Thomas Song, Class of 1953
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DONIN: Alright. So I'm just going to say two lines to mark the date and the time. Now do you pronounce your town Habertown [Haabertown] or Habertown [Habertown]?

SONG: Habertown [Haabertown].

DONIN: Okay. So today is June 20th.

SONG: June 20th, yeah.

DONIN: Two thousand thirteen. Alright. My name is Mary Donin and we're here in Habertown, Pennsylvania, at the home of Thomas Song.

SONG: That's right.

DONIN: Dartmouth Class of 1952. Is that right?

SONG: '53.

DONIN: '53. Sorry. Sorry about that. Okay, Thomas. Well, we've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time.

SONG: Yeah.

DONIN: So I'd like to begin by you telling us about your origins, what you were just telling me about earlier, how you were born in Japan.

SONG: I was born in Japan in 1929. It was 19 years after Korea disappeared from the map. Japan invaded Korea basically and forcibly annexed it to a colony. And my parents were born during that period, just before the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and 1905. Both of them were into an old governing class of Korea, Korean aristocracy. And my father and my mother both graduated from Japanese universities. My mother was a doctor, a gynecologist, and my father was an engineer, majored in mechanical engineering, and worked on a super express train between Dairen, Manchuria, and Harbin. At that time it was a very modern train.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And he was a part of that designing team for that train. And my mother interned in a Japanese hospital and was practicing as a gynecologist. And both of them, of course, were rebels at that period and rather leftwing. And, of course, all the intellectuals of that period were leftwing anyway. [Chuckles.] So Madame Kollontai and Margaret Sanger, all these people were household words in my family, including another one, Rosa Luxembourg.

DONIN: Ah! Mm-hmm.

SONG: Anyway. Where am I going now? I was born in Tokyo. And my family moved from Tokyo to Dairen, Manchuria, in 1932 or '33. I must have been three or four years old. And my father was—my parents are very much concerned about my future because I no longer had a country. But my family itself was split in six different ways because of the perplexity of how to survive under the Japanese occupation. One of my uncles accepted a Japanese title, [chuckles] became a Japanese aristocrat. He was a count, baron viscount and count. Above that was a duke. Anyway, my mother's side was also associated with another branch of the family. And my grandfather—I don't want to get into too much details because I get sidetracked.

DONIN: There are so many stories to tell about your family.

SONG: My—I guess you call them great-uncle, the grandfather's generation—he grew up in a family that produced—that became very active in the reform movement. And one uncle—what do you call? Alternate uncle, whatever you call that thing, became a duke in Japan. And Karl Marx died in 1883. Next year in 1884, there was a palace revolution, and the revolution failed. One of the uncles my grandfather grew up with was killed by the Chinese army and the other one fled to Japan. And so did another uncle of mine; he came to America, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. [Chuckles.]

DONIN: Uh-huh!

SONG: And became a doctor.

DONIN: So your connection to the United States was—

SONG: From that. And then the first ambassador, Korean ambassador, to the United States was an uncle of that sort.

DONIN: Oh! Goodness! Okay. So can you describe what your parents did? You left off because you got on this sidetrack—tell us what happened when you were three and you moved to Japan, right?

SONG: My parents were—that's another story. [Chuckles.]

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: My parents were born after the Russo-Japanese War, around that time. You know my father was born before Russo-Japanese War. My mother was born during the Russo-Japanese War. And when they became twenties, in their twenties, they studied in Japan. And among the governing class of Korea, children don't have the right to choose a spouse. You marry whoever they tell you to marry. Well, you know, during World War I, the king of England and Russian emperor and the German emperor, they were cousins.

DONIN: Mmm.

SONG: And they had no say at all how they were to get married. My father was forced to marry when he was 13.

DONIN: Oh, goodness!

SONG: Just to make sure the family transaction keeps going on. And he was very unhappy about it. And he met my mother in an American women's high school where he was teaching. And they eloped to Japan. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: And hence I was a bastard.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: You know, I wasn't recognized by the family.

DONIN: Right.

SONG: So at the first point, I had to live with the first handicap, and that was being a bastard.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And being discriminated against. Anyway…I hope I'm not getting diverted. The first time when I found out that I was a bastard was I was eight years old. I was on a school picnic to a beach outside of Dairen, Manchuria. And I had a pass given to me by my father because my father was already working for South Manchurian Railway Company to design this train, right? So as a benefit, he could get a pass for me. And in that passbook, it declared my status to be "bastard. "

DONIN: Oh, dear!

SONG: And I had no idea what bastard meant.

DONIN: Right.

SONG: It had very fancy Chinese characters that says "bastard." But I didn't know what it was. So I went home and looked it up in the dictionary and I found out what a bastard was. And in those days they wrote that fact in every single document.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: So no matter where you go, if you had to show it, it said "bastard."

DONIN: And your country of citizenship, what was it? What was your country of citizenship?

SONG: I was not a citizen. I was a subject.

DONIN: A subject.

SONG: Of Japan.

DONIN: Yes, I see.

SONG: And there's a difference.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: Anyway. So from the time I was eight years old, I knew what is to be declared different.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: And in 1990, when Ed Hermance wrote that nasty letter to the College, I had a lot to think about. You know?

