

00:00:03

EVELYN HERSHEY: Good morning. My name is Evelyn Hershey and we're here at The American Labor Museum. It's our pleasure to speak with this morning Sondra Gash, the daughter of Saul Stenton. Today we're going to be talking with Sondra about her father. Today is September 8, 2005. Sandra, please provide a brief biography. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

00:00:33

SONDRA GASH: First of all, thanks for the opportunity to say a few words about my father from a daughter's vantage point. My words will be personal I'm not official. I'd like to start off by telling a story which is a scene from when I was 14. I think this gives you a sense of my relationship with my father and what he was like. I needed back surgery and went to the hospital for an extended stay. When my father and mother left, he presented me with a blank writing journal. "You can write," he said. "Keep a record of what happens." It was a lovely gesture. I kept looking at it admiring it and then began to write. It gave a special meaning to my experience. I don't think it was his intention that I should be writing about him today, but here I am talking about him and now in the process of writing a memoir in which he is a central character. I can still see him sitting at the dining room table scratching out words. His pens squeaking along in his sprawling handwriting as he drafted a speech he would be giving the next day. Often, he read these speeches out loud and I listened. And though I was only a young girl then, he would ask me for my comments. I attended Eastside High School, became the first female editor of the school newspaper, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and have worked as a writer, journalist and teacher for many years. I live in Tewkesbury, New Jersey

with my husband Ira, a psychologist. We have two grown daughters with families of their own. My father had an enormous influence on me. He valued education though he never got a formal one. I was born in Paterson in 1934, during the Great Depression, a time of great turmoil. In that same year, my father became an activist. He loved Paterson. It was his spiritual home and his muse. It had a history of radical unionism and my father was steeped in history.

00:02:54

EVELYN HERSHEY: Can you tell us about your father's earliest years -- about his immigration experience in particular?

00:03:03

SONDRA GASH: He liked to talk about that. He was a very proud immigrant. He was born in Pabianice, Poland in 1910, arrived in this country in 1920 at the age of 10. He dropped out of school in the ninth grade and was fond of saying that he got his education. He would say "ed-gee-kay-shun". The way he pronounced it was kind of either Patersonian or immigrant. He rose to become International President of the Textile Workers Union of America and founder and President of the American Labor Museum in Haledon, New Jersey -- the nation's first museum dedicated to the struggles of working people in this country and the union movement's contribution to bettering the lives of workers. As we know, the museum helped to commemorate the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913 in which 24,000 workers struck 300 silk manufacturers. So that's the beginning. I can tell you a little more as I move along.

00:04:09

EVELYN HERSHEY: I'm wondering when he was a boy he came to the United States at the age of 10. Yes. Did he ever give you a sense of how that immigration experience [was] traveling on a boat -- what it was like and how it

00:04:26

impacted him? SONDRRA GASH: Yes. In fact, this might be a time to read the poem that gives you a sense of that. And

00:04:33

I will read this poem, if it's okay, that I wrote

00:04:38

that's basically about his journey. *Bold Heart*. "You dreamed of leaving, Leaving the ghetto village, the dusky alley in Pabianice where you were born. Then one day with your family, you arrived at the station, but somehow in the crowd, in the rush they left without you. As the train chugged away hissing steam, your mother's face was there in the window, her hands banging the glass. Mama don't be afraid, I'll find you! Were you afraid? A runty Jew boy of 10 alone on a dark platform, a foreigner wearing an oversized coat with curly wood buttons. A woman took your hand. A policeman set you on the train that led to Szczecin, the German port where they were waiting to leave for America. Then the big, open pit called Steerage, you sneaked past the door, down to the hold of the ship and found the kitchen where bold as a bird in search of

bread, you begged for crumbs. On the deck, your white shirt flew like a goose in the wind. Did your feet have wings? How did you know one longing leads to another? Feisty boy-chick, who taught you such hope? When the ferry crossed the Hudson,

00:06:23

you arrived in Silk City, Paterson. The crowded railroad flat on Bridge Street near the river. You sold balloons for pennies, hawked papers on the downtown streets. Did you yearn for the turbulence of that rough bazaar? When you brought lunch to the mill for your father, when you stood peering through tall, dingy windows, was it the roar of noisy shuttles, workers lined up in rows like machines that roused you? Cunning, street-smart boy who knew how to fly.

