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NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH TILLY SPETGANG

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Tilly Spetgang on January 12, 2012 in Voorhees, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here and thank you for lunch. To begin, could you tell me where and when you were born?

Tilly Spetgang: … May 30, 1926, which makes me eighty-five.

SI: Where were you born?

TS: Manhattan, New York City. I lived in the Bronx, but that's where I was born.

SI: For the record, can you tell me what your parents' names were?

TS: Herman or Nicu, N-I-C-U, Forschmidt, F-O-R-S-C-H-M-I-D-T and Bertha.

SI: What was your mother's maiden name?

TS: Goldberg.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, can you tell me what you may know about the family background?

TS: I know almost nothing. They were wealthy merchants in Bucharest, Romania. They had a big, wonderful antique store, and they were not the typical immigrants who came here. Although they came at the same time, the whole family--father, my father's father, mother, two brothers and one sister and himself. He was the oldest. I don't know why they came here and they went back, … and then, I don't know what happened. They stayed here a few years, didn't like it, went back. My mother, do you want to hear about her?

SI: So your father stayed, but the rest of his family went back?

TS: Correct.

SI: How old was he when his family went back, approximately?

TS: I would say about eighteen. World War I was looming, maybe that was why they went back, I don't know.

SI: When they were here in the United States did they also have a similar business?

TS: I have no idea. … I never met them and I have no idea. I don't even know their names.

SI: Did your father not just talk much about his family or background?

TS: No, he didn't come to think of it. That's probably why I know nothing about it. I have their pictures up on my wall but that's all I know. What I do know is that my father's mother, my grandmother, was a very fancy socialite, and would have her hair done like Marie Antoinette up in big white curls and wear a frock and go to afternoon dances--very high society in Romania. I don't know why they left and came to America, but they were certainly not the typical immigrants. …

SI: Your father was probably in his early teens when they came here.

TS: I would say he was about … sixteen or seventeen.

SI: They were only here for a couple of years.

TS: Yes.

SI: Did your father ever tell you any stories about his life in Romania?

TS: Yes, they were very sad stories because my grandmother was obviously a socialite. My father was the first child, and she didn't want to be annoyed with having a child, so when he was two or three, they sent him to a boarding school. … He was a very unhappy boy there, and he kept saying when he had Alzheimer's as an eighty-five year old man, "My mother never gave me a penny for candy." That loomed so large that it lasted all his life. Beyond the dances and the antique store and being a socialite, oh yes, my grandmother was a gourmet cook, and when they moved to America, I'll tell you how they met, my mother learned at her side in the kitchen and became a gourmet Romanian cook. That's all I know about them. They never met me.

SI: They did not correspond afterwards?

TS: No. …

SI: Tell me about your mother's side of the family.

TS: My mother was a peasant--the prince and the pauper. She was born the oldest amongst eight girls. They lived in a little shack with dirt floors, all of them, I think one or two rooms. She never went to school. They never had the penny to pay for school, and she didn't have shoes in the winter to walk to the school. So, she never went to school. She was illiterate. When she came to America, which I'll tell you about in a moment, she went to night school, and learned a tiny bit of English enough to read a little bit and, of course, speak. … She learned how to speak English. My mother never read anything I ever wrote, she was illiterate, and when I would offer to read her my material, it bothered her, and she'd say, "Another time." So it was just a strange situation. My father was an intellectual. They met on the way to America on the boat. She did not speak a word of English. He knew four languages--French, German, Romanian, English. … They asked her for her passport. She was sixteen years old, and had a cousin in New York who was sponsoring her. … She didn't understand they wanted her passport, and he was behind her

in line in France, in Paris, and so he stepped forward and said, in French, "What do you want? I'll translate it into Romanian," and he told her, "They want your passport." That's how they met. My mother liked my grandmother very much because she was an excellent cook and she was interested in learning. So, she didn't, wasn't drawn to my father, she was drawn to my grandmother. … When they came to this country, World War I was almost ready to break out. There were all kinds of problems and rumblings, and my father came to my mother, and they knew each other barely, and said, "I don't want to go to the Army. I don't want to fight. I don't want to get killed. Will you marry me so I don't have to go to the Army?" … She stupidly said, "Yes." Why, I will never understand. They had a very, very bad marriage, mismatched, but they had three children who turned out fine, so you never know.

SI: That must have been a clashing of worlds. Your mother was here by herself when she came to the United States?

TS: Yes, she was sixteen, the oldest of eight daughters, and they sent her to America to earn money. There was no money where they were in Bucharest. They were peasants, and she was an expert seamstress. … She could sew men's coats and tuxedo jackets, the button holes, by hand, and she became, she went into the union and whatever money she didn't need, of course she lived very simply at her cousins. She sent money and she brought first her next sister. … When the next sister came over, they both worked, and sent money home for the third sister and then they had all eight sisters here--seven, one died--and mother and father. … The girls all worked and brought the parents over, and that story is very common in that era.

SI: Did she ever talk about what it was like to be working in poor working conditions?

TS: Yes, you mean the sweat shops.

SI: Yes, the sweat shops.

TS: Yes, sure, she talked about it a lot. She was not involved in the Triangle fire, but she was right there, in that kind of factory, … where they were tight and no open windows and, you know, nothing, no decent conditions. … They worked Saturdays and all week and late, and then got on the subway to go back to their apartments. … It was a very rough life, but you got to remember, she was young, she was strong, and she was ambitious to bring her family over. That was her goal, she adored them, and she did. [Editor's Note: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company building caught on fire on March 25, 1911 in New York City, leading to the death of 146 women who worked there. The tragedy led to new safety regulations and awareness of poor working conditions.]

SI: What was your father doing at this time?

TS: My father started out in making eyeglass frames. They weren't plastic, they were tortoise from turtles, and there's another word, which I cannot remember, for the material, but he got badly burned. Very inflammable process making eyeglass frames by hand, and he got very, very

badly burned and had to leave. … He was very smart, a very bright man, but also, practically no schooling but omnivorous reader and he became self-educated and he became a very learned man from reading any kind of book all his life. So he turned me on to writing and to reading. I forgot the question.

SI: What was your father doing as a career? You said he was making eyeglass frames.

TS: He eventually, when I was a young teen, like ten, became an insurance salesman for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and Metropolitan built a housing development, a beautiful place in the Bronx, in East Bronx, with high rises and gardens and playgrounds and fountains, gorgeous place. … They gave first preference at very liberal, a low rent, not low but medium rent, to their agents, and he was an agent, so we moved into Parkchester when I was about fourteen. I did, one day, I used to be a very curious kid, and I used to rummage in drawers as most kids do, and I found a taxicab driver license with my father's picture on it. Went to my mother, and I said, "What is this? … Did Papa drive a taxi?" … Of course, it was the tail end of the Depression, and she said, "Child, hush, hush, put it back where you found it, never mention it." He was so, as an intellectual, he was so embarrassed to drive a cab, which I think is nonsense, but anyway, I think all work is good, I don't care what it is. My mother told me a lot about her life in Romania.

SI: Tell me about what you remember.

TS: Well, for instance, about food. My grandmother had very little money and their meal for the end of the day was a big pot that stood on the stove, wood stove all day, and she threw whatever vegetables, if they had a piece of meat or a piece of chicken or whatever, went into the pot, and then it was a soup or a stew by the end of the day, and that's what they had every night. However, oranges were magical because they were imported and they were expensive, and the eight girls were so anxious to get sick so they could go to the hospital and have an orange. Every day, the goat would be driven to their door, all the little doors, and the girls would line up with cups and they would get their one cup of milk a day directly from the goat. … I told you my mother was an excellent seamstress. Most of the girls were, they were taught. The poor girls were taught to sew in order to earn a few dollars, you know, in their lives. So, my mother said that Bucharest was like Paris, my father did too. It was so gorgeous, and this was pre-communism, and the main street in Bucharest was like the main street in Paris with the beautiful buildings and the flags and the fountains and people dressed beautifully, and going by in horse and buggy, and that kind of place. Not where my mother lived, just where my father lived. My mother lived on the outskirts of the town, of the city. My father, when he was here, when he was already a citizen, always said, "Romania is better, Romania is better, this is better in Romania." … Then my mother and father, … Ceausescu was the dictator of Romania at that time, they took … a boat, and they went for a trip back to Romania, and what they saw, and how people lived under communism, cured my father. Then he thought America was the place to live. It was wonderful compared to what he saw his friends and family, how they were living. So he was convinced that way. [Editor's Note: Nicolae Ceausescu was the communist dictator in Romania

1965-1989. Under his regime, Romania was impoverished. He and his wife were sentenced to death after being found guilty of mass murder.]

SI: Did your father ever talk about going back to Romania?

TS: Yes, this is an odd story. They were Jews; however, I told you they were here in America for about two, three years. They lived on the fifth floor of an apartment house. My parents lived on the first floor. A letter came to my father, "To Mr. Forschmidt." He opened the letter, and it really was a letter to his father, but it was put in my father's mailbox. It was from the previous servant in Romania, they had servants and a plush house. One of the servants found their address, I don't know how she did it, and she pleaded for help of money. … My grandfather got her pregnant, and she had a little girl named Sperantza, and they were starving. She was a single mother and she was Gentile, so I have a Gentile side of my family … and most of them are in Canada now, but my cousin and her husband are still in Romania and we correspond. …

SI: You are related to this woman?

TS: … Well, through her little girl, her name was Sperantza. She had a daughter and that's my cousin, first cousin. … Anyway, second cousin, first cousin, doesn't matter, she's a cousin. So, my father and mother took this letter up to the fifth floor to the grandfather. He read the letter, and he said, "I'm not interested in helping her, let her starve." So, my mother and father with their few dollars in the Depression took on the job of supporting this little family of a mother and child in Romania until my father was ready to die at eighty-five and then he asked me to take over the support of that family which I did with my husband Irwin. When their forty-year old refrigerator broke and there was no way of fixing it anymore, we sent five hundred dollars, and they sent us a picture of them with the new refrigerator. I used to send food packages when Chernobyl (1986) went up and the winds brought the radiation to Romania which was close to where Chernobyl was. They asked for powdered milk. We sent cases of powdered milk and I sent clothing and money all the way through until finally things got better for them when Ceausescu was killed. … My cousin sent me a letter thanking me for all the help that we had given them and my father and mother's help, and said, "We don't need it anymore. We're on our own, we're alright," and we've continued to write since then. Two of her children are now in Victoria, Canada.

SI: Did you ever meet her personally?

TS: Never met them, … never spoken with them, but my granddaughter, when she was in college, she just graduated last spring in … Oregon, she made a trip up to Toronto and met the family, … and she represented us there. I asked my brother and sister if they would help in supporting this family and neither one of them was interested. … So, they never wrote and they don't consider them family. They are blood relatives, how close can you get, and they were in need.

