

Josef Gingold Exclusive Interview

When Josef Gingold when was eighty years old I interviewed him in his teaching studio at the Indiana University School of Music. I've transcribed the interview to help clarify words and passages that may be acoustically difficult to understand. It is a verbatim transcription intended to accompany the interview, but is not intended for publication as a literary composition. *Kim Maerkl*

The First World War

Listen, I'll tell you a story, I swear I don't think you would ever believe it, I started scratching on a fiddle when I was about three years old. My oldest brother was a violinist, he was about seventeen years older than I and he was the oldest, I was the youngest of six children. My brother had this violin, and I tried at the age of three to find a way to open the case and I took the violin out. I was just scratching, three years of age. I managed somehow to play some sort of tune.

Well, after that my father went to Warsaw on a business trip and he brought me back a little violin and I was so thrilled. I was about four years old. I asked my father what makes it play, and he said see when you put the bow down there's a little man inside and he begins to dance. I wanted to see the little man and "Crack," I cracked my violin in half. My father got so mad he began screaming and yelling at me, and I got frightened because my father never yelled, he got mad. My mother said, "Why do you tell him such stories he's four years old, of course, he wants to see the little man."

The war broke out, the First World War and we lived in the city in Russia where they had one quarter of Russia's ammunition was in our city. The Russians knew if the Germans invaded that we better clear this whole city, so we got twenty-four hours notice to leave where, nobody knew, no destination, impossible to get on a train, it was taken up by troops.

We families all decided we would walk somewhere, we decided, and then we walked for about three weeks. I'll tell you how fate works sometimes, we walked in the fields and at night everybody would hold hands so we stayed together as a group and slept in the open fields. No food, my father had offered five hundred rubbles for a loaf of bread, and the farmer wouldn't sell it to him. In the meantime, the ruble went completely out, five hundred rubles was like five rubles. The war was going so badly for Russia at the beginning.

Finally, we got to a little city called Pruziana, we got to Pruziana the Germans had already occupied that town, there were military all over. They stopped us all, they gathered us up and put us into an armory and bare floors, we all had to sleep on the floor, we were glad.

The first thing they did was to get my father and my brother for slave labor. Able-bodied men, my father was no more than about forty-three years old, forty two, forty-three years. They promised rations for that, food rations, they did give food rations for that, it didn't amount to ...

It was not a concentration camp, the kind that Germany had in the Second World War, nothing like that, they were afraid of the civilians carrying disease, so they isolated us from the military.

Right next door was another part of an armory, it was an officer's domicile, and one day I was outside with another two or three kids, and we were playing and I was attracted by the sound of a violin. There were two German soldiers, and one other and one was playing the violin and they were trying to teach this violinist a tune that they wanted to sing and he had a tin ear. They kept on saying, "No that's not it," and he was trying, and I heard that tune twice, it was quite enough, it was very simple. So, I motioned to them that I played, you see, and they looked, they thought it was cute, and didn't pay attention. Finally, one of them must have said look, it's a child, let's see. So, they went to the man who was the sentry who stood guard and they said, "Let him out, he's a little child, he wont harm anybody." I got up and took the violin and to this day, I remember to this day, and I don't know I never heard it since.....(He plays the piece.) Those two soldiers began singing with me, and they thought I was a genius.

Well anyway, I went right back and I came back to the armory where we were all staying, I never told my mother about it, I didn't think there was anything important to tell, probably. That night, two German soldiers with bayonets came in, "Wo ist der kleine Josef, der die Geige spielt?" My mother got so frightened, she pointed to me...my mother, she used to live in Karlsbad, she spoke fluently. So they explained; the two soldiers said that he was a prodigy and he would play for us a song, don't worry, we'll bring him back, he'll be all right.

It was a big officers' domicile, noisy and full of smoke, I remember that. And I also remember I had never heard a concert in my life, I didn't know about applause. When they all broke out cheering, I got so frightened, and then, the two Germans, they took bows and they gave me a bow. And, one of the officers, whose name was Krock, Oberlieutenant Krock, I see him before me as I see you right now. The impression was

incredible, he took a hat, passed it around and everybody put some money in it. They gave me that, and I wouldn't take it. I showed them that I was hungry. I see Krock, Oberlieutenant Krock, looking at me, his eyes filled up with tears, so, he sent four soldiers back with me, each one carrying two sacks. I came home, everybody waited for me and the soldiers they took the sacks off their back and said that's his fee for performing so brilliantly. Oh, I forgot to tell you, they asked me if I could also play something alone. I tell you what I played, a little mazurka of Wieniawski called Québec, it's beautiful, I play a little better now. (He plays the piece.)