00:07:06

You must have felt you belonged. Did you always know you had the magic in you? Itinerant father, lover of picket lines, meeting halls, late night celebrations, you pinned up pictures of John L. Lewis, Norman Thomas, Roosevelt on your office walls. From the 30s on, organizer, agitator, fighter for justice, not giving up has been your god. At 95, you still carry your datebook filled with the future, yet won't say a word about what you want. A proper burial. Cremation. Your ashes sprinkled over the sea.

00:07:54

Old father, despite weak legs, forgetfulness, occasional falls, still the peddler of wings, still writing letters to friends all over the country, still saying if you don't like the way things are, go out and change them. Still your bold heart. Just last year, when we walked together on the grounds of your retirement home, people stopped to tell you that Jack, who sang in the chorus had died and Sally was with us no more. You shared your regrets then said to me as we moved along, death, I'm not interested. It's not part of my plan." I think that conveys his optimism.

EVELYN HERSHEY: Yeah, and a sense of who he was even as a 10-year-old boy and then

00:08:53

a teen in Paterson. SONDRAS GASH: Right. EVELYN HERSHEY: I know I've heard stories about his entrepreneurial spirit as a teen. Maybe you could say a few words about what your, what your father's life was like as a teen in Paterson and then how he became involved in the labor movement. So, two questions together. SONDRAS GASH: OK. What was life like in Paterson for him his first years there as a teen? Even before that, my mother received a call after he died, just recently, and the man said,

00:09:34

"Hello Freida, I'm Saul," his name was also Saul. "Remember me?" And then he said something my mother didn't know. He said, "I met Saul, your Saul, when I was seven. He hired me. He was 10. We together worked a newspaper route," and apparently my father who had only been here a few months, was already starting a route and hiring seven-year-olds to work for him. Maybe it's not...maybe it's exploitive labor, I don't know, but that's the way it was with a lot of people who came over and were poor immigrants and had to work and

00:10:16

that kind of thing.

00:10:20

I can share with you that it was desperately important for my father to go back to Poland. He cared a great deal about going back. So, when he was 86, I accompanied him long with my sister's daughter, Lisa, my niece. So, there were three generations of us traveling around in Poland. When we got there, he had already written to the city hall from here, but they never responded.

00:10:51

But the guide, a Polish woman, immediately found out where the house was and we went to the house. And when we saw the building, low blackened building in the poor section, he did not recognize it. It had been 76 years since he had been back. So, we walked to the back. I said, "Dad let's walk around a little bit first," and we did. And he said, "I don't recognize this." We went out into the dirt courtyard. He looked down and his hands started to shake and tears came to his eyes. He said, "There were geese in the yard here. There were geese in the yard." And that jogged his memory and we went back into that very apartment, rang the bell, the man let us in. He showed us where his father, who had been a tailor, had -- and this apartment was as big as this room. And then there was a curtain dividing -- that kind of very primitive situation. Right. So that's a little bit about my father and his background.

00:11:57

You asked about my prose and poetry projects. I do want to mention that I am at work on a memoir about the immigrant experience in America and the yearnings of people caught in restricted situations as my father was. When he moved they lived in a very small place which I've seen in Paterson. He had three sisters. They had the better rooms. He said the reason he loved going out onto the street was because it [the apartment] was very dark and closed in and it was a woman's world more. My grandfather was in the front room with a tailor shop and all the rest of the house was for the women. So, he went out onto the street at a young age and he began to love being out there. So, my book is told from the point of view of a museum curator. Did you know that? And it explores the life of a labor leader who's a vivid personality with a large social conscience. The character starts out as a poor and uneducated dye- shop worker in Paterson in the 30s, becomes an organizer, becomes the President of a large union. And while the personal lives of these characters are invented, I use historical figures and actual events and songs and speeches to convey the public and private atmosphere. I have written one other book. This one that I'm working on is called American Thread. It's a new one in progress. The other one has been published in 2002 by CavanKerry Press. And it focuses on a teenage girl, based on my mother whose life is disrupted by her mother's mental illness. My grandmother fled Odessa in Russia and went to Lodz, a silk weaving town which is now Poland. In what is now Poland. And there's a lot of detail in that, that I won't go into, but I do want to say that my father family came from Lodz, Poland. Many Jewish people came from Lodz, Poland. Especially silk workers because it was a silk weaving town and they knew about Paterson. So, they came here. So, I wanted to say that my father -- we will go back to the immigrant experience if you want. If you feel there's more to say, but I feel that Paterson at the time when he settled here was a very interesting place. It had a radical history. There was turmoil because of the Depression when he was in his coming of age years and it helped to define him. Paterson was...he felt very strongly that Paterson was everything to him. He loved Paterson.

