

**Leon Stein**  
**Born September 18, 1910**  
**Chicago Illinois (14<sup>th</sup> St on the West Side)**



My father and mother were both born in the town of Bratzlav which is in the Ukraine Russia, Podolia Gebernia, on the Bug (pronounced boog) river. When my father, Harry Uhnstahl, came to America (about 1903), his friends convinced him that this was not a real American name, and they induced him to change his name to Silverstein, which in 1917 he changed to Stein. He had an excellent tenor voice and both in Europe and for a short time in America served as a part-time cantor. He was offered a scholarship in Leningrad (Moscow?) but the family decided not to accept this, because being observant Jews, they feared he would not be able to follow the dietary laws. (This parallels, for entirely different reasons, when my sister Pearl was offered a scholarship at the University of Michigan with Pianist Joseph Brinkman, she refused it, the parallel being that this for her was an equally important turning point in *her* life.) My grandparents were Sholom Lazar, which I believe was originally Lazarovitch, shortened to Lazar when they came to America (about the same time as my parents). My Grandmother was Rose Pritikin.

My mother was about 13 years old when she came to America in about 1903 also. I think that my parents were first or second cousins. They got married when my mother was about 18 years old. She was a very handsome woman. She was all her life a very regal person. She was tall, blonde, always very dignified in her bearing. Most of her family were all in the needle trade – tailors and furriers. My father’s brother Sam, his only relative, had a tailor shop in Chicago. He never married.

My grandparents and their immediate family moved to 1412 North Campbell Avenue around 1913. One of my earliest recollections was the death of my grandfather – I was about 5 years old at the time. I remember that he was ill at home, apparently with cancer. I remember the scurrying about, the needles. He was living downstairs of our family. We lived literally in the garret upstairs. When he died, he was placed in a casket in the living room with candles at either end. [Was it spooky for you? – “It was certainly impressive”].

My uncles and aunts (the Lazars) who lived downstairs – there were 9 – Morris, Sol, Louis, Ira, Abraham, Nathan, Jenny, Bessie. Morris eventually opened a large fur store on Devon and Broadway. He actually had an affair (he was divorced at the time) with the woman who managed the millinery store, which he also owned next door. He loved big cars and one day while he took this woman named Fisher and her husband for a ride – the car turned over and while he and the husband escaped, she was paralyzed. While he could have assigned the medical costs to the insurance, until she died, he assumed the medical expense and it practically broke him. He had one daughter living (Leah Schwartz, married to Jack Schwartz, currently living in Chicago).

Sol was the owner of the large Lazar’s Kasher sausage company, first on Roosevelt Road, later on Kedzie and Bryn Mawr. His children were Mary, Seymour, Shirley and Dorothy. They were extremely orthodox. His daughter Dorothy moved to Israel with her husband Sidney Talsnik, who now owns a large food store in Jerusalem. Louis (the father of Sy and Alex Lazar) was divorced from Bellah. His 2 children were Symour (Cy) and Alex Lazar. He was quite a womanizer.

Ira worked for Sol for awhile, then a girl, Minnie, came from New York to marry him. His daughters are Shirley and Vera.

Abraham became Dr. A. M. Lazar, eye ear nose and throat specialist, the head of that dept at Mt Sinai Hospital. He married Betty Zagorski. They had two children, Helen Simon and Sibyl Roth.

Nathan was one of the leading ophthalmologists in the United States. He married Marian and they had one daughter Barbara Lazar.

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Jenny was a nurse. She never married – she was very interested in Irving’s and my career – she’s the one who made the contact with Herbert Butler with whom we studied violin.

Sophie Tucker was a distant cousin of my father. My Aunt Jennie kept in touch with her and her family in the east (Boston?). At one of her Chicago appearances, Miss Tucker appeared at the Great Northern Theater and stayed at the Great Northern Hotel, next door to the theater. On Saturday mornings, Irving and I took our violin lessons at the American Conservatory of Music, 25 East Jackson, just a few blocks from the hotel. So, naturally, Aunt Jennie decided that Miss Tucker ought to meet these two prodigies and she took us to the hotel – certainly not the most propitious time for a visit with a vaudeville entertainer. Miss Tucker was still in bed when we were ushered in to meet her, very sleepy but gracious enough for what must have been one of the most underwhelming experiences in her eventful life.

