

Dona Anschel Strauss  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Vietnam Project  
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

[HANNAH J.]

SOLOMON: Hello. This is Hanna Solomon speaking from Rauner [Special Collections] Library at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and I am currently speaking with Dr. Dona [Anschel] Strauss, who is calling in from London, correct?

STRAUSS: Yes.

SOLOMON: Thank you so much for speaking with me today.

To start off, I'd like to hear—just establish some—some biographical context—can you tell me where you're from?

STRAUSS: Well, I was born in South Africa in 1934. I left South Africa when I was a 20-year-old student. Didn't want to live under apartheid. And I—after that, I was a graduate student, first in Cambridge [England] and then in Paris [France]. After getting my Ph.D., I had a post at the University of London.

In London, I met my husband, [Edmond B.] "Ed" Strauss. He was an American, is an American, and we got married, and it was the dream of his life to live on a farm in Vermont, so we moved to the States and managed to buy a small farm in Vermont.

I became a member of the mathematics department in Dartmouth. Ed taught at a community college in the area, called Canaan College. It was 1966 that I joined the Dartmouth faculty. And the Vietnam War was being—was being waged at that time, at enormous human cost. It eventually cost the lives of 50,000 young American soldiers and millions of Vietnamese.

To that purpose, it had become clear that it was a war that was not going to be won. And there was a protest movement against the war that was gathering momentum and was

particularly evident on the campuses, which were involved in protests against the war. And my husband and I—

SOLOMON: So—

STRAUSS: Sorry.

SOLOMON: If you don't mind, I'd like to—I'd like to—to go back quickly. I would love to hear some more about your—your childhood and how you grew up, your family.

STRAUSS: Oh, right. My family were Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe to South Africa, and like many Jewish immigrants to South Africa, they lived in the countryside. My grandparents—both my grandparents had small trading stores in the South African countryside, in the Eastern Cape.

I grew up in the Eastern Cape and came to hate racial discrimination, partly because of what I observed in South Africa and partly because of being Jewish at the time of the Holocaust.

SOLOMON: Right.

STRAUSS: I became—I became a student at Cape Town University [sic; University of Cape Town] and graduated with a master's degree in mathematics.

Is there anymore that you would like to know about my childhood.

SOLOMON: Excuse me? Say that again?

STRAUSS: Is there anymore that you would like to know about my childhood?

SOLOMON: Can you tell me about your parents?

STRAUSS: Right. My father was a physicist. He became the head of the physics department in Cape Town and was widely respected as an—both as an academic and as an individual because he was a person of great integrity and dignity.

My mother regarded herself as being a housewife. That was a generation when—when women regarded as it their major duty to look after a husband and children. She was—she was a very warm and loving and very capable person. Everything she did, she did superbly.

So as you can gather, I feel quite proud of my parents.

SOLOMON: [Chuckles.]

STRAUSS: And when my father—

SOLOMON: And—Oh go ahead.

STRAUSS: —my father retired when he turned 65, and he and my mother moved to Israel, and one of my brothers was already established there.

SOLOMON: So Judaism played a large role in your home life?

STRAUSS: In a sense. In a sense it did. Neither my mother nor my father were observant Jews, and they didn't go to—they didn't go to synagogue services or keep kosher, but and my father called himself an agnostic. But they were very aware of their Jewish heritage, and they were ardently Zionist, as all, almost all Jews were who had witnessed the Holocaust. It seemed—

STRAUSS: Of course.

STRAUSS: —it seemed a necessity to Jews of that generation that there should be a homeland somewhere to which Jewish refugees could go.

SOLOMON: And how did they end up in South Africa?

STRAUSS: They—they were opposed to racial discrimination, and politically they would have called themselves liberal, but they were never really involved in anti-apartheid political activity. I was when I became a student at Cape Town University. I had joined the movement, an anti-apartheid movement called the Non-European Unity Movement, which nowadays few people have heard—have heard of. It has disappeared. But it had quite a large following, certainly a following

numbering in the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands at the time that I joined it in the 1950s.

SOLOMON: And can you tell me a little more about that—that environment,—

STRAUSS: Well,—

SOLOMON: —what it was like?

STRAUSS: South Africa was in the grip of a process which was a very ugly system. It means in your daily life you had to classify yourself by race in everything you did. If you sat down on a park bench, it had to be a bench that was marked "Whites Only." If you went to a post office, you had to go through a door that was marked "Whites Only." And white and non-white people were kept apart in every aspect of life. They had to live in different areas, do different kinds of work. There were laws that forbade black people to become skilled workers. And they had to go to different schools and universities. In fact, universities were based on your racial identity, so there were different universities, not just for whites and non-white people but for white people, black people, Indian people, Cape colored people. And it was—it was a bizarre and ugly system. And it's the main reason that I didn't want to live in South Africa.