00:14:57

Did you want to ask me anything else? EVELYN HERSHEY: Yes. I'm wondering how specifically he got involved in the labor movement. All right. Idealism didn't come

00:15:08

right away. He took a job at 18 as a shipping clerk in one of the mills. But he liked to play basketball and he was a boxer, an amateur boxer. Made a little money once in a while. You know, two dollars when he fought. At night he hung out at the corner luncheonette with his buddies, playing the pinball machines. Suddenly, a friend of his father's appeared with an admonition. Saul, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at the union meeting? Don't you know the workers at your plant are planning to go out on strike? Do you know about the terrible working conditions in all the silk mills around here? The poor pay, the exploitation. You should be there.

00:15:57

My father felt guilty.

00:15:59

He ran out of the store, down several streets, kept running across the Arch Street Bridge past alleys and empty lots until he arrived at the meeting where he listened and he understood and he spoke up and he said he was sorry. "I should have been here from the start," he said.

00:16:17

So, he became then a shop steward then an organizer and never stopped being a fighter for the cause. EVELYN HERSHEY: Though he didn't work in the dye-shop, he worked in the office at the dye-shop. SONDRAS GASH: Right. EVELYN HERSHEY: He saw the working conditions of the dye-shop and knew of the chemicals and the dangers of working in the shop and the long hours. SONDRAS GASH: Exactly. EVELYN HERSHEY: What year was that? Around what years? Was this in the

00:16:42

early 30s? SONDRAS GASH: This was the early 30s. In 1934 he joined the union. And before that he had been active a little bit and I think this is what formed him; intellectually, emotionally, and in fact my mother used to say, "He's married to us, but he's also married to the union." And maybe she would say half-jokingly and maybe meaning it, "If he had to choose, he probably would choose the union." But he was a good father. He was very tender. I knew my father's soft side. He was a very soft guy and I know he was a tough negotiator, but he had the soft side too. EVELYN HERSHEY: I'm wondering at the time in the early 30s if there were many

00:17:29

new immigrants in the union when he joined?

00:17:33

I don't know if you know. Or what nationalities. I assume there were many Poles still working.

SONDRA GASH: Poles, Italians.

00:17:41

There weren't many Blacks in that area at that time, but there were Poles, there were the English, there were Germans, and there were a lot of Italians, and there were Jews. EVELYN HERSHEY: And this was Dyers Local #1733. SONDRA GASH: Yes. EVELYN HERSHEY: Which is one of the founding Locals of the textile workers unions in a large town and a large Local.

00:18:02

SONDRA GASH: That's right because this was the hotbed, the home of the Textile Workers Union of America which he became the President of many years later. EVELYN HERSHEY: In your view, and this is a bigger question, what moments, events, struggles or accomplishments do you think your father would regard as the high points of his work as a union official?

00:18:35

And then what also might have been the disappointments or low points?

00:18:39

SONDRA GASH: Okay. I think my father would say that leading the 17-year-drive to unionize J.P. Stephens Textile Company, when he was the President of the union was the most significant historic thing that he ever did. It changed things. It was creative, ambitious, dramatic, and courageous of him. He spearheaded one of the most publicized unionization drives since the war -- World War II -- in the anti-union south. It ended successfully in 1980, eventually organizing 350,000 workers in 12 mills. In 1975, he engineered a surprise move by arranging for his 174,000-member union to merge with the larger Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. He pushed for the merger because it would make money and manpower available for the campaign on which the 1979 movie Norma Rae was based. He never gave up the fight when others felt defeated.

