

PHOENIX HOUSE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Morty Sklar

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Morty Sklar conducted by Caitlin Deighan on September 25, 2014. This interview is part of the Phoenix House Foundation Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1

Interviewee: Morty Sklar

Location: Jackson Heights, New York

Interviewer: Caitlin Deighan

Date: September 25, 2014

Q: Start. And this is Caitlin Deighan. I'm here with Morty Sklar. Today is September 25th, 2014 and we are in Jackson Heights, New York. So Morty, let's start by you telling me when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

Sklar: OK. I was born in Sunnyside, Queens.

Q: Not too far. [laughter]

Sklar: And we moved when I was four years old, we moved to Elmhurst. Grew up in Elmhurst. And when I was nineteen or eighteen we moved to Jackson Heights and what else? Some more about my childhood?

Q: Yes, talk some more about your childhood. Many siblings? Did you —

Sklar: No. OK, my childhood, say, going up to high school or something like that?

Q: Yes.

Sklar: Yes, I have a brother four years younger. We were both pretty different. He was kind of a more outgoing guy and I was kind of shy and kind of fearful, [laughs] being around people. And I had a couple of friends, you know, that I felt close with, one of them I'm still friendly with, he's my age and he lives in California, we keep in touch. The other guy I kind of lost touch with. I guess I don't really think of, a lot of people think of how wonderful childhood was and happy and all that and I guess my happiest moments were laughing [laughs] and doing bad things with one of my only two friends, like breaking and entering. [laughter] But it was more or less for something exciting to do, because I didn't find it exciting or fun being around other kids. I would try to go for instance to the Hobby Hub, not the Hobby Hub, the Bunny Hub, I think it was called, a little gathering place. I thought, I have to make myself socialize. But it was so boring [laughs] and I was uptight, and I don't know, I'd just rather be by myself and yet a lot of people who were that way, they read a lot or had hobbies—but I didn't do that either. So it wasn't really much of a childhood except my parents loved us, loved me, loved my brother and even though we had a lot of conflict in the family—my father was, you know, a self-made businessman and he struggled and put lots of hours in. I mean, he was home but he'd be checking the bills or doing something and so we went out as a family occasionally but we didn't spend too much time, going out or doing anything. And so like I said, we were loved, but there was all that conflict and I was more sensitive.

My brother didn't appear troubled but it had an effect on him, too, because ultimately he never really got off of drugs. It wasn't always heroin. In fact, he didn't get strung out on heroin. He used other drugs but he was a party guy and he just kind of destroyed himself with drugs and gambling. It's a shame, because he was very talented. He had some good ideas for business and

things like that, and he was a good father. He was a good father. He always paid attention—even when he separated from his wife, he was very attentive to his daughters.

One thing that made me feel like a human being was humor, was laughter. And my mother had a good sense of humor. [laughs] Now my mother was kind of a, I don't know if you want to call it typical Jewish mother but like, "Why haven't you called me?" you know, or "Your brother hasn't called me." "He just called you this afternoon." "Yes, but what if something happened this morning?" You know, stuff like that. And oh, and of course, she was the protector. My father never hit us or anything, but he'd take his belt off, you know, and threaten, and my mother would get between us. [laughs] I think it was like a good cop/bad cop type of thing sometimes, I don't know.

And then when I got old enough to realize that my father wasn't always wrong, if he came home late for dinner, there's no sense telling him every time, like, "The chicken is cold," you know, "I've been slaving all day over a hot stove and you come home late," you don't have to keep saying that over and over again. Well, when I finally, one day I sat down with my mother, I said, "You know, I know how Dad is and he has a temper, too, but he's not wrong all the time," and she'd say, "What? You're going to side with your father? After all these years I protected you," stuff like that, you know. So then I started having conflicts with my mother—because otherwise I was a good boy, I took out the garbage, I washed the dishes, I made my own breakfast in the morning, you know, all that stuff. So let's see, where was I?

Q: How about school?

Sklar: Oh, school, I kind of went through school—I did have, well, I did have an interest in, I guess compositions, writing compositions.

Q: That makes sense. [laughter]

Sklar: Yes, right. And I was good at math, but I didn't know what to do with it. Oh, I tried to do something with it in college, they say actuarial work is really good paying work and then I realized, oh no, you have to study law, you know, case histories. Because an actuary is not just a person that figures, does figuring, you know, of different kinds. He's also an executive in a business, so you have to know business law and all that and that's the last thing I wanted to do is study law, case histories. Anyhow. I didn't know what to do. But I wanted to just finish up about the sense of humor. My whole family had a sense of humor. Now my uncle, my mother's brother Murray was actually a comedian, but I mean, he didn't really make a living at it—but during the summer he'd go up to the Catskill Mountains and he and my aunt would stay for free in a hotel to entertain, and he did some outlandish things, too. And then the rest of the family all seemed to, you know, laugh a lot [laughs] and have a sense of humor, so that kind of rubbed off — it just, I mean it may sound like a weird thing, but when I laughed I felt like a human being. [laughs]

As for beginning drug use, I'm not your typical, I don't think, your typical junkie, ex-junkie, who was influenced by—I was very little influenced by my peers because I really didn't, I wasn't trying to impress anybody. I was trying to avoid them, escape from them. And so, oh see, I start going off on a tangent and I lose myself.

Q: That's OK. Tell me about your first experience with drugs and how that began.

Sklar: Actually, eventually I thought I was self-medicating with sugar, because I ate lots of candy and sundaes and ice cream and all kinds of sweet stuff. I didn't drink. You know, the Jewish holidays, we'd have like some kind of ceremonial wine or something, but it never occurred to me, until I was seventeen. And when I was seventeen I was ashamed that I had nowhere to go on New Year's Eve, so I bought a pint of wine and I just told my parents I was going to a party and I just went out and drank it on the street. But I didn't realize that it takes a while for it to have an effect. [laughs] So I bought another one. And then when I started the other one I thought, oh-oh. And one of the things I did was, I got into a cab that was parked. So this cab was curbside and I got in, [laughs] and then the guy opens the door, the cab driver, and says, "What are you doing in my cab?" and he said, "Where's my changer?" I said, "I don't know. I swear I didn't take your changer." But he opened my jacket and I had it. But I didn't remember. But anyhow, he let me go, he didn't call the police or anything, he didn't make a scene. He didn't hit me or anything, he just let me go. And I came home and boy, I was drunk. [laughs] And my mother, but see, the sense of humor—my mother had me in the bathroom leaning against the wall and cleaning me up. And she laughed and said, "Gee, I haven't done this since you were a baby." [laughter]

Q: Right, right.

Sklar: So that was my earliest like, but I never became alcoholic, I never really cared, in fact I wished that, at certain times when there was a panic and you couldn't get any heroin, that I could have a drink or something, but no, it didn't work for me. It did for some people. So I'm thankful that it didn't work for me because I might have, you know—that would have been another problem. Then at the end of high school I didn't know what to do, so I went to NYU for engineering, that's another thing I thought I could do. Oh, they said engineering had a good future, civil engineering. And I was good at certain things, but I wasn't good at other things. Oh. A basic thing is like—they have another name for it—"engineering drawing." I think it's, "orthographic projection." I had no sense of three-dimensional drawings and you know, to be an engineer—and I didn't care that much anyhow about it, so I finished that semester and I volunteered for the draft for the Army.

Q: What year is this?

Sklar: This was 1954. At that time a person of my age would be drafted eventually. It was like the tail end of the Korean War.

Q: Korea, yes.

Sklar: But they still had a draft. So I thought I might as well get it over with and I went into the Army. And then in basic training they showed this movie of a lot of people jumping out of airplanes with parachutes and I thought, "Wow," and so I joined the Airborne. [laughs] I went to North Carolina, to the 82nd Airborne. And also, part of it was, it didn't look as boring as the

regular army. [laughter] The other thing was the prestige, because people would think it's a big deal, being a paratrooper, but I didn't. [laughs] But I thought, I know other people would.

Q: So it looked fun, yes. [laughs]

Sklar: Yes, and then your Class A uniform included boots and it didn't if you weren't a paratrooper or certain elite, you know. And so my stay in the Army wasn't too good either. I ended up—I had four court-martials for different reasons. The last one I got five years' sentence, which I ended up doing only eighteen months but with forfeiture of all pay and allowances, and a dishonorable discharge. I had four offenses—you want to hear all the details?

