

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOEL R. STERN

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Sandra Stewart Holyoak: This begins an interview with Dr. Joel Richard Stern at 4069 East Yucca in Phoenix, Arizona, on December 23, 1996. The interviewee is Dr. Stern. The interviewer is Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Dr. Stern, I would like to begin the interview by telling you how much I appreciate your participation in the oral history project and to ask you to answer a few questions about your parents. If you like, could you state your date of birth and where you were born?

Joel Stern: I was born January 31, 1923, in Newark, New Jersey.

SH: Can you tell us about your parents? Let us begin with your father.

JS: My father was born someplace in New Jersey, as was my mother.

SH: Could you give us your father's name?

JS: Irving Stern was my father's name.

SH: Was your father also born in Newark?

JS: Someplace in New Jersey, but I'm not sure where, the same with my mother.

SH: Do you know where any of your grandparents came from?

JS: My grandparents, ... some of them came from Europe. ... Whether they all came from Europe or not, I don't know.

SH: Do you have any siblings?

JS: I have a brother who lives in Florida.

SH: What is his name?

JS: Eugene.

SH: Is he older or younger?

JS: Younger.

SH: Can you tell me a little about where you went to elementary school?

JS: Elementary school, ... part of the time, I went to Avon Avenue School in Newark. That's the only elementary school I can remember.

SH: Where did you go to high school?

JS: Southside High School, also in Newark.

SH: What did you think of Newark? The director of this project, Dr. Piehler, is absolutely in love with Newark. He defines it as one of the finest cities in the country.

JS: Surely, you jest.

SH: [laughter] No, he is quite serious. What did your father do while you were growing up?

JS: My father was an attorney.

SH: How did the Depression affect your family?

JS: Seriously.

SH: What were the consequences that stemmed from the Depression?

JS: Well, to give you an idea, every now and then, we had enough money to get a pint of ice cream for the family. That was a treat.

SH: What kind of a family unit did you have? Did you have a lot of aunts and uncles around?

JS: Yes, we had some aunts and uncles around, yes.

SH: In Newark, was your family your community, or were you involved with other children in Newark?

JS: Oh, sure, many kids on the block and in school.

SH: What did you do in school for extra-curricular activities?

JS: I'm not sure we did any, ... [if] I did anything in school in the way of extra-curricular activities.

SH: What was your favorite subject in high school?

JS: I didn't have any particular favorite subjects. They ... were all satisfactory.

SH: Did you have a teacher or a mentor in high school that sent you in the direction of your studies?

JS: No.

SH: Do you have a teacher that you remember at all?

JS: I remember a couple from high school. There was one teacher who, believe it or not, was very popular with the football team.

SH: In what way? [laughter]

JS: In that she was young and very attractive.

SH: [laughter] That should take care of that. Do you know what subject she taught?

JS: I don't remember.

SH: Where did your father get his education?

JS: I don't remember.

SH: You are not sure?

JS: No.

SH: Did your mother have any college education at all?

JS: Somewhat. She was a teacher, so she must have had some college training at least.

SH: Where did she work?

JS: In Newark, special education classes.

SH: Did your father have his own firm?

JS: He had his own firm, I guess.

SH: Do you know if he had any partners?

JS: There were no partners. It was just ... my father, yes.

SH: Did your father specialize in any particular field?

JS: Not to my knowledge.

SH: Were you involved in any of the temple activities?

JS: I was not engaged in any temple activities.

SH: Was your family?

JS: I don't think so.

SH: When you left high school, why did you decide on Rutgers?

JS: Because I got a full scholarship.

SH: Who sponsored the scholarship?

JS: One of our next door neighbors was a Representative from the State House of Representatives.

SH: Do you remember his name?

JS: I don't remember. It was a woman at that time and I don't remember her name.

SH: She sponsored you for the scholarship, and then you did four years of undergraduate study at Rutgers.

JS: Yes.

SH: What year did you enter Rutgers?

JS: 1939.

SH: When were you aware of what was going on in Europe?

JS: 1932, approximately.

SH: What were the reports coming back to your family and the community in Newark saying? Did you get your information through your school, your family, or the news?

