yGerald Meyer

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Interview Conducted by
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Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
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PEARLSTEIN: I'm Jim Pearlstein and I'm interviewing Gerald Meyer as part of the oral history of the PSC based on interviews with pioneers in the union. And since this is a history of the Union through biography, why don't we start at the beginning. Where were you born?

MEYER: I was born in Hoboken, New Jersey on June 5, 1940, and I am the middle son of three boys. My mother was born in Hoboken and lived there. My father had lived in the next town up from there, Union City, New Jersey; this is all within Hudson County, New Jersey, right across the river. I forgot to ask them had they lived there after I was born or where exactly they lived after I was born. But my first memories, which I think might have been when I was two-and-a-half or three, were of living in West New York, a near by town, also in Hudson County. We lived in a three-room cold-water apartment in a tenement. In a town like West New York and other towns in Hudson County, Hoboken and so on, there weren't the housing codes that, for example, La Guardia has put in place in New York. There was a tank in the kitchen to make hot water with gas. There was gas on the stove to cook, but the heating actually came from coal fire in the kitchen. It was a four-story house and there were four apartments on each floor. We lived on the second floor back-left apartment, and my grandmother lived with my grandfather on the first floor, in the right-front apartment. My mother didn't know how to ignite and maintain the fire in the coal stove. My grandmother would take care of that. In addition to a sink to wash dishes, there were two concrete tubs in the kitchen to wash the clothes. We also bathed there. Later, I realized the bathroom was too cold in the winter, so we couldn't use the bathtub. There was a large sunny room which served as a bedroom for my parents and

my younger brother and me. The middle room was a large kitchen. The smallish back room, which was very dark, was furnished as a living room, was where my older brother slept. In the winter that room was closed off because it was too cold.

My father, at the time, worked as a welder in the shipyards in Hoboken. He worked a lot of overtime, and I think he liked what he was doing. My mother was a housewife, but my grandmother seemed to do most of the work. She was always around taking care of us and cooking or doing something, or taking us to the park. Our lives were starkly poor, looking back. One of my earliest memories was when the landlord knocked on the door carrying two big, brown paper bags. He asked, "Do you want these?" We were sitting at the kitchen table, my grandmother and the three boys, and my grandmother said yes. What it was was toys. There were various kinds of toys, mostly old fashioned, wooden toys. These were our first toys. We played with them for years afterwards.

PEARLSTEIN: Let me ask, interrupt to ask you a question.

MEYER: Sure.

PEARLSTEIN: A lot of people remember the years of World War II as the heyday of factory work in America. When a factory job was a good job. You could support a family easily. You could see yourself rising out of the working class even. But that apparently did not happen to you?

MEYER: None of that property lasted in our house. There were wage controls, and my mother didn't work. Again, there were three children, and we were all young. I had a brother, two-and-a-half years older, and a brother a year-and-a-half younger. We might have come into existence in part as a plan to keep my father out of the war. I think my mother was very interested in that. I think we were happy, but there were no signs of any prosperity whatsoever. I can remember it very distinctly to this day everything about it. One of my earliest memories was collecting wood in the street with my grandmother for the stove. I mean, we were really poor. When my grandmother took us to the park, we would dig in the sandbox with tablespoons she brought from home. It was all kind of very odd. I remember her darning holes in socks. She did this by inserting an egg into the sock and patching the hole by weaving with yarn. These things seem very peculiar by today's standards. But somehow, we were happy. There was no memory of anything unhappy particularly there.

My father was an air-raid warden and that was kind of exciting. There would be air-raid drills and every apartment was equipped with dark green shades that would cover the windows. My father would go out on the street with his flashlight and we thought he was some kind of hero. I remember my father taking us for a walk around the neighborhood and pointing out to us small satin banners that hung in the windows facing the street. In the middle of a white center, surrounded by a red and blue striped border were blue stars, which indicated how many sons from that family were in the armed services. We saw one banner which had in the center a gold star that indicated that one son had died in combat.

PEARLSTEIN: Was there a wide family network that you were part of in that part of New Jersey?

MEYER: The fact that my grandmother lived downstairs was very critical to everything. She was always there in the house. She was very earthy and resourceful. She would send me and my older brother out into the backyard to steal clothespins. Everybody had wash lines and she would tell us, "Take the clothespins! Take the clothespins!" She was so Jewish, but we don't want to get too much into all this ethnic stuff. My grandmother was down to earth, getting things done somehow, like stealing clothespins. And my mother was a bit out of it, I think. She couldn't quite figure out what to do. And I remember we would take the firewood and put it in my grandmother's bathtub and we used it as boats. During the afternoon, my grandmother sat outside the tenement with other women on folding chairs while we played.

PEARLSTEIN: Aside from family, did they... your family have a lot of friends in the neighborhood? Were there a lot of ... an active social life?

MEYER: My grandmother's two sisters who lived in the neighborhood were involved and helpful. That was the Jewish connection, and they brought things for us, like toys and so on. My one aunt had two daughters and she would bring toys that clearly were meant for girls. There was also some contact with my mother's sister but not a lot. My parents were ashamed of being poor and they therefore isolated a lot so there wasn't a lot of hospitality offered. My father had an old bachelor uncle, Otto, who had no place to go on

holidays and he would join us. There were rare visits from other relatives from both sides of the family. We weren't allowed to have friends in the house. We stayed more by ourselves. But I think it happened because they were really ashamed at how poor we were. There was also some type of general disorganization in the household.

PEARLSTEIN: Was the family, as you were growing up, religious at all?

MEYER: My mother, who was from an Irish and French-Canadian background, was a fanatically religious Catholic, and very absorbed with that. Her idea of what to do was to take us to church a lot, and particularly me. I think her focus was more on me than my two brothers. And there were a lot of religious icons in the house, pictures, statues, and so on. I mean that was very evident. My father stayed apart from that. He didn't participate much.

PEARLSTEIN: That didn't create any conflict?

MEYER: I don't think so. And later he joined her in that. The women wore these guys down at some point. I was very disappointed with my father when he openly affiliated with the Catholic Church. He would go to Church on Sunday, but he didn't make any point of it. But my mother was very involved with the Church, coming from her own family background. Her family had been very devastated by alcoholism, her father and her brothers. There were a lot of family secrets. One of her brothers had been in a mental institution. He had been a leftist, interestingly. But there were a lot of secrets; that my

paternal grandmother was Jewish, that my mother's family was really, completely almost wiped out by alcoholism, the males. Her father and at least two of her three brothers were alcoholic. So there was a lot of shame and a lot of hiding.

My brothers and I bonded very closely, which is true to this day. It was a kind of a survival strategy; that we realized that we needed each other in order to get out of this alive, we had to stick close together. I don't know whether it came from that or our parents' general overall incompetence. I often think about this, and about my grandmother trying somehow to keep the family together; to find enough food to put on the table, to cook, to do something. But it didn't work very well. We moved, around 1945, into a four-room apartment with heat, except the radiators were freezing. I mean, there was ice on the inside of the windows throughout the whole winter. I've never seen that anywhere else. It was infested with roaches. My brothers and I would concoct some sort of hard poison from a concoction of cleaning materials. This was our self-taught chemistry lesson.

PEARLSTEIN: Did your father's work and the conditions in which you were living have any effect that you can sense on his politics?

MEYER: My father was very definitely class conscious and very pro-union. There was no question about it. It was very evident that he believed in unions, it was part of the family culture. But where we lived these were almost universally held values. There was nothing unusual or uncommon about these attitudes. There was also some definite idea that the Democratic Party was for the working people, for the poor. They wouldn't say

poor, but say for the working people. We had no delusion that we were middle class at any point. I mean that just would have been silly. We just weren't. One of us would say something to the other, "Well, where's the newspaper?" It's on the "Koch table." We called it a Koch table because Mrs. Koch gave us the table. So that became the Koch table. The degree of deprivation is still hard for me to understand. I mean, my grandmother did some work. She worked preparing food for a brother-in-law who had a delicatessen. Later she became a candy lady in a movie theater. When I was around seven or eight, my mother started working locally, in different stores in the neighborhood. My father held miserable jobs where he got injured or contracted illnesses. He was unemployed and couldn't find work.

There was a lot of shame involved in being so poor. Some of it was very upsetting. We were sent to Catholic school, and in each morning in class, they would distribute government-provided, half-pint containers of milk to the children. You had to buy the cookies. On some days there would be Mallowmars and others there would be oatmeal-raisin cookies. However, we never had the two cents for the cookies. So we would sit and watch the rest of the kids eat their Mallowmars, their cookies. A couple of times, the nun would give me some broken cookies. I don't think there were more than two or three children in the class who didn't have a few pennies for the cookies. There was a lot of shame involved in being that poor and it never has left me to this day. And I don't think it can for me or my two brothers. Later in life, I would sometimes buy a double box of Mallomars cookies and eat them all. With a lot of help from a therapist, I've been able to spend some money on myself.

PEARLSTEIN: Did you stay in parochial school through high school?

MEYER: When I was about to enter the sixth grade, my mother unexpectedly took us out of Catholic school. When I looked back at it recently and it didn't make any sense, given her affiliations and her devotion to the Catholic Church. I didn't ask her at the time why she was doing this. It never entered my mind to ask them for explanations or to request anything. No one ever asked my brothers and me anything, and we did not feel entitled to ask for anything. As children, we were simply expected to follow their orders, to silently obey. I accepted that as normal. Recently I asked my younger brother about it and he said: "Well that was because a nun had punched him and gave him a black eye." So my mother had, at least in that situation, the good sense to prioritize her children's needs over her loyalty to the Church; so we were sent to public school. The transition was very difficult because at that time the Catholic and public schools had an extraordinarily different culture. This was a very working class area and the Catholic schools were very regimented, and very crowded, by the way. For one thing, neither my mother (who wore glasses herself) nor the nuns notices I couldn't see. It was only shortly after I was transferred to the public school in the sixth grade, the teacher noticed that I couldn't see. I could barely see the big E on the chart. When I got my first pair of glasses, it was one of the most exciting days of my life. I had had no idea that you could distinctly see something that was further away than only a few feet. I distinctly remember how surprised I was to be able to see the mortar between the bricks of a building. I had lived in a type of limbo for years before that. The failure of my parents (and the school) to

have my eyes checked also had a lot to do with my inability to play sports that required seeing a ball.

When my father finally got a good job, which was during the Korean War, working for Wright's Aeronautical, it was a UAW plant, there were two or three very long, extended strikes. This was the first time the family was covered by health insurance, Blue Cross-Blue Shield, and conditions did seem to get better. They bought a refrigerator. We were the last people on the block to have an icebox. My mother started to work a bit more, and my father was still working at Wright's. So we moved in 1953 or so, to a better apartment in Weehawken. And also, my grandmother gave up her cold water flat and got widow's benefits from social security. It was a more middle class town, but the block where we lived was not middle class particularly at all. There were a lot of rooming houses and there was a bar on one corner, a diner on the other, and a single-room-occupancy hotel on a third, and so on. The apartment was sunny, it had six rooms so my grandmother could live with us. There was heat and hot water. The town had an excellent public school system and that was most important. I went to public school there in the sixth grade, and for the first time, I was given an I.Q. test, and I scored the second highest in the class. Although my relatives often said (and my father decisively) that I was a "walking encyclopedia," my intelligence had not been noticed before by anyone in school. In the second grade at the Catholic school, the teacher sat us in rows left to right according to who they thought were the smartest kids and out of eight rows I was in five, row one being the top. Within each of the rows, we were seated by height. So because of my height, I was seated at the end of the row, from where I couldn't see the blackboard. I just didn't fit into their idea of what they thought a smart kid was. I don't know how they

decided that, but I believe it had something to do with class. The more middle class children, who were dressed better and acted better, were favored. But after enrolling in public school for the first time I got some recognition that I was intelligent and that was very good for me. That was very helpful to me.

PEARLSTEIN: What happened in high school? Where did you go to high school?