00:19:52

I think that's one of his most distinguishing qualities. He just never gave up and other unions eventually followed suit, merging for the sake of greater strength. So, he set the direction of unions giving up their power, the individual giving up his power because there was something larger. And I feel that my father was idealistic and had a lot of integrity and I always felt that. And people all tell me all kinds of stories now about him and even before that made him somewhat unique in the labor movement because he was really, in a sense, a spiritual guy. That's what I feel about him. EVELYN HERSHEY: And one of the results of the merger was that he relinquished his post as President of the Textile Workers Union to become

00:20:48

an Executive Vice President. SONDRAS GASH: That's correct. EVELYN HERSHEY: Of The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. So, he took a step down administratively for the good of what he saw as the good of the union and the workers' position. SONDRAS GASH: Absolutely.

00:21:08

He was very empathetic and also, this is just the sideline, even at 95, he would be -- when I would be having some kind of event -- he would give me names of people, addresses of people. He kept them in the datebook. He did not forget names. I'm younger than he is obviously, much younger I think and I forget. A lot of people talk about forgetting. My father did not forget people's names and he did not. He was like a walking historian of his own life and which was reflective of the whole period. So, he knew he would say well Roosevelt did this in 1932. We did that in 1948. He just had dates down pat.

00:21:58

EVELYN HERSHEY: What do you feel he would regard as maybe disappointments or low times. He was an idealistic, optimistic man, but there must have been some low points. What would they have been and how did he get

00:22:12

through them? The two things that stand out in my mind. One, even back in Meany's time, the AFL-CIO did not do enough organizing of the unorganized. And the problem still exists. He didn't have an answer for how to get them more activists, but he believed that more had to be done to reach out to the workers that were not unionized and we're not getting benefits because of it.

00:22:41

And the other thing was he valued labor education. He had that immigrant quality of wishing he had had more education and admiring people who were well educated. And he felt that there wasn't enough labor education in the public schools, so that the entrepreneurial spirit, individualism became the hallmark of what was called Democracy. And he had another - the other wing was more communal, more responsible more cooperative. And he always valued that side more. So, he was disappointed when the Labor Museum began, which he had a big part in developing, he was thrilled

00:23:29

that he could participate at this level. EVELYN HERSHEY: We spoke a little bit about the JP Stevens organizing drivers I should say that you did and it took place during the 70s. I'm not really sure. Saul would know the dates better than I do.

00:23:46

SONDRA GASH: Yes. In 1976, I think was the end or 1980 was the real end. So, there were 17 years before 1980 when he was down back and forth and spending a lot of time in the South: North Carolina. And I I've spoken with people that worked with him. His staff. And they would say he wasn't just calling from a distance. He was there. And one guy told me that he would call people and then ask for the number and call them back. He was a little bit tough. He wanted to know if they were really there where they were supposed to be. He cared. And sometimes he came down unexpectedly and they were, you know, they weren't afraid of him, they were pleased that he was like one of them participating.

00:24:38

EVELYN HERSHEY: We talked too, a little bit about his interest in labor education. I'll add this question in any way. We talked about maybe not mentioning it, but can you talk about your father's relationship with Rutgers University? Especially I know he had a relationship with William Paterson University too. But I think his involvement in labor education at Rutgers is also very important in addition to the Labor Museum here. So, maybe you could say a few words about his regard for Rutgers and the wing

00:25:11

that's named his honor. SONDRA GASH: He was very proud to be connected with Rutgers and Paterson University. At Rutgers, he began to do some teaching and this was new for him and by the way, referring back to the museum, when he had to retire and he was forced to retire because of the laws of the union. He became active in forming this museum and I'll always remember how one day he called and said,

00:25:45

"I'm going to the Smithsonian. Okay Dad. How come?" He said, "I'm learning." He said "larning".

00:25:54

He'd put it down a little bit. "I'm learning museum-ing. I'm learning museum-ing." And he was very impressed with that part of him that was developing.

00:27:11

At Rutgers he was regarded for a time as a labor-educator-in-residence. Was that his title?

SONDRA GASH: Yes, I forgot that. Yeah labor-educator-in-residence. And when I see his name on the new building, the new wing named after him, I take great pride, great pride. He was very unusually -- I think about his legacy -- inclusive. He really was the kind of person you could go to [and] he'd listen. He'd talk. He liked people so, that all kinds of people, all kinds of situations interested him. He was like a lifelong learner.