SI: That is a pretty remarkable story.

TS: … I told you this story, why did I tell you this story--something about my father.

SI: Did your father ever consider going back to Romania?

TS: … When he went back to Romania, he went to say hello to his mother and father and brothers and sister, but he went to stay with Sperantza and her mother because they had been writing for years and years and they were very close. … He met the family, the mother and Sperantza's husband and children and so forth.

SI: Your parents got married during World War I?

TS: Just before World War I.

SI: When did they start their family? Are you the oldest?

TS: I'm the youngest. I have a sister, Jeannie, who is alive and she's ninety-three and she lives in Long Island, New York. … Then my brother died about six years ago, he was in the middle, and I am the youngest. So, my mother had Jeannie when she was about, they got married when they were nineteen or twenty, so she had her when she was about twenty-two. … She had me when, well, my sister's eight years older than I am, so you know I came along very unexpected and unwanted. … They didn't have legal abortion in those days, and here I am to tell you about it. Not unwanted after I was born, unwanted before I was born, because it was the Depression, and they were having hard times putting food on the table. They didn't want another child. However, here I am.

SI: You said that you grew up in the Bronx. At this time, the family was already in the Bronx when you were born?

TS: Yes, the Crotona Park area. I lived at 1502 Crotona Park East, a five story apartment house facing the park and I adored the park. My mother took me there with her sisters--her sisters lived in the area--brought their children who were not in school, and we would meet in the park and … sit on benches, and the kids played. … I have a long story which I'm going to make very, very short. I found a stone one day when I was maybe four in Crotona Park. We were playing store, and grass was lettuce and so forth. It was a white stone, very heavy, smooth, looked like a golf ball, and it was so attractive, I put it in my pocket and took it home. It's the only memento I have from my childhood, it has remained with me. When I was in my twenties, and I always wanted to be a farmer, and I bought a farm with my first husband, which I will tell you about in a minute. My sister and I were walking down the dirt road to get the mail and on the ground was my white stone. So I said to Jeannie, "The kids must have been going through my drawer, and they dropped the stone, they took it, and they dropped the stone." When I got home, I had two identical stones. They turned out to be gastroliths from dinosaurs and I have them in my drawer. [Editor's Note: A gastrolith is a rock that has been swallowed and digested by an animal.] So, that's where I lived, and I loved the Bronx. The Bronx was a great place to grow up in. Every

Saturday, when our parents wanted a little privacy, they sent the three kids off to the movies for the entire day. I'm sure you've heard that there were two films and serials. Buck Rogers and all these and cartoons, and on the way, we would stop at the delicatessen and this was the treat of the week. You would buy a hot dog with hot sauerkraut. You can imagine how that theater smelled with all the kids bringing all these different ethnic foods. I loved movies and I loved the park and on May Day which was May 1st, I think, when I went to kindergarten in the Bronx, they would set up a May Pole in the park with streamers and each child had a tall, tall May Pole, had a string, and we would dance around the May Pole, all the little girls and boys, and I remember that very well and loved it. New York was a great place to grow up in, great. It was safe, relatively safe in those days, not like it is now, and as soon as I was ten years old, I was allowed to go by myself on the subway downtown to the Museum of Natural History which was my favorite place to go. … It was free in those days and I would spend hours there by myself going from exhibit to exhibit. I knew every inch of that museum. Then, when World War II came and I was in my teens--and all the boys left--I would to go to Greenwich Village. I'd go to all the little theaters, and see all the plays that eventually landed up, some of them, on Broadway, and at night, safe, Central Park at night, safe. At least we didn't hear the terrible stories. I don't think they were taking place.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood in the Bronx. This is before you moved in to the community for insurance agents, right?

TS: Yes.

SI: That was about 1940 that you did that?

TS: A little later. When did the War start, … '42?

SI: December 1941 for us.

TS: … I was living in the Bronx, but we had moved to Croes and Manor Avenue in little houses, four apartments in a house. Then we went to Parkchester, Metropolitan Place. I would say it was about '40, '39, '40. Well, I can do it by age. I was born in '26, '36, yes, '40, maybe '39.

SI: What were those neighborhoods like before you moved into Parkchester, the ethnic makeup. What you would do in the neighborhood?

TS: Apartments, ethnic, I have been very fortunate in being raised in mixed ethnic group neighborhoods. I never lived in an all-Jewish neighborhood. It was always Irish, and Italian and Catholic and Protestant, and Chinese. My friend Mamie Louie, I spent a lot of time in her parents' Chinese laundry. Blacks, we all lived, there were no incidents, and it was great having mixed friends, loved it. Roller skated out on the streets, we did everything on the streets. The apartments were very small like a one-bedroom or a two-bedroom, one bath, but very tiny, and unless it was raining very hard, we were out from morning till night, unless we went to school, and then we were out. Played a lot of games, had a million friends, played boy's games like

hockey, roller-skating hockey, not ice. If it rained in the summer time, after a rain, you would take a Popsicle stick and put your name on it and then the rivulets of water alongside the step, what do you call it?

SI: Gutter?

TS: The gutter, and then there's a step.

SI: Curb?

TS: Curb. You put it, you'd sit on the curb, and put your popsicle stick with your name, and all the other kids did the same, and then they would swish down the street and we'd all run to the end of the street to see who arrived first and won the race. We had no choice, I had a doll, and when Monopoly came out that was big time. To get a game of Monopoly, it was expensive, and I was the youngest, they refused to teach me how to play. "You're a pest, get out of here," my brother and sister--my brother especially. Eventually they taught me when I got a little older. One doll, and I would learn how to crochet and knit so I can make dresses and skirts for my doll. Playgrounds, spent an inordinate amount of time, safe. The only time our parents called us was to come up for dinner. Saturday was cleaning day, the whole family. We knew when we got up in the morning we had breakfast, and then everybody had jobs to do, to clean the house from top to bottom. Oil the furniture and wash floors and so forth. Swept, dusted, I don't think we had a vacuum then. It was a broom of straw. I don't remember. We didn't have rugs, we had oil cloth with Persian designs on oil cloth in the living room. It's just odd when I think about it. I loved all the neighborhoods I lived in, lots of friends--good times.

SI: The Great Depression started when you were about four.

TS: … It was '29. That means I was already three years old. Well, I don't remember the Depression, I was too young.

SI: Most people say it lasted up until World War II.

TS: Yes.

SI: Well, this is interesting because it could be a matter of you just grew up this way or maybe it did not affect your neighborhood so much. Do you remember seeing the effects of the Depression in your area or on your family?

TS: Only in these ways. I got one outfit a year--new outfit--one pair of shoes a year. It had to make do. We did the same thing that Irwin told you, we used to cut cardboard for the inside of our shoes where they had holes. There was no money, you know, to go. When I talk about the movies, the movies were a nickel or a dime for all-day movies, you know. We're talking about a very few pennies. There is something, when I was very little, when I still lived in Crotona Park, the candy store that sold penny candies and so forth, after school let out at three o'clock, they

would get something called a Charlotte Russe, would be delivered. There was no refrigeration, so they would have a glass case, and they would put the Charlotte Russe, was a paper cup, and was cut like a king's crown. …Then, in it, was placed a sponge cake, a yellow sponge cake, and then about this much real whipped cream with a cherry. That was a Charlotte Russe, and once a week I got a Charlotte Russe. We would go to the grocery store, we would wait for the shipment to come in, and then I would have a Charlotte Russe. Irwin also, I don't know if he told you. It was a real treat, and when I think of today, how did the kids appreciate. I don't know with everything they have at their fingertips, I don't know how they appreciate. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You were telling me a story about how your grammar school had a gardening program.

TS: Yes, it was wonderful. I don't know if other schools had it but in the summer, any child who was interested in growing anything, and remember we were silly kids, so we were not exposed to gardening, could come every day and work on the garden. A patch was his or hers, and I grew petunias. I had never grown a thing in my life, and I grew string beans and brought them home. I can't tell you how thrilled I was, and that was the beginning of why I had, underneath it all, always wanted to be a farmer. … The other, I won't tell you the other reason. I might as well. When we lived in Crotona Park and then we lived, everywhere we lived, we had no air conditioning, and the summers were hot and hard in an apartment. … Every summer my father would pack us all into an old beat up car and take us to Spring Valley, New York and look for a farm and knock on the farmer's door and say, "Do you take boarders," and invariably times were bad and they did. For fifteen, from the time I was two till I was seventeen, I spent every single summer on a farm, except maybe a year or two here because I did do the garden and that was when I was about seven. But it instilled such a love for livestock and gardening and grape vines, and everything that when I left Hunter College in New York, I married a childhood friend and the two of us borrowed money. No, first we went to work for a year for Joe Gurevitch in Freehold, New Jersey to learn the business of egg farming, and then we went around and we borrowed money. We only needed a little down payment, it was such a broken down terrible condition farm, but it had two houses--two little, tiny little houses. We liked that idea so we could have a family visit or whatever, and we bought a farm. … Within two years, my sister took her family and moved into that second house, and then my parents followed from New York, came to the farm and built a little one room house, and that's how I landed on a farm, and that's how Irwin and I met, because of the farm. He was working here in Camden at RCA. He didn't want to pay rent, and … he's also an outdoor person as I am, he was looking for a farm. We had a mutual friend. I was dating one of his friends. That was because my husband walked out on me and our little girl and left us with no money. I was already on a newspaper, but I wanted to get rid of my farm, so it was for sale. So Warren Paul, who is a mutual friend, told Irwin, "The woman's editor on the *Evening Press* in Levittown, Pennsylvania, has a farm. Would you like to see it?" He said, "Yes." We met at a luncheon and he got the farm, the child, the family. He got … nine cats and three dogs, got the whole shebang. So that's how I landed on … a farm in New Jersey.

SI: We will definitely get more into that.

TS: Oh, yes, I loved it, it was a dream come true, but I was in my twenties, strong.

SI: It is interesting that you went to these farms. I have heard about that from farmers not from the people that went out to the farms. What would you do during these summers spent on the farm?

TS: I would swim in the lake. I would help collect the eggs. I learned how to push your hand under the chicken and take out hot eggs that she was sitting on. I learned how to do lots and lots of stuff with animals and crops and loved it. I worked on the farm, loved it. Had friends, other people came and friends from New York came, and it was a great life even though I was born and raised in New York and I went to school, a wonderful high school, James Monroe High School and Hunter College, which I despised, but that's a different story, and then moved to Jersey for a farm.

SI: Irwin was telling me you have a story about Prohibition?

