

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

William Helmreich Oral History Collection

**Interview with Vera Stern
February 13, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Vera Stern, conducted by William Helmreich on February 13, 1990 as research for his book *Against all odds: Holocaust survivors and the successful lives they made in America*. The interview was given to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Oct. 30, 1992 and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

VERA STERN February 13, 1990

VS: -1947

WH: Did you come by boat?

VS: Yes. I came on the (?Dubras?)

WH: Did you leave from (?LeHave?)?

VS: Yes. With my mother and we were hidden in Paris throughout the war. And I was with her, I mean her and my father – from '38 to '43. My father was deported in '42 to Auschwitz from Paris. And, my mother and I hid until '42. And then I had this chance to escape to Sweden. With a group of Swedish Jews who were given ten days to clear out from France and were given permission to travel through France, through Germany, through Denmark and then to Sweden. Had they not left Paris at the time, they would have been treated like all the other Jews. But because they were Swedish, so they had until '43, until '43 they had – they were protected by the Germans.

WH: And where were you born?

VS: I was born in Berlin – of Russian parents.

WH: And your parents had come from where originally?

VS: Russia. Moscow.

WH: From Moscow. I see, so in '38 you left Berlin for Paris. And during and between '40 and '43 where were you hidden . . . ?

VS: Well, from '38 until the Germans walked in '40.

WH: Right

VS: And, '40, '41, we lived in our apartment. '42 my father was arrested first at our apartment because we were just (inaudible) people. We were registered at the police as Jews wearing the – you know, the star on the yellow piece of cloth. And, - we all traipsed to the (inaudible) police because it was a Frenchman who arrested and somehow, we were able to get my father off at the (inaudible -?prefecture?) under the condition that he comes every week to sign in. Like being on bail – And, because while we were in the apartment, and he told him to pack a bad and ect., ect., it happened to be Pesach. And I'll never forget, - and we still had you know, full of matzo and everything from the day before, night before. And we had a prayer book. At the time I was involved in a, a

synagogue. Conservative synagogue. And I sand in the choir and so, I mean, we were all very you know, very Jewish. And, and so I opened up the book and in French it had a prayer to France. And he was so impressed by that he actually came to arrest my father as being Lithuanian. We had Lithuanian passports. But Lithuania was taken up by, - it was taken by Russia and we got a stamp into that passport that they were now Soviet citizens. And at that time the Soviets and the Germans were allies. So while the man was there, I went to my room and I ripped up the mattress where we had hidden those passports. And I brought them, I mean, you know, you do things to –

WH: That you don't think today you would –

VS: And we brought them out and showed the stamp and so you know. He said he was willing – (inaudible) walked out of the apartment. I mean, my father was handcuffed but he put a coat over his arms so that the – you know. Or, he had handcuffed himself. That's right. You know. My mother's wrist was handcuffed to his wrist. (Inaudible) And the coat was sort of –

WH: Between them.

VS: Between them. And, uhm, we went to the (?profecteur?) and a lot of back and forth and talking and I mean, he must have said, you know, that here's a young girl, and she's very French, you know, and that's – so, eh, so he was released and that was Pesach 1042.

WH: How old were you then?

VS: In '42 I was fifteen.

WH: Oh.

VS: So from, from whatever month Pesach was, April or whatever, you know, I mean, it was around that time. Until, until July he went every week and signed and everything was fine. In July he went and ran into an another you know, whoever, Ger-, -I, we don't know. German or French policeman. "Jew? You are free?" And he never came back.

WH: He never came back. He did not make it through the war. You mother did.

VS: War? He didn't, - never came back that afternoon. They took him there. He never had a chance to, to (inaudible).

WH: And you don't know how it happened, of course.

VS: Well, he wrote us a letter from (?Drause?). And you familiar with the French, eh?

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WH: I was born in Switzerland and my parents were in Marseille.

VS: Oh, oh. So you know. (inaudible) was a camp outside of Paris, you know.

WH: Right. And that was the –

VS: And that was the first step (inaudible).

WH: The embarkation –

VS: And then they, eh, -

WH: Right.

VS: And he was there for several weeks and he managed to write us a long letter explaining all this and he gave it to, you know, there were people who were delivering what do I know – bread, and you know. I mean, there were French people who came in and out of the camp.

WH: Did you have close calls during the war where you were almost caught while you were in hiding in Paris?

VS: You know (inaudible).

WH: The possibility existed.

VS: Of course. I mean, there was a curfew after I don't know. Eight or nine o'clock, so when I was out and it was curfew time, I ripped off the thing. You know, sometimes, there was a little thread left, you know (inaudible). Maybe somebody looked, but I was blond and I didn't look too, you know, too, too Jewish.

WH: Now, had you not gone in 1943 the risks would have increased far more.

VS: Oh!

WH: I mean, afterwards, so certainly that you ran great risks. When did you meet your husband?

VS: In '51.

WH: In '51. You met here in Israel?

VS: Yes. In Israel.

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WH: Oh, maybe you better explain that to me. You came here in '47.

VS: In '47.

WH: And then were you - .

VS: And I worked at the U.N. Got a job at the U.N.

WH: Doing what?

VS: Well, I started off as a messenger and then I became I became a filing clerk in the documents (inaudible).

WH: How did it happen that you got this job with the U.N.?

VS: Well, I, - because I came here and me sister who is older had come before the war.

WH: I see.

