

CONCERTINA WORLD



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Bellows

The Matusewitch Family Story



Eric Matusewitch



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Photos Cover:

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Original publicity photo (by Bruno of Hollywood) of concertina virtuoso Boris Matusewitch, New York City, 1948.

Front inside:

The original early 1950s publicity pamphlet for the music-dance team of Boris Gregory (Matusewitch) and Danny Daniels (first dance partner).

Preface

This is the story of a unique musical family. The Matusewitch name was virtually synonymous with the concertina and accordion, two bellows instruments invented in the first third of the nineteenth century, for eight decades. My grandfather Gregory (1886-1939), the family patriarch, concertized extensively in Russia and Europe before moving the family to the United States in 1923, where he had a relatively brief but lively career. He appeared in major concert halls, the vaudeville circuit, early American radio broadcasts, and Jewish variety and fund-raising events.

Boris (1918-1978), the younger of Gregory's two sons, succeeded him as America's leading concertinist and teacher of the instrument. Over the course of a rich and varied career, he performed at west coast nightclubs, gave annual concerts at Carnegie Recital Hall, was a featured soloist with orchestras, and teamed up with dancer Rod Strong in an innovative combination of music and dance. Boris also taught hundreds of students. Gregory's oldest son Sergei (1917-1998), a prominent classical accordionist, also played the concertina and taught the instrument together with Boris at their New York City music studio from the 1950s through the 1970s. Finally, while an amateur, I also performed publicly with my father (Boris) at venues that included Carnegie Recital Hall and the New-York City Historical Society.

In addition to popularizing the English concertina in the US, the Matusewitch family's legacy includes a concertina tutor, recordings, original compositions for concertina and accordion and a slew of articles about the clan.

I offer a big thanks to family members (Marc, Peter, Sondra, Gerri, and Yakov) who shared their memories and enabled me to piece together our story.

Finally, every person who writes about the English concertina is indebted to Allan Atlas, a concertina performer-lecturer and prolific author on all aspects of the instrument. Allan, my father's star student, also kindly reviewed and provided editorial assistance with the section on Boris and Sergei. Gratitude is also owed to the librarians of the Central Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia, who were unfailingly courteous and helpful and to Pauline de Snoo, editor of *Concertina World* (a publication of the International Concertina Association in the UK) in making this publication possible.

But I must not leave my inquiring amateurs without a word for those who most deserve my sympathy. They are people who desire to enjoy music socially: to play together, to explore the riches of concerted chamber music for mere love of it, and without any desire to expand their lungs or display their individual virtuosity. Yet they are too old to learn to fiddle, or, having learnt, cannot do it well enough to produce tolerable concord. Their difficulty is, fortunately, quite easy to solve. The instrument for them is the concertina.

London Music in 1888-89 as heard by Corno Di Bassetto (Later Known as Bernard Shaw), 1937

Concertina

The English concertina is a small hexagonal, free-reed bellows instrument with buttons or keys on both sides. It was invented in 1827 by the prominent English physicist Sir Charles Wheatstone (1802-1875). Wheatstone, who played a major role in the development of both telegraphy and devices to measure electricity, wanted to create an instrument that would be both easy to master and suited to the most difficult music of his day. (There are three types of concertinas: English, Anglo, and Duet. This essay focuses on the English instrument, which is fully chromatic and, for the 56-key model (standard 48 keys), has a range of four octaves—similar to the violin.)

The concertina began life in elite circles, achieving popularity in England's upper-class drawing rooms and leading recital halls. A number of these instruments were sold by concertina manufacturer Wheatstone & Co. to dukes, lords, and prominent clergymen. Lord Balfour, British Prime Minister from 1902-5, was an ardent concertinist who enjoyed playing music by George Frederic Handel in concertina ensembles.

The concertina was also championed and performed publicly—to critical acclaim--by three prominent musicians: Giulio Regondi (1822-1872), Bernhard Molique (1802-1869), and Richard Blagrove (1826-1895), guitar, violin, and viola virtuosos, respectively. That trio, along with other less-known mainstream composers, wrote a variety of music, including concerti, sonatas, and chamber pieces for the instrument. In addition, more than 150 concertina instruction manuals were published during the Victorian era.

The great French composer Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) had praise for the concertina in his influential nineteenth-century tome *Treatise on Instrumentation*. He found its timbre "penetrating and soft...it combines well with that of the harp and the piano-forte."

Since the concertina was portable, easy to learn, and eventually mass produced, it became popular with the English working classes in the second half of the twentieth

century. The concertina also found its way into the English music hall, which featured musical acts performing everything from classical music to pop songs to novelty tunes and early ragtime and jazz. Leading music hall performers were the concertina-playing Fayre Four Sisters: Inga, Sylvia, Tina, and Lillian Webb. They toured Great Britain, Europe, and the US from the early 1900s to the 1950s. Their repertoire was enormous and included Chopin piano preludes, arrangements of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, and Jelly Roll Morton's popular *Tiger Rag*.

In addition, concertina bands became popular in most of the northern England industrial towns around the late 1890s. Many of these ensembles consisted of eighteen to twenty-five concertinas with instruments specially made to correspond in tone and range to the standard band instruments. Several European clowns, including the famous Swiss clown Grock (1880-1959), also took up the concertina and exploited its comic possibilities.

The English concertina gained wide popularity in Russia during the last third of the nineteenth-century. In the 1880s the Russian Minister of Instruction recommended that the instrument be introduced in the public schools. In addition, a number of prominent concertinists surfaced in Russia and Eastern and Western Europe in the early 1900s. Among the best known were Gregory Matusewitch and Raphael Alexandrovitch Sonnenberg (1886-1942, known professionally as "Raphael"). Both those musicians eventually moved to and performed in the United States. Gregory's son, Boris, succeeded his father as the leading American concertina virtuoso from the 1940s through the 1970s. The Russian virtuosi, unlike their English predecessors, primarily played music written for the violin.

The concertina's popularity waned after World War I for a number of reasons, including the arrival of the piano accordion, declining interest in the concertina among young people, and the drop in musical instrument sales overall due to the advent of the radio and phonograph.

The 1970s witnessed a revival of the concertina, mostly by folk musicians. Concertina historian Neil Wayne estimated in 1975 that there were more than 3,000 concertina players using their instruments in the British folk music scene. American folksinger and concertinist Peggy Seeger—Pete Seeger's half-sister—held workshops at folk song seminars throughout England and Scotland during the late 1960s and early 1970s, demonstrating the potential of the instrument.

Prominent folksinger Pete Seeger also recommended the concertina for use in folk music. In his book, *The Incomplete Folksinger* (1972), the vocalist opined: "The little

octagonal concertina...is an even better instrument [than the accordion] to accompany quiet songs. It is not so loud as to drown out a voice, and has a sweeter tone than most big accordions." To emphasize his point, Seeger noted that "Sergei Matusewitch plays violin concertos on his concertina." The concertina found a place among prominent folk music groups, including The Chieftains (traditional Irish band) and The Boys of the Lough (Scottish-Irish Celtic music band).

There were others players and tutors. Frank Butler 1904 – 1992 was one of the concertina teachers who wrote two tutors, Volume One and Two that are more classically oriented. Only Volume One was published in print but volume two has been passed around in copies of a hand written version. He was it seems not that interested in performing himself.

With Douglas Rogers the virtuoso playing of the concertina as a classical instrument was brought back to the concert platform in the 1980s. Douglas Rogers, originally a classical guitarist, performs, teaches, and records in England, USA and in the Netherlands where he taught the concertina at Fontys University to Pauline de Snoo. Rather than relying on the standard violin literature—in the European tradition—Douglas Rogers has been championing music written for the concertina by nineteenth-century composers such as Regondi, Moliq, and Richard Blagrove. Several new compositions have been commissioned by and written especially for him.

Pauline de Snoo, who is Dutch, completed a bachelor degree in teaching the concertina, wrote a tutor and completed, supported by Alistair Anderson (a famous performer and teacher of folk music), a master degree performance at the University of Newcastle, UK in 2005. Besides having new compositions written for her she also composed herself and recorded a CD with modern music.

Wim Wakker, who is Dutch and now lives in the USA, has similarly kept the concertina alive through his performances, recordings, and teaching in music schools since the 1990s.

In the U.S, Allan Atlas, Boris' star student and concertina historian, came back to performing in New York City and elsewhere after a hiatus of many years. He gave a series of lecture-recitals on the concertina with pianist David Cannata, and formed the New York Victorian Consort, which performed nineteenth-century music for voice, concertina, and piano. Finally, all this has lead to new music composed for the concertina; Allan Atlas identified thirty-eight pieces written for the instrument between 1982 and 2009.

In Caracas, Venezuela the professional composer, pianist and concertina player Ricardo Teruel has composed a large number of very modern pieces for the concertina at the same time as the above concertina players were active.

This summing-up may not been complete due to the sometimes very local and unknown places where concertina players live and work. Fortunately the concertina tradition does continue everywhere.

Fun Fact No. 1: The 1936 mystery/comedy film *The Princess Comes Across* co-stars Fred MacMurray as a concertina-playing band leader who performs a song, "My Concertina," during a talent show. The working title of the film was simply *Concertina*.

Fun Fact No. 2: On May 6, 1946, comedian Stan Laurel of "Laurel and Hardy" fame married Ida Kitaeva Raphael, the widow of concertina virtuoso Raphael.

