



Phyllis Isaacson Transcript

Sandy Gartner: This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum, meeting with Phyllis Ruth Wolfson Isaacson to conduct a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is Thursday, January 24, 2008. We are at Phyllis' home in Brattleboro, Vermont. Phyllis, do we have your permission to record this interview?

Phyllis Isaacson: Absolutely.

SG: Great. Okay, I'm going to ask you the first question, which is sort of a multi-part. I'm going to put it all out there, and then you can talk about which parts you want first. Both your mother and father's families came to the United States in the 1880s. Why did they emigrate from Russia and Poland? Where did they live when they first came over? Were they religious? What traditions did they pass on to you? Can you share some memories and stories from their lives?

PI: Wow, that's many questions.

SG: It's a mouthful, so we'll do one at a time.

PI: Okay, let's start with the first one. Why did they leave Europe? Because of persecution, it was a very difficult life. They were very poor. There was no future. So they had the courage to get up and leave. Which I think is amazing ...

AB: Just make sure she's loud enough. Do you want me to watch that?

SG: Sure, if you want. Just in case. Keep going.

PI: What was the second part?



SG: Where did they live when they first came over?

PI: They came over and lived in the Boston area. Chelsea and Everett were very large Jewish communities originally, a hundred years ago. That's where most of the families settled – Chelsea first, which is right outside of downtown Boston, just over the river there. The family started out there and then moved to other places.

SG: in the Boston area?

PI: Yeah, initially, I would say for one or two generations, stayed around the Boston area. They started moving to other parts of the country or even far-out suburbs. After World War II, many people started moving because of more mobility, roads, jobs, things like that. What's the next part?

SG: Were your mother and fathers' families – were they religious?

PI: No. They were more into the (arbitrating?). Do you remember the Ladies Garment Workers Union?

SG: Yeah.

PI: In the Boston area and New York. There was a side of the family that was very, very, I would say, Socialist actually, as many Jews were at certain times. My mother's family, in particular, was very involved in labor, labor issues, and that entire movement. So that's what they pretty much focused on.

SG: So, although they were not religious Jews, were there any traditions in your family and things that were passed down to you?

PI: Yes, well, I think honoring the holidays, in terms of getting the family together. My parents were not synagogue goers. When we were living in Winthrop, right outside of Boston, the synagogue was strictly Orthodox. I know that they really weren't interested.



Having two daughters, there was no point trying to find bat mitzvah opportunities. They just weren't religious people; it was more the culture and the traditions that were maintained in the nuclear family and the extended family.

SG: I think you kind of answered the next question, but the question was that you said that your family belonged to an Orthodox synagogue but didn't attend services.

PI: Right.

SG: Did you have any religious education as a child?

PI: No, none. My religious education started when I became an organist at a Conservative synagogue in nearby Revere. Literally, that's where I began to learn what it was to be a Jew in terms of the religious stuff. I also began to understand the total synagogue here. What was happening when and why? Because I was there every Friday night and some Saturdays, playing for the services at a company in the choir. After four or five years, I began to understand the whole series of things.

AB: When was that in your life?

PI: Right after high school. I was actually in college when I got the job. So, it was through college, and maybe one year after.

SG: Did you have to belong to any youth groups or go to any camps when you were growing up?

PI: There was a Young Judaea group in our community, and I was a member; I wasn't an active member, however. I did not go to any Jewish camps. I went to a Girl Scout camp, but I didn't go to a Jewish camp. When I was in college, however, I was a music counselor at a Jewish camp for one summer.

SG: Where was that?



PI: New Hampshire somewhere. I don't even remember where.

SG: You said that your parents were more into the labor organization; that seemed to be where their energy and passion went.

PI: My mother's side of the family, definitely.

SG: Your mother's side. So were both sides –? Why do you think they chose to become more secular than religious?

PI: I think when they came to the United States, that was sort of what the atmosphere was in the community in which they found themselves. There were synagogues. I remember my grandfather occasionally going. But the family as a unit never went to synagogue on holidays; it was just not part of what was done.

SG: What about your father's side of the family?

PI: My father's side, also very poor, initially came over here, and there was much more focus on education, making sure that they went to college. My father was one of three boys. He and his older brother definitely had an education. The younger one wasn't really interested in a college education, but he was a successful businessman in his own right.

SG: As a young child, you lived during the time period of World War II, was your family affected directly by the Holocaust? When did you learn about what was going on? Has it affected you in any way and how you view the world today?

PI: Yes. It sure has affected me. Oh, yes. Well, let's start as a child. I was really a little kid because I was born in 1938. The war was just about starting, and I didn't really have any understanding of what was going on, except for the fact that there were blackouts every once in a while. That was because the government felt that there were Germans



lurking offshore, and there were in submarines, etc., and maybe they were warships carrying planes. So the whole Boston area had blackouts from time to time. I remember very vividly my dad playing a phonograph in our house during that time. He would take a tiny flashlight and just play the phonograph so that we would have something to listen to, at least, some music around in total blackout. But at least it was something going on instead of absolute silence. So that's what I remember during the war. And I remember the rationing. My mother had ration books. It was very important to keep that tallied somehow or other. On the very end of World War II, I think it was in the summer – it must have been August after the Japanese surrendered, I can't remember – we were living in Everett at that time. I can remember this huge celebration atmosphere all over the community. My mother's older brother and his family, [my] cousins, came over in a little station wagon. That was their car at that time. They invited me to go along. We all crawled in the back of that car and were just driving around and watching people celebrate. Again, I was just a kid because I might have been seven or eight at the time – 1945, summer. But I do remember that vividly because it was so out of character in terms of everything else that had been going on at that time. So that's pretty much what I remember of World War II. It didn't occur to me at all what was going on overseas. The older brother of my dad was a doctor, and he was taken into the army to go over and be in the European Theater. He was away, out of the area, totally because he was in Europe. I remember when he came home. That was a huge celebration. Again, I was a little kid. Those are the things I remember.