DONIN: Right. That was just the first of many….

SONG: From the time I was eight years old, I had to live with it.

DONIN: Right.

SONG: And there were so many other things. And when I came to this country, being a gay was the least of my problems. I had so many other problems. I was stateless when I came here, right?

DONIN: Right. So what year did you come to the States?

SONG: 'Forty-eight.

DONIN: Oh, 1948.

SONG: Only three years after surrender of Japan.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: And that's another long story. You know how I managed to come here and how I managed to escape from Dairen, Manchuria from the Russians.

DONIN: Yeah. So tell us a little bit about how that happened, how you escaped from Manchuria.

SONG: I have to tell you a little bit more about the story before that.

DONIN: Before. Okay.

SONG: My parents were so worried about my future. I was not acceptable to my family, being a bastard. And in that time if you are a bastard, if you are a bastard, you couldn't get into high school.

DONIN: Oh, they even kept you out of high school.

SONG: That's right. I couldn't get inside the high school even. That's what a bastard was about in Japanese law.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: So that's a long story. That was a big wrangling between my father and head of the clan. I won't get into it 'cause I could take the whole day to talk about it. Anyway, the family compromised, and I was made specially legitimate by my father legally divorcing my…mother-in-law [stepmother?], I suppose. His former wife.

DONIN: His former wife, yes.

SONG: And so I was able to get into high school.

DONIN: Uh-huh!

SONG: You know there was so many of this stuff. And being gay is one of them. Anyway, then the first year of my high school in 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. And by that time I was growing up. I was 12 years old when I got into high school. We are living over Chinese because Manchuria, in Manchuria, there were lots of Chinese, and Japan colonized Manchuria, colonized Manchuria after Korea.

DONIN: Oh.

SONG: So that Koreans were second-class citizens. But at least they say to the colonized Chinese, "You are number three. We are number two." Okay?

DONIN: [Chuckles.] Mmm.

SONG: So then in high school, between 1941 and '45 when Japan surrendered, it was a sheer hell. The Japanese kids were so ingrained, brainwashed, to think about the superiority of the Japanese people, so they looked down on everybody else who was not Japanese. Something I saw when I came to this country, you know, Black segregation was then very much on. Anyway, I don't wanna sidetrack.

When the war was over—oh, during the World War II, I had to live with the fact that I was Korean. In spite the fact that part of my family was titled in the Japanese aristocracy, it didn't matter.

Korean's a Korean, you know. And at that time I found Roman Catholic Church.

DONIN: Mm-hmm!

SONG: My father was so worried about my future; parents had thought about it. They hired a tutor, a German tutor, German Jesuit tutor. He was my mentor really.

DONIN: Aaah.

SONG: And I remember telling him about being a bastard and being discriminated and not accepted by my family and all that stuff. And I remember him telling me this, and I never forgot. He said to me, "Think of Nazareth in Judea at that time, in those days. A peasant woman becomes pregnant. And the neighbors come around and say, 'Who is the father?' And Mary says, 'God.' Do you think any idiots would believe this? Do they think it's a wonderful thing? Today we think this the most miracle. Things don't work that way." And he said to me, "Remember that." And there was a town called Blagoveshchensk in Siberia, across Manchuria on the other side of Amur. That city was a large Russian town. Blagoveshchensk means in Russian, "annunciation."

DONIN: Ohh.

SONG: And there is a Cathedral of Annunciation. It's a beautiful church. And the father said to me, "Any time you think of somebody tells you about your being a bastard, think of that cathedral. It is dedicated to bastardry." You know it never left my head. It never left me. Every time I got—every time when I was harassed, I thought of that cathedral in Blagoveshchensk, Annunciation. The name means "annunciation." Anyway, and that's also the reason why even now I'm a Catholic. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Mm-hmm! It was a source of strength to you.

SONG: It was. It really was, you know? And even here in Philadelphia, we have all these scandals about the priests being pedophiles and the rest of it. You know? There is something wrong about this whole setup, you know? Because these poor kids have—poor priests, young seminarians—have no time to realize who they are, to establish themselves. So when they become ordained and become

grownups, they are still in childhood. Anyway, that's sidetracked. [Laughter.] Anyway….

DONIN: So you had a hard time in high school because you were harassed.

SONG: Harassed. And not only that, being a Korean, too.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And one of the things which hurt my father, I learned from my tutor, was you know when they harass you, learn to forgive. These kids don't know what they're saying. They are children of peasants. Among them this kind of class distinction means so much to them.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And they have to look down upon the other race, the other ethnic groups. Anyway, I got sidetracked.

DONIN: So they were worried about what was going happen to you.

SONG: Oh, yeah. And they brought me up speaking Esperanto. You know the language?

DONIN: I've heard of it, yes, yes. Hmm.

SONG: I thought you'd say. So I will…. [Hands Mary something.]

DONIN: Let's see what this is. Oh! Espero. Okay.

SONG: Esperanto.

DONIN: Yes. [L. L.] Zamenhof is the author. Okay.