SOLOMON: So what was it like attending university there, in that environment, for you personally?

STRAUSS: Well, when I became a student at Cape Town University, this would have been, let's see—I was only 15 at the time, and so this would have been in 1949. Cape Town still had students of all races. There were non-white students at Cape Town University. Not many, not more than 10 percent of the student body. But for the first time in my life, I was able to have friends of all races.

And in the next decade, in the 1950s, it became impossible for non-white students to go to Cape Town University. There was a protest march against—against this—of Cape Town University and the staff and students, which was, in fact, led by my father.

- SOLOMON: So your—so your—okay.
- STRAUSS: Sorry, what were you going to ask?
- SOLOMON: Were both your parents involved in this, or was it just your father?
- STRAUSS: Just my father. I don't think my mother took part. But my mother hated apartheid, and she hated with more emotion, I think, than my father did. My mother and father were quite anxious about the fact that I was moving in circles when I was a student, where some of my friends were non-white. I remember them asking me not to go to a particular party where some of the people would be non-white. They felt I was putting my father's position at Cape Town University in jeopardy. I had a lot of conflict. I didn't like going to the party against my parents' wishes, but I felt it was impossible to refuse to associate with people because of their race. I felt that would be a betrayal of everything I believed in.
- SOLOMON: So how long were you at Cape Town University, then?
- STRAUSS: Four full years. I completed a master's degree in mathematics, and then I got a—then I got a scholarship to study at Cambridge. I came to Cambridge and discovered that it was Paris, that was the exciting center of the kind of mathematics I was doing, so—and I also had discovered I could go and study in Paris and remain registered as a Cambridge student.
- So I went to Paris, lived there for two years. I think I mentioned that I had married someone else in the Non-European Unity Movement, and the same year that I moved to Cambridge, [unintelligible] papers, and he subsequently became rather famous for his work on computers in education.
- Anyway, we first studied in Cambridge and Paris. Both got Ph.D.s in mathematics from Cambridge while studying in Paris, then moved to Geneva, where Seymour [A. Papert] was working with [Jean] Piaget, a very famous figure in the field of child and infant [psychology].

During that year, during the year we were in Geneva, our marriage broke down because he fell in love with somebody else, and I moved to London, where I had a position in the mathematics department of the college of London University [sic; University of London].

Seymour moved to America, to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. And a few years later, in London, I met my second husband, Ed Strauss. [unintelligible]. And it had been a dream of his life to have a farm in Vermont, so we both moved to America, saved up for a year, and we were able to buy a small farm in Vermont.

SOLOMON: What year was that?

STRAUSS: That—we moved to America in 1965 and bought our farm the next year, in 1966.

SOLOMON: So that must have been a big change from South Africa to Europe to Vermont.

STRAUSS: Yes, it was. It was, indeed. It was a big change, and it was—our farming was very small scale. You couldn't make a living by farming in those days. We made a living from the fact that I had a position at Dartmouth and Ed had a position at a community college.

On our farm, we had one cow, one animal bred for beef, two sheep, six chickens, and then—and a vegetable patch, and that was it, really.

SOLOMON: So at this point—

STRAUSS: The work involved on the farm was quite demanding. For example, the cow had to be milked twice a day, without fail. And there was all [unintelligible], the farm work involved.

SOLOMON: Did you enjoy it?

STRAUSS: Yes. Yes, I did. It was a new experience, and in some ways quite rewarding, but I was quite glad that I didn't have to do farm work once I had my children because there was no way I could have looked after small children and had a full-time position as an academic and done farm work.

SOLOMON:

Of course.

STRAUSS:

So I was quite relieved that that phase of my life had ended—

SOLOMON:

[Chuckles.]

STRAUSS:

—before I had children.

SOLOMON:

So at this point, the Vietnam War had sort of been escalating for a few years now. Had you been keeping up with world news in that aspect, or were you aware—

STRAUSS:

Yes. As Ed and I were very politically aware, very left-wing, anti-Stalinist, and we were in the States in 1965, when there was a large demonstration in Washington against the Vietnam War. Have I got the date right? Yeah, I think it was actually 1966.

SOLOMON:

I believe so.

