

**Interview with Lewis Terr**  
for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society  
*(Participant Noels: Harvey Pugach interviews Lewis Terr)*

Noel: Today is February ninth. Eighth --

Louis: Eighth.

Noel: Eighth, excuse me, 2019. I am speaking to Lewis Terr about the Terr family. There's a previous interview with Nancy Terr, his sister. So, Lewis, give me your full name, the spelling of Lewis, the names of your parents, your place of birth, your date of birth.

Louis: Lewis. L-e-w-i-s. James Terr. T-e-r-r.

Noel: Parents' names?

Lewis: Isaac Terr and Mildred Rosen Terr. I was born August 30, 1946, in Valley Stream, New York, which is on Long Island.

Noel: Yes. Who were your siblings? I know you had many.

Lewis: Siblings?

Noel: And the order?

Lewis: An older sister, Laurie -- Celia Laurie Terr. Myself, my brother James Abner Terr. He doesn't like that middle name; I don't know where it came from. Dana Rebecca Terr who became married name Konno, K-o-n-n-o. Nancy Ellen Terr.

Noel: Is the youngest?

Lewis: Yes.

Noel: Okay., and I've interviewed Nancy. All right. So, who was the first Terr to come to the United States? Why did he or she come to the United States? Approximately when?

Lewis: Approximately only, because that's all I know. My understanding is generally around the turn of the twentieth century, 1900 area. Part of that is deduced from the fact that my father was born in this country in Washington, D.C., in 1910. We were told that, it would have been the -- my grandfather or his generation, grandfather, was one of a number of male children, and that they were in an area controlled by an anti-Semitic government, whether it was called Russia per se, or something else.

Noel: It was the czarist regime.

Lewis: Yeah, the czarist regime. You know, apparently there was a policy. We were told that only the eldest son was exempt from military service. So they were in the situation where the rest decided that they would rather leave than be conscripted into the military service.

Noel: Okay. so that's your father's side of the family?

Lewis: That's correct.

Noel: What occupation did your -- it was your great-grandfather who came, right? Or your grandfather? Who was the first to come?

Lewis: It would have been my grandfather's generation.

Noel: Okay.

Lewis: My grandfather.

Noel: What was his occupation/

Lewis: So my father's father was, we were told, a lithographer. Some kind of a, well, early printing form.

Noel: Yeah.

Lewis: And I don't know if I really ever heard more details than that. It was also kind of mysterious why he was in Washington, D.C. for the birth of my father. Never did get that straight.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: So that's why he came; that's what he did. And you know, I think some of my failure to know some of this stuff is either possibly my father who was famous for reticence, or shyness, I would call it. Maybe his father was like that too. Maybe he didn't know, you know, a lot of these stories.

Noel: Okay. And what about -- then we'll talk about your father. But your mother's side of the family, what was her name again? It was Rosen?

Lewis: Rosen. Her father was named Tom Rosen. He had -- I think we know a little bit more about her side of the family. Her father had a few siblings, at least a couple sisters and maybe three brothers, who were, you know, generally came to New York from, we understood that both sides of our mother's family came from a small area, close, you know, her father and mother lived not too far apart before they were married. Fifty miles or something like that, and near Virdipsk (phonetic), Lithuania.

Noel: Virdipsk?

Lewis: Yeah. And once again, I would kind of assume that they came to this country in the generally, in the same time frame of my father's side.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: Again, just guessing. Presumably for similar reasons, in like they -- maybe the environment, or they just had the opportunity, you know?

Noel: Okay.

Lewis: For sure, I don't know.

Noel: Or maybe relatives told them, "Hey, it's good here. Come. Get out of Russia."

Lewis: Yeah. Well.

Noel: Because there was chain migration, you know.

Lewis: Right. Right. I'm sure that the grapevine -- but I don't know about relatives, you know? I don't, I think.

Noel: Well, you find that among the Irish, among other ethnic groups. You know, one person comes and then they encourage others to come, for one reason or another.

