

Werner Stargardt of Werner Jewelers

A Narrative excerpted from An Oral History Interview*

With Virginia Lillis Smith, May, 2013

In 1935 I was age sixteen living in Berlin, and by recommendation, I became known to a company who manufactured watches, and clocks. I learned how to put watches together. They imported single parts by the gross from Switzerland, and I did *le montage*, assembly. That means we have a plate, wheels, another plate, and we put by hand watches together. We put the dial on, the hands on, we put it in a case, and ready is the watch. The salesmen with a sample line of these ready watches visited jewelry stores all over Germany.

After three and a half years of the *montage* as well as repairs of watches, due to the Nazi era, I lost my job. My parents and I needed to immigrate. After trying maybe twenty different countries our choice was to choose between China, Shanghai, or Ecuador. We were accepted in Ecuador in 1939. In order to settle there we had to go into agriculture for the first two years.

In Quito there were maybe three thousand Jewish immigrants from all over Europe. In Guayaquil, the port city, there were maybe fifteen hundred or two thousand. In Cuenca where I lived, there were maybe thirty families.

We met another Jewish family, from Westphalia. She came from a butcher family, and he was in agriculture. We two families shared a big, fairly comfortable house, about ten kilometers outside Cuenca on the main highway. We had no electricity, no drinking water. The water had to come from a river, which was in the background of our rented farm. The water had to be cooked in order to take a bath as well as make soup or everything eatable. The women cooked, and we men tended to the agriculture.

We ate what we grew, and took the surplus to sell in a big farmer's market in Cuenca. But since we had to buy so many chemicals in order to

*This interview was done as part of an ongoing Oral History program at the Center for Local History. Transcripts and audio recordings are housed at CLH, Arlington Public Library. Editor's note: The somewhat stilted English in this oral history is purposefully retained to capture the flavor of the interview.

make the soil fruit-able and successful, there was very little profit in the whole agriculture. After the required two years of agriculture, we returned to Cuenca.

There I could profess my profession as watchmaker. I started with a bedroom in our living quarters and later opened a jewelry store, called *Relojería*

Suiza. [Swiss Watches]. During this time I married a nice girl from Germany, an Austro-Prussian who also came to Ecuador due to persecution. I met Elfe [Elfriede] on New Year's Eve 1943 and we married, and Ralph and Fred were born in Ecuador. While the boys were young we decided it was time to move to a larger place with good opportunities for the boys and my business.

In 1951 I made an excursion just to get to know America and its opportunities. I visited jeweler friends in Washington, and New York, to see which had the better outlook for me. I came to the conclusion that New York was too hectic and competitive.

I had good friends who provided us with documents and I had accumulated, over the ten, twelve years in Ecuador, some money, which I had to deposit in banks in America. All of that helped to get our visas. We came to Washington in April, 1952. I found a job as a watch repairman within two weeks, at 805 G Street NW, which I kept for two years until a friend called my attention to an opportunity in Arlington, to buy, at a reasonable price, a jewelry store. So, in July, 1954, I bought this store, which was called Washington-Lee Shopping Center. There was a bakery, a supermarket and a restaurant, all on that strip next to my store. Unfortunately, the situation deteriorated, and one store after the other left. Meanwhile, they were building a new shopping center at 5013 Columbia Pike, at Dinwiddie Street. I moved into the new store in May, 1957, and we called the store Werner Jewelers, This store exists today, fifty six years later, with my son Ralph as part owner.

We carried a very extensive selection of fine jewelry all along, not necessarily high priced. We had an extensive selection of watches, a lot of gold jewelry, diamond jewelry, loose diamonds, loose stones, semi-precious stones, and diamond rings, wedding rings—all things that belong to a jewelry store. We did sizing and mountings, putting a diamond in a new ring or pendant or bracelet—whatever.

I could profess my profession as watchmaker. I started with a bedroom in our living quarters and later opened a jewelry store, called Relojería Suiza [Swiss Watches].

— Virginia Lillis

We advertised in the yellow pages, in newspapers and we mailed invitations for special sales on occasions like Mother's Day, Father's Day, Memorial Day, Christmas, especially, and all this added to our success. But the best advertising always was, and always is, mouth to mouth. Integrity, honesty, knowledge—all of these are mottos and headlines of our store.

The jewelry market has changed naturally. Today, to buy a gold necklace—fourteen-karat gold, especially if it's imported from Italy—costs so much money that the average person cannot even afford it. Therefore, silver jewelry has taken over.

I hired Joy Turpin while she still attended Wakefield High School. She was to be a salesperson or apprentice. Joy developed as a dear friend, and a very good salesperson. Fifty years later she still is with us. The customers adore her. I am in touch with my son every day. If he has small jobs, like putting batteries in watches, putting hands or crystals in watches, which I still can do, I help him with wherever I can. Ralph is able to do certain jewelry repairs but not everything. So I've use a foreign trained watchmaker. He comes every week to the store to pick up jobs and makes them at his home. After a week, he delivers what is ready.

In many ways, I am still European. I love classical music. I am a member for decades of WETA, and I watch Lincoln Center concerts as well as operas and all that. I love America. I love living here, and I'm happy here.

Werner Jewelers closed for business 12/31/2014.

About the Author

Virginia Lillis Smith conducts oral history interviews about Arlington businesses for the Center for Local History, Arlington Public Library. She is a retired art dealer and a lifelong Arlington resident.
