 20.

DM: Yes, I knew him and you could say I know him well, because he came to our place in Bedford Village. My parents had a place there and we often had events there, sometimes for entire weekends. So, in one way I knew him well, but in another way, I didn't know him at all. Rachelle (Horowitz) was very close to him, as you know.

LC: It is interesting, for me, as someone who had no history with Shachtmanites before DSA was founded, the different feelings that I would find around the 1973 split. To me, Harrington always spoke very fondly of Bayard.

DM: I think the people around Bayard liked him. He was certainly quite skillful, a very interesting person. For the longest time he didn't join our side of the movement – he eventually joined – because as he once explained to me, "I'm already Black, a pacifist, and a homosexual. I can do without being a socialist." He felt he couldn't do what he was doing and also carry the burden of being publicly known as a socialist.

LC: Well, he had been a Communist in his youth, and that was often used against him.

DM: And eventually he became a rather odd pacifist.

LC: It's hard to maintain an absolutist pacifist position.

DM: Yes, but then you're not a pacifist. Pacifists are absolute about the use of violence. If you just saying I'm for peace, I prefer peace to war, that's a different matter. We should all have that view.

LC: I could understand why Bayard would choose to be silent about the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. He would think that there was a small window to enact the broad social democratic agenda of the Freedom Budget that could make a real difference in the lives of African-Americans, and the support of Lyndon Johnson was necessary to accomplish that goal.[144] Some of the later positions are harder to explain.

[144] In *Fragments of the Century* (pp. 203-206), Harrington makes an argument along these lines: he disagrees with Bayard's decision to mute his opposition to the Vietnam War, preferring the forthright anti-war position →

DM: It would have been easy for Bayard to abandon his pacifism in World War II, but he went to jail to resist the draft, so I know his pacifism must have been pretty principled.

DM: You know, the Shachtmanites thought World War II was wrong, but not from a pacifist position. They thought it was their duty to go into the army, not in order to defend their country, but in order to be able to be with the working class. They never revised that position. I mean that's one of the things about Shachtman: it isn't as though when he starts thinking about their positions, he says, "We were wrong." He didn't say "we were right," but he never looks back on that experience and our mistakes as something to learn from.

LC: Well, I have to say when I went to a DSOC youth conference right before the merger, and I got in this conversation with Irving Howe about World War II. He was ready to criticize the Communists for flip-flopping their position on the war after the Hitler-Stalin Pact and then again when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, but when I asked him about the Trotskyist position on World War II, and how they viewed it as a war between imperialist powers in which they wouldn't take sides, he was not a very forceful critic. It was like he didn't really want to talk about it.

DM: Yeah, he might have remembered why at the time it seemed sensible. And he probably tried not to think about it, because it was not something we were proud of. We would have been healthier had we thought about such things, obviously. Along with a lot of other things.

DM: At the same time, we insisted everything we did was of the utmost importance. You know, I remember writing a piece with pomposity, where we made clear whether we were not voting or we were abstaining and the difference between the two, and that night realizing that we were all imagining that some history in the future would write about who took what stand. In other words, the position our little group took on this question

of Martin Luther King, but sees Bayard's stance as understandable, born out of "his love for justice in America." Rustin, Harrington concludes, "did the wrong thing for the right reason."

was part of the historical record, and we wanted to make sure that we recorded it for history in exactly the right way.

LC: There was a Shachtmanite I was researching, Chalmers Stewart.[145] I was interested in him because during the 1930s he was the organizer of the teachers union in Akron, Ohio for almost an entire decade. And so I went to his papers, thinking I might find something about what was happening in the union and what sort of work he was doing. And there was literally not a single thing about the work of the union. There were boxes of the most meticulously bound collection of every set of minutes of every Shachtmanite board meeting, convention, what have you. It is all there, in careful chronological order, with not a meeting missed. But not a single piece of paper from a decade of union organizing.

DM: That would not be true of Carl Shier or Saul Mendelson. They were deeply immersed in their union and political work.

At this point, the conversation ventured off into a discussion of various contemporary organizing projects, and the oral history ends.

[145] Chalmers Stewart went by several party names, and on rare occasions he wrote about teacher union work under those names in the Trotskyist press. Under the party name Blake Lear, Stewart wrote about a campaign (p. 2) of the Akron union, identifying 'Chalmers Stewart' in the article as the union's president, and about Trotskyist battles (p. 2) with the Communist Party inside the Ohio state teacher union federation. Stewart also wrote under the name James Fenwick. If a reference to Fenwick in Irving Howe's response (p. 7) to Hal Draper's attack on the launching of *Dissent* is any indication, Stewart had a reputation of being one of the more sectarian figures in Shachtmanite circles.