SONG: That's right. And the song La Himno Esperantisto, "The Lucky Sparrow." I grew up singing it.

DONIN: Oh, really!

SONG: And I was three years old when I started that lesson with my father. He got a very nice-looking children's textbook for Esperanto printed in Holland.

DONIN: Uh-huh!

SONG: And I learned how to—I still remember the book. You know, I don't have it of course. But I remember that, that beautifully illustrated book. And when I got to Dartmouth, I had to get a test given by Dartmouth. It was an aptitude test for language, foreign language.

DONIN: Language, yeah.

SONG: And they gave you 16 rules of grammar for Esperanto.

DONIN: Ah!

SONG: And you sort of internalized the grammar. And then they'll give you tests in that. It says, "Here, translate them." You think I had any trouble? I spoke the language! Anyway, my next door roommate was Anton Phillips. And he was a student from Holland.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: And he is the eldest son of the Phillips family who owns the Phillips Electric Company. It's a huge international monopoly. Anyway, as soon as I got into the dormitory and got settled down, I met Anton Phillips. And I says to Anton, "Where are you from?" "Holland." Holland! [Laughter.] Isn't that amazing?

DONIN: Yeah. That's amazing.

SONG: And I spent a year with Anton, and Anton went back to Holland, and I never saw him again. But that's a side story.

But being gay…. Of course in Japan, there is none of this physical violence against gays as in America.

DONIN: Are you talking about back when you were a young man?

SONG: Yeah, in Manchuria.

DONIN: Oh, yeah.

SONG: And Russians came down.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: And that's another long story, what they—it was a huge disappointment. I thought—we thought—under socialism, Russians were extremely advanced. Their living standard must be sky high. They must be so cosmopolitan. Hah! It was a joke. But, you know, what happened was so many Russian soldiers were transferred to fight the Japanese from Germany. And most of them were infected with VD.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: You know?

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And as the occupation went on, the Russians became more comfortable, and they realized the Japanese doctors are more efficient than the Soviet doctors. So they flocked, Russians, to Japanese doctors. And my mother's clinic was inundated with the Russian soldiers.

DONIN: Oh, I bet! Yes.

SONG: You know? And initially my mother kept saying, "No, this is a gynecological clinic. We treat only women. We don't handle men." You know, these soldiers literally begged her to treat them.

DONIN: Oh.

SONG: They said, "We have no place to go."

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And also by that time the Koreans were smuggling antibiotics from South Korea to Manchuria by fishing boat.

DONIN: Uh-huh!

SONG: And my mother had all these antibiotics. So she sort of became a miracle doctor, you know? Do you remember, in those days even under the Japanese, we didn't have antibiotics. We treated VD with mercury drugs, mercury. You used the mercury. I don't know what it did. But finally, because some of the Russian soldiers literally cried, my mother said, "Alright. We'll treat you. But my son will have to be

the interpreter." [Laughter] So I became the interpreter for my mother.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: I don't want to tell you a long story, but during the World War II, I listened, by the direction of Father Schiffer, my tutor, to KRHO in Honolulu, Hawaii.

DONIN: Amazing.

SONG: And it was 10-10 kilocycles or 31 meter bands. And I think it was eight o'clock in the evening, I would drag out the shortwave radio and listen to this. And you know, 70 years later, I even remember what KRHO said. I'll reproduce it for you. It goes beep beep beep on the 10-10 kilocycles. I was dialing, and it says, "This is station KRHO, Honolulu, Hawaii. We are transmitting the Voice of America on 10-10 kilocycles or 31 meter bands." [Chuckles.] "Here is a short summary of the news." I still remember it.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: Because I listened to it every night.

DONIN: So how did your English get so good?

SONG: Esperanto.

DONIN: Oh! Oh! I see.

SONG: When I studied Esperanto—

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: —in the freshman year, English in freshman year, to the most Japanese kids, this was their first experience. To me it was an old story. [Chuckles.]

DONIN: Oh.

SONG: I knew Esperanto grammar, so I could grasp English by the grammar. I don't have to explain to you what Esperanto was like. But I was able to speak English in six months.

DONIN: Wow.

SONG: Also, thanks to this KRHO, I even had American accent. [Laughter.] Oh boy.

DONIN: That's great. So was that a big help when you got to Dartmouth then, your ability to pick up the English so quickly.

SONG: I had no problem.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: Also I could typewrite in English. I could even take shorthand, Gregg, in English.

DONIN: Amazing!

SONG: And I came here with a tenth-grade education to Boston. And they said, you have to spend two or four years finishing American high school curriculum. I finished in one year because of that. Also, because I had Father Schiffer behind me—

DONIN: Yes, right.

SONG: —I learned Latin from Father Schiffer. Also, in Manchuria I used to sing solo in the Catholic—at Mass.

DONIN: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

SONG: So I got into Boston. I went to local Irish church, and I became a singer. And in those days all the hymns were in Latin.

DONIN: Right.

SONG: So I knew every one of them.

DONIN: That's great. So who were you living with in Boston?

SONG: It's another story. I'll make it very short.

DONIN: Okay.

