

Irving Fine Centennial Oral History: Esther Geller

Speakers:

Esther Geller

Nicholas A. Brown, Music Specialist, Music Division

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Location: Geller-Shapero Residence, Natick, Massachusetts

Description: Artist Esther Geller, wife of the late composer and Brandeis faculty member Harold Shapero, was a close friend of Irving and Verna Fine, and was in the inner circle of the musical leaders that founded the School of Creative Arts at Brandeis University.

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>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wonderful, well I'm here with Esther Geller who's of course the wonderful wife of Harold Shapero and a friend of Irving Fine and Verna Fine and they whole crew of Boston and Brandeis composers and delighted to be able to speak with you about Irving in the sense that you knew him and also that Harold knew him. And how you all sort of made Brandeis what it is today.

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>> Esther Geller: Well, as in the music department

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yes, their music well, for me, that's the part of it that matters.

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>> Esther Geller: Irving lost no time in getting Harold in the department when he first came and he had the idea of starting a whole creative arts department, which eventually happened.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: And what was the campus like and what was the energy like there in the early days?

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>> Esther Geller: In the early days it really was very lively. It was a small campus and it has grown considerably since then I'm sure because they have a new science building and they focus on I think the life sciences. I'm not sure exactly. We haven't been ... in touch with Brandeis for a long time, except to go to the concerts.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: And what, what was it like when Harold joined the faculty? Was he excited about that or how did he feel about joining the school?

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>> Esther Geller: It's curious because I didn't know and he didn't know whether...how he would do in academic life. And later on, he had to be chair of the department and he wasn't sure that he could do those things but it turned out that he was very good at administration and he was a good chairman and he knew how to delegate authority and responsibility and so he was surprisingly good chairman when his turn came. They rotated the chairmanship but it was for several years at the time.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: And Tanglewood was so important to all of your lives...

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>> Esther Geller: Right

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: ...for so many obvious reasons. What was it like when you were all there together as a group?

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>> Esther Geller: Well we had a lot of fun. We were very young and I remember one summer when we spent...we all lived, Verna, Irving, Harold, and I and Lukas Foss...we were all living in a rooming house not too far from the Tanglewood campus. We had a wonderful time. We were very good friends and when the musicians, the guys went over to Tanglewood, Verna and I often stayed back at the house and I remember we used to...she was very clever...we used to make up crossword puzzles. We had a good time together and Lukas was a very lively...yeah he was very lively he was sort of the baby of the bunch and we had good times.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wonderful. Were there any specific highlights of concerts that took place there, whether it was Harold's symphony being played or Irving's?

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>> Esther Geller: It's funny I know that there were performances of their work but I can't remember the specific ones. I know that Koussevitzky was still around and Harold studied with him...well didn't really study with him but worked with him to learn to conduct and Koussie just made a lot of fun of Harold because he said his hands were too big and fingers were too long. And he was too tall.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: How tall was he?

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>> Esther Geller: He was...he wasn't a very tall guy. He was about 5' 10 and a half, 11. On a good day he would be at 5'11.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wonderful. And did you attend any of the early festivals?

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>> Esther Geller: Oh yes. Those we were intimately involved with because the creative arts—I wasn't of course but Harold and Irving were. They engineered the festivals and invited various other musicians from different kinds of music. I remember one time they had a very well-known jazz orchestra and the leader, whose name escapes me now...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Was that Miles Davis?

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>> Esther Geller: Who?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Miles Davis.

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>> Esther Geller: No it wasn't him. He wasn't as good as Miles Davis. Be he was a good...I think he was a good jazz composer and arranger and he had this little orchestra so they did some and Harold had a piece that he wrote called, "On Green Mountain." It was a take-off on Verdi's...Monteverdi. And it was a jazzed-up...it was classical but it was a jazzed-up version. It was very lilting and sort of remnants of his swing-band era. Because when he was young, when he was a teenager, he had his own swing-band. It was called, as I recall, "Jean Dennis". I don't where they got the name but he had this little band. I knew him at the time. We'd met very early on and I was a student at the museum school and he used to come. And I had an iron...two other friends had an apartment near the museum and the museum school and he used to come after a performance and visit. So he would come at all hours of the night after an evening of performing with his orchestra. I don't know how long, it didn't last very long that particular time.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did...how did you sense Irving and Harold's relationship with having to teach and their administrative duties? Were they ok with that? Were they frustrated with that in that it took them away from composing, or were they sort of just going along with the flow?