MEYER: Well, I couldn't adjust well to the public school. Again, it was a kind of a cultural problem. I didn't know the protocols. Also, a much larger part of my story is being gay, and I only realized that recently, and how greatly that impacted at every point of life along the way. But in Catholic school, interestingly, that didn't become an issue because there was no physical education, for example. I never really engaged in any kind of competitive sports. I could roller-skate. I could bicycle ride. I could even swim a little bit, but I couldn't engage in competitive sports. But in Catholic school that wasn't an issue because there weren't any organized gym classes. There was a gym teacher who came once a week. You had to pay a dime. We often didn't have the dime, by the way, and sat on a bench watching. This went on for some of the time at least. But in public school there was gym every morning actually, and that was torture for me. That was very difficult being picked last and, oh God, that was a daily crucifixion. Also, I was bullied, which was both frightening and humiliating at an unbearable level. Despite the encouragement I had received in public school and its generally pleasant atmosphere, I was happy when in the seventh grade I went back to Catholic school. By that time a kind of a seed had been planted, that would allow me to grow in an unexpected direction. I

think, because of the year I spent in public school. I'm not entirely sure what, but some shift had occurred. I mean, I still thought of myself very much as a Catholic. I don't think that could have been different at that moment.

I had always been a Dodger fan, and I was the only Dodger fan on the block. In itself that requires explanation I didn't have. Why was I the only kid delighted with blacks having the opportunity to play in the league team? At that time, the *New York Post* was very liberal and one of the aspects of it being liberal was that it was pro-Dodger. Probably a huge percent of the people who read the *New York Post* in that day were from Brooklyn, and were Jewish. So I started reading the *New York Post* because of the sports columnist, James Cannon, who was pro-Dodger. Well, I would read on the back pages that, and all of a sudden I began turning the pages forward and there was Max Learner, there was Murray Kempton, there was this whole world and I just fell right into it. It was a very odd thing. I didn't know anyone else who read *The Post*. There were very few Jewish people in the neighborhood there were few copies on the newsstands where I grew up.

PEARLSTEIN: So it sounds like, despite what you say about a certain kind of defensiveness and insecurity in sort of social situations, you certainly had a kind of independence in other ways.

MEYER: Well, yeah. There was some...

PEARLSTEIN: And self-confidence.

MEYER: There was some strength from somewhere. It's harder for me to identify where the strengths came from. There was a lot of neglect. I mean, my parents didn't monitor what we did. We went off wherever, and activities weren't monitored: what we did in school; what we did outside. We were free agents. They didn't check our homework or comment on our report cards when they signed them. My younger brother worked full time since he was fourteen. He worked at a bakery.

PEARLSTEIN: Now, you went back to Catholic school in seventh grade. Then ... but high school was ...

MEYER: When I returned to Catholic school in the seventh grade, I was becoming ideologically a dissenter. I became very anti-McCarthy. There were other kids in the class who were anti-McCarthy, by the way. I wasn't the only one and that was debated a lot. Some of the Irish-American kids, their fathers had been Coughlinites, so there were some ideas around, something to work off of or with. There was an undercurrent of Catholic social teaching. So trade unions and social programs were considered to be good. The focus was not on getting ahead, either in my family or in the school. The focus was on something, a little harder to identify, but it wasn't that it was preparing you for the great American middle class or success as conventionally defined. In a way that could go off in a number of different directions. This ethos might have been preparing some people to have a vocation, to become a priest or a nun. That would have been their ideal, their goal. What was prioritized was loyalty to the Catholic Church. Religious identity was about the Catholic Church as an organization. It was very Irish Catholic,

very Jansenist, as it's called. Kind of a Catholic Calvinism, with a lot of devotion to the organization; to the Church militant, as they called it. The Catholic community in Hudson County, where the Catholics comprised a large majority, was ghettoized. Associating with people from other religious backgrounds was very discouraged. You had Catholic Boy Scout troops, and whatever. When I was a kid, I remember seeing couples being married outside the Church, outside the doors of the church, or even, in one case, on the steps of the rectory of the Church, because if there was a mixed marriage then they couldn't enter the Church and be married. It was that kind of a world, a very narrow world. Despite the inwardness of my world, I was beginning to, from reading *The Post* in grammar school, develop a social conscience. I was very disturbed by what was happening in the South. The beginnings of the bus boycott, and so on. And I viscerally hated McCarthy. That almost overshadowed all other issues for me. I saw him as a bully and that is the worst kind of a nightmare, actually for me as a personality or type. I'm sure that this reaction had something to do with being gay. I had many good friends. Unfortunately, most of them have died but, yeah, I was always very successful socially. I always had a lot of friends. I put a lot of energy into these relationships and had lots of friends and socialized a lot. And then I would read a lot. I didn't pay too much attention to school at all.

PEARLSTEIN: Did you think about college at all?

MEYER: Well, college wasn't on the map. I mean, my parents hadn't graduated from high school and neither of my brothers graduated from high school. There was no

message of getting ahead. There was another message: *not* to be a bum. I mean, that was the message, *not* to be a bum. That meant that you were destined to work. That it was a disgrace not to work; so there was a very strong work ethic. But it didn't matter a great deal what you did. You could do anything, pump gas or whatever. There was, like, no great differentiation between what kind of work you did. You could be a chef or you could be a waitress or you could be whatever, but you had to work. Neither parent showed any concern whatsoever about our advancement. I believe they positively didn't want their children to get too far ahead. They didn't want us to become too different from them, which would have had the effect of subverting family solidarity.

PEARLSTEIN: Did you get any encouragement in school to think about college when you were graduating?

MEYER: Not particularly, no. I don't think so, not even a little bit. I think later I did, in high school. I went to a Catholic high school, St. Michael's in Union City, and it was, again, very much a repetition of the primitive Catholic elementary school system that existed at that time in Hudson County. You had lots of nuns and day teachers who, clearly weren't qualified to teach these very large classes and an extraordinarily old fashioned type of curriculum. Lots of religion. Tons of religion and tons of religious observance. I mean, we were dragged off to Church regularly. It wasn't about Sunday. It was about First Fridays and, oh God, all kinds of religious holidays and every day during Lent.

I started reading. I read *The Nation.* It was pretty boring during that time, and I just sort of began to read. I don't quite know how it all happened. A lot novels, *Madame Bovary* .... In high school, I started to find the Russian novelists. Dostoyevsky.

PEARLSTEIN: It's hard to imagine how you came across that stuff.

MEYER: It's hard for me to say where my interest in reading came from. When I was around nine, one of my father's aunts dropped off a set of around fifteen books called, *The Books of Knowledge*, of some ancient vintage. After my parents saw how quickly I read them, they bought me a set of encyclopedias, some volumes of which I read until the binding was broken. I frequented to the public library. During the summer, this is going back to West New York, I would go to the library during the summer with a little girl friend, this was maybe when I was eleven. And I was just looking for books to read and I picked up *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* It made an enormous impression on me. I can still remember what the book looked like, it was an old book, with an illustrated cover.

I think I gravitated toward smart people. I had an instinct to do that. There was a big culture of talking at the time, it was somehow an Irish thing. In my neighborhood the predominant group was Irish. In the Catholic Church at that time if you weren't Irish they made you Irish. That was the culture of the Catholic Church; it was very Irish and it did privilege talking a lot. There was a lot of talk, a lot discussion, and arguments about religion and political issues. We would stand on the street corner arguing about McCarthy or more and more about the Catholic Church. There were some rumblings pretty early on. But the big break for me happened curiously.

I was expelled from St. Michael's. I became very rebellious, sort of just acting out; ridiculing teachers, cutting classes, and I was expelled from the Catholic school. Then I went to a short stint back in the public school. Somehow during the summer after my freshman year, I began to come apart and had a complete nervous breakdown. This is quite a story. Perhaps the most relevant part of which was that I spent over one week in a public institution that was a snake pit and a private institution which after five weeks got me back on my feet. I experienced a life and death situation; I experienced what happened to poor people and happened to rich people who had the same problem. In the public hospital, a young African-American man was strapped into the bed next to me. Somehow during the night, he died. There was no treatment of any kind. It was nightmarish. It was at the private hospital that for the first time in my life I had my own room. It was also there that I first met a Leftist, a patient who told me she was a member and regular voter of the American Labor Party. My mother couldn't raise any more money from my relatives and so I was released even though the plan was for me to live there and go to the local high school. I then knew if I disintegrated, I would be remanded back to the snake pit.

After my release from the hospital, I again went to Catholic school--this was Holy Family-- a smaller Catholic school also in Union City. There was a genuine ideological conflict. I really was acting quite normally, I think, as a fairly, as I look back at it, as a student. I showed interest, I went to class on time. I did my homework, but the nuns were becoming uncomfortable with me, and I was getting perhaps more uncomfortable with them. But I wasn't that aware of that, actually, at the time. We had economics once a week and one class. When the textbook described socialism, I said to

myself, "Well, what's wrong with that? That sounds good to me." I remembered thinking then that my father worked for Wright's Aeronautical. So they were producing airplanes that the government bought. So when the government paid for the airplanes, they had to also give the profit to the people who owned the factory. So I said to myself, why? It didn't make any sense to me why the government didn't own the factory. If it had, then it wouldn't have to pay a profit to the owners of the factory to purchase the airplanes. I remember thinking perhaps my father would get some of that money. I don't know what. I remember earlier when he was on strike it crossed my mind that the amount of money he should get was the most possible, that was the right amount of money, the most possible, in that situation. My grandmother was sort of angry at the rich people who she called "rich bitches." "The rich bitches," she'd say all the time. So there was something going on. But then, to this day it surprises me.

There was an anti-intellectualism in the Catholic school system that was pretty intense and a discouragement of individuality in any particular way. I mean, it was very, very regimented. One day, I bought an anti-McCarthy book to school; a very early and completely forgotten tract against McCarthy, by Elmer Rice called *But We Were Born Free,* which he wrote from a Cold War liberal perspective. (Since then I've never seen any reference to it.) A nun came up to me and she said, "What is that, Mr. Meyer?" I said, "Well, it's a book." She picked it up and she looked at it; she turned to the rest of the class and said, "Don't talk to him. I don't want any of you to talk to him." And I don't know, maybe I had stayed up too late reading Dostoyevsky, or I hadn't had enough cigarettes already, so I threw my books across the floor and I walked out. In the past, when I told that story I'd always said I was expelled. Only recently I realized I had

walked out. I must have told that story a thousand times in my life, and I always said I was expelled from Holy Family. But, I wasn't expelled. I fucking walked out. That's much better.

I then returned to the public school, which was Weehawken High School. In Weehawken High School they were more liberal and they understood that they had this kid with problems and they sent me to the guidance counselor. I was already seeing a therapist once a week and I was taking medication so, "what bothered you?" The idea that bothered me was gym. Well, guess what? They said I didn't have to go to gym. This was incredible! But something else happened too. In Hudson County there were a lot of little working class towns; sections of a couple of which were vaguely middle class. At that time, North Bergen, which was the most middle class of these towns, did not have a high school. North Bergen had quite a large Jewish community and those kids went to Weehawken. That really impacted the high school in a very dramatic way. These were very good students. Most were lower middle class; some of them were working class, not many, some a little better off than lower middle class; a few from professional families. But regardless of their class background, they were serious students and they were, for the time, remarkably liberal, and very pro-intellectual. So there was this astounding shift that occurred; all of a sudden I was thrown into a situation where I was at home; and what I was good at or who I was, was valued. And that really, really made a lot of things possible. So also, many of the teachers were effective because Weehawken was right across from Manhattan. So you had, Oh, I don't know, maybe women from more middle class backgrounds and so on, who didn't want such a hard job teaching in the City and they travelled to teach there. There were gay guys who taught there, and we

knew they were gay, interestingly, and that didn't bother anybody. They were in the English Department. It was a very good place for teachers. There were teachers with Ph.D.'s. The school was a wonderful building, a WPA palace, a gorgeous, gorgeous building, with handsome woodwork and terrazzo floors and a magnificent gymnasium and auditorium. People were very supportive of me. There were many teachers who took some notice of me. I was especially good at history. I won a prize. That was important for me. It meant a lot to me. But again, I kept on not taking my studies very seriously. I started to read a lot more. All the time. I was reading all the Russian novels, short stories, and a wide range of social literature.

