DP-30
GEORGE CHAUNCEY WEISMAN
BIRTH DATE: 1913
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 24, 1989
RUNNING TIME: 1:15:00
INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS
RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN
INTERVIEW LOCATION: CULVER CITY, CA
TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1989
TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1995
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

THE UKRAINE, 1922
AGE 8
PASSAGE ON "THE LAPLAND"

PHILLIPS: This interview is with Mr. George C. Weisman. I'm Andrew Phillips. It's interview number 404 [DP-30]. We're doing this interview on Wednesday the 24th of May 1989. We're beginning the interview at about twenty after twelve. Mr. Weisman, where is your original, where is your country of origin?

WEISMAN: Uh, my country of origin was, uh, the Ukraine in Russia, which is an area called Bessarabia, which is close to the Roumanian border.

PHILLIPS: Could you spell Bessarabia for us?

WEISMAN: Pardon?

PHILLIPS: Could you spell . . .

WEISMAN: Yeah, B-E-S-S-A-R-A-B-I-A.

PHILLIPS: It helps out the transcriber.

WEISMAN: Bessarabia.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Thank you. What year did you, were you born?

WEISMAN: 1913.

PHILLIPS: And what year did you immigrate?

WEISMAN: 1922.

PHILLIPS: And you were eight years old, I think.

WEISMAN: Yes. I was eight-and-a-half, actually. Uh, we left Antwerp in about January 25 of 1922.

PHILLIPS: Okay. What I'd like to do is to do the interview first in the early, to document some of the early parts and experiences of your life. If you could tell me what town you were born in in the Ukraine, and a little bit about what your parents did.

WEISMAN: Well, I was born in a town named Yaltushkov, which is in the Podolsk guvernya, or state.

PHILLIPS: Could you spell all of that for me?

WEISMAN: Uh, which one? Yaltushkov?

PHILLIPS: Yeah, first.

WEISMAN: I don't know. Y-A-L-T-U-S-H-K-O-V.

PHILLIPS: Yeah, and . . .

WEISMAN: And the guvernya, P-O-D-O-L-S-K, Podolsk. And, uh, I left there when I was about seven years old.

PHILLIPS: Where did you, what sort of house did you live in?

WEISMAN: Uh, we lived in a, uh, fairly well-built house with a metal roof, which was, I guess, at that time, an indication of social status. And, uh, as I recall, it was very comfortable. There were just the three of us. My father and my mother and myself, I being an only child.

PHILLIPS: What did your father do for a living?

WEISMAN: Uh, he was a bookkeeper in a beet sugar mill that was located in that town. And that was the town's largest employer, and only industry, so far as I can tell.

PHILLIPS: Could you be careful not to move the, it makes a bit of noise. Thank you very much. Thank you. Um, could you give us a bit of a sense of what went on around that town? Was it agricultural primarily?

WEISMAN: It was agricultural primarily except for this one factory. Where the agriculture consisted of potatoes, and sugar beets and cabbage and onions and things of that nature. But it was primarily agricultural.

PHILLIPS: And was it a, uh, an enjoyable experience for you as a young child in that town?

WEISMAN: Uh, some of it was until the pogroms came, and then it was not so enjoyable.

PHILLIPS: What was your first indication of the pogroms? Where did you first learn about them?

WEISMAN: Well, I think it was in 1918, uh, the Russian soldiers had more or less revolted on the German front and, uh, killed most of their officers and came home and found that, uh, the home scene was desolate. Their people were starving and the country had been very badly managed by the czar and the Mad Mon Rasputin who had, seemed to have a hypnotic hold over the queen. And, uh, they came home, all they had was their guns, and they decided to take from whomever they could whatever they could, uh, by using the guns. They'd get drunk and raid different villages and, uh, at first it was a disorganized thing with individual soldiers, but then they organized into regular armies. And, uh,

systematically marched on town after town looting anything they could find and amusing themselves by killing Jews. That was the start of the pogroms. As time went on, 1919, uh, 1920 was worse because then they were highly organized. There were two primary raiding groups, one under, uh, General Denikin.

PHILLIPS: Can you spell that?