Lewis: Well, you know, we've done some genealogical research and tried to figure out who was first, where, when. It seemed like there must have been a tradition of, -- and this is from census material from about the turn of the century. It seemed like it was, they say who lived in a household, and it seemed like they were, somewhat, not necessarily a complete blood family group, but rather a group.

Noel: Yeah.

Lewis: Some of the relatives seemed to have been in households with non-family members.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: So maybe that's how you come over; you know?

Noel: Well, there were boarders. A lot of immigrants had boarders to make money because, you know, they were poorly paid or whatever. They struggled. And so you took in boarders.

Lewis: Oh.

Noel: That happened.

Lewis: Okay.

Noel: All right. So, let me back up and ask you some questions I forgot. Okay. So you told me when you were born and your parents' names, and so forth. tell me something about your education.

Lewis: My education?

Noel: Your education.

Lewis: All right. So, started out in Charlevoix, Michigan, kindergarten through sixth grade. In 1958, we moved to Las Vegas, New Mexico; seventh grade through twelfth grade there. Graduate of 1964 class of Robertson High School in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Left Las Vegas as fast as my legs would carry me, up to Boulder, Colorado, for the University of Colorado for four years.

Noel: Why were you so anxious to leave Las Vegas?

Lewis: I didn't really like it that much.

Noel: Did you have friends?

Lewis: Oh yeah. I was what would be considered a popular guy in high school.

Successful student, somewhat of a successful athlete. And -- but it just never really resonated with me. I was eager to leave.

Noel: Okay. What was the extent of your --?

Lewis: I didn't finish my education. You don't want to hear my education?

Noel: Yeah, sure.

Lewis: So, four years at the University of Colorado. BA in economics, and I think, philosophy. Then it was not until about the nearly ten years later, after a stint of living in northern California, the Bay Area, I left to the east coast, Boston, to go to law school. I went to a night school. Four years later in 1982, got my JD. You know, lived in Boston for a while, and eventually ended up coming back to New Mexico.

Noel: What kind of work did you do while you went to law school?

Lewis: While I went to law school, I was, first, a bartender. A friend owned a bar and recruited me. Got to meet interesting characters. It was just like a TV show; it was great. And then, many of our customers were trades people, and rough characters. They were roofers. They came in; they were all muscular and suntanned and I got out of the smoky environment and went up on the

roofs in Boston. Became a roofer. And after that, it was maybe, yeah, towards the end of that, I became part of a professional painting crew.

Noel: So you get your law degree and you practice for a while in Boston?

Lewis: That's right. About five years, more or less. Five, six years in Boston; one of the stints being an assistant city attorney for a suburb of Boston. And then, partially due to marital issues, a breakup, I came to -- back to New Mexico, and worked for the state of New Mexico, Taxation and Revenue Department for a number of years.

Noel: Okay. What was your wife's name? Your ex-wife?

Lewis: Well, the mother of my children and my wife, her name was Christine Avaro Ryan. She was from Liverpool, England.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: She generally was a schoolteacher.

Noel: And so you had two children or one?

Lewis: I had three.

Noel: Oh three, excuse me.

Lewis: One was born in California, and two were born in Boston. Kelly and Jeffrey. And my oldest son was named -- is named Damon.

Noel: Damon? Okay. So you come to New Mexico and you work for the state?

Lewis: State of New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department. I was -- first off, I was a hearing officer, hearing administrative matters. Pretty much, I was a

jack of all trades within the department which handles a lot of different types of tax programs.

Noel: What was the extent of your mother's education?

Lewis: Well, my mother had a very itinerant, young life because of health issues with her mother. Her father was an entrepreneur. So he traveled; he left her with the grandparents in Olean, New York, at one point. She finished her high school education in San Antonio, Texas, for some vaguely unknown reason, although there happens to be a guy in Las Vegas, New Mexico, who recently popped up, who was, I don't know if he was in her -- he couldn't have been in her graduating class. He's not as old as she was, but somehow they had some connection from San Antonio. Maybe it was somebody else from his family, Fred Kline (phonetic), is his name. So she graduated high school in San Antonio, Texas.