Once in an English class there was a substitute teacher who said, "Well, George Bernard Shaw was a socialist. Not a communist, but a socialist." I turned to my friend Barry Aronowitz and I said, "Barry, I'm a socialist." Barry then turned to me and I na very matter of fact way replied, "I am too." I said, "What? Barry, you're just saying that." He says, "No. In fact, my whole family socialist." He meant they were Labor Zionists. On occasion, I visited his home. These were the first Socialists I had ever met in my life. His parents, who were Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Poland who belonged to a Labor Zionist group, Poele Zion (Workers of Zion). I thought, "That sounds good."

By that time I had left the Catholic Church, and I realized when I went to Weehawken something else very big happened. I went home, and I thought about my grandmother, and I said to myself, "Grandma doesn't go to Church, and when I was young, and talked about the Virgin Mary, she would roll her eyes. And she sometimes talked this Germanic language with her sisters and she ate matzos and gefiltefish and drank little bottles of Manishevitz wine on Jewish holidays." So I asked her, "Grandma,

what's your maiden name?" "Goldstein," she replied. Well, that was a very big moment for me. I became furious at my parents, furious at my mother specifically, also my father, that they did that to her. I mean, I just thought that was outrageous that this had been left hidden. And maybe she wouldn't have said anything anyway. Maybe they had made some decision within the family not to speak about that. Her mother was Jewish. The father was Swiss Catholic. And there were three other sisters and two brothers. The two brothers never married, and only one of the four sisters married a Jew, so they probably didn't know what to do with it, so they just didn't talk about it. Her two sisters, who lived in the neighborhood, and two brothers, who never married, had no religious identification, but in a variety of ways were culturally Jewish. I had only minimal contact with the third sister, who lived in Queens, which seemed to be on the another continent.

My mother, who I think in a day-to-day way, functioned poorly, did remarkably well in crises. She could mobilize herself and became very focused and very effective. There was a repeated pattern in my family. She would go to the Jewish relatives, my grandmother's siblings and get money. When there was major illness in the family, my nervous breakdown, taking care of my grandmother when she was dying, she'd go to her sisters, my grandmother's sisters, my father's aunts and uncles, actually, and I considered them my aunts though, and their brothers and take their money from them. I said take money because my mother did nothing reciprocal, never acknowledged it.

I joined the NAACP when I was in high school. I just sent them $5 to join. I had nothing I could do with that. I remember I got a petition from them for integrated schools and I got something like a thousand signatures on the petition. Almost everybody I asked

signed. This was in the McCarthy Era and almost every kid in the school would sign it. (It seemed I knew everybody. What I did was hang out. I hung out and I read books and once in a while I would go to class. And so I did that). I sent the signed petition in to the NAACP. I never got any acknowledgement for that work. I don't know what I expected, but it was just operating in this isolated situation. I electioneered for Adlai Stevenson in 1956. I just went to the local Volunteers for Stevenson headquarters. I passed out leaflets in front of a supermarket and on the main shopping street, I hung palm cards on door knobs in the public housing projects, and so on. The Democratic Party machine did not support, and as a result, it was the only time in the two hundred year history that Hudson County ever went Republican.

But then through Barry, I got the idea that I should go to Israel, and so I went to a *hachsharah*, a kind of a boot camp sponsored by the Zionist movement where you learned a little bit of Hebrew and some of these folk dances. Many of the kids came from Communist families. Two of them had fathers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. They were poor, working-class Jewish kids, and I fit in with that. After I graduated from high school and I worked for six months in the New York Stock Exchange. It was during the big steel strike. Every time U.S. Steel's stock would go up everybody would applaud; every time the stock would go down, I would applaud. There wasn't one African-American person working in the Stock Exchange, as brokers or clerks or whatever capacity, that was 1960, not one.

So then, I saved some money and I went to Israel. I worked on a kibbutz for six months in an ULPAN (work-study) program. That was a transformative experience. It was my boot camp. Due to the downward spiral and the aftermath of the nervous

breakdown I had when I was fifteen, I had had quite a lot of trouble functioning actually, at least when I think of it, maybe I didn't as much as I thought, but in the sense of showing up, getting to school on time, being able to stay there for the whole day. I had trouble with that. So when I arrived at the kibbutz, the first day I got there. They took some of us down to the road was and they handed me a pick. We were supposed to dig a drainage trench. I remember swinging the pick and watching it literally bounce off the ground. I swung it again and again it just kept bouncing off the ground. It was really hot and I thought I was going to faint. I didn't want to faint so I sort of said I have to go to the bathroom and I started to pray. I was praying to Jesus actually, I think. "Jesus Christ, blah blah blah." Maybe I didn't want to faint. So they somehow figured out this wasn't a good job for me. I was then assigned to work in the *pardes*, the citrus-fruit orchards, planting grapefruit trees on this sloping hill. After the grove was planted, I worked irrigating the rows of trees. The surroundings were exquisitely beautiful! This was located in Yemeck, Israel, the Valley of Israel. It was like paradise. In addition to the natural beauty of the valley, to me it was like paradise because I thought I was living in socialism. As far as the eye could see, there were all these kibbutzim. From afar they resembled little medieval towns. In the center of these settlements there were water towers which reminded me of cathedral steeples. They all had *bayit tarbut*, a culture house, a community center. There was also a library. And the most important building was the communal dining room. People lived in charming little houses clustered together, surrounded by gardens.

It was an incredible experience, I mean, to witness that and a lot of the day-to-day life in the kibbutz impressed me. We hadn't been sent to dental clinics as kids, for

example, so between my two brothers and myself we don't have one set of our own teeth. Well, there the kids had braces. They had orthodonture. They went to the dentist. That impressed me. They all went to high school. My two brothers hadn't graduated from high school. I liked it. I liked it very much. I liked the communal aspect of that life. The first time I ever heard a string quartet was at an open-air concert attended by members of the kibbutz in the general area.

It was really an immeasurably important experience to me. The most critical piece was that I was able to work. I arrived there in February, I believe, but as it got hotter it became more difficult to work. There was a drought, so to conserve water we began work at four in the morning and work until six before eating anything, and then work more, and then eat lunch and then go to Hebrew class. This was six days a week. Now I was the kid who couldn't get out of bed in the morning to attend school, I would get out of bed to pee and then go back to bed, you know what I mean? The six months I worked in Israel allowed me to internalized a lot of self-discipline

PEARLSTEIN: But you knew you were going for a limited time...

MEYER: Well, I actually deluded myself that I was going to stay. Now, I think that was not reasonable, I mean, in fact. I think the way I was raised you could never really leave. I think my parents broke our wings purposely and I think that wasn't uncommon in those days. They wanted someone to take care of them, which we did. We wound up taking care of them throughout their old age. Both financially, but also physically, we took care of them in their home till they died. And my mother was sick for a long time,

thirteen years. They never went to a nursing home. That's a very common pattern in working class families from my generation, by the way. And I'm not saying they intentionally did that, but for them there was a payback for having children. They didn't have children so that they would be successful and go away or become very different than them. That wasn't the purpose. And nowadays people solve that problem in another way. They don't have children.

PEARLSTEIN: So when did you come back?

MEYER: I came back from Israel after six months but I actually believed I was going to return. I was utterly convinced that my return to the States was a respite of some sort. I had not been accepted for the second level of the *Ulpan* which was a work-study program, partly because I wasn't that clear about my identity. I wasn't willing to entirely declare myself being Jewish. The family who I was assigned to when I arrived at the kibbutz advised me, "Just say you're Jewish." Nobody on the kibbutz cared that I had a mixed background. They were all atheists. They were anti-religious. So the fact that the Jewish side was on my father's side was of no material interest to them. There were other mixed people there too. One of the better teachers told me when she found out about my mixed background. But Daniel (this was my Hebrew name), you are the most Jewish kid in the Ulpan. But I somehow couldn't do it. It was an odd thing. Whether it would have meant being too disloyal to my mother, I really don't know. Going to the second level of the *Ulpan* was a big investment for the Jewish Agency, and they correctly sized it up that I wasn't going to stay, probably. At the end of the *Ulpan*, I could have continued working

full-time doing agricultural work. That would have been very, very hard. And my Hebrew was halting. I had learned more than I realized, I think, at the time. Later when I looked back at it I had learned quite a bit. (In general, I can learn to read a language very rapidly, but I have great difficulties in speaking a foreign language).

PEARLSTEIN: So what happened when you did come back to the States?

MEYER: I think, at that point really I self-identified as a Communist. When I was in Israel, I had concluded that that's what I was. On the ship going to Israel, I met a girl who came from a pro-Communist labor-Zionist group, Hashomer Hatzair, and there were some people on the kibbutz (including the family to whom I was assigned) who were from Mapam, the Left party, which was still pro-Soviet and more clearly anti-U.S. I gravitated toward them. It was just my outlook. It was just the way I looked at things. And the Jews from Latin America who were on the *Ulpan* were very left-wing. And so when I came back, that was where I was going to be, I think, for the rest of my life. I mean, that's how the die was cast from that point on. While in Isreal, I concluded that the kibbutz movement had peaked. At the most, only one new kibbutz was founded each year. And, that life was not acceptable to most Jews and certainly not to Arabs, so socialism would have to derive from another source.

PEARLSTEIN: When you came back to the States the purpose of getting this money was what?

MEYER: Well, originally I just got a job, kind of a part-time job. I had this notion I was going to study Hebrew. However, I would have just worked and I couldn't imagine how I could have done that physical work, which was very hard for me, fulltime. At that time the food was not entirely adequate; life there was really quite severe. I had gotten very sick when I was at the kibbutz too. I think it was just a question of nutrition, actually, and so I couldn't picture how I could have learned Hebrew on my own further while doing that kind of work. So I had the presence of mind to return to the United States. My mother did send the money for me to come back. I had raised the money to go. And when I got home, she borrowed money for me to go to college.

I went for a year to Fairleigh Dickinson University. When I arrived at Fairleigh Dickinson, I joined a car pool, and when I got into the car, there was another rider, she was a recent immigrant from Yugoslavia named was Mara, who couldn't speak English very well. She had arrived in America from Yugoslavia around the same time that I had landed from Israel. I still imagined I was going back to Israel, and she thought she was going back to Yugoslavia. Well, anyway, that's the woman I ultimately married and with whom had two children with. She had come from a family that was very left wing. There had been partisans, and so on, in her family and people who had been supportive of the resistance and supporters of a unified, socialist Yugoslavia. So we had a great deal in common. She wasn't Jewish. So the Jewish connection had very little opportunity to persist. Zionism, which I had largely believed in, didn't see any future for Jewish life outside of Israel and was really quite contemptuous of the diaspora. And I wasn't religious. I was an atheist. So I didn't know what to do with a Jewish identity. I might have been in, curiously, the type of dilemma that my grandmother was in. So I didn't

make too much of that after that. Although culturally I always have felt very Jewish, and most people assume I am, by the way.

PEARLSTEIN: So what was your ... In enrolling in Fairleigh Dickinson, in going to college, what was your thinking about what you were going to do?

MEYER: Well, I knew I'd been very fortunate in one way. It's sort of like an arm sticking out from heaven, pointing, with the finger pointing saying "History." I never was very good in anything else. However, I was always very, very good in history. When I took College Boards, on the achievement tests I got 800, a perfect score in History. In my high school, as far as we know, I was the first person to get a perfect score in any one of the tests. The tests were harder then, by the way. Later, when I took the Graduate Records, I again achieved a perfect score. It's kind of an unusual thing, but all that reading, not going to class and reading, at least for a test like that, it paid off a lot. There was nothing else very remarkable about Jerry Meyer. This led to an idea, which was quite an unusual idea to have for somebody from my background, to teach history in college. I didn't want to teach it in high school. I didn't want that at all. And I felt I was good at it and I started to get some very positive feedback right away at college in terms of a history professor taking an interest in me, and so on. But what was very important was that I had internalized some self-discipline. Everything after the kibbutz was a piece of cake, I'm telling you, up to this day. I mean nothing has matched what I had to do there for those six months. Everything—going to college and showing up and doing

homework and assignments and reading this thing and that thing—has been easier than that.