WEISMAN: Uh, D-E-N-I-K-I-N. And the other one under General Petlura. That's P-E-T-L-U-R-A. And these were, uh, very well-organized army troops that looted and killed very systematically. The only, uh, good part, if you can call it good, was that the, uh, the scuttlebutt, when they started to march on a town and take it over, we'd usually get warning of it in advance by people who had been raided in the previous town, and had sent messengers on horseback to the next, to the surrounding towns, to more or less inform the people what was coming. So we'd usually have some time to go and hide and bury the valuables and do other sundry things to escape.

PHILLIPS: Tell me of any eyewitness accounts or experiences you yourself had.

WEISMAN: Yeah. Well, I think in 1919, roughly, I was playing with a bunch of peasant kids who lived in the area around my house. And, uh, we heard that there were some raiding parties coming.

Uh, so, uh, there was a peasant who lived next to us who took care of the farmland that we owned, and there was, like sharecropping, I guess, you would call it. And, uh, whenever we heard the raiding parties were coming, his wife would take me and put a cross around my neck and throw me in with her other five kids. The man would take my father out on a rowboat out into the middle of the river, and they'd pretend to be fishing. And the woman would take just my mother as a peasant woman and they would go to the market, sit in the marketplace over some vegetables. On this one occasion, uh, we didn't have enough notice to do the usual things, so the kids, the peasant kids and I ran into a barn adjacent to the road, and we went up into the hayloft, as far up as we could get. And we watched the road through cracks and knotholes in the thing. And, of course, we were very quiet. And, uh, I saw seven or eight soldiers, looked like Cossacks, dressed like Cossacks, with sabers drawn, on horseback, and they just sabered everybody who was in the street. I saw them, in one case I saw a man's head cut off and rolling in the street. They just swooped through the road and whoever happened to be in their way they got sabered. They also, later on, they had infantry people with bayonets on their guns, and they would bayonet people in town. I never personally saw the bayonetting, but I did see the calvary and the sabers. And I guess I was about six or seven years old at the time. It

had quite an effect on me. Uh, other incidents occurred, I could hear shooting and I could hear shouting and crying and screaming and things like that, but this was the one thing that I actually witnessed with my own eyes.

PHILLIPS: What was the feeling in the village like at such times? The fear, what was, how was that manifested?

WEISMAN: Well, it was, it was mixed. I guess there were some anti-Semitic people and, uh, Greek Catholic priests who hated the Jews and would actually help the raiding parties by telling them who to kill and where to go and what to do. And, uh, in the case of Jewish homes, what they would do was surround the house and then set it on fire, and then shoot anybody that came out. Uh, in many cases, valuables were buried in different places by different people, and some of the peasants who were aware of where the belongings were buried would more or less inform the raiders where they were for their own self-protection. But those were in a minority and for the most part the peasants were very sympathetic and, uh, hid the Jews and, as a matter of fact, even took their belongings in and hid them in their own places where even the Jews didn't know where the belongings were, but they trusted these peasants. And, uh, in our case that was so with the peasants who lived on our land. So it was all mixed. There was mass hysteria when the information got around.

Everybody scurried to hide somewhere where they thought they couldn't be found. Most of the people would run and hide in the cemetery because they quickly found out that the Cossacks were very superstitious and they wouldn't enter a cemetery. So many people would stay in the cemetery two or three or four days or whatever. The peasants who knew they were there would bring them bread and boiled potatoes and things like that, and they'd stay there till the raiding party felt that they had sucked the town dry and they would leave.

PHILLIPS: These raiding parties, this was, how did this tie in with the Revolution which was happening at the time?

