MY LAS VEGAS

with Elvis, Sinatra, Streisand, Darin, Prima & More

Bobby Morris

As told to J.J. Grant

Foreword by Steve Smith

Photo by Jules Follett

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FOREWORD

Bobby Morris: My Las Vegas is storytelling of the highest order; it's one of the most fascinating and entertaining musician autobiographies that I have read. Bobby's life encompasses a varied and immense spectrum of experiences, and this book succeeds as a cohesive narrative on a number of levels. It's a quintessential U.S. immigrant story of success against hardship. It's a story of a musician who pursued diligent musical training on drums and developed as a consummate accompanist, bandleader and artist. We are privy to the genesis of Las Vegas as a business venture and musical hotbed. We get an inside look at the golden years of a bygone era when real music was made by excellent musicians in Vegas. We get to share intimate moments with some of the premier performers, entertainers and personalities of all time and are introduced to quite a few colorful characters along the way. It's the story of an early rock and roll pioneer, creator of the "Prima shuffle," and the drummer on many influential songs, most of which feature creative and innovative drum parts. And finally the book serves as a primer for the drummer of today; in addition to his drumming, Bobby developed an unparalleled diversity of business skills and entrepreneurship. That part of Bobby's story is an inspirational precursor to the multi-faceted skill-set needed for the professional drummers of today—though Bobby's playing and business career transcends that of any musician that I've ever met. Bobby rightly serves as an inspiration and mentor to all musicians, regardless of the instrument that they play.

I invite you to sit back and savor each delectable morsel of the book you have wisely chosen to be part of your personal library, the story of the life and times of Bobby Morris.

Steve Smith
March 2019

Chapter 1

OPENING NIGHT

Elvis and his conductor, Bobby.
(July, 1969)

It is July, 1969, Las Vegas, at the International Hotel. I am walking from my dressing room down a long, narrow corridor toward the stage, where the most anticipated event in show business history will happen. Walking beside me is the man around whom all the controversy and excitement has swirled for the past year—the man that the critics, the fans, and even the stars have turned out to see.

It is a signature moment in the life of Elvis Presley—a personal make-or-break moment. He hasn't performed a live concert for more years than he'd like to remember. The music scene has changed drastically in those years due to the British influence.

He is adorned for the battle. To survive in the industry, he knows instinctively that one must be a chameleon of sorts. While staying true to one's core, an artist must be ever changing to engage, surprise and fulfill the people, both musically and visually. Gone are the metallic gold jackets and skin-tight black leather suits. They have been replaced by an impeccably tailored set of black slacks and open black shirt. As we travel together through the dimly-lit hallways, flashing gold and diamond rings glitter on the hands that will grab the microphone and take control downstage within the next few minutes. He is physically toned, with matinee idol good looks and, of course—the voice.

So much is riding on this night. In front of the drawn curtain, the audience is filled to capacity—in fact, over capacity. On stage, the 45-piece orchestra has assembled. The background singers (the Imperials and the Sweet Inspirations) have taken their places on platforms to stage left. At center stage are Elvis' longtime personal back-up musicians. All are waiting for the downbeat—from me. It's my orchestra and I am Elvis' personal conductor and musical director.

As we walk, we talk, and suddenly the thought comes into my mind: How is this happening to me? How has a kid from Poland, who came to this country as a ten-year-old immigrant not knowing a word of English, been entrusted with the responsibility for such a night? I had to put that thought right out of my mind and concentrate on the enormity of the details of this evening. Elvis has worked so hard to get to this point: months spent with me as a guest in his home in the Hollywood Hills, selecting the songs for this performance. So much is riding on this night. He is about to seize his moment and claim his victory, and yet he turns to me, as one man to another, and says, "Bobby, who's out there?"

"Elvis, the world," I respond.

Then I proceed to tell him the names of the great stars of stage, screen, and television in the audience.

He says, “Bobby, I’m nervous.”