I also started to do political work. I went to New York, joined the Committee to Abolish HUAC (The House of Un-American Activities Committee), and I started to do various political activities. There was some right-wing film "Operation Abolition," which was pro-HUAC. We had a contrary film and we had literature to show how their film was lying. And we would follow that film around and distribute literature. I got Carl Braden and Frank Wilkinson (They were among the last people to go to jail for contempt for refusing to testify before HUAC) to speak at Fairleigh Dickson. When they appeared before the Committee, they refused to take the Fifth Amendment. They took the First Amendment. When I began organizing their speaking engagement, the Dean called me in to try to persuade me to cancel the event. And then I said, "Well, you know, I'll have to get in touch with the American Civil Liberties Union Academic Freedom Committee." I just made that up. And so the Dean said, "well, as long as you don't do any further publicity, young man." I had suspected they might do that, so I had put an article about the upcoming event in the student newspaper. Once it was published, it would have been really embarrassing for them to forbid the event. It was good for me to see that, what was going on in America in a college. By the way, the meeting was a big success. The small hall, which seated almost one-hundred, was filled to capacity.

In NYC, before the mass movement of the anti-war movement, these were large assemblies of the Left in St. Nicholas Arena and Manhattan Center. It was a kind of event that people have forgotten about. There weren't many young people in attendance at these events. These rallies had a kind of almost ritualistic aspect to them, and I would

gather friends together to go there. There would be speeches and Pete Seeger or Martha Schlamme would sing. I liked all of that. And I started to read *The National Guardian* and *The Worker*, and very much felt that that was going to be my life, to do Left political work. But I kind of freelanced a lot.

PEARLSTEIN: Did you graduate from Fairleigh Dickinson?

MEYER: No, thank God. I told a teacher, "I really think I would rather go to Rutgers," and she replied, "Well, if you want to go, go now." And at first I thought it was very rough that she said that, but she was absolutely right. I applied. My grades were good, and I had these sensational SAT's, so they accepted me.

PEARLSTEIN: So this was after your first year or ...

MEYER: I went to Rutgers, Newark, in my second year, which at the time was very much like a New Jersey version of City College, remarkably so. It was less Jewish, but quite similar. It attracted working class and lower middle class kids, who couldn't afford to go away to school. It was a very good school. It had a very good library, and we shared the same faculty with Rutgers, New Brunswick. It was housed in a terrible physical plant, chock-a-block buildings in downtown Newark.

I went there with a conscious political mission. I wanted to form a club, a left-wing club, and I was determined to do that. Within a couple of months, I had organized the Liberal Club. I chose the name so that I could find a faculty advisor (he was about to

retire) and successfully go through the process of being certified as a legitimate club. We organized forums in the school. Prior to these meetings, we would set up a literature table, which helped build for the forum. We invited speakers who were opposed to the McCarren Act and against nuclear testing. We had one event for gay rights, which I was opposed to. I thought that that was divisive and not political. During all time, I was pretending I wasn't gay to myself. I don't know who else believed it, but I was trying to believe that. I went on a little freedom ride to Delaware and Maryland with CORE. We would go to the anti-atom bomb marches. And we'd go to different demonstrations and do different little ... very, very, very small scale. We did quite a lot. When I arrived at Rutgers I didn't know anybody; I was a sophomore and people had already made friendships. So I went to the student lounge and there were some people singing folk songs. I said, "Well, that's where I'm going to find people; they were singing labor songs." And I remember one kid, Dennis, saying, "Well, my grandmother said that Lenin ... I thought to myself, "there's the first one," and he was the first one. There was a chapter of the NAACP, and there was a chapter of CORE. One by one, we sort of got together a very interesting group of people, most of whom had been from Party families. One of them, Shawna, came up to me, her parents had been in the Party, and said: "I found another one of us." She said, "She's in the bathroom crying." I said: "So what do you mean? Why is she in the bathroom crying?" She explained: "well, she's crying because the history teacher said Robespierre was a terrorist, and she's insisting that he was a revolutionary." So that was Carol. (Carol and I are still friends.) We were very tight together. In addition to political activities, we did a lot of drinking at the time; a lot of hanging out. There was a lot of intermarriage within that group. These political

activities brought us closer together. I'd learned a lot at Rutgers. Academically I didn't do badly; I did certainly nothing very stunning, but I really learned a lot. But we had joined little picket lines and some of the marches against atom-bomb testing.

There was a Communist Party-backed sponsored forum in Newark, the Friday Night Forum, which I would attend with my friend Carol. When we arrived, the old timers would coo, "Oh, the youth are here." They made a big fuss over us. They asked us, "How can we get more young people to come?" So I said: "well, why don't you invite our friends (Carol's future husband and a buddy of mine) who had traveled to Cuba to break the blockade." When we arrived at the hall that Friday for the forum, the door was locked, the lights were out, everything was closed. Well, what had happened? The chair from the Saturday Night Forum was told later by the owner of the place, "I'm a Mason. I believe in free speech, but the FBI was here and they told me it's best if the place isn't open."

During that time, the FBI was all over the place. And I was not a member of the Communist Party. I was not a subscriber to *The Daily Worker*. In addition to my activities as President of the Liberal Club, I would sell copies of *National Guardian* every week and copies of the *Monthly Review*. Each month they would come to the house. He once blurted out: "I work on a lathe in a factory to send you to college. What are you? A paper boy." He couldn't fathom this kind of thing.

There was a lot of learning involved from these political activities. I gained a lot of confidence because being able to form the club involved entrepreneurial skills. There potential and real opposition to the existence of a left student club. I was able to find an adviser, some old leftist, somebody that was going to retire actually and so he was willing

to do that. I had to figure out, how to get speakers there, find literature, and how to get room. And most importantly, how to attract audiences. It was very good for me in terms of building my self-confidence, and to bond with other people. I really learned a lot.

PEARLSTEIN: You say you had this very strong idea that you wanted to teach history in college. So what happened with this? I mean ...

MEYER: Well, I had no idea really what entailed; I just was taking it a step at a time. I was a history major, and I took as many history courses as I could, but I always read in addition to the assigned reading. The classes were remarkably ideologically biased. I went from class to class—the history classes, the economics classes, the philosophy class—and the professors would be preaching why Marx was wrong. It was astounding really. This had the opposite effect on me then what they intended. It made me want to know more about Marxism. In almost every course I would go to the library and I would get some left-wing book that paralleled the curriculum of the class. The Russian history class was the worst. That was like listening to Radio Free Europe twice a week. So in addition to reading the assigned text, I got a textbook by a Jesse Clarkson. He wasn't a Marxist; kind of a materialist, kind of an economic determinist in some way. I did all of this without any guidance of any sort. In the course on the Civil War I got Du Bois's book, *Black Reconstruction*. I did something similar in almost every course. I would find a left-wing book which I did not necessarily finish. I also would go to the library, and read the Left journals, such as the *Monthly Review*. I also read the Social Democratic magazines too, *Dissent* which was a little more left than later perhaps, and *New Politics*.

I would almost always write book reports on left wing books, for example, Kautsky's book on Communism in Central Europe during the Reformation; so I was sort of training myself for something. To be a leftist, what else.

But then when I graduated, I didn't know what to do. So I did what everyone else did at that time, which was to become a social worker for the NYC Department of Welfare. I liked that job very much, by the way. I was assigned to a center in the South Bronx. I tried to work the system to maximize the benefit for the clients. I helped build the Social Workers Union, and joined a strike. My life at the time was a little bit checkered. I returned to college to get my Master's to avoid the draft. I was getting more and more heavily involved politically all the time.

PEARLSTEIN: You went back where, to Rutgers?

MEYER: I went to City College to the Master's program there. But I was getting more and more involved with more and more political work. I mean, the Union but also mostly anti-war work. I think I took advantage of my ex-wife a lot, to ignore her and not pay attention to her much. I remember telling her before we got married, I said: "The most important thing in my life is my politics. You have to understand that." I can't believe I said that, when I think of that. I don't know whether she responded. When I think of it, I was really channeling my mother. That was my mother actually saying religion was the most important thing for her.

PEARLSTEIN: You were married before you graduated from college?

MEYER: We got married in 1965, right after I finished college, minus six credits which I finished at night. At that time, in that place, people got married early. If you didn't get married by then, you were probably not going to get married. People got married after high school or after college. The only other way you could get out of your parents' house was to enlist in the Army. Living on your own in other circumstances was unheard of. You wouldn't have moved around the block. What would you have done? Lived in a furnished room? People didn't live together, at least where I grew up, at that point, before they got married.

So I really did lots and lots of political work all the time. I could see things were changing. I was very aware the FBI was aware of me. There was no question about it. After I got my file, I found out they sure were. Previous to this, I had gotten a lot of feedback, particularly from black students, that they had been approached by the FBI or by a Dean in the college. They got the message that it would be better for them not to associate with me, or they shouldn't be a member of the Liberal Club. Some of them reported this in a way as if saying they were sorry. Or one girl, an African American girl, Gloria, told me that the Dean had threatened to take her scholarship from her if she continued associating with the Liberal Club. She remained friendly with me and later dated my older brother. This embittered me a lot. Two older African-American students (one of whom became a leader of CORE) told me that the FBI had questioned them about me. After the FBI had succeeded in preventing the first meeting about Cuba from being held, we organized another meeting about Cuba. We hired a hall in a hotel. We didn't tell them exactly what it was for, and we had a lawyer (Morton Stavis) waiting to go to a

judge for an injunction. At the last moment, the manager of the hotel told us that the contract that I had signed for forty-five dollars became four hundred and fifty dollars. We had to pay it. We paid it to have the meeting. But this was, you know, God bless America. I can't really forget any of that. I felt very embittered about it and it had the effect to make me more defiant. I was generally very good at what I did. I was able to get things done; get people together. I started to organize Marxist Study Circles and I would get together friends, my older brother, people I knew, fellow students. And at the most there would be eight people, twelve people. I did it numbers of times. We would study the *Communist Manifesto* and *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*. But something was definitely beginning to change. I mean, you could see that there was some change in the atmosphere. Although in the early '60s, it was still very much the McCarthy Era, very much so. Someone I knew in Newark was indicted under the Smith Act, some time around 1963 or '64; I think they were the last people. There was some pretty heavy-handed repression up to that point.

I mean I was just drawn to the anti-Vietnam War movement. I felt so responsible. I don't know if I've ever felt so compelled to do something about some perceived wrong, whether today it's gay rights or anything else, the idea that the United States was raining death and napalm on a mass population every day. I was very motivated try to help stop that. Frankly, I also very much wanted to help a Communist country survive and expand.

PEARLSTEIN: Did your politics at this point have any influence on your thinking about work, shifting from the social welfare to...?

MEYER: Well, I would have been happy being a social worker. I might have stayed there. My very good friend from Catholic grammar school, James Shanahan, was Vice-President of the Union. I had converted a lot of people in my life to Marxism and socialism, lots of people. (It reminds me of my mother converting my father, but also her friends at work to Catholicism). He became a very devoted leftist, though less so before he died. Without losing his commitment to the poor, he went back to the Catholic Church. I had frequently thought in terms of working in the Union. My original idea about what work I would do was educational work in a Union, but I didn't know how to do that. I didn't know what that would be. I didn't know how to define that. I mean, how do you apply for that job, or whatever?

I left the social work job to go back to college, primarily to avoid the draft. Despite my student status, I was called up for the draft. I was prepared to go to jail, but I was able to evade that by saying I had once attempted suicide, which was true, and other different points about my somewhat troubled psychiatric history as a child. I was sent for an interview with this psychiatrist; he asked: "You say you're depressive. What depresses you?" I said: "This is very depressing." He said softly, "All right. Get out of here! Get out of here!" Despite getting the exemption, I felt bad because I was going to be inducted with kids I had graduated with. I had to appear at the Draft Board where I had grown up and the kids that were there were the working class kids. Although, I had not actually socialized much with them, they had greeted me warmly. Certainly, many of them went to Vietnam, and I'm sure that some of them that died or were wounded. I did feel very bad about that.

PEARLSTEIN: So once you got your Master's from City did you immediately go into teaching?

