

PRESERVING MEMORY: NEWARK AND RUTGERS
IN THE 1960'S AND 1970'S

An Interview with

LORRAINE ELIAS

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

JULY 12, 1991

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GILBERT COHEN: It is Friday, July 12, 1991. This is Gil Cohen. I'm meeting with Lorraine Elias, who has served in various capacities on the Newark campus as student, faculty member, and staff member in the English Department. And Mrs. Elias was at Rutgers in Newark, has a B.A. from Rutgers in Newark in 1969 in English. An M.A. from Seton Hall in 1978. And has served seven years as adjunct faculty in Rutgers-Newark. She has a master's degree from Seton Hall from seventy-seven to eighty-one. And she has been in the Ph.D. program in English in New Brunswick. Let me amend that. From seventy-seven to eighty-one Mrs. Elias was on the faculty at Seton Hall. Now, we are sitting here in the Special Collections Room of the Dana Library. And I guess my first question is what led to your decision to select Rutgers in Newark as the college of choice?

LORRAINE ELIAS: I don't recall ever making a very drastic decision. I came from a working-class family in Newark where girls didn't leave home. I was accepted to Douglass, my father wasn't pleased about that. I was accepted to Northwestern, he was less pleased about that. At my high school, which was Arts High School right up the street, we were very academically-oriented. And we knew through the grapevine that Rutgers was an academically more selective and desirable place than, at that time, the local state colleges. So for someone who for various reasons was not going to go away to school, Rutgers in Newark offered what was then almost an Ivy League level of coursework and demands and a diploma that certainly was recognized. I had started out with ideas for a career in art or music but fell in love with literature because of my English teachers at Arts High School. And so came to Rutgers in Newark, simple as that.

COHEN: Would you say that this perception of Rutgers in Newark, the perception of its academic standards, was shared by your fellow students?

ELIAS: Oh, definitely. Yes. Very definitely. We had, the colleagues, the comrades, in study here included people from working families, from poor families, but also from the immediate suburbs. There would be sons and daughters of cleaning people and steelworkers mixed in with sons and daughters of doctors and professionals. And it was extremely mixed. And with very little consciousness of difference, I would say.

COHEN: And this was 1963.

ELIAS: Nineteen sixty-three when I entered.

COHEN: When you entered.

ELIAS: Yes.

COHEN: To what extent did the affiliation with the fact that Rutgers in Newark was part of the great Rutgers University as a whole affect—was it the name Rutgers that affected this perception? Or did you know by reputation that the school, Rutgers in Newark, actually had the standards that that would precede.

ELIAS: Well, as I say, at seventeen, I was being discouraged by my family from going away. So I thought, well, I'm not going to Douglass. So I'll go here. It's all part of the same place. And I can't be sure, but I think—I had friends who went to New Brunswick campus and to Douglass campus. And there was a perception that the curriculum was pretty much the same and demands were pretty much the same.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: I'm glad I didn't go to Douglass. I'm a city kid, and I was just as happy to be here so I could go over to New York more often and listen to jazz over there.

COHEN: Talking about being a city kid, did you consider it an advantage, disadvantage, or somewhere in between to be attending a commuter school?

ELIAS: Oh, I don't think I thought twice about it then, as from hindsight. I was happy coming here. I was able to walk home to the Ironbound when I needed to. And I had done that from Arts High anyway. And of course Newark then was still the kind of city where one didn't fear to go from neighborhood to neighborhood. Public transportation was accessible and inexpensive. And I had friends from all over the city because I did go to a specialty high school. And so I felt very at home. And I don't think I—once I was here—I don't think I thought twice about going to school elsewhere.

COHEN: Just for the record, how would you describe physically, and any other way you can think of, as far as the—let's say physically the old campus.

ELIAS: Well, the old campus. If anyone gained the Freshman Fifteen on the old campus, it was their fault entirely, not the fault of the campus. Geographically, as far as—

COHEN: Could you repeat that...?

ELIAS: I said if a person gained the Freshman Fifteen —those fifteen pounds that people gain.

COHEN: Oh, oh. [Laughs] I never heard of that.

ELIAS: On this campus it was the person's fault not the fault of the campus. You will remember also, you will help me on this. The campus started, let's have a starting point at Rector Street in that old beautiful WPA building which housed the Dana Library. Never have I seen such a beautiful library: linen-fold paneling, fanlight windows, dark wood, views of the river. I first read an entire *Gulliver's Travels* sitting in a carrel with a fanlight window, watching the boats make silver streaks along the Passaic.

COHEN: Oh, that's wonderful.

ELIAS: Let's give that as a starting point.

COHEN: Okay.

ELIAS: And in there was the biology and all the labs.

COHEN: Chemistry.

ELIAS: Chemistry.

COHEN: Geology.

ELIAS: Geology. Manspeizer-land.

COHEN: Physics.

ELIAS: Physics, the whole thing. So from there, when I was a freshman and I had bio and the three-hour, four-hour bio labs when Dr. Maiello was a mere lab assistant in those days. One had to walk within ten or fifteen minutes, I believe, west on Rector Street across Park Place, across Military Park. We should have walked down New Street, west on New Street. But we found out how to cut through Hahne & Company Department Store to Halsey. And then we had to go up New Street to Washington and turn left, turn south. Walk towards the back of Bamberger's before we got there. We would come on the west side of the street not too far past St. Patrick's Church to some buildings: one-oh-one Washington, which was a small factory-office type building in which many of the history classes were taught and some of the art lectures. And then farther south on Washington, directly across from Rosie's Luncheonette, was one-fifty-one Washington, which today I believe is Planned Parenthood. It's next to a big warehouse. And in there were housed the English and the foreign language classes. And almost all my two-hundred-level or higher humanities classes were in that building. I was in there in Spanish class on November twenty-second, 1963, when someone came in and announced to—I guess it was Mary Plevich—that school was let out because the president had been shot. And I remember proceeding from that Spanish class out onto Washington Street. So the campus went from the Passaic River west all the way over to Washington. And I don't believe there was anything on Plain Street, now known as University Avenue until we got Conklin and Boyden Halls.

COHEN: Well, Ackerson actually went up before.

ELIAS: Ackerson. And I had nothing to do with that so I don't remember it. Then of course the campus went north on Washington. We had fifty-three Washington, which housed many of the administrative offices, the swimming pool, and gym—and gym was required then. I think I had gym in the new theater of the new wing of the museum because that's the building that the museum bought. And then we had the Art and Music Departments in the beautiful carriage house which borders the back of the Newark Museum garden. There one heard lectures by the famous George Weber who just recently passed away alone in Ireland. And of course the Newark Public

Library was almost a part of the Rutgers campus because we used that as much as we used the Dana.

COHEN: Could you go into that, the role of the Newark Public Library?

ELIAS: Well, I first was taken to Washington Street by my mother. It had to have been in the forties because I was wearing little white shoes. And I remember seeing my little white shoes going up the marble steps as I ascended to the second floor. I grew up in that library. And of course used it when I was in high school four days a week and nights. So it was just—there was no transition. One used the Newark Public when one couldn't get something from Dana. One used the Newark Public if one was, say, on any given day concentrated over here on Washington Street because it was more convenient. And the interlibrary loan—I don't remember doing interlibrary loans from Dana to Newark. If I did, I don't recall it.

COHEN: There was no mutual agreement where you could borrow books directly from Newark Public at that time?

ELIAS: If there was, I can't remember. I used Newark a lot because I'm a music person, and I used to spend a lot of time studying my Rutgers subjects while listening to Mozart on the fourth floor.

COHEN: You can do that?

ELIAS: Well, no, I missed honors by one tenth of a point, that's probably why.

[Laughter]

COHEN: What could you say about the—

ELIAS: Oh, one more building.

COHEN: Sure.

ELIAS: One more building.

COHEN: Go ahead.

ELIAS: The Military Park Hotel, mainly the ballroom. In 1963 all 100-level courses, that is freshman lecture halls, were held in a mirrored ballroom, something like Versailles, with hundreds of students sitting at long tables. And the professor of a given course lecturing from the dais. And so I was able to see McDowell of biology lecture about the circulatory system, you know, and this mirrored-chandelier ballroom. And I watched McDowell—he always lectured with his back to us and drew on a board. So I was able to watch McDowell draw the venous and the arterial systems simultaneously, one in blue, one in red chalk on this little portable blackboard in Military Park Hotel ballroom, while we took notes. And I had Milton Gold, the deceased Milton Gold, from the History Department lecture to us on medieval history from that

dais. And Sidney Greenfield lecture on botany. And I think those were my classes there. So that's the kind of campus we had: ballrooms, factories, one real building which was Rector Street.

COHEN: What were your impressions of the new campus once it opened up in sixty-seven?

ELIAS: My impressions? Well, I'm a dinosaur, and I don't like anything modern. And the first time I read anything in the twentieth century was in a T.S. Eliot seminar with Dr. Christian. Had I finished my Ph.D., it would have been on *Tristram Shandy*, so that's my limit. So I don't like modern things. I thought it was ugly. [Laughs] That was what I thought. And I thought that the gray cinderblocks were hard—I couldn't find my way around. There were no landmarks.