SONG: I escaped Manchuria because the help of six Russian soldiers.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: Who loved me as a friend. You know over there, friendship doesn't get sexualized as here in America. Friends are friends, period, you know. And these Russians are so grateful that my mother cured them. And also, you know, I was speaking with them in Russian. When I said we are gonna escape, these Russian guys helped me.

DONIN: Fantastic!

SONG: From our residence to the harbor, there were six or seven—what do you call them?

DONIN: Watchpoints? Checkpoints?

SONG: Checkpoints.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: Manned by Chinese Communist army. And these Russian soldiers borrowed a Russian army truck, put the red flag, and here they had what they call Manning rifles; they're sort of semi-rifles. And we'll go from one checkpoint to another checkpoint; these guys would say to the Chinese: "This is a Soviet army truck. Get out."

DONIN: Amazing.

SONG: And it happened five, six, seven times all the way to the harbor. And they unloaded the stuff and said goodbye, and they just left. And I got out of Dairen Harbor that way. And when I got to Korea, it's another world, right? I couldn't get into a Korean college because I can't speak Korean. I didn't know any Korean. I didn't have any—I had nothing to do with the Korean country. I grew up under Japanese. So I went to the bishop. And the bishop said to me, "Look, I will write a letter of introduction. You go and work for the U.S. government." And I was assigned by the bishop to the chaplain's office, army chaplain's office.

DONIN: Oh, perfect!

SONG: And the army chaplain's office was catering to all kinds of missionaries from America and Europe. It was right after World War II. And they had a special army post of this privilege, being

European missionaries. So they'll get all these letters. My job was to be the postman to start with.

DONIN: Perfect. Mm-hmm.

SONG: Anyway, also I had no Korean friend, and there was nobody else but Koreans there except some White Russians, and that's another story. Then I met an American soldier. And my job was to deliver the mail in the evening—take them to the church, deposit them and then go home.

One cold September spring—it was like winter—it was snowing, I remember. I had bunch of letters. I almost didn't go up the hill to deposit them. I said, I might as well just go home, you know. Something was tempting [me] to go home. But something told me to climb up that hill. So I did. I deposited the letter. It was so cold I decided to go to the room where there was a stove going. I went in.

There was a tall, six-feet American soldier standing in the corner. Naturally I introduced myself and explained why I was wanting to get warm. And he and I began to talking. He said to me, I remember, "You speak English, don't you?" And he was a kid my age stationed in Pusan, Korea, and was shuttling between…. He was a guard, one of the guard of the American train that was shuttling back and forth between Pusan and the capital city, Seoul. And he was there, and he had some kind of business with a priest from Boston. And he came over there. The priest was gone, so he was just getting warm there. And I just met him by accident. But we became good friends. And every time he would come to Seoul, he would look me up.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: And we were such innocent kids. I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, I didn't go into a place like a bar or anything. I didn't even know how to go into a restaurant. He and I just walked around Seoul, Korea. About five months or six months later, he came home to Boston. And he couldn't forget me.

DONIN: Aaaw.

SONG: So he talked his…. By that time I was in correspondence with his sister, older sister, Marion. He talked Marion and the parents to bring me in as a foster child.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: So I got in because somebody adopted me informally.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: I don't remember what it was, but it was also a transitional stage. Everything was in fluid anyway. And Marion got me a scholarship to a prep school in Boston.

DONIN: Oh, goodness!

SONG: Newman Preparatory School.

DONIN: Oh, Newman Prep. Sure. I know Newman Prep.

SONG: So I got into Newman Prep, and I came in. And I began singing in the local church as a church soloist. And that was—It was sort of a ploy by the parish priest to get me accepted because it was only three years after World War II.

DONIN: I was gonna say—

SONG: There was such a hard feeling against the Korean—

DONIN: Japanese.

SONG: Japanese and Asians. You know, it wasn't easy. But I began singing every ten-thirty [laughs] in the morning in the church every Sunday. I was in.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: You know?

DONIN: That's great. And you were living with the family.

SONG: Sheas, S-H-E-A.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: Sheas, Shea family. And this was Hyde Park.

DONIN: Oh, yes. Yes. Very good people.

SONG: Yeah. They were wonderful. They were wonderful! They were not rich people either. They were working-class people. My foster father was a plasterer.

DONIN: Oh.

SONG: And they supported me for a year to finish high school. And I began going to Newman Prep School. I commuted with this soldier's brother, elder brother, called John. John drove into Boston, and, you know, I accompanied him, and I could go to high school from there. Anyway, I guess I'm telling you everything. But I made all A.

DONIN: Uh-huh! Fantastic!

SONG: Straight A.

DONIN: Fantastic!

SONG: And also they let me graduate in one year, you know. And it's Marion, my elder sister, who found Dartmouth.

DONIN: She found Dartmouth for you? Yeah.

SONG: She was dating a doctor, Albert Wagner [Alfred Albert Wagner '49].

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: Who must have been in the Class of '47 or '48 or something like that.

DONIN: Oh.