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>> Esther Geller: I think you could say that they were both frustrated at the fact that they had less chance to compose. Irving was sorely disappointed that he wasn't appointed at Harvard, you know that story. But he made up for it by working with the music department and the creative arts department. They got... I helped in that department. An artist to start the art department was Mitchell Siporin who was a friend and we had spent a year in Rome together the Siporins and the Shaperos were neighbors, had rooms next to one another in the American Academy in Rome. He came to Boston and they wanted an art...a person to start an art department but they couldn't afford to get, to have...get several people and they needed someone who knew art history and they need somebody who was a practicing artist and Mitchell Siporin fit the bill very well because he was very knowledgeable about art and history so he answered all those demands. And so they hired him and he was the first in the creative arts department to start teaching in the art department, teaching art.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What of the culture that Irving and Harold instilled into Brandeis at the very beginning do you think sort of stayed with the university throughout now, through the years...?

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>> Esther Geller: Well I don't know how...I really don't know how...what's left of that particular time. That was a very exciting time because everything was new and I remember when Irving and Harold had gotten going and the department was started they realized they could use somebody else and so Arthur Berger came to mind and they called Arthur and Arthur came to be the third one of that group. Arthur was married to a person called Esther and we knew that she was really devoted to New York; she was a real New Yorker whereas Arthur was perfectly happy to leave New York. So it was difficult for Esther to leave New York and so she never was totally happy having left it. Arthur had his particular style of teaching. He was extremely intellectual and brilliant guy. Maybe soft toned in a way but those students who could appreciate that kind of knowledge I think benefited from him very much. The same way they did from Irving and Harold because they each had their own style of teaching. And they were lively.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: The little that I had chance to interact with Harold, he was such a character.

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>> Esther Geller: Yeah he was a character. And apparently he was a baseball fan and he...I remember some of his students saying that they learned a lot about baseball. They didn't know how much they'd learned about music [laughter]. But that of course was just a light remark.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: How important was Verna in all of this and your role as well as sort of the forces behind the men?

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>> Esther Geller: Well, Verna was a very strong character and she kept Irving more or less on an even keel. He was more...he was very lively and he was very pretty and the girls liked him so that was a problem. And we...Irving and I and Harold faced that problem in a couple of different venues. One was when we were I think in Vienna, I think. I don't know if you know about this?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I think I've read a little about it.

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>> Esther Geller: Yea, right. We were...it was about 11 or 12 at night and we were about to go to bed. And there was this big banging on our door and was Irving "Help me, Help me! I'm escaping!" And apparently one of, probably a chamber maid was...she was doing all the chasing and he was trying to escape from her. It was just a role reversal. And of course he took advantage of...I mean he was...he was at the MacDowell Colony also. He had...there were girls who were after him. To what extent, his liaisons went I have no idea. But Verna was very smart about his particular quirks. It's funny. I remember when we went to the MacDowell Colony together...not together, before we were married I went as a single person and Harold as a single person and Lukas was already there at the academy and...but we knew one another when we were going up there. We got there and Lukas said to us "I'm going to...at dinner time, I'm going to make a big thing about introducing the two of you to one another because he said he didn't want...because the ladies at the MacDowell colony were such gossips—everybody, especially the writers, because they lived on gossip. They told me what's writing all about? It's gossip. So Lukas said that he wanted to make sure that everybody realized we didn't know one another before we...he introduced us at the MacDowell. I thought that was very funny. That got to Mrs. MacDowell who was still alive and she wrote me a letter...she wrote us a letter. Unfortunately, I don't know where that letter is, it's gone. But she regretted so much that we had gotten married. We got married 2 weeks after we left there, the MacDowell Colony. She wanted us to marry at her house and it would have been lovely had we done that but that wasn't the case but it was a charming letter.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: We have the MacDowell collection at the Library.