JS: In the news, radio, in those days, newspapers.

SH: At what point did you realize that America would probably become involved in the war?

JS: Well, certainly by 1936.

SH: Your family felt that way. Even when you were in high school, you thought this.

JS: Oh, sure.

SH: When were you aware of Pearl Harbor?

JS: Pearl Harbor Sunday. ... I was seated at my desk in Winnants Hall at Rutgers, listening to a football game, and the football game broadcast was interrupted by the news of Pearl Harbor, [that

it] had been bombed.

SH: What did you do after that?

JS: The next day, at the bookstore, we heard President Roosevelt's announcement that ... we had become involved in a war and my initial deferments were all because of my eye sight. I was 4-F for several years.

SH: You continued your studies [question not intelligible]

JS: Yes.

SH: When did you graduate from Rutgers?

JS: '43.

SH: Then you went directly into the Rutgers graduate program.

JS: Yes.

SH: Whom did you study under?

JS: In Agricultural Biochemistry, with William Russell.

SH: What were you studying?

JS: We were engaged in research, Vitamin A, metabolism, in those days.

SH: Did you initiate this study with him during your four years?

JS: No.

SH: This was just a program that you applied for.

JS: Yes.

SH: Where did your interest in research come from? Was there something in your four years at Rutgers that sent you in this direction?

JS: I can't remember that far back. [laughter]

SH: We will just concentrate on the four years before you started the graduate school program. What were you involved in at Rutgers?

JS: I was on the fencing team and I wrestled for one season. I was on the newspaper, *Targum*.

So, I was relatively active.

SH: When you were on the *Targum*, what was your job assignment?

JS: I was a lowly reporter.

SH: What were your specialties?

JS: Reporting, on a low scale.

SH: Were you involved in any of the Greek societies?

JS: No.

SH: Were you involved in the dances?

JS: No.

SH: Were there a lot of Greeks on the football team?

JS: I don't follow you.

SH: What activities kept you busy during your four years?

JS: Like they say, with the athletics and the *Targum*.

SH: That was your social life.

JS: Yes.

SH: Did you go home only on holidays or did you stay at the school?

JS: I went home on holidays and, sometimes, weekends.

SH: Were your grandparents living at this time?

JS: Some of them were, some had died.

SH: After you started in the agricultural graduate program, working on Vitamin A, did this then take you into your Ph.D. program?

JS: No, that took me, subsequently, into the Ph.D. program.

SH: And did you [question unintelligible]

JS: Yes.

SH: Did you continue with the same professor and research?

JS: Yes, yes, but, the subject change[d] from Vitamin A to Vitamin B-12.

SH: After that, where did your research take you?

JS: After I got my Ph.D., I went out to Washington State to do nutrition work with the Department of Poultry and Husbandry out there. Subsequently, I went to Chicago to do medical research, and, later on, since I was in the medical group, I continued there with the hospital, [the] clinical laboratory and chemistry laboratory in the hospitals.

SH: What were you focusing on?

JS: In the hospitals?

SH: Yes.

JS: After I did research, I just ran the chemistry laboratory in a couple of hospitals.

SH: You were not specifically doing research.

JS: No, no, I was not doing research then.

SH: When did you meet Mrs. Stern?

JS: I met Mrs. Stern in Chicago, at Michael Reese Hospital.

SH: What was Mrs. Stern's occupation?

JS: Mrs. Stern was a resident in hematology at that time. I was in the Department of Pediatric Research.

SH: Did you finish together?

JS: No. She went off to work in a children's hospital and I continued at Michael Reese for a year or two.

SH: What year were you married?

JS: We were married, [laughter] 1944. Is that right?

Charlotte Cohen Stern: What?

JS: We got married in '44.

CS: No, I don't think so.

JS: '54.

CS: Yes, that's better.

JS: '54.

CS: What's ten years more or less? [laughter]

SH: Where is Mrs. Stern from?

JS: Green Bay, Wisconsin, home of the Packers.

SH: Do you still follow the Packers?

JS: Religiously.

SH: What about the Giants?