SONG: Al Wagner. You'll find his name in directory somewhere I'm sure.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: I never looked for it. But anyway, Al Wagner was a Dartmouth graduate.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: And Al Wagner is the guy who said, “Marion, how about checking on Dartmouth?” And I don’t remember anything because all these applications and everything, Marion took care of me. And you know I am very lucky. Every time…the Russian soldiers, meeting Robert Shea.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And then Marion. And then Al Wagner suggesting Dartmouth. And it’s out of clear blue sky, you know.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: As if it was prearranged.

DONIN: You had some angels looking out for you.

SONG: It was, it really was. Anyway, I didn’t mean to tell all these stories.

DONIN: It’s great.

SONG: [Laughs.]

DONIN: So now let’s talk about how it was for you at Dartmouth when you got there? Did you go see it before you applied?

SONG: No. No. I just… A September day when Marion and her boyfriend… By that time she had a different, she had a different boyfriend, whom she married. John. John and Marion drove me to Dartmouth, September day. And I remember it was a rickety ride because there was no superhighway then, you know. I got to Dartmouth and I remember we bought a mattress and a desk. Cost five bucks. [Laughter.] That’s all I had in my pocket. And I got in. And class started. Of course I didn’t advertise I was gay.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: As a matter of fact, all through my college career I didn’t come out. It’s something you had to hide.

DONIN: You had to hide it in high school, too.

SONG: Of course. But in the Orient, I grew up in a very different atmosphere, you know. Sexuality is not sexualized so much,

eroticized so much. I really think American gays are very strange people.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

SONG: They have to hide.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: And if they open it up, they get beaten up. I never understood it. I never understood that. But it's not something you want to talk about.

DONIN: But you realized you couldn't talk about it when you were here.

SONG: Over there, too. I mean, you don't advertise.

DONIN: No.

SONG: You know what [is] your sexuality. I mean, it's a very private matter.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: But I handled it over there as a private matter. And decent people don't talk about sexual acts in public, right? So I thought it was like this here, too. But when I really found out how violent the atmosphere was, was when I got into the U.S. Army.

DONIN: Oh.

SONG: In 1954. Six years after I came to this country, I was drafted. I spent at a cadre in Arkansas.

DONIN: Oof!

SONG: For three years. And boy, I saw, I heard plenty about the violence.

DONIN: Yeah, dangerous if you let anybody know.

SONG: Also, because I could type, I could take shorthand, and I was a college graduate by this time now—I am getting ahead of the story here a little bit. As soon as I went in… Well, let me tell you just one more thing which you have to know. In 1949 I got to Dartmouth. In 1950, Korean War broke out.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: North Korea attacked everything. And between 1945, the relationship between America and Russia became worse and worse and worse. And by the time I came to Dartmouth in 1949, things were pretty sad.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: We had a thing called McCarthyism.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: You remember those days.

DONIN: Mmm.

SONG: And I kept thinking this is a free country. At Dartmouth, I never shut up. I talked as if I were an American. And I was very critical of some of the policies Americans took in Korea. Because the best officers were sent to Japan. The trash came to South Korea. They had no understanding of what Korea was about.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And they had such a feeling of superiority, they looked down upon us Koreans. And I really had a rather unpleasant time under some Americans—not all Americans, but some Americans. Anyway, once North Korea attacked—the war broke out. Typical McCarthy thing came in. That side or this side. Either this side or that side. And response is, What the hell do you mean? You cut up our country, north and south without consulting us. Korea is one. It makes no difference. Hah! That's pro-North statement.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And I came under suspicion while I was at Dartmouth.

DONIN: Really!

SONG: Yeah. I mean three years—sophomore year, junior year, and senior year—war was going on in Korea. I didn't even know which side attacked first because South Korean government wasn't the most

virtuous government either. It was corrupt! It was very corrupt. And Syngman-Rhee, he was one of the most dictatorial presidents we ever had. Naturally I couldn't sympathize with that kind of a president. Anyway, so I didn't major in sociology, which I wanted to major in. I majored in mathematics.

DONIN: Why?

SONG: The safest subject to study.

DONIN: Aaah. No politics involved.

SONG: No politics involved. But I read books. There was the Baker Library. I could read plenty books. I read books, I graduated in mathematics. And this is what I was telling you about how good Dartmouth was to me. Dartmouth gave me an extra scholarship to be used at the University of Michigan for graduate study.

DONIN: Oh, terrific! In mathematics?

SONG: In mathematics.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: I continued in mathematics, and I was drafted. And I served three years in the U.S. Army. And at the end of my three years, I got American citizenship. I really felt protected. 'Til then, you know, can you imagine me telling the Immigration Bureau, "I am gay"? Instant—you'd be subject to instant deportation at that time.

DONIN: So you had to keep that secret for a long time.

SONG: Long time. Not secret: shut up.

DONIN: You kept it hidden.

SONG: Yes.

DONIN: Kept it hidden. So who were your friends at Dartmouth? Who did you count on as your friends?

SONG: I had numerous friends: Thomas McBride; he became an MD. He died last year.

DONIN: Aaaw.

SONG: And there was another kid called John Joy ['53], J-O-Y, who became a professor somewhere.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: But you know I lost track of him. And there was another friend, Bob Derzon and Dick Lowenthal. Those are two good friends. But, you know, of course I never told about gay life or anything because I didn't have any gay life.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. And did you participate in any kind of fraternity life? Did you join a fraternity?