Well, we opened up the bags and I will never forget to this day, it was the first time I had ever seen sardines, and sardines, chicory, a crude form of coffee, chicory, biscuits, a lot of biscuits, cans with meats, I don't remember what kind of meat. Well sardines I tasted and to this day I have a passion, I feel like a little five-year old. Anyway, my mother opened the sacks and she said to everybody, "We share and we share alike, come on over." And within five minutes everything was gone. There were so many of us, you see. It's quite a long story about everything, I don't want to bore you.

Then, we came to this country, we came in 1920. You see, the part of Russia where lived became a Polish republic with Paderewski as its first premier. Then, we lived there for about a year or so, the war ended in 1918. You know the treaty of Brest Litovsk, that was the new Russian Bolshevik government. We signed a treaty with Germany allowing Germany to finish the war with them. Germany then was free to revert all the troops to the western front, and they called it "The infamous treaty of Brest Litovsk." Well, that's the city where I lived and I remember my father taking me to the railroad station to see the Russian delegation. I saw Trotsky, and he is as vivid as if I saw him a half hour ago, with a little beard and my father," Can you imagine a Jew in the Russian government, unheard-of." That was the most violently anti-semitic nation in the world.

To America

Then, we came to this country and I resumed my studies at the Music School Settlement in New York, and they were marvelous to me. They gave me a violin, I didn't have an instrument, a teacher that bought me music and gave me tickets for concerts, all free. And I was only there about six months when they thought I should have a private teacher, that I had outgrown more or less the school. I always had such a warm feeling in my heart for this marvelous institution.

Then when I came back, I came at the height of the depression along with many other very good players in New York. We used to walk the streets, literally, maybe trying to find somebody, meet an acquaintance, "Do you know of any job?"

So, I had one year that was horrible but I did not for a moment complain or felt sorry for my lot, I had to take care of my parents to begin with, my father had no profession and in those days people, the highest educated people couldn't get a job for five dollars. So I didn't feel sorry for myself, "Look, I chose to be a musician, this is what you want, what you have to do."

In New York

I love the violin, and I set a certain standard, I didn't want to get off. One day, I auditioned for a musical comedy by Jerome Kern which was called, *The Cat and the Fiddle*. It was a chamber orchestra, only three violins, hand picked and I auditioned for that and I got a job. The show ran fifty-six weeks, I earned eighty dollars a week, it's like earning eight hundred now, more than that, it was such a fantastic learning experience, I cannot tell you.

When you sit as concertmaster it's not only that you play so well, it's also your attitude, it's also your alertness. I learned two things by playing fifty-six weeks, and that stood me in good stead for the rest of my life. First, you never take your eyes off the stick because no two performances are alike. Second, what is the fifty-eighth or sixtieth performance to you, is the first performance to the audience; don't slacken, play. I used to give all the time, I used to play my heart out. It was a nice show to begin with. You know some of the music from that, it was a joy, I tell you. I've never forgotten the tunes. (He plays the piece.) *The Night was Made for Love*. You know this one? *Smoke Gets in your Eyes*. (He plays the piece.)

I never looked my nose down at music. I love jazz. I've played jazz, I've played with André Kostelanetz. You know who they had in the orchestra, Benny Goodman, the two Dorsey Brothers were in the orchestra. You know, I didn't know their names. I played, *Roberta*, *Music in the Air* and then I began to play in different orchestras.

I got married at that time in 1934 in October, I was married and my wife was an excellent violinist and she, she had a good vision about me. They announced the audition in the New York Times that a new orchestra was being formed by Toscanini by the National Broadcasting Company, and auditions are going to be held. She said,

"Why don't you audition for that?"

Playing under Arturo Toscanini

Listen darling, if I were to speak about Toscanini I need a book. I cannot tell you enough how this man affected me and everyone else, he was a wild one. He was a perfectionist. He demanded perfection from you, but he also demanded it of himself. He was very hard on himself, and I remember once he was screaming and he was saying, "Shame on you and you and you and you."

Personally, he was a terrific conductor, I mean his musical language was incredible. Somehow whatever he did you always knew where he was. He was the clearest conductor I ever played with, you never had to second guess him and he worked so hard at rehearsals, there used to be a pool of water, perspiration, it made you want to work just as hard when you see an example like that. He was in some ways a little gruff, I must say, very much a peasant. But, he was a very great man in other respects, you know of the stand he took against Mussolini and Hitler; it was remarkable. He was beaten up by the fascists, bodily beaten up. He refused to play the Giovanezza. (The anthem of the Italian fascists.)