Playing with a virtuosity that was not short of wonderful, the artist produced music from his small instrument that the writer of these lines could never believe it contained.

Excerpt from the review of a Gregory Matusewitch concert in the January 18, 1928 issue of Savannah Morning News.

Gregory

My paternal ancestors hailed from Minsk, Belarus. Belarus is the region enclosed by historic Russia to the northeast, Lithuania to the northwest, Ukraine to the south, and Poland to the west. Under czarist rule (1793-1920), Minsk was the capital of the Minsk province. From 1920-1991, it was the capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). At present, Minsk is the capital of the Republic of Belarus and the administrative center of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

During the 19th century, Minsk was one of the largest and most important communities in Russia. In 1897 the city had 47,562 Jews, or 52.3% of the total population, making Minsk the fourth largest community in the "Pale of Settlement"—the region of Imperial Russia in which permanent Jewish residency was allowed.

Minsk also had a thriving Jewish economy. In the early 1900s, the vast majority of all local merchants and small traders were Jewish, and Jews owned some of the largest factories in the city. Notable Jewish individuals born in Belarus include artist Marc Chagall (Moishe Sagal, 1887-1985), producer Louis B. Mayer (Lazar Meir, 1884-1957), radio and TV pioneer David Sarnoff (1891-1971), and former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres (Szymon Perski, b.1923).

The Jewish population of Minsk was dramatically reduced due to the Holocaust. From more than half of the population of the city, the percentage of Jews dropped to less than 10% ten years after World War II. A memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust was erected in Minsk immediately after the war, the only one of its kind in the U.S.S.R.

Some of my Jewish relatives from Minsk survived World War II by moving their families to the Central Asian province of Uzbekistan (officially the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic) soon after the Germans invaded Russia in June 1941. They settled in the Republic's three largest cities, Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara, and found work in the factories that were relocated from Western Russia and Ukraine to Uzbekistan to preserve the Soviet industrial capacity. A few of my relatives received government medals for their war-related factory work.

The Matusewitches who survived the war moved back to Minsk. Some of their more fortunate children entered universities or institutes, mostly for math, science, or engineering degrees. Obtaining admission to a Soviet university, though, was more difficult for Jews due to religious quotas, so most went to technical training schools. One of my post-World War II era cousins graduated from the Belorussian State University, while another graduated from Minsk Polytechnic Institute.

A group of Matusewitch cousins were able to leave the Soviet Union in the 1980s largely due to America's Jackson-Vanik Amendment. That was a 1975 law that denied favorable U.S. trade relations to non-market (communist) countries that blocked their citizen's freedom to emigrate. The Amendment was a response to the Soviet Union's restrictions on Jews attempting to leave for Israel or the West.

My family tree can be traced back to Hyman Matusewitch (originally Matusевич or Matusewicz), my great-grandfather who was born in the 1850s and died on September 1, 1939—the day the Germans invaded Poland and started World War II. He was the proprietor of a Minsk china store, a branch of the prominent Kuznetsov china factory. In 1900 it was the biggest porcelain factory in Russia, exporting to Europe, India, and China.

Hyman married a woman named Dvora and had eight children: Yakov (Yonkel), Zalman, Dodka, Fania, Leibel, Wolf, Motel, and Grigori (Gregory in the US). The latter child, my grandfather, was born on August 15, 1886. The old family photos in my possession are those of fashionable and prosperous secular Jews. Among those were two of Gregory's nieces—Dashe and Ida, whose pictures appeared in the July 24, 1927, issue of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a New York newspaper, after they won a European beauty contest. Gregory's older brother Dodka was a professional card player and a dandy who sported a cane with a carved white ivory tip and a captain's cap.

Gregory was a mustachioed and muscled young gymnast. He was also high-spirited and would not hesitate to pummel cops he encountered who were mean or anti-semitic. Throughout life he always referred to the police—both Russians and Americans-- as "Cossacks." Like Dodka, Gregory was a natty dresser, favoring formal attire and spats during his European and American years.

There is a family story about how my grandfather came to play the English concertina. The teenage Gregory saw a drunk Tatar in Minsk, known as Mulka the Tatar, who was playing that instrument. My grandfather, intrigued by the sound, traded a bottle of vodka for the concertina. (The credibility of this story is bolstered by a historian's account that Minsk was home to a small community of European Muslims or

Tatars.) Gregory was very musical and taught himself to play the concertina, which was then popular in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Gregory concertized in Russia during his early years. His albums contain documentation of several performances: a December 2, 1912, concert at the Officer's Club of the 119th Minsk Infantry Division; and an October 13, 1919, concert for a club at No. 3 Bobruskiya Street—also in Minsk. And according to family lore, Gregory also played for the Czar's family, though never for the Czar himself. (A short feature about Gregory in the February 20, 1930 issue of a Jacksonville, Florida newspaper confirms this story. It states in part: "Matusewitch is a Russian and his fame spread so far over that large country that the czar asked him to play at the royal court. He did.")

Gregory married Manya (Marie) Greenwald and had two children: Sergei, my uncle, in 1917 and Boris, my father, in 1918. My grandfather was drafted by the White (anti-Bolshevik) and Red (Bolshevik) armies during the Russian Revolution years but deserted from both. Although he was arrested by Red army commissars for desertion, Gregory's affluent family was able to buy his freedom by bribing the right officials.

Since he was a wanted man, Gregory spirited his family out of Russia to Danzig, Germany in 1920, which was to be home for several years. It was in the Free City of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland), which was administered by the League of Nations, that Gregory became a prominent performing artist.

Gregory concertized extensively in Germany and other European countries during the early 1920s. He performed at the Hotel Reichshof (a large, ornate structure with a salon, restaurant, and spectacular dance hall) and the Friedrich Wilhelm Schutzenhaus, both in Danzig; and at the Hotel Metropol, the Central-Hotel Zoppot, the Hotel Stolzenfels, the Stadttheater, and the Burgerkasino, all in Zoppot. Zoppot was a fashionable German resort near Danzig that was popular with wealthy aristocrats from Berlin, Warsaw, and Koenigsberg. It was also a favorite spa of Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany.

The German music critics hailed my grandfather's performances. The reviewer for the *Danziger Zeitung* newspaper wrote this about Gregory's January 1921 concert at the Friedrich Wilhelm Schutzenhaus: "The way he played the 'Zigeunerweisen' by Sarasate showed us what can be got out of this instrument." The critic for the *Koenisberger Zeitung* newspaper was even more laudatory: "The art executed by Russian, Gregory Matusewitch, was really unparalleled and extremely charming. It is an enjoyment to see this artist handle his instrument."

Gregory's typical concert program consisted of works written for the violin—but played on the concertina—by Tchaikovsky, Sarasate, Mozart, and Kreisler and other

masters. While Gregory generally played classical violin music, he also enjoyed performing Russian and Yiddish folk music and delighted his audience by including some in almost every program. Some of his favorite concert pieces were the Jewish liturgical prayer *Kol Nidre*; a potpourri of Yiddish melodies called *Yiddische Meloden*; his own Russian-themed composition for concertina and piano, *Oriental*; as well as traditional Russian and Ukrainian folk songs. As an encore, Gregory would pull out a miniature Russian accordion from his suit pocket and play a short polka or mazurka.

According to documents in his scrapbook, Gregory made five recordings for Odeon Records and 12 recordings for Deutsche Grammophon in Berlin in 1921. He performed compositions by, among others, Pablo de Sarasate, Henri Wieniawski, Johannes Brahms, Peter Nevsky, and David Popper.

While in Danzig, my grandfather also received a League of Nations passport, which allowed him to travel to other countries for six months, or for the life of his musical contracts. From 1920 to 1923, Gregory crossed the Atlantic several times to fulfill such obligations in the United States. Sol Hurok, the fledgling impresario, was Gregory's concert manager during those years.

Hurok, also a Russian Jew, was born Solomon Izrailevich Gurkov. For six decades, virtually every big name in music was presented by Hurok, including Marian Anderson, Andres Segovia, Artur Rubinstein, Isaac Stern, and Jan Peerce. Gregory and Hurok, though, had a falling out--probably over money--during the 1920s, prompting Hurok to take on another Slavic concertina virtuoso, Raphael Alexandrovich Sonnenberg--known professionally as "Raphael"--in the 1930s. (This parting of the ways is reflected in Hurok's 1946 autobiography, *Impresario: A Memoir*, where he mentions "Raphael of tender memory" but makes no reference to Gregory.)

On May 8, 1922, while in the US fulfilling his musical contracts, Gregory made a recording for the Victor Talking Machine Company. It consisted of two selections--*Czardas* by V. Monti and *Concert Polka* by Peter Nevsky--for which Gregory received the princely sum of forty dollars. (Three years later a New York store advertised the record for 75 cents.)

On March 8, 1922 Gregory appeared on an early American radio concert: a Charles D. Isaacson *Evening Mail* wireless concert broadcast from Fort Wood (Bedloe's Island) on station WYCB. (The first American radio broadcast station was opened in November 1920 by Westinghouse in Pittsburgh.) He shared the program with American contralto Louise Vermont and Mexican tenor Alfonso Romero. The March 8 edition of that New York City newspaper took note of this unique event:

A distinct novelty on the programme will be the projecting for the first time by radio-phone of selections played on the concertina by the Russian virtuoso, Gregory Matusewitz. This artist has made a serious instrument of the little brother of the accordion and those who listen in tonight will find that Mr. Matusewicz can get the tones of a violin or viola from the concertina. His command of the concertina enables him to play selections by Sarasate, Kreisler, Popper, Mozart and Tschaiakowsky.