Bessie was a secretary and a model for the painter Pougialis, a very well-known Chicago painter. She was married twice – her first husband, a young man tried to kill her – he came after her with a knife. She remarried and had no children.

As was common in those days, émigrés established “relief” societies for relatives still remaining in Europe. Periodically fundraising programs were presented. On one of these – I was about 8 or 9 years old, my uncle Abe (then a medical student) coached and rehearsed me in a memorized presentation of Thomas Hood’s Song of the Shirt... “With fingers weary and worn, with eyelids heavy and red,...” On another occasion, my brother Irving and I came home from our regular Sunday football game, forgetting that we had been scheduled to play a violin duet for a Bratzlaver Relief Program. We had time only to put on a pair of clean trousers over the soiled ones, preparatory to leaving for our “engagement.”

My brother Irving was born February 12, 1909. I was the second child (9/18/10). Pearl was born May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1914. Seymour was born about 1917. Lester was born in 1920.

We lived upstairs in this garret with a sloping roof. It was very small – there was a kitchen, living room, and 3 bedrooms. It had gas fixtures. No bathtub – we bathed in a galvanized oval metal tub. My father was a tailor who originally worked for Hart, Schaffter & Marx. They had a big strike and my father, who was a foreman, because he was management he didn’t really have to go out on strike, but he did. And as a result, afterwards he was not rehired. After that he got some other jobs and eventually he became a fur finisher. Before he became a fur finisher he would frequently secure loans from the Morris Plan – there wasn’t that constant an income.

Jenny was an independent lady and Sol was ultra orthodox. There was a major storm when Jenny brought in a can of pork and beans into the house – it was like a scene from a Maxim Gorky play. Screaming, yelling, it was pretty bad.

Abe (who was working as a cab driver) and then Nathan were in medical school. Ira was angry so he took the door off the room of the bedroom – if they wanted to study he wasn’t going to make it easy on them, because he thought that they should have been working more to support the family. During the First World War, with the shortage of coal, Ira was afraid that because we had parlor stove heat, that we might be using the coal for our stove from their supply, he changed the lock on the shed, to be sure that we wouldn’t use the coal. In the winters I remember it got really cold in the garret, ice would form about 1/8” thick inside the windows.

Subsequently, after he got married, Ira had a quarrel with Sol (his brother). He moved to New York, where he opened a laundry shop.

Both Irving and I studied violin because we couldn’t afford a piano. (Ordinarily one would study one instrument, one another.) When Abe went to Vienna to specialize in eye, ear, nose and throat, my parents accumulated \$125 (I don’t know how they got the money) which they gave to him to purchase a violin for us, which I still have – a Matthias Thir- 1776.

The American Conservatory where we studied violin with Herbert Butler was on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the Kimball Building. About 1955 this building was purchased by John C. Lewis, a coal-tar executive who then gave the building to De Paul University, which then moved its downtown campus to that location (at 25 East Jackson) from 64 E. Lake. The DePaul music school then took over the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floors. The 6<sup>th</sup> floor studio of our violin

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instructor, Herbert Butler became the office of the Vice President John T. Richardson. The corner office which I occupied as Dean from 1966-76 was originally the studio of Adolph Weidig, head of the theory department of the American Conservation of Music.



Because I skipped a couple of grades, Irving and I graduated in the same grammar school class, and we went through high school together. We graduated from Sabin grade school in June 1923, and graduated from Crane Technical High School in June 1927. Irving became interested in popular music and had a dance although he had never studied piano. I was familiar with people in the WPA music who was the music director for the WPA project for the State of Illinois. One day when I came in to have an orchestra work of mine read, he asked me if I knew somebody who could direct the (WPA) dance band for the City of Chicago, so I said "Sure, my brother Irving." This was important because while our family could easily qualify for relief, my parents simply would not even think of applying for it – they were too proud. So his income at that time was quite important. Irving married Naomi Desarmeau, who was French Irish Catholic. She was a dancer. They had one child Richard, who became a concert pianist, now living in Holland. Immediately after WWII, having been

prior to that time a leading salesman for the Wurlitzer company, Irving decided to go into business as owner and director of a music school of his own, the American School of Music, eventually constructing a large school building in Chicago.