SG: Has it affected how you view the world today?

PI: Oh, yes.

SG: How would that be?

PI: Well, the whole Nazi thing, persecuting Jews primarily, but certainly lots of other people – I mean, it was six million Jews, but millions of others as well – has certainly



affected how I look at Germans and Germany. I will be very honest. I have a thing about Germans and Germany. I will never set foot in Germany in my lifetime. That's just something that – as an adult, I've come to make that decision. I've been all over Europe, but not Germany. I have this visceral thing going. It may be totally irrational, but that's how I've been affected by it. As a child, I certainly didn't know what was going on, but we all, as adults, have read countless things. Eventually, this uncle that I talked about, after decades of total silence, opened up as to what he saw. That was an impact on everybody. But I've read a lot. The other thing is, I think it's going on now in the very strict Islamic countries. For instance, women are being persecuted so badly, genital mutilation, all kinds of things that are happening to women in those societies. It's happening again – and in Kenya, and it happened in Yugoslavia a couple of decades ago. I don't remember the exact dates, but all of this kind of stuff. The world just never learns. That's the effect it's had on me. I've done a lot of reading recently, books by women who were born in Islamic countries and women who eventually had the courage to escape and get out of there. You've probably heard of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who wrote the book called *The Infidel*, and Brigitte Gabriel, who wrote a book – she was a Lebanese, a Christian actually, but she was persecuted so badly by the Islamists over there that she wrote this book *Because They Hate*. That's the title of the book. It's all about her life being persecuted by all of the Arabs around. So it hasn't stopped. It happened to Jews in Europe, but it hasn't stopped. Other people are being persecuted now.

SG: On a different note, no pun intended ... [Technical issues.] We see that both your parents were musicians. Was this an avocation or profession for them? What role did music play in your home?

PI: Well, my father was an electrical engineer by day. And a musician, weekends and evenings. He played the trumpet, and he played very, very well. So, he earned a considerable amount of money. It was a second income playing trumpet in all kinds of bands all over the Boston area. My mother was an amateur violinist. She played but not



well; she was sort of a second violin type and played in community orchestras and things like that. They both sang in choruses, little groups that the Jewish community actually put together. They were involved in music a lot, and that had a big impact on me.

SG: At what point did you decide that you wanted to make music your profession?

PI: Somewhere in high school, I think.

SG: I'll throw out a few questions. Did you start your musical education at a young age? What instruments were you playing? Did you attend any special music programs, participate in concerts or theater?

PI: All of the above. I started officially piano lessons at age six. The reason they started me early – that was early in those days. It's not today, by the way. But back in the '40s, that was considered early. I was already playing the piano, so they figured they better put me into lessons.

SG: So you played by ear?

PI: Yes. I started the lessons and played a lot for community groups, theater groups, accompanied soloists, accompanied choruses in high school and junior high, accompanied shows. One of the first big shows I ever did was Annie Get Your Gun, and I have done many since then. That was when I was a junior in high school. I played the entire show. To this day, all of that music is permanently in my memory. Anything you want to do, I can see it; I can play it.

SG: Can you shoot a gun?

PI: Yeah.

SG: Okay, cool.



PI: Yes. "Anything you can do, I can do better." [laughter]

SG: The question was, were you surrounded by music?

PI: Yes.

SG: What point did you decide to make music your profession?

PI: In high school.

SG: In high school, you said.

PI: Yes. Other instruments.

SG: Other instruments. That was it.

PI: When I was in the seventh grade, the person who was the music director in the public schools yanked me into the band by insisting that I play an instrument. My dad had an old horn, old mellophone, which is sort of in the family of French horns.

SG: A mellophone?

PI: The music goes around and around and comes out here. So I had that mellophone, and I started a few lessons on it. My father actually was able to teach me. I played that horn throughout high school in the band. That was a very important part of my life in school because being in the band brought me a whole different group of friends and instrumentalists and experiences and all that kind of thing. It was very positive when I got into college that summer as a music major at Boston University [BU], which is also your own alma mater.

SG: Right, absolutely, and my daughter's.



PI: Well, the director of the band there said, “You’re not going to play that awful horn.” He handed me a French horn, a true French horn to use; it was on-lend, of course. So I had to learn the French horn, which was a bit more difficult to play than the mellophone. The mellophone is more like a trumpet. There aren’t as many places you can trip up on a mellophone. But with the French horn, it’s a treacherous instrument. I eventually got good enough so that I was able to at least stay in the band and hold down the third horn chair. I enjoyed it very much. Because as a piano major – as a pianist, you’re all alone, you’re practicing by yourself in a practice room or wherever, and there’s nobody else around. But when you’re playing the French horn in a band, you have a hundred to a hundred and fifty of your closest friends in the room, so it was a very good social circle that I made there.