JS: We are Packers fans.

SH: Okay, that answers that question. [laughter] Did you have to explain to anyone during the war why you were not serving in the military?

JS: All that I had to do was say that, "I'm 4-F."

SH: Did your friends act differently toward you?

JS: No, no, there was no ill feeling about it that I noticed.

SH: Did you ever feel that you suffered any bias?

JS: No.

SH: Did you see anything that made you think that you were blacklisted?

JS: From personal experience, no.

SH: Did you hear reports of it?

JS: No, no, I heard nothing about it.

SH: We have students who are doing research in that area. Now, I am going to ask you a few questions about Mrs. Stern, so maybe we should keep her nearby.

JS: Are you listening?

CS: What?

SH: Would you state her full name for me?

JS: Charlotte Cohen Stern.

SH: Would she like to tell us when her birth date is?

JS: July 1, 1927, [laughter] '28, '26, '39, whatever, 1927.

SH: Does your wife have any ethnic background that you would like to discuss? [laughter]

JS: I think she is a pretty loyal American citizen. How do you mean "ethnic background"?

SH: Well, I think that a lot of people want to know if she is Hungarian, or English, or Irish.

JS: I think we are both from, or, rather, our grandparents were from Poland.

SH: Okay.

JS: ... And Europe. No, where?

CS: Half of them were from Russia and Austria.

JS: Half were Austrian and where?

CS: Austria and Russia.

JS: ... And Russia, okay, Austria and Russia.

SH: Was all of her education done in Green Bay, Wisconsin?

JS: She went to school in Wisconsin and went to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

SH: From the university and then into the residency in Chicago, what was her background? Where did she go from there? What degree did she obtain?

JS: She got a medical degree from the University of Wisconsin, and then, she went to this hematology residency in Chicago. Then, she, as I said, worked in this hospital school for

children in Chicago.

SH: Did she work after that?

JS: Yes. After that, we moved out here and she was a resident in psychiatry at Maricopa General Hospital. Then, she worked as a psychiatrist for some ten years. Her office was in Scottsdale.

SH: When did you move to Arizona?

JS: 1976.

SH: I understand that you have two sons.

JS: Yes.

SH: When and where were they born?

JS: They were born in Chicago, Michael Reese Hospital, in '56 and '[5]7. Is that right?

CS: What?

JS: The kids were born [in] '56 and '57.

CS: Yes, yes.

JS: I got that one right.

SH: What are their names?

JS: One is Kenneth, the other is Michael.

SH: Where are they now?

JS: One is in California, the other is in Texas.

SH: What do they do? What were their educational backgrounds?

JS: They went to grammar and high school in Skokie, Illinois, that's outside Chicago, and Michael went on to do college work at Stanford and post graduate work at Wisconsin and Stanford. He's now in Texas.

SH: What does he do now?

JS: He is an assistant professor in the Department of Biology, I guess. I say, "I guess," because his specialized research [is] in genetics, and biochemistry, and cell physiology.

SH: What about your other son?

JS: He's a painter in California.

SH: How long has he been there?

JS: I think he's in the Los Angeles area. He's been there since '76, about 1976, some twenty odd years.

SH: Did you teach him to paint?

JS: No, I think he picked it up out there.

SH: Does he show his work in galleries in that area?

JS: No, it was mostly commercial painting, ... houses and so on.

SH: Were any of your children involved in the military at all?

JS: No, I'm sure they weren't.

SH: They did not go to Vietnam.

JS: No.

SH: I read on your pre-interview survey that you have a date and place of discharge in 1947.

JS: That's correct.

SH: Were you in the military at all?

JS: Oh, yeah. When the military got to the very bottom of the barrel with regard to the physical capability of their recruits, my eyes no longer kept me out. I was drafted.

SH: When were you drafted?

JS: Oh, I don't know, after I got my Master's degree sometime.

SH: How long were you in the service?

JS: Something over a year.

SH: What did you do while you were in the military?

JS: After basic training, I was in [the] medical corps.

SH: Where was your basic training?

JS: Camp Lee, Virginia.