WEISMAN: Well, there were several things happening at the same time. Politically it didn't tie in with the Revolution at all where we, as far as we were concerned, because the Revolution primarily took place in the big cities, in Moscow and Odessa and Kiev and, uh, called Leningrad now, it was Petrograd in those days. Uh, and we didn't feel too much of the impact of the Revolution. But the Revolution was going on and simultaneously there were troops who were still loyal to the czar. And there was a socialist group who didn't like either one of the other two and, uh, it was just turmoil. Depending on the area where you were, the Revolutionists held sway. In some sectors, I'm trying to remember the name of the president they elected, uh,

Torensky, had a group that held forth on our town. They were predominant in our town. And then the rest were the Cossacks who were still loyal to the czar, his personal bodyguard and so forth, was the third group. And these raiders were a fourth group. And they all had very little to do with each other and each one was busy doing their own thing and, uh, pretty much ignored all the others. The place was in a turmoil. There was no diplomatic relations. Russia didn't have a government. Uh, the czar had been deposed and the royal family killed. And Korensky lasted about, oh, I don't know, sixteen months or seventeen months. His was primarily the socialist government. And, uh, then the revolutionaries were taking over gradually more and more land, but again this was mostly in the large cities and the people in the boondocks where we lived didn't see any signs of the Revolution at all.

PHILLIPS: Did your parents ever talk about these events to you?

WEISMAN: Uh, well, they didn't exactly talk about them to me, but they talked about them in conversations with other relatives when they'd get together for a wedding or a bar mitzvah or some other event and I would overhear it. Uh, they didn't much, uh, well, I was a child and they didn't much discuss these things with me, so I gleaned what I could from listening to them talking to each other and to other relatives, primarily.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what they said?

WEISMAN: Well, my parents were primarily socialists and they were friendly to the Korensky Regime and they hated the communists. Uh, they didn't think it would work. and, uh, most of my relatives were in the same, uh, category. They all belonged to the Workmen's Circle in New York and they had their reading groups and their papers, uh, language dailies, the Forward, for instance, the Yiddish paper, and the Movoye Slovo, was the Russian paper.

PHILLIPS: Spell that.

WEISMAN: (he laughs) Well, it was spelled, we used to call it Hoboken Ovo because the Russian letters were like H-O-V-O.
(he laughs) But, uh, the Movoye it was, to spell it out in English I'd say M-O-V-O-Y-E, one word, and S-L-O-V-O would be the second word. "The New Word" is as I understand is what it means.

PHILLIPS: That happened later on. So, okay. So, you, this was happening, as you were a young boy, you were about . . .

WEISMAN: Seven.

PHILLIPS: You were almost, okay. Tell me about school.

WEISMAN: Where, in, in Russia? I didn't go to school. My mother educated me, primarily. And, uh, I could, uh, read and write and do simple arithmetic at a very young age, at the age of five or six, in fact.

PHILLIPS: Was that common that young children would be taught by their parents?

WEISMAN: It was not common, but my mother was very well-educated, and my father, uh, was fairly well-educated. And my relatives, uh, my cousins were also educated at home by a tutor. But I, sometimes I would join the group and, uh, particularly in arithmetic or mathematics. But other than that, reading and writing in Russian was taught to me by my mother, primarily. I have no recollection of going to any formal school of any kind while in Russia.

PHILLIPS: When did you, your parents, decide to leave? Under what circumstances?

WEISMAN: Well, they decided to leave in about, uh, 1918 when the pogroms started and the political upheaval in Russia looked like it was going to get worse, and they decided that the best thing to do would be to leave the country. So we actually left about 1920 and, uh, under the, uh, aegis of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, HIAS. My mother started negotiating with them and my

Aunt Rose, who was our sponsor in this country, had contacted them here and, uh, the family of relatives, both my mother's and father's side had, uh, contributed a fairly substantial amount of money that my Aunt Rose used to, uh, get us out of the country. And the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society at that time recommended that we get out of Russia and get into Roumania and Bucharest. My father had been born in Buchavina in Roumania, and he was actually a Roumanian subject. He had dual citizenship. He was Russian and Roumanian. So when we went to Buchavina, which was his birthplace, we only stayed there for a few days, then we went to Bucharest. And, of course, to get there we had to steal across the border, which I think we did in about November of 1920 because we had to cross the river when it was frozen. There was a group of about ten or twelve of us that went with a guide, two guides, in fact. And, uh, at the designated time we rendezvoused in some farmer's barn near the river, and when it got dark, uh, well, we had to stay in the barn for three days because the guide said the ice wasn't sufficiently hard to cross. So we stayed in the barn eating raw potatoes or whatever else we could get our hands on, uh, bread, until the guide said that the river was sufficiently frozen over so we could cross. And then we waited. When it got very dark, we started across the border to the Roumanian side. When we get to the other side, we found . . .