COHEN: What did it do for your sense of—well, for the campus's sense of... For your sense of the campus as an entity is what I want to say.

ELIAS: By the time they got the campus, I had established for myself such a core of friends, most of them English majors which included the professors who, although they maintained a formal exterior with us, were very collegial with us. We had our own hangouts and our own places. So that the campus for us was not really a physical site. It was a movable feast. [Laughs] I think that's what I'd call it. If one had a crowd here, the feast moved from Rosie's Luncheonette to Max's Luncheonette. If one was old enough, to the backroom of McGovern's Tavern where we went not so much to imbibe, but to discuss whether Spinoza loved art, or whether one was an Aristotelian or a Platonist. And so we had all those places, which was kind of a café society. And I thrived—or thrived—in that and loved it. So when the new campus came—we didn't have Robeson—we remained in our café society. And then there were the lounges at eighteen Washington Street—Washington Place.

COHEN: Place, yes.

ELIAS: There was a very big lounge in the basement there, where some students, who happened to be black from Montclair and East Orange, always played Whist. And where the Ukrainians used to play Ukrainian music and dance. And the only other lounge, Rutgers lounge, I ever spent any time in was in the basement of one-fifty-one— one-fifty-one Washington for those of you who don't remember. So that was our social life. Now, the coming of the campus for us, and because it was—I was already married and working part time—that campus was just another place to go to class for me and for my crowd.

COHEN: For the new campus.

ELIAS: Yes. I don't think the new campus was established enough when I was here to have any real meaning. But again, this is all very subjective.

COHEN: Well, I mean....

ELIAS: And again, I'm a sentimentalist, and I really remember the camaraderie and "Those Were the Days My Friend" feeling, if you know that song, that we had in our café society at Rutgers. That's what it was.

COHEN: Would you say that this camaraderie and this café society feeling declined or disappeared because of the new campus? Was it made impossible by the new campus?

ELIAS: To an extent, yes. When I came back here in eighty-four as a teaching assistant, I had my assistantship here but I went to classes in New Brunswick for the Ph.D., I felt a lack of those places. Max's was still here. Max had migrated with the study body. Max had started out on Halsey Street. And then when we got the campus on Plain Street—on University Avenue—he got a little hole-in-the-wall next to what is now New Jersey Books.

COHEN: Max's Luncheonette.

ELIAS: Max and Rachel. And do we want to know a little bit about Max and Rachel? They were part of Rutgers.

COHEN: If you have something to say, by all means.

ELIAS: Max and Rachel were Polish Jews who had been in the concentration camps, who you could see their numbers on their arms. Max—I don't know where Max was. Rachel had been at Dachau and had been treated so badly that she was never able to have children. And she was a short, dark-haired, very tough lady who worked with a Camel cigarette with an ash always on it, dangling from her lips. Max was a small spare man with a bald head and ferret-like features, who sat at the cash register and read the *Wall Street Journal*. And there was never a check written up in that luncheonette. Somehow Max knew what you had had.

COHEN: You're right.

ELIAS: And they were famous for their pastrami on rye. And they gave the thickest tuna fish on rye and the best pickles you could ever buy. If Max wasn't looking, though, Rachel would add on to the sandwich. But if he was looking, she would keep it at one ice-cream scoop of tuna fish. It was dirty. Rachel worked the grill with the cigarette ash hanging over the hamburgers. They had a little poor, flea-bitten waitress named Chickie with carrot-red hair, skinny little woman who was worked to death, who sometimes was there. But mostly we got our food over the counter from Rachel. And that was our student center and our study hall. And I was an editor of the *Gallery Magazine* and quite active in it for a number of years and did some *Observer* work, I think, in my first leg here. So we had all our *Gallery* meetings, arguments, planning sessions at tables in Max's. Or even Rosie's across from one-fifty-one; I'll save that for later. The best anecdote about the cleanliness of Max's is when James Cordell, Class of sixty-nine, Dean Maskovitch, Class of sixty-nine, and I—they were my two coeditors on the *Gallery*—were sitting at the table, and Mr. Cordell noticed that in one of these large sugar shakers there was a fly. And we always bemoaned the terrible—we didn't care. We were tough; we could survive anyway. And Cordell looked up, and he called out, "Max, there's a fly in the sugar." And Max flipped back the *Wall Street Journal* and looked over and said, "Don't worry, it's dead."

[Laughter] And then Rachel would call from the grill, “Max, change the sugar bowl.” So that’s the kind of café society. Rosie’s was owned by a little, very, very downtrodden Irish woman from down in the Ironbound. And Rosie’s was not—the food wasn’t as good. It was terrible actually. But one could roll out—

COHEN: Rosie’s was on New.

ELIAS: No. Rosie’s was on Washington right across from the front door of 151. Rosie’s had a jukebox, which Max didn’t have. And Rosie’s soup was terrible, and her hamburgers were horrible. But you went there because the crowd went there.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: And professors went over to buy cigarettes. But the professors went, too. Not having a separate faculty lounge was excellent because the professors sat with us at these crowded little tables. And classes very often spilled over. A nice anecdote about the late, great Gellert Spencer Alleman, seventeenth and eighteenth century professor of English, whom we loved, with whom we took any course we could get. Alleman always taught first period, which in those days was eight-twenty. And he was never in good health, and he used to take the thirteen bus in from Nutley. So often he would be late. And somehow some secretary or some custodial person would often leave a note on the blackboard that Mr. Alleman would not be here, and that Mr. Cordell or Mrs. Elias or Miss Motto—Dr. Motto of English—should take over and run the class on Congreave or Stern or whatever. And of course we had no intention of doing that. Although we were the intellectuals, we weren’t going to be so square as to run a class.

COHEN: You’re still talking the old campus.

ELIAS: We’re talking one-fifty-one. So we would repair across the street to Rosie’s first period. And everyone else would leave. But the knot of people who loved Congreave and loved Alleman, would go to Rosie’s and talk. And Alleman knew better than—when he came later to go into one-fifty-one, he would come straight to Rosie’s and find us there and say, “Oh, well, I can see you’re holding class,” or something like that. So those were our two cafes. And McGovern’s backroom when we got old.

COHEN: Did you ever use Len’s Diner on...

ELIAS: No, because being a humanities major almost from the beginning, I never got down that far except to go to my bio lab. So that was the Rector Street-Fulton Street crowd that would go to Len’s. I know where it was.

COHEN: Oh, the humanities and social sciences classes, most of them were off of Rector—

ELIAS: Were over in one-oh-one.

COHEN: —right there.

ELIAS: Well, they were held in one-oh-one Washington, one-fifty-one Washington. And as I said, the freshmen lecture halls were in the Military Park. But once you got out of there, you were back on this side.

COHEN: I'm forgetting that. Okay. Thanks for correcting me. I'll remember that.

ELIAS: So we used Rosie's, Max's, and McGovern's. The boozers, the people who were really hooked on booze, hung in Bell's Bar on Central Avenue.

COHEN: Oh, yes.

ELIAS: I never—a lady didn't put her foot in Bell's Bar. No. Because in McGovern's backroom ladies were treated as ladies. [Laughs] Bill Scully watched that the ladies were treated well. But Bell's Bar was the dive. And the frat men went over there.

COHEN: After the move to the new campus—well, actually you were here during the transitional period, sixty-six to sixty-nine, crucial years—how did the perception then, and I guess since then, of the dominance of New Brunswick affect your perception of the quality of education on this campus?

ELIAS: I don't think I even thought of New Brunswick. I was so—by the time we moved into the new campus, I had fallen in love with scholarship. And, as I said, I was working—I was running the *Gallery*. And I was so involved in my courses here that this was my world. And I never set foot in New Brunswick except to visit friends at Douglass—but that was before I came here—until I went down there for my doctorate. So I wasn't...my ears weren't open to the scuttle, the New Brunswick scuttle. Was New Brunswick perceived as a monster then? I think a little bit.

COHEN: Crops up you know.

ELIAS: It crops up. Now I see it as a very good thing in a way. We still have a lot of camaraderie in our staff and departments here. Because you can always say New Brunswick did it. Therefore we don't get at each other's throats. We can always conveniently blame New Brunswick, and I make a big joke about that. [Laughs] It's New Brunswick's fault, not ours. No, I don't remember even thinking of New Brunswick. The professors that I had at that time were so good, so demanding, my work was so demanding, my social life was so excellent, and I always had part-time jobs on top of everything else, that I didn't think I was in a deprived world as opposed to a privileged world.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

ELIAS: That whole idea has been created by the media anyway.

COHEN: Is that so?

ELIAS: Yes. And we were not influenced by that stuff. The individual still had a lot of presence here. We were such a mixed bag of people. And we had a common goal. In the English Department that was to read, discuss, and wallow in literature.

COHEN: You mentioned the professors who have this influence on you. Who were these professors...?