Q: Yes.

Sklar: Disobeying a direct order, disobeying a non-commissioned officer's order. Disrespect to an officer, disrespect to a non-commissioned officer and steal—oh, they called it “misappropriation of an Army vehicle,” but actually I stole it. [laughs] So why? Because we're out sixty miles from base and we're on the Pee Dee River and it was so boring. And guys, for entertainment, some of them had, they paid some women and they were lined-up in the woods. I thought what the heck. So I just decided I'm getting out of here. [laughs] And I took a Jeep and I was halfway—my idea was, you know, I was eighteen-years-old—my idea was to take it back to Queens. [laughter] And I had a friend whose father had a service station and we would file off the serial number and we would just convert it and nobody would know. [laughs]

So I was halfway back to the base and I was stopped by an officer of the day who's coming in the other direction and he asked me, "What are you doing with the Colonel's Jeep?" I didn't know it was the Colonel's Jeep—it was just a Jeep. Well, I had cut myself on the barbed wire going under. Oh actually, before that, when I cut myself I went to the — what do you call it?

Q: The infirmary or —

Sklar: No, we were camped out. The person that takes care of, you know —

Q: A nurse or—?

Sklar: Yes, something like that. Who does the medical stuff. And he said, "See me in the morning because I'm sleeping," you know. So I thought, so I told the officer who stopped me that I was going to camp to get treatment. He says, "Well, turn that around." And he got in his Jeep and he said, "Follow me back." He started going and I just kept going. [laughs] And I did go to the infirmary. So that was what all the charges were about. I was in a stockade but I was awaiting trial—I wouldn't stay in the stockade, because they were kind of major offenses. Then they sent me down, oh, I had, I'm going to take you off on some trips, I guess.

Q: That's fine.

Sklar: I had a really religious experience in the stockade.

Q: Really?

Sklar: Yes. Because of my offense I had to have, I don't know why, but I had to have like an armed guard with me only, instead of going out with everybody and doing things, whatever you do, like cleaning up places and —

Q: You were more isolated from the—yes.

Sklar: And we'd walk along like the highway or the roads for long periods of time, picking up cigarette butts, stuff like that. Well, that was OK, but I mean, it wasn't so bad. But I attempted to talk to the guy that was watching me and he didn't answer me, you know, and I really got pissed off. Because we were going all that time, like he can't speak? We're out there, what about him? Doesn't he want to break the monotony or something? And so I really—I was very frustrated. And then at lunchtime we went back, one of the days we went back and you have to make your bunk nice and tight and put everything on it. So instead of disrupting that and having to put it back again, I lay under the bunk on the floor, just to take a nap. And all of the sudden just all of my frustration, all my anger, all my awful feelings just seemed to ooze out of me. You know.

And I felt, I felt so good and I thought wow, I didn't even do anything to feel this good and it's just like a gift, it feels so good, you know. And then I even thought, I was looking forward to going to synagogue with my father when I got out, you know, because I used to go out of respect, but this time I really wanted to go—but then it turned out that it was boring. [laughter] It depends where you go. Now, the part that wasn't boring is the cantor. He was so emotional, he

would fall to his knees and cry and everything. And that was beautiful, but the rabbi would go, “Sh.” If you said something, he’d go, “Sh.” [laughs] But, overall it was kind of boring. But anyhow, that was the Army. Oh, and in the Army I learned how to type by a book, the *Rowe Method of Typing*.

Q: Oh, wow.

Sklar: Yes. *The Rowe Method*, page by page. So I learned how to touch type. And that came in handy. And I became a clerk. So the Army wasn’t, oh, and I was pretty good at chess intuitively and I was, oh, they sent me to Fort Gordon Disciplinary Barracks in Georgia.

Q: In Georgia, OK.

Sklar: That’s a more long-term place. That’s where I learned how to type. And also, oh, well, I might as well tell you everything. Part of it is kind of like bragging. I won a weightlifting contest. [laughter] Well, I was bodybuilding and they said there was a contest. Bodybuilding is different than weightlifting. Weightlifting is for the amount you would lift. Bodybuilding is just developing. Well, that kind of excited me. I thought, oh boy. So I stopped bodybuilding for a while and I just did weight training. And the time came for the contest and there was a guy that he hardly, I never saw him in the gym, hardly, but he was big and he was strong and he could lift a lot of weight. And he could lift more than me. So I exceeded my normal amount because of the competition, the incentive. But it still wasn’t as much as he could do. But I played it dirty

because [laughter], because when he got ready to do his weight I could see the bar was uneven and I didn't tell him. Normally if someone's bar is uneven I say, "Be careful," because —

Q: It could hurt, yes.

Sklar: So he lifted it up and it tilted and some of the weight went off that end and then the other one and then the whole thing fell down. So he didn't get hurt. But he failed. And I won.

[laughter] Oh, and eventually, I could show you it, but my mother broke it over me once. She got mad at me. I have like a little stash—

Q: A trophy?

Sklar: A trophy. And she hit me with it once and it broke. [laughter] Because we were arguing. [laughs] But I still have, you know, the plaque and the image of the guy holding the weight, so that's the Army and what else? Otherwise, oh yes, I was good at chess. And so in my company I beat everybody, there weren't that many people who played chess but whoever, and so they said, "Well, you should go to the camp," to the general competition of everybody, you know, in Camp Gordon or Fort Gordon. But when I went I froze up. I was an intuitive player. I never studied moves or anything.

Q: Strategy, yes.

Sklar: And it seemed like my intuition [laughs] left or something. [laughter] I don't know what it was. But anyhow, I came out of the Army. I went to, I should have reviewed this a little bit, before. I worked for my father for a while.

Q: So after Georgia you came back to Queens?

Sklar: Yes. Oh, I moved to Manhattan and I was working as an extra waiter for Whelan Drug chain, I don't know if they have it anymore. And they had stores all over, all the way from Greenwich Village up to Harlem and I would work, instead of having to work in the same place all the time, I'd relieve people for vacation, for lunches and stuff like that. So I would get by that way. And when I was in a Greenwich Village store on Sixth Avenue and St. Mark's or Eighth Street, I was playing, I put some money in the jukebox and then this guy sat down in front of me and said—let's see, who was it I was playing? I can't recall offhand. I mean, I know who it was but it doesn't come to mind. He said, "Oh, you dig," oh, Horace Silver. *Senor Blues*, I think he was playing, *Senor Blues*. He said, "Oh, you dig Horace, huh?" [laughs] So I said, "Yes," and we started talking and he turned out—he was a pianist from Los Angeles.

So we got to talking, and he said, "I want you to meet some of my friends," and we got together. And they're all gay. Including him. [laughs] I mean not, not effeminate gay but, well, when they started getting into their little raps and things, you know, talking, dishing the dirt and all that, a couple of them would get into that feminine thing, but anyhow. But they were easy to relate to and then we smoked some marijuana. OK, so, smoking, that relaxed me and I really had fun talking, just talking, talk, talk. We just talked, you know. Oh, and listened, we listened to

Symphony Sid on the radio all night and [laughs] so anyhow, of course, at different times, let's see, yes, they all came onto me at different times, but they realized that I didn't want to and so they didn't make a thing out of it.

Actually, the first time, the guy who turned me onto poetry, one of the guys, he worked for the U.N. [United Nations], he traveled around a lot. He was an older guy. Yes, he was ten years older than me. He invited me for dinner one night and well, like I said, I'm going to put in some things that are irrelevant probably, he asked me what kind of dressing I wanted on my salad and I thought, dressing? Like all we ever had was mayonnaise. [laughter] He said, "You want oil and vinegar? Or you want this, oregano?" [laughs]

Q: Fancy, yes. [laughs]

Sklar: Yes, you know, of course, nowadays we do — [laughs] But anyhow, I grew up with mayonnaise. They didn't even have a lot of those like bottles of ranch dressings or anything at the time. And so anyhow, at some point he said something awful to me, I mean, I won't repeat it, what he liked to do. And I was very let down, very disappointed. I thought, gee, I thought we were going to be friends and he just wanted to have sex or something. Well, it wasn't true. After that, you know, he just never made a thing out of it. So, we all were really good friends and I consider them my first really adult friends and I was—what, at the time, 1959—I was twenty-four. OK, I was a late starter with drugs. So we were smoking marijuana and then someone came around with speed or meth, you know. And we started doing meth. And then, let's see. Whoops.

