

**Interviewee:** Margot Iris Soven, PhD

**Interviewer/Abstractor:** Rebecca Goldman

**Date:** March 11, 2015 (Session 1 of 3)

**Location:** Margot's office, Olney Hall, La Salle University

**Running Time:** 43:59

- 00:01            Introductions of interviewer and interviewee, including permission to record.
- 00:31            Born in the early 1940s<sup>1</sup> on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, “the area of Manhattan between the Williamsburg Bridge and the Manhattan Bridge.” Her father, (Philip) Paul Korman, was also born on the Lower East Side, but her paternal grandparents were born in Poland. He was a firefighter and helped in his father's fish store. “As far as I can remember, he always worked at two jobs.” Her mother was from the Ukraine and moved to the U.S. when she was six, in 1921. Her mother's family initially settled in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, but eventually moved to the Lower East Side. They started a small restaurant at what is now the South Street Seaport Museum. Both of Margot's parents attended Seward Park High School in Manhattan, where they met.
- 03:01            Talks about her immediate family. She has two younger brothers, Ira (“the middle child, as he always signs his emails”) and Roger. Ira lives in Dallas, Texas; he is married with two children. Roger currently lives in Philadelphia, but previously lived in Montreal. He has three children, currently living in the Canary Islands, San Francisco, and Washington [DC].
- 03:57            Describes her childhood living on the Lower East Side. Her immediate family moved to Brooklyn when she was 11, but until then, Margot lived close to her extended family. “It was the good old days.” She remembers attending P.S. 42 with students from many other countries. Her family lived near the firehouse where her father worked. She walked to school and everywhere else.
- 06:36            Most of Margot's old Lower East Side neighborhood has since been demolished, but because her old building (58 Norfolk Street) has historic sites on both sides, it remains intact. She last visited about twelve years ago, but used to make frequent shopping trips to the Lower East Side from Philadelphia, especially to Orchard Street. Since Margot's childhood, the LES has undergone many changes. “First I think it went, quote, downhill,” but it is experiencing a revival today, especially for artists and young people.
- 08:57            Margot describes her home and daily life on the Lower East Side. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom, “as I think many mothers during that time were.” Modern appliances like washing machines and dishwashers didn't exist.<sup>2</sup> When she reads short stories about apartment living, they remind her of her childhood.

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<sup>1</sup> At Margot's request, I have omitted her exact birth year from the interview log.

<sup>2</sup> In a follow-up email, Margot clarified that these appliances did exist, but her family did not have them.

“We did not leave the house until it was completely tidy.” Her mother would sit at the park with other mothers, knitting, while Margot and her brothers played at the public park. Her mother would also meet the children in the park after school. As they got older, Margot and her brothers went to Hebrew school, the public library, and the Educational Alliance<sup>3</sup>. “It was a very idyllic childhood.” Her family was not “incredibly observant” [in Judaism], but “everybody went to Hebrew school” in the afternoon, around the age of eight. She remembers attending with her cousin, who was around the same age, but being separated because they talked too much.

11:36 Margot remembers her elementary school experiences. She had excellent teachers, and describes how hard they worked to integrate children who could not speak English, since it was “an immigrant neighborhood.” The teachers formed a buddy system, where native-born students were paired with immigrant students to help them navigate the school. She and her classmates took field trips, such as to the bank. When she moved to Brooklyn and attended public school there, she vividly recalls her teacher saying, “I would like you to welcome Margot. She comes from an underprivileged neighborhood in Manhattan called the Lower East Side.” “Brooklyn was considered a step up in the world.” She remembers having many talented teachers, especially women, “because that’s what women did.” Miss Halloran, her fourth-grade teacher, worked hard to integrate immigrant children into the school. She remembers music and other programs that she thinks have been cut out of public education today.<sup>4</sup>

14:23 By high school, “I knew that I was going to be a literature person.” She remembers excellent teachers at James Madison High School. Mr. Rodman, whom she had as a senior, convinced her that she would be an English major in college. Margot was in high school during the Baby Boom years, so the high school had 6,000 students in split sessions (morning or afternoon shifts). She graduated high school in December and started college in January. She was in the academic track in high school, as opposed to the commercial track. “If you were Jewish, you were in the academic track.” It was assumed that students in the academic track would go on to college.

17:17 Almost everyone that Margot knew went to the city colleges [New York City’s public university system]. “I never even thought that there was any other possibility.” The colleges were free and well-regarded. She chose Brooklyn College because it was fifteen minutes away from her house by bus. Her (future) husband was also from Brooklyn, but attended City College for its engineering program. Margot planned to be an English major and assumed she would become a teacher after graduating. She lived at home during college, and even today the city colleges remain non-residential. At the time, Brooklyn College

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<sup>3</sup> The Educational Alliance offered classes and activities for Jewish children on the Lower East Side.

[http://www.edalliance.org/our\\_history](http://www.edalliance.org/our_history)

<sup>4</sup> In a follow-up email, Margot clarified that music and other programs are often lacking in some city public schools.

had 35,000 students. She received an excellent education. Compared to college today, “we had lives outside of college. College was a place where we went to study.”<sup>5</sup> Margot participated in the English club but was otherwise not very involved in student activities. She completed a “fairly traditional” English literature curriculum, but had room in her schedule for electives like art history and philosophy. She also double-majored in secondary education.<sup>6</sup> It wasn’t until graduate school that Margot developed her interests in American and modern British literature.