He went to Palestine to conduct what is now the Israel Philharmonic. Because so many Jews, particularly from Germany had no place to go and this great violinist Bronislaw Huberman created this orchestra and got them all together. Israel was not a state yet, it was Palestine at the time. He went to conduct the opening two concerts. In music, the whole world focused on that orchestra at that time, everybody was affected by it.

He came to see the widow of Wagner to tell her that he will not be conducting at Bayreuth, she asked him why.

He said, "I'm going to conduct a new orchestra, the Palestine Symphony."

She said, "You're giving up Bayreuth to conduct a group of semi-demi Orientals, for what reason?"

He said, "For humanity!"

He walked out of her place and turned his back on her. Bayreuth was a holy shrine, nobody refused Bayreuth, he did.

On big issues he was marvelous, with the orchestra he could be a wild one, he

could also be very fair at times. I think one of the reasons why Toscanini had such problems with his temper sometimes, was not for a good reason, you know, is that he could not verbalize very well in English. George Szell spoke eight languages to perfection. He had a remarkably organized mind, and he would have certain directions, he would explain it and there was no second guessing. Toscanini sometimes would do that and achh, achh, we knew already that it is something that he could not say.

But what a musician, oh God. Toscanini had a reverence for the composers score. In other words, what was on it without getting his personality in it all. He believed that he could read between the lines, but essentially the music was not for him to show off with, the music was for him to interpret, and of course, the more he did that, the greater he became. For him the score was what the Bible is to the Pope; it's a religion, music was a religion with him and everyone who came in contact with him couldn't help but get a little tiny piece of that with him, the love of music and music-making. It was a terrific inspiration.

It was pretty hard leaving, but I had to be concertmaster. I was playing in the violin section, I was happy, I would have played in the outfield for Toscanini if he had asked me.

From Toscanini I learned about the giving of relentlessly of yourself to whatever it is that you are interpreting.

George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra

Szell was marvelous, Szell was an entirely different type of a conductor. He first of all, was a great orchestra builder. Secondly, he was a musician of the elite. Third of all, he could be a very good friend. He was a type of artist, I mean he was so exact, so perfect. It was not always easy to sit under his nose, you know, but I managed to survive.

Let me tell you another thing about George Szell; first of all he was a very marvelous pianist. I used to play a lot of sonatas with him, and those were like learning sessions, it was wonderful and I loved it. I'll tell you what, Szell, like Toscanini in his own way cleansed much of the so called traditional ritards and things that had nothing to do with what the composer had written down. Szell had a wonderful ear for balance, the string section sounded like a string quartet I tell you. I mean his Mozart, his Haydn, early Beethoven, it was little diamonds, every little eighth note was a little diamond. Not only did the phrase sparkle, what made the phrase sparkle was each individual note had its own place. He was a very good friend, and he was a very great teacher. I learned more

about teaching from George Szell than I did from any of my violin teachers, Ysaye included. You know, if you have an attitude, if a musician has an attitude, and he goes to play with a great conductor, he's there to learn, because we can always learn from a great man, from a great musician. Not because it's a job and you look what time is it. That is what shortens a musician's life and shortens his love of music. Occasionally, he could be very inspirational. Szell, if he would be in a wonderful mood and conduct and somebody would play (he sings) everything would cease.

I got along beautifully with George Szell to the very end. There was not something, I just wanted another way of life. When I was offered the position here and I spoke to Szell about it he released me from a three-year contract, and that's the story.

Teaching

You asked me a very good question, what made you want to become a teacher. My grandfather was a very well-known Rabbi who stressed education more than anything in the world.

So about teaching, first, I think the most important thing in a string teacher's playing is a perfect intonation. Intonation is the basis of a beautiful tone, it's not the vibrato only, it's not the bow pressure, if a note is dead in tune you don't even have to vibrate, it's already beautiful. And if you do vibrate on it, it will have a series of overtones. It's fascinating.

Why do we play scales so much is really mainly for intonation, of course for dexterity, and things like that and the relationship between one note and another is so important. I emphasize also, oh my gosh, it's hard to pinpoint, I'll try my best. I emphasize good bowing technique, that's very important. Good position of the instrument is important, these are all fundamental things.