ELIAS: Okay. Milton Gold, whom I mentioned, in the History Department tried to effect an Albert Camus [laughs] presence. He wore the trench coat with the epaulets always open. And he strode into the Military Park Hotel ballroom. And he, of course, was a Near East specialist. He was a New York Jew who had lived with Arab Bedouins in his studies. But he was a brilliant historian. And I listened to him lecture on everything from Ancient Greece to World War II in 1963 and sixty-four. The scope of the lectures was incredible. We—the onus was on us to learn. The professor was not interested in spoon-feeding us. And if there were complaints about that, the people who complained were considered fools and probably would not be long for the university. They were demanding and brilliant, just absolutely brilliant. I don't know how else to describe them. And then we had to go home and read twenty books in a semester and write intelligent exams. And that was Gold. My freshman comp teachers I don't remember clearly. I had Professor Greenfield for botany. And these people were intellectuals in their fields. And again, stood up there and lectured. You could ask a question here and there, but then we had these little discussion groups that were run by TAs which were a waste of time. But one learned from those notes and from listening. And one had to listen or learn from an occasional appointment with the professor. So Greenfield and McDowell in biology were almost unapproachable. But we didn't feel that as a personal affront. They were the professors, and we were the students. I had Mary Plevich for first-semester Spanish. She was demanding and caustic and—

COHEN: Was she?

ELIAS: A little bit. But we liked her. I liked her very much. And then I went on to have my second semester of first-year Spanish with Kaya Tono and Soccarras one of the first wave of the Cuban immigrants who infiltrated our Foreign Language Department in those days. This was a lawyer and a judge from Cuba who was not allowed to practice law in the United States without reeducating himself. He became a professor here, and I wound up minoring in Spanish because of him. Demanding, brilliant, and human at the same time. That's how I would characterize most of the professors here. Their collegiality, their somewhat formal camaraderie with us was not hurt by their professional stance or by the academic demands they put on us. Kindness wasn't seen as easiness. And I don't know if all students perceived it that way. But as time went on, we became friendly with certain professors because of that. Soccarras was one of them. He was very, very open to the students, but a demanding teacher. To get an A from him was a reward, as it was to get an A from Milton Gold, of which I had one of the very few.

[Laughs]

English professors: I guess Literary Masterpieces—my first Lit-Masterpieces was actually 216. That's when Lit-Masterpieces was a requirement for all sophomores. As I must say whoever got

rid of that made a mistake. But I was a freshman, second-semester freshman with space to fill, and I had already made dean's list. And so Dean McGill, my advisor, said, "Well, we have a young man here just out of Brown, and you're smart enough to take 216 first. And you're the kind of student we think he should be teaching. So we want you to try Mr. Christian. And so I had Henry Christian for my first upper-level, beyond the 101 course. And I was terrified of him. He was young, brash, and arrogant and very, very demanding. And it was a wonderful course. I guess I became an English major in that course. That's where you read *Hamlet* and *Henry IV*, Parts One and Two. And *Gulliver* and Dostoevsky and stuff like that. I had Blossom Primer for 215. And Blossom Primer of course, an adjunct here for 30 years I suppose, is probably one of the best faculty members we ever had. She gave unannounced quizzes on *The Odyssey*. [Laughs]

COHEN: Anyone else....

ELIAS: Oh, shall I? Well, Gellert Spencer Alleman. May I talk about Alleman who was a character of sorts? Who had a Bryn Mawr accent. And I called him the Dr. Johnson of Rutgers in Newark. For those of you who don't know who I mean, I mean Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century British essayist. Alleman affected a persona. But he did it in such a way that he endeared us to him. He had an office in James Street, as did everyone at that time. From whose bookshelves he had suspended on a purple ribbon a button. You know in the sixties people all wore buttons proclaiming their political affiliations. His button was hand painted in Gothic letters, and it said, "I like Dryden." [Laughter] Alleman was one of these lecturers who talked to himself, and we listened. He had many comic routines. When he taught Farkwar's[?] *Recruiting Sergeant*, one of the more obscure eighteenth-century dramas that non-English majors don't recognize but we all know and love in the English Department, he would tell the story of how he had been a recruiting sergeant during World War II. And for exams, he often wore a purple blazer, from which he had suspended his marksmen's medals. He was known to bring a first-aid kit to final exams, out of which he would take single-edged razors for people who had despaired, methiolate and gauze and adhesive tape for people who had changed their minds. [Laughter] Three-cent postcards [Break in recording] Three-cent postcards. That's where we stopped on side A.

COHEN: Right.

ELIAS: He sold three-cent postcards at exams so we could get our grades, at five cents apiece, two cents going to the Alleman Fund. He also discouraged us from sending him Christmas cards, said it wasn't worth the fifteenth-cent investment. He said rather he would prefer a greeting on November fifth, on Guy Fawkes Day, which was the day of the Popish plot. What more can I tell you about him? I did a research paper for him on three plays by Congreave. And I bought my mark-up postcard and gave it to him so he would mail me my grade. And on the postcard he wrote, "A—excellent paper. If you keep writing like this, you will become very wicked indeed." [Laughter] I could tell you more about him, and if I remember more, I will. But let's move on to someone else.

COHEN: Okay.

ELIAS: Huberman's Shakespeare. We read a lot. Had to memorize passages for Huberman. Lewis Zocca, a real Rutgers person and someone who gave quite a bit to this department, as I understand, was a fine Continental Renaissance Lit professor. I took a year of Continental Renaissance Lit with him, did papers on Savonarola and Thomas Moore. Let me think. William Reed Maniere the second, American literature, probably one of the most brilliant individuals I've ever met, who had at age seventeen or eighteen been shot down by the Germans in World War Two and wore a Distinguished Flying Cross to class at all times. But went to Yale on the GI Bill, studied with Maynard Mack, wrote on Cotton Mather; was an expert on colonial American literature, I believe, as a Ph.D. out of Michigan. And it was with Maniere that I think I really became a scholar, not in a professional sense, but in a vocational sense. I've never become a professional scholar. I remain a teacher and an explainer. But I think I took every American lit course Maniere ever gave. Really fell in love with Hawthorne and Melville. And I did a one-semester independent study in my last semester here with Maniere on Melville. And under his direction read everything Melville ever wrote. And did a paper on Captain Ahab and received very good comments from him and later very, very fine recommendations to graduate school from him. To illustrate the level of academic work we did here, while I was taking that independent study with Maniere, I was taking a T.S. Eliot seminar with Dr. Henry Christian, reading things like the *Four Quartets*. I was taking modern Spanish poetry with Dr. Socarras, I was probably taking—

COHEN: These are what years again now?

ELIAS: Sixty-eight, sixty-nine. This is the later....

COHEN: Now, we're going on to the new campus.

ELIAS: But in the courses we were treated like graduate students, we were treated as professionals. One never handed in a late paper. One never asked for an incomplete. And I can say that in the years I've taught, I've been a teacher at all levels, including religion classes on the grade-school level. I've taught at St. Benedict's High School, at Weequahic High School, at Montclair-Kimberly Academy. And I've been a university instructor. I would say that the bulk of what I know and the kind of method of reading and methods of analysis, ways of viewing literature, the how of thinking, all that I learned here as an undergraduate from these people. I really can't say that I added a lot to that in my master's and doctoral studies. I already knew how to do it when I went on to those levels. And I'm not exaggerating. This is not the sentimental part of me talking.

COHEN: When the college moved to the new campus and you came back after sixty-six and sixty-seven—I believe it was the first—

ELIAS: Yes.

COHEN: —full year of operation, and then the campus was dedicated in 1968. Was there any difference in the quality of the teaching, the style of the teaching that you saw?

ELIAS: Not then. It was the old school.

COHEN: The old school. So not then. When, if there was a change, when did that change come about?

ELIAS: Oh, I only heard the change came about in my years away from here. I would say the middle seventies.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. That's right, you were getting your B.A. in sixty-nine, so at that point...

ELIAS: Yes. That was when the—I think early to mid-seventies when we started the do-your-own-thing college education. And I think we as a university probably didn't give into that as much as some places. But that was when students wanted to choose everything themselves. No more requirements. We got rid of Western Civ as a freshman requirement, Lit-Masterpieces as a sophomore requirement. No more two years of a foreign language for everyone who walked through these doors. I think it was disastrous.

COHEN: Why do you think Rutgers in Newark was slower to respond to that pressure for a looser curriculum than other institutions?

ELIAS: I think because we were in the hinterlands. We are in Newark. We were not the center. Sometimes it's good not to be the center, I think, because we were not in the mainstream. We are a city—we were like a private college of our own. And the clientele here, the students here, were working people, people who came here with a very serious purpose. Many of us paid our own tuition, which I must say was two hundred a semester for twelve to twenty-one credits. There were the frat guys and sorority girls who had a reputation for being non-serious students. This was a school of serious students and serious faculty. We didn't come here for some kind of a romp first. I was a cashier at National Shoes on Broad Street for all the time I went to school here. And later on I was a teacher while I went to school here. When I had accumulated my 120 and some credits, I became a permanent sub at Weequahic and took late afternoon classes here in my last year. Girls wore business suits. We dressed when we went to class. There was not that casual suburban campus feeling here. It was like going to school in New York City. It was the same kind of thing. The big push towards this what I consider a false freedom in academe, came out of the suburbs, came out of the campuses that lived in a world that was—not that it wasn't real. But it had nothing to do with the serious life of the city, working people.

COHEN: What influences did you see—or do you see now—which are operational in this transition to the looser curriculum?