TS: Yes, I do. My mother's second oldest sister, her first oldest sister after her was named Sabina and of the seven sisters, she was the only one who became rich, and all the others struggled all their lives through marriage and everything. … One of the reasons that she became rich is that her husband was a bootlegger and she used to help him every day. She would take the newest baby, and they had big coaches, carriages in those days, and she would line bottles up in the bottom of the carriage, put the mattress, put the baby, and around or under the blankets and behind the pillow, she had bottles and she would walk with the baby in the carriage and deliver, come back, load up again, walk. The baby spent a lot of time in the carriage, and that's how they made it financially. They made it big time, but that's how they started in bootlegging days.

SI: You discussed earlier how your mother was a master seamstress. Did she continue working after she started the family?

TS: My father was abusive and I asked my mother when I was very young, "Why did you stay with him? You had a trade, you were a good seamstress." She said, "It was a *shanda*, a shame, for Jewish woman to work after marriage." I said, "Italian women worked, … where's the big shame?" "No, no, no. I couldn't face my family, I couldn't face my friends if I worked," and so she stayed in that terrible marriage, rotten marriage, even though she could have earned her own living and taken care of a child. That was when she had one child, then she had three.

SI: You said your father eventually worked for Metlife.

TS: Yes, so did my brother.

SI: Was he able to maintain his employment through the Depression?

TS: No, that was after the Depression, although you talk about the Depression up until World War II, and to me, the Depression sort of ended much earlier before World War II. I don't remember. He became an agent. When did Papa become an agent? I used to help him with his debit book and I was ten, which means 1936. So he was already an agent in '36.

SI: I am guessing that he was able to maintain his employment and that he was never laid off at any point.

TS: No. He always had a job. He always brought money home, not a lot, and nobody else was working, nobody else was contributing. I was too young. I started working, but I never contributed money to the house.

SI: What did you do?

TS: I started at fourteen, which was the age, at that time, that you could get working papers and every Thursday night and all-day Saturday, I worked at Macy's in Parkchester. They had shops, and that was my first job and I did that till I was sixteen, however when I was fourteen, there was a newspaper in Parkchester called the *Parkchester Press*. They ran a contest; write a story about an interesting person and you can win a prize. So, I interviewed my brother-in-law's friend, who was an artist, and I submitted it. I was fourteen, and I won the prize, which was a real fountain pen with ink, and the whole nine yards, and I loved the whole idea. Well, the next week they ran the second contest with another prize. I didn't go in person, I mailed it. Well, then I went to my, I was a freshman in high school, I went to my Spanish teacher, William Wachs. We called him "Willie" Wachs, sounds like a cartoon. Anyway, I interviewed him, and then I won the prize again. I won a second fountain pen. Then, I got a phone call from the editor, who does not know that I am fourteen, and he said, "Tilly, I'd like you to come into the office, I want to meet you." … I said, "Okay," and in walks this tall, skinny girl with saddle shoes and a poodle skirt and pigtails. He said, "You're Tilly?" I said, "Yes." He said, "How would you like to earn five dollars a week writing interesting stories," and that was my second job. I did that at the same time that I was working at Macy's. Macy's took me through to college, and then at college, where did I work? Actually, there was very little time. I had to take the subway all the way downtown to Park Avenue and 57th Street where Hunter was. At that time it was an all girls' school, big mistake for me to go there. Most of my friends went to Queens College in New York. I should have gone there. I went there because it was a challenge, they only accepted the top students and so I took all the tests and got in, and that's why I landed there. It was not the right school for me. It was just not the right school for me. I didn't like it--loved high school.

SI: You mentioned earlier that as early as ten you were allowed to go down to the Museum of Natural History.

TS: Yes, and all over New York, I walked all over New York.

SI: What was it like being exposed to the different parts of the city?

TS: It was wonderful. I went to Chinatown by myself. For a dollar you could get a big plate of chop suey which was a lot of onions sautéed. I went to the Italian section, the markets. I went to Park Avenue, all the fancy women, and the clothes, and the cars and the buildings. Everywhere, I went down to Orchard Street where they had the push carts with all the vegetables and clothing and everything out on the street. It was a Jewish area and pushcart against pushcart lining the streets, I don't know the name of the area but anyway I went there. I knew New York like the back--by the time I was a teenager, the back of my hand, I knew New York--loved it.

SI: Would you go by yourself or would you go with friends?

TS: Yes, most of the time by myself. … I tried getting my girlfriends interested, not interested, and I loved just going anywhere I wanted. I felt free, free and safe, and all it took was the little few pennies for the subway to get there and back. I used to go at night. I told you I went to the little theaters, the Provincetown Playhouse and so forth in Greenwich Village, got to know all the actors and occasionally would go to, when I was sixteen or seventeen, go to a party that I was invited to by the cast. The cast, you know, after the show would talk to the people in the little theater, it was wonderful. It fostered a lifelong love of theater in me, and then when I married Irwin and he knew nothing about the theater, had never put foot in a theater. We began and I taught him and we began and we've loved theater ever since and he too, but it started then. … When World War II came and I used to go … down to Broadway, and all the sailors and the Marines and the Army men, servicemen were there. I never felt threatened, I never had anybody give me trouble. At night, Saturday night, it was just a playground for me growing up.

SI: Let me jump back a little bit. Tell me about your early education before high school. What did you think of it and of the quality of your teachers?

TS: I had a teacher, Miss Crimm, who was my English teacher in one of the grammar schools. I must have been about twelve, and one day she asked me to stay after school, and I said to myself, "Uh, oh, Tilly what did you do now?" but couldn't remember anything. I stayed, and she said to me, "Tilly, you know, of course, you're going to be a writer." … I looked at her, I was twelve, all she had to judge was my class assignments. I never once thought of becoming a writer. I became a writer by accident. I wrote, I had my own column in the *Monroe Mirror* in high school. I always wrote. I told you I had this little job, and in college I wrote, but I didn't become a professional writer until an accidental event when I was on the phone. I was [in my] early twenties.

SI: What was your parents' attitude towards education and in particular their daughters getting an education?

TS: I was very smart, the only one of the three who was very smart. My sister's high school burned down and she never went back to finish. My brother never finished high school. He got his GED once he was in the service, and there I was, very smart. I come along. Not once was a word ever said to me to encourage me to go to college and go on. One summer, I took a civil service test and scored very high, and so I got a job on Wall Street with the United States

Dispatch Agency, and I was earning thirty-four dollars a week, a civil service job. … My father said to me, "Why do you want to go to college, you're earning thirty-four dollars a week. That's more than most men are earning. You're capable of earning big money in the civil service." So their attitude was non-existent. They never once asked to see anything I did for homework, I was self-propelled. I loved education, I loved reading, I loved learning. I didn't need my parents. My mother, as I told you, could not read, and my father never once looked at any homework or book or anything I have ever done at that time. Once I became a professional writer, then he began to keep my column--I had a syndicated column--in his wallet to show to people, but that's where it began and ended.

SI: I skipped over this question before. I wanted to ask, were there any traditions kept up in your family, anything from Romania, in terms of language or food?

TS: Yes. Both my parents spoke Romanian. They did not speak a word of Yiddish, but the three kids understood every word of Romanian. We all did. We did not know how to speak because my parents insisted that we answer in English. So, it's a shame because there was a language that we could have learned, and we knew, we understood it, but we replied in English. We just knew a few words, that's all. There were no Romanian traditions, I had no religious background at all, unlike Irwin who comes from an Orthodox background. I come from not even a secular, no religious training at all, never put foot in a synagogue. The only thing we did was on Passover, my mother served no bread and on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, everybody fasted in the family. That was the beginning and end of my Judaism. So it wasn't until I met Irwin, who came from an Orthodox background, that I began to. We belonged to a synagogue eventually, and it was hard for me. I felt I was in a foreign land, you know, but I always went to be next to him so he would not be alone at services. So, that was the beginning and end of my Judaism, and nothing from Romania. I have a little box on my dresser, handmade in wood from Romania, but that's all I have left. I used to have embroidered skirts and blouses and everything. They've all, over the years, gone their way. I don't have anything left. … I never went to Romania. We have had the opportunities because I didn't go when Ceausescu was dictator because my aunt went and then could not get out, and had to go to a Russian labor camp, hard labor camp, an American, my father's sister. So, I didn't want to go, and then when he was gone I had lost interest. By then Romania was very run down and sad. It was not a place to go as a tourist.

SI: Growing up in the 1930s, were you aware of what was happening overseas?

TS: Oh, sure.

SI: Were you following the news of what was happening in Germany?

TS: Oh sure, and I can remember clearly, like it was this morning. My father bought the *Daily News*, brought it home, and on the cover was a picture, this big, and it showed the Holocaust victims, the piles of naked bodies, the skeletons, the few people who were alive in those striped suits and starved with the gaunt faces. … I looked at that picture, the first of many, and I was

about maybe thirteen or fourteen and I said to myself, "So, this is what they do to Jews, they burn them in ovens." You don't really think I was interested in pursuing Judaism after that? Most people, when they saw those pictures, said, "I'm a Jew, I am proud of it. This is what they do to their Jews, I will fight it with every breath of my body," but since I had no religious background, I did not feel that way. I thought it was the most horrible thing in the world.

SI: Were you aware of the Bund activities in the United States?

TS: The what?

SI: The Bund? The American Bund?

TS: Yes, I know who you mean. …

SI: Yes, particularly since it was headquartered in New York.

TS: Yes, I was aware through my father. He spoke about it, he read about it, he knew about it, and spoke about it to the family, so we knew about it, but other than that, no.

SI: Had you seen anything in your travels around the city that stood out?

TS: No, unlike Irwin, I never had anything anti-Semitic happen to me until we were adults with children living in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. They made us move, they forced us out, but because I lived in a mixed neighborhood, went to mixed schools, never had a problem, and I was not aware of what the Bund was doing and so forth. I knew, I know of it. I remember Papa talking about it, but beyond that, no.

SI: Where were you when you heard Pearl Harbor was attacked?

TS: I was on a picnic, it was a Sunday. I was on a picnic with my boyfriend's mother and my mother and father, my sister and her husband, and me, and we were in Tibbetts Brook in the Bronx, a beautiful park. We had taken a lunch with us, it was a beautiful day, December 7th, and we got in the car to go home, and my father turned the radio on and we heard about Pearl Harbor. The first response in the car was, "Where is Pearl Harbor," and the second response was, "My God, this means war," and that, my mother, you know, has a son, and my boyfriend's mother, thought of my boyfriend and all the sons. Plus, my boyfriend was killed by a German sniper in Germany after three months in the Army. He was taken out of Syracuse University, and soon to be killed. …

SI: How much older was he?

TS: He was a year older than I was.

SI: How soon after Pearl Harbor did things begin to affect your life?