VS: She was very American and she thought that, you know, the land of eh, well, of freedom. I mean, she just – and she wanted us to leave in '39.

WH: I see.

VS: She left in '39. One year after we arrived in Paris.

WH: Excuse me, but could you have left in 39'?

VS: Yes.

WH: I mean, she says she wanted – could you have gotten a visa?

VS: (inaudible) She had a boyfriends from Berlin who was very nice and they made it. She actually got an affidavit from some group of obscure relative in San Francisco and she took it and she went. And she got the visa and she arrived. And my father, my mother had to – there were born in Vilna, they had gone to Moscow, they had gone to (inaudible), they had gone to Berlin, they were now in Paris. They were tired, you know. That, eh, it was a different generation.

WH: I know.

VS: And in '38 my father was, en, '38, He was born in '90, so he was 48 years old.

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WH: So she helped you to –

VS: You know, today, 48, one is young.

WH: No doubt about that.

VS: He wasn't old. But, for him it was already, you know –

WH: Oh (inaudible).

VS: Starting a new life was just –

WH: Surely. He –

VS: The thought of it was just –

WH: Sure. He had uprooted himself several times.

VS: Several times. Losing everything, eh, you know.

WH: So, she helped you get the job with the U.N., your sister?

VS: When I came here and she saw that I speak languages, so – she only wanted the best for me. So, the United Nations. So she knew somebody up at the United Nations, and I was introduced to that person and she was very nice, and interviewed me, and took me to a meeting of the Security Council. And, that day Gromyko spoke. And it was eh, it was at the Security Council, eh (?confected?) interpretation. Meaning that at first the speaker, and then whatever language, into English or into French or if it were Russian or Chinese or Spanish. Into English and French. These were the two main languages. So, in the middle they had sort of a center table and all the interpreters were sitting in the middle and I sat there and I watched them and I didn't see anybody take notes and Gromyko spoke. It happened that I speak Russian because my parents taught me. So I understood you know, more or less I mean, of course, it was very you know, highly (?faulting?) languages, and political, and so on, but –

WH: Sure.

VS: Still I understood. And I see these people sitting there laughing and then I was one interpreters turn, you know, to translate into French and he just went and I sat there, you know, with my moth opened, and then the English woman saying you know, to exp-, in English, and at one point, Gromyko interrupted (?him?) and said "Even." He had omitted

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the word “even” So the phrase could have been, “The Russians wanted this and this,” Or, “Even the Russians wanted this or this.

WH: There’s a difference.

VS: After that, I decided that this is not for me. The is for –

WH: You prefer to deliver the message.

VS: This was interpretation (inaudible). “oh, you can speak languages, you can be an interpreter.” (inaudible) people don’t know but this was my introduction. And I got to know all of these interpreters and translators who were phenomenal. Phenomenal. Because I became, I , o – first of all I started as a messenger. I mean, this was the lowest and it was very nice because it was at Lake Success. I don’t know if you remember it.

WH: I live –

VS: It was a huge –

WH: I live right near there.

VS: Building. Yeah? Huge. It’s a very round building.

WH: I live in Great Neck.

VS: So, Great Neck, my God, it was my second home.

WH: (Talking about North Shore Towers)

VS: We were out in 1950. The building, you know. Everybody moved.

WH: So you were working for the U.N.

VS: So I worked for the U.N. and because I was young, and I was willing to do anything and I, I mean, after all I did speak languages.

WH: How was your English.

VS: I spoke English.

WH: I’m curious . . . (inaudible) to know what your first impressions were of America. When you first came here. What you thought of the country. What you thought of the people. As well as you can recollect. I mean, you sailed into New York Harbor, I presume.

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VS: Yes. It was very, very exciting and very overwhelming. I thought that - .

WH: Excuse me, but where you with your mother?

VS: Yes.

WH: So did you – was there a feeling that, - did you feel the way you described to your sisters general impression, that this is a land of opportunity – you were twenty then?

VS: -yes. Exactly twenty.

WH: And you were starting your life over again.

VS: Yeah, yeah. Well, I, you know, it, eh, it was exciting. It was a challenge. And, uh, the war was over. The fact that the war was over was already such a relief. I mean, in '47 the war was already over since '45. And those two years I spend in Paris coming back from Sweden and working at the Swedish consulate because in the meantime I had learned the language and I was saved by the Consul General of Sweden de Paris. Raoul (? Norley) He was a fabulous man. He saved Paris from destruction, by the way, and today we can be (inaudible).

WH: I'm curious, you know, you know, I know you're involved with the Wallenberg –

VS: Yeah. Well, I'm sure that's why, - that is why I am involved with the Wallenberg. Because they –

WH: I mean, do you think that this was typical of the Wedes, here's another Raoul who you say was a wonderful man and –

VS: (inaudible) very nice. He was just a, -great –

WH: I mean, Sweden was neutral during the war, they're not famous like the Danish are for putting (inaudible)

VS: (Inaudible) yeah (inaudible)

WH: But do you feel that there was something about the Swedish people?

VS: Well, look, politically you know, they were neutral and they dealt with one side and with the other side. But in the meantime, they also helped the allies because they had established a, -they had an air base in the North and all the British planes and American

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planes flying to Germany you know, to bomb. They had, -they could land there, you know, to fuel, and I mean, whatever else they-.

WH: So when you came here, you knew some English?

VS: OH, yes! Because I always –actually, in Berlin I went after elementary school I went to a German Jew-, -a German-English High School.