ELIAS: I can't say with any real knowledge when we changed it. I think it started with the anti-Vietnam business and spread into academics. This political protest got mixed up with the idea of academic freedom. And liberal meant loose. When in fact liberal studies, humanitas in the Renaissance, meant a broad and disciplined education. And then the media got hold of it and created a reality for us, I think. I wanted to say something else, let me think back. Oh, I think that the protests and the attitudes, which is an ad hoc thing for those of us who were involved in the Vietnam protests, and I was for the two years that I didn't go here. I was over in New York City, in my Marxist period—or my American novel period, depending on what day of the week it

was—sitting in on courses at Hunter or at the Free University and marching in demonstrations. That was an ad hoc response to a real situation. The armchair liberals and the suburban campuses got hold of that, I think. Now, please, this is just me.

COHEN: That's what we want.

ELIAS: And I think that they manufactured it, they institutionalized it. Well, you can't have an institutionalized protest mentality. So that this kind of freedom fighting mentality became entrenched and everything had to be turned upside down. Everything had to be turned up. Add to this the civil rights business. Now, the sixties civil rights protests were, again, ad hoc. They were—I find it interesting when young people of all races express certain anti-Semitic feelings about—today they perceive Jews to be racist. I almost cried because when I think of the various people that were in those civil rights protests, when I think of some of them like Harry Baldwin who wrote in North Carolina and who was a great civil rights Jewish person. And I think of the Jewish people who were involved in the civil rights movement here at Rutgers because we had a large Jewish population. It was all ad hoc. We had quite a few black students here. But the black students that came here when I was a student here were not different because they were black. They had the same serious academic mentality that everyone had. We were all going for the same goal. And we did have quite a large black population. I don't mean it was half the school or a third of the school. Most of those black students I don't think came out of Newark. They must have come out of East Orange and Montclair. And they were here. The working-class students, of which I came, were mostly Roman Catholic. And then I'd say about a third of the school had a Jewish student population when I was here. So again, that was—anything that we did here in those days concerning the war or racial equality was in response to a situation. It had not been institutionalized, and definitely had not been media-ized.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ELIAS: If you don't mind if I verb it here.

COHEN: Speaking about the black students, obviously there were grievances. How did you perceive the grievances at the time?

ELIAS: In my first leg of my studies here in the early sixties, there were no grievances. In the later sixties—see, sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight were the highpoints of Vietnam. I think Vietnam was a hotter topic here than the black thing. When there was the takeover, which as I told you I'd almost forgotten....

COHEN: February 1969.

ELIAS: 'Sixty-nine. Those were black radicals, as I remember, from outside the university. The protests were organized—Most of the political and racial protests were organized by that time by people from outside wherever they....

COHEN: Was that your perception?

ELIAS: That was my perception. I know that. I was involved with the radical movement over in New York, and it was outsiders, and they were programmed to do that. I don't know exactly who the people were in sixty-eight and sixty-nine. I can tell you that in my classes in those years, there were very few black students, especially in English. I don't remember black colleagues in my classes.

COHEN: At the time, admissions standards and admissions were of course a major issue for the Black Organization of Students.

ELIAS: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Not only on this campus but throughout the country. What was your perception at the time of that issue?

ELIAS: I don't remember what they demanded at Rutgers in Newark in those years. So I'm speaking now just from my recollections of the general attitudes of that time. I think that many young people were misled by leaders, whether black or white, into thinking that freedom meant a loosening of standards. And I was teaching in an all-black high school in Newark in those very rough years after the riots. And I saw it happen there. We were told, or indirectly in a way, that we were supposed to not be as demanding for black students as we were from the white kids. I was instructed by a man who taught me, in my years at Arts High and who had become chair of that department then, never to lie to my students. And once I gave a D to a kid and he was watching me grade, and he said, "A D, huh? Let me see that paper." And he said, "You gave this kid a D?" He said, "You racist." And he was a white man. And I said, "Well, you know, I know he comes from a poor home and he doesn't have father. You want me to raise the grade?" He said, "No, give him an F." You're a racist because you're telling him that he can't do better.

COHEN: This was in what school now?

ELIAS: At Weequahic High School in Newark in 1968-69. And I never forgot that. And what a lesson that was for me. I saw nonacademic political organizers, people who themselves had never been serious students, influencing this. And having been involved in the Martin Luther King kind of civil rights thing from a young age, from the time I was sixteen, having been in Washington in sixty and seeing him and heard him—

COHEN: You were there.

ELIAS: I was there. I saw this as a sellout. I saw this as an easy way. I went to a half black high school. Arts High was half black when I was there; with Henry Bethaya [sp], the son of Katherine Bethaya, our resident black novelist here, who just wrote a novel about growing up in Newark. And we had everything there. We had strict academics, we sang Mozart opera, we sang spirituals. I had proof in front of my eyes that race had nothing to do with academic ability. Not that there wasn't racism and unequal education going on in other schools. But I don't think that it was the people who made strong demands on students both academically and behaviorally who were hurting those kids. I think it was the bureaucratic, the bureaucratic mind took this over. I think it was detrimental.

COHEN: In retrospect, how do you feel about the demand for numbers at the time, considering that the numbers of black students were hurting? Small number of black students.

ELIAS: That's a very—right. Of course it did not—the population on this campus did not reflect the Newark population. But I have to say something about the Newark population. After the riots in sixty-seven, I would guess that half the white population of Newark got up and moved within one year. The only neighborhoods that didn't show that were the Ironbound, which was heavily immigrant, and perhaps North Newark, the Italian section. Weequahic just caved in. Weequahic had been completely Jewish. Now there were many neighborhoods, neighborhoods weren't mixed—there was a ghettoization here—but there were the edge neighborhoods that were always both black and white. Newark wasn't predominantly black until, I don't think, until after that cataclysm. So it happened all of a sudden. And of course Newark was not an island. The suburbs and Newark— one didn't feel ashamed to be from Newark. The stigma, the Newark stigma, didn't happen until after the riots. So that you didn't need to reflect a Newark population. Rutgers for everybody around here. If you lived in East Orange or Montclair or Hillside, you weren't considered a foreigner if you came to Rutgers in Newark. Newark extended out in those days. We were not isolated. And so the call for numbers, on one level, of course is necessary. But to bring people in, to lie to kids and tell them you can get a Rutgers education when you don't have the academic ability, to try to train a kid in a summer who hadn't been able to read or write properly for twelve years was to me the most—the worst part of it was that you were hurting that student.

COHEN: Did you have any sense of the effectiveness of the remedial program which started out as the Academic Foundations Center and then became the Academic Foundations Department?

ELIAS: Yes. I don't know anything about that department. My teaching here has been 101, 102, 121, 122, Lit Masterpieces and Shakespeare. And I don't even know what students I have come from AFD. I don't even look. I deal with the student in front of me. I think that academic problems are not racial. I've got brilliant black students I've got...white kids from the suburbs who are total losers. So I tend to be so anti-quota and anti-statistics so that I run my courses where I deal with the individual. And I feel that I would be wrong to see them as anything other than that student in front of me who either needs help or doesn't need help. In the night school, where the population was predominantly black, I can see that those people had not had proper training. But that has nothing to do with their intelligence or their desire for learning.

COHEN: Now how do you feel about the necessity or lack of necessity for a remediation of inadequate preparation? How did you feel then? How do you feel now?

ELIAS: Okay. Back in my student days I don't think I thought much about it except that I was aware that these people were being brought in, and they were trying to do something in a short time, which wasn't going to help. It was band aid surgery.

COHEN: Even so then?

ELIAS: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. That I remember thinking because, again, I was working in a Newark high school and seeing it from that end. Now because we have accepted this idea of letting people come into a school who may not have the academic training, and to say they don't have it because they're black may be true, but I don't think so. The will to work is very strong in some people. And I've had students come out of inner-city schools here who are wonderful and who work hard. Remediation's necessary, given the fact that we've accepted a certain—what seems to be sometimes an open-admission policy, although I don't think it is on the books. But you don't do remediation by teaching social awareness. These people need real technical remediation.

COHEN: As a teacher of composition and literature, how have you dealt with the need for remediation on the part of students?

ELIAS: It's very, very difficult.

COHEN: What do you do?

ELIAS: I give a lot of time that I shouldn't have to give. I give a lot of personal time. I make sure I see my freshman comp students anytime they need me. Now that I worked eight to nine hours a day in the English office and teach at night, I don't have as many hours to give as I did when I was a high school teacher mornings and a 101, 102 teacher here afternoons. I used to have a station in the cafeteria. By the way, many of us have reestablished café society in the cafeteria. [Laughter] I had a corner. I didn't have office hours in a box in Hill Hall. I have office hours at a table in Robeson. And it got kind of famous. So that when I went on to teaching nights, one of my colleagues said, "We miss you at your post in the cafeteria." You have to sit with a student, and you have to teach him grammar, and you have to teach him the technical tools. You see what happened was the freedom wave, the free way of teaching, that, is the free way of teaching writing: Get your feelings out, don't worry about the technical aspects, dovetailed in with the racial problem. So that you have black students who have been hurt not by racism but by the general sloppiness of the teaching of the language to anybody. So what I do is teach grammar. And the old Latin form called imitatio, where you have a student look at a sentence, say, written by Martin Luther King or Carlyle. It doesn't matter. And have the student make a sentence in his own words that looks like that, that uses the same parts of speech. Real, down-to-earth hard work, technical work. What I get from students is— [Break in recording]

COHEN: You were saying....