STRAUSS:

I think it was 1966. There was a large demonstration in Washington against the Vietnam War, which Ed and I both participated in.

At that time, there were just two groups who were involved in protesting against the war, the students on the campuses and the Quakers. So there two coaches that had been hired to go from Dartmouth to the antiwar demonstration in Washington. One was hired by SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, and the other was hired by the Quakers.

And in fact, at that time we had many friends who were Quakers because—because of our antiwar activity, and we often went to Quaker meetings, in spite of being Jewish.

SOLOMON:

Can you tell me about what the experience was like, going to that protest in D.C.?

STRAUSS:

I don't think I have too much to say about it. It was a large protest. I don't remember the precise numbers involved. I would guess it was in the hundreds of thousands. Ed and I were in the SDS coach with some of our friends and took

part in a March. And that's really about all I have to say about it.

SOLOMON: Okay.

So in 1966 you started working at Dartmouth.

STRAUSS: In 1966, yes.

SOLOMON: And I believe—were you one of the only female professors at the time?

STRAUSS: There was another female professor, Marianne [Silverstein] Brown. Marianne and her husband [Edward M.] "Ed" became close friends of ours. But really it was the only time in my career as a mathematician that I had a colleague who was a woman. In those days, it was unusual for women to be mathematicians.

SOLOMON: Can you tell me a bit about the campus climate once you got to Dartmouth?

STRAUSS: The campus climate?

SOLOMON: The environment.

STRAUSS: Yes, it was—coming from England, I was surprised that—how cautious people were about stating their political attitudes and when these attitudes were anti-establishment. For example, I would take around petitions against the Vietnam War to ask my colleagues to sign them, and there were lots of people who would sort of whisper to me, in a corridor, that they agreed with the petition but they were afraid to sign it. And I was surprised by that. America is supposedly a country where there is freedom of speech, and no one should be afraid of stating what they believe. But, unlike present, large numbers of academics did not have tenure and were quite fearful about their future position.

SOLOMON: So you seem to have taken on a—a leadership position, then, as far as the on-campus movement, went?

- STRAUSS: Well, I wouldn't say leadership position, but in certainly an activist position, I was certainly actively involved in the antiwar movement. I wouldn't have called myself a leader.
- SOLOMON: [Laughs.] What other types of activities were you involved in then, antiwar activities?
- STRAUSS: I think it was the dominant activity because that was a dominant issue at the time. The war in Vietnam was a very large issue on the campuses. I wasn't—I don't remember being actively involved in any other issues or that I had—or that I had, or that I had strong, left-wing feelings on many issues. The Vietnam War was certainly the dominant issue.
- SOLOMON: So in what ways were you involved, then, in anti-Vietnam [War] activism? What other types of things did you do?
- STRAUSS: Well, apart from farming and teaching mathematics and doing research in mathematics. I don't think I did much else—
- SOLOMON: So, then, 1969 was [the] Parkhurst [Hall takeover on May 6, 1969], correct?
- STRAUSS: That's right, which happened in 1969. Is that a group of students, known students in SDS occupied the admin building. This was a protest against the Vietnam War and against the fact that Dartmouth was actively involved because Dartmouth had a ROTC [pronounced it ROT-c, Reserve Officers' Training Corps] program, which was training students to join the military and to fight in Vietnam. So we saw Dartmouth as actively involved in the war. And then the sit-in was a protest against that involvement, in particular against the ROTC program.
- Dartmouth reacted very harshly to the sit-in. It called the police. The students involved were arrested and sentenced to 30 days in prison. And this was the first time that the university had reacted so harshly to antiwar protests. It was the first time that a university had called the police and that the protest resulted in prison sentences for the students.
- SOLOMON: Can you tell me what it was like being a part of that protest, being inside the building?

STRAUSS: Well, I wasn't really a part of the protest. There were two faculty members. The other was a lecturer in the chemistry department, called Paul [S.] Knapp, and myself. We went into the building during the process and to tell the students we supported what they were doing. We had both left before the police arrived. We weren't really part of the protest, but, then, we did support it.

SOLOMON: Can you describe the scene?

STRAUSS: Well, there were—there were students occupying the admin building, many of them students in SDS, and people were talking and discussing and listening to—to speeches. After the sit-in had ended, Paul Knapp and I, the two faculty members who had gone in and said that we supported the students, were put on trial by the CAP, Committee Advisory to the President. The outcome of the trial was that we were suspended from our positions for two years.