Noel: What is that?

Lewis: Oh that's me. That's my phone.

Noel: You want to turn it off?

Lewis: It'll go off. It'll stop --

Noel: All right, so?

Lewis: She was always proud that she was a high school graduate. It turns out that after her marriage, after her kids, five children were all raised, she was living in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Enrolled in Highlands University. I'm not too sure exactly when she started, but she plugged along and graduated with a



bachelor's degree in 1969. I've got a yearbook with her pictures, her name in it. And so yeah, she was really proud of that, so.

Noel: Was she a nurse?

Lewis: My mother? No.

Noel: Oh.

Lewis: Well, you know, she might have done something during World War II, related to the war effort, but not a nurse. She was not.

Noel: Okay. So, your dad comes to Las Vegas?

Lewis: Right.

Noel: To practice medicine?

Lewis: That's correct.

Noel: All right. So, how did he wind up in Las Vegas and why did he wind up in Las Vegas to practice medicine?

Lewis: His medical practice in Charlevoix, Michigan, was not adequate to support his family. And after being there for maybe about seven years ... approximately the early fifties, ... he started looking around for other opportunities and just answered ads in a medical journal. Interviewed and looked at opportunities in upstate New York, southern Michigan. I guess one fine February, flew out with my mother to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where a Dr. Dellinger, Earl Dellinger was looking for a partner to partner up with before he could consider retirement. So they went out there and were feted

very well. And loved the weather, loved the people. Found it very friendly and decided to move out there.

Noel: Before I forget, what was his date of birth? Do you know?

Lewis: His date of birth? His date of birth was August 26, 1910.

Noel: And your mother's date of birth?

Lewis: May 27, 1918.

Noel: Okay. So he gets to Las Vegas? And he begins practice with --?

Lewis: Earl Dellinger.

Noel: With Earl Dellinger. It was a general practice? Was it a general practice?

Lewis: Yes, it was. And family medical practice was, at least in a small town, was very different in those days than a doctor would experience today. I kind of made a couple notes at your suggestion of what type of stuff he did.

But, one thing I -- we all remember a lot, was these house calls. People would call up and he would go off any time of day or night, to ranches and all kinds of things. And, you know, obstetrics was not so much of a specialty. He delivered hundreds, if not thousands, of babies. I mean, probably hundreds. And anyway, and like, so I still to this day, run into people, "Oh, your father, you know, delivered me, or my family," and stuff like that. It was just kind of interesting, his practice. Probably hard, but interesting.

I remember one story where he just -- this is kind of along those lines, where a friend of mine, was kind of a rancher/rodeo guy. Maybe it was a

Sunday or Saturday or something like that. "Can your father fix me up?"

Well, I don't -- he had a broken arm or something from falling, you know, getting thrown off a bull at a rodeo.

Noel: Oh.

Lewis: And he was in the competition, you know. So he comes to our house. My father fixes him up. And why is it, so, you know, urgent and everything? He's got to ride another bull the next day.

Noel: Oh?

Lewis: Which he did. But, you know, funny things like that.

Noel: Now, did your father have an office?

Lewis: In the house.

Noel: A medical office? In the house, or --?

Lewis: Not in the house, no. He had his den.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: His reading and smoking room. Yeah.

Noel: So what other stories do you have? Anything?

Lewis: About him?

Noel: Yes. In the medical practice?

Lewis: I couldn't really think of specific stories. He didn't really share. You know?

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: Yeah.

Noel: That was confidential. A lot of it was confidential.

Lewis: No, even my mother, she always wanted to know, but I think he was pretty good about keeping his confidences there.

Noel: What did they tell you or what did you witness about their social life in Las Vegas?