WH: Gymnasium?

VS: Yeah. I mean. It was called the (?Goldsmith School?). It was a Jewish school and English was the second language so I, you know, I started learning a bit (inaudible).

WH: Now, you have not been able to complete your studies, of course, during the war, and when you came here, was there a thought of completing whatever the high school equivalency or-.

VS: Well, it's, you know, very hard. On one hand you know more than somebody your age.,

WH: Right. You're certainly more mature than somebody your age - .

VS: -you are more mature. You have seen things, you have gone through things, and, and at the same time you do want to study so you, you learn from life. You read, you know, I lie to, to lectures, I went to theatres, I drank it all up. I mean, I went to concerts, I went to- .

WH: listen to a radio, go to a movie0.

VS: Oh, I was wild, you know, to soak it all in.

WH: Did you have brothers, also? Or just one sister?

VS: No, just one sister.

WH: So in a sense you were fortunate in that you at least had your mother and your sister here.

VS: Right.

WH: And did you experience any discrimination or prejudice against you as coming – as an immigrant from Europe in the early period?

VS: At the time, no.

WH: Nobody ever said anything to you?

VS: No. But i- felt, one thing that I felt very strongly about was the fact that Jews in America were – living in a free country, were not disciplined anymore. I was brought up that as a Jewish girl I had to be better, and this and that, and honest, and more, you know, - and I open up the papers and I saw somebody robbed somebody and it was a Jew, and somebody killed somebody and he was a Jew, I mean, to me this was such a revelation. This was really, the most shocking impression that I got from America, about the Jews. The others I didn't know – the Americans. So I got to know them, and at the U.N. they had all sorts of programs, sending people to –families for week-ends, you know, to become acquainted with people that lived outside of New York, and I got to know a lot of people. And, uh, then the most exciting thing of course was the fact that I arrived in August, started to work in August, and in November, partition was (inaudible . . .) and I was there, and since I was on the document business, because I –messenger I didn't stay very long, you see, they promoted me. And, uh, the messenger, I started telling you about this long building this is- that they had, somebody had a document, They were "A-5" and they wanted to send it "A-102" well, he wasn't going to go so he called up for (messenger?) service, and we had picked up the envelope, you had to be very trustworthy, you know, (inaudible . . .) to deliver it "A-102." So that was the job. So I asked, I circulated and I you know, and I met people, and they said, "Where are you -," you know, everything was so new at the time. In '47. It was very exciting there, at the U.N.

WH: Had you not had this – never mind the translation job, but had you not had this facility of languages, you probably wouldn't have ended up working there.

VS: Who know. Who knows – but, and then I became the secretary, the private secretary of the Director of Language Division. And that Director took care of translators and the interpreters, -and everything that had to do with documents and the (inaudible). And I became a secretary and you know, so I got to know all these people whom I admired so much. Because they were phenomenal. They were famous, you know. When you talk about actors, you talk about (?violinists?), you talk about interpreters. The Brothers ?Kaminkar?, for instance. They were two French brothers. Phenomenal.

WH: I'm laughing because I know I will tell people that I speak 5 or 6 languages and I go, but I never try to fool myself that I could by anything like an interpreter, then people come over to me and they said, "Oh, you know Flemish! Oh, you now German!" Sure. They don't understand.

VS: Yeah!

WH: Surely.

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- VS: Anyway, this was also my first- contact with professionalism. This is not to say, “Oh, well, you speak languages, so ergo you can do this and that.” And I saw those professionals, and (inaudible . . .) I mean, I never had any complexes, I was glad that I noticed that, that I realized it right away.
- WH: In time.
- VS: - I mean, I would never had gotten through the exam, you understand. But, by just talking me to that meeting, that, that said it all. I always tell the story. (inaudible). I will never forget it. How he appointed (inaudible . . .)
- WH: Yes, well, professionalism is important (inaudible). Now, then, you worked for the Documentation Center and – what, I’m very curious to know, since you were there, and they took the vote of partition, could you tell me what your reaction was, what your feelings were then? (. . . inaudible. . .) in terms of as a Jew and as a person who survived the Holocaust.
- VS: Well, I mean, with the Weitzman arriving, and Sharetz (. . . inaudible . . .). And, uh, all these people whom, you know, who were my dream, because I was uh, in the Zionist movement already in Berlin.
- WH: You were in Berlin. So you were not an assimilated German Jew.
- VS: Oh, not at all! First of all, we’re not German.
- WH: Right.
- VS: Because of the Russian.
- WH: They would have called you a (?) student, right?
- VS: That’s right. We were, we were – discriminated by the German Jews, but, we were Jews. I mean, Russian Jews. And I joined the movement. And I met a girl who was two years older, and her parents also had come from Russia, and our parents were friendly, and – she was already was in the Zionist movement (. . . inaudible).
- WH: Working people?
- VS: Yes. Anyway, we were kids, and we had this –
- WH: Excuse me, but was it family, was your own family observant in any way? Were they particularly religious?

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VS: My parents were not observant. But my grandfather, that generation, was very – but he was a wonderful man, and very tolerant and -.

WH: And Zionist.

VS: Yes, but you know, more traditional, and so on. Although, one son of his went to Palestine before the war. My mother's brother. And the other brother went to Sweden. That's how I got to Sweden – because he was the one who started to make contact with this (?Raul Norley?) when he came to Sweden during the war he was the President of – already the Swedish Red Cross so he came and my uncle looked him up, you see, and told him about us. So, that's – I mean, I had, you know, -

WH: You had connections.