Now we’re in the wings just off stage. Elvis looks like a 6’1” Adonis, his mane of black hair catching the glint of the backlight behind the curtain.

I tell him, “Elvis, these are all just people—people who came out to see you. People like you and me. They all get dressed in the morning and they all go to the bathroom. In fact, when you’re out there, picture everybody in the audience with no clothes on, sitting on a toilet seat.”

As he breaks up into laughter, his tension seems to ease. I walk out behind the curtain, take my place at the podium, and give the downbeat.

Elvis strides out from the wings at stage left to an explosion of flashes from cameras from the press and fans. It looks like lightning. An ocean of deafening screams arises and does not abate, not for one minute. In the middle of his opening number, Elvis turns to me and gives me the “OK” sign, meaning that he is at ease and is back where he belongs: in command.

What the audience doesn’t know is that just for a second, between Elvis and me, they’re all sitting there without any clothes on.

Chapter 2

THE KID FROM POLAND

Boruch (Bobby), age 3.
(1930)

I'll get back to my relationship with Elvis, but in order to get there, I must begin at the beginning, with my origin in Poland and the Forrest Gump-like journey that led me to that point. One of my first memories in life is that of my mother standing on a hill with her long, wavy auburn hair blowing gently in the breeze. I ran up the hill to her and asked, "How old am I?" She told me that I was six years old that very day—it was my birthday. The year was 1933.

That small grassy hill was just outside of our village of Snipiskes (pronounced "Schnippischeke"), which itself was on the outskirts of Wilno, Poland. My mother, Berta (Bertha), was a beautiful young woman. She had met my father, Dovid (David) Stempelman, years before. My siblings and I were born in relatively rapid succession. I always felt that my mother and I had a very special bond, and it all started on that gorgeous day when it was just her and I on that glorious hill. I don't know where my siblings were at the time, and why she chose that time to be there with me, but it is a lovely, tranquil first memory that I have cherished to this day in my heart.

My father was born in Poland, but traveled to America as a young man and enlisted in the United States Army. He fought on the side of the Americans during World War I, and thus obtained his American citizenship. Because of this, we children were fortunately deemed Americans by birth, living on foreign soil. After the war, my father worked in the United States as an independent "money-lender" and amassed a small fortune (approximately $10,000, which by today's standards would equal a couple of million dollars), saving every dime and dollar he could.

Father returned to Poland and was perceived as a very rich American. In Europe at that time, anyone coming from America was considered rich and glamorous; in town, there were rumors of his wealth. From his photos, he looked as if he could have stepped out of the novel *Dr. Zhivago* as a sort of predecessor to actor Omar Sharif. One day while in the big city of Wilno, he entered a dry goods store, where a beautiful shop-girl in her late teens was working. She was earning five grossen per week, which amounts to a penny for five days of labor. Though she was significantly younger than he, he was instantly smitten and struck up a conversation with the shy young girl.

Unfortunately, this scene was observed through a window by another someone who had taken quite a fancy to Bertha over a period of weeks: a young man from the neighborhood. He waited until "the American" was browsing on the other side of the store, and then confronted the shop-girl quietly. He threatened to throw acid in her face "so that other men would not want her anymore." The young man then quickly departed, while the dashing American was still in the shop. My mother was terrified and told my father of the threat, and he immediately offered to walk her home. After this, he came by the shop again and again, and began "courting" her, and they began

"keeping company" (as she called it) in her parents' front parlor. He walked her home from work every day, and very shortly proposed marriage. He told her that working at the dry goods store was a thing of the past and that she would never have to work again. The marriage lasted from those hazy days of the early 1920s to my father's death in 1973 at the age of 86. My mother never remarried. Shortly after their wedding, my brother Josel (Joseph) came along. He was three years older than me, but to me it might as well have been a span of ten years. He was independent and mature, had his own friends, and not too much time for his kid brother. There wasn't all that much interaction between us at all.