Lewis: Well, it was pretty impressive. I think they really fit in, nicely. You know, they really -- my mother is very social, was a very social person. She lubricated the wheels of that, because my father was not a misanthrope, or anything, particularly, but kind of shy and not real talkative, to say the least. So my mother was a good balance for him there. So they had a few real good friends, who had parties: other doctors, a few other doctors in town, and other professionals.

My father was in Kiwanis, was probably the main, you know, group he was in. I recall that he may have been in the Elks Club. There used to be somewhat of an active Elks Club there in Las Vegas, but it eventually burned down and kind of disappeared, I think.

So they had an active, reasonably active social life, with friends, parties. My mother, she was particularly proud of being a volunteer for the opera, Santa Fe Opera. Fundraiser and things like that.

Noel: They'd go every year to the opera, I'm sure?

Lewis: Possibly.

Noel: Did they go to Santa Fe often for cultural events? Besides the opera?

Lewis: Santa Fe was the only place, was the nearest synagogue. So they went for the High Holidays as kids.

Noel: What kind of background did your father come from? A traditional Jewish one? Reform? Do you know?

Lewis: Well, I think his forebearers were far more Orthodox than he, and perhaps his siblings were. He had four sisters, who, all of them were what you would call modern, not exactly maybe feminists, but they were not constrained by traditional roles. They struck out and had their own professions. So I don't think he was, probably his background was very immersed in traditional or Orthodox type practice, but I don't think he or his siblings were primarily involved in that. So, to the extent that we had a religious training or background, it was very Reform.

Noel: Okay. Well, did your mother feel comfortable going to services and so forth?

Lewis: Oh, yeah. She was perfectly comfortable. I'm trying to think -- you know, it's funny. When I think of her, I think of the cultural aspect of Judaism, more like the Yiddish background.

Noel: Okay. So she had that?

Lewis: She grew up speaking Yiddish. That was her language.

Noel: Okay.

Lewis: Yeah, that was the language they spoke in the home when she was young.

Noel: Oh, I --

Lewis: She was a lot with her grandmother. When my father -- when her father was off on the road being an entrepreneur, she was left with her grandparents, somewhere, I think, Olean, New York. And they just spoke Yiddish in the house.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: That was her -- so I remember a lot of conversations between her and her younger sister, Gertrude, who was known as Gigi. They'd kind of have little discussions, or "No, that's not how you say it. This is how you say it," in Yiddish.

Noel: Well, I didn't realize she had that kind of a background.

Lewis: Oh yeah.

Noel: And so, there weren't many Jews left in Las Vegas?

Lewis: There were --

Noel: Very few.

Lewis: Very few.

Noel: Did they celebrate holidays with them? I think Nancy mentioned the Tigrits (phonetic).

Lewis: The Tigrits were the main ones that we were aware of. They lived right, straight across the street. And well, we had -- the one holiday we mainly celebrated was always Passover Seder.

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: And then it was always a kind of a dispute about Hanukah versus Christmas, you know. As kids, you don't want everybody else to be celebrating Christmas and hearing about all of that, without you getting in on the action, you know? So we kind of did a little bit of both Hanukah and Christmas. I mean, they -- the parents resisted Christmas a little bit for a while. But they finally pretty much gave in completely.

Noel: And you went to the Hebrew School in Santa Fe, for a while?

Lewis: Well, I guess you could call it Hebrew School.

Noel: So basically --?

Lewis: I went over there the Thursday prior to my bar mitzvah. Thursdays, I remember going over there for some education from the rabbi. Fridays, when it came closer to the time for my performance, I'd be tutored by my father in his den. Friday night, you know, very reluctantly. Everybody is out having fun, and I'm there. But so that went on for a while. And I don't know if I ever quite thought of it as Hebrew School, but I guess.

Noel: Do you remember who the rabbi was when you were bar mitzvahed?

Lewis: Never thought back on that. I don't remember, offhand. I don't.

Noel: Okay.

Lewis: I remember who else was around. A couple people who I could get that information from, but I don't remember.

Noel: Do you remember some names? Mention some names?

Lewis: Of my cohorts?