TS: Well, the boys went away, and a lot of funny things happened as a result. First of all, we all wrote. Not we all--me, my girlfriends. All my brother's friends, my brother was five years older than I was, but my brother taught me how to dance and I was his friend's partner. So everybody learned how to Lindy and Jitterbug and everything because of me. I was tall and I was a good dancer, but when they all went to the war, I wrote letters to everybody. I came home from school and the first thing I did was write, one, two, or three letters a day, and Papa was willing to spend, you know, the letters then were thin, overseas air mail, paper.

SI: The V-Mails?

TS: They were thin. They were about this big, and you had to write real small to get everything and you didn't send regular paper in those days during the war. … So, we all wrote letters, and then my senior prom was coming up and my boyfriend was dead, and I had a friend named Gerry Gilman. He was from Boston, and I adored his family because his mother and father were commercial artists. This was in the Bronx, and his brother Don was a designer of Broadway set designs and I liked Jerry as a friend. So I asked him, "Are you willing to take me to the prom?" He went to the same high school as I did. He said "Of course." I didn't have any money to buy a dress and I had no gown, but I took my sister, my sister was eight years older, so she had two gowns. This skinny, straight haired, eyeglass girl went to the prom wearing a strapless flame chiffon gown with a big feathered bird at my hip. I mean it was so ludicrous, when I think of it, what I must have looked like. Poor Gerry, he never said a word, but anyway, as a friend stepped in, like he went in the Army a year later. … Then, there was Harry DeCola who had either flat feet or he was deaf.

Irwin Spetgang: He had a punctured eardrum.

TS: A punctured eardrum, so he was home, and he became a friend. Well, he was a friend before, but we would go places together and do things together. The boys who were not conscripted stepped in and became pseudo brothers, buddies of the girls who were left, and a few of them landed up with each other and that sort of thing. As far as the war, other than like you couldn't go anywhere with a car, the gas rationing, the lights, the wardens in the Bronx, the foods were rationed. … You couldn't make a party because you didn't have enough stamps to get foods to serve, and then we used to save ten cents a month or a week toward war bonds. By then, there were war bonds, … savings bonds. Beyond that, I told you I was a loner and I would go by myself, but my girlfriends would stay home and cry, but I used to go everywhere by myself when the boys were gone. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

TS: You ready?

SI: Yes.

TS: You asked me what I did on the farms between two and seventeen years of age. Two of the best memories I have in my life from those years, one of them was picking … wild blueberries. We would go out with pots from the farmer's wife and we would go out to wherever the blueberry bushes, tall ones, were. Today, they keep blueberry bushes, the cultivated ones, low so they're easy to pick and not above your head or you need a ladder. Out in the hot sun with the bees buzzing, I would hear the plink of the blueberries hitting the bottom of the pots, filling the pot with blueberries, coming back to the farm house, giving them to the farmer's wife and she would make blueberry muffins and blueberry pies. You name it and she made it with blueberries, and we all shared, and that is one of my most favorite memories. The other also on the farms, we had one particular farm we liked very much, the Goldman Farm in Spring Valley. They had a lake. Anyway, they also had a creek. The water was about eight inches deep, ice, ice cold, and on the bottom of the creek were white smooth stones, little ones. … We had wool bathing suits in those days, and my hair was long, and as a child of about seven, six, eight, I would lie full length on these white stones in the ice cold water, my hair streaming and I absolutely adored that sensation. I loved water from that day. … I adore water as a result, I love lakes, I like streams, I like rain, I like the ocean, you know. I like water, and that was my first memory of water, enjoying water. So you asked me what I liked about the farm. Aside from working on the farm, I played on the farm.

SI: Well, obviously, that would play into your conservation work later on.

TS: Absolutely, it makes sense.

SI: Going back to World War II, you graduated from James Monroe during the war and then went to Hunter College during the war?

TS: … '44, I graduated high school I think. How old would that have made me, '26, '36, '46.

SI: Eighteen.

TS: Yes.

SI: Hunter was a center of where women were trained in military training. I think either the WACs or the WAVEs had a training contingent there I believe.

TS: At Hunter?

SI: I think so. I thought that was the case.

TS: Never heard of it.

SI: No?

TS: I wanted to become a WAC. My father absolutely refused to hear of it. He said, "Only prostitutes become WACs." I said, "I'm not a prostitute. I want to go have that experience." My father threw a fit. So I never went, and now that I know from Irwin and other friends what the military was like, I would not have been a good soldier. I don't take orders easily, I give orders. If there's crowd of people, I become the leader, not the follower, so I would be a very poor soldier unless I became a lieutenant or someone with authority. I can't see myself now that I look back on it and know more about what it was, you know it was just a glamorous idea to me at that time.

SI: Did you know any women in the service?

TS: No.

SI: It was just something you heard about in the news.

TS: Only one woman here, who has died, was a WAVE. Excuse me, excuse me, there's a woman here, Pearl, who was either in the Army or in the Navy because she wears, on Veterans Day, she wears her hat.

SI: Yes, I believe she signed up for an interview. I am curious how women in the military were viewed at the time. You seemed to admire them, but your father had another view of them. From what I understand, many, particularly men, had a negative view of women in the military based on stereotypes.

TS: Yes, that's true.

SI: Did you get involved in anything else, like the Red Cross or the USO?

TS: No.

SI: You mentioned going around the city and the city being filled with service personnel.

TS: Yes.

SI: Would you go to dances, things like that?

TS: No.

SI: Would you have any interaction with servicemen other than just seeing them on the street?

TS: Well, I had so many friends who came in on furlough and we used to visit and eat, and go to the movies and play and dance, and everything. Everybody I knew plus my brother, who was severely wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, and then was in Army hospitals overseas for a year. … They kept saying they wanted to take off his leg, and he kept begging them not to, and try this

and try that. … My parents grew old in that year, they both turned white. No, I had close encounters with servicemen, friends, family, everybody. We all had stars in the windows and you know about that.

SI: Yes, the service stars.

TS: Yes.

SI: Did you interact with anybody from outside your pre-existing circle of friends?

TS: Well, I dated servicemen. I don't know whether I should tell you this. [laughter] I dated an Army officer, his name was Archie. I don't remember the last name, very tall, very good looking. I was about seventeen, and I was on the farm, and he took me back to the farm house and we stood at the door and he kissed me goodnight. … I almost had a heart attack because it was my first French kiss, and I didn't know what was happening. I thought there was something terrible wrong going on, and of course, pushed him off me, and he didn't like that one bit. I had encounters with servicemen. I got marriage proposals. I've had four, five marriage proposals in my life. I accepted two.

SI: You mentioned there was this circle of men who did not get into the service for one reason or another.

TS: Yes, who were friends.

SI: Was there a stigma attached to these guys?

TS: Absolutely. From servicemen, remarks were made when we were out on a date. If there was someone in a suit or informal, well we didn't have denims in those days, but informal slacks or whatever. "What's wrong fella, how come you're not in service? Where is your uniform?" … Maybe they might have been servicemen wearing civilian clothes, you know, but remarks were made. … They were not looked down at by the girls who dated them. Well, not dated, who hung out with them as friends, who went to a museum with one, like I did and so forth. No, never looked down at them. We knew why, each one had a story of why, and they were sure to tell you right away at the beginning. I assume to avoid just that stigma.

SI: During this time you were also working at Macy's and writing.

TS: Macy's and writing.

SI: What was the name of the paper again?

TS: *Parkchester Press*.

SI: *Parkchester Press*, okay. First, with Macy's, did that job change at all because of the war restrictions? Were there limits as what you could sell or was rationing involved?

TS: … No. I worked in the lamps department so I have nothing, you know. …

SI: For the paper, what kind of stories would you write?

TS: About people, interesting people, and as a kid, I had a lot of, there's a Jewish word, *chutzpah*. How would you describe it--nerve. I had a lot of nerve. I asked a lot of, even then, and today I'm known for it. I teach a course at the Jewish Community Center, and it's called "People Talk." I've taught it for fifteen years, and it's for senior men and women from fifty to ninety span, and I ask provocative questions. It's a wild class, so I've always asked questions from the time I was a kid, and I quickly learned in Parkchester and among my relatives and among my friends who had a good story. Who has a good story? … It's very funny, my latest book. I wrote it with Malcolm Wells, who is very well-known in New Jersey and all over the world. He had the nerve to die, my partner. …

SI: How often would you produce pieces for the newspaper?

TS: About once a month, about twelve a year. I was a kid, you know, and I had school work. I was an honor student in an honor class in an excellent school. Plus, I worked at Macy's, you know. So, I was a busy kid and we didn't have television and little gadgets in our hands to play with and video games. We didn't have any of that. So, let's start with, I'll show you, here's my kid's solar energy book. It just came out in paperback, and I told you, they just sold it to Korea, you take that home. You'll get a good laugh out of it, and you'll learn a lot about solar. … Then I just put together, just for the family, this. This is what I do here at Lion's Gate. There are fifty of them in there, and I am now on fifty-five, which won't go in the book. I can't give you one of those, I only made ten, but anyway.

SI: These are some of the stories you worked on.

TS: These are all good stories, these are good stories. … Of course, finding my lead to get into the story is incredibly important, and wrapping it up in a lively manner is incredibly important.

SI: What do you remember about some of the big events from World War II?

TS: I can tell you an event. I was working, as I told you, for the United States Dispatch Agency on Wall Street, and I was working an old switchboard with, have you ever seen them with the plugs? You pull them out, cords. … Well, that was where I was working that day. I look out the window, we're on the sixth floor, and I see tons of pieces of paper, people are throwing out of the window, and I turned to the people I was working with. I said, "I don't know what's going on, but people are throwing paper out of the window." Everybody rushed to the window, and then the boats in the harbor at Wall Street started whistling, and we turned the radio on, and

that's how I found out the German part of the war, the European part of the war, V-E Day, what was that called?

SI: V-E Day.

TS: What were the letters for when Japan surrendered?

SI: V-J Day.

TS: V-J, this was not V-J. This was the European war ended, and then we all ran into the street. People were grabbing each other, and hugging and kissing and singing and dancing, and it was a wonderful day, and I was fortunate enough to have been right there when Wall Street, when it hit Wall Street, so I saw that. I don't remember anything about V-J Day, except it seemed it was horrible. The atom bomb being dropped on Hiroshima, and then two days later, another one, and then realizing people being burned up alive or eventually dying of cancer. It was a horrible, horrible thought, and we didn't know whether Truman had done the right thing or not, how close we were to the end of the war or a Japanese invasion or what in the South Pacific. We didn't know. We'll never know, I guess.

SI: You felt that at the time, it was not something you thought later on after learning about it?

TS: No, I felt that at the time, sure. I was how old already? I was a young adult.

SI: How long did you work for the Dispatch Service?

TS: Two summers.

SI: Did you continue working at Macy's?

TS: Yes, until I graduated high school.

SI: Tell me a little bit about Hunter College. You said you really did not like it, but what was it like?