SG: What was Boston University like in the 1950s? At that point, did your parents or did you have an expectation that you were going to become a teacher?

PI: I was in the teaching program, music education. Boston University, in those days – wow. The first two years that I was at the College of Music, it existed down in Copley Square, right behind the Boston Public Library. It was kind of a vertical building, nine or ten floors. Part of our classes were in there. Part of our classes were at another building across Huntington Avenue on Blagden Street. So we had to walk about a ten or fifteen-minute walk between those buildings. Then we moved up to the Commonwealth Avenue campus. My last two years were up there at a building that they gutted and redid.

SG: Is that the School of Fine Arts?

PI: Yes, that’s where it is now.

SG: When you walk across the bridge, and it’s on the right hand side.

PI: Yes, that’s where it is now. So that happened in ’57 when that building was renovated for our use. Commonwealth Avenue became our campus. I used to go back



and forth because I was a member of Hillel, but I wasn't an active member because the curriculum at the College of Music was so intense; you just didn't have time with rehearsals taking a chunk out of your day. I mean, it's two hours, perhaps three times a week, in addition to all the other classes. There was a lot of time involved being a music major. So I didn't have too many friends on the main campus, although I did join a sorority. That gave me a little bit of contact with what was going on outside of the College of Music.

AB: Was it a Jewish sorority?

PI: No, it wasn't. I decided just to pledge a regular sorority. I had my Jewish contacts through Hillel.

SG: Was that on Bay State Road, in the Castle?

PI: Yes. That's where it was.

SG: It's still there.

PI: Is it? The same building?

SG: Yes. I think I went there once.

PI: I went there a lot my freshman and sophomore years, and then after that, boy, I just got so busy student teaching and all that stuff. It took my time.

SG: Tell us about your decision to pursue a master's degree in conducting. Did anyone, in particular inspire, influence, or support you? A second question to that – a second part would be, tell us about the wall of resistance you encountered as you pursued your interest in your career.



PI: It's gender-related, definitely, and it still is. It's out there. I decided to pursue a career in conducting because I started doing some conducting and got good results. I was music director at Temple Isaiah in Lexington for about five years. During that time, I had a very successful choir. In addition to the Sabbath services, we did some major productions. One of them was the Sacred Service of Ernest Bloch, complete with orchestra. We did the [Joseph] Haydn Creation, again with orchestra. And we did [George Frideric] Handel's Judas Maccabaeus with our orchestra. So I had these experiences behind me. I was studying with a conductor in the town in which I was living in Lexington. He was mainly a choral conductor. I wanted to get a little bit more experience, not just choral but orchestral as well. The idea, about ten years later, came into my brain to pursue a master's degree in conducting, and so I applied to the New England Conservatory and got in.

AB: And how old were you at that point?

PI: It was 1969 that I actually started that, so I was thirty-one.

AB: Did anyone particularly inspire or influence you or support you?

PI: Yes. I think the person I was studying with at the time, other people who I worked with, certainly my husband, family, that kind of thing. Do you want to shut this off for a bit, and I'll let you [inaudible].

AB: Sure. Let me do that. [Recording Paused]

SG: Well, I guess I'll go back – maybe to the one –

PI: Wherever we were.

AB: The wall of resistance.

PI: Oh, yes.



SG: As you encountered and pursued your interests and your career.

PI: When I was at New England Conservatory, from '69 to '71, I started out in a choral conducting program. The person who was in charge of that program was a woman who I had sort of seen from afar, but she had a major name in the Boston area. I thought, "Wow, that would be a great role model." Turns out I was absolutely wrong.

SG: Really?

PI: This woman was one of those negative, nasty ladies who gave a tremendous amount of attention to the students that were sort of remedial reading types. Is that a good way to put it? Not good. Who really shouldn't have been there, to begin with. Those were the people that she gave quite a bit of support. Those of us who were already conductors, who had a little bit of experience, who were really quite talented and capable – I'm being honest – were the people that she cut down all the time. She did not run the so-called conducting class very well. It was a humiliating experience for many of us and quite a turnoff. As a result, at the end of the first semester, I decided I really needed some conducting lessons, and I wasn't getting it from her. I auditioned for the orchestral conductor at New England Conservatory, and he was very, very kind. I studied with him privately during the second semester. I was still in a choral program, mind you. She got wind of it and summarily dismissed me from the program at the end of second semester because, quote, "I would be more receptive to the teaching in the orchestral department" end quote; that was her reason. Okay. So I went into the orchestral conducting department for the second year. It was actually the best thing that could happen to me because I got much more conducting experience, worked well with the person in charge of the orchestral conducting program, and was much happier because it was a more positive experience, not a negative one. So the bottom line is that some women who have made it can be very nasty to those women who are coming up. They are not mentors at all.



SG: Do you think they feel threatened?

PI: This one did. Absolutely. She was very insecure, very insecure.

AB: I'd like to ask a question now. So then, as you went on in the world of conducting, did you find resistance to your work as a woman because you're a woman?

PI: Yes.

AB: Can you tell us some about that?