VS: I had angels all over. I mean, you know, it's, it's really fascinating when you think back how it all worked out. And, -so my grandfather would come to our house and would drink from this, you now, glass, uh, glass- he would eat from a glass plate, and drink his tea from a glass and eat his boiled egg, you know, but he tolerated everything, and he was a very loving man.

WH: So you were saying – you were already steeped, or certainly involved in Zionist activities –

VS: Oh, yes.

WH: Now, did you think of going to Israel after the war?

VS: Oh, I wanted it all the time. I wanted to go from Berlin, so, - but I was too young to go on Aliyah.

WH: Right.

VS: You know, a (inaudible . . .?Aliyah Beit?) and my parents wouldn't let me go, I mean, you know, -

WH: And what about after the war?

VS: Ah! After the war, I went. I went in '51.

WH: But you came here, -

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VS: I came here because my sister, who, you know who had been here a long time with her husband, and she wanted us to come to America. But, we applied for a certificate out of Paris, and we couldn't get it because of the British, because they wouldn't -.

WH: You mean, you would have gone to live (inaudible) -.

VS: -absolutely! My mother and I , we, we -.

WH: You decided you wanted to go there.

VS: We would have gone. Because we had family there, you see, first of all, her brother was there.

WH: And Aliyah Beit was not an issue, in other words, you couldn't have gone illegally from there, easily?

VS: How? I don't know.

WH: Well, there was route, a ?B'reka? Route.

VS: Okay, but, my mother was, you know, I mean, she -

WH: Also, like you described your father, I mean - .

VS: -you know, a little tired from it all, and the war was over, so we applied for certificates which were given, but at the rate of 900 a month, or something.

WH: Okay, so in other words, it was too difficult.

VS: With all the people who were liberated from camps and you know, came you know, from one country to another. I mean, there was such a - (inaudible ? halledan?) there, that - .

WH: Okay, now from '48 you were still at the U.N. and how much longer -

VS: 1948, '49, - and then '50 I went there on my vacation.

WH: You went to Israel.

VS: Yes. To Israel.

WH: It's just very interesting to me -

VS: So that my mother didn't feel that I was young, you know, leaving her.

WH: Well, so - ?

VS: But, just went – (inaudible) I had a month vacation and I went to Israel.

WH: Where were you living here in New York? What borough?

VS: Around the corner from where I lived in a, one of those townhouses. You know, where one landlady sublet - .

WH: You were a “meter”

VS: (? . . . inaudible) we live in Central Park West and 81st Street. (Mr. Stern comes in and she introduced him to WH and Mr. Stern acknowledges his presence politely then announces to her that he has to be at Carnegie Hall in ten minutes . . . Mr. and Mrs. Stern discusses their plans to meet later).

WH: So, in '50, you went on vacation to Israel, and – would I be correct in saying that from '48 until '50 you just constantly thought, “I want to make aliyah”?

VS: OH, absolutely, Especially since now there was no more problem, you know.

WH: It's very different that other survivors who came here. Other people came here, alright many I have interviewed many people who have said that they wanted to go to Israel but they couldn't go. And they came to America and they settled down, but they still have had such a strong desire to go, that after seeing this land of milk and honey, you still wanted to go to the other one, which was –

VS: Well, (inaudible) because I felt that I wanted (inaudible) –

WH: Life was hard there (. . . inaudible).

VS: Yes, but it was our country. I mean, at that time, I was not as American as I am now. After all, living with him, and being involved in you know, everything. But, I was not unhappy here. The only this is, that having wanted to go to Palestine all my life, so now I could go to Palestine. All I needed was you know, (inaudible) - .

WH: - so what happened on the vacation? Did you solidify your intentions then?

VS: Absolutely – and I saw all our relatives, and I had an aunt who was very nice and invited my mother to spend time in Israel. And my mother went after I came back. She went there for three months. And when she came back, she said, “Now I understand why you want to go?”

WH: Could you tell me a little more bout that? When she said, “Now I understand.” Was it the people, was it -.

VS: Well, everything. It was just, you know, it’s a wonderful country, that- I mean, you’re in your own (inaudible) country (inaudible . . .)

WH: You’re going to say “that’s (?right?)” But I will tell you one thing. I have interviewed maybe 140 people. I have interviewed no one in this country – I did in Israel – but interviewed no one in this country who made aliyah to Israel in the early period after coming here. I went to Israel this summer specifically to interview people who had moved to Israel after moving here. And I interviewed about 20 of them. But almost all of them with one exception had come in the late ‘60’s, ‘70’s to retire. But you came to make a life there. So what happened when you did get there with your mother in ’51?

VS: Then I went on my own. My mother came back and stayed here, -you know, (inaudible).

WH: I see. And you went by yourself?

VS: I went by myself.

WH: What about your sister? Did you have a discussion with her and say, “Why don’t you come with me?”