PHILLIPS: Can you recount the actual journey across the ice?

WEISMAN: The journey across the ice? Well, we all walked, uh, one guide in front and one in back. And, uh, my cousin Daniel was with our group. It was my mother, my father and my cousin Daniel, who was twelve years older than I am. He is still alive, and eighty-eight years old and living in New Jersey. Uh, sometimes we get together and talk about these events for the short time we were together, because he went with a different group once we got to the other side. But, uh, he was leading me by the hand and, uh, it was a good thing he was because I got to a thin part in the ice and I fell through. And he yanked me up, and got me out, and we kept walking. Uh, the first guide walked ahead of the group like a point man, and the second guide stayed behind to watch the laggers or people wandering around, because it was very dark and, uh, we had no lights, couldn't use a lantern or anything. So, uh, it was pretty scary. Then we got to the other side and, uh, we found a group of about twenty people that had already got there from somewhere else, and the guides took us to a cave. Uh, the other side was an encampment, it was a steep, straight-up hill. It was, I'd say, about fifty feet high. And underneath it was the, there was a cave of some sort, and we all sat around, got in the cave and sat there. And, uh, the guides didn't want to go again because they were going back

to the Russian side, and there were some other guys on the Roumanian side supposed to meet us and take us further into Roumania. But, uh, when the Roumanian guides arrived they said that there was a, uh, a troop of soldiers patrolling the borderline, and they had dogs. As a matter of fact, we could hear the hoofbeats of the horsemen when they rode by, and we could hear the dogs howling. And he suggested we stay in the cave for the rest of the day and try to get out the following night. Uh, so we did that. The only problem we had was there was a young couple there with an infant. And the infant cried and the guides were afraid that we would be caught because the cries of the infant would attract the patrol, or the dogs. And, uh, so the mother tried very hard to keep the infant as quiet as she could. She breastfed him most of the time, and that kept him quiet. But the following night the infant either had colic or some other problem, and he was crying incessantly and screaming and everything else and the guides were very nervous about that, and they kept hounding her to keep the baby quiet and finally the baby quieted down and we all left. And while we were leaving she tried to breastfeed the baby and she found that the baby was dead.

PHILLIPS: The little child had just . . .

WEISMAN: Infant.

PHILLIPS: Yeah.

WEISMAN: A few weeks old. And, uh, the mother insisted on carrying the dead child around. She wouldn't let go. And she had obviously gone, her mind was one. And, uh, once we got out of there they separated her and her husband and the dead child from the rest and took them somewhere else. I never saw them or heard of them again. When we got to a shelter in Buchavina, it was a shack with two wooden benches and an earth floor. And, uh, we stayed there until the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society sent a wagon, a horse and wagon, and a driver to take us from Buchavina to Bucharest. Then we stayed in the shelter that was maintained and kept by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. We stayed there for some time because paperwork to get us the passports and visas and money and all the other red tape that we had to go through to be properly documented so we could come to the United States was being taken care of and, uh, we had to wait. So we stayed in Bucharest for a long time, almost a year, until everything came through. And we still had problems because our, what they call Schiffskarten or boarding passes, as it were, for the ship, were in Antwerp, in Belgium. And we had to get from Bucharest to Antwerp the best way we could. Uh, this was about 1921, the latter part of 1921 and while the war had been over for, say, three years, there were still a lot of violent