My grandmother & I were very close. She was one of the few women who actually read Yiddish (remember Yentil?). We owned a Yiddish translation of the Old Testament. (English was spoken in our house, and some Yiddish). While I was still in grade school I attended the Yiddish classes of Arbeiter Ring – the Workman's Circle school, which was a critical determinant later, in terms of marriage and music. My grandmother would discuss her readings with me. She lived downstairs – she ran the whole house downstairs after her husband die in 1915. One of the things when she was upset with any big issue that came up, she would say to me "mirdarfn schreiben a brief tzum president" (we have to write a letter to the president). So she would dictate and I would write it in English and she would take the letter and put it under the oilcloth on the table and that was the end of it – it was off her mind.

I was a voracious reader – I read everything – Among other things, my uncle Ira had brought a large bookcase full of books, which had a concave glass in front of the case, which had a large and eclectic collection of books which I read to the accompaniment of the one or 2 records which were all they owned. One of the things that I avoided reading was called "Men of Letters" – I thought "who would want to read letters?"

My grade school graduation was the occasion of my first published work The English class who asked to write a report on a professor from Northwestern University who had visited Albania and gave a lecture at the school. The English teacher had assigned a report, and the best one was to be published in an annual publication called the Sabinite. The way it was selected was that all of the papers were passed down to the end of each row, and the person at the end of the row selected which they thought were the best of the papers in that row, and then the teacher took those home and selected the best of the best. The she read that one to the class and asked, now does anybody think they had a better paper, so sort of hesitantly I raised my hand. So she read mine and she asked for a vote of the class, and unanimously including herself she felt mine was the best.

Pearl studied piano and I assumed the monthly payments for the upright piano which we rented. I had weekend jobs selling shoes in various shoe stores. Pearl studied with a number of teachers including Joseph Brinkman, who wanted to take her to the University of Michigan to give her a full scholarship, where he had been appointed to the faculty. She was one of his best students, but for a combination of reasons, she didn't go. She studied with Tomford Harris and then I got her a scholarship at DePaul with Arthur C. Becker – I was completing my last year of a scholarship.

Pearl married Peter Zukovsky, a clarinetist who became bass clarinetist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and also a clarinet instructor. Frankl, the director of a music school, convinced Peter to move to California to open a music school together, but Frankl backed out after they started it, so Peter & Pearl were left with the California School of Music in North Hollywood. They had 2 children, Charles and Julie. Pearl moved back to Chicago after Peter died – she was afraid because of earthquakes. At that time I was dean of the school of music. I appointed her to the faculty. She stayed in Chicago for about 15 years, and then moved back to California. She passed away in 1989.

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Seymour, as a young man, worked at Lazar's Kosher sausage. He was a star football player at Crane Technical High School; a general all-around athlete. He married Leonore Elet. He became a pilot in WWII, and on the occasion of winning his wings, he flew over a herd of cattle buzzing them, so he was busted from lieutenant to staff sergeant. Thereafter he was stationed in England and Germany. After the war, they adopted 3 children, Gary, Michael and Susan. Susan has 3 daughters. Seymour died in 1989.

Lester went to Roosevelt High School and Wright Junior College. He was very interested in social issues. He was in the public relations department of the Army Air Force, first stationed in S. F. and then in the Philippines. On the way to the Philippines, his ship was hit by a kamikaze pilot, but fortunately for him, on the opposite side from him from where he was at the time. He and Seymour opened Vogue Furniture Industries, starting with nothing, in Lincolnwood Illinois. Eventually they went into the real estate development business together and became Lincoln Pratt Building Corporation, building skyscrapers on the near north side and large housing developments in the Chicago suburbs. When Pearl lived in Chicago they gave her an apartment in one of their skyscraper buildings. Lester was married briefly to (Kitty) – the day before his wedding he said to Seymour, "I wonder if I'm not making the biggest mistake of my life." The marriage only lasted a short time. Later he married Augusta, who is Burmese, but was born in Malaysia.

After high school, I went to Crane Jr. College and completed my 2 year course in a year and a half. The way I did this was by taking more hours than they would normally allow. I graduated Salutatorian of the class. The head of the music department at Crane College was Robert Gomer Jones, an excellent organist, a graduate of the Royal College of Music in London and also director of the Welsh Male choir of Chicago. He gave me an enormous amount of private instruction time for which of course I remain eternally grateful.