MEYER: But I was able to complete my Master's degree, and later advanced in my career and other aspects of my life. I was studying European and Russian history, actually, and I wrote a very good Master's thesis on an aspect of Soviet agriculture: Khuschev's Virgin Lands program. (There is a connection to my experiences on the kibbutz and my choosing a topic on Soviet agriculture.) I did very well there and I did get a lot of support from teachers. It was a very, very good program at that time, a wonderful program. I learned a great deal.

...

PEARLSTEIN: Despite people like Stanley Page and ...

MEYER: Even though he was anti-Communist, Stanley Page liked me. Somehow I charmed Stanley Page a lot. Even though I didn't hold back on my politics at all, he was friendly with me. He actually was the adviser for my Master's Thesis, which he told me was publishable; but he never told me how to get it published, and I was too unassertive at the time to ask.

I somehow have been able to be a politically active Leftist and survive—even thrive—in most settings that were decidedly not Leftist. I don't know how I finessed this. I think that surviving in hostile environments has had something to do with being gay. I had to find a way to survive in a tough neighborhood, I couldn't fight. I never knew how

to fight. I could never throw a punch or anything, never. I never did it in my whole life. Somehow you have to survive so you find some way of convincing other people not to hurt you – even to protect you – even though you're different than they are. I don't know how, what it is. But I did become friends with leftists there like Manny Chill and Walter Struve, with whom I'm still very good friends. Walter spent a lot of time working with me. I am still friends with him and he helped me with my writing, which was very chunky and very troubled, because I really grew up in a kind of almost illiterate household. We spoke almost dialectical English. Still, some of the prepositions I use are perfectly odd, perhaps this comes from my grandmother. But everything was spoken in double negatives. There was some paucity of language too. Curiously, I had met Struve before. So we had bonded there prior to being in a teacher-student relationship. We first met as members of a newly founded anti-war group in Washington Heights. The Washington Heights group was a summer project of SDS. There in a number of the inner-city communities, student activists committed to live there and help establish community-based anti-war groups. A few of these students committed to stay longer. No community residents were joining the group. So what Walter and I decided was the only way we could accomplish that was to go door to door. Every Saturday, oh God, we did this for, like five months. So we were like Jehovah's Witnesses. We developed a questionnaire: "Are you for the War or against the War? If they said they were against the War, then we would try to get them to come to a meeting. You know? It never happened. The couple of people that showed up to a meeting, when they got there, there was so much fighting, they never came back. This was a community group, the whole

point was the community group, and there were people there from a political party which I won't mention their name, who wanted us to organize college students!

PEARLSTEIN: Why not?

MEYER: Well, it was the Socialist Worker Party and its youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance. Its members in our community-base peace group insisted that what we were doing was wrong and that we should go back and work on the campuses! It was the most destructive, insane thing I've ever experienced. At the end they won, but what did they win, everyone else had left by then, every single person. It was something out of a nightmare. It was utterly bizarre. One of the leaders said that working in the community was "going into the populist bog." So Walter and I would go door to door with this questionnaire (There was one other member, an old Communist Party member, who also canvassed). If the respondents said that they were for the War, we'd say: "Well, we understand. But we're losing the War so the government will have to escalate the War. We would then ask a series of questions! How would you agree to escalate the War? A) By using the atomic bomb? B) Raising Taxes? C) Sending more troops? We would draw them into this logical trap, so to speak. It was very effective. There was only one person who kept saying yes. It was an Irish guy drinking beer, and he was already pretty drunk. (Remember this was a Saturday morning). He was a bus driver. And his wife, as I remember, had committed suicide. (I wonder why). And he had, like, eight children there and he was popping beers and saying: "Yes, we should use the atomic bomb. They should take all my children to fight and die! We have to stop the Reds!" "My wife

committed suicide but the kids can fight." And the kids were going, like looking like, "What? Us too?"

PEARLSTEIN: So you got your Master's. What year was it? Do you remember?

MEYER: That must have been, like, maybe '68.

PEARLSTEIN: That was the time when there were a lot of jobs.

MEYER: Oh, the jobs were everywhere. Most of what happens to people in life is circumstantial. I mean, if you wanted to teach college history there was no better moment in the history of the United States than that moment. Everyone was going into college to avoid the draft, and then all of a sudden there were all these student-aid programs, so college enrollments doubled or more overnight. After completely the Master's program, I got accepted to the CUNY Graduate Center Doctoral program. I enrolled in history, with a major in Eastern European History and a minor in Modern European History. I found the graduate program to be remarkably cold, alienated. I couldn't stand it. I went to the head of the program, who was, no less, Adelman. (He was nice to me too!) In any case I said: "I can't take it any more." I said: "I'm working full time in the Department of Welfare. "I enrolled in the doctoral program because I wanted to teach. And I can't attend school all the time. I need to earn some money." He replies: "Well, there was a young woman just here. I offered her a job and she turned it down. Would you like it?" I said: "I'll take it." That was teaching one course in Queensborough Community College.

It took almost six hours per day commuting. F Morningside Heights to there they paid four hundred and forty dollars! But really that small beginning started me off. Very shortly, I became a full-time adjunct. (At the time, there were no restrictions on the number of sections any adjunct could teach, at least in the University as a whole). I used to travel from Queensborough to Kingsborough. That took something like twenty-seven hours per week travelling. I did everything on the subway. I practically used to have to urinate in between the trains while they were moving. I would eat lunch on the train. I would never give my seat, no matter how crippled or old anybody was. So I would do all my class preparation and all the correcting of the papers and exams on the train. But I treated the job as if it were a full-time job and that really paid off because ultimately when I finally finished the dissertation, I had two job offers. These options existed for a young guy with a Master's. I had some coursework completed, but not a lot.

That was the nature of the job market at the time. In 1972, I took the job at Newark College of Engineering because they offered a three-year contract. The engineering college in Newark required two courses in European history for all its students. The students were forced into these classes and, boy, they didn't want to be there.

By then, the peace movement had started to expand exponentially. My God, previously to get a handful of people together around anything left-wing took a lot of work. All of a sudden everything started moving in the other direction and I was ready to go. Some of my friends from Rutgers, Newark, and people who had been in the Liberal Club, and Carol, and so on, very good, close friends of mine worked in the public school system in Newark and a few of them were in the leadership of the Newark Teachers

Union; by then a remnant of a Local AFT that had been Communist-led. What had survived the McCarthy era was a handful of members who the local kept together to pay the salaries of the people who had been blacklisted. That included Lowenfeld, who taught Philip Ruth history. They were remarkable people, who couldn't teach in college because of the Depression and in large part because they were Jewish. So it was an exceptional group. A remarkable group of black teachers who were very class conscious and very highly educated and motivated to do something important at the time coalesced with this aging and about-to-retire group of older Jewish leftist teachers who had been in or around the Party. Carol Graves, who became the NTU's President, was a good friend of my best friend Carol, so I was brought into that circle. There were two prolonged strikes. When there was an injunction issues against the strike (at the time, strikes by civil servants were illegal), I participated in a demonstration. I got arrested, and along with more than two-hundred teachers protesting this measure, I went to jail.

Simultaneously with these activities, I was organizing a student peace group and ultimately we had a student strike. We carried it out to the end. The faculty was amazed. They couldn't believe it.

I lost my job. You know, when I look back at it, I don't know--I was certainly not paying attention to my degree. I don't know. Maybe I would have lost the job anyway. However, there's no question, that once I became active in the student strike and I had been arrested and I went to jail, the Chairman stopped saying hello to me. I mean that was it. It was over. I had been identified as a faculty supporter (perhaps I was the most visible of a few faculty who were involved). I attracted especially negative attention from the administration because in my interest in expanding the student strike as long as

possible, I publically took the position that because the student strike had been inaugurated by a referendum, it could only be ended by another referendum. By a minuscule margin the students were able to extend the strike. I had had the three-year contract, and I continued doing whatever I could. However, I knew it was all over. By then my wife was pregnant with my first child, Anna, and I said "Oh my God, holy shit, now what?" I was finishing up my course work for the Doctorate, and had no job, and so I was preparing to go back to be a social worker. That option was always there in those days. Applicants were placed on a list in order of their scores on a test that was purely based on knowledge of vocabulary. The first time I took it, I got forty-nine out of fifty. Three weeks after taking the test or because I would be able to resume my old job, it didn't seem like a miserable idea to me. I also thought, well, I'll get active in the Union. My options were fewer than many other college students because I never once conceived of moving outside the City. My brothers never moved. The idea of removing myself from family and familiar backgrounds, even physical settings, has always been unimaginable for me actually.

During the strikes in Newark, I did various kinds of support work, There was a reporter from the *National Guardian* who was writing articles on the strike. I buddied with him to help him gain access to people and to interpret what was going on and to encourage those articles. The following year he was instrumental in my getting a job there as well. In 1971 he got me a job with Hostos Community College which first started offering classes in 1970.

PEARLSTEIN: But technically at this time you were still involved in the Doctoral program?

MEYER: Yes. I had basically just about finished my course work but I had not, in fact, completed my orals and I certainly had not begun my dissertation. But that was not unusual at that time at all. Open enrollment had just begun so you had entirely new colleges opening up. At that time I had friends who told me, well, if I had to teach in a place like Hostos, I'd rather not teach at all. And guess what happened to them? They never did get a full time position. But for me, to go to Hostos Community College was like a dream come true. I mean, from my perspective, there never was a better match for me in my life.

PEARLSTEIN: Do you say this retrospectively or you felt that way ...

MEYER: I knew it from the first day. It was like a miracle. I mean, it was as if everything that I was, was useful, and was honored, and was valued in that situation.

PEARLSTEIN: By the students? By your colleagues?

MEYER: By everyone, it seemed to me. By administrators. I think I had better relations after with the administrators than the faculty at the college. I wasn't prepared to join the administration, that was never an option for me. But I think I had less conflict over the years with the administration than I did with my peers. There are interesting reasons for

that. I always had a wider, institutional view of the college, and almost all the faculty had a Departmental, or a professional, view. I didn't share those loyalties. I mean my concern was for the institution and the feudal arrangements brought about by the departmental structure always seem reprehensible to me. I had trouble adjusting to that. However, over the years, I've also received a lot of support from faculty. In the Senate elections, for the At-Large Delegates, I would always be the first, second, or third in the number of votes. And they knew my politics! That was clear. I mean, I'd never explicitly stated that. I never said to any other that a very few committed Leftists that "I'm a member of the Communist Party ...", but many knew that.

PEARLSTEIN: So did you become active, politically active on the Hostos campus as soon as you got there?

MEYER: I became active as soon as my foot crossed the threshold. Within two weeks, I organized a forum on the 1972 Presidential election, which included a representative from the Communist Party. Now, the College was utterly unique, I mean, in the sense that we had a club, The Federation of Puerto Rican Socialist Students, for example. Right from the very beginning the school exuded an extraordinarily politicized, radicalized atmosphere. When I arrived and for many years there after, it was inconceivable that anybody would state that they were against independence for Puerto Rico. No one would have ventured to say that.

PEARLSTEIN: Is it your sense that faculty were recruited with a notion of their… social-political commitment?

MEYER: that was true in the Social Sciences Department and having those commitments would not have hurt anyone else anywhere in the college. There was no doubt that in my case it was an absolute plus. My background as a radical, politically active Marxist intellectual (of sorts) was considered to be an advantage. The fact that I had been involved with student activities; that I was active in the Union; even my ideological point of view was considered to be an advantage in terms of my application. When I was interviewed for the position, the departmental P&B committee included faculty *and* students. Remarkably, there were three African-American students or departmental P&B! I was accepted over, non-white candidates, who didn't have those bona fides. The committee really wanted me. They very reasons which caused me to lose my first full-time position, were the same reasons I got the job at Hostos. It was a brand new college. It was so exciting. Newark College of Engineering, the department chair who imagined he was some kind of leftist, he would give specific duties to everybody every year, so, one year my assignment was to make sure there were blue books in the filing cabinet. The next year I took care of the bulletin board. He treated us like we were children. But at Hostos, I was appointed to the Curriculum Committee of the college, which helped shape the course requirements for the College's degrees. It was a wonderful learning opportunity and it was wide open; no one ever objected to anyone taking an initiative.