PI: Yes. One of the jobs I had, shortly after or during that – in 1970, I was given the job as conductor of the Concord Chorale, up in Concord, New Hampshire. I was with that group for fifteen years, actually, and built it, I have to say. When I took over the group, it was one year old. It grew and grew and grew. It was a really good organization. But there were a lot of problems with people within the organization accepting a woman as a director. It took a while for me to cut through the nonsense.

SG: What year was this?

PI: 1970. During the time that I was music director there, around 1975, we were invited – that is, the Concord Chorale and I – to perform at the New Hampshire Music Festival during the summer. We performed the [Gabriel] Fauré Requiem with the orchestra – two or three performances. I don't remember the exact [number], but I conducted the chorus and orchestra, which meant that I had to have a rehearsal with the orchestra or two prior to it. During the first rehearsal with chorus and orchestra, there was a tremendous amount of resistance on the part of the orchestra to having a woman on the podium. Intermission happened. This is the intermission of the rehearsal. And the concertmaster, who at that time, during the regular season, was the concertmaster of the Metropolitan Opera, came up and said to me, "You're pretty good for a woman."



SG: What did you say?

PI: Not too much. What could I say? He thought that was a supreme compliment. But one of the other nasty things that was going on was also, in the viola section, there were a couple of women violinists who were absolutely negative. They just were not cooperative in any way. It was pretty obvious that they just did not want to have anything to do with a woman up on the podium. So one of the guys in the chorus, who happened to be the president of the chorus at that time, and a very fine musician, organist, in his own right, came dashing up to me during the intermission. He said, "Do you want me to do anything about those two women?" It was obvious to everybody that they were being nasty. And I said, "No, just leave it alone. It'll go away." So that's just one or two examples of the kinds of stuff that was going on.

SG: You wrote that Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* moves you. How old were you when you read it? In what ways did it change your perspectives or your life?

PI: I think I was in my twenties. When did it first come out? [Editor's Note: [Editor's Note: Betty Freidan released her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.]

SG: Was it the '70s?

AB: I don't remember.

PI: '60s.

SG: '60s, maybe.

AB: '60s.

PI: So I was in my twenties, late twenties, I think, when I read it. I had two little kids. I was totally in the housewife, stay-at-home mom routine. That book just opened my eyes – it really did – as to the possibilities that are out there, and I didn't have to absolutely



stay in that role my entire life. It was a wake-up call. Absolutely.

SG: So, at that point, did you decide to step out of being at home, or did you wait a little while?

PI: Well, I waited until my kids were in elementary school. When my youngest finally went to first grade, that's when I went back to grad school.

SG: The other part of this question is, how do you and your views regarding feminism compare with those of, say, your mother's generation or your children's generation? Again, could you talk – maybe this is redundant, but have you had important female role models or mentors, people that have [inaudible] out?

PI: Female mentors I never had. But what that experience taught me was to be a mentor, particularly to females. I mean, that woman at the Conservatory taught me, first of all, how not to treat a chorus, how not to treat a student, how not to behave, in many ways. She was so negative that it was a lesson. It was a lesson always to be helpful, always to be a mentor, and be nice to people. Otherwise, you don't get anything back. What was the other part of the question?

SG: The other part was how do your views regarding feminists compare with those of your mother's generation,

PI: My mother was not a feminist. My mother was a very traditional Jewish mother. There was no part of that that she, I think, could identify with, and she was somewhat amazed at my insistence on pursuing a career. She didn't have that experience in her own life. She couldn't relate to it truly. Now, my kids – my daughter, for instance, has a PhD in pharmacology and is a musician. My son is a musician and is actually making his living as a musician. My daughter doesn't; she's a scientist. But she does play Viola and plays very well. She decided not to be a musician because she did not love to practice. You have to love to practice in order to really succeed. Although, I think she was really



very talented. The practicing thing – well, she knew what she wanted to do.

SG: Is she in California?

PI: Yes, she's the one in California.

SG: What's her name?

PI: Karen.

AB: Sandy, this is a good place for us to stop and change the tape over. [End of Track One.] Anytime is fine.

SG: How did you meet your husband, Lou? Was his family and upbringing more or less religious than yours?

PI: I met him on a blind date. The blind date was through a member of that sorority that I joined, the non-Jewish sorority.

SG: At BU.

PI: At BU. She had friends who knew this guy who was at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and they were looking to fix him up. So that's how it was. That's how it happened. It's just one of those things, a blind date that actually worked. Actually, our daughter was fixed up with her husband, too; it was a blind date in Minneapolis. She was working at that time at General Mills, just after she got out of college, and he was working on a PhD at the University of Minnesota. So blind date, again – two Jewish kids they were trying to fix up. So it does work. That's how I met my husband. What was the other –?

SG: Was his family and upbringing more or less religious than yours?



PI: No, he had a father who was not the least bit religious. His mother had more of a religious upbringing. When Lou was a child, they moved to the DC area because his father got a job with the government. He was a civil engineer. It was during World War II. The religious education that he got was because his mother insisted that he have it. His father didn't care. He was bar mitzvahed in a Conservative synagogue, and he did have confirmation as well.

SG: What brought you to Vermont? The other part of that is why did you – maybe this is a presumption, but I think you belonged to the Brattleboro Area Jewish Community [BAJC] congregation as well as the Havurah.

PI: Yes, the Havurah is a totally separate group of friends. A couple of them belong to the synagogue, and some don't.

