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HOUSE CALL

Itzhak Perlman Became a Star on TV at Age 13

The violinist and conductor beat postwar poverty in Israel to become a 16-time Grammy winner and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient



Itzhak Perlman at a Billy Joel concert at New York's Madison Square Garden in 2015. PHOTO: MYRNA SUAREZ/GETTY IMAGES

By *Marc Myers*

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Itzhak Perlman, 73, is a violinist, conductor and educator who won 16 Grammys and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015. He is the subject of the 2017 documentary, "Itzhak," directed by Alison Chernick. He spoke with Marc Myers.

My parents didn't know each other growing up in Poland. But in the mid-1930s, they left their families and moved alone to a strange land that would become Israel. They were Zionists and didn't know a soul when they arrived.

I doubt they sensed what was about to happen to Jews in Poland, but I'm sure they were suspicious. My father showed me letters he had received from his parents after he asked them to join him. His brother was in the Polish army then and his parents didn't want to leave him behind. When they were desperate to leave in 1939 after Germany invaded, it was too late.

My parents met in Tel Aviv. After I was born in 1945, we lived in a small rental apartment in the downtown area. We were very poor. There was only one room with a hot plate. A shared bathroom was across the hall from our apartment.

My father, Chaim, was not trained at anything. He took whatever work he could find. He worked in construction until he injured a leg.

My mother, Shoshana, wanted to work and earn money. Her dream was to become a seamstress. After my father's injury, they had sufficient savings to buy a men's barbershop across the street from our apartment. My mother cut hair and then taught my father. Eventually they bought the rest of the apartment, which meant two more rooms.

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Radio was our only entertainment. The first music I remember hearing was a classical piece. In 1949, I listened to old fiddle players, such as Jascha Heifetz. I wanted to play the violin from age 3½. So my parents bought me a toy one. But when I drew the bow across the strings, it sounded horrible. I threw the bow away in frustration. I heard something in my ear that I couldn't reproduce on that toy instrument.

Six months later in 1949, I woke up one day and couldn't stand up. I had contracted polio at the peak of the Israeli epidemic. I was in kindergarten.



Itzhak Perlman on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' at age 13 in 1958. PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

I didn't panic. Children never get upset about things like that. They get used to anything. I was in the hospital for two or three weeks. had to be fit with leg braces.

I still loved the sound of the violin. My parents sensed my passion and bought me a violin. When I was 7, I began to practice in earnest. I'd attend school starting at 8 a.m. and finish at noon. I had the rest of the day to practice, play a little with friends and finish my homework.

By then, we had moved into an apartment about a block from my school. My parents were tough on me. Because they weren't musicians, all they knew was that I should practice. But practicing is drudgery. I made practicing fun by playing pieces I hadn't studied.

Everyone said I had a great sound. I don't remember. I was moving toward my goal—to become very good. I didn't think of myself as special. Determined, yes. Maybe talented. But not a prodigy.

In 1958, when I was 13, my mother and I traveled to New York so I could appear on "The Ed Sullivan Show" for the first time. I wasn't nervous, just a little anxious. I played for only three minutes. I became known nationally overnight. I played fundraisers for many Jewish organizations. That's how I made a living at first.

My TV appearance led to an opportunity to audition at the Juilliard School of Music. There were exceptional teachers there, like Ivan Galamian and Dorothy DeLay.

After I was accepted at Juilliard, my mother and I lived in a hotel in downtown Manhattan for a couple of weeks. The room was so small that when you opened the door, you could touch the window.

Neither of us spoke English. It was a very depressing time. My mother insisted we eat only kosher food. Fortunately, there was a kosher deli next to the hotel. For three weeks I lived on french fries, hot dogs and 7UP. I loved it.

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When my father joined us in 1959, we moved into a small apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. We lived on the seventh floor above a liquor store. On the next block was a record shop

where I went every day to buy an album.

Today, my wife, Toby, and I live on the Upper West Side, not far from Lincoln Center. My favorite space at home is where our TV is. I love to play my violin while watching baseball with the sound down.

For health reasons, I'm not supposed to eat hot dogs, but I still love them. I'm a purist. I add just a little mustard and a little ketchup. That's it. If I'm at a baseball game eating that hot dog, I'm even happier.

Perlman's Pearls

Favorite childhood book: Charles Dickens's 'David Copperfield'

Current violin: Soil Stradivarius 1714

Provenance: 'The violin belonged to Yehudi Menuhin. I bought it from him in 1986.'

Preperformance snack: 'A banana or a pear.'

Most challenging violin piece: 'Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D Major.'

Reason: 'There are many arpeggios and scales, and you have to make music out of it.'

Favorite nonclassical albums: 'The Beatles' "Rubber Soul," Paul Simon's "Graceland" and any album by Billy Joel.'



Beatles Rubber Soul

Favorite jazz musician: Art Tatum

Biggest fear: Airplane turbulence

Favorite dessert: Old-fashioned seven-layer cake.

Favorite wine: Burgundy (red)

Favorite baseball team: New York Mets

Biggest worry: 'Being late for a flight.'

Habit to kick: 'Worrying so much.'

House Call appears weekly and features famous people reflecting on their childhood homes and experiences growing up.

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