fighting on the borderline. A lot of the countries were quarreling with each other on where their borders should be, and there was still a lot of military activity along all the borderlines. So at that time, uh, the agent from the HIAS decided that my cousin Daniel would go separately with a group of younger people who could rough it. and he was, uh, I'd say twenty years old at that time, nineteen or twenty. And, uh, my father was to go with a group of men, men my father's age were the most vulnerable. My father, I think, was about thirty-six at the time or thirty-five. And, uh, for some reason or another the patrols and the authorities seemed to pick on men in that age group more so than others. Uh, of course, they also picked on the young people, but the young people roughed it through the countryside on their own and they stayed away from the towns and the cities and the areas where the patrols were. Uh, and they decided that my mother and I should travel separately, because a woman with a small child, nobody paid any attention to. Uh, they felt that that was the easiest way to do it. So that's the way we started on our trip to Antwerp. We went through several countries, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland and then from Switzerland into Belgium. Uh, when we, my mother and I got to Antwerp, it took us about three or four months to make the journey and we did it mostly by rail an, uh, nobody bothered us on the way. The authorities in the, uh, who were checking

documentation in the various countries ignored us. A woman with, a shabby-dressed woman with a small child they could care less about. Uh, we found out my father, we got to Antwerp, but my father didn't, and we didn't know what the problem was. We found out later that he had been caught by a patrol on the, uh, Hungarian border, and he had been jailed. And, uh, while he was in jail he developed this yellow jaundice. Uh, the HIAS found out about it and they sent a man down there who bribed the officials and got my father out of jail and into a hospital.

PHILLIPS: Sorry, where was he in jail, again?

WEISMAN: Somewhere in Hungary. I don't, I'll try, Halmi, I think it was called, H-A-L-M-I. My vague recollection of what it was. And, uh, he got him out and got him treated. He was okay. And then got him to Antwerp and, uh, but then my father and I were both so ill that we couldn't get on the ship that we were scheduled to sail on, and we had to wait for about another six weeks for another ship. And, uh, we sailed through Antwerp on or about January 25, 1922.

PHILLIPS: That's the end of that side of the tape.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

PHILLIPS: This is side two of interview number 404 [DP-30] with, uh, Mr. George C. Weisman. And let's just pick up on, I think we were about to leave, you'd been there about a year, I think, in Budapest, right?

WEISMAN: No, this was Antwerp, in Belgium.

PHILLIPS: Oh, I'm sorry, Antwerp.

WEISMAN: That's right. Uh, well, we hadn't been there that long. We'd been there about two or three months. It took us a year to get from Bucharest to Antwerp, that was the thing. (he laughs) Uh, going across the various borders. And . . .

PHILLIPS: Maybe you could talk a little bit about those difficulties. Did you sometimes find that you were sent back from borders? What was the problem?

WEISMAN: Well, uh, there weren't too many problems with my mother and myself, although my father had been bounced a couple of times. Uh, in most cases, we would go to the railroad station and, uh, we would be met by a Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society agent and if we had to stay over a few days, he would take us to a safe house somewhere in town, and we would stay there two or three days. Well, we had a language problem with the people, but the people who cooperated with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society were

obviously, uh, very well-intentioned and very willing, uh, to help. It was like, I guess like the old underground railroad in the slavery days over here. Uh, we had very few problems, my mother and I, although we did have to live most of the time in the railroad station waiting rooms, eat there and sleep there. But we couldn't afford to become obvious to the authorities, so that we couldn't stay, if we had to wait two or three days in any place an agent would usually meet us and take us to a, some private home where the people knew who we were and what we were doing and, uh, we would stay there for a while.

PHILLIPS: How old were you during this time?

WEISMAN: I was about, uh, almost eight, about eight years old at the time.

PHILLIPS: The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, tell me a little bit about that. They sound like a really wonderful organization.

WEISMAN: Yeah, it was for us. For us they were a lifesaver. Uh, they took care of the, well, their headquarters where all the negotiations with them were conducted by my Aunt Rose. My mother's older sister was our sponsor, uh, out of New York City. And, uh, they had agents and offices in various other countries and locations who would act as intermediaries and messengers and, uh, they were the ones, for instance, to every country we