SG: Well, first, I guess, if you want to talk about what brought you to Vermont.

PI: We were living in DC at that time, having moved from Massachusetts from Lexington, and we lived in the DC area about nine years. But neither of us wanted to be there. We didn't like it. We wanted to move back to New England. We didn't like the climate. It was too muggy and awful in the summer. In the winter, it wasn't cold enough to ski. So there. It just wasn't our climate. And beyond that, it was always about politics. The DC area is so political all the time that we just got tired of it. We started looking for a way to get back to New England. So we bought an inn, and that is how we did it.

SG: Well, actually, we have questions about running an inn, if you want to talk a little bit about that, too.

PI: We always enjoyed hosting friends or hosting relatives and having dinner parties and making large seders and all that kind of stuff. So we thought maybe this would be an interesting thing to do. We took some courses. We didn't jump into it blind. And nothing frightened us. So we started looking in Western Massachusetts and Vermont. The



reason we isolated those areas is that we didn't want to be too far away from our kids, who were at that time – Karen was in New Jersey, and Ron was in Maryland, both married and little kids happening. So we wanted to be within driving distance, a one-day drive at the most. That's why we sort of zeroed in where we did.

SG: Where was the inn?

PI: It was called the Shield Inn when we had it. Subsequent owner changed the name; it's now called The Snow Goose. It's about a mile south of Mount Snow. It had twelve rooms. We could feed about thirty people at a time because some of the rooms slept more than two. We started concert series there, both classical and jazz – had a very successful concert series going. After about three or four years, Karen and her husband, and the baby moved to California. We figured that if we were ever going to spend any major amount of time with them, again, we couldn't be innkeepers because if you are an innkeeper, you don't leave for a week or two at a time. You have to be there to answer the phone. You have to be there when your guests arrive. You can't leave it to other people because an inn takes on the personality of the owners. So we decided to reorder our priorities and sell the inn. So we put it on the market, and literally the second people who saw it decided to buy it. We were not prepared because we expected it would be a year or two. We'd be lucky if it was a year or two because that was what the average time was that it takes to sell an inn. So we were very rushed and decided to come to Brattleboro, started looking around with a real estate agent friend of ours, and we found this.

SG: You started to talk a little bit about – that you were a producer of concerts at the inn. Then you were at the Memorial Hall Center for the Arts in Wilmington.

PI: That's right.

SG: Were you conducting, playing, or organizing?



PI: I was playing and organizing. I organized a Tuesday night concert series, primarily summertime, because that's when huge amounts of people come up from Florida. They summer there because who wants to be in Florida in the summer? So we had a large audience.

SG: Is that the inn or the center?

PI: Both places, actually. This same audience, after we sold the inn, followed us to Memorial Hall Center for the Arts, where the concerts continued. I was on the program committee there and handled the Tuesday night concert series. But there were other things going on at the Hall as well.

SG: I'm just curious, what kind of things?

PI: Well, there is a theater group. They put on a musical every single year. They've done [Stephen] Sondheim. They've done [Richard] Rodgers. They've done the whole gambit.

SG: Have you been part of that?

PI: No, no. Next year, I believe I heard through the grapevine that they're doing Of Thee I Sing. So it should be very good. Very good [inaudible].

SG: Could you go back a little bit and talk about your relationship with the radical Jewish community and your participation in the Havurah, as well.

PI: Okay. We joined the BAJC shortly after we bought the inn because I feel in a small rural setting or rural area, it's very important to support the Jewish community. It wasn't necessarily that important to us in Washington because there are so many synagogues and so many Jews. We actually weren't synagogue members down there. We were just sort of there. But when we came here, it was pretty obvious. There was only one



synagogue in Brattleboro. There was another one in Bennington. Maybe there was one twenty miles this way or that way, but we joined BAJC.

SG: What year was that again when you first came here?

PI: It was probably '95 that we [inaudible]. I've been mildly involved. I have not accepted any invitations to become a board member because I just don't want to get that heavy into it. But I have been involved with musical events, isolated ones here and there, fundraisers where I work on a specific project, and then I'm done. I've done several of those. We have a lot of friends in the Jewish community. And certainly, some of the members of our Havurah are very active in BAJC; some are not even members. But this group got together almost by accident. A group of folks were hanging out together one time. I don't remember what the event was, but many of us were friends. The conversation got around to former Havurot that some of them had participated in in other communities. So we said, "Well, why don't we have a Havurah?" We got it, and here we are. Subsequently, some people have left because they've moved, and we've brought new people in. It's fluid. But right now, we've got a very nice group, and I am very happy with that group in addition to the BAJC. It's a totally different kind of thing.

AB: So what kinds of things do you do together as a group?

PI: We meet about once a month in different homes. And each person whose home it is in comes up with a subject or an activity to do. It's always oriented to Jewish things. Sometimes we talk about family influences. Sometimes we talk about Israel. Sometimes we talk about politics, always hooked into the Jewish community, or the overall Jewish community in the United States, or Israel, or the world. It's almost like a very interesting philosophical discussion. Everybody is very educated and interesting in our own ways. We all have a variety of opinions.

SG: What does Havurah mean?



PI: A group of friends.

AB: Do you celebrate holidays together?

PI: Yes.

AB: Can you tell us about one of your favorite holidays?