My gosh, if you are taught in first grade that c-a-t is pronounced "sat" and not "cat," you see if no one corrects you it will be sat for the rest of your life and it's the same with the beginning. Why I think the mistake so many parents make when they'll go let's say, to some neighborhood teacher, say oh, he only gets five dollars a lesson, it's good enough for the beginning; nothing is good enough for the beginning dear. I think the beginning teacher is the most important teacher a student will have. Because eventually they'll reach a stage where they'll come to a big music school or a university to study with some artist teacher, they can only benefit if we people, who are, let's say in the

higher hierarchy of the profession, do not have to start repairing damage which may have been done. And some great talents sometimes have been ruined.

You asked me what is your system. I don't have a system darling. There are systems for producing a can of Coca Cola, I mean this is a system for me, it's all systematized. You're dealing with a human being when you're teaching, not two human beings are alike. Like fingerprints, there are no two sets of fingerprints that are the same. So you try to see what is the need mainly for this person. You might give a certain fingering to one person, and it doesn't work at all, for another person it's medicine, for another one it's poison, that can happen. I feel that my aim in my teaching, whether I succeed or not, and whether I succeed or not means a heck of a lot to me, naturally, I like to succeed in what I've undertaken. What I merely try to do is to see a very gifted person and what are his needs. I don't want him to sound like anybody else.

First of all, have patience, a teacher with no patience is no teacher. Secondly, you sometimes play for a student, only when really necessary, when something isn't right, you try to play or maybe sometimes to inspire. And then, you see a person is developing beautifully. And he's reached a stage sixteen, seventeen, where he has some ideas. Let's hear them, why not, my word is not holy. Then, I see something coming out of the violin that is so beautiful, keep it, encourage that, try to get it out of the person even if you get to reach a higher stage. To me, that's teaching with a sense of humanity and a sense of beautiful music making. That's our job. I find all these beautiful talents; each one is going to find something in life, to do something in the music field. I try to teach them that music is a religion, it is to me and always has been and I don't think there's a person in the world that loves music more than I do and since the age of three this has gone on.

Always con Amore

Listen dear, we never stand still in our life or in our professions and I've had many, many changes, even some on the violin. How I have changed tremendously since I came here. (Indiana University) I do a lot of thinking for myself, and I experiment with different fingerings, different bowings, different attitude and always con amore, always with love. You never play dutifully; you play beautifully. I think this enthusiasm has kept me going for many years.

Tradition in Violin Playing

Tradition has changed a lot. You know, playing violin playing is very much a personification of the times that we live in. There's a style of playing, people wore their hearts on their sleeves, it was nice, and they had certain mannerisms. I wouldn't call it a mannerism at all; they had certain expressive means or needs of playing. For instance, glissandi were very much evident and down shifts, you would hear a man like Ysaye when he played, (He plays).

I tell you something, it was beautiful, we don't play like that anymore. This was one way. Now the greatest barometer of the times that we live in is Bach. Now, he has changed since when I was a boy. I heard the great violinist Bronislaw Huberman it was great. He played in those days, he would, it was very poetic. At the same time you would question is it very serious or very authentic, whatever you want to call it. Today, everything is so serious and authentic you're wishing for a little poetry. It has changed, first of all, we have better strings than we used to have, all gut strings, they were terrible. They used to snap, they used to go out of tune in a warm room and we don't have to fight that anymore. I'm amazed how wonderfully in tune some of the people like Ysaye and Sarasate. I heard a recording of Sarasate, marvelous, wonderful technique, it's not the most inspired playing but marvelous left hand. And Ysaye made some beautiful recordings, but you have to take into consideration what he did, he played *Humoresque* from Dvorak, (He plays). I tell you, if you listen to it a few times you begin to love it, because the artist was great. Some people play very much the modern way and say nothing.

Technique is not fast fingers, technique is a know how, it is like having a wonderful vocabulary. You cannot speak well, or certainly you cannot write a paper or a story or even a good letter with a vocabulary of eight words. That's the same here in playing; the bigger your vocabulary the more you can express yourself, providing something comes from here. (He touches his heart)

Instruments of Cremona

I played a Strad for forty-five years. One of the great wonders for me about these great masterpieces is how they have withstood years of high pitch, changing weathers, playing in large concert halls. It's one of the great wonders of the world, you know.

Listen, the violin makers in Cremona, they made violins for church services. Stradivari was a craftsman, he never thought that he would be one of the immortals in history. We

think of Stradivari as an original innovator and what he has accomplished and what he has left. We think of him as we think of Shakespeare or we think of Rembrandt, you see. The same thing, he was a very great artist with the crudest tools imaginable. Sometimes somebody asks you what is the secret of Stradivari, how can I answer. Violin makers for three hundred years have been trying to find out, how do I know. They haven't guessed, some of them think they have. It's one of those sweet mysteries of life, you know.