TS: … Well, it was a problem because at James Monroe High School, I was a very big wheel. I had my own column called "Gremlin Gems" in the *Monroe Mirror*, big newspaper, with my picture at the top. So I liked that, I liked the notoriety, the celebrity. I wrote shows and produced them, directed them. I didn't act in them. I did act in shows at Hunter College. I was in an honor's class that was kept together, forty of us, boys and girls, for the four years of high school. My best friend was Jane Thornton, and we're still in touch to this day. Many of us have been in touch. It was just, I loved my teachers, I loved the classes. I was a very, as I said, I was well-known. It was a very, very happy place and time for me to be, other than the war. … Of course, losing my first boyfriend was horrible, which is why I got married. It was his best friend, of my boyfriend, and we consoled each other into marriage which was a terrible mistake. So that

marriage lasted like very few years, a few years, enough to have a fabulous daughter--fabulous, fabulous. I don't know what my life would be like without her, and Irwin adopted her when she was very little. Anyway, I forgot where we were.

SI: I do not want to bring up something that is painful, but what was it like losing somebody that close to you? Was there a service or any kind of memorialization?

TS: There was a knock at the door and Harry DeCola came to the door. He was the one who had the punctured eardrum, so he was a friend also of my boyfriend, Mel, who was killed, although I didn't know he was killed. There was a knock at the door, and I let Harry in, and he said to me, "Where can we talk privately?" Well, this is a small apartment in Parkchester, there's no privacy. I said, "Let's go into the bathroom." So we went in to the bathroom, we both sat at the edge of the bathtub. I said, "What's up Harry," and he started to cry. I said, "Harry, what's up?" … He told me that Mel, word had just come that Mel had just been killed. Later we found out that he had been shot in the back by a German sniper. Of course, I got absolutely and totally hysterical. Then I went to visit, we, my mother and father, my aunt, went to visit his mother and father, and there was his--how many years has it been--there was his picture and a candle and his mother said to me, "I'm dead," and she was. She was nothing after that for years; nothing. … Then, when I married Marty, we decided to go see, Mel's body was brought over and he was buried in Brooklyn. It was a family grave site, and Marty and I just decided to go to Brooklyn to his grave, which we did, and I stood there. Melvin Klein, and the date of his birth, the date of his death, and I closed that door like a tight, tight drum. I absolutely refused to believe in my mind, that the Mel that I had been, that was my teenage love, and for years I was, in the ground, at that spot where his name was. I absolutely shuttered myself from that thought and I talk about him occasionally. I have his picture on my bulletin board. I have the men in my life on the bulletin board, and my friends, family, all the men in my life, and he's there. You know who he looked like? The first time I saw, I got a call from my sister, "Tilly, there's a new actor you have to go see." I said, "Why, is he that good?" She said, "His name is Richard Gere." That's what Mel looked like, and his picture looks like Richard Gere, a young Richard Gere. Played the violin, was a fisherman, an outdoorsman, and very, very smart, and mean. He was a mean guy, could be mean. He was mean to me at times, but I was so gaga with my first boyfriend. So, I married his best friend who was a friend of mine. I must tell you that right after the war was over, there were millions of marriages, and I sort of fell in with them, it was the thing to do.

SI: Had your first husband been in the service?

TS: He was a tail gunner on a B-29 airplane. Always wanted to be a pilot, didn't pass the test for pilot but was on a B-29. Bought it at the end, finally when after he walked out on us, met another woman who had money, bought his own airplane, got his pilot's license and so forth. That's the direction he went in. … I closed the door, I didn't really close the door, I tightened it. I didn't want to think about it. I was a kid. …

SI: We started off talking about Hunter College and what you did there.

TS: Oh, yes. Anyway, I told you that I was a big wheel at James Monroe. Then I come to Hunter, and at Hunter all the teachers called me … Ms. Forschmidt, which is my maiden name. They never bothered to call me Tilly. All my teachers called me Tilly at high school, never stayed after class for a moment to talk, to be friends with. This one, there was no intermingling between the teacher, the college teachers and the kids at Hunter. I will tell you, to be fair, but there are about ten to twelve women here who went to Hunter College, adored it. The only thing I liked, there were two things I liked about Hunter College. On the sixth floor, they had, I'm going back to nature, they had a, what do you call it with the flowers, and under glass?

SI: A greenhouse?

TS: A greenhouse in which they grew flowers, and I would go up there with my homework and the sun would pour in and make the room hot and wet and smell the flowers. I'd sit on a stool and do my homework, sit there alone. I loved that, but here we are back to nature. I'm always going back there. The other thing is that there was a foursome, a quartet of string instruments and in the auditorium they had a theater. I would go and they practiced, and one of them was a Miss America, Bess Myerson. I think she played the cello, I'm not sure whether it was the cello or what. Anyway, she was in the quartet and while we were both in Hunter, she won the Miss America contest. She was a very beautiful, six-foot tall girl with a nice shape.

SI: She was the first Jewish Miss America?

TS: Yes. That's the only two things I liked about Hunter. I didn't allow myself to like Hunter. I should have gone to a college with boys and girls, not an all girls' school, that wasn't for me.

SI: How competitive was it once you were in there?

TS: I don't remember that being competitive. I didn't make many friends. My friends were on the outside, from high school and Parkchester.

SI: Did you major in journalism?

TS: [laughter] I never thought of being a writer even though Miss Crimm told me when I was twelve, and even though I wrote for the *Parkchester Press* and my school paper in high school, that was hobbies, not work. … Of course, when I went to Hunter College, I signed up for courses to become an English teacher. It seemed the only logical thing for me to do, and of course I never became an English teacher, I became a writer.

SI: You said the thing about your professors only calling you by your maiden name.

TS: Formal name.

SI: Do any of them stand out as being influential?

TS: I don't remember one of them. Oh, they may have been wonderful. … There was not one class I allowed myself to like. I remember Latin and Spanish I was good in. I had five years of Spanish, two years of French and a year of Latin. I was very good in languages, of course, because that's my natural propensity, but Latin, did I hate Latin. I never even tried to get on the paper. It was as if I was shut down, didn't want to, didn't give myself a chance, and there was no one to talk to me in my family, no one was interested.

SI: Did you and your first husband get married while you were still at Hunter or was it after?

TS: No, I never finished Hunter. I left after a few years to go live on the farm.

SI: I thought that was a little bit later.

TS: … When Rutgers came to me when Irwin and I were living in Erlton, called me, and asked if I would be interested in starting a writer's workshop at night for adults. I said, "I would love it, absolutely love it, but you have to know something, I don't have the degree, I never finished." Well, they were a little taken back by that because here I was with a big career going on. … I had a syndicated column in twenty papers and so forth, and they said, the man said, I don't remember his name, "I'll get back to you," and I said to Irwin, "Yes, sure he'll get back to me." Well two weeks later he calls me and he said, "Well, I went before the board, and, considering all your experience in writing, it seems rather foolish for us not to have you on board with the writer's workshop," and I taught for eight years at night, loved it. Had a good time, my classes loved it.

SI: What year did you start teaching there? …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You said it was about 1961 or 1962.

TS: Yes. Can I tell you my funny story about Rutgers and Irwin? … He's going to be angry. One year, our classes were right next door to each other. It was the first time it had happened, and he was giving out blue books, he was giving a midterm exam.

IS: Are you trying to embarrass me?

TS: Yes. Honey, it's such a good story. … His class started to fill out the forms, the booklets, the blue booklets. My class was right next door. I always, to this day, had very, very raucous classes, a lot of laughter, a lot of course conversation.

IS: We were both in the Armitage building, which is one of the Camden class buildings.

TS: Anyway, it was disturbing him and his class.

IS: It was disturbing my class, it wasn't disturbing me.

TS: So he said to his class, "Keep working, I'll be back in two minutes." He opens the door without knocking, my class doesn't know who he is, he stalks in and he says, "Mrs. Spetgang, I'm giving a midterm exam right next door and your students are disturbing me. You're going to have to keep your class down." He then turns on his heel, my class, their jaws have dropped down, turns on his heel and stalks out, opens the door--walks in to a supply closet.

IS: The front door and the supply were right next to one another.

TS: Were right next to each other. My class was watching the door handle. As the door handle turns for him to come out of the supply closet, they get hysterical, absolutely hysterical, but they were quiet after that. I asked them to be quiet, and that was at Rutgers. … I remember it very well. [laughter]

SI: What year did you cease your studies at Hunter?

TS: I was there about three years, two and a half, three years. Had an automobile accident in the middle, and had to drop out, and then I went to night school at Hunter, which made it worse. I worked all day at 57th and Madison at Jordanoff Aviation, and then I would grab a sandwich and go flying up Madison Avenue to where Hunter was to go at night. It was very hard, and I didn't like it anyway, so that's when I dropped out. What year? Well, I left high school in 1944. It would make it 1947--'46, '47.

SI: What were you doing for this aviation firm?

TS: I was working on running the department where all the big plans for airplanes, the drawings, I was in charge of all the drawings. I filed them, I gave them out, I accepted them, all that kind of clerical work.

SI: You told me earlier how you wound up on the farm.

TS: Yes.

SI: Where was the farm again?

TS: In Perrineville, New Jersey, and it's between Englishtown, Freehold and Princeton, Monmouth County.

SI: I live near there in Hightstown.

TS: Oh, wow. Then you know where Perrineville is. Well, the lake, the little synagogue. My farm was right there, a mile in from (Wolfe's?) General Store, behind the church. That's where my farm was.

SI: You described the farm in general. What was it like getting started on the farm?