Noel: Yes.

Lewis: I remember a guy who's currently a lawyer in Santa Fe, Ralph Schroyer.

Noel: Yes. I know -- I've spoken to Ralph.

Lewis: Oh, have you? Yeah, we lost touch. We kind of were --

Noel: Mm-hm. The family, for a while, was in Clayton, New Mexico.

Lewis: His family?

Noel: Yes.

Lewis: Oh, I didn't know that. I remember exactly where their house was in Santa Fe.

Noel: Well, they moved to Santa Fe. But there were a couple of Jewish families in Clayton. The Hertzsteins were --

Lewis: Oh, yeah. Right, right. I'm familiar with them.

Noel: And Schroyer's dad, he came in the late thirties from Germany and he worked for Hertzstein.

Lewis: Oh, is that right? Oh.

Noel: Yeah.

Lewis: I didn't know that.

Noel: Right. That's what I can recall.

Lewis: That's the nice thing about being a historian, getting these stories and putting it all together.

Noel: Right.

Lewis: Yeah.



Noel: Okay. Is there anything else that you can think of? Let me see, I made some notes.

Lewis: Well, you asked me to think about stories about my dad.

Noel: Yes.

Lewis: Doctors. Who were the doctors? Political, social, family trips, travels. So, I've got brief notes on that.

Noel: Okay, tell me.

Lewis: So all right. Hit me.

Noel: Sure.

Lewis: Or we can just throw it out there. Okay, I'll tell you the doctors' stories that I know, very minimal. My mom was basically involved with, you know, her children. You know, she was very active and helpful, and a great mother. Her organization was PEO. Don't ask me -- it's a secret, whatever that means. Nobody will tell you.

Noel: You don't know what it stood for?

Lewis: Even on her deathbed, she wouldn't tell me.

Noel: Oh.

Lewis: No, it's a secret. I'm not supposed to tell. It's a, you know, a charitable organization having to do with, maybe, education. That was her big thing. She was in that all her whole life, from Las Vegas.

She was proud that she graduated from Highlands. Her main, you know, thing was just her unbelievable interest in people. She would just

embarrass me so much when I was young. She'd grill my friends, you know, about their whole family tree and everything.

Noel: Really?

Lewis: But she remembered it all. Forever! She never forgot any of it. And she was just so connected with people. And I remember, oh, both of my -- two of my sisters married Japanese guys. I don't know, in connection with which one, but she took a trip to Japan with one of my sisters and that was a big deal. I mean, kind of, she wasn't young when she did it. And I remember that she was a beautiful swimmer. Okay?

Here's a little tiny funny thing. My father was a Republican. My mom was a Democrat. Both very much into their own thing. So she always said, "We cancel each other out."

My father ran and was on the school board for a little while. That was about his only foray into politics. They tried to draft him for something else, but I guess he just wasn't interested. My mother always told the story about although Dad was a Republican, he cried when FDR died.

Noel: Interesting.

Lewis: Yeah.

Noel: A lot of people were touched by him, FDR, even though they were republican.

Lewis: I know. Well, even though I read in the paper today that he was, signed the declaration for the Japanese concentration camps too.

Noel: That's right.

Lewis: Not pretty.

Noel: And other people were involved in that, Earl Warren, who later redeemed himself as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, but he pushed for the relocation of the Japanese.

Lewis: Oh, we have remnants of that, seeing that today, too, you know, so.

Noel: Right.

Lewis: Yeah, my dad's social thing -- I said Kiwanis. And he was -- he was involved with an organization called Air Force Flight Surgeons, or something. And he'd go to reunions every once in a while with my mother, to those things.

You asked about who were the doctors in Las Vegas at the time he showed up? There weren't that many, not compared to how they were today. There was himself and Earl Dellingner. A guy named Dr. Johnson. There was a Dr. Mortimer. I don't remember their first names. And then, my sister reminded me that really a fantastic individual named, what was his first name? Zolt (phonetic). He recently died last year. Dr. Zolt. Unbelievable character, and who else? Sansoi.