Gregory also performed in six concerts sponsored by the *Evening Mail* between February and April 1922. In recognition, he received a certificate placing him on that paper's "Approved and Recommended Teachers' List" for concertina.

The *Evening Mail*, which folded two years after Gregory's concerts, had two distinguished literary figures on staff: H.L. Mencken and Robert Garrett Lucius "Rube" Goldberg." Goldberg (1883-1970) was a Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist, sculptor, author, engineer, and inventor. He is best known for his "inventions"—complicated gadgets that perform simple tasks in indirect, convoluted ways. In 1931 "Rube Goldberg" became an adjective in the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, defined as accomplishing something simple through complicated means.

Gregory also played several times for another interesting American radio station: WEVD. That was a news-talk radio station launched in August 1927 by the Socialist Party of America to honor its recently deceased leader, Eugene Victor Debs (EVD). That station, however, was taken over in 1932 by the leading Yiddish newspaper, *The Jewish Daily Forward*. That paper created the most famous Yiddish radio program of all time—*The Forward Hour*, a variety show that aired every Sunday morning at 11:00 A.M. Each *Forward Hour* featured an orchestra, a chorus and soloists, plus a bevy of famous actors and actresses who staged plays by such writers as Isaac Bashevis Singer and Kadya Molodowsky.

My grandfather made his first appearance on WEVD on July 5, 1933. Jo Ranson, a radio columnist for the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper, wrote that "Matusewitch is a comparative stranger on American kilocycles although he is well known to phonograph record players. He has appeared on the concert stages here and abroad and in the air series he is to give on WEVD he will, I'm sure, gather around him a new army of friends."

Gregory made his formal American debut on February 25, 1922 at Town Hall in New York City, and the concert was widely acclaimed by that's city press. On February 26 *Musical America* declared:

Enter the concertina into the sacred precincts of the concert hall! Gregory Matusewitz has the honor of being probably the first person to give a recital on the English Concertina in New York. Mr. Matusewitz, announced as being Europe's foremost virtuoso on this instrument, need not fear that this distinction, if such it be, will be wrested from him. His numbers were those

which are in the repertoire of all violinists...There was fluent technique in his playing as well as tonal variety.

Franklin P. Adams, a charter member of the famous Algonquin Round Table literary group, gave this florid account of Gregory's performance in his "Conning Tower" column (*The World*, March 4, 1922):

And we to Town Hall to hear Mr. Gregory Matusewitz play upon the concertina, and he had two kinds, a baritone and a soprano, and got such effects from them as I never knew could be got, sometimes like an organ and sometimes like a flute and sometimes like a cornet or other brass and sometimes like all of them, and very lovely too, and I marveled that a man could come all the way from England to play such an instrument and scarce anyone there to hear him, albeit crowds will acclaim second and third rate workers and let them man go unheard. Lord, I should think the novelty of virtuosity in anything would make people to come; but if I were a vaudeville manager I should give this man a high wage to play.

Gregory moved his family to the US in 1923. The Matusewitches were fortunate to come when they did; one year later Congress—intent on keeping out "undesirable" aliens--passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which sharply limited immigration from southern and Eastern Europe. The legislation was aimed squarely at Slavs, Italians and, especially, Jews. Upon signing the Act, President Calvin Coolidge commented, "America must remain American." The immediate impact of the new law was dramatic. Between 1880 and 1924, about two million European Jews entered the US--an average of 45,454 per year. In the year after passage of the Immigration Act, less than 10,000 European Jews were able to enter.

Gregory had a relatively brief but remarkably busy musical career in his adopted country. His scrapbooks for that time (1923-1939) are filled with concert notices, articles, programs, and reviews in four languages—English, Yiddish, Russian, and German.

The family settled in New York City. With 1.6 million Jewish inhabitants in 1920, the city had become the greatest Jewish population center of all time. Jews also had an outsized influence in many sectors of the city's life, including—and especially--the arts.

The Matusewitches first home in the US was an apartment at 954 East 173rd Street in the borough of the Bronx. They had to move regularly, though, for two reasons: the inability to pay the rent when times were tough, and complaints from neighbors about the "noise" that Gregory and his two sons made practicing at the same time or individually. Changing living quarters could also have been profitable for Gregory and

his family; because landlords needed tenants, they usually offered one to three months free rent during the Depression.

Their most notable home was the Shalom Aleichem Cooperative, originally named the Yiddish Cooperative Heimgesellschaft, a complex of 15 five-story buildings erected on Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx in 1927. It was founded by left-wing Jews committed to the preservation of secular Yiddish culture. The property, named after the great Yiddish writer whose work inspired *Fiddler on the Roof*, housed a number of Jewish writers, artists, and musicians. The most famous resident was Bess Myerson, the first and only Jewish Miss America. (1945).

Beyond housing, the Cooperative offered such additional services as three art studios, daycare, two *schules* or folk schools—one for the communists and one for the socialists--where many Shalom Aleichem children could study Yiddish language, and an auditorium for lectures, concerts, and dramatic productions. Gregory occasionally performed in the auditorium. (A December 8, 1934 concert he participated in celebrated the First Congress of the Soviets in Biro-Bidjan—the Jewish autonomous state in the Soviet Union.)

When the Matusewitches moved into the complex during the early or mid-1930s, the Cooperative's newspaper contained this welcome notice: "Gregory Matusевич, the celebrated exponent of that lovely English musical instrument, the Concertino [sic], is now a resident in our community. We extend our greetings to the artist and his family and wish them happiness in their new and, let us hope, permanent home."

My father said, half in jest, that Gregory learned to speak English from his friend, the heavily-accented actor Gregory Ratoff (1897-1960). Like my grandfather, Ratoff was a Russian Jew who fled his homeland during the Bolshevik revolution and immigrated to the US in the early 1920s. Ratoff played Mae West's attorney in *I'm No Angel* (1930). He also achieved success as a film director with *Intermezzo* (1939), the tearjerker starring Ingrid Bergman and Leslie Howard. Gregory never mastered the nuances of the English language—even with his friend's help. He called anybody who was important, for example, a "shot."

Gregory was active professionally in the Jewish-American community. His major musical sponsor in the US after 1923 was The Workmen's Circle (or Arbeiter Ring), a labor- and socialist-oriented, fraternal institution founded in 1900 to serve the needs of recent Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Organized in local branches or chapters, it offered its members life insurance, unemployment relief, healthcare and educational and cultural activities. Gregory played at many concerts

organized by Workmen's Circle chapters across the country. He also performed at the opening of that organization's 31st convention at the Belasco Theatre in Washington, D.C. (1932). Norman Thomas, the six-time presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America, spoke at the event.

The U.S. had a thriving Yiddish theater scene between 1890 and 1940. At the time the U.S. entered World War I, there were 22 Yiddish theaters in New York City alone. Many of them were centered on Second Avenue in the Lower East Side. Gregory performed with a number of Yiddish stage luminaries in variety and fund-raising concerts sponsored by Jewish organizations. Among these leading entertainers were Boris Thomashevsky (1866-1939), a founder and matinee idol of the Yiddish Theater; Celia Adler (1889-1970), known as the "First Lady of the Yiddish Theater"; and Ludwig Satz (1891-1944), dubbed "The Charlie Chaplin of the Yiddish Stage" by American critic and commentator Alexander Woollcott.

The concertinist shared the concert stage with other well-known Jewish performers who were not associated with the Yiddish theater. On January 16, 1935, for example, he played three pieces in a Women's League for Palestine Luncheon and Musicale at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Also on that bill was Gertrude Berg, who offered an "original monologue." Ms. Berg (1898-1966) created, wrote, and starred in the widely popular radio and television series *The Goldbergs*, about Jewish life in the Bronx, which aired between 1929 and 1955. Indeed, the opening TV show line, "Yoo hoo, Mrs. Bloom," became a national cliché.

Other prominent individuals he shared billing with included Joseph "Yossele" Rosenblatt (1882-1933), regarded as the greatest cantor of all time; and violin virtuosi Joseph Gingold (1909-1995), Mischa Mischakoff (1895-1981), Oscar Shumsky (1917-2000) and Mishel Piastro (1891-1970)—all Russian Jews.

(In 1922 George and Ira Gershwin wrote a humorous takeoff on the names of four famous Russian-Jewish violinists—Mischa Elman, Yascha Heifetz, Toscha Seidel, and Sascha Jacobsen. One refrain from that sprightly ditty, *Mischa, Yascha, Toscha, Sascha*, is:

We're not high-brows, we're not low brows,
Anyone can see,
You don't have to use a chart,
To see we're He-brows from the start.
Mischa, Yascha, Toscha, Sascha.)