The trial—at the trial, we were defended a very well-known lawyer, [William M.] Kunstler. He was the lawyer who defended the Chicago Seven. You must have heard of him. And he came out—

SOLOMON: Yes.

STRAUSS: —to Vermont to defend Paul and me.

By the way, I've been looking through my files, which I unearthed for the first time in decades, and discovered that I have a copy of the speech I made at the trial, and I have a copy of a newspaper account of the sit-in from the *Valley News*, and I could—I could scan these and send you copies if you'd like to have them.

SOLOMON: That would be wonderful, yes.

STRAUSS: I'll do that. I'll do that this evening.

SOLOMON: Thank you. Wonderful.

STRAUSS: Anyway, the—the decision of the CAP was to suspend us from our positions for two years. So Ed and I decided to

return to England, and I spent the next—this was in 1969—I spent the next 40 years as a lecturer at the University of Hull in England. We didn't become seriously involved in political activity, but I recently—Ed has joined a political—a small political group in England called Association for Workers' Liberty [sic; Alliance for Workers' Liberty], which—

SOLOMON: Did you ev- —go ahead.

STRAUSS: I had my turn.

SOLOMON: Once you left Dartmouth, what were your feelings?

STRAUSS: Sorry? About Dartmouth?

SOLOMON: Yes.

STRAUSS: Well, I felt that Dartmouth had reacted too harshly to the protest by having students put in prison, and by dismissing members of the faculty were doing no more than stating something they believed. And as I said, this is harsher than the behavior of any other university.

Hello? Hello? I didn't know if you were still there.

SOLOMON: Yes, I'm still here.

STRAUSS: All right, because I don't [unintelligible] recording machine anymore. Is it still on?

SOLOMON: Yes, it is still on.

STRAUSS: All right. Is there anything else you'd like to know?

SOLOMON: Any of your—any of your thoughts and feelings about the—the whole situation, anything more regarding the war in Vietnam specifically or the environment on campus, Dartmouth's reaction.

STRAUSS: Well, I think the protest movement against the war did achieve something. I believe it was a major factor in ending the war, and it was important to end the war because it was costing so many lives. I—I didn't feel enthusiastic about the regime that took over in North Vietnam, but I think it was

right that the war was ended and that it was right for to want it to end.

I was talking to my brothers and sisters last week, in fact, because we had a family gathering in Israel to celebrate my—my brother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, and they asked me I regretted having taken part—whether I regretted the part I'd played in this demonstration, and I said, no, I didn't regret it, and I didn't feel I could have done anything else. I think it's very important if people feel that something wrong is being done, to stand up and say so.

SOLOMON: Were you ever disappointed that there wasn't more of a reaction on campus?

STRAUSS: I'm sorry. I didn't quite catch that. Could you—

SOLOMON: Were you ever disappointed that there wasn't more of an antiwar movement in any of the places that you were?

STRAUSS: In a way, I don't think so. I wasn't disappointed that there wasn't a stronger reaction against the war because there was, in fact, a strong and widespread reaction, and I think this is one of the factors which ended the war. But I do feel disappointed that people don't react more than they do against, well, against suffering being caused to others. This isn't connected with the Vietnam War, but in England at the moment, we have a government that is causing a lot of suffering by attacking the welfare society we have so that in the last few years, people are going hungry. There are people who can only eat because they go to food banks. People are becoming homeless. Child poverty has soared. And I feel there isn't enough reaction to this happening. People should really care more than they do or appear to.

SOLOMON: Do you think maybe that's a result of your upbringing and of your—your involvement in movements, that maybe your generation was more invested in things that were going on?

STRAUSS: I think—I think my generation was more involved than young people are today, because when I was—when I became a student, the Second World War had just ended, and we'd seen immense tragedies like the Holocaust. And I belong to a generation which feels committed to build a better world.

And to some extent, we did. To some extent, the welfare state that emerged in western Europe were built on the basis that nobody should go cold or hungry or without shelter or medical treatment if they needed it. We did create societies based on that principle, which are being undermined at the moment.

But I do feel that when I was a student, young people were far more involved in social and political issues than they are today. You don't have the same challenge—

SOLOMON: Do you—

STRAUSS: —of having the will to rebuild and build on a better basis.

SOLOMON: Do you think your experience at Dartmouth, being suspended by the administration, affected the way that you made decisions when it came to living in—in London afterwards and particularly not being as politically active?