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>> Esther Geller: You do? I wonder if that letter is anywhere.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: It could be. I'll have to look. Let me make a note. When was the last time Harold went up there?

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>> Esther Geller: Oh I think it was probably...we were probably there in '47 I think the last... '47 because '48 we went to New York and we lived in a suburb across the Hudson for a year. Then we went to Yaddo after while we were renting this house across the Hudson from New York. We went to Yaddo after that and after Yaddo in '49 we went to Europe. We went to...because he got the Prix de Rome during the war years and he wasn't able to take advantage of it. When he got a Fulbright in '49 and I got another fellowship called the Cabot fellowship from some Boston thing. But my fellowship came from Boston so it was cash on hand. It was enough money to get us across to go to Rome to see at the Prix de Rome villa because his money, the Fulbright, which was an Italian, it was only in Italian money so he didn't get any money until we got there. So we used my fellowship to get there and then from then on we used his to survive.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you take a ship over?

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>> Esther Geller: Yeah. Those days, we took ships. And of course, I loved, I loved...oh I loved those. I remember we went back and forth a number of times. The planes were beginning to go but there was just the very beginning and people didn't take planes. I think the last time we came home from Rome, I had to leave early that year in 1950 because my father died and I wanted to come how to stay and be with my mother. And then he took...let me see did he take...no he took a boat. Yeah, it was still a boat. The boats were wonderful. I loved them, he did not. He was not a sailor.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did he ever entertain on the boats?

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>> Esther Geller: No, no, no. His days of entertaining at the piano—I think they ended when he and Lenny used to play four hands together. What they did do and what I do regret exceedingly is the fact we had no tape recorders in those days. Irving and Harold used to sit down at the piano and play improvisations together that were so beautifully formed, you would think they were

completely written with three movements and the whole bit. It was extraordinary. And then when we were at the academy, Mitch Siporin, who was extremely musical, the two of them or mostly Harold would play on the piano and Mitch Suporin would sing in a comic, a comic way. They were really, really hilarious. They're just memories in my head now. If only they had a tape... a little tape recorder it would have been so fun.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Mmhmm. Wow, amazing!

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: In terms of Brandeis, Sacker was such an important character. How did Harold and Irving feel about him and did they feel supported by him? Did they have conflict with him ever?

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>> Esther Geller: I don't think there was much conflict. If there was conflict, it would have had to do with Irving would have had to deal with it. Harold was never in any position to. But I think Sacker was, on the whole, very supportive of the music department because the music department at that point was getting to be very well-known and people became aware of Brandeis because of the music department. Life sciences hadn't really started yet which later became so very well known in Brandeis.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did the music crowd ever run into Eleanor Roosevelt while she was there on faculty do you remember?

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>> Esther Geller: I think they said she came one day I think. I never saw her. I have no memory of that 'cause I was never there but she just visited.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What has it been like to go back to Slosberg and to Brandeis in general and sort of seeing how the university's changed and...

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>> Esther Geller: Well we were all so taken with Slosberg in the beginning because it was a marvelous venue for concerts and of course from what I gather the hearing... what do you call that?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: The acoustics...

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>> Esther Geller: The acoustics were excellent. But it was a small hall and I don't think they've ever made a bigger one.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh no, same one.

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>> Esther Geller: Same one. But they kept talking about it because in those days all the concerts were really really well attended. I don't know, I haven't been there...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: They're not so much anymore

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>> Esther Geller: They're not, right? It's a shame, isn't it?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Definitely. I was chatting with Marty Boykan yesterday who says hello and he was telling me there used to be hundreds and hundreds of people and even the lobby would be filled with people and...

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>> Esther Geller: That's absolutely true.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: It's mind boggling because we never had anything like that when I was there.