ELIAS: I was saying that because I teach this hard-core technical expertise kind of thing—grammar, how do you fix the sentence? Well, you can't fix the sentence unless you know what kind of clause you have to use and so forth and so on. Most of these people haven't been taught this. And as I say, it has nothing to do with their race. It has to do with the twenty years of sloppiness, of get your feelings out English teaching that has affected everybody. The comments I get from the kids: My God, I never knew that before. I wish I had known that before. How come no one ever told me that? And I get some results. There're not as great as I'd like them to be. We have a very fine director of freshman writing named Malcolm Canaire, who has a vocational dedication to working with these people. And he's arranged all kinds of tutoring and

retake classes and retakes of exams and so forth and so on, where people are not discouraged from giving up. We have graduate students here are some of the best tutors I've ever seen, who give even more time than the instructors do. And some of it is perceived as spoon-feeding, and students who have been spoon-fed and who have no self-starting, self-motivation to learn, don't get anyplace. They go from tutor to tutor, from pillar to post. The students who realize that they need to get a little more self-discipline and are looking to learn are very successful in these programs.

COHEN: Moving into the literature courses. We're in the era of diversity...do you find that introducing literature which we normally didn't think of as in the canon, so to speak, by introducing this literature into the courses, what effect, if any, does this have on the receptiveness of students?

ELIAS: I haven't introduced much. If it were introduced in a literary, academic way, I think it would be fine. But the whole thing has been so politicized, so that if one likes the *Iliad*, one is speaking from a privileged viewpoint. And I've been called a racist because I like the *Iliad*. If one likes Native American or black literature, one is politically correct. I tend to avoid the issue in my classes because, again, I think it's been politicized, blown out of proportion. And again, I'm taking a noun and turning it into a verb. It's been media-ized to such an extent that I don't think it deals with the real issues. All literature is important. All works of art from any group of people are important. I don't think we have the literature we did for all these years because someone wanted to hurt one group of people. I don't see it as a combative situation. I don't care where your genes are from, you still need to know Western civilization because you're either a victim of it or beneficiary of it. [Laughs] So our laws, our institutions, whether you like them or not, come out of the Greco-Roman world, come out of English history. And for someone not to know them, I think, is putting him in a box and limiting him.

So I think in introducing other literatures—we should; there's nothing wrong with that, of course, it's wonderful—but we shouldn't do it in this political, combative way. Because an American is an American. And how we became American is varied. So I guess that sums up my view. I don't like the way it's being done. And I don't like the categorizing that's going on. I think the categorizing is disastrous, and it creates bad feeling. I've had black people respond to John Donne's "Batter my heart, three-person'd God" with great vigor because they have a very strong scriptural tradition behind them. I have anybody just absolutely love reading James Baldwin or the essays of King. Very few people read his essay, "From Birmingham Jail," they're always astonished at his classical references. But that makes him, the political people say, well, he was influenced by his persecutors, by his owners. I think we have to get rid of that attitude. Then we can have a sane integration of newer literature with classical stuff. But to throw away classical tradition in a country where rhetorically we belong to the classical tradition; let me say that. Physically, genetically, even in certain private cultural ways, we don't.

I'm an Eastern European person. I'm the grandchild of people who never spoke English on my mother's side. My mother's people never—died not speaking English. That's genetically. And in what I eat, and in my religious festivals or whatever, rhetorically, that is in terms of my language and how I move in the world, I'm an American. And to be an American in terms of the laws and the political structure means to come from classical tradition. I might want to blow it up, I might

want to throw it away, but if I don't know it, I'm more of a slave or an oppressed person than I would have been if I knew it. And to put whole groups of people in boxes and not teach them this stuff is to put them—to make them even, disenfranchise them even further from the American system. And they won't even be good at blowing it up. [Laughs] Because they'll be led by people who will lead them down the primrose path. So I don't know where it's going. I'm a little frightened. I see myself as holding on to some old stuff. I figure the kids can read John Donne with me. They'll go in somebody else's class and read the new stuff. So I don't teach my material in a combative way. I say, well, you need to know this and you need to know that.

COHEN: Talking about combativeness is to go back to 1969. We spoke briefly before about if you had any recollections of the takeover of Conklin Hall, which was a major event on the campus.

ELIAS: See, I was in Max's Luncheonette... [Laughs]

COHEN: ...Anyway, the issues—there was about three days of students in Conklin Hall and those issues. What recollections do you have of the reactions on campus to that?

ELIAS: You see by that time I was an Ivory Tower intellectual. On one level. And a Martin Luther King follower and an anti-Vietnam person on another. I didn't think one had to negate the other. I think—I thought these people were misguided because I knew about King, and I knew about his ideas and his attitudes. I was about twenty-three or twenty-four at this time. I saw these people as aping others because like some of the students who protested against Vietnam, they weren't willing to put themselves on the line for what they were doing. They were whiners. You know they would make demands and then want to get off scot free.

[End of Tape #1]

COHEN: We are back!

ELIAS: Okay. I think I had been saying that then I perceived some of the protesters, and it's such a hazy memory, as rather immature and not really understanding what it was all about. They were already enacting some kind of a media-choreographed thing. Or they had been told by someone what to say. So I suppose I was a little contemptuous of the whole thing.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

ELIAS: A funny anecdote is that—you're into this minority stuff, you know. And I am Lithuanian on one side and a mix of Slovene and Hungarian on the other. And the name I mentioned before, that of Dean Maskovitch, my coeditor on the *Gallery* and still a family friend who's from Elizabeth, he was Lithuanian and Hungarian. And so we thought we would paint ourselves a sign: "Unfair to Lithuanian Hungarians" because we were the only two we knew of on the Newark campus. So many of us were cynical about it. We thought that it wasn't going to help the black students, and it wasn't going to do much. And with that, I was gone. I mean that was only a couple of months before I graduated. And as I said, I was teaching at Weequahic High School most days at that time, dealing with some of the disastrous effects of what had

happened the year before. And saw a lot of this coming. And it probably influenced my decision not to teach when I moved up to Boston because I was very discouraged and saw the civil rights movement disintegrating from my viewpoint. But things go the way they go. And probably, despite the fact that the bureaucrats got hold of a very noble idea and ruined it to a great extent, probably kids slipped in, really bright kids perhaps, got into the university, who might not have come if it weren't for some of the new programs and the things that followed that. And so I'm not really judging it in the sense that it should be taken away. I don't think we can take it away. I think it's part of our society now. What happens, what's happening today, is that a lot of minority students do want to be heard as individuals; they're reacting against the classification. And I get that in my night classes.

COHEN: How do you mean?

ELIAS: They don't want simply to be part of a certain race or social class. They don't want to be seen as nearly that. They want to be seen as Miss Lewis or Mr. So-and-so or Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones. They want to be seen as a person who gets what he gets because he works for it, not because someone just said, "Here, you go in this box, and you get that." It's my feeling, I think, that most people want to be known for their own personal achievements. And I see that. I see people reacting. I see people who will go the way the bureaucracy tells them to go, and that goes for anybody, any race, class, or gender. So we try to get whatever good we can out of this system. And I was talking about remediation before, and I have forgotten some of what I said. But the remediation can't be politicized. It has to be technical. It has to give these people real power, not some kind of mythical, ephemeral power. It has to give them technical power, language power, because without the *koine*, that is the language of the people on the hill, the language of the people that run the show, I think our minorities will be even more hamstrung. And I'm afraid people of all races are telling them that they don't need that, and they need it desperately. I would risk my own position to tell anybody that. I enjoy working with these people. And I try to inspire them as much as I can. It's hard. Many kids fail, many people have to take their freshman comp final three or four times before they can get it right. And as I said earlier on the tape, all kudos to Professor Malcolm Canaire, now on leave, for his dedication, his encouragement, and his patience in letting people rework and try again and study again. And currently while he's on leave, we have Dr. Barbara Gross, who's continuing this with incredible patience in the writing program. And helping everyone that they can help. And working against odds and dealing with great numbers and feeling—all of us feel very often almost in despair that we can't give as much as we'd like to. We've got too many people. With the budget cuts, we're going to have more people in classes.

COHEN: You're referring to a remedial program within the English Department...?

ELIAS: What happens is that composition often becomes remedial.

COHEN: Sure. Yes.

ELIAS: Because people come out of—I don't know if they come out of AFD. They come with skills that thirteen weeks or twenty-six weeks are not going to change. They're just not. They come from a lifetime of sloppy teaching. And it has, again, nothing to do with their race.

COHEN: Is this, what you said, this is a problem which cuts across all ethnic, racial, whatever lines?

ELIAS: Yes, yes. I said that earlier, and I say that now. I say that the problem is not racial, and the problem is being masked under these categories.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: The problem is an American problem. American people don't know how to read, write, think, or speak in many instances anymore.

COHEN: Okay. I want to get back to the question of the social life on campus, either on the old campus, on the new campus. And you mentioned very vividly before the—

ELIAS: Café society?