went into, we had to have the money of that country. And we couldn't go to a bank and, uh, so usually we were met by somebody from HIAS. Some of them were just, uh, private people who helped out. They weren't necessarily employees of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. But, uh, my Aunt Rose would deposit the money with the society in New York City and they would then disburse it and see that we got money all along the route that we took and depending on what country we were going to stay in, if we were just going through a country they didn't bother much, but if we spent any time in that country two or three days, which we did in several countries. Uh, we went through Austria, Germany. Switzerland, we spent quite a bit of time in Switzerland. And we had to have Swiss money. And, uh, they provided us with a place to stay, and gave us enough cash of the country that we were in so that we could buy food and, uh, and, uh, pay for other things. Buy some clothing that we needed and, uh, and that's the way it went till we got to the United States. It was all done at the New York City end. They were also instrumental in getting us all the visas and passport and documentation that we needed to proceed from one country to another. And although my cousin Daniel and my father had been detained in a couple of places and needed help to get out. Uh, my mother and I didn't have any problems hardly at all, even though we didn't speak the language or, uh, so I don't really

remember any serious problems that we had en route other than making connections and not being able to speak the language of the country and, uh, inconvenience of that sort.

PHILLIPS: I take it the staff of the HIAS were all Jewish.

WEISMAN: Yes. I think, I don't know. (he laughs)

PHILLIPS: The people you were staying with, of course, were not necessarily Jewish.

WEISMAN: Not, no.

PHILLIPS: So you were being helped by all sorts of people.

WEISMAN: Yes, that's true. Uh, we were being helped by people who the agents knew were reliable or willing to cooperate or willing to help. And, uh, in most cases the houses that we were sent to were not Jewish, en route to Antwerp.

PHILLIPS: So take us now on your journey from Europe to the United States.

WEISMAN: Well, we boarded a Red Star liner named, I think it was Lapland. We had tickets on the Finland, but we missed that one, and we took the second ship, which I think was called the Lapland. I can't recall right now. But, uh, we went second class. The HIAS recommended that we not go third class or steerage, that we go second class, because, uh, we were all physically worn out

and, uh, their scuttlebutt was that the treatment of immigrants in first and second class was a lot more flexible and tolerant than it was in the other classes. So, uh, we had a second class cabin aboard and, uh, the ship was nice, the food was very good, except apples were a dollar apiece. You had to buy those separately. But the staple foods that we ate for the three meals of the day were fairly substantial, and we ate quite a bit. (he laughs) We hadn't been used to eating that well because from 1918 to 1922, food was in very short supply. As a matter of fact, in Bucharest, most of the women would sell themselves on the street for cheese or bread or ham or whatever they could get. And you had to buy most of your food on the black market at outrageous prices. Fortunately for us, our relatives in the United States had supplied sufficient funds so that we were kept pretty well-funded along the way and we didn't have too many problems except that in some cases food was just not available no matter how much money you had. So by the time we got to Antwerp and the time we boarded the ship we were all in pretty bad shape physically, uh, undernourished and weak and haggard and whatever. But the ship was okay except for the weather. We were crossing the North Atlantic in the end of January and the first week in February. It took us two weeks to cross the ocean. The weather was very bad. Uh, after we got about a day-and-a-half out of Antwerp, from then on, uh, the

weather was bad. We weren't allowed on deck. Spray coated the ship and formed ice over everything and, uh, the ship tossed and pitched and turned. Everybody was seasick. And for some peculiar reason, I was the only one in our group who was not seasick, and I used to eat everybody else's dessert because my parents couldn't even come out of the cabin and supervise me. And I remember the ship was pitching and rolling so badly that I crawled up to the dining salon. You couldn't stand up, or you'd get your head beat against the wall. So I crawled along the floor and up the steps and into the salon. The chairs in the dining salon were anchored to the floor, as was the table. And the chairs were swivel, so you could get in, turn the seat around and, uh, get in, and then face the table again. The stewards were very nice to me. Uh, so that was a little bit of a lark for me, but the rest of it wasn't. My father and mother and practically everybody else was sick almost all the way. Uh, we went to New York by way of Halifax. They had some freight in the hold that was destined for delivery at Halifax. Uh, so we stopped at Halifax to unload, and they chopped the ice off the cables and off the deck and everything else, and then the following day we continued to New York and got to Ellis Island. But it was, I have no recollection of seeing the Statue of Liberty. (he laughs) Although they told me it was there. We got to New York, it was already dark. It was February the 6th.

And, uh, meanwhile, between Halifax and Ellis Island, I found, uh . . .