Gregory played at the April 4, 1931 Convention of the Peoples' Tool Campaign. The Campaign supplied "declassed" Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia with tools and machinery to put them on a self-supporting basis. The convention was addressed by Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), an important Jewish-American editor and novelist. Cahan was a founder of the influential and widely distributed Yiddish newspaper the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and served as its editor for a remarkable 48 years. He introduced the popular *Bintl Briv* (or "Bundle of Letters") column, an early Yiddish "Dear Abby"-style advice column that printed questions from readers and offered authoritative advice on family, romantic, and social issues to new immigrants. The newspaper published the work of virtually every notable Yiddish writer, including Nobel Prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer. Cahan also wrote *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), a major novel about an immigrant who becomes a successful cloak manufacturer.

Gregory performed several times in concerts held by his hometown society or *landsmanshaft*: the Minsker Young Friends Benevolent Association in New York City. *Landsmanschaften* were the backbone of the immigrant Jewish community. They were organized according to immigrants' European town of origin and provided a wide variety of social and cultural activities, along with vital material benefits such as medical care, income support, and burial assistance. In 1938 the Yiddish Writers' Group of the Federal Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency, concluded there were some 3,000 of these organizations in New York City, with more than 400,000 members—a quarter of New York's Jews.

On April 28, 1926, Gregory performed at a testimonial dinner at Manhattan's Hotel Biltmore for a very colorful figure: Max Bernstein. Bernstein was an ambitious businessman who built Manhattan's first (and only) "Jewish luxury hotel" in the poor and predominantly Jewish Lower East Side—Libby's Hotel and Baths (named after his mother). The \$3 million edifice, which opened three days before the testimonial dinner, featured opulent Turkish and Russian baths, an ornate swimming pool, a modern gym, a large portrait of his mother in the lobby, and the country's first Yiddish-language radio station. Bernstein hailed the opening, which was attended by a crowd of 20,000, as a "milestone in the history of New York Jewry."

Unfortunately, the "Ritz With A Shvitz" lasted for only three years; it went into foreclosure in 1929, and was subsequently demolished by the city. When he passed away on December 13, 1946, the *New York Times* obituary headline read: "Max Bernstein, 57, Once Hotel Owner; Realty Man Built \$3,000,000 Edifice in Slums Only to See Memorial to Mother Razed."

Gregory played at union functions during a difficult time for labor—the 1920s. Having been valued as a partner in achieving victory in World War I, unions were now vilified as anti-American, demanding, and guilty of putting its goals ahead of the general welfare. Union membership and activity declined sharply in the face of this hostility. My grandfather was featured at a 1922 concert for the striking cloak makers of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) at Webster Hall in New York City; a May Day Celebration arranged by the Dressmaker’s Union at Cooper Union in 1924; and at the Fifth Anniversary Amalgamated Tobacco Workers Grand Concert and Ball at the Harlem Casino in 1926.

Gregory played in vaudeville venues across the U.S. That form of entertainment was popular in the U.S. from the early 1880s until the early 1930s, and typically included a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together under a common bill. By the late 1920s almost all vaudeville bills included a selection of cinema.

One such 1920s vaudeville event was held at the Fox Theater in Philadelphia. My grandfather shared billing with musical comedy stars Olga and Mishka; “America’s Foremost Tenor” Grant Kimball; and the 1925 silent film, *Zander the Great*, starring Marion Davies.

Gregory also performed at a particularly notable vaudeville venue: B.S. Moss’ Colony Theater at 53rd Street and Broadway. The 1,761-seat theater opened on Christmas Day 1924 as a venue for vaudeville shows and motion pictures. On November 18, 1928, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon released to the public, *Steamboat Willie*, debuted at the Colony.

The concertinist participated in a September 24, 1927 Colony Theater variety concert. The bill featured three other musical acts, including a “dramatic dance interpretation of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* by Miss Felicia Sorel and her dancing assistants,” and a screening of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*—a Paul Peroff Picture. According to the program notes, Gregory’s appearance “commemorated the centennial of the invention of this quaint instrument.” The reviewer for the September 26, 1927, issue of the *New York Telegram* wrote, “Gregory Matusewitch, virtuoso of the miniature English concertina, causes it to emit a startling versatile collection of sounds.”

A number of Russian-themed restaurants flourished in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s. They had names such as The Russian Inn, The Eagle, Katinka, Casino Russe, and The Russian Kretchma. They featured striking modernistic wall murals by Russian émigré artists, balalaika music, and entertainment by Cossack performers. Gregory periodically performed at two of the most popular establishments: The Russian

Bear Restaurant (645 Lexington Avenue), and the Russian Art Restaurant (underneath the Russian Art Theatre at 181 Second Avenue). The latter was modeled after the most famous night club in Moscow, featuring a resident balalaika jazz orchestra and dancing. It also lured customers with its caviar, vodka, borscht, and blini.

Gregory had a number of piano accompanists (now more appropriately referred to as “collaborators”) during his US years. The most notable was Norman Secon (1908-1958), who joined Gregory during the 1930s. Secon appeared as soloist with various symphony orchestras, including those of San Francisco, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Baltimore. He made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1949, and *The New York Times* critic found that Secon “is a gifted young pianist, and in his hands the piano speaks clearly and with conviction.” Secon also accompanied Jose Greco and His Spanish Ballet, and was the pianist for the Savoy Opera Guild in New York City. The music critic for *The Billboard* wrote in 1943 that Secon, “whose single piano has been the entire orchestra of the Guild since its inception, did his usual superlative work, and remains one of the most astounding of all Guild phenomena, turning his single instrument into a magnificent full orchestra at will.” Secon, sadly and like my grandfather, passed away at an early age--49.

While Gregory was the leading concertina virtuoso of his time, he was also eccentric. During the Great Depression, when money was scarce, he declined to perform in a concert because the sponsor or promotor required a white suit, which he considered inappropriate performance attire. He also passed up opportunities to do more radio work—and raise his profile and income--in the 1920s because he did not want to play while people were listening to him in their bathrooms.

Gregory Matusewitch passed away on July 28, 1939, at the age of fifty-three in New York City. His sons Sergei and Boris continued the family musical tradition for sixty more years.

Heard a concertina player in a nightclub and rushed to [Boris] Matusewitch, the famous concertina artist, next day for lessons.

Alexander Rose, Memoirs of a Heterosexual (1967).

Boris and Sergei

Boris Gregory Matusewitch was born on November 6, 1918, in Minsk, Belarus and came to the U.S. with his family at the age of five. Since he lived in Danzig, Germany for three years prior to emigrating, German was his main language. His American grammar school classmates called him the "little Dutch boy" because they could not distinguish between Germany and Holland. (Little has changed since then: a 2002 National Geographic survey revealed extensive geographic illiteracy of young Americans.) Like most young immigrants, though, he soon picked up English.

Boris attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx. Clinton had an enrollment of 12,000 students in the mid-1930s, which placed it in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the largest high school in the world. Clinton's student body was about 50 percent Jewish, and a great Jewish basketball player, Bernard Fliegel, led the high school to the 1934 Public School Athletic League title. Following an equally impressive collegiate athletic career, Fliegel became one of the top professional centers in the late 1930s and 1940s in the American Basketball League.

Boris's classmates included actor Stubby Kaye, who played "Nicely Nicely Johnson" in the 1955 musical film hit, *Guys and Dolls*; and Martin (Marty) Abzug, who married Congresswoman Bella Abzug. While they were "making out" with girls in the balcony of a movie theatre, the usually quiet Marty once screamed out "bear ass!" (referring to Boris) and squealed with delight. My father wondered why his normally mild-mannered boyhood pal got involved with the loud and acerbic feminist leader. The Bronx high school turned out other prominent alumni, such as writer James Baldwin, photographer Richard Avedon, and poet Countee Cullen. They all contributed material to *Magpie*, the student publication.

Another Bronx boyhood friend was Herbert Stessin (1922-2011), four years younger than Boris. My grandfather Gregory encouraged Herbert to become a pianist. Stessin took his advice and became an esteemed member of the New York musical community. After a busy career as a piano soloist, Stessin joined the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music. There, Stessin was an adored and respected teacher of generations of piano students, many of whom became celebrated artists and teachers in their own right.

Boris studied the concertina with his father and mastered it at an early age. In 1935, Boris and his brother Sergei, an accordionist, auditioned for the *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour* radio show, the most popular coast-to-coast amateur program in the country. An article in the February 2006 issue of the newsletter of the Radio Historical Association of Colorado described the frantic competition to appear on the show and "grab at the brass ring":

Many of the more than 35,000 depression-era hopefuls arrived in New York by bus, hitch hiked, or 'rode the rails' of trains to audition during the show's first year on the air [1934]. There were even reports of some people selling their homes to pay for their trip across country to New York. After the initial crush of amateurs, it was estimated there were 10,000 applicants a week. Unfortunately, the producers could only audition 700 amateurs a week. And, from that number only about 20 were chosen for each broadcast. The odds of qualifying for the show were about 70,000 to one against. Successful contestants were given ten dollars for appearing on the show, plus a big meal—which could be bought for about fifty cents at the cafeteria across the street from the studio...Many of the unsuccessful, depression poor hopefuls, not having enough money to return home, or to live in New York, ended up applying for welfare in the city.

Years later, my father and uncle recalled one young person waiting to audition with them that day— a skinny and shy Italian kid from Hoboken, New Jersey named Frank Sinatra. At that time Sinatra was part of a singing quartet, "Frank Sinatra and the 3 Flashes," later renamed the "Hoboken Four" by Major Bowes himself. Both Sinatra's group and my relatives won the auditions and appeared on the show. (A clip of the Hoboken Four performing on the *Amateur Hour* in 1935 is available on [youtube](#).)