COHEN: Café society.

ELIAS: "Those Were the Days, My Friend."

COHEN: Well, just how important was that social life to you and your fellow students?

ELIAS: I don't think you can say we said it was important or not important or we thought it. It was life. Social life for me, and I suppose I might be different, social life for me and for the people with whom I was congenial, was not separate from our academic life. It was our life. Our studies were our life. Our social life revolved around them because we enjoyed it. We loved what we were doing. Love affairs, marriages, divorces, abortions, you name it, they were all part of it. For me, for my crowd of English majors and for other friends in other disciplines, this was our world.

COHEN: What did you find in that? Why was it so important?

ELIAS: Why was what so important?

COHEN: Literature, studies....

ELIAS: If you asked me to tell you why, I don't know. I was an English major when I was three. I don't know. Again, I didn't choose this. It happened to me. I wasn't aware of choices in life the way people are supposed to be now. I said before, and I said once when I did a paper here, I suppose I owe my love of literature not just to my teachers because I went to the Newark public schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade when we were really taught. I had a private school education. The schools in this city were ranked among the best in the country when my parents went and hadn't slid much further when I went. It was only in the sixties that it started to slide. But that's because they gave in to outside opinions and stuff.

But let me go back. I think I owe all my love of language and literature to my mother and father. My father because he's a gregarious conversationalist and has been for sixty years an amateur radio operator. And he literally, practically, taught me how to speak on a microphone. I would sit on his lap and speak into a microphone. I knew how to send a little Morse Code at a very young age. So my father's gregarious and conversational. I come from a big conversational family where you talk to everybody all the time. My mother had more serious purpose. My mother was very poor, grew up on Chapel Street in the Ironbound. Lived in a tenement. Very few welfare people today live as poorly as people lived in Newark in the twenties, in the teens when my parents were born. My mother lost all her family to infectious diseases by the time she was eighteen, save one brother. And she saw three brothers choke to death with diphtheria. And her parents died of pneumonia. But her parents were Lithuanian immigrants who had been born under the czars, the Russian czars, were not allowed to be educated. My father's people, who lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had to be educated. All peasants went to the eighth grade. So my grandfather on my father's side came here with three languages and learned English in Central High School and became a steel foreman at the age of nineteen. But my mother's people came out of the Russian milieu and came—They were a little older, and her mother never worked. Her father pushed a broom in Sherwin-Williams and Benjamin Moore paint factories, was crippled from rickets and arthritis, and housed his family in a twelve-family tenement. And my mother's mother spoke—she was very gregarious; I'm told I'm like her. I never knew her. She died when my mother was thirteen. She spoke Polish, Lithuanian, I think some Russian and some Yiddish, not because she was Jewish but because she had to know Yiddish to go to the stores in her neighborhood. And they couldn't write. They made an X. My mother's mother would take her to Bamberger's when all the neighbors went on Ferry Street down there. But my mother was very enterprising. And when she wanted a refund, she had to find someone who could speak Yiddish. Or she would have my mother speak for her. My mother would be terribly embarrassed. And then her mother had to make an X on the refund slip because she could not even print her name. And they went to their graves illiterate. But poly-lingual.

So my mother was very—worshipped teachers. I think it was a given that somewhere along the line I would be a teacher. Teachers to my mother were gods. And she was taken to school by a truant officer. Her mother didn't even know to send her. And couldn't ask to go to the bathroom in English in Hawkins Street School in 1922. And wet her pants because she was afraid. So she pushed me to learn, and she read to me. She would give up her housework to read over and over and over again. She was impressed by Americans, and she learned about Shakespeare and *Child's Garden of Verses* and Adele Davis, you name it. And she read, and they read the newspaper aloud to us. And I always read. I was surrounded by books.

COHEN: So what did the Englishman John Donne have to do with all of this?

ELIAS: Oh, I learned about John Donne here. My mother read poetry to me more than anything else. *Child's Garden of Verses*. I have little records and stories. My mother sang to me. I was trained in music in the Newark public schools from kindergarten on. We had singing constantly. We memorized poetry. Penmanship was writing of poems, passages from Shakespeare. I think the cadence of poetry is very, very important in teaching language. I always had my high school students memorize Shakespeare passages. I was so unpopular. Can you imagine in 1990 making kids memorize? "To be or not to be?" [Laughter] Who why did I become an English major?

Here, it just was a continuation of my life. And I think that poetic influence was very strong. I never had trouble writing. I had never trouble spelling. And then my grade school and high school teachers were demanding and strict and blue-penciled things and taught us Germanic versus Latinate routes. I knew that when I was fourteen years old. Took us to Shakespeare plays. And so I grew up on it. And I'm not supposed to have grown up on it coming from a four-room cold-water flat next to a factory in the Ironbound because that's not my class.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ELIAS: And I get very angry when I hear people say, oh, well, you're an ethnic. No, I'm an American and a Lithuanian who likes John Donne. [Laughs] And my love of more advanced literature was born here. When I first heard—when I first read Hotspur's little rhetoric love scene with his wife in *Henry IV*, Part One, I was thrilled. When I first read *Hamlet*... I didn't read *Hamlet* until 216. I didn't read it in high school. I read it with Christian in 216. I was floored. I was impressed. I thought this stuff was wonderful. I think I might have not read John Donne in any course. I read it on my own. You know it was serendipitous. You went to the library to find one thing and you found another. I fell in love with Pope here, and I fell in love with Hemingway, and fell in love with Chaucer. For that I thank Rutgers. I should say this; this is important: the course offerings, the number of course offerings in the sixties probably were twice what they are now.

COHEN: Yes. I wanted to touch on that since you've.... how did the curriculum change, late, middle sixties into the seventies?

ELIAS: I don't know when it changed. I wasn't here in the seventies.

COHEN: And why?

ELIAS: And I'm not sure why. Part of it was this what I consider this nonsensical do-your-own-thing style of education. Not counting Lit Masterpieces, I accumulated fifty-four credits in 300- and 400-level courses here in less than three years' time. And we don't have things anymore like undergraduate seminar in T.S. Eliot. We don't have— And if we have them, they don't run constantly. They run, you know, every four years. When I see the course listings and I do them, I'm the department secretary, I'm dismayed at the narrow choice. Money, I suspect, is one of the reasons. Also I don't know how much this minority business, you know. People from Newark don't want to read this stuff? Don't need to read this stuff? A lot has to do with—this goes beyond racial or religious classifications. In the last twenty years I think people want to teach what's relevant to students' lives. No one taught me anything that was relevant to my life. That's why I went home in my neighborhood and went to the butcher shop and heard my mother talk Lithuanian... and then read John Donne in my school because they didn't think about where I came from. In trying to teach relevant things, we say, well, this is not relevant. The students won't like this. This is boring.

Once I was challenged by a colleague for teaching Ovid, or suggesting to my freshmen that they read Ovid. And I was doing it because we were reading Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. And I saw that piece as an anti-metamorphosis. If you knew Ovid, you knew that what Kafka was

doing was quite different from what Ovid had done with his idea of metamorphosis. So I thought I'd put it on reserve, you know, let some kids on their own if they wanted to do a research paper showing how Kafka took the idea of metamorphosis from the classical tradition. Perhaps they'd like to write about it. Well, some colleague said, "What do you mean you're teaching Ovid? What course are you teaching?" And I said, "Well, I'm not actually teaching it. I'm suggesting they read it. That's 102." [Laughs] And the individual sneered and said, "That's not relevant to their lives." I think the person thought that she would throw me a little. And I just came right back at the person and said, "Exactly. I don't teach anything relevant. I want to teach them something they never heard of. The more irrelevant the better." So I think part of the problem with course offerings might come in an indirect way, a subtle way from this idea that much of the stuff I read and perhaps that you've read as an undergraduate never mind isn't politically correct; is simply boring, irrelevant. I haven't heard a student mention Alexander Pope's name in all the years I've taught here. And yet I read it with Primer when I was here. There's a person, Irwin Primer, faculty member; probably the senior member of our department at this point, with Christian coming second. But I took eighteenth-century with Primer.

But you could take eighteenth-century poetry. You could take eighteenth-century prose. You could take eighteenth-century drama. You could take nineteenth-century drama, nineteenth-century novel, and then nineteenth-century just prose. I left out Richard Alcock, with whom I read all the great Victorian essays in one book. I still have the book. You cannot get a genre period—combination period genre course here like that. There are many more survey courses than we used to have. I don't remember the 200-level survey courses being in existence when I was here.... I think they put them in when they took out 215-216 as a requirement. I don't think they're as effective as 215-216. But I don't see things like that anymore. I do see, for instance, coming up next year, the British Essay taught by Primer. I see it with rejoicing, I hope enough people sign up for it. So I think it's that. I think it's budget cuts. I think it's.... I only know this not officially, I think—I hear, I've heard people say—they like to put the money into the sciences in Newark. They don't give as much money to the humanities in Newark. Some people always say they think there's a plot to get rid of humanities in Newark all together. I think that if they do that, we will have—the minority thing here could be used to a good end if we're ever threatened with that because people in Newark, the minority residents of Newark and students at Rutgers, can say, Hey, wait a minute. Just because I'm in Newark doesn't mean I have to have this taken away from me. So, you know, if that ever comes to be, which I only hear through people ruminating out loud, we might be able to use some of what seems negative in certain places as a good way to keep us going. And I think part of it comes with not giving money to Newark in general because it's Newark, because of the stigma.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: And I don't know. Some of the people who are fifteen to twenty years older than I am on this faculty don't have much hope. If I lose hope, then I have to stop teaching here. And I, people like me and people like Rachel Hoddas, a great classical teacher, classical literature, people like the Warhorse Christian, who's given his life to this place, I think we still hope that we can at least keep the level that we have now. Beyond that, I don't know.