Oh, and then I don't know if you ever heard of, was he Irish or Scottish? Alexander Trocchi, you know. Do you know him?

Q: Yes.

Sklar: I forgot if he's Scottish or Irish.

Q: I think Scottish.

Sklar: Yes, I think so. Well, he came around one day. [laughs] And my friend Harris, who is the more well-read guy and who turned me onto poetry by reading, he would read poetry but I had read poetry before. But in fact, I wrote poetry on my own—at first I wrote a journal, then I wrote poetry. But I never paid attention to form or anything—it was just expression. And one day I decided I'm going to get a book of poems and I got this book, *50 Great Poems* or something like that. And a lot of it really didn't get to me and I thought well, I guess I have to study poetry to appreciate it because I don't get this, you know. But the stuff Harris read, like Robert Creeley and Gregory Corso, you know, [laughs] oh, that's poetry. So anyhow, he knew Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book*, and I said, "Wow, Alexander Trocchi." I don't know if he met him and invited him over...

He came over and [laughs] then he had some heroin and he was offering it to people and I think that's when — no, I don't think that, no, I tried something else that he had, scopolamine, which is a truth serum, but he said it was a good high. But it was awful. I guess it was good for him.

But I avoided the heroin. And anyhow, eventually I did, okay, how did I get strung out on heroin? I was using speed. At first we used to just, we called it dropping Benzedrine, like tablets, you know. But then we started, I started, I shot up methamphetamine once and I thought that's too much, so I was skin-popping and I got a couple abscesses. Oh, so I went to Elmhurst General here, to have them removed. Meanwhile I think, I don't know, I forget at that time, I was at home again, or either that or I came home while I was in the hospital, something like that, I don't know. My brother wasn't living here anymore.

And yes, I was here before I went to the hospital. And I was doing speed and doing a lot of drawings and creative stuff, a little bit of writing. And then in the hospital, when they did the two abscesses, the doctor came in, didn't say a word, he cut me, cut me, ow, you know, and left and I kind of didn't like that. I don't know why. [laughter] It wasn't a good bedside manner.

Q: No.

Sklar: Like how about telling me what you're going to do. [laughs] Well, he had me stand up on something and anyhow, then I was in bed and I was really, both sides, so I couldn't get comfortable and I rang for the nurse and nobody came, or somebody, I rang for a nurse attendant or something. And I heard women talking outside, right outside my door and I called out, "Nurse, nurse," and I kept ringing and they kept talking and I took a water can and I [laughs] threw it at the wall, okay. So then the doctor came and they started questioning me. I said, "Well this, well that," "Yes, but it's not normal to throw a water can against the wall," and they called my mother to ask how I was behaving at home and she said, "Well, he stays up all night and

draws and paints and he has a short temper,” so they decided to send me to Creedmoor for evaluation, Creedmoor State Hospital, which is like a mental institution, yes. So I went there and they tried different —

Q: So they didn't realize that drugs were an issue. They didn't make the connection?

Sklar: I don't remember anybody questioning me about that. It wasn't, I don't think drugs were a big deal then. Or maybe, well, it was the Beat Generation. But no, they were smoking marijuana. They weren't, like you had a few people using heroin, but mostly no. They were drinking and driving from coast to coast in jalopies at nineteen cents a gallon. Anyhow, they gave me different things, the old type of tranquilizers, you know, they were awful. So they tried one, tried another, it didn't work and then I saw a psychiatrist, very nice woman, a psychiatrist. And she said, “Well, you don't *have* to do shock therapy, but in your case I would recommend it because usually it treats depression pretty good, we've tried it.” And I kind of trusted—and you know what? I confided in her. Because you can get crazy — well you know that, you can get crazy on meth. I said, “Well, I'm telling you this because I trust you, but,” I said, “sometimes I feel like I have a purpose in life to save people,” you know, sort of like, not Jesus, but something where I'm going to have a good influence on people. And she said, “Well, that's normal. That's an expression of your humanness,” or something like that. It's normal, it's not crazy.

But anyhow, I did have the shock treatment, I had fifteen of them. I think it affected my brain somewhat. I read up later that in those days they really didn't adjust it too well. But anyhow, what can you do? They didn't like, you know, ruin me completely, or maybe not at all. And it

got to the point with shock therapy, fifteen of them, like one day we're on an elevator and the door opened, it was my ward and I said to the attendant, "Aren't we going to shock therapy?" and he said, "We're just coming back." [laughs] OK. Another time I woke up with a spoonful of oatmeal in my hand like this. [laughs] Yes. So it was pretty effective. And it had an effect like marijuana. Like it just, it scattered my brain enough that actually I felt better than when I was just stone cold sober, you know.

But it didn't last very long, and when I got out I started using again. OK, then, when I got arrested after that, since I was—I got arrested for different things. Mostly it was like, well, petty larceny. I did get busted for works, possession of works one time. I was a ward of the state, so I did go to the tombs. I don't know if they call it "the tombs" anymore.

Q: What's that?

Sklar: The detention center in, I think it's Whitehall Street or downtown. Detention center where you wait for trials and you don't stay there very long. But then they sent me back. I thought I'd go to court, or I did go to court, but then instead of getting a sentence they sent me back because I was a ward of the state. But I probably ended up spending more time that way, because I'd be there six months again.

Q: Back in the hospital.

Sklar: Yes, six months. And probably if I get a regular petty larceny charge, I'd get 30 days or something.

Q: So they kept sending you to a mental hospital, they didn't send you to detox or were they —

Sklar: Because I was a ward of the state.

Q: Because you were a ward of the state.

Sklar: No. Well, yes, at that time —

Q: It didn't —

Sklar: No, at that time they didn't have that selection. Yes, right, they didn't have that. Well, I don't think there was anything, there wasn't anything much at the time anyhow, not a real drug program. You know, it was like, they called it, "revolving doors." Even the Rockefeller program, like — you probably know a lot about that. The third time that I was in Creedmoor, well, I'll tell you the kind of state I was in. Was it the second time? Let's see, when did JFK [John F. Kennedy] get assassinated? It was in 1963 or '64, I was in Creedmoor and I was watching it on TV. "The President has been assassinated," you know and I'm looking at it and I was thinking, boy, [laughs] I know that's an important thing, but I don't seem to care, you know.

And then my parents came, you know, and I remember them embracing me. “We love you and we’re going to stick by you,” and I felt like gee, I know they love me but I don’t feel it, you know. Why? Because you don’t just receive love, you have to be open to love, you have to be able to love, really, to experience love. But anyhow, oh, my cousin Norma, she’s thirteen years older than me, may she rest in peace. She was a guardian angel of mine. She understood. She was an actress, but then, when she had gotten married and had children, she kind of put it aside. She was in the Actor’s Studio with Bernie Schwartz. You know who he is?

Q: Yes. Whoa.

Sklar: And with Rod Steiger and different people like that, you know, way back then. And oh, with Bea Arthur. [laughs] Yes. But anyhow, but so she was an artist and she was in some plays. But like I said, she put it aside for her children, to have children and get married. But she understood me more than anybody. Like my Aunt Muriel, who I loved and you know, she was sweet. She was my Uncle Murray’s—

Q: The comedian’s wife?

Sklar: Yes, yes, yes. Like, “What are you doing?” “Oh, I’m working on a novel.” “Oh, what else are you doing?” [laughter] You know, like what are you doing to make a living? What about your future? But Norma, she always understood me and so she told me when I was in—oh, and she also recommended, I don’t know if it exists anymore, but when I was like, still before I got into drugs, she knew I didn’t have much of a social life, I didn’t have a girlfriend or anything.

And so she recommended I go to Bleuler Psychotherapy place, it was in Flushing. And I went there and [laughs] that wasn't anything much. So anyhow, when I was in Creedmoor for the third and last time, she told me about Barney Ross, the fighter, that he was addicted and he went to Lexington, Kentucky, to the public health hospital and was cured there.