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>> Esther Geller: Isn't it amazing?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yeah.

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>> Esther Geller: Well, I don't know. People were...it was new and people were very supportive and they were aware and besides which, you didn't have to pay for those concerts. Certain ones, I think, special ones I think you had to but the concerts were always packed.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Do you recall how it was that Bob Koff ended up coming into the department? Who recruited him or...?

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>> Esther Geller: I don't know how he got in. Everybody loved Bobby. He was a wonderful guy. I don't know who hired him. You know of course poor Erwin Bodky gets the short end of the stick and it's not fair because he was the one who started the music department and he was a lovely person. But, you know, those young Turks as I suppose, Harold and Irving, were so lively and people paid attention to them. And so Harold always liked Bodkey and everybody did. He was a wonderful guy.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Any fun memories of Lenny and Aaron?

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>> Esther Geller: I have lots of fun memories of Lenny and Aaron. Mostly of Aaron cause I loved Aaron and I know Aaron loved me back so that was good. Lenny, I have fond memories of him too...you know, 'cause we knew each other from when we were kids...well, I met him maybe when I was in my late teens maybe, early 20's...late teens I guess. And we went to his wedding at his parent's house I think. We went to the wedding. And of course then he went to New York, we stayed here. His career blossomed liked a century plant. And it was amazing.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did he ever...so from the period when you were all together and younger with Lenny and Aaron thought the later years, was it always the same and like a homecoming whenever everyone got together again or was it always different?

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>> Esther Geller: It was, well, I don't recall any specific times when Lenny and Aaron and Irving and Harold and us all got together especially but one summer at the MacDowell Colony...I don't know if I was married or not I can't remember...but Aaron was there. And every Saturday night they used to have dances at the country club in Peterborough and I used to go with...there was a guy who was a writer and I used to go with him because he liked to dance, and then it turns out that Aaron came because he liked to dance and so Aaron and I became dancing partners. And that was wonderful, he was a wonderful dancer. And I said to him, I remember saying to him "Oh my God how did you learn to dance like this?" And he said "I had two older sisters." And he said "when I came home from school they were waiting for me to pounce on me because they needed somebody to dance with." So he said he learned to dance because of his older sisters making him dance.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wow! Wonderful. Was there a certain dance that was your favorite with him?

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>> Esther Geller: Not really I think the usual dancing that one did in country clubs. You dance with people holding one another and then there was always the last dance which was a waltz and he was good actually. Well, he was a good musician! [laughter]

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I know Irving and Verna had gone to the Library for the premiere of *Appalachian Spring*. Did you and Harold ever go down for any performances at the Library in Washington?

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>> Esther Geller: The Library of Congress? I think we were with Aaron for one performance of *Appalachian Spring*, and...but I think it was in Boston. I don't know who the performers were. But I remember sitting with Aaron during...through the performance. But I've seen it a number of times in different places.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Was there something about Irving that Harold remembered the most or laughed about the most in the years after Irving had passed?

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>> Esther Geller: Well he was...he was really a charmer. Both with men and women. And we were so close it was almost like a family because we saw one another. Of course there came a time when that closeness stopped. I don't know if you know anything about that. Irving was always very neurotic so he went to...whether he was a psychoanalyst or not, but we'll call him a psychoanalyst and you know Irving really...Harold and Irving before we moved to Natick...we moved to Natick because Irving and Verna were living here and they said, "You have to come out here." So that's another story. But we did move to Natick because of them. This psychoanalyst told Irving and Irving went to him and was...he was...he respected what they said. He said...and this guy said to him, "You're paying too much attention to Harold. You're depending too much on Harold and you've got to move away from him. You've got to establish your own self away from him." Now this I got from Verna because she was upset about that. And Irving did exactly what he said so he tried to remove himself so we saw each other less and we didn't understand why and Verna explained to me afterwards that Irving was doing what the analyst told him to do, which was dumb. It was a foolish thing to do because that guy really interfered and broke up a wonderful friendship. It was really terrible.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did it affect your relationship with Verna?