On November 21, 1936, Boris and Sergei performed with their father Gregory at the Wurlitzer Auditorium in New York City. While Gregory played solo pieces by Liszt, Monti, and Sarasate, his young sons played accordion-concertina duets. According to an article in the December 1936 issue of *Accordion World*, the journal of the American Accordionists' Association, the capacity audience "received this distinctive program enthusiastically."

Boris attended the all-male City College of New York (CCNY) for the 1936-1937 academic year. CCNY, a tuition-free public school of mainly poor immigrants' sons, was an intensely radical place during the Depression. Future literary figures Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, and their friends would gather in alcoves in the college cafeteria to argue politics and revolution. Alcove #1 was the province of the Socialists, while

Alcove #2 was home to the pro-Stalinist Young Communist League (YCL) led by Julius Rosenberg, who was executed by the US government in 1953 for passing information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. In 1937 the YCL formally banned their members from speaking to, or arguing with, the socialists.

Boris, who had a strong social conscience, was a member of the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL) at the college. That organization's members had an extensive reform agenda, which included federal aid to education, government job programs for youth, academic freedom, racial equality, and collective bargaining rights.

Boris' daily cost for attending CCNY was probably thirty cents: a dime for a round trip subway ride—it was and still is a commuter college—and twenty cents for food. According to one undergraduate's recollection, "a memorably generous and highly seasoned chopped liver sandwich" cost fifteen cents on campus during the late 1930s, leaving a nickel for coffee or a soda.

Expectations for finding employment after graduation from CCNY during the Depression were low. Preparing for commencement exercises, the 1937 College Yearbook (*Microcosm*) predicted, "Silently, the class will walk in the stadium for its final meeting as a class. Just as silently will the boys meet again on the line outside the employment office."

Perhaps the most distinguished members of Boris' class (1940) were Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, and Kenneth J. Arrow. Like my father, Arrow was the son of Eastern European Jews and a young Socialist. Years after graduating, he became a founder of modern neo-classical economics, and the joint winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1972.

After leaving City College my father began his musical career in earnest. Boris and Sergei gave their first joint recital on May 5, 1939 at the Rand Music School in New York City. An article in the June 1939 issue of *Accordian World* stated: "The appreciation with which these two artists were regarded left no doubt that they were indeed masters of their favorite instruments, and doing much to make them popular." The next year, the Matusewitch brothers performed at the McDowell Club in Manhattan and were heard on a series of WQXR radio broadcasts. Boris also had engagements at the Waldorf-Astoria and Biltmore Hotels, and soloed with the New York Mandolin Symphony Orchestra in Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Fantasy on Russian Themes*.

Just prior to America's involvement in World War II, Boris moved to the West Coast. He played nightclubs, supper clubs, and other entertainment venues in California; Washington; Oregon; and Vancouver, British Columbia. He was variously billed as the "Heifetz of the Concertina" and the "Monarch of Concertina Melody." A Canadian newspaper found that "Boris is an accomplished concertina artist with a technique refreshingly different from that of the average instrumentalist."

Uncle Sam invited Boris to join World War II in 1943. My father was sent to racially-segregated Camp Sibert, Alabama, for basic training and initially assigned to the chemical warfare service. He developed pneumonia three times, however, after arrival. While he was in recovery the first time, his unit was shipped overseas. After recovery, he was assigned to military police (MP) duty—guarding German prisoners of war (POWs). To keep them docile and in tow, he warned, "Ich bin ein Jude" (I'm a Jew.) There was no doubt that the concertinist would use his rifle if provoked. While he was sick the second time, Boris's MP unit was also shipped out. After his second recovery, he was reassigned to another MP unit and worked as an escort MP, taking prisoners to their military prison destinations. (Actor Jack Nicholson, portraying a navy MP, had this thankless task in the 1973 film, *The Last Detail*.) Boris was also sent to pick up GIs who had been arrested by civilian authorities.

In one gruesome assignment, my father and his superior--a sergeant--were sent to bring back an African-American GI being held by a small-town Alabama sheriff's department. When they arrived at the jail, they were told the soldier was shot and killed attempting to escape. Neither Boris nor the sergeant, who was a southerner, believed that story. Being black in Alabama in the 1940s was a dangerous proposition, and they were treated horrendously.

There was an all-black unit training at Camp Sibert at that time. The night after they were informed of their scheduled overseas assignment, they rioted in response to their poor treatment by the army and destroyed their portion of the camp. The MPs did not attempt to break up the riot; they decided to wait it out. This was also the only time my father and the other MPs were issued submachine guns; they normally carried 45-caliber pistols.

The third time my father got pneumonia, the ranking camp medical officer recommended him for a military discharge. Haig Shekerjian, the brigadier general in charge of the camp, though, refused to approve the discharge because he was taking concertina lessons from Boris. The general—the first cadet of Armenian descent to graduate from the US Military Academy at West Point and the first Armenian-American

brigadier general--was an obnoxious, racist character: he told Boris at their first meeting, "Matusewitch, I hate Niggers and Jews!"

After Boris recovered a third time, the Pentagon noticed that he was a musician and reassigned him to Camp Sibert's Special Services Training Group, an entertainment division. Private Boris Matusewitch subsequently performed in various musical revues, including *Yanks-a-Poppin* (a show based on Irving Berlin's *This is The Army* revue) and *Broadway in Khaki*, for the GIs in the states and the Pacific. The talented group of entertainers--including Hollywood tap dancer Ray Malone, trumpeter Anthony Pietricola (who Boris affectionately called "Pepsi Cola"), and singer John Lowman--played for the troops at Guadalcanal, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, the Philippines, and Banika (a small atoll).

Carrying around an unfamiliar musical instrument in a suspicious looking square case in a war zone, though, had its risks. Security-conscious MPs occasionally ordered Boris--at gunpoint--to open the case, remove the concertina, then play and even disassemble it. My father quickly learned to carry and be handy with a screwdriver.

On July 13, 1944, Private Boris Matusewitch appeared for a second time on the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour*. Other audition winners from Camp Sibert included Privates Ray Malone, Bobby Breen (formerly Eddie Cantor's child singing sensation), and Bill Finnegan (bandleader and arranger for Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey).

Among Boris's other wartime colleagues were actor Mickey Rooney and folksinger Pete Seeger. Boris told me that Rooney--who met the second of his eight wives while stationed there--was a "bad boy" who disliked taking orders, and Pete was the world's worst shaver, always cutting his face. Perhaps that's why the vocalist grew a beard later in life. Seeger, who was at Camp Sibert for four months in 1944, wrote "[I]t was from Alabama I did some of the most important work since coming into the army. When on furlough I helped make some more union records with Alan Lomax, Tom Glazer, and others. Later, on a three-day pass I took a part playing the banjo for Earl Robinson's Lincoln cantata."

Like Mr. Rooney, my father was not a model soldier: three times in his army career he was promoted to sergeant and three times he was demoted back to private for "talking back" to an officer.

Boris was also quite friendly with fellow G.I. Robert (Bob) Lissauer (1917-2004), a composer, author and musicologist. During the war he was the administrative officer for *Yanks-A-Poppin*. After the war, he taught at New York University, owned a sheet music business, and managed singers and composers. He also wrote *Lissauer's Encyclopedia of Popular Music in America: 1887 to Present*, considered the definitive

reference book in the field. Lissauer, who admired my father's talent, composed two *Preludes* for him, which he (Boris) performed publicly in New York City.

Another accomplished army buddy was Private Howard Taubman, the music critic of *The New York Times*, who held my father in high regard. In his autobiography, (*The Pleasure of Their Company*, 1994), Taubman reminisced about my talented and playful father:

Boris Matusewitch became a good friend. And why not? The first thing he said when he met me was that he read my book *Music as a Profession*, published some years earlier. Boris played the concertina brilliantly, and his repertory was enormous. I would kid him, demanding to know how a serious, talented musician could devote his life to a squeeze-box. He laughed off my remarks, but in exasperation offered to play the Bach Chaconne—all of it. I didn't think I could endure the Chaconne in these surroundings, especially from a concertina. Boris argued; I demurred. One very warm day after lunch, I lay down in my bunk and dozed off contentedly. I was awakened by the Chaconne. There stood Boris, grinning mischievously and pumping away with intensity. As I roused myself to reach for a pillow to fling at him, I found that he had planned carefully! So-called friends gripped me by the arms and legs, and there I remained pinned down until the last notes of the Chaconne. Boris knew it all and played it remarkably well.

My father's friend was also held in high regard: Arthur Gelb, the managing editor of *The New York Times*, wrote in his autobiography that Taubman was "one of the most authoritative music critics in the country."

In January 1946, while stationed in Manila, Boris was one of the organizers of an unprecedented military event: massive demonstrations by enlisted men and officers demanding to be sent home. The spontaneous GI outbursts--which also took place in Hawaii, France, Germany, and even California--were triggered by a January 6, 1946, War Department announcement that demobilization would be slowed down. (The U.S. was apparently worried that it would have inadequate forces to counter the growing Soviet threat in Europe and Asia.) This reversed a December 26, 1945, promise to discharge all GI's with at least two years of service by late March 1946. *The New York Times* reported that on January 9th, "bayonets dispersed four thousand GIs in Frankfurt" when they "tried to rush the headquarters of the United States Forces in the European Theater with the objective of forcing General Joseph T. McNarney to confront them on their demand to be sent home." If the Articles of War had been interpreted strictly, thousands of American soldiers would have been guilty of mutiny.