My given name is Boruch Moishe, and I was born in the summer of 1927. I remember as a child that I had many neighborhood friends of all ethnicities and nationalities. Everyone would play outdoors with whatever equipment anyone had available. We used sticks, balls, marbles, or just played games like tag or hide and seek. No one had any "toys," and I didn't know of such things, despite my father's wealth. Money was to be saved—not spent on frivolities. Of course there was no television or radio—or electricity for that matter. All the neighborhood children would end up speaking each other's languages during the course of the day. In Europe, at such a young age this is quite common. So I would come home at night speaking German, Russian, Italian, French and of course my native Polish, depending on who was outside that day. I could understand everything but English. Strangely enough, my father spoke no English in the house, only Yiddish.

We had a comfortable house for its time, there in the suburbs of Wilno. I remember it having a basement with military memorabilia in it—old unusable revolvers, knives, bayonets, and even a small cannon! We had an icebox in the kitchen, although most of the time we could leave milk (delivered in bottles) and other perishables on the windowsills, because it was so cold outside. Of course, there was the outhouse and a coal stove. My mother was a fantastic cook, and when evening came my parents would light oil lamps and we'd have a wonderful meal. After dinner we would stay at the table and sing songs, sometimes with neighborhood friends—old Russian songs like "Ochi Chyornye" or the "Song of the Volga Boatmen." That was our entertainment.

When we went to bed, we could hear the horse-drawn carriages traveling past our house—men delivering ice or goods—and the wheels would make a very distinctive sound on the cobblestones: a soothing kind of "ca-la-la-lop, ca-la-la-lop," like a soft sort of drumbeat. I would drift off to sleep to this cobblestone lullaby. My mother washed all of our clothes by walking and carrying the laundry in a big basket down to the river. She would lay the garments one by one on a large rock and begin scrubbing them with an oversized cake of brown soap. Obviously, there were no washing machines. She would then carry the damp laundry back home to hang on clotheslines to dry.

My brother, Ozer (Arthur), was born during these lovely, carefree childhood times, and I welcomed him with open arms. I loved playing with him and teaching him things; I really never had been included in my elder brother's world. When Arthur learned to walk, he was with me constantly, because here was someone I could interact with all the time. He was my very own "in-home companion" that didn't have to go away just because the sun went down! However, the first time I met my baby brother wasn't quite so idyllic. I remember looking into a dimly lit bedroom from a hallway in our house and seeing a lot of darkly-dressed, somber grown-ups standing around a bassinet with an infant in it screaming at the top of his lungs. As I inched farther into the room, I saw on a side table a small dish with some sand in it. On top of the sand was a small ring of flesh with some blood on it, which to me looked like a tiny penis. I was appalled, in shock, and instantly thought in my horrified silence that these savages had cut the little infant's male organ off! It was quite traumatic. In reality, it was merely a circumcision—a bris—a ritual carried out in our religion every time a male baby is born. But in my mind, it was terrifying and I wish someone had taken the effort to explain it to me ahead of time or had sent me off to a relative or friend's house—or anywhere—so that I didn't have to experience that event. I couldn't discuss it with anyone, because I guess I wasn't supposed to be there in the first place, so I just tucked it away in the back of my mind and remained silently afraid for a long, long time.

On weekends, my mother would have Josel and me carry a gigantic covered metal kettle containing a huge piece of raw beef infused with spices surrounded by potatoes, carrots and prunes from our garden about a mile down the road to the center of town. We'd put a wooden pole through the curved metal handle on top of the pot, and off we'd go, side by side. (When he got old enough, Ozer would tag along to help). Our destination, the town square, was the site of a "community oven" of sorts: a gigantic, cavernous slow cooker ensconced in a stone wall. We'd walk home, and return about 24 hours later to retrieve the roast (which was called "cholent"). We'd put it back on the pole and head home—under strict orders not to sample any of the delicious contents along the journey. Sometimes we'd make it back to the edge of town without lifting the lid, but the aroma—oh, that aroma wafting out of the pot! —and the tender meat falling off the bone would wear us down to the point where we'd have to stop, dip in, and get a sample. We'd grab a piece of potato from the juices or break off samples of the meat, being extremely careful to chisel off only the pieces that wouldn't alter the general contour of the roast. It was a risky thing to do, but we couldn't help ourselves. To this day, I have never tasted anything as delicious as the unique flavor of that 24-hour cholent.