We had a President, Candido De Leon, who was a rather problematical guy. He had spent some time in a Franciscan seminary and he wore sandals. He was a bit diffident and not very effective. Nonetheless, I got along well with him. There was a lot about him that caused me to indentify with him. He designed the college based on a strong liberal arts curriculum, and we had that. There were twelve credits of behavioral social sciences, a six-credit language requirement, eight credits of natural science, six credits in humanities, and two in physical education. This broad liberal arts program was very rare, extremely rare, in a community college setting. Although the idea of a bilingual college was poorly defined, he endorsed this project. I was also able to effectively work with Dean of Faculty. I immediately joined an initiative which melded language with course content to help the students pass the CUNY writing exam. This experience stuck with me throughout all my years at Hostos, I worked on all kinds of projects having to do with the question of language and content. More than thirty years after that, I am teaching a Writing Intensive course as an adjunct. Hostos was ideal for me in the sense that it was so open and it was an extremely politicized culture. Unfortunately, we didn't know what to do with all of this. Most of what was so special about the college has just been jettisoned, by the way, two years ago. The liberal arts concentration for the degree has been diluted and the bilingual component of the college has essentially disappeared. It's one of the reasons I resigned, by the way, why I retired when the shift took place in the College's curriculum to a more conventional format.

PEARLSTEIN: But there were certain off hand remarks you made earlier that suggested there were also tremendous tensions or conflicts within the faculty.

MEYER: Well, I think at the very beginning that wasn't that detectable. I think it was a question of getting the school off the ground and getting it running. I also had crossed the threshold. I didn't initially sense any particular resistance or rejection of me from any area and a great welcoming. I mean, I don't know if I've ever experienced anything quite like that. I felt very endorsed, very affirmed, by what was going on and I did try very hard. I really did work very, very hard there. I had lost my job at Newark College of Engineering and I was aware of that, that that could happen again. So I consciously focused a lot on working with the union; that it seemed to me ...

PEARLSTEIN: Now remind me, in that time, '71, when ...

MEYER: I was there '72.

PEARLSTEIN: Was the time to tenure still three years?

MEYER: Five years. And I knew I had been fired once so it could happen again, that was clear, but I wasn't going to change anything about what I did. There was a leftist in the Newark Teachers' Union (Lownfeld's son) who could have gotten me a job in Essex Community College. Before he made contact with a friend who chaired the History Department, he demanded "but you know when you go there, don't do the same things you did at Newark College of Engineering." I didn't say "fuck you," but I didn't pursue that avenue further. I wasn't going to do that. I saw my work as a college teacher as part

of my political work. To some extent, I saw my teaching in the classrooms as a type of political work too, clearly. It also had something to do also with the activities outside the classroom, which I was convinced helped build a community and a community of a type of resistance. I think that's how I saw that. I also believed that the political work that I engaged in at Hostos enriched college life.

PEARLSTEIN: Were you tempted to move from the West Side to the South Bronx?

MEYER: I had moved at that point to Park Slope in 1969 and I lived living there. We lived in a, it was a small six-room apartment, but there was nothing fancy. My wife didn't work. In 1971 we had a daughter named Anne, and in 1973, we had son, Adam, so I was supporting a family. The salary was low, approximately $1,050 a month net. We had bought a house with another couple in Park Slope so the housing costs were very low, but still, there was nothing much left over for a vacation, or whatever. There was no car. (I have never learned how to drive). It was pretty austere. So I didn't feel in that sense any need to get that close to the students' community. I think my living in Park Slope was good in a way because I knew there were differences. I wasn't them exactly, and I think that was good I didn't make that mistake in my mind. I have boundary problems galore, but I didn't really have that idea. I had the feeling that I had had my own life and my own background, but I also had a type of confidence that I had something to offer. Perhaps more important, I appreciated their culture and to some extent wanted (and do) participate in it.

PEARLSTEIN: Now you said, given what you recognized from your experience at the Newark College of Engineering was the insecurity of these college jobs, you had said, and then I interrupted you, that you had connected to the Union right....

MEYER: I felt that if I were going to continue my political activities, which I had every intention of doing, that it would be better if some repressing measure was taken against me, I would have some protection, that there would be some recourse, especially because I didn't yet have tenure. At Newark College of Engineering, there had been no union. There was no recourse at all. There was no appeal about anything to anybody. When the Dean called me in to tell me my contract wasn't going to be renewed, he started, "well, we noticed there's..." I said, "Why don't you keep this short." Thank you very much and I walked out. There was nothing you could do. What was I going to do? Go to the American Civil Liberties Union to... where would I go? There was just no recourse.

I think by any conventional measure I had done a credible job as a classroom teacher. I had also made some progress toward my degree. During the three years I worked there, I had never been observed and I had never received an evaluation.

PEARLSTEIN: Now, when you came to Hostos was there an active chapter?

MEYER: The chapter had just begun and it was not particularly active. Although there were a couple of non-white people that would attend the meetings, the Chapter was widely known as the White Caucus. There was a Black Caucus, a Puerto Rican Caucus, and the PSC chapter. In fact, the PSC did not yet exist. The CUNY community colleges

were represented by the United Confederation of College Teachers. It merged the following year with the Legislative Conference, which represented senior colleges.

PEARLSTEIN: Okay. You were saying that in '72 when you hooked up with what was then the Hostos chapter of the United Federation of College Teachers

MEYER: Right.

PEARLSTEIN: It was known as the White Caucus. Could you explain that?

MEYER: There were meetings, which as I remember had no clear agenda. There were some desultory discussions about the upcoming merger between the Legislative Conference and the United College Federation of Teachers.

PEARLSTEIN: Gerald, when we left off you were talking about the fact that the Union Chapter at Hostos had become known as the White Caucus.

MEYER: Right.

PEARLSTEIN: Was there a Black Caucus and a Latino Caucus?

MEYER: There was, in fact, a Black Caucus and there was a Latino Caucus. It might have been a Puerto Rican Caucus. In fact, I believe it was actually a Puerto Rican

Caucus. And I think whites, many whites, at least felt marginalized. I don't think I did particularly.

PEARLSTEIN: Did the Caucuses have institutional form? If the PSC was identified as the White caucus was there an organization that was identified as the Black Caucus or was this simply a ..

MEYER: There was an actual organization, sure, with officers and so on. It wasn't part of governance but we, at that point, didn't yet have a Senate, for example. Both the Black Caucus and the Puerto Rican Caucus died out at some point.

PEARLSTEIN: Do you remember approximately when?

MEYER: That's a good question. I think probably, certainly by 1980 they were gone. And part of that was a kind of very interesting phenomenon where the College became less black and much more Latino but also simultaneously, less Puerto Rican, so those identities really in some way became more fluid or less rooted in the social reality of the college.

PEARLSTEIN: You had said last time in this connection that your own activity in the Union was reduced in part because you felt that people's preoccupations had become too much bread-and-butter and not enough engaged with the uniqueness of Hostos as an institution and interested in its development. Is it possible that something similar

happened with the Black and Puerto Rican Caucuses; that people became more preoccupied with professional development...

PEARLSTEIN: United Federation of College Teachers, UFCT.

MEYER: It was affiliated with the AF of L-CIO so it functioned more like a labor union. It had a social democratic leadership-it, who I believe, might have been Shackmanites, and the Legislative Conference was something like the equivalent of the NEA of that period. Its members didn't think it was appropriate for college teachers to be in what they saw as a blue-collar organization. The Legislative Conference considered itself to be a professorial organization. The merger was to be effected the following year, and so the Union, I think, had bargaining rights for the community colleges. There were some very important issues; the issues of parity, for example, between the community colleges and the senior colleges in terms of salary, work load, and criteria for tenure and promotion. The Union had a presence in the school, but it wasn't a major presence. Of course I went to the meetings and I thought it was very important and I was aware that unions could protect people, and could do a great deal. This activity certainly matched my own politics and my own involvements with the Newark Teachers Union and the Social Workers Union and earlier in my family background. I cared about that a great deal. The Chapter Chair at the time, Les Alt, resigned as Chapter Chairperson in order to run for a University-wide office as an independent. (He lost). There was no one else who wanted to take this position, but I really did want to do it very badly. I don't know exactly what I envisioned at that moment, but what crossed my mind was that along with

whatever else I might do in this position, it could help me survive in academia as a radical. So I became Chapter Chairperson in the Fall of '73, and I remained in that position until the spring of '79. This five-year time period was the busiest period of my whole life. I totally devoted myself to the work at the college with the center of it being the PSC Chapter but from that center, my activities spoked off into all kinds of other directions, specifically the building of mass movements on behalf of the college.

PEARLSTEIN: Can I interrupt you here with a question?

MEYER: Yes, of course.

PEARLSTEIN: At the time it's my sense that a lot of people associated with the so-called New Left who were doing all of this anti-War work

MEYER: Right.

PEARLSTEIN: And community organizing and student organizing, and so on, were very dismissive of the labor movement as retrograde and so forth.

MEYER: Yes, they were.

PEARLSTEIN: But this didn't influence your thinking at all?

MEYER: Not my thinking. And there wasn't a lot of that point of view among the faculty and students at the college. However, there was the problem of community control in Ocean Hill/Brownsville and the Lower East Side, which brought the United Federation of Teachers and the Black and the Puerto Rican community into bitter conflict. The PSC was going to join the AFT, and the UFT had been involved in what black people and many Puerto Rican people strongly felt, very strongly, was a racist activity directed against their communities, so there was a significant obstacle to the AFT building in a community where there was a significant black and Puerto Rican presence. At that time, there were remarkably few, really scattered, actually, non-white teachers in CUNY. However, Hostos Community College's faculty was roughly one-third, one-third, one-third, the largest one-third being white and the smallest one-third being African-American. The student body at that time was significantly African-American; it might have been as much as 30 percent maybe more, and among the Hispanics, who comprised the remainder of the student population, it was overwhelming Puerto Rican. Over time, the demographics of the college significantly changed. Today at most 10 percent of its students are Puerto Rican. The largest group by far is Dominican and there are immigrants from everywhere, including a surprisingly large number of Africans. By the way, at the time, I supported the UFT over the leaders for community control. I simply could not conceive of oppressing a union regardless of its leadership's politics. In similar circumstances I would not take that same position today.

PEARLSTEIN: The faculty tended to caucus according to race?

MEYER: The tendency was for the white people, the white professionals, to think of the Union as their caucus and there was very little non-white presence in the Union Chapter in the first year that I was there. However, when I became Chapter Chairperson I devised a type of a structure for the Chapter which sought a representative from every one of the Departments. Now, there was an absurdity in the structure of Hostos that, here we were, a college which was, at that point, Of approximately three thousand students, but we had twenty Departments. (Later there was a consolidation of Departments). But I was able to find someone in just about every Department willing to serve, and I also added on a representative from the constituencies, which had University-wide Chapters. So I had a HEO, and I had a college lab technician also with a seats on this Executive Board. So I created an Executive board not with Vice-President, Treasurer, whatever, but representatives ... like a kind of Coalition with representatives from each of the academic units and then the two College-wide units. This converted African American and Puerto Rican members into active members of the chapter.

PEARLSTEIN: And did you get any feedback from the Central Office ...

MEYER: No. No, I winged this. I just did it that way. I don't know what precisely caused me to do that, what model I was following. I mean, I thought about the College a lot and somehow I came up with that idea. I do think the more creative piece of that was to have added a representative from the HEOs and the college lab technicians. The leadership was aware of this because I published the names of the members of the Executive Committee in the Chapter Newsletter.

PEARLSTEIN: You produced these yourself?

MEYER: Yeah. I produced them myself. Well, I produced the copy and they were photocopied downtown. But they were really quite extensive. If you wanted to find out what was happening, about what was going on, you read the chapter newsletter. I would insert labor cartoons, and articles that I had cut out of the *Daily World* and elsewhere. I also published a table of membership by Department, by unit, so the English Department, thirty-five teachers; twenty-three were members, etc. It served as a gauge of what was happening in terms of membership. It did create pressure on people to join and the membership started to mount. Interest in the PSC tremendously increased because it had moved into a vacuum. The College Senate, I don't believe, had been organized yet, and the administration functioned poorly (which has been generally true at the College) so there was this vast vacuum. So the newsletter became the medium of communication for the college.