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>> Esther Geller: No, it didn't. Because I... Verna was really outraged and that's how I know about it. Because we didn't know why suddenly Irving was being cool when he used to be here every single day. If he wasn't here in this house, we were there in his house.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Interesting.

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>> Esther Geller: Yes it is. He paid attention to this foolish, interfering analyst who interfered with people's lives and actually he took a very... a very important chunk of away from Irving, of life, that he could have because he didn't have much longer to live.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What year was this in, do you remember approximately?

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>> Esther Geller: Well it was a few years before he died. It was a number of years before he died. Because we were in Europe when he died and we got a cable from Arthur saying that Irving had died and I remember getting it in our apartment and I remember said what kind of a sick joke is this? And what happened was we were going to stay for two years but we cut it short and we came home because Irving died. So that was really, really sad.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I can imagine.

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>> Esther Geller: And it's a surprise... see we didn't know and Irving didn't know. But his doctor—Verna told me this—doctor told him that he had already lived 10 years before... longer than his heart would have allowed him to live. So apparently he had some major problem.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Was there any sense of if it was hereditary or was it just sort of...

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>> Esther Geller: No, his mother and father survived him. It was terrible.

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>> Esther Geller: That was very sad.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: How did you see Verna and then the girls coping with it all? Was it a struggle for them?

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>> Esther Geller: Well there were three girls and Claudia and Emily were a little bit older. But JoJo was nine and she suffered the most. She really...it was...it was a terrible blow to JoJo. I don't know if she ever got over it. She had a lot, a lot of problems afterwards. But Emily and Claudia are a little bit older and little more stable.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: So you must have been very close with them as well.

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>> Esther Geller: Oh sure, the children saw each other every single day. Of course, Hannah wasn't as gregarious as she was young. She and JoJo were pals. But she always felt the Fine girls came down on her in a group and so she suffered socially but that's because she wasn't exactly very adept at socializing, especially at that age.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: So what lead to Harold's decision to retire and to leave teaching full time?

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>> Esther Geller: Well, one thing I recall is that they needed new people. Arthur had...was he still there? I can't remember if Arthur stayed longer but I remember they needed new people and they hired somebody...another composer, a very good composer but I forget which one it was. But his salary was almost three times as much as what Sonny...what Harold got, because they...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What?

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>> Esther Geller: Because they...they hired a new person with a huge salary compared to what Harold was getting, and Harold said you know I could do better financially by not doing anything at all than by staying there and getting so little money and the new person is getting so much. So that precipitated his retirement. It was the best thing he ever did.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh yeah?

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>> Esther Geller: Oh yeah, because he started writing.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: And that was post-Sachar that that happened?

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>> Esther Geller: I think yes, I think it must have been because Sachar...I forget the name of the other people. There was a husband and wife...there was a woman at one point who was head of the university. I forget the names.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What do you think Harold and Irving and Arthur and Lukas and Lenny and Aaron, if when looked at as the group they were and as the unit they were early one, what will they be remembered by and what do you hope they will be remembered by?

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>> Esther Geller: Well I don't know about my hope in how they will be remembered but I do think that they, when they mention Harold and Irving and Lukas, the three of them and maybe Arthur too cause he came later, they refer to them as the Boston Group so indeed they were, because they functioned very well. Lukas was the pianist for the Boston Symphony at the time so he was very active so we went to the symphony every week while Koussie was there and if we weren't there in the green room, there was hell to pay with Koussie. He'd say, "Where are the Shaperos? They're not here tonight." But we always showed up.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yea. Koussie was obviously so important to all of them.

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>> Esther Geller: Yes.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: And to you as well. What was that relationship like for Harold and Irving?