So she talked to the people at Creedmoor and talked to my parents and me and they're not really—normally you're not allowed to go out of the state if you're a ward of the state, but they allowed me to go for that. And I did go. And that was another nothing. [laughs] I ate well. It was great because they had farm grown food around there and freshly slaughtered animals, you know, in that area, Lexington. But therapy, I went to therapy and there's a—I don't know if he was a psychiatrist or I don't know what he was, but he's at the head there. We were all sitting around and I asked him some question and he said, "Well, what do you think?" And you know, and none of the other people said anything. You know, there was no particular — it just didn't seem like, how is this going to help me? I don't — so I didn't go back to that. But I did a lot of bodybuilding, I ate well and I thought, well, oh, I'll show you how sincere I was about kicking. They had some kind of, they did experiments down there with drugs.

Q: I've heard.

Sklar: Yes. And I volunteered for a heroin experiment and luckily they turned me down, I forgot why. [laughs] I forgot why. Well, I don't know if they told me why but you can't just volunteer, it has to be some, oh, I think because I was in a mental institute or something, you know.

Q: Probably for the best.

Sklar: Oh, of course, of course. But I got out and I started working as a waiter again.

Q: Back in New York?

Sklar: Yes, yes. This was 1964. And I felt pretty good, but I had no outlet for—and I thought—here's how I rationalized my first shot of heroin. Oh, and I was in touch with the guy that turned me on to poetry and also another guy that I met, his friend, he did covers for a couple of books of mine and—a really good artist, independent type of artist, but you know, he was still doing portraits when everybody was doing abstract art. He was a real individual. I really liked him. And I got together with them and I thought, you know, I'm okay, I just need to get involved, I'll have a girlfriend eventually. So just in the meantime I take this one little shot and that got me back into it again. Oh, and then it was—here's part of the rationalization. I read or heard that you get it, you become addicted if you use three days in a row, [laughter] so, I would skip a day or two days.

Q: To prove to yourself, yes.

Sklar: Yes. And then when I didn't skip a day I would just take half a bag. So that was sort of like skipping a half a day and two half days were a whole day. And sure enough, eventually you know, I was strung out again. So okay, altogether I went to Manhattan, oh, and I got busted for

petty larceny, I had a court date. So this time when I went to Manhattan General I think it was, I don't know if it was the fourth or fifth time, I forgot, altogether the different—like different things between Creedmoor and Lexington—you know, it was a whole bunch of times. When I first went to Manhattan General to take, they called it, “a detox program,” twenty-one-day detox, I had great hopes.

Then I realized — you get off of drugs and that's it, you know. I mean, I didn't think of it that way at first, I thought, well now, now that I'm clean. Oh, this is part of what they said in Phoenix House, I think Dr. Efrén Ramírez said it. Part of the demoralization process, you think, they're telling you you have help. You don't really have help, but they're telling you you have help and when you fail you think, 'I can't do it,' not 'I didn't get the right help.'

Q: Right. There's no hope, yes.

Sklar: Yes. So I think that happens with a lot of people, with people that are obese even, who can't help it, I mean, I mean who *can* help it. It's not in their genes or anything. Yes. So this time when I went into Phoenix House, I mean when I went into Manhattan General, Morris Bernstein Institute, the last time in 1966, November 3rd, I wasn't there really with any hope of kicking. I was there to clean up, so that when I went for my court date I wouldn't have to kick in the tombs. Oh I did, one time I had to kick in the tombs. And that was an interesting thing, because my parents wouldn't bail me out, which is the right thing to do. And I'm in a cell with this guy. And I'm thinking, god, I have to kick in here? And I asked him, I said, “Did you ever kick like cold

turkey?” He said, “Yes, I’m doing it right now.” So I said, “Yes, well, what’s it like?” He says, “Ain’t nothin’ to it but to do it.” [laughter]

Q: OK. [laughter]

Sklar: Well, oddly enough, that was kind of reassuring. [laughs] Because if he was an example, you know, [laughs] and I thought, yes, it was kind of miserable, you can’t sleep. You know, you ache all over and all that, but it's not like having, oh, in Lexington there were people that couldn’t stay there because they had what you’d call “dealer habit.” They couldn’t, they couldn’t quit. Their habits were so heavy. Or they had like pimp habits, where they had constant heroin all the time. But anyhow, so it's not so hard if you're not that deep into it, but it's bad enough. And besides, it's you know, not the right state of mind to be in. So I didn’t want to kick, so I went in there the last time and luckily someone told me, someone said—I think it was the guy that I co-edited and established *The Phoenix* newsletter with, Bob Wenzel. He said, I think it was him, he said, “You know, they say there’s a real drug program coming around,” and that kind of excited me, you know, or at least it got my attention [laughter] at first. And you had to extend from the twenty-one-day floor to the twenty-eight-day floor, which is my big, okay, an extra week.

And we got up there and it was all talk about it, people heard about it and I was in a room with this guy, Bob Wenzel and another guy, do you know, did you follow jazz at all?

Q: Yes.

Sklar: Did you ever hear of, well, it doesn't mean you would have heard of Ernie Wilkins.

Q: I don't think so.

Sklar: Yes. Well, he was a good arranger and he played with Count Basie and he arranged and everything. And I was in the same room with him. And we got to be really good, really good friends, because he was a funny guy and we laughed a lot, you know. Anyhow, you know, with some people, race doesn't seem to matter, is not a—I'm not talking about prejudice, but just being able to relate to somebody. And with some people it just comes easy. In fact, I'm going to digress again. Oh, how I got strung out. My first shot of heroin.

Q: Yes, when was that?

Sklar: OK. [laughs] See, that's why I was talking about missing important things. I was back from Creedmoor and I was here and my brother came over with some friends and my parents weren't home, and we shared a room before he moved out. And he wanted to turn on with his friends. So he had like two friends, at least two friends with him and they'd cooked up some heroin, and then shot up and my brother said, "Do you want some?" I said, "No, not heroin." He said, "Well, it's better than that shit," excuse me, "that shit you're using now. You know, it's making you crazy and you're driving Mom nuts," and all that stuff.

Q: The meth he was talking about?

Sklar: Yes, yes. Yes. So I tried it. [laughs] “Try it, you’ll like it.” An old rye bread commercial, “Try it, you’ll like it.”

Q: “Try it, you’ll like it.”

Sklar: Anyhow. That was it. But I didn’t think, you know, that’s it. And it was on my mind, kind of. And so I went up with a friend of his, we called him “Bach,” but his name was Bachamino. I went up to East Harlem with him and I copped with him. And oh, what reminded me about that was relating to blacks. I mean, even now, Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, there weren’t hardly any blacks, really. Puerto Ricans were the only Spanish. And so I went up with him and remember him jiving with some black guys and I thought, shit, I could never do that, you know. [laughs] They would tell right away I’m full of crap. [laughter] You know. But they related, and I felt like a jerk. But then they related to me, just like another person, like, “Well, this guy’s going to cop some dope, I guess.” [laughs] And it relaxed me. I felt like gee, I can just be myself, I don’t have to be like Bachamino and act like, and besides he was a racist anyhow because then he’d say, he’d refer to them as *malignane*, which is like, what is it? It’s a black vegetable, eggplant, in slang Italian. But anyhow, you know, a derogatory thing.

Q: Yes, get it, yes, pejorative, yes.

Sklar: But anyhow, there were some bad guys up there, but there was one guy who was an angel, that you’d trust him with your money. He’d go off and bring it back and all of that, you know. So it just depends on the person.

Q: Yes, indeed.

Sklar: So anyhow, that's when I had my first shot of heroin. Not with Alexander Trocchi. But I ended up copping from him, not copping from him but yes, there were times when he had, he would share some, I could buy some or he'd turn us on.

Q: He's your connect, yes.

Sklar: And he was living on Avenue C, Avenue C is pretty nice now, I think.

Q: Now it is.

Sklar: Yes, but at that time it wasn't too nice. You had to watch yourself when you went over there. So where did I leave off from?

Q: You were at MBI [Morris Bernstein Institute] and you just moved to the fifth floor with your roommates.

Sklar: Yes, with Bob Wenzel and Ernie.

Q: Ernie, yes.