In response to the GI demonstrations, General Eisenhower announced on January 15, 1946 a new schedule for demobilization. Although it did not meet the demand for the release of all personnel with two years' service by March 20th, it provided

for the release of all with thirty months' service by April 30th. As the GIs began to see that their demonstrations were having effect, the participation in new protests started to decline.

Boris was honorably discharged from the army on March 18, 1946, at Ft. Devans, Massachusetts, and received the following decorations: Good Conduct Medal (despite his disciplinary problems), Asiatic Pacific Theater Campaign Ribbon, American Theater Campaign Ribbon, Philippine Liberation Ribbon, and the Victory Medal.

My father moved back to New York City to resume his musical career. To improve his command of the violin literature--which he played on the concertina--he was coached by Vladimir Graffman (1891-1976), a prominent violinist and father of piano virtuoso Gary Graffman. (The elder Graffman had studied with legendary violin pedagogue Leopold Auer at the Imperial Conservatory in St. Petersburg in the early 1900s). Boris also took advantage of the GI Bill of Rights and continued his musical studies at the Greenwich House Music School in Manhattan with violist and Baroque music expert Fritz Rikko (1903-1980).

Rikko emigrated to the U.S. from Germany in 1941 and formed the early music ensemble Collegium Musicum in 1951. The group, which concertized extensively and made recordings, is probably best known for the free summer concerts it gave in Greenwich Village's Washington Square Park from 1956 to 1974 with Rikko as conductor. Boris said that Rikko believed there was no worthwhile music written after Bach and Vivaldi.

During the post-war years, Boris appeared as a regular soloist with various mandolin orchestras and gave annual recitals with brother Sergei. *The New York Times* critic enthused over Boris's January 24, 1948, joint concert at New York City's Times Hall: "The concertina is a melodic instrument, of haunting quality, capable of delicate inflection, nuance and even vibrato. Boris played it as if it were a violin, giving his selections musical meaning as he swung his instrument before him. His rendition of Mr. Lissauer's works had charm and melody, and the composer added his applause to that of the audience."

One of Boris's piano accompanists during those years was Pauline Apanowitz (later Pauline Styler). Pauline, who became a close family friend, taught Phillipa Schuyler (1931-1967), a prominent biracial pianist and composer at the age of four. Ms. Schuyler was often compared to Mozart because of her precocious talent. Another of his distinguished accompanists was Bertha Melnik. Ms. Melnik was a member of the Philharmonic Piano Quartet from 1947 to 1952, the assistant conductor of the New York

City Opera Company from 1954 to 1956, and an instructor at the Julliard School in New York City from 1958 to 2008.

During the first half of the 1950s, Boris--known professionally in those years as Boris Gregory--paired up with dancer Danny Daniels, and later dancer Rod Strong, to create a novel idiom of music and dance. The team was managed by National Artists Corporation, one of the most influential management companies for American musicians. Its distinguished roster included Nathan Milstein, Isaac Stern, Beverly Sills, Andres Segovia, and Jose Iturbi. Gregory and Strong performed at night clubs, colleges, concert halls, and other entertainment venues around the country.

Their act was reminiscent of the 1940s team of harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler and ballet/tap dancer Paul Draper. During the 1950s, though, the latter duo was blacklisted for alleged Communist affiliations. Adler later moved to London, where he won the adulation of the British public.

Gregory and Strong, accompanied by pianist Morse Haithwaite, performed classical, light classical, popular, and jazz pieces. Rod performed solo dance interpretations of pieces played by Boris. A particular crowd-pleaser was their satirical version of Anna Pavlova's famous "Dying Swan" solo dance piece. At the end, while the animal was expiring, Boris pulled out a pop gun from his tuxedo pocket--he always wore formal attire--and shot the poor creature, played by Rod. That scene always got a lot of laughs. The program notes for the Palmer House's Empire Room (Chicago) whimsically described the team's performance in January 1953: "Gregory & Strong are an unusual act, with one male following the other around the room, pumping on a little concertina, while the other taps out five offerings, with ballet overtones. Offbeat gavotte is an imaginative thing, and the other endeavors also are cleverly arranged. Challenge terp[sichore] to fastie 'Fiddle Faddle' [by Leroy Anderson] is a strong clincher."

Paul Herron, entertainment columnist for the *Washington Post and Times Herald*, noted that Gregory and Strong were headliners in the Sheraton-Carlton's Harlequin Room in May 1954. He advised patrons to "stay for the second show, too. The act is unusual and you probably won't appreciate it as much the first time as the second go-round."

Lee Mortimer, the "Nightlife" columnist for the *New York Daily Mirror*, called their act at the Plaza Hotel's Persian Room (New York City) in 1952 "swell." "Strong," he wrote, "is a top flight hooper and Gregory is an expert on his tiny squeeze box." The rabid anti-Communist columnist—he called Frank Sinatra a "pink" in 1947 and got punched in the nose for it-- also wrote, "The act is reminiscent of the Larry Adler-Paul

Draper team before its members took to left-wing politics, which all but ended their careers. Fortunately these lads are content to entertain.”

A high point for the team came on September 13, 1952, when they appeared on NBC’s *Your Show of Shows*, the popular television program starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. This was a must-see program for viewers in the early 1950s and it won Emmy Awards for Best Variety Series in 1951 and 1952.

While performing with Rod Strong, Boris was profiled in the December 1, 1952, issue of the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, a major New York City daily. In that piece, titled “Twist Its Arm and It Squeals—but Nice,” Boris decried the “music blue-noses” who refused to accept non-orchestral instruments. “The concertina meets opposition everywhere,” he told staff writer Ed Wallace. “People think I’m just playing it until I get the down payment on an accordion.”

During the 1960s, Rod Strong moved out west, where he became the wine master and founder of the highly acclaimed “Rodney Strong Vineyards” in Sonoma County, California. In a 2006 obituary, *The New York Times* described Rod as a “pioneering California vintner” who “was a leader in transforming Sonoma County’s reputation from that of rustic farmland as the area became one of the finest of the finest wine regions in the country.” Rod didn’t forget my father, sending him a case of his finest wines.

Unlike Rod Strong, Danny Daniels stayed in show business and became a commercially successful choreographer. He won Broadway’s 1984 Tony Award as Best Choreographer for *The Tap Dance Kid*, and was the choreographer for some notable Hollywood films, including Woody Allen’s *Zelig* (1983) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984, starring Harrison Ford).

About 1955, my mother—who had her hands full with three active boys and a full-time teaching position—told my father he had to help out at home. Being a dutiful husband and father, he traded travel for domesticity.

Boris continued his rich and diverse musical career after he settled down in the Big Apple. The versatile concertinist supplied the music for a ballet choreographed to sea shanties by dancer Edward Villella (*Off to Sea Once More*), which was part of a 1970 New York Philharmonic International Promenade Concert. Harriet Johnson, the *New York Post* music critic, took note of my father’s faux-nautical stage costume: “Boris Matusewitch, a sea-hippie, was there with his concertina to add sights and sounds to life on deck and in port.”

In the mid-fifties, Boris soloed with the Ray Bloch orchestra of the *Jackie Gleason Show*, a CBS comedy-musical-variety program. Gleason’s immensely popular

The Honeymooners was a sketch from that show that was spun off into its own series in 1955.

The Matusewitch brothers also gave joint concertina-accordion recitals at Carnegie Recital Hall, the Lincoln Center Library Auditorium, and the New-York Historical Society Auditorium, and soloed with the Hudson Symphony Orchestra (New Jersey) in 1968.

Boris played in the orchestra of a number of Broadway musicals, including *Fanny* (November 1954-December 1956), *Wisteria Trees* (March-September 1950), *The Wall* (October 1960-March 1961), and *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (December 1967-January 1968). The last show was based on Dan Greenburg's popular, humorous book and starred the unlikely duo of Godfrey Cambridge, a middle-aged African-American actor/comic, and Molly Picon, an elderly icon of the Yiddish theatre. In one song, Cambridge (who plays Picon's son and rebels against joining the family garment business) wails, "I don't want to be in buttons, I don't want to be in bows!" The show ran for only 20 performances and was savaged by the critics. Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* wrote, "Its jokes are old and mild and if, physically speaking, one can creak with palsy, this play with its abominable music (by Michael Leonard with lyrics by Herbert Martin) creaks with palsy."

My father was occasionally a studio musician. In 1959, for example, he played in an orchestra composed of free-lance musicians for a recording of Russian folksongs, *Around the Samovar*. One of the other musicians was the outstanding violinist David Nadien (1926-2014), who made a lucrative living recording television jingles, film soundtracks and the like. New York Philharmonic music director Leonard Bernstein raised eyebrows when he appointed Nadien concertmaster in 1966. Concertmasters are typically recruited from other orchestras or promoted from within the ranks. Nadien reportedly took a cut in his annual income by accepting the prestigious Philharmonic position.

Boris even provided the concertina music for several television commercials, including after-shave lotion and cigarette commercials. He was always happy to pick-up his small "residual" checks at the musician's union office in midtown Manhattan. (Besides a one-time fee for making the commercial, musicians receive modest sums each time the advertisement airs).