TS: Everyday was a joy. We worked, physically, so hard. … My sister, who I considered a hot house flower from the Bronx, who arrived on the farm clutching silk lampshades, she was next to me, working, feeding the birds in the chicken coops while the two husbands went to New York, selling eggs and chickens. My mother would set them up in Parkchester on a route and so forth. It was hard work, vaccinating birds and washing eggs, handling eggs, packing eggs. … Of course, feed companies were being subsidized by the government, and eggs were costing, were dropping and dropping in the market place, and it got to the point where it was costing us money to work hard, package the eggs, and sell them. They would come with big trucks, take them away, all the boxes of eggs. It was costing us money every dozen eggs, that's how bad things turned out financially, but I'm telling you, I loved every minute of it. There was a group on the farm, in the farm area, Perrineville, called the Rural Study Group, and they were women farmers and wives of farmers and we would meet once a week in each other's homes. There were about twenty, and we would do book reviews and current events and talk about the best movies or shows or whatever, opera, whatever. It was a lot of fun. We put on shows and that's what led me to my professional writing career. One year I, with a woman named Millie Handle, wrote a three act musical show in the Perrineville area, which was all egg farmers with one potato farmer, called "Make Mine Scrambled." … We took forty farmers, who had never had a foot on a stage, had them painting scenery, making costumes, singing, dancing. I wrote parodies of songs and we put on this show, three nights, raising money for the cancer fund, and we had packed houses in the Perrineville Jewish Community Center. Now, one night in the audience was a woman, Nancy Dubois, and she worked for the *Freehold Transcript* in Freehold, a little paper, weekly. She went back to work the next day raving about this show she had seen. The editor, Gene Gleason said to her, "Who wrote it," and she said, "My friend, Tilly Bratman," was my name at that time, I've had many names--Spetgang is the longest one--and so she gave him my name and number. He called me, he said, "What have you written?" I said, "Well, I wrote all through high school, I had my own column, and did features, and I worked for the *Parkchester Press*, and I wrote in college." You know what, I don't think I wrote in college. I don't remember writing in college except assignments in English, and he said, "Well, would you be interested in a job, you can do it from home." I said, "What kind of job?" He said, "Writing a gossip column for ten cents an inch." Now, he's talking, you know newspapers have narrow columns. He's talking about this much, ten cents, and I said, "Okay, I'll start that way," because I had a party line of eight families on my one phone, and whenever I picked it up people were talking, so I would interrupt and if I would hear that Mrs. "A" was coming in from Florida to visit her sister in Perrineville, I would say, "Listen, this is Tilly. Can I use that in my gossip column," and they always said sure, why not. I got all my stuff, practically everything, the rest I got from the Rural Study Group, from twenty women, and when I was writing this gossip column, I was a Girl Scout leader. … I made my sister my assistant, and we took a troop of girls into the woods for two weeks, and my daughter, Wendy, was six months old in real diapers. There were no paper diapers, disposables, in those days, and I would be washing her diapers in the stream. … When I came home, I wrote an article about it, it was very funny and I wrote it, and I brought it to the editor, Gene Gleason. I said, "Would you run this and pay me for it?" He

read it, he said, "Sure," and he gave me my first byline in the *Freehold Transcript*. A couple of months later, I went to him, and I said, "I'd like to write features." He said, "If they're good enough, I'll run them." I said, "But I want, instead of sending out a camera man and paying him, if I buy a camera and learn how to use it, will you pay me?" My husband had already left, and I was desperate to support my child and me and the mortgage. He said, "Sure." I bought an Argus C3, 35mm, taught myself how to use it. … Then, for close ups and portrait work, I bought a … Rolleicord--not a Rolleiflex--a Rolleicord, and I taught myself to use that for close ups and portraits and I started to earn money, and then I asked him if I could write a weekly column and he said, "Write twelve, so you can prove to me you're not a one, two, or three columnist." I wrote twelve. He said, "You're on," and … I started "Spice of Life" and then I got it changed to "Slice of Life." Eventually, I left there, and I got a job as woman's editor on a daily in Levittown, Pennsylvania. The paper was called the … *Levittown Evening Press*. That's where I met my friend, the man Warren Paul, who knew Irwin. So, you can see how he landed up on the farm and how I became a professional writer. I wrote, eventually I was writing for the *Bulletin*. You're too young to remember the *Bulletin*, there was a big paper in Philadelphia called the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. I was the co-editor of the Sunday magazine until that folded, and when it folded I began writing books.

SI: I want to go through that step by step. How long did you work at the paper in Freehold?

TS: Maybe two years, not even--maybe a year, but I kept moving up very quickly.

SI: First you were writing the gossip column, and then the features. Gossip columns are something that have really gone by the wayside now. What kind of role did it have in the community?

TS: It was more a column about comings and goings, so forth, and someone came to Perrineville to visit family or whatever. It was more that than gossip. He called it a gossip column. It was just a way of spreading the news of the community of Perrineville, so that's what I did.

SI: When you started writing these features, do any of them stand out in your memory?

TS: No, but it felt wonderful taking pictures and seeing them printed with my stories. I had never done that before, and I was good enough so that they reproduced well, and I was very proud of the fact that I knew, I learned how to handle these two cameras. … Oh yes, there is a story, there are many stories, and maybe you know about this. You know where Roosevelt was?

SI: Yes, that was a Jewish community that was created with people from the city.

TS: That's right, and they had a factory there where they worked, sewing and so forth. That's how it started. Well across the Etra Perrineville Road, was a place called the Hechalutz, H-E-C-H-A-L-U-T-Z, and that was a preparatory farm for young people who wanted to immigrate, live in Israel, and work on kibbutzim and I did that story. I'll never forget because I was so attracted, but I was already a farmer, not in Israel, I was not interested in Israel, but they were. … They

were Zionists and so forth, and that was a typical story. I did so many stories about people which is my forte. I went everywhere. I became while I worked for the *Levittown Evening Press*, I also, you wanted to know about the Freehold paper.

SI: You can jump ahead, we can go back.

TS: Okay, my beat was New Hope, Pennsylvania. Now, in New Hope, and around New Hope, there are many, many lovely homes owned by celebrities in New York, especially theater people, and as woman's editor, I was invited to all their parties. So, I had just met Irwin when I was doing this, and I asked him if he'd like to be my escort, and the whole idea of meeting celebrities and going to their homes and so forth was lovely to him, he was all thrilled. I took him to Celeste Holmes' home. We were at a party and he was standing at the buffet and next to him a man introduces himself. It was James Michener, the author, Oscar Hammerstein, the Princess of Siam, all these big people, well-known, and so forth, and that was my beat. So it was fun and Irwin loved it, loved being my escort so he can participate.

IS: That was how I was seduced.

TS: I also was a stringer for two papers in New York. The *Herald Tribune*, which was a fabulous paper which no longer exists, and the *New York Daily News*, which was a real junk sheet--very popular. I went to a nudist colony and I took my little, little girl with me on that story and that was for the *New York Daily News*. I went to Supplees Nudist Colony in Pennsylvania, and I had been asked by groups where, I will mention this is one of my stories, "Did you get undressed," and I said, "Well, I certainly did not want to be conspicuous," and that took care of that. … My daughter Wendy, who was entering kindergarten in the Perrineville two-room school house, the first day the teacher said to the children, "What did you do this summer," and my daughter, Wendy, raises her hand and said, "My mother and I went to a nudist colony." I'll never live that down. I've done well. Of course, once I reached the *Bulletin*, I did fabulous stories, fabulous stories. Cardinal Krol, do you remember Cardinal Krol or you're too young, in Philadelphia, Cardinal Krol, very big wheel in the Catholic Church. He called my boss, my editor, who was also very Catholic and he said, "I'd like Tilly Spetgang to spend a few days in a cloistered convent near the art museum in Philadelphia." It's the Pink Sisters, and they're called Pink Sisters because their habits are mauve, they're not black, and so my editor said to Cardinal Krol, "I don't think that's a good idea. Are you aware of the fact that she's Jewish?" Cardinal Krol said, "I assumed that she was Jewish from the way she taught, writes about her family and food. So, yes," he said, "I'd like her to go, if she's willing." So, I said, "Okay," and I had Irwin drive me to the convent, and he was supposed to drop me off and pick me up in three days, but I got cold feet when I saw the walls with no way out. It's cloistered, they stay there, they don't go out. So I said to him, "I want you to leave the car here in case I have to get out of here." So, when you're talking to him again--well he can interrupt.

IS: In case you need any detail on any of this, we have all the tear sheets out in our storage room, all the *Philadelphia Bulletin* magazines with cover pictures and what not.

SI: Great.

TS: Anyway, he did leave me, and when Sister Mary Margaret met me at the door, she had a big ring of keys. They were a big golden wire, steel gates, and she used a key and we went in and she locked it behind us. Third time she did that, third golden gate, I said to her, "Sister Mary Margaret, how do I, we get out of here in case of a fire?" She said, "That's a good question, follow me." She took me down the hall … in an enclosed garden and courtyard. They grow their food there. A lot of their food they can, and they also play ping pong or whatever games, and in the wall, that enclosed tight wall, which was about ten feet high, was one door. It had a handle on the inside of the door, not on the street side, so you couldn't open it except from the inside. She said, "If there's a fire alarm, go directly to the garden and out this door. Anyway, that was a fascinating story. They took bets at the *Bulletin* because they adopt the, they do not speak except for two hours a day, an hour after lunch, an hour after dinner, that's all. … I had to do all my interviewing in those two hours, and the rest of the time I had to keep quiet, and they took bets, they had running bets on whether Tilly could keep quiet for twenty-two out of twenty-four hours, which I did. Irwin had an experience coming when he left the car for me, and he walked through a rather rough neighborhood, and three young men surrounded him, and they said to him, "Got any money, mister?" … He quickly thought, and he said, "Would I be walking alone in this neighborhood if I had money," and he kept walking, and these three young men were dumbfounded by his remark and didn't follow him. Anyway, that's just one story. I have a million stories. Lakehurst going up, I was the first female they took up in their bubble helicopter, and going down in a submarine. Went to Fort Dix and spent three days in the Army barracks and marching, and my gold tooth was stolen that had come out when I was polishing my boots, all kinds of stories.

SI: Well, I want to get back to Perrineville.

TS: Yes, love to.

SI: Just my familiarity with the area and some of the people I have interviewed who were also farmers in that area, I know a lot of them were refugees who resettled there from World War II.

TS: That's right.

SI: In general, what was the community like there?

TS: Well, we had a dirt road going into our farm and then we had a dirt driveway. The upper area was divided into two farms. Our farm was on the left going that way. On the right lived two refugees, Mr. and Mrs. Fisch, who were brought here by a Jewish organization called HIAS, H-I-A-S, and they were brought here and settled to work on a farm. So they didn't speak English, and we didn't speak Yiddish. We used a lot of shouting and arm waving. … They would ask for help, and how do you do this, and how do you do that. There were very few refugees. Most of the people in Perrineville were young, idealists, like me, who came from Philadelphia and New York City, to settle on a farm. It was a dream. At that time, a woman

named, I think, Betty MacDonald, wrote a book called "The Egg and I," and as far as the Perrineville area, we had the lake with a bar right across the street from the lake. We had a rope that got us into the lake. We had row boats. We ice skated in the winter time, and down the street was the synagogue and the community center. The people were mixed. We had the Jews and Gentiles; farmers. I would say, in Perrineville, most were Jewish, but we did have Gentiles too, and in the Rural Study Group, we were mixed women. … Our friends, of course, were mixed, but we all had babies at the same time, and it was just great, just great. Worked hard, physical, hard, and played hard. New Year's Eve was a big deal. We'd go to the Roosevelt School with Ben Shahn's murals on the wall, world famous, and get drunk. I used to drink occasionally in those days, I don't drink anymore. It was an idealistic time of life, and because we were young and strong and in good health, it was extremely enjoyable. The only thing sad about that time was that my young marriage broke up very quickly because Marty could not handle being a parent, and as soon as we had a child, he could not take it. He didn't know how to behave, he was frightened of being, the responsibilities of being a parent, and so he walked. Left us with no money, and nothing, and it was a very big struggle for me, and I lost a lot of weight, became very skinny, looked terrific in clothes. Then I got a divorce, and then two years later, I met Irwin, and we got married. He came to the farm on summers and weekends. … In the beginning he thought he could commute to Camden to RCA. He tried it, it was too difficult. It was over fifty miles away, it was a tough commute.