The center of Schnippischeke was the scene of a very significant event in my young life, although I didn't know it at the time. In 1934, when I was around the age of seven, my parents took all of us children (Ozer was in a carriage) to see a parade in which my

grandfather was a participant. We saw men on horseback, decorated horses pulling even more decorated wagons, and then I heard it: the faint, distant sound of a marching band with brass to a military beat. It came closer and closer, and the sound was all I could focus on. The contraptions going past me were superfluous now. All I wanted to see and experience was that music, and more importantly that beat. As the band of about 40 passed, imagine my amazement and delight to see my Grandpa right in the center of a line of bearded old men playing gleaming snare drums, with sticks moving so fast they were a blur: "ra-ta-ta-ta-TAH, ra-ta-ta-ta-TAH, ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-TAH, DA-ta-ta-ta-TAH."

I was so proud that he was in that parade. The sound of all those snare drums, coupled with the line of booming 40-inch bass drums strapped onto the men that followed, was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I'll tell you, the vibrations went right through me. It was so exciting, and I know that in my heart—right there on that cobblestone street in Poland watching my Grandpa —that's where the seed of my passion for drumming was sown. But it was to lie dormant for a few more years. Up until that moment, all I had associated with my paternal Grandpa was that when I sat on his knee (which I avoided if I could, because his breath smelled funny: typical Grandpa cigar-breath of the times), his long bushy, white beard would scratch my face when he kissed my cheek. Now, in the flick of a drumstick he was transformed into my superhero.

There are only a few other relatives from the old country that I can remember. First and foremost is my beloved Ja-Ja (uncle) Lazer, my father's younger brother. He was a very well-to-do bachelor who owned a haberdashery that I visited many times in the city of Wilno. I still remember coming into his shop and being met with the scent of new fine clothes and millinery. Uncle Lazer would stop by our house frequently. I guess because he didn't have any children of his own, we became his children. He'd come laden with gifts for us, mostly chocolates and fruits, including bananas with a taste that has yet to be duplicated in my life. He was so much fun to be with. I remember on one occasion, however, my brother and I conspired, collaborated, and carried out the act of running to the front door and "mooning" him as he entered. As jovial as Uncle Lazer was, that didn't sit too well with him. I don't remember whose idea the caper was originally, but one by one we got paddled by my father when he got home—with a razor strap, no less. He shaved with a six-inch-long folding blade, which he sharpened by scraping it along a leather strap daily. He enlisted the strap on this particular occasion, I assume, so that creative thoughts like mooning our elders would not occur to us again any time soon—and they didn't.

Uncle Moishe was one of my mother's brothers; I was named after him. I remember he was married to a very genteel lady, and had a beautiful daughter and handsome son.

They lived in another part of Poland, but would travel by train to visit us occasionally. They dressed in very fine clothes and I was always so happy to see them. My paternal grandmother and maternal grandfather and grandmother all died before I was old enough to know them. People died so young in those days. Antibiotics were virtually unknown or scarce, and when you got seriously sick, it was very often fatal. My mother's grandmother had actually contracted pneumonia after walking in a storm in a funeral procession following the cart of a departed friend. She died about a week later.

Then there was the day that a young woman showed up at the door with dark brown shoulder-length hair, slender, in her early twenties, a pleasant-looking girl, with my father standing right beside her. He told us her name was Frances, that she was from America, and that she was our half-sister. It seems that my father had been married many years before to a New York lady who was Orthodox. I'm sure my mother knew about this former life and my father's having to get permission from the temple to get a divorce—but we children sure didn't! Divorce was almost unheard of in those days, and was even considered scandalous. But my father was his own man, and once he made up his mind to something, he saw it through. He was a man ahead of his time.