EVELYN HERSHEY: While at Rutgers, his students were labor leaders also from what I understand. I think you have some photographs in the museum and it looks like he imparted what he knew and his experiences to labor leaders in other industries. Outside of textiles.

SONDRA GASH: Not just textiles. Right. In fact, he was like an innocent in a way, learning. He was already in his 70s already [and] beginning to learn a new form of expression.

And it's still related to unionism, but it was another side that he could develop of himself. And he gave himself fully to this institution now and its development.

00:27:30

00:27:35

People would say. People called me recently after his death and would say things like it was amazing when you were with him. He could give you a history of what had gone on just off the cuff.

00:27:47

He knew so much about labor history. He was a walking compendium of the story and that was admirable. Admirable. I think that's what he taught. I think. He used himself to garner interest in unionism. EVELYN HERSHEY: How did he view retirement?

00:28:09

We talked about that a little bit and what did he do as a retiree? People always ask, what are you going to do now that you're retired. How did he view retirement for himself? SONDRAGASH: When I saw that, and I saw that question, I thought retirement?

00:28:22

My father? They are like an oxymoron. So, they don't go together.

00:28:29

My father never really retired. When he had committed himself to this labor museum

00:28:36

he was here all the time. When he went out to live in St. Louis three years ago, because my mother wasn't that well and they needed to move to a place that would be convenient near my sister who wanted, after many, many years, for them to live near her,

00:28:55

he began to get involved in strikes and activities. And there was a big march. Only a few months before he died. He was 94 and they put him in a little car. They gave him a little cap and everybody else marched and he waved from the car. Then it was on television. He had a way of bringing attention to himself, somehow. Something charismatic in his personality I think. So, retirement -- I don't think he ever really retired.

00:29:28

He would always find something new to do. EVELYN HERSHEY: And I think recently he was involved with the Jobs with Justice campaign in St. Louis too.

00:29:36

SONDRA GASH: Absolutely. An organization that's an outgrowth of the I think the AFL-CIO, but independent in many ways. It is very powerful out there in St. Louis and he became extremely active going to all kinds of meetings and he always, all his life he would send out material. So, I would get and everybody would get all this written material about.

00:30:00

Jobs with Justice now. The organization he was involved in the last few years. EVELYN HERSHEY:
How was that? SONDRAS GASH: He admired

00:33:55

for his allowing himself space to grow even more. EVELYN HERSHEY: I think we can conclude.
Can you think of anything else? Then we can conclude. Of.

00:31:22

So, I would say his legacy for the family is that he was someone to be very proud of

00:31:28

because of his public role, his particular place in the public place. He felt he belonged out there.

00:31:39

I cared about that about him.

00:31:43

What else can I say? What's your view on his legacy? EVELYN HERSHEY: I think that's very well
said. I'm wondering if there are any other of your writings about Saul

00:31:55

that you'd like to share. Any other of your poetry that you'd like to share. SONDRAS GASH: If there's time. EVELYN HERSHEY: In the time that we have left. SONDRAS GASH: Well I have one or two poems that are very short that give you a sense of him that are a little bit, in a sense, light-spirited. And this one is called *Sepia Photo 1920*. "Ellis Island has landed in New York City. Here is," and I'm looking at this picture of my father. "Here is my father, a boy of 10, just off the boat. Baggy Trousers held up with suspenders, head tilted forward, stiff pitch of shoulders, small, feisty, Jew-boy standing slightly apart from sisters and brothers. Hoarding (sp) street life in downtown Manhattan.

00:32:51

Argument already shining in his dark witted eyes and his fist already raised." One more.

00:33:02

This speaks for itself. *His Oversized Suit*. "Eighty-eight and when I bump into him at the Hoboken station he's wearing the suit. He says he'll grow into someday. His step, still jaunty, his hair still black. He's going one way, I another. When I call, he turns. Gotta rush, he says. Can't miss the train. He's licking an ice cream cone,

00:33:34

and dashing off. My father, still a young man in a hurry.

00:33:39

My father. Eighty-eight and still growing into his suit." And when I'm saying the suit, I think of my father as always growing. Always moving and developing. So, the suit was the metaphor

00:33:55

for his allowing himself space to grow even more. EVELYN HERSHEY: I think we can conclude. Can you think of anything else? Then we can conclude.

00:34:09