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>> Esther Geller: That's interesting. It's funny, I don't think...when I think of Irving and I think of Koussevitzky, I don't pair them in my mind. Whereas, I know...well Koussevitzky commissioned Harold's symphony so that was a very important thing he wouldn't have done the

symphony if he ...if Koussie hadn't done that. And Koussevitzky was...I remember once going out to visit him in Tanglewood at his home because Harold wanted to show him his serenade which he had just completed. I don't know if he had shown it to Stravinsky yet but Koussevitzky looked at it and...and everybody said Koussevitzky couldn't read a score and all that bologna but that was not true. Even though that was the reason that Nicolas Slonimsky was brought to Boston, because he was...theoretically, that's what I heard, I don't know if it's true, to help Koussevitzky read scores. Nicolas would be happy to tell you that himself because he was quite a character. He's a whole book in himself. And he did write a book about himself called, "My first a hundred a one years" no, "My first hundred years" I think. He lived to be I think over 101. But what did you ask me about? Oh the serenades. So we brought the serenade and he looked at it and he said "Well, if this were written by Prokofiev, it would be...he said if the name Prokofiev was on the top of this instead of Shapero, it would be played in every symphony orchestra all over the place. But it's only Shapero so nobody's gonna play it. In other words, he thought it was good but he sent the score to Stravinsky and Stravinsky was really thrilled with it and he wrote...I wish we had the letter but he said...he referred to it as a masterpiece. He called it a masterpiece. And that was the serenade which is a beautiful piece. It had one of the prettiest slow movements ever. That's what Harold was good at. His slow movement of the symphony is good and the slow movement of the serenade is good. I mean, he had the gift of melody which was not bestowed on most composers.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: There's so much discussion at different times in the 20th century about Stravinsky's goal and Boulanger versus the Second Viennese School. How did Harold feel about that divide and did he pick a camp or did he subscribe to both?

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>> Esther Geller: No he did not subscribe to both. He didn't like the other camp. I don't think he was too keen on it although I don't think he was unaware of the musical possibilities of the 12 tone or whatever it is and he made use of it as Stravinsky did in his last pieces too.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: With Irving there is somehow more awareness than with Harold in terms of performances that happen of his music, and such. What do you think is the key to getting Harold's music and legacy out there more?

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>> Esther Geller: The trouble, see the thing about Irving's music is it was more like his personality. He was gentler and more congenial and so his music is gentler and perhaps more congenial and definitely much cheesier to perform. Harold's music presented performance problems and I remember once when we were out on the west coast and they performed his

symphony and the guys, one of the symphony guys...you know how symphony players are, they were gabbing and one guy said to us that it was one of the most difficult pieces he had to play. He says "But it was certainly worth the effort." And he said that we symphony performers are very lazy, and I'm sure that's true.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yea, to a certain extent.

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>> Esther Geller: If they had to work hard to get something over, you heard about it. The thing about Irving was...and his analyst was so weird that, and that is why he tried to separate them is that Irving never wrote a note without consulting Harold and they would be on the phone for hours at a time talking about his next note and that upset his analyst. He felt that he was depending too much on Harold.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: But was there, up until that analyst medaling, was there any resentment on Irving's part of that relationship?

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>> Esther Geller: Oh no...no, no, no.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Then why would the analyst go to that? That's very strange.

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>> Esther Geller: Analysts! [laughter] I don't know. But it might have come out when he was talking to his analyst how much he depended upon Harold. But it was not anything that was...when we were living through it, that anybody noticed, wasn't anything that anybody noticed.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: It was just normal.

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>> Esther Geller: Because we were such good friends. And you expected to have a lively exchange in every department.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Is there a comparable way that Harold sort of sought Irving's advice?

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>> Esther Geller: I don't know. I don't think so. No I don't really think so. It's interesting. But certainly they discussed one another's work all the time. I can remember, I don't recall the exact conversations, but there were one after another conversations about the music that they were writing, and that was wonderful because they were both working. And occasionally Lukas would be in the loop too.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Was there a certain piece or type of piece that you and Harold preferred of Irving's?

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>> Esther Geller: Of Irving's? Well, I liked Irving's music...very pretty. Of course, his songs were not influenced by Harold at all. Those were...I forget what they were called...Alice in...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: "Alice in Wonderland," the two sets.