SI: They did not have the modern highways that we have now.

TS: All backcountry roads.

SI: After you were done with the Freehold paper, how did the opportunity for the Levittown paper come up?

TS: I felt the time had come to move on to a bigger paper with more responsibilities and more opportunities to write. … So I went, I looked at the paper *Editor and Publisher*, and they were looking for a woman's editor, and I was interviewed and hired on the spot. I gave, once I was woman's editor, I was looking for, I had three women working for me, I needed a third, and I advertised in *Editor and Publisher*, and one day, a young woman with a great gift of gab walked in. Her name was Rose DeWolf, and I gave her her first job, right out of Temple University in Philly, and she went on to become a very fine writer and wrote books and so forth. Well, I've written books too. [laughter]

SI: It is striking looking back at women getting into journalism at this time. There were very prescribed roles for women in journalism and then your generation sort of pushed against it.

TS: Yes, you wrote obituaries if you were a woman. But I never had to do that, but listen Shaun, I did everything in a newspaper office. If the floor needed sweeping, I swept it. If someone needed a cup of coffee, I got it. If we had to set type on a Wednesday night for the Thursday edition, I learned how to set type upside down and backwards with hot lead. You did what was needed and you worked and you learned. Today, it's so stylized, you have to go to

college, you have to go for a journalism degree. I never had a journalism class. I don't know how to type. I'm very fast, but I am not a touch typist, no one in the office, I was the only woman, none of the men in the office was touch typists. None, none of us knew how to type. We didn't learn it.

SI: You said you would do everything from sweeping the floors to the type.

TS: Of course.

SI: Did everyone do that?

TS: Everyone did it. Everyone lent a hand. It wasn't just because I was a woman. I never ever had a problem in fifty, sixty years of a career being a woman. I always earned the same salary, I did the same work. Of course, for a time, I was doing investigative reporting as a stringer for the *Herald Tribune*, and one of my stories led to quite a few problems. I was given the assignment of Jersey migrant farm housing. The way they lived, what were the conditions, and so I got my little beetle bug and went to a nearby potato farm. … I knocked on the door and I saw the one outhouse for a whole like twenty families, it was ridiculous, horrible, and I walked in, and I interviewed the migrant workers who were there. It was after work, and in the crib, standing, was like a one and a half, two year old little boy, and he was missing an arm from here to here. I said to the mother, "How did your son lose his arm," and she said, "I had to leave him, when he was a baby, in the crib, and I went out to pick the potatoes, and rats got at his arm." I took pictures, and I gave them to the *Herald Tribune*, and then they ran them this big on their front page which led to a grand jury investigation. I went back with my editor, this was when I was still on the *Transcript* working for the *Herald Tribune* also, and we were shot at by the farmer. He saw us, me, he immediately started shooting at us. We jumped in the car and left, and the grand jury investigation forced these farmers to put in running water and a big expense, you know. Now, the result of all that is, I was coming home from a meeting at eleven o'clock at night on a farm dirt road, narrow, and no lights, no backup lights then on cars, no lights, nothing, black. … In the middle of the road, so that I couldn't get by, was a car, four doors were open, and there were four men standing at the doors waiting for me. Now, I knew what would happen if I stopped, so I jammed the reverse, stick shift, of course, and went careening in the darkness back up the road and I went right to Max. I don't remember his last name, he was the sheriff, woke him up, he got his gun, threw his coat over his pajamas, and we went back, and of course, they were gone. The next morning, my father said to me, "Tilly, I want you to get out of investigative reporting. I want you to go back to feature work. You have a child who needs you. You cannot take those chances," and I agreed, and I became a good feature writer, but, from that day on, my father went out to my car before I left for work and turned the key to make sure there were no explosives. So, you asked me about stories, there are a few stories.

SI: That is pretty amazing.

TS: Yes, wonderful for when you're old and you want to tell stories.

SI: What year was that approximately?

TS: What year? A long time ago.

SI: That was probably mid-fifties?

TS: Well, let's see. Wendy was born in '50 and she was about, Marty had already left, about '52. Are your questions going to be heard?

SI: Yes.

TS: Okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

TS: … I'm good at three things as far as being a journalist. I am very good at finding a good story, digging it out, finding it. It's almost as if I'm a magnet and they jump at me and stick to me to even today, at my age, … as I am moving through life, stories keep jumping out at me. Of course, I'm not writing about them anymore. So, finding a good story. The next thing is the lede, L-E-D-E, which is the opening graph to a story. I am an excellent lede writer. I know how to hook a reader so that they say to themselves, "Oh, this is interesting, I want to read more." The third thing is I am crystal clear in what I write, so that I don't write down to people, but if I have a choice of a very, very obscure word and a word that will be recognized by the majority of readers, I will always go for the recognizable word. I will not do what many writers do. They show off their skills, and they will choose obscure, difficult [words]. I'm not saying I write three letter words, I don't, but they will pick a French word or whatever, I don't, I won't do that. So those are my, other than writing, those are my three strengths as a journalist. I just wanted to say that.

SI: Those are good points.

TS: Yes.

SI: When you were working in Levittown, were you living in the area or commuting from the farm?

TS: No, I lived on the farm, I commuted every day.

SI: Was it difficult to get yourself into that community living so far away? Freehold obviously is close to Perrineville, but to integrate yourself into the community you are covering?

TS: You mean Levittown?

SI: Yes.

TS: Very difficult. Sometimes I would get mail, especially if I would write a story, then people would respond so I would get fan mail with other story ideas. I would get connections, one story to the next story. If I knew something was going on that was special, I would go to that event, cover it, and pick up stories or contacts. I would network and, of course, New Hope, which was my area, that was my beat, you know, it's a great place, artists and writers, and composers. It was a great place to be a writer. So, I've never had difficulty finding stories, and here I am in this commune called Lion's Gate. It's really a CCRC of elderly people, and, you know how many of them have said to me, "I have no story," and then of course I write a very good story about them. My god, no one is more surprised than they are. Most people are unaware of how the story of their lives collectively tells. They don't think that way, I do, or every writer does.

SI: I agree--most people I speak to start off every interview with, "I don't have anything to tell you."

TS: [laughter] Yes.

SI: You were hired as a women's editor.

TS: Yes.

SI: What did that position entail? It is a type of position that does not really exist anymore.

TS: That's right, now that women do men's work, you know, which I began to do when I hit the *Bulletin*. I did every assignment that a man would do except sports, I don't know anything about sports, I'm not interested. Anything "soft" I would do. If there was a ball, if a celebrity was coming to sing, I would interview the celebrity in their dressing room, the Latin Casino, I went to every show. I was up front, I interviewed every entertainer that came. I interviewed people in the audience who were celebrating birthdays and so forth and so on, soft stories, people stories, a lot of people stories. In Levittown, if I heard of a good story, you know, someone saving a person or a fireman or whatever, and they were not the--no politics, no sports. I'm thinking of what I did not do. Most I did, cooking, which I would be interested in today, you know, that always interested me, nature, I was and am and, of course, my work in the environment started early through a man we met named Malcolm Wells, "Mac" Wells and I have to tell you about Mac at length. I can't make it short because he made such a difference in our lives, both our lives. I was given the assignment at the *Bulletin* to write a story about him because he had just built an underground office on Cuthbert Boulevard in Westmont. It's still there today. In walks this tall, slim, gorgeous looking man with a white beard at that time, no, not a white beard, black at that time, it turned white, however, a non-speaker, hard, tough interview. When he talked about his building, he was fine, anything else, nothing, "nada," so I said to him, "Mac, I live in Cherry Hill, you live in Cherry Hill, let's write letters to each other. That way I'll get to know you and I can do the story, a big front cover story." Well, it turns out the man is a fabulous writer--can't speak, excellent writer. Make a very long story short, he and Irwin and his wife and I became very, very tight friends. We opened up a business, a solar energy business, at a time

when no one knew what the heck solar energy was used for, what it is, where do you get it, how much does it cost, and when the men would go out on a call for an installation of solar, they would spend all their time answering questions. So Mac came to me and said, "Tilly, you're a writer, please write me a little book that we can give out answering all the questions about solar energy." That was my first book, it's on the wall, it's called, *Tilly's Catch a Sunbeam Coloring Book*. It was a coloring book for kids. Mac had a wicked sense of humor, very funny and very simple, and we sold [it]. We had seven printings that, without advertising, went across the country from California here to Jersey, and that started the whole thing about the environment. … He gave up his business, he had eight architects working for him. He led a high life, a luxurious life, and he began to realize how architects are helping ruin the world. … Things like paving over, making parking lots without making the rain water able to come back to the earth and the aquifer. He made us aware of the environment which we had never given a thought to until we met Mac Wells. That was a very long time ago, the two men were asked to make a big exhibit at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, which they did, a working solar thing so that people could feel heat coming from the outside and hot water and so forth. … Then we went on to write serious books, and then I went on to write other books, and I made a writer out of him because he was a natural writer and I worked with him for six months and got him a weekly column in the *Bulletin Magazine*. He became so good, and then he wrote thirty-nine books. So that was the Mac Wells story made very short. Now, something about when I was in Levittown.

SI: We were talking about being a women's editor.

TS: Yes, I did soft stories.

SI: It sounds like you enjoyed the stories.

TS: I enjoyed everything. If I had to do it over again, the whole thing as far as being a journalist, I would jump at the chance from day one, from the gossip column up. Loved it, learned, was good at it, made people happy and enjoy, plus I got tons of fan mail all of which I've thrown out. [laughter]

SI: You were trying to sell your farm, and that is how you met Irwin?

TS: Yes. We kept it for about three years and we were taxed off. The taxes were too expensive and unfair. We did not have birds anymore, the coops were crumbling, the houses were crumbling, and they kept taxing us as if we were a working farm, and so we sold it for a song and got out because Irwin's job was in Camden.

IS: Long commute.

SI: Yes, I can imagine without 195 or some of these other highways.

IS: I took back roads through Mount Holly and too often I'd meet up with herds of cattle that often moved from one side of the road to the other and I'd be in the middle of it. That was before

air conditioning, I had the windows open, some big old cow would put her head in and drool all over me, and I'd get to RCA and the first stop was the men's room to clean up.