SONG: I didn't have the money. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Oh, that's right. It's expensive.

SONG: Very expensive.

DONIN: Yeah. Did you have to work a job there? Did you have a job at Dartmouth?

SONG: No.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: But I was connected with Delta Upsilon.

DONIN: Oh, yes!

SONG: And I had a lot of friends at Delta Upsilon. They were very good to me, too.

DONIN: DU.

SONG: But, you know, I was a total outsider.

DONIN: Uh-huh. In the life of Dartmouth you were an outsider.

SONG: Yeah. Oh, I was a good friend with the editor of *Daily Dartmouth*.

DONIN: Oh, yes!

SONG: Ted Laskin.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: And he was two or three classes ahead of me.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: Class of ’51. And he was a good friend. He and I kept in touch with each other for a long time by correspondence.

DONIN: How did you manage— Where did you go when it was break time, when it was in the summers and over Christmas? Where did you go? Did you go to the Sheas in Boston?

SONG: No. Mostly in the summer I went to Lake Placid.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: Which in those days…. Students’ department was extremely good to me. They would find a job for us. And sort of tell me where to go, how to go, you know?

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: I still am very grateful for that. I worked every summer.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: That way.

DONIN: You needed the money.

SONG: Needed the money. In a summer hotel.

DONIN: Oh, I see.

SONG: And these summer hotels would prefer to hire Ivy League students.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

SONG: You know?

DONIN: Yes. It improves their reputation.

SONG: So I made a lot of Harvard, Columbia and Yale and Princeton boys—friends—that way.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And, you know, we are all poor, and we all have to work. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Yeah. Did you ever feel any backlash because they probably assumed you were Japanese?

SONG: No. It's one of the reasons—I was so Americanized.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: I wasn't like a kid from the Far East. You know, basically I spoke American.

DONIN: Yep.

SONG: [Laughs.]

DONIN: And you understood the American culture.

SONG: Culture, yeah. I had no problem slipping into the American life.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: As a child. Even from high school.

DONIN: Right, right. So the faculty and the students treated you—they welcomed you.

SONG: I was no different from kid from California. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Yeah. That made things a little bit easier for you.

SONG: It made it easier. But it's because of my Esperanto background, you know. Yeah.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And also, I'm just supplementing. My story is that during that World War II period, between 1941 and '45, those three years I didn't associate too much with Japanese kids, because of this. I made fr-—oh! At that time the church I was attending, Stella Maris Church, the Star of the Sea.

DONIN: Uh-huh!

SONG: The Dairen Catholic, see. It had an academy catering to the European kids. And the sisters were teaching in English. And because of my tutor who was Jesuit, he steered me into friendship with the European kids. These European kids were not, straightly speaking, European. They were stateless people, so-called White Russians.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

SONG: There were many Georgians, Armenians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Czarist Russians.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And I became friends with these people. And I had to sort of keep it quiet. I wouldn't let the Japanese kids know that this was happening. So I got used to—I was associating with these kids, especially the Jewish kids. And our common language was English and partially Russia. And we normally spoke in English.

The sequel to this story, another horrifying story. Most of these people were stateless or Czarist Russians. The Communist Russians came in; they were all sentenced to Article Such-and-such for 15 years hard labor or 25 years hard labor, and was exiled. Some of them ended up near North Pole in Magadan [Prison]. And one of them…'til recently I was still in contact, Joseph Lerner. Yeah.

Joseph Lerner—oh, my God! That's another long story—graduated from St. Joseph's College in Yokohama, Japan, two or three months before the atomic bomb was dropped in Hiroshima. He graduated on sort of a changed schedule, and passed Hiroshima, got on a boat and managed to escape and arrived in my hometown, Dairen. And—atomic bomb!

DONIN: Oh! What a story!

SONG: And at that time, Soviet Union had just declared war against Japan. And the Soviet consulate people were arrested, was put into a temporary prison; that prison was formerly a summer resort hotel belonging to Joseph's father. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Amazing.

SONG: And when Japan surrendered, the emperor read a rescript telling the Japanese people that Japan's surrendering. That rescript Joseph had with a military policeman guarding the prison.

DONIN: Oh, gosh!

SONG: And he had escaped the Hiroshima bombing just few days before.

DONIN: Just a few days before.

SONG: Anyway, he was arrested by the Russians, sent to Magadan. He was sentenced to 25 years hard labor for treason against Russia. And he said, "What do you mean by treason? I am Jewish! I was born in Manchuria! I have nothing to do with Russia." "No. Doesn't matter." Anyway, I heard from him from Israel a year ago.

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: And he had been released from the prison in Magadan in 1956 when Stalin dropped dead. And then the Russians—the Soviets—wouldn't let him get out of Russia. He ended up teaching English within Kremlin to the children of the Soviet elite.

DONIN: That's crazy! For how long?

SONG: 'Til he was finally permitted to go to Israel. He got out during that period, you remember, when the Israelites are fighting with the Russians about releasing the Jewish people. He managed to get out that way. Oh, I got sidetracked. [Laughter.] Anyway, where was I?