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>> Esther Geller: Those were early on and they were very nice and they were charming and they were Irving. It was only when he started getting more serious and trying to do something much more serious that he got heavily influenced. But of course they were both heavily influenced by Stravinsky. And Aaron. And I haven't mentioned another person, Leo Smit. Do you know that name?

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>>Vaguely.

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>>Well Leo Smit was a very good friend of all of ours. He was an incredibly wonderful pianist and when he was younger he played, he was the ballet pianist for the City Center Ballet. When they practiced, he...he was their pianist. And then he concertized but he, he also wrote music. So he was heavily influenced by Harold's music and he wrote a set of variations that were very similar to Harold's variations. But he was a wonderful pianist. And he played...I don't know if he ever played his piano concerto... I don't know. A person called Lipkin played. He had this piece that was sort-of a piano concerto. I forget what it was really called. But it was mostly for piano. It was for piano and orchestra.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did Harold do much performing once he had taken the position at Brandeis?

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>> Esther Geller: No. He was very good at the piano early on but when he started to compose away from the piano, which was also quite early on, he did everything in his head and he didn't go near a piano anymore, which is kind of a shame because he lost his... I mean, at one point, he used to be able to... you used to hear him playing all the time. But when he was composing and actually probably the computer had something to do with it when the computer came around.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Well this has been wonderful to hear your stories and your and Harold's perspective on things. And I think what's so important about you and Harold and Irving and Arthur and the Boston group was that it was a unit. It was a group of people who were friends and colleagues. Your lives were so intertwined that there's no way you can look at one without the other.

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>> Esther Geller: That's true, that is true.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: There was no Irving without Harold. There was no Brandeis without both of them. There was no Lenny at Brandeis without Harold and Irving. I think in the... for those that either didn't live it or haven't really taken the time to see how things actually played out some people get unfair amounts of credit in sort of looking at that period. But I think Harold and Irving were the forces that sort of made Brandeis the lasting place in terms of music and the arts that it is now. I wish they could get back some of the energy and quality that Irving and Harold brought in when they were there.

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>> Esther Geller: Well I don't know what the music department is like right now.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: The faculty are all wonderful. I think... they're not having the *Trouble in Tahiti* premiere, for example, and the Mark Blitzsein *Threepenny Opera* translation. Nothing of that level.

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>> Well because Lenny of course had those feelings for Broadway early on which Harold never did. Harold never had any affinity for the theater at all.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Even non-musical theater

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>> Esther Geller: Yeah, even non-musical theater. He had no affinity for it and that was a failing because if he had been more interested, it would have broadened his particular horizon. And it was very important for Lenny and Lenny started very early on when he was a kid vacationing in Sharon, Massachusetts and they already did little musicals.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: We have the program booklet from the shows at the Library it's hilarious. And they have a whole program where they're adverts and they're all jokes that Lenny had made about his sister and all of the friends that were in the production. It's hilarious.

^55:05

>> Esther Geller: Lenny was very funny. I remember when one of the...I don't know if you have this somewhere, this particular little anecdote, but at one point in New York Lenny was playing...he didn't play the whole piece, but he played one movement of either the serenade or...I forget which. But it was in connection with the Gershwin prize that he won. And so Lenny and Sonny went up to visit Mrs. Gershwin and she was living in some hotel or something, whatever. They went to the...this is Lenny's story that I remember he told me...they went to the apartment and knocked on the door and Mrs. Gershwin, this is their mother, and Lenny and Sonny tried to explain to her that they were performing a concert in honor of her son but she didn't quite grasp what they were trying to tell her so she said to them, "We Gershwins don't need no charity." [laughter] That was Lenny's verbatim...it was so funny. That was one of Lenny's great stories about Mrs. Gershwin.

^57:02

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Was...Oh Harold told me a story once about I think it was Stravinsky in the kitchen with an apron.

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>> Esther Geller: Oh yeahm that's a good story!