VS: Yeah, but she was you know, she was (under the Zionist? . . . inaudible I mean, I was, I was in the movement . . . ? static) I was in Europe, in occupied Paris, you know. She – saw it all. It’s very strange. I mean, she was – she knew that Hitler was (?evil? . . . inaudible . . . static . . .) that Jews were in Terrible difficulty, and she wanted us to leave, but we didn’t, so she went. But, Palestine, Israel, (. . . inaudible-static . . .). And, so , I left for Israel and I (inaudible) met all the relatives, you know, that were there before, and having lived on kibbutz, it already became much easier and I settled in Jerusalem and I lived with a cousin there who was a professor at the Hebrew University (. . . inaudible) in biochemistry. His name was ?Lichtenstien? (inaudible). And his wife, a lovely woman, and a daughter, who was 4 years old at the time (inaudible). She was my big Hebrew teacher, you see. And I adored Jerusalem. To me Jerusalem was – still has the same, same - .

WH: What part did you live in?

VS: ?Leharveyah? and, (. . . inaudible –static . . . ? . . . very Sparta? . . . ?no telephone? . . .) never an ounce of anything, of food that was not bought from ration coupons and once I got a can of Danish ham from somebody who lived in no man’s land, somebody I knew from – Europe, and he gave me that and I brough it home, and it was never eaten. I’m

sure it was thrown out. (inaudible –static . . .) So, it was a very interesting period, you know. It was fulfilling, it was you know, you – learn values. And, -you appreciate – what you have (inaudible –static).

WH: What did you do there/

VS: So, fist I registered at the Ulpan, of course. And there I did (inaudible –static) broadcasting news in French (inaudible-static). And then they were preparing the first Zionist Congress in Israel. The first one. (inaudible).

WH: In the State.

VS: In the State. For that purpose they (inaudible . . .)

WH: (inaudible-static). I was teaching at Hebrew U that's why I asked you.

VS: So, (inaudible) in '51 (inaudible . . .static) the first building, the (?Convention?) Center for the Zionist Congress. I mean I remember the first day they opened up and they were (inaudible).

WH: Inaudible - ?Hertzel), I guess (inaudible . . .)

VS: Next to the Hilton.

WH: Right . . (discussing the neighborhood in Israel – tape static). So you covered that Zionist Congress.

VS: Well, I covered, so I went to the, - the people who were running it, you know, and I said that I had experience from New York of organizing you know, the team of interpreters because they announced that they were going to have simultaneous –

WH: Translations?

VS: Translations. Interpretations. Not like the Security Council in those days, but so, in other words, they sit in a booth, they listen to the speech into their ears and they immediately translate in their language. So, but for that you have to be prepared, you have to have those basic documents, you have to know, you know, who's speaking. So, I offered my services. So, I worked there and then I met him about four days before the opening of the Zionist Congress.

WH: And how long had you been in Israel then, already – three months.

VS: He came to Jerusalem to play in a concert, a recital, and we all bought ticket and you know, all the relatives and all the friends, everybody, you know already have a whole group, and we were going to the concert and then, of course, again, you know, all sorts of coincidences. His pianist, Russian pianist, had a cousin in New York. Composer. His wife was a Russian translator at the U.N. So, we met because I wanted to improve my Russian. I just learned it from my parents, but never really studied. So, at the U.N. staff could take language classes give by, you know, the professional translators, interpreters.

WH: By the way, just parenthetically, how many languages do you know?

VS: (inaudible) varying degrees. Six or seven. Anyways, so I took Russian lessons and this lady was my teacher. And it turned out that she lived in my sister's building on the West Side. 'Cause, we stayed late sometimes, you see, because of the lessons. So, and I knew people. I would always find a ride because that was the big thing. That people who had cars and drive back and forth to Lake Success would take passengers and paid fifty cents a ride. Anyways, whatever it was. You know, you participated in the gas and in the maintenance of the car, and so on. And I always asked for two seats. They always say, "Who (inaudible)." It was Tamara, my teacher, you see. So, when I left for Israel, Tamara's husband died and I was still in New York. It was a terrible thing he died. The cousin, Janice and Isaac Stern were on a tour in Europe. They were not coming back for three, four months. In 1951, you didn't hop on a plane to come back, you know, in a few hours. He was busy, they were playing and so, - but I was at the funeral. So when they came to Israel, I felt that I had to extend my condolences. I had met him through this Tamara, because one summer we took a - we rented a house in Kings Point so that we would be able to get out of town for the summer, and so, my mother and her composer's mother, that was the one generation, then Tamara you see, and I, we went to the U.N. to work. My sister and her husband went to New York, to work, and then the weekends, we would you know, share the facilities, the (inaudible) and we were always very mindful of each other.

WH: You rented a house in Kings Point. Was it common practice then to have summer rentals?

VS: Yes.

WH: Do you remember where you were?

VS: Maybe I have papers yet, (inaudible . . .), letters. (Inaudible). Anyways, so, and we always had this agreement: You had guests, you have your guests, do not invite - I mean nobody was obligated to invite each other, so you had - so, one day, they invited the pianist and his wife and so we said "hello". And, you, know, I mean, I didn't know him very well, but I felt that, you know, (. . . inaudible . . . static) express my condolences. And he said, and he remembered me of course, and he wanted me to sit with his wife

(inaudible –static). I said, “Thank you very much but I, you know- (inaudible).” “No, no, no, you sit with my wife” Anyway, it is a long story, and the day of the concert somebody didn’t have a ticket, anyway, okay, I’ll maybe able to get an extra ticket. So, that’s how, that night, I met, and, and- the pianist back stage as they were arriving at the concert hall. And, instead of getting the ticket from him, or from the wife, I had to give my ticket away, and I sat with her. This was, so this was the beginning. And we got married seventeen days later in Israel.