TS: I know I'm talking out of sequence, but I'm thinking of it because I showed you that picture. Did you ever hear of the Rickshaw Inn? Now, you're from northern, mid-Jersey. It was a very, very, very fancy hotel that was built here and before they opened they gave a weekend party for the press, newspapers, magazines, radio, television people and their spouses, and they had Robert Goulet as the host, and of course, I took Irwin and we had a wonderful weekend of eating lobster and steaks and we had a blast. I was standing and talking to some, we were all newspaper friends, we were all together, and I was standing and talking about a story to a group of friends, and a strange man taps me on the shoulder, and he says to me, just like this, "Would you like to be on the radio," and I looked at him and I said, "With this Bronx accent, you want me to be on radio?" He said, "I like the way you talk, and you've been a newspaper woman." He had asked about me, and he knew how to ask questions and he said, "Here's my card, come see me, I want to audition you." Well Irwin and I thought it was a con game of some sort, couldn't take it seriously. However, I said to Irwin, "Why don't you come with me? I'll call him, and that way I won't be alone, and I won't walk into something peculiar." It was legitimate, and I got my own radio program on WKDN. It was a daily interview show, which I did when I was at the *Bulletin*. You can see that I worked two, three different types of writing, and radio, and talking, and teaching jobs. I was teaching at Rutgers when I worked at the *Bulletin* at night.

SI: You were very busy.

TS: Yes, I prefer that even to this day.

SI: Where was the Rickshaw Inn? Was it in Camden or Philadelphia?

TS: Cherry Hill.

IS: Cherry Hill, right across from the horse track.

TS: Yes, right across from the race track. It was a gorgeous hotel. …

SI: After you sold the farm in Perrineville you moved to Cherry Hill?

TS: No, we moved to … Westmont for a year, and then we moved to Erlton.

IS: Which is a part of Cherry Hill, or at the time it wasn't Cherry Hill yet, it was still Delaware Township, then they changed the name.

TS: … Then we moved to Cherry Hill, and we were there for fifty years.

IS: No, then we moved to Woodcrest.

TS: That's Cherry Hill. Woodcrest is Cherry Hill, honey.

IS: So, is Erlton.

TS: Yes, all right. …

SI: Which was the community that you said anti-Semitism drove you from?

TS: Erlton.

SI: How long did you live there before that happened?

TS: Ten years.

SI: Irwin told me his version of the story, but could you tell me what you remember?

TS: Well, he was in Florida looking for another job, and I was alone for the weekend with the children, and we were invited to a friend's house for dinner and, of course, we went. When we came back, the entire front porch had horrendous garbage ground in by shoe marks, and things I won't even mention, were on that porch--so obscene. I went in the house, I got on the phone, I called Irwin in Florida, and I said, "Honey, they win, we lose, we're leaving." We had had incidents, nothing as bad as this. Our daughter Wendy had a new pair of sneakers. On the bus the kids used to wear their sneakers around the neck, one here, one here. They took a razor, cut the shoelaces, threw the shoes in her face and said, "Here, you dirty Jew." That was our kid. They both had incidents so I said, "They win, we lose, we leave. Let them have Erlton to themselves."

IS: You have to understand, the prejudice wasn't just against Jews.

TS: No, it was against Catholics.

IS: The Catholic family that lived across the street from us also had problems.

TS: Yes, they sent their kids to a private school because of it. … They were Baptists, and they had a church up the road on Route 70. We had many incidents. We loved the house, it was an old farm house. We had a double lot with big old tulip poplar trees. We loved it, but that was it.

SI: Did you ever feel compelled to write about it in any of your columns?

TS: Never.

IS: We also thought that might draw more--as it was, Tilly's column, very often drew …

TS: Hate mail.

IS: Hate mail.

TS: I got tons of fan letters, but a few hate mail, sprinkled.

SI: What would draw the most hate mail? Can you give me an example of a story that would draw the most hate mail?

TS: Oh, I don't remember. Anything that indicated, anything that smacked or smelled of being Jewish. I never said that in print, ever, but like Cardinal Krol said, "I assumed she was Jewish from the way she writes about family and food." So, some things are pretty obvious.

IS: Well that could be Italian just as well, or any ethnic group.

TS: That's true, family and food, Italian, same thing. Just one of those things. …

SI: How long did you have the radio show?

TS: Two years; they got sponsors and that was fun.

SI: Would you be interviewing local people?

TS: Yes, well, writers, artists, teachers.

IS: Often she would have the guests as anonymous so that they could speak freely.

TS: About their lives, their marriages--the sort of stuff you see on television today, I did forty-five years ago. It was fun.

SI: If you gave people anonymity, were they pretty open about their lives?

TS: Such funny stuff like one woman said that she waited every night for her husband to go to bed, and then, of course, she went to his pants and took all the change out, and whatever was in his wallet, she cut in half--take half for herself and half leave for him, you know, little things like that, funny things.

SI: How did the opportunity to work at the *Bulletin* come about? Did you go to work at the *Bulletin* or did you go right to work for the magazine or were they kind of together?

TS: They're together. *Discover Magazine* is the *Bulletin's* Sunday magazine.

SI: Were you hired to work on the magazine or were you hired to work on the paper?

TS: I'll tell you. … It was a snowy Sunday. There was a knock at the door when we lived in Erlton, and I opened the door and there was my friend, Rose DeWolf who I gave the job to, her first job to, and with her was a very good looking Hungarian freedom fighter, and his name was Francis (Laeping?) … and they came in to the fireplace and Rose said, "Tilly, I had to have you meet Francis because your words go with his pictures." … He hands me a box to look at his pictures. I leave the group, and I go in the kitchen, and I look through maybe forty, fifty pictures and he is good. However, one picture talked to me, and I picked that one picture out of the whole box and I went back, and I said, "I'll try and do some kind of photo essay on this picture." I had never done one, and that week I wrote it, I sent it to Francis, he approved it, and he worked at the *Bulletin*. He hand-delivered it to the editor, Paul Murphy. Are you getting the picture, hun?

IS: No, I'm getting the response when the piece was published.

TS: They bought it immediately. They called me up, it was one of the most thrilling calls I've ever gotten because it meant the "big time" for me. I'd always been a regional writer, and this meant Philadelphia, big newspaper. Anyway, I was a freelancer, and they ran this story that I had written and he had used his photograph. A lot of letters came in, but this letter I saved, the one. It was from the vice president of N. W. Ayer, which was the biggest advertising agency in America at that time, and he was a big wheel, and I don't have glasses. I'm going to let you carefully read the letter.

SI: You want me to read it on the record?

TS: Yes, sure.

SI: Okay. Before I read this, can you just briefly explain what the photo was and the essay was about?

TS: Show it to him.

IS: I'll get you the book.

TS: It was of an old man, the back of an old man wearing a carucal hat walking on a street in Philadelphia in the snow. Do you have it, oh in the book? I thought we had it. Honey, we have it. Oh no, I have a different story on the wall. Anyway, I did a book of my best short writings and his picture is in that book.

IS: Here's the picture.

TS: See the picture and the essay. It's easier to read, if you want to read the essay, I don't know. Okay, this letter came in.

SI: It's addressed to the editor of the magazine. "Dear Mr. Bergman, this is the very first fan letter to an editor of a magazine that I have ever felt compelled to write, but I simply could not let the *Walk in the Snow* piece from yesterday's *Bulletin* magazine go by without extending my sincere compliments for one of the finest productions I have seen in a long while. I searched your editor's notes for some background on the author and photographer. I certainly hope the next time you use their work, which could be every week for my taste, you will let their admirers know a little bit about them. I think they are both pure artists. Cordially, E.G. Gallagher, Vice President, Executive Director of Copy Department. … It was January 28, 1964.

TS: When Bergman got this letter, he called me, he says, "Start writing." Now, I was a freelancer. I was not working for the *Bulletin*, and I must have written them maybe for a year, every week, they appeared in print, tons of fan mail. … Then, I was sick in bed on a Thursday, it was raining in the winter and Rose DeWolf called me up again, and she said, "Tilly," and she worked for the *Bulletin*. She said, "Tilly, the Sports Editor was just named Executive Editor of the Sunday magazine, *Discover*. He's looking for a right hand man and I told him about you, can you come in and meet him now?" I'm sick in bed with the flu and it's raining. I said, "Sure I can." Got up, got dressed, drove to Philadelphia, met him, Jack Wilson, had a wonderful interview and then toward the end of this wonderful interview, I said, I dropped a bomb, I said, "Jack, I have a thirteen year old at home. I want to be home when she gets home from school. I don't want her being a latchkey child," and he said to me, "I'm sorry, I need someone here all the time." Okay, I put my coat on, I walked to the door, and I had my hand on the door handle. I turned to him, and I said, "Jack, you're making the biggest mistake of your life," and he said, "Why?" I said, "Because what I can do," I wanted to work three days a week. "What I can do in three days is going to take someone else two weeks to do," and I walked out. Went home, got undressed, got back in my sick bed, the phone rings an hour later, "It's Jack Wilson, can you report for work on Monday?" It took three years for me to find out what happened between the time I left and the time he called me. He went out in the city room and he went to all the Jersey writers and said, "Ever hear of Tilly Spetgang," and they all said, "Hire her." That's how I got my job.

SI: In the next session, I want to get more into your career in the *Bulletin* with the magazine, these other aspects of your life and then your work with the conservation movement. To wrap up this session, you both got married in 1957. Did you have more children after that?

TS: Yes. We have a daughter, Valeri. She's nine years younger than Wendy, they're like this. She lives in Virginia, Wendy lives with her husband in Mexico. We had two daughters, and as I said, Irwin adopted Wendy when she was very little when we got married. And there's a rotten story which I won't tell about how he managed to adopt her.

SI: Is there anything else you want to add to this session?

TS: Yes, I'm glad there's going to be another session because I want to talk a lot more about the environmental work that we have done. I feel that it is our mission in life, other than family, raising our kids was the most important thing that we've ever done. Career is important but the

work that we did from day one to this day is more important than my career and Irwin's. I feel that way. I don't know how Irwin feels.

IS: It certainly has more of a lasting effect.

TS: Yes, I feel, my feeling, very strong feeling, is that you leave the world a better place than the one that you've came into, and I feel that the work that Irwin and I have done in our own small way is very persistent and far-reaching. So, that's important. So, today when I asked you, who uses this audio information, these interviews, and you told me environmentalists would be interested. Then I became very interested in what we were doing. Up until then I was curious, I thought it might be an interesting afternoon or morning, but as soon as you said environmentalists might use it in the future, then I really felt it was important.

SI: Well, again, that is something we will definitely get into next session, and I know we have to wrap up now. Thank you both, I appreciate all your time today.

TS: It was fun.

SI: Thank you again for lunch, thank you.

---END OF INTERVIEW--

Reviewed by Katie Ruffer 10/23/12
Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 1/9/13
Reviewed by Tilly Spetgang 2/27/2013