

STEVEN SCHRADER ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Biography

Steve Schrader was born in 1935 in New York City. His parents had immigrated from Poland in the 1920s, and he grew up with a brother in the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights, which was largely Jewish at that time. His father ran a dress contracting plant and the family’s economic circumstances were secure during the war years. After World War II, his family moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He went on to study at New York University and then joined the U.S. Army in 1959. Steve is currently a writer and resides in New York still today.

Summary

In this interview, Steve discusses his father’s successful business, including his wartime work manufacturing uniforms for the Women’s Army Corps (WACs). He remembers that his mother bought black market beef for the family, his father bought war bonds, and his school had a Victory Garden during World War II. He also recalls going to school and the state of race relations in Washington Heights. Steve reflects on how his memory of the war and Pearl Harbor came mainly from hearing songs and watching movies, and that he did not learn about the Holocaust until years later. He closes with a reflection about his views towards the war seventy-five years later.

Keywords

Women’s Army Corps, Victory Garden, Jewish American, New York City, childhood, scrap metal collection, Holocaust, race relations, war games, manufacturing

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: My Father's Work During the War

[01:33 – 02:06]

My father had a dress contracting plant, and he had managed to get a contract to make WAC uniforms—Women's Army Corps—and so he did quite well. Though it was interesting, he told me later, in order to get the wool, he had to go to the head of the Woolen Bureau, where they rationed wool. And he had to pay them under the table to get wool to make uniforms for women. And he became pretty wealthy for Washington Heights at that time.

Story 2: Victory Gardens and Foil Collection

[08:56 – 09:48]

We had a Victory Garden, I think, in kindergarten. Ms. Bertzel [*phonetic*] was our teacher, and we grew vegetables. I guess I assumed these were being sent overseas. [*laughs*] When I look back, I guess maybe it meant that if everybody did it, there would be more vegetables here; it would be easier on the people who were left here.

And I remember friends of my parents, a couple who were heavy smokers, always brought me their tinfoil, silver foil, from their cigarettes. Because my parents didn't smoke—my father hated cigarettes; nobody smoked. But [because] these people smoked, they'd bring me the silver. And you crunch it up and you make a ball. And when it became big enough, like a softball, you brought it into school, and you were contributing to the war effort.

Story 3: Reactions to the Death of President Roosevelt

[11:05 – 11:55]

I do remember the day [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt died. We were in the school yard; I think it was in the spring—you remember your childhood being sunny and in the spring. And there was a kid, he had an Irish name, and I assume they were conservatives—his name was Richard, I don't remember his last name. He had an older brother and the older brother said he was happy that Roosevelt died. And a bigger kid jumped on him and beat the hell out of him.

His mother came pretty soon. If we were in the schoolyard—I think it was during lunch hour, probably—we would mill around and play and kid around. And she came and she called them “cowards.” She went to the principal, and as far as I know, nothing was done.

Story 4: An African American Friend’s Experiences of Racism [13:46 – 15:25]

We had an assistant super who lived in the building. His name was Ray [and] his son [was] Jimmy. He was black, and he lived in the basement. It was like out of Ralph Ellison, you know the—what was the [name of that book]?

HG: *The Invisible Man*.

The Invisible Man. It was in a basement, where the wall was uneven and it was damp and they had curtains. And that was where they lived. Jimmy happened to be a very nice young man. After the war, when my father had made money, he hired him as a chauffeur to drive him back and forth from work. Jimmy was ambitious; he wanted to go to college and become an aeronautics engineer.

The school was exactly across the street from us: P.S. 187. I could look down from my window and yell down to the kids. I was the pitcher on the team, [and] I said, “I’ll be down in a minute, as soon as my piano lesson is over,” which drove me crazy.

In the third grade or so—Jimmy told me this later, because I sort of tried to adopt him. He was an older kid and I liked him and he talked to me, and I would go down to the basement until my mother would come and get me. But when I talked to him, he was telling me in the third grade, Ms. Roberts, the principal, called him into the office and said, “Jimmy, you’ll be happier going to school with your own people.”

She sent him from P.S. 187 to a school in Harlem. He was pretty bitter about it when he talked to me because he was smart. And even if he wasn’t smart, he lived across the street from the school. He could’ve been the worst kid in the school [and it wouldn’t have mattered]—we had some bad kids and they went to P.S. 187; they didn’t kick them out.

Story 5: Views of Japanese and German Americans [16:04 – 16:42]

KG: *Did you have any feelings about the Japanese [Americans in New York]?*

Well, I wouldn’t have considered them full human beings. The same way there was the Chinese laundry—you know, “No tickee, no shirtee.” That was how we looked at anybody Asian—and, of course, the way the American government did, too. We were all alike that way.

And Germans—nobody stressed German [Americans], even if you were Jewish. I don’t think they talked about Germany so much then. I mean, yes, after the war people were not buying Volkswagens for thirty years.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

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Photograph of Steven Schrader being interviewed in his New York City home (Photo Credit: Herb Goodheart)