PI: Many, many years ago, we celebrated Passover together at the home of this couple that lives out in Newfane. They live so far off the beaten track that it really is a challenge just to find their house – unpaved roads almost all the way, one lane. Anyway, it was a bad night in April. It was a very wet night. One couple and their children, young children – this wasn't just Havurah, but a lot of other people. This family decided they had to leave a little bit early because their kids were getting antsy. So they took off, and they started out. Well, they took a bad turn and ended up in the mush somewhere off-road. He walked back to the house to tell everybody what had happened and maybe call somebody to tow him out. There was a call made to tow, but all the guys, of course, thought they were –

SG: He-men?

PI: Yes, enough so that they could help these people out. Well, no, it was really dicey out there. It took a very talented crew on a truck to lift them out of whatever ditch they got into.

AB: This was mud or snow?

PI: Probably a combination of both. But in the meantime, they had a piano in the house. So there were about fifteen of us hanging around waiting for whatever action because we could not go out or go home until that car had been lifted out of that place that it was in. So I sat down at the piano and started playing, and the group was singing for about an



hour – any tune. We just simply sang. And that particular Seder has been in our memories for all these years. It was kind of fun. It was probably about eight years ago. But eventually, we all got out. But the guy in the tow truck stayed around until we all got out because he didn't expect any more disasters, but just in case, he didn't want to have to be called in again.

SG: When your children were growing up, did you belong to a synagogue?

PI: Yes.

SG: Did they have a religious education and bar and bat [mitzvahs]?

PI: Yes.

SG: Can you talk some more about that?

PI: Yes, we belonged to Temple Isaiah in Lexington, which is a Reform synagogue. Both our son and our daughter were bar and bat mitzvahed, and they went through confirmation. When that sisterhood started its first adult bat mitzvah class, I joined that class and had an adult bat mitzvah with three or four other women.

SG: That's great. So now that they have children on their own, and they're living in their own homes, do they relate to Judaism?

PI: Yes.

SG: You showed me the pictures of the –

PI: Yes. We'll start with our son. His daughter, Elena, was bat mitzvahed in '04, I believe. She had her confirmation last year. She's very active in Jewish youth groups and things like that and went to a Jewish camp this summer, a leadership camp in New York called the Kutz Camp. I didn't know about it either. Anyway, she's very committed



and into that. Her brother will be bar mitzvah in June. Our son is the choir director at that temple. He also teaches Sunday school, fifth grade. On the other side of the continent, I should say, our daughter's family. The answer is yes. They belong also to a Reform synagogue. Their son will be bar mitzvah in October. Our son-in-law, Dave, also teaches fifth grade Sunday school. I don't know how it happened that everybody's teaching fifth grade, but they do. So they're all involved in their synagogues, Reform synagogues.

SG: Well, you mentioned having to deal with the glass ceiling as far as being a woman, and I was wondering, did your family have to deal with any kind of prejudice in your community or in your work because of being Jewish? Did that ever become an issue anywhere?

PI: It might have been in an underlying kind of way. But I think whatever serious prejudice there was to my conducting pursuits was because I was female. There are plenty of Jewish male conductors. I don't think that's a problem, like Leonard Bernstein, James Levine. There are many, many of them. So being Jewish isn't the issue; I think it was being female.

SG: In 1982, you went to Israel on a [inaudible].

PI: I conducted the Concord Chorale on [inaudible].

SG: Can you tell us about that trip and also your year of guest conducting in Israel in '83 and '84? If you could talk about those experiences in Israel?

PI: Taking the Concord Chorale to Israel was a wonderful experience for me and them. I had never been to Israel. Many of them have never, obviously, because most of them were not Jewish. We had a guide, who was excellent for the two weeks we were there. We had concerts that were set up in various places, kibbutzim, as well as major concert halls. We were there in the summer, so it was very, very hot. We were there just after



the Sabra-Shatila war.

AB: Massacre.

PI: Massacre. It was 1982. We were literally on the Lebanese border at certain times. We were on kibbutzim up north. We traveled and toured all over the state of Israel. It was educational as well as musical. It was really very, very nice.

AB: How was that arranged?

PI: Through a tour company.

AB: Was this something that you proposed, or were you invited?

PI: I was invited.

SG: Was it separate? There was a choral tour, and then there was a conducting tour?

PI: No, all the same.

SG: It was all the same thing.

PI: I conducted the chorus.

SG: Okay, gotcha. All right. Now I understand.

PI: Because I was the music director of the Concord Chorale.

SG: Okay, gotcha.

AB: But then you said something about a year of guest conducting.

PI: That came the following year.



AB: Okay. Tell us about that, too.

PI: Yes. I met some people while I was there during that time and indicated that I'd be interested in coming over for a year or something to work in Israel. I was lucky enough to inquire about it at a time when the [inaudible], which is the Israel kibbutz choir, had a music director who was looking for a sabbatical. So his sabbatical coincided with my coming over there and conducting that group for a year. I lived on a kibbutz and did some teaching while I was living on the kibbutz. But with the choir, the choir would meet all over the state of Israel, different places, different rehearsals, different weeks. It was an auditioned choir of about sixty or seventy people from the kibbutzim scene all over Israel, north and south. They would congregate in one place about every two to three weeks. That's where we would rehearse. And sometimes we would be on a kibbutz for that (kennis?) – they called it a (kennis?), a coming together to rehearse for two or three days. And at the end of the (kennis?), we would perform for the kibbutz. At the spring of that year, I conducted a series of concerts in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and also a couple of other places with this choir. But the very first thing – I literally got there in September, and the very first job that was already set up was to prepare the choir for the Benjamin Britten War Requiem to be performed with the Israeli Philharmonic. It was a huge job.