WH: Quick courtship. Seventeen days later. Was your husband from, - where was he born?

VS: He was born in Russia but he came here, his parents came to San Francisco when he was ten months old. So that was hardly -.

WH: Hardly being born in Russia.

VS: Hardly being born in Russian. And –

WH: It’s like me, I came at the age of ten months . . . how long did you stay in Israel with him? I guess you went back to get married.

VS: No, we were married on the seventeenth of August and we left on the twenty-first, and he had concerts in Europe.

WH: I guess your whole life changed tremendously. Here one minute you were going to make aliyah, settle in Israel, and the next minuet you were married, traveling around the world with the famous violinist, - how do you feel about all that when you look back in retrospect?

VS: What can I say? It’s amazing. It really is, if I have to say so myself. Really. But it’s – that’s my life, and it’s all true, you know, I (Inaudible) and it’s amazing, throughout the years, the people that I have found again, here, there, everywhere, with whom I had link, you know. In Sweden, in there, in Israel, at the beginning, you know, it, it’s –and Paris. –

WH: Now, do you think that –when you think back about what happened, you surely have a lot of contact with people who are German, you know, who professionally you meet them, suppose people are not Jewish –

VS: Germans from Germany?

WH: Yes.

VS: None.

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WH: None. Well, I mean, in the music world through, aren't there –

VS: In those 17 days I hardly knew him, but I knew on thing, that he was not going to play in Germany.

WH: Has that been the case, he has never played in Germany?

VS: (inaudible –static ?NO?)

WH: You know why, I'll tell you this parenthetically, I had told you that son was interested in music, he plays the piano, and he had teacher who came here from (inaudible –static . . .and her name was . . .). You know her . . . (discussing this piano teacher).

VS: Anyways, I know the name.

WH: She was considered the best . . .

VS: Yes.

WH: She came here and taught my son . . . (discussing the background of the piano teacher . . .and her husband's subliminal anti-Semitic remarks). I was curious to know, first of all, if you thought that what happened in Europe – I wouldn't ask you if it could happen again in Germany, but could it happen here?

VS: It could happen here in America? Well, not to that extent, but the fact that there is anti-Semitism (inaudible –static) is not exactly a news item.

WH: No, no, but does it – when you see these incidents that happen here –

VS: (inaudible-static) I'm not surprised.

WH: What do you think of the prospects of German reunification now?

VS: Well, (inaudible) . . . I'm so removed from the whole thing, that – I know that it's an important thing politically for (inaudible) Europe and the world. But I personally, (inaudible) it's just as if it were on another planet. We have no contact with the (inaudible). Naturally, when people lived divided, you know, a war and so on, it's like Israeli's and the Arabs, you know, at the time (? Of the?) '67 war -but they're not one people, you see. Now the Germans feel, you know, the East and the West, I mean, they have a common language, and it was just the system that was different. Eventually, listen to the same people, now that they have (inaudible -?brought?) up all their Jews –

End of Tape #1, Side A

Tape #1, Side B

VS: the attraction was his lesson, you know, the day the wall came everybody was running.

WH: Selling the wall.

VS: Selling pieces of the brick. Anyway -

WH: Most people that I speak to say it makes them very nervous. That this country which once-

VSL Well, so, what can you do? I mean, it's -

WH: Nothing you can do. Not individually.

VS: It makes you nervous because Germany will become strong again and we'll have another Hitler? I don't I don't, I don't know. How can you predict? And, they're entitled to this, now that they have paid reparations that they had millions of enemies, -and there are still some decent Germans who speak out that history is - that they lived with that all the time.

WH: What happened to your own career. And your own work after you came back.

VS: Which career.

WH: When you started in '48, '49 you worked for the documentation center, -

VS: It came in very handy. You know, my husband's already getting involved in all sorts of things with (inaudible -static . . .) there. So, you know, our home became, I mean, there was always one very important office section. With letters, with papers, with photos, with (inaudible), so I just started to ?find? them.

WH: You're very involved in your husband's work?

VS: Yes. I mean, not just because I can play the role, but because I thought that this was the only way to live was to share. I'm not a musician, but I love music. So, I listen, he plays. But then there are so many other things that he's involved in. Like the, I mean, the whole Carnegie Hall campaign, and the - I was involved, I knew what he was, -he had in mind. I knew that he wanted to achieve, he went on tour, I kept track that people you know, relayed it to me, and we formed a committee. For three months we worked absolutely feverishly. In 1960. And Carnegie Hall was saved any how in May, of 1960. That was the date when it was suppose to be torn down. And instead of that, (inaudible) the City bought the building. Created a Board of Trustees. Most of the people who were

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– had been on the committee, and Isaac Stern because President. And he's been President ever since and during the summer we got funds from the City to restore it (inaudible) spruce it up (inaudible). And we opened up in September of '60. With (inaudible . . ?Pearl Baily?) . . .came and Jack Benny came, you know, it was (?something?), you know, and they would come and from then on it's been work, work, work.

WH: Of the various things that you're done, what would you say that you take the greatest pride in?

VS: My children.

WH: Can you tell me a little bit about them?

VS: Well, we have three children, my daughter is a Reformed Rabbi, ordained rabbi, her husband is one.

WH: Where is that?

VS: In New Jersey . . . one has a congregation in Monroe Township and the other . . .about ten miles away . . .and they have three children, already, and now I have two sons, that are musicians, professional musicians. So, we are very happy.