Frances stayed about a week with us. I don't remember too much about her, except that she carried in her luggage an innovation from America which we had not yet seen: rolls of toilet paper! We thought this was the greatest thing ever invented, and it would be a very sisterly thing to share these rolls with us. It would make our outhouse excursions so much more pleasant. But she would not part with even a single sheet. At the end of the week, she left (maybe she ran out of toilet paper?). Or perhaps she felt we were coveting her tissue too intensely and she buckled under the pressure. In any case, we never heard from her again— and didn't give a "sheet," either.

During the week I always looked forward to going to school. My schoolhouse was located a few miles away. I'd walk to the end of the town's main street and then follow a usually snowy path down a mountain slope to the small dark building at the very bottom. Almost all of the children in the school lived in the town right there at the bottom of the hill. All grades were housed together, as it was truly a one-room schoolhouse with one very strict, stern schoolmarm. Before our lessons, the mean teacher would make us remove our shoes to see if we were following hygiene principles when it came to our feet. I remember once being cracked across the toes with her ruler because my feet didn't meet her particular standards. Believe me, my feet were impeccable from that day forward.

It wasn't long before I figured out that it would be more expeditious if I found an easier way to access the school at the bottom of the mountain. On my own (I didn't see anyone

doing this before me), I fashioned my own set of makeshift skis out of two boards and ropes. I whittled notches on the underside of the boards so that the ropes could be tied onto my shoes, and really enjoyed shushing down the slope to school each day after that. Of course I was still stuck with carrying the skis back up the mountain at the end of the day, but I didn't care—there were absolutely no time constraints on my young life. Mind you, I didn't even know this activity was called "skiing." To me, it was just an innovative means of getting from one place to another more quickly. I guess it's true that necessity is the mother of invention. This is where my love of skiing was born—and I'm still skiing to this day.

Once I reached home, my doves were always waiting for me in the backyard. At any given time I'd house and care for dozens of doves, and would spend hours just observing their habits and marveling at the fact that each time they would fly off, they would return with a new friend or partner, each wanting to partake in a scrap of food. Oh, how I loved those doves. I was always physically very strong for my age, and one of the community sports was a race of sorts carrying someone on your back. At age seven-and-a-half, surprising as it sounds, I could carry a small man on my back and still cross the finish line.

One day, this activity caught the eye of a local shopkeeper who recruited me to help him single-handedly rid the neighborhood of what he considered to be a public nuisance: cats. He told me what a problem the cats were creating, gave me a gigantic burlap bag and promised me a grossen (1/5 of a penny) per cat to round them all up, carry them through the forest to the river, tie the bag up and throw the bag with the cats in it into the water. Dutifully I began rounding up the cats, because a grossen per cat was a potential fortune to a young entrepreneur like myself. I must have collected ten cats. They were all in the bag over my shoulder and I was trudging through the forest to the river. They were all howling and scratching away at each other and at me through the burlap bag all the way through the forest. I finally got to the river's edge, but I just couldn't do it. I knew it was wrong—horribly wrong. So I opened the bag and let the cats out, and they ran in all different directions, happy to escape that bag and their potential watery fate. Instantly I felt lifted and wonderful. Then again, there was that matter of the ten grossen, so I left the bag in the forest and headed back down the long road to the shopkeeper for my pay. When I got back to town, there were the ten cats, all milling about. They had run through the forest and made it back to the exact same neighborhood ahead of me. Needless to say, the shopkeeper was not pleased. My potential fortune of two cents was quashed. But I was very proud of myself that day because my conscience had led me to do the right thing.

Unbeknownst to me, in the far off land of America, in a very poor section of a town called Tupelo, in the state of Mississippi (concurrent with my cat-herding adventure)

a baby boy was being born whose life would dramatically intersect with mine some 34½ years later.

They named him Elvis.