Sklar: We had time on our hands. Oh, well first of all, then, Tito Vasquez, he's the only, oh you know the name?

Q: I do, yes.

Sklar: Yes, because he's not the guy that was—predominant in my mind is, Victor Biando was my guy, you know. And he was a New Yorker who went to Puerto Rico, went through the Ramirez program and came back with Ramirez and he had certain status, like in the city, was I forgot what, but also he was important when Ramirez established a program here. But he was my guy because the way, I used to think, when I see an ex-addict, I'm going to see somebody just holding on, you know, like if not like this—but he's going to be kind of, you know, formalistic in some way or controlled.

Q: Yes.

Sklar: Not him. Boy, he just talked and you'd listen to him and I'd think, wow, this guy's an ex-addict. [laughs]

Q: So he was more successful in selling this Ramirez method than Dr. Ramirez was, probably, right?

Sklar: No, he's my first contact with the Ramirez program.

Q: OK.

Sklar: Yes, he was my first, he came to the hospital ward. I don't think Dr. Ramirez came up there. Tito Vasquez and Victor Biando did. And I remember afterwards, after he talked to us I went up to him and I said something to him and he put his hand on my shoulder, you know. And I felt it was so personal, you know. And it was him, you know, to do that.

Q: It's natural, yes.

Sklar: Yes, it was natural. And later on one of his concepts was reaching out and love and concern. And after an encounter people would embrace and everything. You know. And that was especially effective after a marathon encounter, you know, where you're really like opened up in a marathon encounter.

Q: So those encounter sessions start then, in this —

Sklar: Yes, it did. Yes, yes. And so —

Q: What did you think of them? I mean, that must have been brand new. You didn't see that at other hospitals.

Sklar: I'll tell you about the one that sticks out in my mind.

Q: Please.

Sklar: OK. Well, you know, I didn't mind, what I thought—I'm used to yelling and screaming. [laughter] Except they were more organized than my parents. [laughter] You know, at least they had a purpose, I mean, to come to some, you know, to some — instead of just letting off steam, you know. But oh, Victor came back one day and he sat down like this. And he was like this and I thought, "Oh no, I hope not." And then he said, "I just got back from three days of hassling with the City to convince them that it was important to fund cigarettes. That cigarettes could be harder to kick than heroin." But he spent three days, he hardly got any sleep, because besides doing that he had other things to do. I thought, oh, thank god that's all it is [laughs] is he's tired. You know, he's not like on anything.

Q: Right.

Sklar: Again, like I said, I showed you how "sincere" I was in Lexington, when I tried to volunteer for the heroin —

Q: Trial, yes.

Sklar: — experiment. Well, here I heard about a pilot program, it was a pilot program then, in 1966 or '67, a methadone maintenance program. And I secretly applied for it. Again, God was with me because they rejected me, because it was a control group. I went to Creedmoor, no. They didn't want somebody with mental, with that kind of mental illness.

Q: Gotcha.

Sklar: And then, you know, one of the things they teach you at Phoenix House—to be a fink. Because that’s how a lot of the street guys thought—if you tell on somebody and something they did, you’re a fink. You know. Well, luckily this counselor was a fink [laughs] because when we went to encounter group he said, “How come you applied for the —”

Q: Oh, he called you out on it, huh?

Sklar: Yes. “How come you applied for the methadone maintenance program?” and then everybody’s yelling at me, or not everybody, but in particular like Andy Jerrick, he really impressed me. He was like this dancer and Carlos [Pagan] knew him and he was another, like an artist type of guy, a dancer and — “You applied for the methadone maintenance program and you didn’t mention it to us first? You know, you didn’t bring it to the group?” Well, it was such a strong thing that it actually felt like that’s when I really was pulled into the program. I mean, from then on, I was in the program.

Q: They were the support network that—yes.

Sklar: Yes, yes. And then of course, one of the things Dr. Ramirez talks about is the “limit situation.” That you try, anytime you can you try to get out, and I’ll try this and that, and when

there's nothing left, that's when you face it. And that was it. That was a limit situation. Because I wasn't going out on the street again, after that. Yes.

Q: And so how long, so you went from twenty-one-days in Manhattan— to twenty-eight-days—

Sklar: And then the program.

Q: And then —

Sklar: Right. And the plan was this. That from there, because Manhattan General, Morris Bernstein, which doesn't exist anymore, was a place they planted the program. But we couldn't stay there and we didn't want to stay there. Everyone walking around in pajamas and everything. But besides that, it's not just—it's a hospital. So the plan was to go to Hart Island, which used to be a workhouse, you know. And so we were supposed to go May 3rd and May 2nd, I don't remember that but I found out from Carlos and I didn't realize how close it was, Carlos and Ron Williams, that on May 2nd they split and went to 85th Street.

Q: To 205, yes.

Sklar: Yes. And I never knew why until we got together again after I came back from Iowa and we were talking and it was because they spent time—some of them spent time in the workhouse.

Q: And they didn't want to go back there.

Sklar: No, they didn't want to go back there. But of course, there's a whole, now it's a nice environment. You know, we had to bust the cobwebs, so to speak and fix the place up and all that.

Q: Bring it up to code. [laughter]

Sklar: Yes. And so —

Q: So you were one of the original ones who went to Hart Island.

Sklar: Yes, I stuck with it and besides, Victor Biando was the one who was the director there. And he had a family, well, he had at least one child and a wife, and he lived there. But of course, he saw his family, but for a while he lived there. And you wanted to talk to him, you'd just go up to his office and knock. Or he had his door open. You could talk to him anytime you wanted. And he was a great guy. And afterwards I wondered about him one day, a good amount of time later. Well, let's see, it would have been in the 1970s. And I found out where he was and I contacted him and—oh, I sent him my first book, which is a book of poems that was published by Coffee House, no, by Toothpaste Press, *The Night We Stood Up For Our Rights*. And he sent me back, I have, oh, I made a DVD out of it. He sent me back two VHSs, I converted them, of his doing a talk on relationships. Yes. And he was doing a whole different thing out there, not drug rehab or anything. But a whole different thing. And then, after that one, I tried to get in touch with him—I found out that, of all people to commit suicide, he did.

Q: Oh, I didn't know that.

Sklar: Yes. I never could, I didn't want to ask his wife anything. Well, I don't know if I could have contacted her, but —

Q: Oh, how sad.

Sklar: Maybe he just, somebody that was so involved and so, caring so much for everybody, like just like in a way like Robin Williams —

Q: So much for everybody else. Yes.

Sklar: He (Robin Williams) was a very caring guy, but he was also giving, just his art, he gave so much. And some people, I guess they end up that way. I don't know. Because I wasn't that close with him (Victor) afterwards. So let's see, where did I jump off that time? [laughs]

Q: So we're on Hart Island. So tell me about that. Like what was a typical day? Was there structure? Were there rituals that were part of it?

Sklar: Yes. Of course, we had our encounters and then, but we had to paint and this and that and—

Q: Everybody had a job to do.

Sklar: Yes, we had jobs and — The only reason I would ever have left was not for drugs, not for anything, not for someone out there that I wanted to be with. It was just being around so many people. Because I just was not socialized, I was not. And I mean, I would —

Q: And there were a lot of people in that facility, yes? Hundreds, yes?

Sklar: Let's see. Well, to start out with there was only thirteen of us. But still, thirteen, thirteen people. One of the things that I learned, you know, somewhat, was how to relate. And how to relate to people. I'll tell you a couple of incidents, like I was in one encounter and someone was trying to help me, it was this big guy, but he was a twenty-year junkie, a dealer and everything else. But some of these guys that went to the extreme, they turned out to be really—like, to be some of the strongest leaders afterwards, and, you know, it's really admirable how some of them turned around and you'd think they were so far gone—they could turn around so much. Well, this guy, I forgot what it was, he's trying to help me. And I think I said to him, "You're full of shit," or something. [laughter] I don't know what I said, but I said something that made him cry. That made him cry, this big [laughs] dude. And I mean, what an awful thing to do, you know. And after that, oh, they gave me a haircut, you know, not a physical haircut, but they put, the staff is there and they just yell at you and tell you what a crap you are and they told me that I was a threat to the community and that they might have to kick me out, and they don't do that that easily. But a threat to the community. It would be like, I mean that would be equivalent to somebody, say, using heroin in there. Or trying to sell it, or something. You know. Well, then, of

all times, of all times for me to have a bad reaction, too, was in this marathon encounter group or I don't know if they called it encounter, marathon therapy group, with Victor Biando. I'm pretty sure, I mean, it seems weird now, but I'm pretty sure it was three days. They bring food to you. You can go to the bathroom, of course.