21:57 Margot describes her first teaching experience. She taught high school for around four and a half years after graduating from college. She married her husband the summer after graduating, “which of course was typical,” and they moved to Chicago for her husband’s PhD program in physics at the University of Chicago. She initially held a variety of teaching and other jobs at a Jewish day school because they didn’t have a job open in English. (She didn’t apply to the public schools because she wasn’t certified to teach in Illinois, and didn’t complete the secondary education major or a student teaching assignment in college because she graduated a semester early.) It was a positive first teaching experience, because her students were well-behaved—“just students who wanted to learn.”

24:18 Margot discusses her early relationship with her husband. They met at sixteen at a synagogue social event in Brooklyn, then reconnected in college. “It was very traditional to get married shortly after college. It was, one, the only way you could get out of your house.” After her husband moved to Chicago for a year, he was very lonely, so they decided to get married so Margot could move to Chicago with him. Their parents vaguely knew each other before Margot and her husband met. “You tended to very often marry someone from the neighborhood.”

25:06 Her first year in Chicago was “a little rocky,” but as a graduate student and wife, Margot and her husband lived in graduate student housing and socialized with the other graduate students and wives. They moved to Brooklyn for a summer while her husband worked in New York, then returned to Chicago so her husband could finish graduate school. Margot completed a master’s degree at DePaul University, “because I had to do something in the summer.” She didn’t have a plan for what she would do with her degree, but a professor at DePaul encouraged her to go on and complete a PhD. When Margot and her husband moved to New Jersey, she enrolled at Rutgers University to complete a PhD in English literature.

28:14 Margot explains the challenges of raising children while completing her PhD and teaching freshman composition at Douglass [College], which was then Rutgers’ school for women. She had her first child, Josh, during this time, and found a

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<sup>5</sup> In a follow-up email, Margot clarified that when she attended college, students often sought their recreational activities outside of school.

<sup>6</sup> Margot mentions later in the interview that she did not complete the secondary education major.

babysitter for him while she worked and studied. Margot and her family left New Jersey after two and a half years, right before she was ready to start her dissertation. While she lived in New Jersey, she studied at Drew University, which was closer to her house in Chatham than Rutgers. At the time, her husband was working at Bell Telephone Laboratories.

30:15 Margot explains why and how she completed a PhD at Penn [the University of Pennsylvania]. She had her second child soon after moving to Philadelphia, and “abandoned” her studies for two or three years to take care of him while he was ill. By the time she went back, her interests had shifted to the teaching of composition, because she was teaching part-time at Drexel [University]. She decided to complete her PhD at Penn and focus on rhetoric and the teaching of composition. “It was a moment in time when the field of composition was getting off the ground, and it seemed to me to be very exciting.” Penn didn’t offer a PhD in this field, so Margot completed a special degree that included courses in a variety of disciplines at Penn, including linguistics and anthropology. She was able to complete this degree because Dell Hymes, then the Dean of the School of Education, was an anthropologist and very open-minded. [Rebecca paused the recording here when a student knocked on the door to ask Margot a question.] “I helped to develop a new program at the Graduate School of Education, then graduated from it, then taught in it.” In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Margot graduated, the job market for literature PhDs was very difficult. Her ABD in literature and PhD in rhetoric and composition made her more marketable. She was offered jobs at Drexel and La Salle, and decided to come to La Salle.

35:16 Margot describes the process of writing her dissertation. Her topic was designing, implementing, and evaluating a freshman composition program, based on her teaching experience at Drexel. Her dissertation committee included faculty from multiple disciplines. “I was doing something that nobody else had done in the area, so to speak.” Her advisor was Dr. Norma Kahn, whose PhD was in the teaching of reading. Dr. Kahn was responsible for many women completing graduate degrees after having children and very supportive.

38:42 Margot talks more about her experiences at Rutgers and Penn. Because she was married and had children, she wasn’t very involved in “graduate school culture.” She remembers several excellent and well-known professors at Rutgers, including Richard Poirier and Paul Fussell. When she first arrived at Penn, Margot’s plan was just to take one course and become certified to teach high school English. “I decided, right now, maybe the PhD is not for me. But I had an excellent teacher, and decided to go the distance at Penn.” She identified as a non-traditional student, but spent her graduate school years with many women in the same situation. (Margot notes that women got married and had children much earlier back then.) Once she decided to complete the PhD, her plan was to teach college afterwards. She briefly taught high school at Akiba Hebrew Academy in Merion and realized that she really wanted to teach at the college

level.

41:30 Margot explains her motivations for choosing to teach at La Salle over Drexel. Drexel didn't have an English department or an English major, and she preferred to be in an English department. Drexel was also a professionally-oriented school, and La Salle has a strong liberal arts tradition. During her interview at La Salle, she realized that "I would have a much more diverse life here," and she liked the people she met here.

43:40 Margot asks to stop the interview [because a student has arrived for office hours]. Rebecca thanks Margot for participating in the interview. The recording ends at 43:59.