STRAUSS: I don't think so. I didn't see it as having been a catastrophe in my life because I was able to continue working and living comfortably in another country. I didn't think of my suspension by Dartmouth as having been a catastrophe for me. And I—

SOLOMON: Do you—

STRAUSS: I was glad to leave because I didn't have farm work to do—

SOLOMON: [Laughs.]

STRAUSS: —when my children were born. And it was in fact—

SOLOMON: When were your—

STRAUSS: —the same—the year after, in 1970, my first child was born.

SOLOMON: And do you think that changed the way that—maybe that you reflected on how *your* parents reacted to your actions, or the way that you saw your own actions in retrospect?

STRAUSS: I'm sorry. My hearing isn't too brilliant, and I don't always hear what you are asking.

SOLOMON: Having children—did it change your perspective on the way that you had acted in the past?

STRAUSS: No. No, I don't think it did. I didn't ever change my mind about the way I had acted. I didn't ever think that I would have acted, that I should have acted differently. I don't think that having children made a difference. If anything, it made me more convinced that it was right to protest against the war because once you have children, you realize how horrifying it is that children should suffer.

SOLOMON: Do you have any other—any other thoughts on Vietnam or the way it affected your life?

STRAUSS: The only way it affected my life was that I left the States and came to England, which I haven't really regretted, no. I've had a good life in England, and so that I don't have any bitter regrets. I brought up my children in England, and they have good lives.

I haven't really been involved in political activity since being in England, not because of—not because my political ideas have changed. My political values have remained the same. But since I never find any other group that has exactly the same political values as I do.

SOLOMON: So over the course of your life, you lived in many different places during really turbulent times.

STRAUSS: Yes.

SOLOMON: Did you see notable differences in the ways that people reacted to situations—you know, such as apartheid in South Africa and the Vietnam War in the United States?

STRAUSS: The main difference I was aware of, is that at American universities academics seemed more fearful of saying what they believed if it was—if what they believed was in conflict with the establishment. I have never experienced this in England. I've never found in England that an academic would say that he believed something, felt fearful about saying something.

SOLOMON: How about the—the student movements?

STRAUSS: When we came to England, there was an anti-apartheid student movement in England, a genuine anti-apartheid movement in England and a boycott directed against South Africa, which I think did play a role in ending apartheid. And Ed and I, to some extent, were involved in that. In fact, at Hull University in the 1970s there was a sit-in which was part of an anti-apartheid protest, which Ed and I took part in. But it wasn't the same drama of the police being called and staff suspended.

SOLOMON: Were you at all involved in the civil rights movement or the Dartmouth move towards coeducation when you were on campus?

STRAUSS: No, not really. We were obviously—we would have been involved in the civil rights movement, because that was something we—we deeply cared about, except that during the years we were in the States, from 1965 to '69, it was the anti-Vietnam War movement which was the major movement, which was absorbing everyone's energies.

SOLOMON: Of course.

STRAUSS: We would have—we would have been involved in the civil rights movement except that it was taking a back stage then.

SOLOMON: But you didn't feel any—I mean, you didn't extensively get involved in the push for coeducation when you were at Dartmouth?

STRAUSS: It didn't exist at the time.

SOLOMON: Okay.

STRAUSS: In the 1960s, there was no real movement calling for coeducation at Dartmouth. I would have been involved if there had been because I do believe ardently in—in rights for women as well as for rights for all people, whatever their race, so movements for women's rights or the civil rights movements are movements that I would ardently support, but I wasn't actually involved in—in that kind of activity.

- SOLOMON: All right. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?
- STRAUSS: I don't think so. I don't think. Is there anything else you'd like to ask me?
- SOLOMON: I think we've pretty much gone through it. Yes.
- STRAUSS: Maybe you could send me a copy of what you write up. Would that be possible?
- SOLOMON: Of course. Yes. I will keep you updated. We have somebody who transcribes the—the interviews, so when that is ready, I will let you know.
- STRAUSS: Thank you. Thank you.
- SOLOMON: Thank—
- STRAUSS: And I'll send you—I'll send you scans of those—of the speech I made at my Dartmouth trial and of the *Valley News* article about it.
- SOLOMON: That would be fantastic. Thank you so much.
- STRAUSS: No prob—Well, thank you for calling. It was—it was good to talk to you.
- SOLOMON: Thank you so much. Thank you for speaking with me.
- STRAUSS: Well, thank you for taking an interest.
- SOLOMON: [Chuckles.] Always. All right.
- STRAUSS: Bye, then.
- SOLOMON: Have a good night.
- STRAUSS: You too. You too. Goodbye.

[End of interview.]