Q: And sleep? Can you sleep?

Sklar: Usually you don't sleep.

Q: Really?

Sklar: Well, yes, I think we might have, but we didn't go to sleep. I mean, we didn't go to bed. We would sleep there. We must have slept, see, that's something I'm not clear of now, either, because how can you be up for three days? And it's not like we're drinking a lot of coffee or anything like that. No. We're eating well and all that. Well, the point of that is to break down all your defenses and everybody's open to everybody. And that worked really nice. Now there was a guy that, Jack Lee, who from Manhattan General, we never did, there's something about him, he didn't like me and I didn't like him, I don't know why.

Q: It happens, right, yes.

Sklar: It just was, you know, and he reached out to me in the marathon. Why? Because, oh, oh, because Victor, or we made it known that, you know, we brought up our problems. So Victor

said to Jack something about, “You want to reach out to Morty, [laughs] and ask him if he’d want to be friends,” or something like that. And he did it very insecurely, but he did what he was supposed to do, and guess what I said? No, I didn’t say, “You’re full of shit.” [laughter] I said something just as bad. Almost. “You’re just saying that because Victor told you to say it.” And then Victor said to me, “You know, Morty, you’re a diamond in the rough,” but he said, “You have to break that snot ring between your heart and your brain. Because you have a heart, you have a brain, but they’re not connected and you have to connect them.” That’s what he told me, I’ll never forget that.

Q: That’s powerful.

Sklar: Yes. So. Oh, and then they brought in Kandy Latson. I forgot the other guy’s name.

Q: Yes. From Synanon.

Sklar: From Synanon. And Victor was gone. I don’t think we had a chance to say goodbye to him. No, there was a guy from Harlem and he started his own program, Al Mortenson. Oh, after we were there, we were there, OK, thirteen of us, I’m pretty sure, came in from hospital and the idea was before, oh, they wanted to start referring people from Rikers and —

Q: Right.

Sklar: But before that, they wanted us to be strong, so—because the people that come, you don't know, they might be coming just to get away from Rikers —

Q: Right, they're not really coming voluntarily, yes.

Sklar: Right. Well, they are volunteering, but why are they volunteering? To get out of Rikers, or because they really want help? Well, of course, they had people that went there that kind of judged and it turns out that in the case of Al Mortenson, it was a good guess. The other guy, no, he ended up having an affair with one of the staff members' wives. Well, why did she do it? I mean, it's bad enough that he did it, but she, a staff member. I think they were part of the Synanon group, I'm not sure. Jim Spellman and Pat Spellman. I didn't think of it, but I think in later conversations just, actually, with Carlos, I think they were part of the Synanon group, too. Anyhow, Al Mortenson, oh, so we got strong and we brought them in and—actually, Richie Lanci, who was the guy that ended up—they talked about vertical advancement and horizontal. Well, he was very good at vertical. He became like a coordinator. But he didn't have the substance, really.

Q: He was another Synanon guy? Or he was just—

Sklar: No, he was from Rikers.

Q: Oh, Rikers, OK.

Sklar: But I think, maybe, I don't think he was there just to get out of Rikers. But he had another failure, you know, just as, well, some people failed. And he thought that, you know, advancing that way was it, and people tried to talk to him but he wasn't listening, much. Now Al Mortenson, he really got into it. When Victor, now here was a guy that—he was a hardboiled, long-term junkie from Harlem, you know, and he loved Victor and Victor was his inspiration and when Victor left he cried. He cried, he cried and I was really ticked off. Who are these people? And they came in with a different attitude. Victor Biando was love and concern, reaching out. They were like, if a dog misbehaves you'd kick it and you know, I think they even said something like that. Not—someone else said it. I think Kandy Latson said it. You know, they're not going to baby you.

Q: So things really changed when the Synanon group showed up.

Sklar: Oh yes, they changed a lot, yes.

Q: And did you wonder why they were there? Like what their appearance—was that ever explained?

Sklar: No, I didn't know until, see, after I graduated I went—I was in Iowa eighteen years. Well, graduated in, well, actually, I graduated '69 but I left New York in '71. Oh, I kept in touch for a while. In fact, I gave poetry workshops at Phoenix House and I went to meetings and stuff. But then I was gone a long time and I didn't stay in touch, really. When I came back it occurred to me, I want—so I contacted Ron Williams, and it was great because he called different people to

have lunch together. So Howie [Howard] Josepher and Carlos and some other guys who—but basically it was like it was him, Carlos and Howie Josepher. And so we were in touch.

That's when I found out, and then actually I found out more stuff recently at Carlos's interview. About all the politics and everything, and how Mitch [Mitchell S. Rosenthal], well, I had an inkling of it, inkling, is that the right word? [laughs]

Q: Yes.

Sklar: [laughs] I had an inkling of it when I started hearing these, you know, how Phoenix House got started and all of that. What? That doesn't sound right. Well then, they filled me in and told me that Mitch sort of did this power play and he brought them in and he got rid of — because I guess you know Ramirez was like, what?

Q: Commissioner?

Sklar: Commissioner, yes. Before. But I didn't experience, and then besides, those guys continued on in the program. I did something else. So they know all the dirt and all the good stuff. Yes.

Q: Yes, both sides. Yes.

Sklar: Yes, yes, yes. You know, I started to do a book about Phoenix House, but from the trenches, like, and then in fact I started to do it, I thought no, I just can't do that. I can't do it for different reasons, it's just too much, I can't do that. Now, but I started to do it, and I apologized to the guys. I even had them—I gave them some assignment. I wanted to start out with them talking about early childhood, about before drugs, this and that and blah-blah-blah. And so, but I gave it up and it would have been too much, especially since they're not really writers, and, you know, it would be too much work. Too much work. But at this point in my life I've done a lot of heavy work with books, but—where was I? [laughs]

Q: Tell me where that Hart Island—you know, the Synanon people came in, Kandy and everyone and the technique kind of changed from love and support to the more TC [therapeutic communities] model that they had been using? Like the humiliation, punishment, that stuff became more prevalent, or—?

Sklar: It just so happens that when they came in, I was sent to—I guess it was reentry. I don't know, I've been in so many different places. Or sometimes they just would exchange people, you know and —

Q: OK. So you didn't overlap that much. Is that what you're saying?

Sklar: No, no. In fact, I don't remember being in an encounter or anything with any of them. No, oh, when I went back or when I went to 85th or 84th, Howie Josepher, in fact, he mentioned one

time, he came with other people, in fact he mentioned the drinking privileges. I said, “We never had drinking privileges.”

Q: I was going to ask about that.

Sklar: No, we never had drinking privileges in Hart Island. He said, “Yes we did.” I said, “Not when I was there.” And then he said, “Oh yes, you came, you left when I came.” “So who needs drinking privileges and what for?” That should only be when you get to reentry, maybe, you're supposed to be responsible enough. You don't want to go out of the program and find out, “Oh, I can't handle it,” or you want to, you're in reentry, you're ready to go back in society, then maybe, yes. And then I remember, when I was in reentry at some place, it wasn't there, it wasn't 85th or 84th. They said, “You could drink now,” but I didn't care about drinking anyhow.

Q: So it wasn't an abstinence-based program initially?

Sklar: A what?

Q: An abstinence—? There was no like, you can never drink again. That wasn't drilled into you from the beginning, that whole AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] concept of abstinence? No?

Sklar: No.

Q: No?

Sklar: No, nothing, nothing was drilled into us except—no, except: you're not living your life the way you want to, or the best way, and you want to change, that's the first thing, a person has to want to change. Because I've tried to get people [laughs] to go. No. And you know, in fact my cousin, before I even went to Lexington, oh, before I went to Lexington, my cousin, I told you about my guardian angel, Norma, she'd heard about Synanon and said, "I'll pay your airfare out there if you want to go out there. I heard it's a good program." So I called Synanon and I said, "Well, how long is the program?" and they said, "Well, it's at least six months," but actually I don't think they graduate from there. I think Kandy Latson and the others were considered what they called, "splitees."