COHEN: Did you see any of this coming in the seventies?

ELIAS: I saw it in the late sixties coming. I wasn't here in the seventies.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: Yes, I feared...I wasn't sure what would happen. But you see then after I left here, I spent three years as professorial secretary and research assistant at Harvard Divinity School. And I saw things hit the fan at Harvard.

COHEN: What did you see?

ELIAS: I saw the protests in the Yard, and I saw the courses watered down at Harvard.

COHEN: You saw it at Harvard, and you saw it here.

ELIAS: I saw it in the Div School alone, I saw protests against traditional Scriptural stuff. They were building a student residence called Rockefeller Hall, and there were protests not to take the money from the Rockefellers because some of their money was going into, you know, Vietnam-oriented suppliers, supply companies. I saw a breakdown of student seriousness at Harvard. I wasn't aware of the racial thing. But there was that whole breakdown of academic traditional business in the late sixties, early seventies. And I did see it continue at Harvard. I saw it as a more vehement force there than at Newark. So the only thing I knew about Newark in the seventies I heard from another faculty member who's no longer with us, but who was a head administrator at Felician College, Charles Rooney.

COHEN: Oh, yes.

ELIAS: A young—at that time—a very young and very good American, twentieth-century American lit man, with whom I learned to read all of my twentieth-century poetry, American poetry.

COHEN: Here?

ELIAS: Yes, here at Rutgers. Charlie left in the cutbacks of the seventies and did not get tenure and that kind of thing. And I was very friendly with him and with his wife. And we used to babysit their kids when my husband and I were students. So Charlie would tell me certain things about what was going on here. Seventy-five seems to have been a year when the place really changed radically.

COHEN: Seventy-five? What happened then?

ELIAS: I think a lot of faculty left, a lot of people were not given tenure. I think that's when they began bringing in what they called the superstar-way of hiring. People who had worked their way up through the departments were either let go and not given tenure or blocked, their promotions were blocked.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: And they were bringing people from outside schools. And that created a lot of bad feeling in faculty, I'm quite sure. And therefore discouraged a lot of faculty. I hear students say, well, you know, you're better than some of the full-time professors. And then they name professors, and it astonishes me. I say, my God, those people are great. And what I think has happened, there's been a lot of discouragement and burnout if student criticisms of some of these people are correct. And that's heartbreaking.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: Again, sometimes I feel... I'm not that young anymore, but as a part-time teacher...and many part-time teachers here, we feel that we're, we're trying to shore up and hold up the tradition. And help the people to whom we're going to funnel, you know, our freshman students, try to keep our senior colleagues going by training somebody to appreciate what they're going to teach them. I spend a lot of time speech-ifying, tell my students that, look, I don't care whether you're a pharmacy major or an accounting major. You're at a university. Take these lit courses, take philosophy. And so forth.

COHEN: Well, talking about departments and, well, promotions, I wanted to get into the area of affirmative action for women faculty in particular, and whether you can— Well, my question is when did the movement for equal rights for women faculty get started on the Newark campus, that you're aware of?

ELIAS: I know nothing about that. I have to say that in my lifetime, as far as I could see, my sex never kept me from doing what I wanted to do. Certainly we didn't have as many female faculty members when I went here as we do now. I can remember clearly, though, in the English Department, aside from Blossom Primer, I remember Elizabeth Hodge who's still part of the faculty at NJIT [New Jersey Institute of Technology]. I remember Felicia Bonaparte. Again, Maria Plevich. Actually those are probably the only female teachers I had then. Of course we now have, as far as I understand it, the first full professor, female full professor, in English. I mean that's Professor Virginia Tiger, both my academic chair and my administrative supervisor.

COHEN: Oh, that's right. Yes.

ELIAS: And I think—I can say this on the tape—if you want to know about the women's movement at Rutgers, Dr. Tiger would be the person to talk to. She knows a lot about it, and is a very active feminist. I'm not an active feminist. I never took Women's Studies courses. I wanted to take Stern and classical rhetoric. There was a bigger consciousness event down at New Brunswick. I was criticized for not taking Women's Studies courses. And that really got my dander up, and I said, "Well, I'm a woman, and I don't need to study it. And I think I can take what I like to take here." I don't see that at Newark. We have Women's Studies professors; we have good ones. They're highly acclaimed by the students. And I don't get that politicized Women's Studies. I don't get a view of it being politicized and shoved down people's throats here.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ELIAS: The women professor s whom we have here in the years that I've been working here, who came on board in the seventies...in sixty-seven Patricia Gartenberg, who was then Patricia Moriarty, was hired. I didn't know her. Now as we know, Patricia Gartenberg was the chair of our department for seven years. She is—she remains an associate professor of Renaissance, English Renaissance. Dr. Tiger, Virginia Tiger, who was hired in 1970 by the English Department. So we had Gartenberg in sixty-seven and Tiger in seventy. I don't know when Rachel Hoddas came on. She's only in her early forties. I think probably in the late seventies. One female professor from outside the feminist tradition, I think—and I can't be sure—a colleague of mine who was the last of our crew to get in under the old system where you came in as an instructor and worked your way up, is the very good Dr. Mary Lamotto, who's professor of Romantic literature and sometimes Victorian. Who was hired in seventy-seven. And I believe she was the last to come in on that instructor level. And then she moved up to assistant and associate. Those are the women in the department that I speak of. Dr. Barbara Foley's very new. Now I don't know if these people—I don't know about Gartenberg and Tiger and even Motto, whether there was an affirmative action program for women then. If there is one now, I would assume that people like Dr. Frances Barkowski and Barbara Foley in our department may have been hired as part of it. But I don't know.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ELIAS: And I don't think I'm supposed to know. Or maybe I am. But I'm just not aware of it.

COHEN: Do you have any sense at all of the effects of the affirmative action for women faculty on the campus on the life of the campus? Any sense, feeling for how it's affected relations between—

ELIAS: Male and female?

COHEN: Well, male and female and between people of different points of view on this regardless of their sex.

ELIAS: You mean different points of view on whether we should have female faculty members?

COHEN: Well, different points of view on how—

ELIAS: How we get them?

COHEN: How we get them, how much of an effort should be made, how much injustice there has been in the past. I mean people of—

ELIAS: I haven't heard much about that.

COHEN: No?

ELIAS: I don't hear a lot about that. There were enough women around here, even when I went. I never heard any male putdown of women teachers. And, you know, this was a coed school from the day I came here. I don't ever—I was never sexually harassed. No one ever came on to me. No teacher ever did that, male teacher. I was never treated differently by professors because I was a woman. Although I can tell you an anecdote about Alleman, and he did the whole thing tongue in cheek. He treated us all beautifully. I never felt that someone was prejudiced against me because I was a woman. The anecdote from Alleman is this—and I've told it to many colleagues, and they love it. Is that he gave numerical grades on essays, tests or otherwise. And my two male colleagues on the *Gallery*, that is Maskovitch and Cordell and I, always got in this order: ninety-nine, ninety-eight, and ninety-seven from Alleman. And Maskovitch got the ninety-nine, and Cordell got the ninety-eight, and I got always got the ninety-seven. It was always an A, so it didn't matter. Well, one day when I was visiting Alleman on another matter, I said, "By the way, why does that...."

[Break in recording]

COHEN: Hey, we're back.

ELIAS: We're back to Gellert Spencer Alleman, I hope, based on my belief in the afterlife, that his spirit is with us, and he's smiling. I said, "Why did Maskovitch get a ninety-nine all the time, Cordell the ninety-eight, and I the ninety-seven, invariably? And he said, "Well, my dear, you know," he said, "Maskovitch is a true scholar, and Cordell would be if he weren't always chasing skirts. And you, Mrs. Elias, are a woman." [Laughter] And all I could do was laugh.

COHEN: Oh, that was really something. I can hear him now.

ELIAS: He wasn't anti-feminist at all. He loved humanity, and he delighted in the females. He had eye problems, and he used to say to us "back in the sixties when the girls wore these teased, bouffant, you know, these sculptured hairdos, he would say, "If you're a female, choose a seat and keep it, because I can only identify you by the shape of your hair." [Laughter] No one saw this as an attack on our femininity or female stature. He gave As women. He gave an A to me. And this must have been in the early eighties right before he died. I'd often stop in to visit, and it was eighty-one. It was three months before Alleman passed away. And I stopped in to visit him, and I hadn't been here in a number of years. So this was in Hill Hall. And, you know, they had to dynamite him out of James Street with all his books and his wooden bookshelves. And there he was in his chair ruminating. And I looked in, and I said, "Excuse me, do you remember me?" He said, "Yes. Why of course." He said, "How are you?" I said, "I'm fine." He said, "Have you become a feminist?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, come in and sit down." [Laughter] He was dead three months later. And that was that.