AB: Was the choir's repertoire always classical music? Or was there also folk music?

PI: There was Israeli folk and a lot of Israeli composers. I brought along a lot of American music like George Gershwin, who, of course, is Jewish, and a few other Jewish American – some spirituals, Aaron Copeland, who was a Jewish American, and a lot of other styles that they didn't really have before. But yes, it was mainly a classically-based choir.

SG: Was Lou with you?



PI: No, he came over to visit a few times, but he was here in the states working. And I flew back once because I had a conducting gig in November. So we were back and forth. Karen came over to visit in December. That was a two-week visit. I rented a car, and we drove all around the country. It was a very interesting experience – a couple of things with her – with the Arab population. It was December and lots of tourists are there in December. We were in Jerusalem, she and I, and I took her to the top of Mount whatever – I forgot which one – where there is a guy, an Arab guy, and a camel. I don't know if you've ever visited Jerusalem.

SG: Yes, I have.

PI: Have you been up there to see this guy? It's a business. He leads the camel around, and you get a ride on the camel for a fee.

SG: Yeah, okay. I think we did that.

PI: Yes, everybody –

SG: Everybody does that.

PI: So we're up there, and she wanted a ride on the camel. So I went first, and she took pictures. Then she got on the camel, and I was taking pictures. An elderly guy, Arab guy, was leading the camel around. A younger Arab guy comes over to me, and he says, "Is that your daughter?" I said, "Yes." "I'll give you ten camels for her." Truly.

SG: Did you hold out for fifteen?

PI: It's been a family joke ever since.

SG: That's wild.

PI: I think he was serious.



SG: I'm sure he was. I'm sure he was.

PI: On that same escapade, Karen and I were in Jerusalem, and it was the end of our Jerusalem time. We got in the car on Friday morning. We decided to drive back to my kibbutz. So leaving Jerusalem, there was this huge traffic jam. All the traffic lights were not working. It was like gridlock. It was early on a Friday. It just wasn't right. I said to her, "This is ridiculous. Can't they ever get things happening here? There's no reason for the traffic to be like this." Turn on the radio; everything's in Hebrew. And, of course, my Hebrew was very scant. I could ask directions and find out where the ladies' room was, but that's about it. So we were trying to find some news in English – forget it, nothing. We crept along, and there was one street we were on one way, and there was a bus kind of tilted up on the sidewalk. We just kept driving very quietly along [and] got back to the kibbutz after about a couple of hours of this awful stuff. Later on, we went into the chadar ochel, which is the big common dining room for Shabbat dinner. I happened to meet a couple of my friends, many of whom on the kibbutz spoke English. She said, "Oh, where have you been?" I said, "We were just in Jerusalem." I said, "We were caught in an awful traffic jam." She says, "Phyllis, don't you know how to stay out of trouble?" And I said, "What trouble?" Well, apparently, that bus that we had passed, that was sitting up on the side of the road, was going to be detonated, but they got to it ahead of time. It was about to be bomb blasted [inaudible]. They found it. They got to it before it happened. I mean, things like that. Here we are, innocent American Jews, just meandering along Jerusalem.

SG: That leads to the question – what do you think about what's going on in Israel now? Have you been back since the '80s or still have connections there?

PI: I was back in the late '80s. I have not been back in the '90s, mainly because we were then in Washington and innkeepers, and a lot of things happened. But yes, I still have a lot of connections there. Many of my friends come here to visit. I've maintained



all those contacts. They're some very dear people. Because when you are with folks for ten months and whatever, you don't just forget them. They were a part of my life at that time. I feel very strongly about what's happening today. I think that the world pretty much is ganging up on Israel in a similar way to what was the antisemitism of the World War II years. It's now anti-Israelism, or anti-Zionism, and Israel as the scapegoat. I feel that there are some twenty Arab countries scattered all around the Middle East, and Israel is this tiny, little sliver, less than the size of New Jersey, but it's the only democracy. It's the only place where there's a true economic scene going on. I mean, there's a lot happening in Israel in terms of education, research, product development. I mean, I don't have to tell you. And all of the Arab countries that are surrounding Israel just want to wipe it out. They say that probably. Some of them are less vocal than that nut job in Iran, but that's the bottom line. They all want to wipe Israel away. So Israel really is in a tough situation there. They're all jealous of Israel. For instance, there's an attitude among the Arabs, even if Israel gives them something, they want more. When Gaza was returned to the Palestinians a year or two ago – I don't remember exactly where it was – there were many structures that the Israelis handed over to them. For instance, really upscale greenhouses, where they were growing all kinds of plants, vegetables and fruits, and all kinds of things that were very, very high quality and could have just been taken over very easily. The Palestinians took it over and totally destroyed it. They didn't want to touch anything that the Jews had handled. So they destroyed these million dollars' worth of – what did I call them?

AB: Greenhouses.

PI: Greenhouses, thank you. My brain just ran out.

SG: That's alright. You're doing great.