Q: Exactly.

Sklar: Yes, you know that. OK. Well, when I called, I said, "How long is the program?" They didn't say that, that it's forever.

Q: [laughs] Right.

Sklar: Oh, at least six months and I thought "Six months!" You know, that's where, see, I wasn't ready. You have to be ready and want help, because six months is nothing. In fact, I ended up being in Phoenix House two and half years, but part of that was because—the slow beginning. We didn't jump right into it, you know.

Q: But don't you think—I mean, that's interesting—two and a half years, that's a long time in a program and that's harder and harder nowadays, I think, to get that type of treatment. Do you think that's one of the one of the reasons that it worked so well for you? That you were there, that you *could* be there for two a half years? That it takes time, you know. No?

Sklar: Gee, I don't know. Well, yes, it takes time. But I think different amounts of time for different people.

Q: Different people.

Sklar: I don't know. I know there was a certain time—you know how graduations are now.

Q: Yes.

Sklar: But there was a certain time I kept wondering if I'm ready, because people would challenge me in different things, and I'd keep doubting myself and questioning. Then I got to a point where I thought, well, when am I going to be ready? How long is this going to — and so at that time, you know how you graduated? You went into an encounter group and you said, "I'm ready," and they'd shoot you down. [laughs] But then you end up with, you know, after you respond and all that, that you're either ready or you're not. Well, they said I wasn't ready. And I thought, who's going to know if I'm ready? I mean, how long does—and I just decided then that I'm going. But I'm going to come back for groups, oh, first I got permission to go out and look

for a job. So they accepted that. When I said, “Yes, I’m going to look for a job, I’m going to get an apartment, but I’m going to keep coming back.” So, that was accepted.

And I got a job at a linen wholesale place on 26th Street and Madison Avenue, Fifth Avenue somewhere. Oh, I got an apartment in Brooklyn. So I got an apartment, a basement apartment on Prospect Park West, right near the park. It was \$92 a month. [laughter] It was basement, but the windows were like street, you know, it wasn’t totally underground. Half the windows were above ground.

Q: You had some light.

Sklar: Yes. And, oh, it was in Brooklyn, so then I got—I think I got a motorcycle, I don’t remember if I got the motorcycle to leave New York or if I got it to commute to Phoenix House or to work. No, I got it to commute to work. And to go places with, you know, for travel. Oh, so that worked out okay. Oh, one day later on, I used to communicate with Mitch and in fact I asked him about doing the poetry readings and he said, “Yes, it’s okay,” and all that. What did I say one day to him? Sorry. [laughs]

Q: No, that’s fine. I mean, tell me about —

Sklar: You could put it on pause. [laughs]

Q: No, tell me about Mitch. Did you know him from Hart Island? When did you first get to know Mitch? Because you seemed more involved with the 205 group, right?

Sklar: Yes.

Q: Yes.

Sklar: I don't remember. I think, well, I related to him before I went to Hart Island, no, I couldn't have, no. I don't know.

Q: He was just always there?

Sklar: I know he was more interested in guys that were kind of more ambitious. And, I mean, even just the regular guys, not just, yes. And that is ambitious, to go ahead in the program. But we had a pretty good relationship for a while. I didn't like when I found out about the history, that's when I started disliking what he was doing. But no. Of course, he came to my Alumnus of the Year award and I gave the talk I wanted to give about where [laughs] I'd started. Well, I mean, I didn't give it in a negative way. [laughs]

Q: No, in a truthful way. [laughter]

Sklar: Yes, I meant to say, I didn't make anything nasty out of it, or anything.

Q: I mean, there is that myth now of Phoenix House —

Sklar: The what?

Q: The myth, the story of the six and—yes.

Sklar: Yes. Even staff, a lot of staff, yes.

Q: It's a useful story.

Sklar: Yes, but there's myths about everything throughout history.

Q: Indeed. [laughs] Yes.

Sklar: So where were we?

Q: So let's talk about poetry and the cultural side of Phoenix House and how—I mean, from very early on, I think you know, I have a newspaper that you sent me called *The Phoenix House* and it sounds like even in —

Sklar: Oh, you printed it out?

Q: Yes.

Sklar: You know, I only have one original copy or I would give you —

Q: Oh no, please keep the original.

Sklar: I wish I had an original to give you. Oh, but I wanted to show you, afterwards, I have stuff to show you.

Q: That's great.

Sklar: And I have some printouts of stuff that, well, maybe you printed it out already, but —

Q: Yes, I printed out everything you sent me.

Sklar: Oh, did you? Yes.

Q: Yes. [laughs]

Sklar: Because I thought maybe you'd like to have hard copies, and I made copies of certain things, but —

Q: Thank you. Well, I'll take more. So you started, I think even back in Morris Bernstein you had a newspaper on the fifth floor, someone mentioned.

Sklar: Yes.

Q: Yes.

Sklar: Oh, I don't know which one you were looking at. Here's — OK, this was —

Q: Oh, wow.

Sklar: You see volume one, number one, March 1967. And you know who did, well, Pete Petit did the—don't know his name, but he did the cover, but all the illustrations in there were by Ernie Wilkins, the musician.

Q: Oh, they're great.

Sklar: He's great, yes, he was great. He's a guy—he had a stroke and he's the guy I looked up to, and apparently he had moved to—I think it was Denmark—and I contacted his wife, or I thought I was contacting *him* and his wife answered the phone. I think it was, yes—I think I called and she said, “Well, all he does now, he has his earphones on, he's listening to music all the time. He had a stroke and that's the only thing that he does.” So.

Q: You know, your piece in this, I wanted to ask you about this, the one called “The Beginning,” from the first Phoenix House newspaper. You talk about being a pioneer and having the sense of

being part of social change. So you guys were very aware of this kind of pressure, responsibility, and innovation, I guess? Yes. I mean, that's just [laughter] fascinating to know.

Sklar: I know. [laughs]

Q: That you were the forefront. You paved the way.

Sklar: I wasn't, as they used to say, "a hope fiend." [laughter] But I had genuine belief and I felt that this was the way to go. This is going to be —

Q: It was different than all those failed attempts before, right?

Sklar: Oh yes, no, this was different. Yes. This was different. And you know, we had time, they were so busy dealing with the City and making arrangements for things that we had time on our hands. So, we had talent shows. I just donated two pieces that I did there. I gave one to Ron to put up, well, to do what he wants with it, put it up in his office and to Howie Josepher, a construction. But we had a talent show, oh, and that guy I mentioned before, who stood out in the encounter when they found out that I was trying to get on the methadone maintenance, Andy Jerrick. When they were doing a talent show, he came up to me and said, "Do you want to do a comedy monologue?" I said, "Me? Why? Why me?" [laughter] He said, "I don't know. It's the way you walk in a room, you look around. [laughs] You know?"

Q: In your blood, that's why. [laughs]

Sklar: So I did it, you know, I sent you a copy, I think, of my monologue. I have another copy here.

Q: Oh, yes, yes. I have it, yes.

Sklar: Anyhow, I wrote the [laughs] monologue and then I memorized it because, you know, I'm not good at spontaneity, except sitting around, but not to perform in front of somebody. And then New York, NBC-TV came around, *New York Illustrated*, their program at 6:00 p.m. and they were doing a piece on this new drug program. I don't think it was called—no, it wasn't Phoenix House yet, no, it wasn't. I tried to get a copy of that, and they said, "No." It was a news video and they tape over it and everything.

Q: Oh, OK.

Sklar: The guy said, "I heard you do a comedy monologue." I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, go ahead." And I started, I stood up, he said, "No," and he pulled his stool over like Mort Sahl, you know, the comedian used to sit on a stool. [laughter] And my name happens to be "Mort" too, but, and he put me on the stool and the guys were around, because without that, you know, at least they responded so —

Q: Yes, you need that feedback, yes.