DONIN: Well, let's see. You'd made your way through Dartmouth.

SONG: Yeah.

DONIN: And then they paid for you to go to Michigan.

SONG: Michigan.

DONIN: For a graduate degree?

SONG: Then I was in the U.S. Army for three more years.

DONIN: And then you were in Korea.

SONG: And when I came out from the U.S. Army, I had the GI Bill.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

SONG: So using the GI Bill, I finished up my graduate degree.

DONIN: Uh-huh. That was in mathematics, your graduate degree?

SONG: No. That's another long story.

DONIN: Aah.

SONG: Remember, McCarthyism was still around.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: And the people are finding Communists under every bed. And I got my master's degree in philosophy. And I said to myself, What am I going to do with a degree in philosophy? Can you imagine an Oriental kid saying, "I have a degree in philosophy. Hire me to teach philosophy in America?" It was a different period; not today. A friend of mine said to me, "Get another degree in library science."

DONIN: Aaah!

SONG: So I got another degree in library administration and became a librarian.

DONIN; Uh-huh!

SONG: And my friend said to me, "If FBI comes around and says, 'What's your specialty,' say, 'I'm a librarian.'" [Laughs.]

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: It's the safest degree no matter what you do, you know. Also, I could read all the books I want.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: I could buy all the books I want. This is a most ideal profession. So I became a librarian.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: And from there I graduated, and I went to Oakland University in Oakland, Michigan, outside of Detroit. And there I worked as a librarian for a year. And then the computer was coming up. And they needed somebody who could handle programming, which was suspiciously like mathematics at that time. So from there I went to Wayne State University and worked as a librarian for a while. And then Yale picked me up, and I became a research associate at the library of Yale University Library.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: Research department. And at that time at Yale they were writing a computer program that eventually is used today for library administration.

DONIN: Uh-huh. Amazing!

SONG: So I'm one of those guys who, you know, worked for that project. And then the head of Yale University Library found me and offered me a job to come to Bryn Mawr College as associate director. So I came here. I'm the one who grew up in computer—

DONIN: At Bryn Mawr.

SONG: At Bryn Mawr.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: I'm the one who brought the first computer for Bryn Mawr. It cost five or six hundred bucks. It was a lot of money then!

DONIN: Yes, it was. And it was just the beginning then. Wow!

SONG: And it was a console. You know it was like this. [Gestures.]

DONIN: Enormous. Right.

SONG: An enormous one. And the guy who hired me for research at Yale became the head of Oakland, OCLC, Oakland College Library Systems—something like that. He was the head of OCLC. That was the first computer library system in the United States.

DONIN: Oh, my goodness!

SONG: His name was Frederick Kilgore.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: Frederick Kilgore, if you look up, he will show up.

DONIN: So that's how you ended up here, outside Philadelphia at Bryn Mawr.

SONG: I came to Bryn Mawr.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: And at Bryn Mawr, I was there for 18 years. And the first thing… As soon as I settled down, I was working with a computer system, the philosophy department came and said, "You have a philosophy degree, don't you"" So I said, "Oh, yes." They says, "We are starting—would you teach a course of Chinese philosophy?"

DONIN: Oh!

SONG: So I taught Chinese philosophy.

DONIN: Uh-huh!

SONG: For four or five years here at Bryn Mawr. So I was a member of the philosophy department.

DONIN: So you held two positions then: librarian and faculty.

SONG: Yeah.

DONIN: Wonderful!

SONG: But basically I was, you know…. I really had to do everything in library administration, you know. I had—Can you imagine when I came here, we had 14, 15 members of the library. By the time I left, there were 45. So it was a pretty large system, you know.

DONIN: And it grew tremendously when you were there.

SONG: Bryn Mawr, being a women's college 'til 1976—

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: All the Ph.D.s granted to women in America were handed out by Bryn Mawr, every one of them. So we had 23 departments. So, you know, it was a very specialized, funny library. We are buying books from Russia all the time 'cause we had Russian department. And we had required that all the librarians we appoint had to handle two languages. And we tested them all ourselves. [Laughs.]

DONIN: So you had a lot of librarians who were speaking foreign languages.

SONG: Yeah. And very good ones, too.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Very good ones. So going back to Dartmouth, tell me how your experience there, those four years there, did that help you feel that you finally had a home someplace?

SONG: You know, I'm frank with you: Four years, I spent most of the time in the Baker Library.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: That was my home.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And I didn't have money to date girls, to do things. So I didn't do anything of that. I just read books. Of course, that's also why I was able to last as a librarian. [Chuckles.] I had very few close friends. And also because I made the mistake of speaking too frankly in my freshman year and sophomore year, I had to be very careful in what I say, what I'm not to say. And I basically lived my remaining three years between the classroom, library, and that was it.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. So you guarded your privacy very carefully.

SONG: Yeah, I had to.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: I had to. Also the kids don't understand it. You know to them Korea was "the Commies" and us. That was black and white. Anybody who is in the middle…

DONIN: So you played it safe.

SONG: I had to play it safe.

DONIN: Yeah. Was it lonely for you?