WH: And . . . what area of music?

VS: Conducting.

WH: Conducting. And are they married, your sons?

VS: No, no. They're younger. So, they are working as conductors, they are passionate about music and they are very happy.

WH: This great if someone follows in their footsteps, (inaudible).

VS: Yeah. But, then, there are no rules, you know. I mean, how often it happens exactly the other way.

WH: Right, -More often.

VS: More often. And, in our case, it just happened. I mean, they were exposed to music, but because we felt that music is part of life, and not everybody has to become a professional, because you must love music. And, you know, you have to be a member of the audience. So, that's the way they started. To go to concerts, to go to his rehearsals, and, but – they

took lessons, you know, here and there. Piano, and then they developed it and they became just enamored with music.

WH: When they were growing up, did they show any particular curiosity about what happened in World War Two and did you speak to them about it?

VS: Oh, yes.

WH: You talked to them about it.

VS: Oh, yes, of course. They know, they know. But, you know I don't impose my thinking on them. Of course they are much more involved with musical life than Germany. They are young, they're young artists from Germany you know, coming to America. They want the competition, they need, you know, they even – my son conduct concert with – I mean, they, -there's much of a relationship you see with the new, the younger generation. And, that's it. I said that and they don't do it to spite me nor because they don't know. They're normal, healthy young people who look at people you know, the way we all should look at people. I cannot look at my generation from Germans.

WH: If you see a German who's 65 years old –

VS: (inaudible) he stepped on my toes when his father, the S.S. said, "Every Jewish girl's toes have to be stepped on" When I was in the first grade (inaudible) when the Germans came. So, so that's it, you know. I'm not going to ask them, I'm not going to make myself a Nuremberg Trial, -you know. You know, a mini-trial, interrogator, and say, "Did you step on my feet? Or did you not?" So, so (where ever?) he stepped. Finished. Do you understand?

WH: Will you not buy a German product if you can avoid it? You wouldn't buy a German car.

VS: (inaudible) See, I, - I mean, you ask the right questions. I- you know, after all what I just told you, if I said, "We drive a Mercedes," you will say, "Alright, it's a good car." Sure it's a good car! Well, we have a Saab. It's Swedish, you see. So, I mean, of course you always find a justification. I mean, I love Russian language, I will love everything Russian. Why? They're just as bastards as the Germans are. But, it's – my mother, my father it was, you know, I was brought with it and I have a kind of affinity toward it.

WH: I'm curious to know if you feel when you think about it that there was anything, -I mean, you were brought up in Berlin, for the first eleven years of your life.

VS: Yeah.

WH: Do you think that there's anything in particular in the German character, their history, that caused them to be the ones that actually did it. I mean, we know that lots of Europeans didn't like Jews, but it happened there.

VS: It happened there, and in the concentration camps in Poland, I mean everybody participated. Hitler was a SPECIAL – you know, strong bastard. Who achieved – almost achieved what he wanted - .

WH: Do you ever get called upon or I imagine you husband must be – get involved in any activities or have anything to do with Holocaust survivors? You know, there are Holocaust survivor organizations, and are you involved at all?

VS: Well, yes, I was on the Warsaw Ghetto and, there are so many organizations. SO many years ago I joined because you know, I had a feeling for survivors. I mean, but of course, it's not the same thing. You see, I am a survivor, but I was never in a camp. When you are a Holocaust survivor, usually you were a survivor in a camp. Like that rabbi was talking about it.

WH: Wurtzberger.

VS: Yes. I mean, I just heard about him. He was in Auschwitz, he was 11 years old when he was deported to Auschwitz. I mean, it's terrible thing. But, my life, in a way, in spite of everything, I led a very protective life whenever I think back.

WH: Well, that's a curious point to me. My parents lived in Paris and fled to Marseilles. . .

VS: Listen, I was young, I really didn't know my father that well. Because he was taken -42.

WH: Well, I think maybe protected, but still –

VS: Well, compared to the American kid you know, who had never been to Europe, my life was torn – and, you know, exposed to danger and things like that. But, -to be freezing in Auschwitz you know, and trying to, I mean, when you see the rows of beds, you know, bunk beds, and the faces of people, and – I was far from that. You know, so you feel also, I mean, not guilty, I mean, your happy that you didn't go though that, but at the same time, if you're honest, you cannot put yourself in the same category. I mean, (inaudible)

WH: Except to know that had you been caught that this would have happened also.

VS: AH! Anything could have. Listen, I -.

WH: It's interesting to me that - .