I applied for a scholarship at Northwestern University and Arnie Oldberg, the head of the composition dept, assured me he would recommend me for a traveling Julliard Scholarship, but that year they were cut off. I needed a full scholarship. I applied at DePaul, because I'd read an article that they were moving to 64 East Lake St from the North Side campus. I was given a full scholarship. Right after graduating Crane College, I spent a year in independent composing. On taking the entrance examination at DePaul I got advanced placement, so I completed all undergraduate requirements in 1 year; I'd been at junior college a year and a half, completing 2 full years work. My total was 2 ½ years in college to complete my undergraduate work. Immediately after graduation, in 1931, I was appointed to the faculty as a part time violin teacher. Previously I'd been concertmeister of the university orchestra. Later I organized and directed the DePaul chamber orchestra.

In 1934, I was taking a walk and I met Mr. Carson who had been an instructor of mine while I was a youngster at the Workman's Circle School. The Workman's Circle was a Jewish cultural fraternal organization which sponsored and supported the Workman's Circle Schools which had a curriculum of Yiddish Cultural subjects. It was socialist in orientation – the more radical wing was called the IWO – the International Workers Order, which was communist in its orientation and that broke away from the Workman's Circle. Carson asked if I would be interested in directing the musical activities – choir, musical plays at the summer camp of the Workman's circle organization near South Haven Michigan. I told him I hadn't done this before, but I was interested, so he gave me some materials and asked me to come, about a week later, to a class to teach some Yiddish songs. He hired me. That began my association with Yiddish and Hebrew music.

At the camp, I directed the rehearsals outdoors and a young lady (Anne Helman) used to come to watch the rehearsals. It turned out she had had an appendix operation earlier that year and her mother had suggested that instead of going right back to work, she spend the summer at their summer home in Mount Pleasant, adjacent to the summer camp. Subsequently I directed the Young Circle chorus in Chicago, and she was a member of that chorus. When we were looking up our birth certificates for passports years later, we discovered that we had been born within 4 blocks of each other. (When my uncle Sol was married, about 1919, at the Hebrew Institute, I was at the wedding. Her father was the manager of the Hebrew Institute on Polk Street, and Anne was living there at the time.) When I met her, we lived 4 blocks from each other. We lived on 2607 Spaulding Avenue and she lived at 4714 Wrightwood.

We were married in 1937. I got a telephone call one night in 1944 from a former student, Carl Haseman, who was the chief arranger at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, who phoned me that the conductor of the concert band and orchestra at Great Lakes, Lehman Engel, (which had one of the best musical outfits in the armed services), had

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received a commission to join the Navy entertainment division in New York. He asked me when I was due to be drafted, which you knew from your order number. I said in about six months. He said if you go down to the Navy office and ask for an authorized special induction: they will jump your order number and you can join up immediately.

At Great Lakes I was director of the Concert Band and Orchestra and arranger for the Meet Your Navy Program (an international radio program), and the On Target Program (a national radio program). One of the sequences that I wrote was the background music for a program directed by Cecil B. DeMille called "Bill Jones is Dead." In 1944 & 45 I conducted the orchestra at Ross Auditorium and also the concert band and orchestra at Grant Park Illinois. Bobby was born June 21, 1945. I was discharged December 16, 1945. I went back to DePaul and taught music theory. The head of the theory department was Wesly LaViolette who was leaving "temporarily" for California and recommended me to take his classes. I'd earned my Masters degree already. Kenny was born on December 8, 1947. We were living at 4527 North Richmond. We bought the house just after I got out of the service with a \$1000 veterans loan under the GI bill.



Subsequently, in 1956 we moved to 4050 Greenwood Street in Skokie and in 1984 moved to Laguna Hills, renting for one year and then purchasing our home at 3405 B Calle Azul. In 1984, prior to leaving for California, I presented to DePaul University what is now known as the Leon Stein Collection – compositions, manuscripts, miscellaneous memorabilia, books, tapes, photographs, etc. A summary of my career as composer, conductor, educator and author is found in that collection as well as in "Who's Who in America," Groves, and other encyclopedias.

The bottom line: Samara once asked me, "Grandpa, what is the single most important thing that ever happened to you in your life?" I replied, "That's easy. It was the day I married your grandmother."

**2/18/90**