SONG: It was very lonely—very lonely. It was very lonely. I really don't want to go back to that period again, ever. And when I graduated, I really had no place where I was going, you know. You remember, I don't have a country. You say, "Oh, I'm an American. I grew up in Oklahoma." I can say none of that stuff.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: If I go back to Korea, they will say, "You are Japanese." If I go to Japan, they will say, "You are Korean," or "American." And it took me 20 years to find myself. I was 40 when I finally realized that I was gay, that I had my own life, I can keep hiding, I can keep denying what I was, and that's the time when I found out that Dartmouth forbade the gay kids to use the classroom. It hit me. It really hit me! And that's when I said to myself, I'm going to come out.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And that's the time when I met Chuck [Charles Burke].

DONIN: Yes. How nice. That's great.

SONG: He was 26 when I met him.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

SONG: Now I looked at him, I said to myself, This kid is now 70. [Chuckles.] We lasted that long.

DONIN: Yeah. It was meant to be.

SONG: Thank God. Thank God. And I met Chuck because—but, of course, the marri—you know, I went through therapy to switch over to get heterosexuality. Well, you know, sure, in that period…I was under psychiatric counseling service.

DONIN: To be "cured" of—

SONG: To be cured. [Laughter.] And listen, "If you get married, you produce couple children, everything will be hunky-dory."

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: "Because it's your choice."

DONIN: Yeah….

SONG: I bought that couple and got married and I had two kids.

DONIN: Uh!

SONG: And it just didn't work out, you know.

DONIN: Yeah.

SONG: I married a very nice girl.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: But what doesn't work, doesn't work.

DONIN: Right.

SONG: You can't pretend that it works.

DONIN: Right.

SONG: And I had the prospect of… My father meanwhile died in Korea. My mother was alone. And she was—it's another long story. But she is all alone there. I can't just leave her there to become old and die. I had to bring her here. My mother was a very progressive, leftwing-ish lady in her youth. But she's now hitting 70. And, you know, how

can you expect her to come here to America, where she never lived, adjust to American life, and have a daughter-in-law who can't speak Korean, doesn't know anything about the Korean culture and being an obedient Korean girl? It's impossible. [Sighs.] I thought and thought and thought and decided that we'll separate amicably.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: And we separated amicably. I'm still sending her monthly check. After so many years, I'm still supporting her. I had a lot of things to wrangle with, you know. What are we gonna do with our kids? It's another dimension of the story.

But Chuck was taking care of his mother. And, meanwhile, my mother arrived. I said, "You're taking care of your mother. I'm taking care of my mother. We have similar problems. Medical doctors are around and we have to worry about money. Let's pool our resources together." And he and I pooled resources together. And before 1970 we ended up moving into this house. Everything worked out. But, you know, my mother became incontinent. Meanwhile, I couldn't stay home and take care of my mother all the time. I had to leave her alone. I didn't have the money to hire anybody. I would come home and found her on the floor.

DONIN: Oh, dear!

SONG: Anyway, we managed to handle it, but first 25 years of life on and off, Chuck and I had to live a nightmare. We didn't have a single moment to ourselves, you know, taking care of two mothers.

DONIN: Yeah. And your ex-wife and two children.

SONG: No, my wife was gone by then.

DONIN: She was gone.

SONG: I made sure that that episode over. You know, we can't carry all these things together. [Laughs.] No, I'm telling you a very shortened version of the story. But Chuck was so good to my mother, you know. She became incontinent. He took care of everything. And he even picked up Japanese.

DONIN: [Laughs.] In order to speak with her.

SONG: Yeah. We had a very funny life, you know.

DONIN: A very rich life with lots of stories.

SONG: Lot. Too many stories.

DONIN: Lots of stories.

SONG: Mother spoke German.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: 'Cause she was an MD. Of course, you know, it was a smattering of German. But she managed. Toward the end I was able to place her in a county home, Delaware County has a home for the aged. And we were able to put her there. It was a nursing center.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SONG: And that was about ten or 15 years ago that finally Chuck and I became liberated at last.

DONIN: Yes.

SONG: We buried his mother before then. And when my mother passed away, we buried her in the same grave.

DONIN: Aaaw.

SONG: [Laughs.] But you know, also when we began living together, it was in 1970—'69, '70—we decided, "We are not going to hide. Everybody is going to know that we are living together." And in those days people looked at you with very jaundiced eyes, you know.

DONIN: So you were both working at Bryn Mawr.

SONG: Yeah.

DONIN: How did that go with your employers?

SONG: That's another story. But we didn't hide it.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: Got to the point where my secretary would be looking for me and she couldn't find me, she would call Chuck. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SONG: Well, I guess that's about the story I meant to tell you.

DONIN: It's amazing!

SONG: [Laughs.]

DONIN: Is there anything else you want to say before we turn off the recorder?

SONG: No, that's about it, I guess.

DONIN: Alright, Thomas, that's what I'm going to do is turn it off.

SONG: How many minutes? How many minutes?

DONIN: An hour and a half.

SONG: Oh, boy!

DONIN: That's a lot of talking for you.

[End of Interview]