- VS: (inaudible –voice over ?could have been dead?) a long time ago.
- WH: it's interesting to me to hear you say that, because actually, considering the fact that you're very much a survivor in another sense, in the sense that your father did not make it through (inaudible) and he was in Auschwitz and that's far removed from an American Jew's experience
- VS: That's for sure. Well - .
- WH: Do you think that Americans can –do you ever have a feeling that they really can't have an appreciation or understanding of what happened in Europe. I mean, American Jews.
- VS: If they did not have a personal experience, certainly not. If they came here and they had relatives who remained and either died or whatever or perished in camps. So, they'll say it, or they hide it because it's also you know, it's unpleasant to (inaudible, ?mention?) with all the psychological about the Holocaust.
- WH: And what about that whole business, that books came out and people said the American Jews knew what was going on, the leadership knew and didn't do anything about it.
- VS: (inaudible) there is something to it. I mean, nobody wanted to be bothered with an influx of immigration and so on during those years. Roosevelt, and I mean, we learned it all afterwards, you know, we didn't – I mean, we come from Europe. We didn't know that, that we were not wanted. That nobody bothered. We thought that the German power was so tremendous that NOBODY could come in and help us, pull us out of there, you see.
- WH: That's a curious thing to me. Did you – do you –ever feel, I mean, now that Hitler didn't win, we know he didn't win, but in 1942, you didn't know what would happen. Did you imagine, did you think to yourself, how would we be able to go on if Hitler wins the war.
- VS: Listen, we lived from day to day. And that was it. In those days it was really the middle of the war. You couldn't, you didn't – there was no way out. There was, you know, the Germans were everywhere. And they made the rules, and –but again, by coming to Sweden and I saw, you know, the other side of life there. There the Jews were very concerned. I mean, that was – and I immediately joined the Zionist group there and, -so we knew what was going on. See, at least the news reached Sweden about the war and many, there were many prisoners who escaped to Sweden that were people from concentration camps. I don't know how, but they got on a ship somehow, you know, through Hamburg, on the Swedish ship, they were hiding you know, in the bottom of the ship. And they jumped out (inaudible) and started swimming. You know. And came to shore and were picked up by somebody who then helped them to – many arrived in

Stockholm. I remember there was a concert hall in Stockholm, they rebuilt it now, so now I think it's fresh, but in those days it had steps, -you know, very wide and the whole length of the concert hall and it was facing the sun during the day, so that if you sat there from 11 until 2 the sunshine in Sweden, which is a big thing you know, and that was a meeting place for all the refugees. It was unbelievable. All you had to do was to come there, at lunch time, and always here, you know, this camp, news from a camp, you know. Somebody who escaped they were from Palestine, like the (?Hannah?) who was (inaudible -?dropped?) into Czechoslovakia. And others who somehow were dropped you know into Swedish territory and then came out to talk about it and the organization that I was involved in, I mean, that was really the Jewish intelligence, you know, in Sweden, everybody came to us and relayed it, and told us and so on. And we helped them. And, for instances, -later on, towards Israel's independence, the Hagganah people came to Sweden and brought arms, and got money, you know, (inaudible).

WH: When you were here in the early years, did you have friends who had come over from Europe at the same time?

VS: From (inaudible) what year?

WH: Well, in '47, '48 (inaudible)

VS: I was very involved then, too.

WH: But did you have friends who came from Europe at the same time . . . let's put it another way, who were your friends when you first came. I mean, you didn't know English that well, right, you weren't Americanized.

VS: No, but I -did not create a non-American crowd you see.

WH: There was such a thing - .

VS: Yeah. There were (?) but I was - no, at the U.N. there was so many people there, you now, I got to know South Americas, and - France I have a lot of.

WH: You sort of looked into it before that you, you said that it's amazing when you think of "all the coincidences that happened in my life," do you ever feel that in some unexplainable way that, in way you led a charmed life in terms of your own survival and in coming here and all the things that happened to you?

VS: Charmed? No.

WH: Do you believe in some higher (inaudible) anything like that ?

- VS: It depends when you believe. If you believe beforehand that it should happen, that's one thing. But when you look back, and you know, it - .
- WH: I guess my question, what I'm really getting at is really a theological –
- VS: Well, listen, I said I was a very lucky person.
- WH: Well, a lot of people raise a question, and I don't ask it only to Rabbi's or to Hasidic Jews, there's a whole question of it there is a God and if there's something special about being Jewish, or anything, how is it, how did this all happen? Do you ever ask that question?
- VS: Well, that goes without saying, but I don't invest all my beliefs in, you know, God.
- WH: Right.
- VS: Destiny. You know. Luck, and whatever. I mean, you have to be what you are. You're Jewish, you're Jewish. So, let's not talk about being something else. So, you make the best of it. Not everything's perfect. And then there are those who saw, "How could God?" Listen, there was a Hitler, God was not going to prevent Hitler from doing what he did.
- WH: Well, there are people who have given up their faith for precisely the reason that you just mentioned.
- WH: Are you saying that you know if they ever had it?
- VS: it's not that. It's hard giving up faith. I mean, what do you expect from your faith. You know, only goodness and candies and so on? The, -it's a cop-out, you know, to blame it all on God. Or to change, you think that it makes any difference if you – I, you invite different source if you become something else. You cannot become. You are what you are. You know, here we relate because there is a similarity between our lives and, or, background, or whatever. It's something that bring - , that puts us together. You can talk to somebody else, who doesn't have the same background, you may find later someone, but who's better or who's worse.
- WH: Well, I interviewed an author the day, his name is Leon Wells, and he said that . . . "God, if you decided in your infinite wisdom that we should all die, okay! . . . but why did you have to kill us like this? Why did we have to die like this?"
- VS: Did he get an answer?

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WH: Well, you see, I have met people in the course of this project, and before it, who's beliefs were strengthen almost by having gone through this experience and still being alive at the end of it, and other people have said, "Well, a God that would allow women and children to be killed like this, especially to those who when we told them to believe in Him, I can't believe." There are very difficult questions. You know, I don't - .

VS: There are no answers to them. And, uh, -

WH: Okay, -.

VS: So, that's it?

WH: That's plenty. That's plenty. Yes. I -

End of Tape #1, Side B
Conclusion of Interview