Boris, the country's leading concertina player, was also the country's leading concertina teacher. The Matusewitch music studio, shared by Boris and Sergei at 53rd Street and Broadway, was a veritable Mecca for concertina and accordion enthusiasts. Since the studio was in the building that housed the Ed Sullivan Theatre, Boris witnessed

some interesting street activity. My father came home one day in February 1964 with a remarkable story. He could barely get into his building because a new British rock group was taping a performance for the Ed Sullivan Show, and a throng of screaming teenage girls was blocking the building entrance. That group, of course, was *The Beatles*. The Fab Four sought refuge in the Matusewitch studio later that day to avoid having their clothes and limbs ripped off by the mob.

My father and uncle had an interesting neighbor at 1697 Broadway. When visiting Boris and Sergei at their studio, I would notice attractive and fashionable young African-American women entering and leaving an office down the hall. It was the Ophelia DeVore School of Charm. Ms. DeVore (1921-2014), the first black model in the U.S., was instrumental in opening the modeling profession to African-Americans through her Grace Del Marco Modeling Agency. She also established the eponymous charm school that taught dress, diction, and deportment to many minority students, including the future actress Diahann Carroll, and the future TV reporters Sue Simmons and Melba Tolliver. In 2004 she was honored by the Fashion Institute of Technology for her contributions to fashion and entertainment.

My father and uncle also taught at the Wurlitzer's Music Store on 42nd Street and 6th Avenue in Manhattan. The store, which was famous for restoring stringed instruments, was a meeting place for the greatest musicians of the day, including Kreisler, Heifetz and Rostropovich. One day the legendary violin virtuoso Mischa Elman was in Wurlitzer's and heard Boris playing a Paganini sonata--probably as a demonstration for a pupil. Elman complimented Boris, remarking how difficult that piece was to play on the violin.

Boris taught hundreds of students. He generally started them off with his own *Matusewitch Associates 5-Week Course for the "English" Concertina*, an eight-page instructional manual that he wrote--but never published--circa 1965; it contains introductory information about the instrument, as well as simple scales and chords. While Boris himself was steeped in the classical violin repertoire, many of his students were understandably less ambitious and simply wanted to learn the latest tunes from the pop, ethnic, folk, jazz, and Broadway traditions. More than a few students moaned, "I don't want to be a Heifetz," as they protested his rigorous classical instruction.

Boris formed a quartet with three of his students in the 1970s. The Concertina Consorte, consisting of two treble concertinas, one tenor concertina, and one baritone concertina, performed at Lincoln Center's Library & Museum of the Performing Arts and

other concert venues. The group's rendition of "Chrysanthemum" by Scott Joplin is included in a 1976 record produced by Folkways Records.

Since arrangements of popular music for the English concertina were then—and largely still are—non-existent, Boris spent countless hours arranging hundreds of pieces for the instrument. Though Boris generally based his arrangements of pop materials on piano reductions that were easily accessible in sheet-music or piano-vocal score formats, he also sought out and often consulted orchestral scores when these were available. And to satisfy his own musicality and prodigious technique—and at the same time challenge his students—he often made those arrangements technically difficult, throwing in complex chords beneath the melodies and taking full advantage of the English concertina's polyphonic capabilities. To assure his students had instruments, Boris imported hand-made concertinas from the Wheatstone concertina factory in England. Many of them were inexpensive beginner models that had Boris's name affixed on the wooden sides.

Among Boris's famous pupils were stage and screen stars Shelly Winters and George C. Scott. My father complained that the garrulous Winters was a difficult student. Her constant yammering was annoying and prevented him from teaching. Once during a particularly exasperating session he yelled, "Shut up, Ms. Winters!" Her loquaciousness, though, was an asset in the entertainment industry: it made her a favorite TV talk-show guest.

George C. Scott had to learn to play the instrument for a Broadway play with music, *The Wall* (based on the John Hersey novel about the Warsaw ghetto). The versatile actor never sufficiently mastered the instrument to play on stage, however, so Boris played it in the wings while Scott moved the bellows silently onstage. In 1960, famed columnist Walter Winchell wrote that "an important part of *The Wall* is the concertina music, beautiful, haunting. The musician doesn't get program credit. He is talented Boris Matusewitch." Teacher and student remained friends over the years, and when Scott was shooting a film in Spain during the late 1960s about a controversial World War II general, he called Boris and announced, "This is Patton!"

Boris even taught a boastful New York State Supreme Court judge. In a May 7, 1975, *New York Post* profile of Justice Edward Greenfield, the jurist said he used to play the concertina but gave it up, "after I mastered Vivaldi."

Perhaps his most unusual student was Chris Colombo, nephew of mob boss Joe Colombo. Chris was a fine concertinist and asked my father if he was good enough to make a living with the bellows instrument. After Boris responded affirmatively, Chris

made preparations for a career on the stage. His family, though, disapproved of the idea and it never materialized.

My father's leading student was Allan W. Atlas, who mastered both the concertina and accordion (under Sergei's tutelage) and performed widely in the late 1950s and 1960s. He described his first encounter with Boris in a 2007 issue of *Concertina World* (Newsletter of the International Concertina Association):

I began to play the concertina when I was a teenager, somewhere around 1956-57. I was studying accordion (piano accordion) with Sergei Matusewitch at the time. Sergei shared a three-room suite with his brother Boris, the concertinist, and though the two rooms in which they gave lessons were set up in such a way that they were soundproofed from one another, one could, if sitting in the waiting room in between them, hear what was going on in both rooms. One day, while waiting for a lesson with Sergei, who was also a good concertinist, I heard Boris practicing one of the unaccompanied Bach sonatas or partitas for violin (I don't remember which one, though I do recall that the Bach Chaconne from the Partita in D minor was one of his technical showpieces.) I was simply 'blown away.' I asked Sergei what in the world Boris was playing, to which he answered: an English concertina. Well, that was it for me. After some lessons with Sergei on a 24-button instrument (if I remember correctly the first piece I ever learned to play was 'Torna a Sorrento'), I switched to a 48-button (later to a 56-button) instrument and then began studying with Boris. He was a fantastic musician, terrific teacher, and absolutely wonderful human being, a 'mensch,' as we would call him in New York.

Allan later became a musicologist and chairman of the City University of New York Graduate Center music department. Besides being an authority on renaissance music, Allan also wrote the only book-length history of his instrument: *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England*. The book was graciously dedicated to Boris and Sergei Matusewitch. In addition, he founded and directed CUNY's *Center for the Study of Free-Reed Instruments* (1999-2014).

Boris's most important pupil, though, was Norma Pollen, a fetching New York City elementary school teacher. Norma played concertina with the Fraternal Mandolin Symphony Orchestra and on May 11, 1947, was the soloist in Vivaldi's Violin Concerto in A minor with that ensemble at Town Hall. She played so well that the two married on July 1, 1948, and eventually had three "little concertinas": Marc (1950), Eric (1951), and Peter (1953). Boris liked to joke that his expenses doubled the day he got hitched; the price of a New York City subway ride jumped from a nickel to a dime.

Boris passed away on August 5, 1978, at Manhattan's Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital. Although he was just 59 years old, he had a full and rewarding life and career.

Sergei Matusewitch was born in Minsk on March 3, 1917, just twelve days before Czar Nicholas II abdicated the throne during the Russian Revolution. Gregory

was notified of this event by telegram at the Hotel Lubianska in Moscow (where he was probably performing). The telegram was signed by "Tzile," presumably a relative or friend of the family.

Like Boris, Sergei attended DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx during the Great Depression. Those were, of course, hard times for almost everyone. Decades later my uncle told his daughters about a traumatic and embarrassing 1930s event: coming home from school and finding his apartment furniture on the street due to failure to pay the rent.

Evictions were common in those days. In his autobiography, literary and social critic Irving Howe recalled that in the Bronx, "Hardly a day passed but someone was moving in or out. Often you could see a family's entire belongings—furniture, pots, pans, bedding, a tricycle—piled up on the sidewalks because they had been dispossessed."

My uncle also had a rich musical career in the US. Sergei studied with Pietro Deiro (1888-1954), whose playing and recordings established the popularity of the piano accordion throughout the world. While Sergei was primarily an accordionist, he also played the concertina and taught the instrument together with Boris later in his career.

Over six decades, Sergei brought the classical accordion to concert stages around the country. Like my father, he gave solo recitals at Carnegie Recital Hall, the Lincoln Center Library and Museum, the New-York City Historical Society, and the Brooklyn Museum. Sergei was also a guest artist at many accordion school concerts. Harold C. Schonberg (1915-2003), the future senior music critic for the *New York Times* and the first music critic to win the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism, wrote this about Sergei's January 27, 1951, Carnegie Recital Hall concert: "Mr. Matusewitch is undoubtedly a virtuoso on his specialized instrument...The accordionist ably played his transcriptions."

Sergei composed three pieces for the accordion, *Artiste Fantasie*, *Etude in D Minor*, and *Capriccioso*. He also made a recording, *Sergei Matusewitch Accordion-Concertina Recital* (S-M Records, 1981), consisting of works by Bach, Tchaikovsky, Massenet, Sarasate, and Frosini. The music critic for the *Express-News* newspaper of San Antonio, Texas wrote that "while we're on the subject of good music on unexpected instruments, this album is a definite standout. Matusewitch is one of the world's leading classical accordionists. On this LP, he serves up an impressive recital [including] works by Bach and Frosini."