I organized a series of forums, the Hostos Educational Forum, where teachers could present topics and reflect on their research... A counselor presented on how to handle a disruptive student. I had a teacher who later on became very famous, Sandra Perl (She left to go on to Lehman and developed a really national reputation) who presented on teaching language across the curriculum. We had a counselor present on the handicapped student in the classroom, and other kinds of teacher topics. I had known that the old Teachers Union, which has been expelled from the CIO, had continued to exert influence among the public school teachers through its very literate newspaper and an

annual conference which focused on professional issues, doing a lot of that work. I was aware that they had continued their presence, in a sense, even after they could no longer function as a collective bargaining agent or anything like that, by doing professional service, in a sense, for teachers. We reported on these activities in the newsletter. I would write a kind of summary, or I would have the presenter write the summary of the forum. It also published good-and-welfare items, and what related to what was occurring with the Local. It became the primary medium of communication for the College. It was published regularly, I mean, every month. It was on legal-sized paper. It could have been two or it could have been four or five, maybe once in a blue moon, it would have been even six pages of text. There were members who contributed to this. There were articles about grievances. The newsletter became the critical medium of communication on, really, what began to become increasingly evident to me and to others that the actual future of the College was not secure.

PEARLSTEIN: Now, this is even before the fiscal crisis?

MEYER: Oh yeah, yeah. We couldn't have done what we did during the fiscal crisis if we hadn't done this work earlier, because what...

PEARLSTEIN: No, no, no. I have ... My question really referred to the existence of the College being in jeopardy.

MEYER: I think so. Earlier, I began to sense that the College was in jeopardy. It was operating in a rented building, a renovated tire factory! It was totally inadequate for what the College had to do. We had no gymnasium. We had no day care center. We had no bookstore. The lab space was so limited that it was impossible for the college to offer enough sections of lab-science course, the completion of two of which was a prerequisite for obtaining degrees awarded by the college. We were cramped into this place like sardines. My office, which was as large as an average single bathroom in a New York City apartment house, housed three teachers. And there was ten-year lease. We didn't own anything. It was just an outrageous situation. There was this extremely ineffective administration and a lot of drift. There was a lot of money, by the way. The money, God knows, no one took the money, but it wasn't put to good purpose. There was a sense of malaise. The college had a very distinguished faculty. I mean, people had opted to go there. Some got promotions, or whatever, to make that transfer, but there were people who gave up tenured positions to come there, to start programs and they saw it as a type of political or a social mission. The founding core of faculty were a very remarkable group of people. Some of them got worn down and less positive as time went on, but it certainly was a very special group.

PEARLSTEIN: Now, you've referred a couple of times to the inefficiency of the administration. But at this stage there was or was not a tension between students and faculty and the administration?

MEYER: It seemed to me in some ways that the last gasp of the '60s occurred at Hostos Community College. There was a whole atmosphere of activism. Some faculty had been active in the '60s. Many of the students were political activists. Also there had been this tremendous strike in the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, which was closed for two years perhaps. During that strike, students had died and everyone knew that and there was an awareness of this and other similar events. We constantly had these infusions of students from Puerto Rico and elsewhere in Latin America who were leftists. We had students that had been involved in the Young Lords Party here in the high school group, or else involved in some other way. There were people who were black nationalists. There were people who were Communist-minded. There was one teacher that was a member of the Communist Party, a black woman, a wonderful woman. I didn't know her well at the time. Later I got to know her because we were both members of the CP's college teachers' club. Later, we hired Herbert Aptheker for my Department and that was the fact that we could do that; that he would be appointed, is just incredible; here was someone who had been blacklisted from his profession and we got him a job and that was accepted. The administration made a special schedule for him so in addition to teaching two classes, he gave College-wide lectures; he was treated with great honor. It wasn't just, like, we're giving you a chance to repair some damage that was done to him. He was given a very appropriate treatment. In 1975, we celebrated May Day where after he was the keynote speaker. We could fill up the auditorium readily for almost any left cause. I played a role in all of that. But I did focus a lot on the Union to try to create a base for these activities...

The President, Candido deLeon, was ineffective in dealing with the faculty. I think he was very well meaning but he was oddly off-putting. He had a way of antagonizing people. His passivity would enrage people. By September 1975, it was clear that the Board of Higher Education (BHE) intended to close Hostos, and in 1976 it passed regulations calling for the merger of Hostos with Bronx Community College. In the fall, deLeon traveled to Senegal in order to represent the United States at some conference. Upon his return, he reported at length to the faculty, all of whom were slated to be fired. That people there listened to salsa in the Senegal, and that the fruits people savored were similar to Puerto Rico. People almost went nuts. Somehow he was not in touch with other peoples' perspectives or feelings. He was very kind to me, very supportive, to the ability that he could support anybody, but overall there was that type of absence. At Hostos, generally, I was willing to take up whatever parts of the job I could of what needed to be done and I didn't find any opposition when I did that, which I thought was very refreshing. I always found that I was able to get support from people in the College and very often even from the administration.

PEARLSTEIN: Did you see any tension in your early years as Chair of the Chapter between the obligation to take care of bread-and-butter contractual issues and what you saw as the need to preserve the institution?

MEYER: Yes, I think so. It was not convenient for me to dwell on that at the time. The fact is the greatest accomplishments of my life were accomplished as Chair of the Hostos Community Chapter, but was at the end of the five years, people wanted me to

leave, I think, in fact. I mean, I didn't run for election, but if I had run for election I'm not sure if I would have been elected.

PEARLSTEIN: Because?

MEYER: Well, I think there were fundamental tensions all along the line. One was that, in terms of grievances, it placed me constantly in a position of supporting people who were marginally against the supervisors, the Chairs, who were also members of the Union. The people who grieved, more often than not, were isolated people, who were not valued, who did not fit into the structure, socially or otherwise, and were problematical. And yet contractually--legally--we had to support them. This brought me into conflict with other people who had power, and most specifically, the chairs. The grievant took that for granted. They were very often underdeveloped people emotionally or personally, in terms of their own personalities or understanding, so that they felt no gratitude and they didn't come back to work harder for the union. Never! They took what they got from the union for granted. That was their right; that's what was coming to them. But the people who were opposed to the grievant winning never forgot it. Never. For example, I took up the fight for someone in the library and I paid dearly for that. The Chief Librarian, I'm positive, voted against me for my promotions, for example, both times, for sure. He was relentlessly hostile to me, baiting, and openly Red-baiting.

PEARLSTEIN: Now, as Chapter Chair at that time you were handling the grievances also?

MEYER: I wasn't handling them directly. There was a Grievance chairperson. But I would write about it in the Chapter newsletter and it was all very politicized so I would try to intervene, at times successfully, on this person's behalf with the administration. There was another aspect of my role as Chair that caused problems for me. The faculty wanted the college saved, but they also were nervous and anxious about what was involved in that; the mobilization of the students and going to the community, that made them nervous. It disrupted the...

PEARLSTEIN: It made them nervous how?

MEYER: I think because in terms of the hierarchy, in terms of the power relations within the institution, within that society. That was disturbing to them, that these relationships began to shift. Were students going to class or were they going to a march? There would be an assembly. Are they responsible to go to class? The students would remonstrate against teachers who wouldn't let students attend a meeting. A very bad incident occurred which I think, was never forgotten or ever forgiven; thirty years later was remembered and anyone that was around never really forgave us. In the spring on 1973, the Social Sciences Department invited Angela Davis to come to the College. That was a big coup; she was, after all, a nationally known figure -- even internationally. Everyone was very excited about it and our very small, make-shift auditorium filled very rapidly with faculty. Then, some black student leaders protested that the black students wouldn't have an opportunity to see her. They insisted that everybody file out and

somehow come back in a different order, allowing more black students to attend. Some teachers said that they had been physically pushed out of the room. That was mentioned decades after as something that was truly reprehensible and something that was a great scandal. There were other incidents like that that occurred in these movements. And some people overlooked them or didn't, but they remembered the bad stuff pretty long, it seemed to me. They were very anxious to, as quickly as possible, get aback to, in quotes, "normality".

PEARLSTEIN: Did you have a sense that there was a certain tension between the desire of faculty to be at Hostos because of its special character and its mission, on the one hand, and then, on the other hand, what used to be called status anxieties on the part of faculty?

MEYER: I think there were considerable status anxieties. There is comparatively little status within the profession that comes from being a member of the faculty of a community college in this country. When the community college is primarily minority, there is even less. And if it's located in the South Bronx, there's even less. If there has been some bad press about that institution, there's none. So it's much more convenient for members of the faculty to identify with their profession, or perhaps within a Department (such as nursing) that has been deemed successful by no external agency. There has been almost no sense of solidarity around being a member of the faculty qua faculty. It always fell back more into those other categories. But I do think I did try very hard, and with some success, by having these activities that brought people together. I always had

coffee and cake. There was a kind of a social aspect to it and a sharing that brought people into the Union Chapter. Now, I think as other entities were initiated and congealed and developed, like the Senate, some of the power from the Union inevitably was siphoned off to those places too. But this was a moment when there was a kind of *tabula rasa,* a vacuum, that I was able to move the union into.

PEARLSTEIN: As these other entities began to develop, like the College Senate and so forth, was there a self-conscious struggle over power prerogatives?

MEYER: Not self-conscious, no, not self-conscious. But the tendency was, at Hostos, was for the Senate to gain influence at the expense of the Chapter. Although I do think for a very long time, the prestige of the Union was very, very high and the leadership of it was fought over a lot, and the people who were head of the Union were people who were widely respected within the College, such as Peter Roman, and Eugene Barrios, who was appointed Dean, Peter Castello, Norman Pena, and currently, Lisette Colon.

PEARLSTEIN: What was the attitude first on your part but then of people at Hostos generally, towards the PSC as a whole? I mean, you as Chapter Chair would go to monthly Chapter Chair meetings. You would be a member of the Delegate Assembly. What was your interaction with the rest of the Union?

MEYER: Well, the thing ... interesting, is that originally the PSC, Chapter Chairs were not members of the Delegate Assembly. I accomplished that. I proposed that. That was

my proposal: it seemed to me something wrong in the structure. The actual work of the Union was done by the Chapter Chairpeople; recruiting members, the day-to-day work. They were absolutely critical, especially at the very beginning. For the membership, the presence of the Union was through the Chapter, which more than anyone else in the PSC, meant the Chapter Chairperson. Initially, the Chapter Chairpeople had no say in the determination of policy whatsoever, none, unless they ran for another office, which was possible. But there was no connection between being Chapter Chairperson with any policy making, decision making body within the Union. I proposed that the chapter chairs be ex-affair members of the Delegate Assembly and perhaps in '77, that's how the Constitution was changed. I proposed it earlier and then it came into the next Constitution. I was proud of that in terms of the history of the PSC. I talked to Irwin about it and I talked to others. I actually proposed it at the Council of Chapter Chairpeople and I made that argument. Why wouldn't they like that? Everyone there thought that was a good idea and then it was actually enacted and the Chapter Chairpeople became ex-officio members of the Delegate Assembly.

My work at Hostos was so exhausting. There was a great amount of work involved. Remember, we did get three-hours release time each semester and inasmuch as Hostos is a small school, it was worth more certainly than getting three hours at Queens, for example. So the three hours was some compensation. Until the financial crisis in 1975-6, we only taught four courses each semester (that was changed to five and five as a consequence of a successful grievance fine and from causes one academic year) so that the Chapter Chair taught three courses each semester. And I was young. I was able to do quite a lot. But this started to get very, very exhausting as we see what actually occurred

and the work became more and more elaborated. I was being drawn into more and more areas, involving more and more people. So it's sort of like this very small base became the fulcrum of what became an enormous amount of ongoing activity, which was in all cases successful.

PEARLSTEIN: In terms of your relation with the Citywide Union ...

MEYER: There wasn't a lot. I think ...

PEARLSTEIN: Did you feel neglected at all?