But, never have we lived in a time where the string playing level is so high and they have nothing to play on. We used to have violins like Gagliano, Vuillaume in orchestras all over. They were very good violins. They were affordable. A Vuillaume used to cost \$2,000. Well you put away some of your salary, you borrow something, and you can afford to get an instrument and within two or three years it's paid for, and it's yours. Those instruments have now risen like this (he motions) because the great Stradivaris are unobtainable, Guadagninis, unobtainable. So all these have soared in price range. Who can afford it.

Orchestral Conditions

Now, orchestras have big seasons. When I was in Cleveland as concertmaster only after fourteen years, my last year there, they had created a pension fund, can you imagine, there was no pension fund. There was no summer season, from April until October the men had to work at driving cabs, it was hard trying to support the family on a minimum salary at that time and then only twenty-eight weeks.

The orchestral picture today is fantastic, there are fifty-two weeks, pension fund, insurance, insurance on instruments, dental care, six weeks vacation, with pay, can you imagine. Look I'm thrilled, I'm happy to see it, musicians are being taken seriously and people realize that they enjoy playing but that they enjoy eating too. So we have now produced the last twenty-five years or so, there was at one time a very big shortage, string shortage. A new generation has come up. Women can work now in orchestras, they wouldn't have them before, so the picture has changed you see.

Teaching at the Music Settlement

When I came to Cleveland, I was offered the Cleveland Institute of Music and the Cleveland Music School Settlement. Now, the Cleveland Music School Settlement appealed to me very much because I was a Settlement School child myself. All my life I've loved the idea of this thing, taking kids off the street and giving them some music. So I didn't take the Institute job which was a guaranteed salary. This is what they told me, we don't know where our next penny is coming from. I said don't worry, I'll go along. And, I stayed with them all the years I was there. I had some wonderful children. Only three students, that's all I could teach but I had actually good ones like Jaime Laredo came to me at the age of eleven and he was a doll; he still is.

Eugene Ysaye

I studied with Ysaye in Europe, in Brussels. He was wonderful, but if I had said something today what he said...he used to refer to the violin as a feminine instrument, "She doesn't sound well today, she's sick." He really spoke with that kind of sentiment about the violin.

One day I said, "Tell me, why do you refer to the violin as a feminine instrument?"
"Because it takes a man to master it."

If I'd said that, they'd have placards out here boycotting my studio. Well anyway, that was cute. But, it was really a man's world until recently in history about fifty years, it's nothing in history, it's a drop.

Nobody at 80

Nobody at eighty can turn the clock back you know, but it's moved beautifully forward for me for many years, and I have a lot to be thankful for. Can you imagine, do you know of any other profession where they would keep someone my age so active? I mean, I'm still working seven days a week. He (dean of the music school) knows how dedicated I am to music, to the violin, to the youngsters that work with me. If I should retire, I'll stay in Bloomington.

Closing Statement

I'm just glad to contribute what little I can to music, to violin playing and maybe a little bit with my attitude toward my students and my friends, a little bit to humanity, a little bit, and that's a big statement.

Excerpts

We spoke Russian at home, German I learned in school, French I learned when I was in Europe, Belgium and English I learned here.

I lived in new York city when we emigrated to this country in 1920. At that time I had a wonderful teacher, Vladimir Graffmann.

I call all the girls darling. I knew Tallulah Bankhead, you know who she was? No. How old are you, eighteen? Tallulah Bankhead was one of the great actresses of the American theater. And I was once invited by people who knew her, I went to her house, she gave a big party and she called everybody darling and all the people that were there, it was like a disease, it spread, and to this day I call all the girls darling, it's a way of affection.

Josef Gingold

October 28, 1909 to January 11, 1995

Josef Gingold was born on October 28, 1909 in Brest-Litovsk. He began playing the violin at the age of three, but political turmoil interrupted his studies. In 1920, the family emigrated to the United States and he began studying with Vladimir Graffman. Seven years later after making his debut concert at Aeolian Hall in New York City, he returned to Europe to study with the legendary Eugene Ysaye. In 1937, he joined the NBC Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Arturo Toscanini. Gingold resigned his position to become concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell, a position he held from 1947 to 1960. He appeared as soloist with the Orchestra on numerous occasions. In 1960 he became a distinguished Professor of Violin at Indiana University. He has been a member of the jury for numerous violin competitions, including the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, which he founded in 1982.

Josef Gingold has had a profound influence on violin artistry in the twentieth century. His music and his stories touch the soul.