Sklar: Yes, well, I could have done it without, but it seemed more natural to do it with them, you know. Otherwise you have to think when to pause and this and that. And so the guy gave me a copy of the audiotape. I did the dumbest thing, I could never do something like that anymore, or for a long time. This guy Bobby Dole, who became some kind of director somewhere, he asked me if he could borrow it and I lent it to him. Not a copy, I lent it to him. And I never got it back. So anyhow, anyhow. My cousin, Helen, in New Jersey, she told me that she was cooking and she heard, it sounded like my voice on the TV. [laughs] And she went and she saw me doing a monologue, [laughs] you know, so that was a big charge, you know, to do that. And Andy Jerrick, oh, Andy Jerrick coached me. Because, at first when I was doing it, he said, “Let me hear you do it,” and he said, “No, no, no. You're not one of those fast talking comedians like Henny Youngman,” or anything. He said, “Just be yourself and relax.” So I was myself. And he gave me that direction. [laughs]

Q: That's great. Is that a newspaper you have?

Sklar: This? Summer 1967 —

Q: *Hart Beat*.

Sklar: *Hart Beat*.

Q: Hart Island.

Sklar: Hart Island, right.

Q: Oh, very cool. Summer 1967, first edition.

Sklar: I could make a photocopy for you.

Q: That would be great. Because I've never seen this one before. I've heard about it.

Sklar: Yes, I kind of figured, I don't have to say everything at once, if it's too much of an overload, you know. You can have all that stuff there anyhow.

Q: This is so interesting.

Sklar: Yes, I could just send you a hard copy of it. I think I took it apart so I could photocopy it.

Q: That's great. So there was always this active cultural side, it sounds like, from the very beginning. You guys were writing and performing.

Sklar: Yes, yes. Oh, and Ron Williams, he wrote a lot of poetry.

Q: Yes, yes. And the *Philosophy* and everything.

Sklar: Yes, the *Philosophy*, right. They still recite the *Philosophy*.

Q: They do, yes. You still have that up on the website?

Sklar: Well, these are just the covers for —

Q: I'll help.

Sklar: I'll send you, I'll photocopy them —

Q: I'll take them. Our team would love to see this, I think. Yes, I have a copy of that, you sent me that already. I printed it.

Sklar: You printed it out, okay. Well, who would have thought to save a lot of copies, but you know, you figure, "That's so long ago," and then—this is all I found. If you want, I could just send you copies of this.

Q: Poetry lecture?

Sklar: These are only a couple. I couldn't find the rest. But it's an example. Here's a poetry workshop at Long Island City and here's one at 74th Street.

Q: Oh, great.

Sklar: Poetry Workshops.

Q: Oh, 1998, 1997. So you stayed involved. So tell me, all right, so you graduate from Phoenix House.

Sklar: To a degree, yes.

Q: I mean, you say, “Okay,” and your last encounter session, and you re-enter and you hang around New York for a couple years.

Sklar: Well, I took a poetry workshop where I got lucky. I had this treasure of a workshop teacher, Isabella Gardner, who was from the elite in Boston, the Gardners, but she didn't care about all this stuff she had to do—you know, and so she just went her own way. She became an actress, and she ended up hanging out with even Gregory Corso. Well, okay, she was more of a street person, in a sense, than some of these New York poets, because when I applied for workshop at the 92nd Street Y, there was this guy, I don't want to mention his name but he was one of the so-called New York poets that hung around St. Mark's Place. They had their kind of—I don't want to call it a clique, but you know, just people identifying with each other. Well, they had an influence on us and I—look, it was a more natural kind of speaking poetry or everyday speech occurrences, experiences. And anyhow, yes, I don't want to mention his name, but he was giving a workshop and I applied for that and then he canceled it, he said because they wouldn't let him have it at his apartment. So then I thought, okay, there's this other person, Isabella Gardner, I don't know who she is, but what the heck. So I applied, and you had to

submit poems and I submitted. I got—I think she sent telegrams out. [laughter] Like, “Welcome to the workshop. We’re going to meet at my place at the Hotel Chelsea.” OK?

Q: OK.

Sklar: Now, I’m sure she didn’t tell the Y that she was [laughs] going to, right? So she’s like more of a street person and she’s from the upper crust and — [laughs]

Q: Right.

Sklar: Right. Well, I didn’t appreciate it, I thought it was natural at the time. I don’t know how many people were in a workshop, ten or so. I thought it was natural that each one was kind of different from the other. But I found out differently when I went to Iowa City, which is where the granddaddy of all poetry workshops is at the University of Iowa, where sometimes you couldn’t tell one poet from another by reading, you know. And plus, you had to be sort of like knighted to give a reading or something, you know, by the workshop. She respected everybody, the way they wrote, you know, and she never—but I found out later on that she had a special feeling for me because—I wasn’t sure why, I thought poetry, well, part of it was that her son, it turned out, died from an overdose of heroin. I never knew that till afterwards, till after the workshop—I forgot how I found out.

Anyhow, did she give a reading list? No. She said to buy a good dictionary, like the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*. Did she point me one way or another to some poets, like they do in the

workshop, “Oh, you have to read this guy and that guy —” Which I guess is okay but doesn’t, I don’t know, they have their prejudices there. She just kind of guided us, encouraged us. And so that was that.

Q: And how was it out in the real world staying clean?

Sklar: Oh, clean?

Q: Yes, I mean —

Sklar: I never had a desire.

Q: Really?

Sklar: Never had a desire. Because the whole point is not just to be free of drugs, but to be involved. I never was involved, you know. I got involved in Phoenix. I was with people and you know, yes. No, it wasn’t like the other times, holding on or trying to. It wasn’t a negative, it was positive, being involved. So no, I never —

Q: Being engaged in life again.

Sklar: Occasionally, once in a while, I imagine taking a puff off a cigarette. [laughs] Well, but I don’t, though. Because I quit one time for five years. And then when I first got married —

Q: Cigarettes?

Sklar: Yes. Or when I married my first wife, she smoked and then a friend of mine and I were sitting, working on this big anthology—I'm going to give you some books to take with you—big thick anthology, and he'd smoke his pipe. But you'd have—I don't know, you'd eat something, maybe have a little, a beer, but not much, just after a while, you know, and then I asked him one day if he had any cigarette papers and he gave me them and I took some of his pipe tobacco and I rolled a cigarette. And I smoked a little, put it down, you know, it was no big deal. But then little by little it crept up on me, and my wife, she would have a cigarette in the ashtray and I'd pick it up, take a puff. Pretty soon I was taking a cigarette out of her package and after a while I was buying cigarettes. So I thought, no, I'm not a one cigarette guy. [laughter] Not that I was a heavy smoker, but it's bad enough even to smoke a half a pack a day. That's no good. So what made me get off on that? Oh, temptations.

Q: Temptations.

Sklar: Yes: no. And like I said, I was never much of a drinker. Then, going to Iowa City. And I was writing more, writing. One day I was working for—I worked for my father for a while, you know, and he had a small wholesale hardware store in Flushing [Queens] and I was making deliveries. And my brother was working for him. I come back one day and my brother says, "Where the hell were you?" I said, "I just wrote a poem." "A poem?" I said, "Yes, but it's a poem for Dad." [laughs] And I showed it to him. [laughs] You know, right away he relaxed. It

was called “Jarashow,” it was named after this old hardware store in Jamaica [Queens] that had a pressed-tin ceiling. Oh, that was a turning point because, when you stop telling yourself, when you get an idea and you tell yourself, well, I’ll write a note for that and I’ll do it later, it’s not the same. It’s like when you get the inspiration for a poem, at least when I do or a lot of people do, you’re there at the time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Narrator’s note:

Where my life was *saved* by a therapeutic community, Phoenix House, I was *given* a life beginning in 1971 in another community in Iowa City, Iowa—that of poets and small-press editors and publishers that came to be named the Actualists, where I started my own The Spirit That Moves Us Press, a literary one, in 1975, and in 1977 co-edited and published *The Actualist Anthology*. In 1983 my press published a book, *The Casting Of Bells*, by a little-known Czech poet, Jaroslav Seifert, who won the Nobel Prize in literature a year later. *The Casting Of Bells* was his first book in English published in the United States. In the next year or two I’ll be publishing *THE ULTIMATE ACTUALIST CONVENTION: A Detailed View of Iowa City Actualism in the 1970s & Its Migration to the San Francisco Bay Area*.