Reflecting his stature in the community of bellows instruments, the September 1942 and November 1943 issues of *Accordion World*, the journal of the American

Accordionists' Association, featured Sergei on its covers. In addition, Excelsior, America's leading accordion manufacturer, included him in its "Album of Stars."

During the 1940s and 1950s, Sergei presented dozens of his students in recital at the Educational Alliance in Manhattan, and the St. Felix Street Playhouse in Brooklyn, NY. Some of those pupils became concert artists in their own right, including Joel Raynor, Allan Atlas, Nicholas Paone, Roy Steiner, and Lillian Cantella. Raynor made his Carnegie Recital Hall debut in February 17, 1960. The *New York Times* critic was favorably impressed:

Although some musicians look down their noses at the accordion, in skilled hands it is an instrument capable of the most subtle tonal shadings and a wide variety of expressive effects. Certainly such playing as that by the dexterous 17-year-old Mr. Raynor is not to be sniffed at. The young artist made a promising debut and it is to be hoped that he will soon be heard from again.

Sergei's most notable concertina student was Randy Stein, a one-time circus acrobat and founding member of the Big Apple Circus who had also studied with Boris. He played the instrument onstage in the 1979 Broadway musical *Carmelina*, and with Sergei in New York City concert halls. In 1981 my uncle and Randy performed Bach's Double Violin Concerto on two concertinas with the Balalaika Symphony Orchestra at Damrosch Park (Lincoln Center). *The New York Times* "Going Out Guide" columnist mused, "How in the world will that sound? 'Very interesting,' says Alexander Kutin, conductor of the orchestra, adding that he performed the work that way in late June in Damrosch Park [at Lincoln Center], to good effect. 'It is something that is different. And people like it. People applaud,' he said."

Randy also played the concertina with John Lennon and Yoko Ono on their *Double Fantasy* LP (1980). That recording won the 1981 Album of Year at the 24th Annual Grammy Awards.

Sergei died quietly and suddenly in the lobby of Manhattan Plaza, his New York City apartment building, on January 22, 1998.

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Original photo of Eric's great-grandfather Hyman Matusewitch, Minsk (Belarus), 1923



Copies of photos of Eric's grandfather Gregory Matuswitch, with some of his bellows instruments, Minsk, 1909 above and 1914 left.





Copy of photo of Gregory Matusewitch playing a small Russian accordion, with his concertinas on a table, Danzig (Germany), early 1920s.



Above: Family photo of, left to right: Boris, Manya, Sergei and Gregory Matusewitch, Danzig (Germany) early 1920s.



Left: Photo of Boris Matusewitch with wife and concertina student Norma Pollen Matusewitch, New York City, 1949.

Original photo of Private Boris Matusewitch (then stationed at Camp Sibert, Alabama) with other winners of the Major Bowes Amateur Hour radio show, July 1943.



Left to right: unknown, Boris Matusewitch, Major Bowes, unknown, unknown.

Original photo of Boris Matusewitch's family. Left to right: Eric Matusewitch (the author), Norma Pollen Matusewitch, Peter Matusewitch (brother), Marc Matusewitch (brother), New York City, 1955.

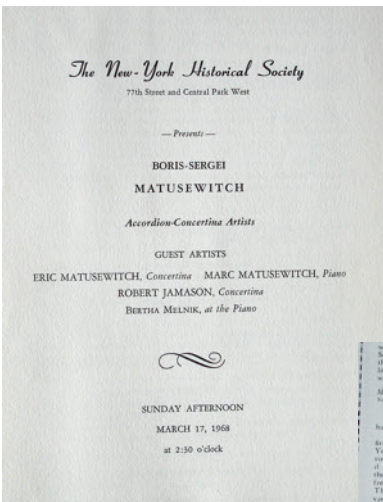


Some pictures of programs and flyers:

Below: January 14, 1953: Gregory and Strong at Coral Room of Fort Montagu Beach Hotel.

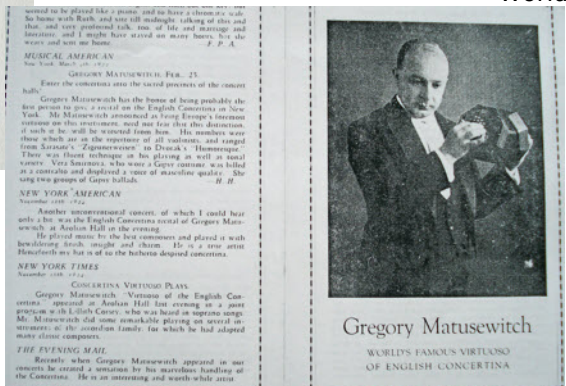


Right: Copy of Sketch in The Nassau Guardian Newspaper, February 8, 1953 including music-dance team of Gregory and Strong (far right)

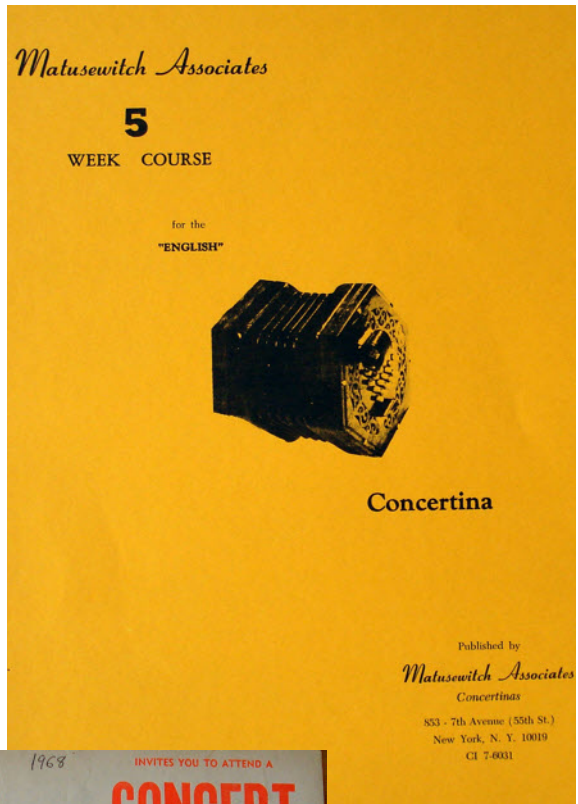


Left: Program for March 17, 1968 concert by Boris and Sergei Matusewitch at The New York Historical Society (New York City), including guest artist Eric Matusewitch

Below: Page from Wheatstone's The Concertina World, 1951 with Boris Matusewitch as "Star of the Concertina World"



Matusewitch Associates 5 Week Course for the "English" Concertina (tutor), originally published 1965. Photo of cover.



Original program for May 12, 1968 concert by the Hudson Symphony Orchestra (New Jersey), featuring concertina soloists Boris and Sergei Matusewitch.

1968

INVITES YOU TO ATTEND A

Hudson Symphony Orchestra

Seymour Rubinstein, Director

PROGRAM

SERENADE FOR STRINGS - Elgar

CONCERTO IN A MINOR Op. 3 No. 8 - Vivaldi
 CONCERTINA SOLOISTS - MATUSEWITCH BROS.

L'ARLESIENNE SUITE - Bizet
 MINUET AND FARANDOLE
 SOLOISTS - HUDSON COUNTY BALLET SOCIETY

SUITE IN B MINOR for FLUTE & STRINGS - Bach
 SOLOIST - LESLIE OSCHMANN

RUSSIAN SAILORS' DANCE - Gliere

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF - Harnick & Bock
 (LYR. BY RABLEY)

ADMISSION FREE

CONCERT

FEATURING

MUSIC AROUND THE WORLD

SUNDAY MAY 5
 3 P. M.

Union Hill High School
 3808 Hudson Avenue, Union City, N. J.

SUNDAY MAY 12
 3 P. M.

Hoboken High School
 Hunk and Clinton Streets, Hoboken, N. J.

About the Author

Eric Matusewitch was deputy director of the New York City Equal Employment Practices Commission from April 1995 to November 2008. From 1981 to 1991, he was assistant director of EEO for the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation (the country's largest municipal hospital system), and from 1976 to 1980, he was an EEO specialist for the New York City Commission on Human Rights. Eric taught courses on employment discrimination law for New York University and Long Island University from 2010-2012.

He is the author of *The Manager's Handbook on Employment Discrimination Law* (Andrews Publications, 2000) and 182 articles on fair employment practices law for national, human resources, legal and paralegal publications. In addition, Eric has given lectures on that topic for schools and organizations in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Texas, Nevada and the District of Columbia.

Eric has been quoted in national and professional publications, including: *The Oprah Magazine*, *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, on employment discrimination law issues, and appeared as a guest expert on the *Montel Williams Television Show*.

Eric is a member of Anti-Defamation League's Civil Rights Committee (Philadelphia Regional Office). From 2013-2014, he was a voting member of the Montgomery County, Maryland, Committee on Hate/Violence (Office of Human Rights). Eric also served as a member of the Advisory Boards of the Berkeley College Paralegal Studies Program and the New York City Paralegal Association.

Finally, Eric is an amateur concertinist who performed publicly with his father, Boris, during the 1960s and 1970s.