Noel: What was that?

Lewis: Sansoi.

Noel: Sansoi?

Lewis: Yeah.

Noel: How do you spell it?

Lewis: S-a-n-s-o-i.

Noel: Oh, okay.

Lewis: And a guy, Dr. Thal, the guy that invented the heart transplant surgery, he was -- he came a little bit later. I don't think he was there when we moved there, but a few years later, I think he came.

Noel: Really? That's interesting.

Lewis: Yeah. I think he was from South Africa. That was about it. Maybe five or six doctors.

Noel: Okay.

Lewis: So it was really a different deal.

Noel: Now, I understand from what Nancy said, his big thing was fishing? Your dad loved to fish?

Lewis: He did a lot of fishing. Also, I wrote down his activities. Pretty impressive considering all his kids and you know, his practice. Reading, woodworking. he had a big shop in the basement. Coin collecting, fishing.

I mean, as much of a handful of a kid as I was, I was not probably the most pleasant child for, you know, I was pretty oppositional. He taught me all of those things. He taught me how to shoot guns, archery, boating. You know? All that --

Noel: Very active physically then, yeah.

Lewis: Well, you know. Yeah, he really spent time teaching me that stuff. I really enjoyed -- I have good memories of that.

Noel: So, did your parents find Las Vegas, at least, enjoyable to live in?  
Satisfying?

Lewis: Oh, they absolutely loved it.

Noel: Hm?

Lewis: Yeah. I think I was the only one of the whole family that wasn't really well integrated somehow. Yeah, everybody adjusted very well to it.

Noel: Did he fit -- feel he was missing out? That he was isolated from, you know, contact with doctors, what was going on in medicine?

Lewis: No, I don't think so. He was very well read. I think he really kept up with his, you know, reading and continuing type education. You know, as necessary.

As far as his connection with is eastern roots, I remember many families, you know, very regular and frequent family trips back to New York City. He's from -- you know, I knew all his sisters very well, I felt. They were a big part of my life.

He was a maniac for these kind of semi-cultural trips. The family trips. I must have been a nightmare, but I mean, that's how good I remember it. He went to the Seattle World's Fair, and drove. Drove a car full of maniacs. We went to the World's Fair in New York, which I don't know whether it was '68 or '64? I don't really remember. I remember a trip to Washington, D.C. in 1960. Some real kind of major family trips like that.

Noel: Yeah, very nice.

Lewis: I remember when we went to, drove to Seattle. We stopped in every state capitol so every state capitol building. That was some big thing.

As far as, like, I've already mentioned, they had a pretty good social group in Las Vegas, and I think the only party that I remember that they traditionally threw was either -- I'm really not too sure if it was New Year's Eve, or New Year's Day. Maybe it was both, to some extent. But I remember it being kind of fun, because I'd kind of be the bartender at the night, pouring drinks for people.

Noel: Oh.

Lewis: Now, I don't know if you need this on the record or anything, but I tried to go through some pictures?

Noel: Mm-hm.

Lewis: That -- kind of crazy. But this is a picture from Charlevoix, Michigan. My two little sisters, and I believe this gentleman here was my mother's father. I mean, you know, he's 100 percent exactly like my memory of him, but very close, so I got to figure that's him.

And I told you that -- I told you about him last time. People thought he was an Irishman or something. So he was a cop in New York for a while.

And this is my idea of what Las Vegas was back in the time. I mean, what does this say? 1961? I remember somebody came through -- you know how they do like those train whistle stop things in the old days?

Noel: Yeah.

Lewis: Some guy, and I just -- maybe you can see better than I can. But I don't know who that was. Some guy came through on a whistle stop tour and that was right about the time the railroad was just becoming less of an issue, a thing in Las Vegas.

Noel: Let me get a magnifying glass. Let me see --

Lewis: Maybe.

Noel: Let me stop this.

Lewis: Okay. Yeah.

*(End of recording)*

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