PI: They destroyed them because they did not want to have anything to do with anything Jewish or anything Israeli. And this is one example of the attitude. The attitude, as we



all know, is one thing for the English speakers and the public media. It's totally different when they are speaking in their own Arabic to their own listeners. They are really out to wipe Israel into the sea. That is all that they want to do. They don't ever plan to make peace. I think if Israel gives back another speck of land, they're shooting themselves in the foot.

SG: The next question is, what are you currently involved in musically? You talked about conducting and doing concerts [and] volunteer work. It's kind of a jump from Israel.

PI: That's okay. I do a lot of freelance work. By freelance, I mean a job here, a job there. During the fall, I was very, very busy accompanying a show that happened in November. Then, after that was over, it seemed that we jumped right into the Christmas season. I was busy playing the piano in a jazz trio that I'm working in. We do a lot of senior citizen homes. So that was nonstop, up until January 1st. Now it's quiet, thank goodness. I can go skiing. That's pretty much it in a nutshell. I do guest work here and there. I no longer have a regular chorus that I conduct or a teaching position or something like that. In May, I'm going to be seventy. So I figure at this point in life, I want to choose what I want to do. Skiing is one of those things.

SG: How does it feel [inaudible] ski?

PI: Yeah. I also enjoy seeing our kids. So we plan to go and visit the California kids; on February 6th, we're flying out there for about two weeks. Then, when we get back, there's a lot of things that begin to happen, again, in the jazz trio world. I have a couple of piano students, although I do not advertise. I don't set out a shingle. If a student is interested and wants to come and study, fine. But I don't want to work with students who are not really self-motivated. I'm beyond the point where I want to deal with that. I did in the past, but I just want to deal with folks that really are interested. So I have adults as well as teenagers.



SG: Where does your jazz trio play? Who's in the jazz trio with you?

PI: It really depends on who's available. But the guy who books it is a drummer that I know who lives here in Brattleboro. Sometimes it's one bass player; sometimes it's another. Usually, it's one particular bass player, but if he can't make it, there are more on the list. If I can't make it, there are other pianists on the list or guitarists. So this person does the booking, and he sets it all up.

SG: What's the name of your group?

PI: What is it called? The Great American Songbook.

AB: Do you have recordings? Have you made some CDs?

PI: I have made CDs. I made a CD with Alison Hale. This is a classical recital that she and I did at Memorial Hall down in Wilmington. Then we recorded it subsequently. I haven't made any jazz CDs. I don't know why. Maybe because I play with so many different people that a CD would highlight, say, a group of four. And then if I sent the CD to a potential client, and they say, "Oh, great. I want those four people," and those four people aren't necessarily the ones that are available that day, that kind of thing.

SG: Where do you play? Around here?

PI: In Massachusetts a lot.

SG: Really?

PI: This particular trio does because the contractor has a connection with the housing, senior housing. He does all the bookings. I don't get involved with that. But I do some work around here, too, private parties and various things.



SG: Some of the things that you mentioned that you enjoy – you mentioned your grandchildren. You do skiing. You'd also mentioned kayaking and photography. Can you talk about some of those other things?

PI: Kayaking is something I got into just recently. A musician friend of mine, a woman who – the one who music directs the shows down at Memorial Hall, as a matter of fact. She's also a pianist. She is an avid kayaker, and she got me into it. Because I liked it so much, I bought a kayak. [laughter] I do it as often as we can in the summer. There are some wonderful lakes around here. Lou doesn't own his own kayak. We sometimes rent or borrow a kayak when he's kayaking with us, but a lot of times, he's just doing other things. I have a group of ladies that we kayak. We go out on Lake Whitingham or Lake Raponda, or over in New Hampshire to – I forgot the name of the lake right over there. But there are three or four lakes that we go to.

SG: And do you do photography?

PI: I have always been interested in photography; I have never really studied it. I've taken a few little short courses that only got me to the very first step. But I've always been a picture taker all my life and just recently got into the latest digital stuff, which is a new world, no longer the rolls of film. That, of course, creates other challenges – downloading all of that digital stuff onto the computer and trying to print and all that stuff. So it's a brand-new world for me. But photography is something I've always enjoyed. Whenever we travel, I'm the one snapping the pictures. I love it. I just enjoy it.

SG: And the last thing is, are there any stories, words of wisdom, or anything else that you might want to share that we haven't asked you?

PI: Oh boy, you've asked me a lot of everything. I've just enjoyed being a musician. There's so much joy that you can have personally as well as sharing it. Sharing it, particularly in these senior homes that we go to, senior residences. We're playing jazz of



the '40s and '50s, and these people love it. They just love it. They eat it up. It's such a nachas, frankly, to see the joy that we bring to them. Over my career, I've just been very grateful for a lot of interesting things I've been able to do. In conducting, I will be very honest and say I have made my own opportunities for the most part because very few opportunities just came my way. It doesn't happen for a woman, usually. You have to really fight for your little piece of the pie. But I've always had a good time once I've gotten that little piece.

AB: Did you ever meet Kate Tamarkin, who was the conductor for the VSO [Vermont Symphony Orchestra] for a short while?

PI: No. No, I didn't.

AB: Just an aside.

SG: Anything else, Ann?

AB: No, I think this has been very, very lovely. We thank you very much.

SG: Thank you so much.

PI: You're very welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]