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Classic story.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh it's a great story and it's true. We went to California for I think it was a performance of something and the Stravinsky...oh first of all, Stravinsky's amanuensis... what's his name...I forget his name at the moment...called us up at the hotel and said to us, "He knows you're here." It was very funny. I don't know how he got to know that we were there, that Harold was there. So we called him...Sonny called him, and they invited us to dinner. So we went up to their place to dinner, it was a charming little apartment in a little house and we had dinner. And Vera was a gracious as anything. She was just lovely. Stravinsky was hilarious, because they had just come home from Japan and that was a...Vera said, "It's not a place for...that women want to go to because they don't pay any attention to the ladies." That's what she said. Nobody paid any attention to her, they just paid attention to him. Anyway, it came time for washing the dishes afterwards and Stravinsky went into the kitchen, we were sitting in the living room. We had eaten and then we went into the kitchen and he put on his little apron and he started to wash. I don't know whether Sonny wiped or what but they were doing the dishes together. And of course Aaron Copland...there was that story, I don't know how true this is, Aaron Copland had said that at one point when they were...when Harold and Aaron were at Tanglewood at the same time, and they were doing some kitchen work and Aaron said to Sonny: "I wonder if Stravinsky does the dishes." So I don't think Harold ever really did write him a letter or send him a wire to say, "Yes! he does do the dishes." But that was funny. But I can remember...we were, at one point living across the Hudson River and Aaron was our neighbor. So we used to visit him and we would eat at his house from time to time. I remember Aaron had a friend—one of his boyfriends—Eric was his name. I don't know if you knew of any of Aaron's friends...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: No not too much.

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>>Esther Geller: He had one friend that he was extremely close to for many years and then he had this other guy who was a painter. So he and Eric, I forget his last name, and I used to get along quite well and we went to dinner at Sneden's Landing across the river from Manhattan where he had a place. So Eric and I were in the kitchen doing the kitchen the work, so we were doing the dishes. We were...the artists were the ones who were open to doing the dishes. The guys were in the other room eating.

^01:01:13

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Well it was a wonderful time. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall

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>> Esther Geller: Well I gotta tell you that...we have...I have a lot of wonderful memories leftover from those days and it's interesting, you know...how certain little phrases and certain little incidents pop into your head and they don't go away. They're so important.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's wonderful. And if you recall anything that you'd think I'd laugh at or...

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>> Esther Geller: I'll tell you something that's hilarious.

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>>Give me a call. Yea!

^01:01:51

>>I'll tell you something that's hilarious. At the MacDowell colony and we all had different cabins and in order...Harold and I had bicycles and we used to bike to our cabins. Harold's cabin was the farthest away from the main building. And mine was not too far away but I had to pass Lukas' on the way to mine. So, I used to stop by and he was...you know, writing away like crazy. He was very, very ambitious and he loved to work. And he wanted to show me something that he had just written. And he came out, I was on my bike, and he came out with his sheet of music and he said, "Look at this, look at this," he says: "The wizardry of it all." I thought it was so hilarious. That's never...I've never forgotten that..."The wizardry of it all."

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's funny.

^01:03:02

>> Esther Geller: Yeah, well he was amazed and it's true, it is amazing actually when all this creative stuff comes out of a person but if you recognize it in yourself I think it's kind of funny.

^01:03:16

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yes it is. It's kind of meta somehow. Well that's wonderful. Well thank you so much for chatting.

^01:03:29

>> Esther Geller: It was my pleasure. Bring back our youth.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Hopefully in a good way.

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>> Esther Geller: Oh yes. Well it's especially since I'm still grieving and it's very soon after Harold died on May 17th [2013] and it's...I'm still dealing with it...how to cope with it, because we spent most of our lives together because we met when we were very young.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I'm so sorry for the loss.

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>> Esther Geller: Thank you

^01:04:16

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Rest assured that his spirit lives on and I feel fortunate to be one of the people who got to meet him in just a small amount but... you know I feel like I'm in the lineage of him and Irving and all of their life efforts.

^01:04:39

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