SH: What about the medical corps training?

JS: Also in Camp Lee.

SH: You basically stayed right in Camp Lee.

JS: Stayed right in Camp Lee.

SH: Were you discharged because the war was over?

JS: Yes.

SH: You said that you stayed in the Reserves for about two years.

JS: That's probably correct.

SH: Were you ranked at all?

JS: I went in as a first lieutenant, and I achieved the exalted rank of captain when I was separated, and, yes, I retired.

SH: From the Reserves?

JS: Yes.

SH: You were only in the Reserves for a short period of time.

JS: Yes.

SH: Did you ever join any of the veterans' organizations, the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the American Legion?

JS: I think I joined the American Legion out in Pullman, Washington for a very short period of time.

SH: What were your experiences as a member of the American Legion? Why did you join?

JS: I joined the American Legion out there because it gave me access, I'm not sure of this, ... to one of their, I guess it was a restaurant or something, which served some pretty good food. I

think that was the only reason.

SH: What were your parents' activities during the war? Were they involved in any volunteer auxiliaries?

JS: No. Neither of them were engaged of anything in that sort.

SH: Did they support the war?

JS: Oh, sure. We all were.

SH: Do you remember where you were when they dropped the bomb?

JS: In Japan, I'm sure you mean.

SH: Yes.

JS: Yes. I had just been inducted and I guess I was in Camp Dix, in New Jersey.

SH: Did your family have any feelings on the issue of the bomb?

JS: I don't know that we ever discussed it at any length, but I would guess they were supportive.

SH: Were your parents Democrats? Were they involved in politics at all?

JS: No. They were in no serious engagement of politics.

SH: Have you and your wife been involved in politics at all?

JS: Besides being registered Republicans and voting as usual, we have no other interest.

SH: You have not been involved in any community politics.

JS: No.

SH: Have you served on the county council?

JS: No.

SH: What have you done since you have been in Arizona? Did you come here basically to retire?

JS: No, no, we came here because I spent most of my time doing research in Arizona State University in Tempe.

SH: How long did you stay there?

JS: Almost ten whole years.

SH: Now that you are retired, what have you been doing to occupy yourself?

JS: I have been doing yard work. I do volunteer work at a local hospital, two mornings a week.

SH: What do you do at the local hospital?

JS: I do the scut work.

SH: Tell our listeners what scut work is. [laughter]

JS: Scut work is doing chores, such as making beds, going on errands, carrying specimen hither and yon, anything that will help out the nurses.

SH: Does your wife work as a volunteer?

JS: No, no.

SH: What keeps her busy?

JS: Me. [laughter]

SH: After you were in the military, you went on to get your Ph.D.

JS: That's correct.

SH: Did you have any other activities, while you were serving in the Medical Corps, that you would like to relate to us?

JS: Nothing particularly.

SH: As part of the Medical Corps, were you only treating those who were on that base at that time?

JS: Yes.

SH: You did not have any other casualties to deal with.

JS: No.

SH: Were they veterans returning from the war?

JS: No.

SH: Experience any ...

JS: No, we didn't.

SH: When you got out of the military, how did you feel the veterans were treated?

JS: At the time, I had no particular knowledge of how the veterans were treated, but, since, I have become aware that their treatment has not always been prime throughout the country.

SH: Do you think it varied from section to section in the country?

JS: From hospital to hospital, I would say so. This is strictly second and third hand. I don't know from first hand experience.

SH: That is the information to give at this point. [laughter] Can you tell me if you have any other thoughts on any part of Rutgers or the war experience that you would like to share?

JS: The most telling experience I had was when I left Rutgers to come out to Arizona, but I had occasion to tell somebody I was a graduate of Rutgers. I was treated with the same degree of admiration as coming from one of the distinguished Ivy League schools. Sometimes, I [would] say that Rutgers was not in the Ivy League, but sometimes, I forgot.

SH: As far as your wife having been a doctor in the 1940s, for a woman, at that time, that was still a fairly unique experience.

JS: Was that a unique experience?

CS: What?

JS: Was it a unique experience, being a woman doctor in the '40s?

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