So again, Newark is a strange place. Although the movements, the current movements affect us, we're just a grassroots, such, I say, real place because we are a city school. And even though Newark has taken a nosedive or seems to have at least in perception, we still serve a very varied community of people: people who work. And I think the fact that they work, even the full-time day students work, they're not taken in by slogans and media stuff to the extent that suburban campuses are. There's always that corrective let's say. There's the corrective of having to work

for a living. The views are always corrected by the realities of the students. And I think there's still a lot of freedom here, so students can live and express those realities. So whatever is threatening, whatever seems to be threatening in these new classifications and so forth, I think what gives me hope is the very student and faculty population itself: We're varied, we're outspoken, and we're small enough to continue to have some kind of a community sense here—which even within the gray brick continues. One adjusts.

COHEN: Okay. Time is running out. I just wanted to move into the area of your views, your perceptions of the various administrations which you have either been under as a student or as a faculty member here at Rutgers in Newark. Whatever you can say in response to these questions.

ELIAS: Are we on?

COHEN: Oh, yes. We're on. For instance, what can you say—for instance, if you had to compare the administrations and style of Mason Gross and Edward Bloustein if you had to do a comparison.

ELIAS: I can't. I have no idea. Mason Gross might as well have been the Wizard of Oz, you know. [Laughter] I wonder if we paid any attention to the man behind the curtain or not. I didn't know either of them. I wouldn't have known them if I had fallen over them. When did Bloustein come on?

COHEN: Nineteen seventy-two if I'm not mistaken.

ELIAS: Oh, alright. And when did he—and then he died in office, couple of years ago.

COHEN: Well, he.... Lawrence has been there since last year.

ELIAS: Right, right.

COHEN: And then Bloustein...

ELIAS: If it's Bloustein that liberalized, quote-unquote, and helped effect these quota systems and stuff—I don't know if he did it because he had to or because he wanted to, you know. Part of it was just the way the world was going. I don't know anything about Mason Gross. Mason Gross would then have been the man in charge when we were a more traditional institution.

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: But then again, how much influence does one man have? And how much is it simply the way history's moving at the time? I suppose the man does. But I don't know what influence either of these individuals had on those times, whether Gross fought the changes, whether Bloustein saw that some of them could be dangerous or hurtful and probably tried to mediate and take a middle ground. I have no idea. That's what I guess.

COHEN: Do you have any sense of the administration of Malcolm Talbott who was vice president of Newark and acting dean of the college?

ELIAS: Yes. Very little. Again, the students when I went here were not involved in stuff like that. The highest person I ever had contact with was Dean McGill, who was a member of the English Department but became one of the associate deans. He was my advisor. And I only went to him one time when he put me into 216 when I was a freshman.

COHEN: Do you have any sense of any of the deans in the college like Woodward or—

ELIAS: I knew who he was.

COHEN: —Gilliland?

ELIAS: We knew them.

COHEN: Henry Blumenthal?

ELIAS: Blumenthal taught history also, didn't he?

COHEN: Yes.

ELIAS: I may have had him or known him as a history professor, and he was highly respected by the students. Again, they created the atmosphere where we went to school. We did not think that we had to be part of that. We weren't.... It wasn't that we didn't care. It wasn't fifties apathy. They did what they did, and we did what we did. The registrar, you know you couldn't get through to them. You had to stand on line for hours. That hasn't changed. But we were not involved in that kind of thing.

COHEN: None of the deans or acting deans—Gilbert Panson after Blumenthal? And then Richard Robey came on as dean.

ELIAS: I don't know that name. But I know Panson's name. I know the names of all these people. I remember seeing some of them on the street.

COHEN: Norman Samuels?

ELIAS: To this day I have never seen Norman Samuels. But I've talked to his secretary. I deal with her constantly now in my administrative role. But we were not involved in that. We were not involved in criticizing or praising or.... They ran the offices, and we went to the classes. So I can't really say much. In my position now? I don't know what I can say. I'm a faculty member and a staff member so that puts me in a rather strange position. I don't know where Francis Lawrence wants to take this place. I have no idea. Norman Samuels has to play the role of the boogey-man because we don't have money. I don't know his views. And I would hope that he would listen to the words of people who are trying to keep our academic standards high. And I think there are lots of minority—I want to add that I think there are many more minority

professors here who are—who want to make sure our academic standards stay high. Because many of our minority professors themselves know what it is to work for an education. And I think there are some of those... I mean I'm not talking from a white viewpoint on that, I should say that. Many black teachers are distressed by the poor preparation of their black students. And they know why it is, and they are as hamstrung by some of the bureaucratic regulations as anybody else. I really can't speak much on administration.

COHEN: Okay. I wanted to ask you questions about your experience with the Dana Library in your career at Rutgers. Services. Let's start with services first.

ELIAS: Wonderful!

COHEN: And then go to collections. Services. What can you say about them.

ELIAS: The services are wonderful. The reference librarians here are—you're my favorite because I remember you from when we were both kids. But Dana Library has a very good reputation. Certainly dealing with Dana people is a greater pleasure than dealing with Alexander people. On a personal level, very fine and professional. Collections. The collections have been depleted. Am I right?

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ELIAS: By theft and lack of funds.

COHEN: Lack of funds, sure. Yes.

ELIAS: I'm not a computer person. The reference room is too hot because the computers...the air conditioning doesn't suffice with the computers. If Mr. Samuels is listening to this, I think he should know that you can't put ten computer banks in a room that's designed to air condition just human bodies. That's terrible, what's happening physically in Dana because of the computers. I'm a bibliophile, and I like the physical existence of books, and I like reference drawers. And I hope that we'll never lose our card catalog, but then New York Public did. I think that there's a great deal to be said for browsing through a card catalog. It has an effect that looking at a green screen doesn't. I don't know that the computers are helping students all that much. I think they create a lot of confusion for the kids.

COHEN: Well, it makes things more complex.

ELIAS: Yes. I would hope that the Dana would be—if it's not popular even—would keep both ways of getting to books, both the card catalog and the computers. Kids tend to browse less when they use computers. Kids [don't] tend to go to the stacks as much. They will use the computer rather than crawl around in the stacks. And the great serendipitous discoveries one makes in stacks while you're looking for one thing and you find another, can't be done on a computer. So I think that's the negative part of computers. And they make the room too hot. The library remains, I think, one of the quieter college libraries in this area.

COHEN: Will you repeat that please? [Laughs]

ELIAS: It remains, relatively speaking, one of the more quiet libraries. I can go upstairs and find places to work where I'm not disturbed by people. If I am disturbed by people, the librarians will do something about it. At least I find that to be the case.

COHEN: That is very interesting.

ELIAS: Why, it's become noisy, too?

COHEN: Well, complaints.

ELIAS: Yes, yes. I do notice that....

COHEN: You're the first person I ever met who said that.

ELIAS: I can find quiet corners up here. But I also find that when I get on my—when I turn into a witch and complain to people, that librarians do respond. I think Miss Mullins—what's her first name?

COHEN: Lynn

ELIAS: Lynn Mullins has been very, very good about things like that. She keeps a low profile; but I had a complaint once about some offensive behavior of students, and she got right on it. So I still like to study here. I come over here on lunch hours and study. And I'm upset that they lock the door at night, the door facing Conklin. I know it's security and all. But that's bad. The hours are sufficient. And of course the collection should be twice the size as it is, but we're strapped by money. But I think Dana remains a good place.

COHEN: Okay. To wrap up, is there anything that we've talked about you'd like to go back to?

ELIAS: I don't know if I'm going back to it or rephrasing it. I would like to see this school continue as the working person's Ivy League. I think in many areas it still is. And again, we're being relative here, considering the changes of the seventies. I think although we're heading into an oligarchy it would seem in American cities with the poor and the rich, I think we should try to keep this a multiclass school. That therefore we should still attract people from the suburbs because there you have middle-class people. And I think that we should continue the tradition of emphasizing academics as academics. Because we're in a city doesn't mean we have to be relevant in every respect. And I think many of our departments still do that. We're not a social laboratory. We're an academic institution. And I think it's to the benefit of the citizens of Newark, no matter who they are, that we fight to keep that. Because I predict that little by little it's going to become evident to people who run the show that these classifications, these mass classifications and these political boxes into which we're feeding our institutions, are not going to work anymore. I mean the communists already learned that. So I would hope that people in this institution, those of us who are alive and kicking and have any spirit to work with, can continue to fight for academic and professional standards so that the people who live in a city,

that's supposedly not a good place to live, can come to a university that is a real university and not a place for political embroilments and social experimentation. If that has to go on, there's still a core of real academics which is the best gift we can give to the people who need it in the city.

COHEN: And finally, are there any topics we haven't touched on at all that you'd like to address? That I've completely missed. Or we completely missed.

ELIAS: No, I think it's late in the day, and I think I've run out of steam a little bit.

COHEN: Well, thank you very much.

ELIAS: Turn off the tape.

[End of Tape #2]

-----[End of Interview]-----

Reviewed and edited by Catherine Carey 10/8/2012