MEYER: Quite the contrary. They took very good care of us. And one of the reasons why, I think, and there's some institutional memory of that. I can't entirely explain it. I think that we were spoiled. We were favored, I would say. I remember members of the staff saying that the central office gave more resources to Hostos than to all the other chapters combined. Any time I asked for anything, they gave it to me. I would ask for money for coffee and cake. "Yes, Gerald." Money for loud speakers. "Yes, Gerald." Money for an honorarium for a speaker, "Yes." They never said no, ever, ever said no. I had the biggest and the most frequently produced newsletters. I remember the woman who took care of this saying they represented half her budget, and nobody ever objected. Now, a part of that was that I bonded with Irwin right away. Irwin told me that he came from a very poor working class family. His father was a butcher, and not a kosher butcher. His parents voted for Henry Wallace in 1948. There was some implication they

were unsuccessful, that they were like *schlemazels* like my parents were. They couldn't make it. They couldn't figure it out somehow, so in a funny way, it was similar to my background. So there was some bonding that sort of as a working class kid to get to this glorious place, in relationship to where we had started, and he liked me. Whether I reminded him of people that he knew or he'd been friends with or from family background, he liked me. Also, I included him. I brought him up to Hostos to address the mass meetings. Most important, we were the most minority college and we had the highest Union membership of any unit in the City University. That was something I was extremely proud of and that was no small thing. At Hostos, there were only a couple of holdouts. There was one black fellow that wouldn't join for ideological reasons. He was a cultural nationalist. But when I think of the holdouts, there were just scatterings of people, who didn't join. There was no pattern to it. There was just a few, you know, dead beats who didn't want to join. Those were the kind of people that wouldn't pick up a check if you went out with them a dozen times. Irwin liked what I was doing. He liked Hostos. There is something about Hostos; it is a very appealing place. I've seen Middle States Accreditations teams charmed by it repeatedly, when they probably should have been much more critical. I mean, there is something charming about the place, the mix of people. And there's a warmth and a genuineness that visitors/outsiders do respond to very much. I don't think that's any less true in recent years, but it certainly was true then. There was another reason. There was a left wing caucus in the Union; the Unity Caucus, led by Israel Kugler.

PEARLSTEIN: Right.

PEARLSTEIN: Was that the Unity Caucus? I think... I don't remember.

PEARLSTEIN: Well, the group around the UFCT that had ... that ??

MEYER: Right, after the merger occurred, they were the caucus that represented the insurgents. Then there was an incumbent caucus around Polishook. Polishook knew clearly that Hostos logically should have been on the other side. I didn't do that. I prevented that. I didn't want that. Now, it's interesting, I had joined the Communist Party in '75, and they wanted me to join the Unity Caucus and I refused.

PEARLSTEIN: What was your thinking?

MEYER: It was a very interesting thing. They didn't exactly pressure me, but I was in a College Teachers Club and there were wonderful people in the group; there was almost twenty people, not all of them from CUNY, but very distinguished people; people who were heads of Faculty Senates and scholars and editors of magazines, and so on, and mixed, Black people and white people. It was a wonderful group. They didn't pressure me. But they wanted me to join the Unity Caucus, in which they had a couple of members in its leadership.

PEARLSTEIN: How did they argue?

MEYER: Well, they didn't argue. They said: "Gerald, we would like you to do this. We feel that this is the better way to go." They valued me a lot in the Party. Ultimately, they accepted my point of view. My point of view which was this: that at Hostos Community College we were really building something very important, which was true and that was evident, completely, in terms of what had occurred. We had gotten Herbert Aptheker a job. We had, people sympathetic to the Party... There was one other member and there was Herbert. There were people that belonged to the Dominican Communist Party, the Salvadoran Communist Party, the Chilean Communist Party. We had someone from the Greek Communist Party at one point, students. But for the Party USA that was ... there were really only three of us. There was later a student who joined, but I think by that time he was a graduate. There might have been some adjuncts here and there, a couple of the members. But the point was there were people, sympathetic to our point of view and who had some contact through family or in the past with the Party too. My point of view was that Israel Kugler was a Shackmanite and an anti-Communist; a rabid ideological anti-Communist, and that to form his caucus meant breaking all my relationships with the union, with Polishook. And I had no objection to anything that they had done. I was friends with them. Actually, it was one of the most interesting moments of my life in terms of the union. I don't think I've ever told this to anybody. One morning before teaching my classes, I stopped off at the PJC office to speak to Polishook and I said to him, I said: "I have to talk with you. Well, I feel very badly about this but I'm going to have to support Israel Kugler." He looked me dead in the eye and replied: "I know who you are. I know what you want. What have I done to limit you in any way?" He continued: "Israel Kugler would get rid of you in a snap." I rose and said:

"thank you very much" and I walked out. Neither Irwin nor I ever again referred to that tête-à-tête. And then I went back to my club and I said I'm not doing it.

PEARLSTEIN: And was Irwin aware of the decision that you'd made? Did you have any further conversations with him?

MEYER: No. There wasn't any need to because he was right. He was absolutely right. I mean, there wasn't a need to say anything more. There was nothing more to say. How could I ...

PEARLSTEIN: He understood what you were saying when you got ...

MEYER: Oh, he knew. He knew. Absolutely. I mean I never put it into words but we didn't have to, really. I mean, it was obvious, really, and he was absolutely right. I mean, there was no logic to breaking my relationship with Polishook and endorsing Kruger. Israel Kugler wasn't building anything that, first of all, anything that would win. I was not even sure I could draw the people from Hostos over to it. I just would have been completely cutting my own legs out from under me, preventing myself from doing the work I was doing, to do something worthwhile, very important at the College and to destroy all my connections and ties. There was no point to it. There was no logic to it. In the club there were two people who attacked me really bad, very personally. They were transferred from the Club, and as far as I know one of them, maybe both, were expelled from the Party.

PEARLSTEIN: Over this.

MEYER: Yeah, um-hum. Yeah, that their behavior was considered to be inappropriate, and I found that out years later. It was interesting, kind of a backdoor thing where someone that knew the husband of one of the people who attacked me said: "Oh, Gerald, he was the one that got my wife expelled from the Party."

PEARLSTEIN: And this incident with the Party and your position in the caucus fights in the PSC was about seventy ...

MEYER: It's hard to remember exactly, the years. Perhaps it was the spring of 1978. There was so much going on moment to moment. But my focus was not so much on that. I mean, I really, very quickly became, in the second year, '73-'74 was the first year I was Chapter Chairperson and I really created some kind of very, very, very thick foundation, broad and thick foundation; all of the representatives from every area and then the Educational Forums. But we also did regular Union stuff. We had people come from the union to report to us and it was really well organized. In the newsletter, we had a report from the Delegate Assembly, and other items that would be of general interest, and so on. And occasionally I would bring something into the newsletter, something about the labor movement, nothing too extreme, but something that was Left. That would be in there too. People liked it.

But the following year was very remarkable. In the fall, that would be in the fall of '74, we kept working with these activities, and so on. But in one of my classes there was a remarkable student ... There were any number of remarkable students there at the time, just extraordinary people, and this fellow, Sam Saunders, a Puerto Rican, who was perhaps thirty years old, who had been raised in an orphanage, had been a student in the Police Academy for a period of time, and had come to Hostos to become a radiologist. We had a wonderful radiology department in Hostos that was actually the best in the City; highest pass rate on the State boards and so on, an extraordinarily good Department. He became head of the Student Government. He was quite conservative politically. He identified himself as a conservative. Now, a conservative at Hostos should not bring to mind anything of what we might call a conservative today. He kind of pooh-poohed my radicalism. He didn't attack it; just found it a little bit preposterous, I think. But somehow we bonded. One day, after class, Sam stopped by my office. He asked: "Jerry, are we living like shit here? How can people live like this? This is ridiculous! He continued, "Look. There's a vacant building across the street," this was the Security Mutual Insurance Company. It's address was 500 Grand Concourse, so we called it the "500 Building" and more frequently simply "the 500." Hostos is situated at an extraordinary transportation hub because the Lexington Avenue and the Broadway lines merge at 149th Street and The Concourse. There are also the buses up the Concourse and the cross-town bus into Manhattan. I think that saved the college probably more than anything I did or anybody else ever did by the way. In any case, Sam said: "Why can't we get the 500 for the College? Why don't we get it for the College?" He asked: "Do you think it's possible?" I said: "Let's talk about it." Within three or four months, we got

the building. It was the greatest high of my life. We started from scratch. In four months, from an idea to getting a bill passed in the State Legislature for the money for the 500, we reached that goal.

The College was really going nowhere; it was going nowhere at all. We had a couple of thousand students. The classes were small. Most compellingly, there were no facilities to run a College. It was, like, not meant to be. So what Sam and I did is we created what became the paradigm for future political work there. We formed a coalition comprised of the PSC Chapter and the Student Government Organization. In subsequent movements, there were elaborations on this formula, which were important in the next two mass struggles, but for that campaign that's what it was. It was the PSC Chapter and the Student Government organization.

Now, Sam was my equal, I'm telling you. He ultimately went on to do very, very well, by the way. He was very entrepreneurial. He never practiced as a radiologist. He followed the same pattern of partnering with somebody like me, except they were medical doctors, and unlike me at the time, they had money. He entered into partnerships with them as an owner of Medicade Centers and became prosperous. He was a very capable guy with a lot of self-confidence and ability to speak. And we just worked splendidly together. Later, I became the best man at his wedding. It was all very nice stuff. However, when I became openly gay, he pulled back. He found that he couldn't accept that. That happens. It didn't happen so many times that I'm aware of, but it happens.

After setting the goal of obtaining the 500 Building, the first thing we did, was to organize a rally outside the Board of Higher Education. We rented buses. There was a lot

of money around. Every student club had a budget, and oh my, there was money all over the place. I used to think the Dean had pots of money under his desk. Anything, whether you would ask for money to show a film or money for released time for a project. Anyway, we rented some buses for the students and faculty. We invited Irwin Polishook, by the way. We had rented a sound truck and a series of students and faculty began to orate. Unannounced, we disembarked in front of the Board of Higher Education and we had a rally demanding facilities for Hostos. That was important for Polishook. It was also good for us. It was front-page news in the *Clarion*. The Board was astounded; they invited in a delegation: myself, Sam, and some of the teachers. We met with the Vice-Chancellor and his staff, and so on. What we heard was that they had never gotten a request from the College. That's what we heard. That no one had ever asked the BHE for space for Hostos. How incredible! The Hostos administration's total failure to seek what the College needed, even on the level of asking. Subsequently, Sam and I lobbied representatives of the Borough President of the Bronx. (It was Abrams at the time). He said: "This is the first time that anyone from Hostos Community College has ever asked us for anything. Bronx Community College is constantly asking us for help." Can you imagine? Here is a student leader and the head of the Union Chapter, a young guy with a Master's degree, and we were the first people to seek help for Hostos from a union stance. Nobody from the administration had ever gone to either the Board or had gone to the Bronx Borough President (whose office was twelve blocks away from Hostos) to ask for any help. Whatever explanation one could provide for the dereliction of responsibility was that De Leon and then Congressman Herman Badillo were carrying out a vendetta ignited by a dispute about where the College should be built. This controversy paralyzed

the two major advocates for the college. In the meantime, the College was going sidewards, more accurately, downwards and nothing was happening. So we projected a series of events. We organized a march through the community. We held assemblies in the school. Everyone wore buttons saying "Hostos Need Spaces." *The PSC Chapter Newsletter* reported on all these activities. Candido DeLeon, who couldn't publically engage in these activities turned his staff over to us. Sam Saunders and myself were directing the staff of the College, including Deans. In late May, we sent three buses filled with Hostos faculty, students and staff to Albany in late May. What was very critical here was the President of the College provided access to Joseph Galiber from the Senate, and Garcia from the State Assembly. We sat there in the latter's office where they wrote a bill, which was a modification to the State budget. That was the very day Hostos got $3,500,000 which, under statute, had to be matched by the City. This was sufficient to buy the 500 Building. All of this happened in four months. This victory added enormously to the prestige of the Chapter. All of these events were reported in *The Clarion.*

PEARLSTEIN: And there was no rivalry or competition over who would get credit for this or ...

MEYER: No. No. I mean, that was clear. It was clear where it had come from. It was unquestionable. It was transparent. There was a lot of top-down management of the campaign that went on. I mean, the mistakes I made in the next struggle came out of this. It was a little too easy. I became convinced that I had the formula, the magic formula.