WEISMAN: What year?

PHILLIPS: 1922, February. We found out that the, uh, I think the customs immigration and two physicians had come aboard ship with the pilot and, uh,m they were busy processing us in first and second class. The people in third class and steerage had to wait until we got to the island before they could be examined and processed. So one of the things that we got from the scuttlebutt that turned out to be true is that our treatment in Second class was much better than the lower classes, and we were processed, physicians had examined us and pretty much just looked down our throats and into our ears and thumped our chests a couple of times, and that was about it. Uh, customs and the immigration people were very nice. Uh, we had our luggage on deck in the salon, the dining salon, and the looked through everything. And, uh, the immigration, uh, man processed all our documents and papers. So we spent very little time on Ellis Island when we got there. We just debarked, presented our papers and our releases and all the other documents we'd accumulated. And they passed us right on through to the waiting room where my Aunt Rose and my Uncle Sam were waiting for us. And they, uh, took charge of us. Of course, none of us spoke

English, but we all spoke Yiddish, so we had to converse in that. And my aunt and uncle didn't speak or understand Russian. Uh, my aunt was my mother's older sister, had been in the United States for some twenty-odd years by that time, and she had forgotten all the Russian she knew so, uh, we all conversed in Yiddish.

PHILLIPS: Where was this actually, where were you, where was this happening?

WEISMAN: In Ellis Island, in New York City.

PHILLIPS: In Ellis Island.

WEISMAN: Yeah, on Ellis Island in the waiting room. After they had processed us through there was a sort of a large assembly room with benches. And they were, the people who were your sponsors would come and pick you up. I think they had to sign some papers for us, too, before we could be released. And they did, and, uh, we were released fairly promptly and my aunt and uncle got a cab for us and took us to Grand Central Station. And they lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut. And, uh, we got on the train and went to Bridgeport. And that was quite an experience for me because I'd never seen a black person before in my life, and I had never seen a banana in my life either. And that was the first day I got a look at both and it was a weird experience

personally for me. We stayed with my aunt and uncle for a few days until we were rested, and then I remained with them while my mother and father went to New York City, went to Brooklyn where some of our relatives had rented a bedroom for them in someone else's apartment. And, uh, other relatives had arranged for jobs for the two of them. So they just lived in a bedroom in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, at 242 South Second Street on the third floor. I have a good memory for numbers. I'm horrible on names. And the, my mother went to work in the Elbee Chocolate Factory in Brooklyn, sweeping the floors and helping out. My father had a job in the, uh, factory that made office partitions and office furniture. And, uh, of course they both worked all day and I stayed with my aunt and uncle in Bridgeport for about a year before I joined my parents. Uh, what happened was that a daughter in the family where my parents were staying left to get married, and that liberated a second bedroom. So, uh, my cousin Daniel and I, uh, my cousin Daniel had been boarding somewhere else, and I was living with my aunt and uncle in Bridgeport. We both came to New York, to Brooklyn, and occupied the other bedroom in the same apartment for a while.

PHILLIPS: So tell me about going to school in the United States.

WEISMAN: Oh, that was quite an experience. My aunt enrolled me in the

public school in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and while my mother and father were still there. And I didn't have any clothes to speak of, so my aunt suggested that we go out and buy me some clothes. But my mother had a little blue velvet Lord Fauntleroy suit that she had carried all the way from Russia, and she insisted that I wear that to go to school in and make a good impression on everybody. Well, of course, we were foreigners, didn't speak the language, didn't understand the customs, and never heard of the word "sissy" before. So my Aunt Rose objected to that, but my mother was a very strong-willed woman and she insisted. So I got dressed in this Lord Fauntleroy suit and went off to school. I no sooner got to school and I was introduced to the teacher, and of course, I didn't speak the language and nobody spoke my language, and it was a kind of a traumatic experience making the adjustment. Uh, but everything seemed to go all right. I was very happy with school. I was very interested, and very anxious to learn. And then recess came out, which I never heard of before, and I got shoved down to the schoolyard with the rest of the kids, and right away there was a circle around me. (he laughs) This weird person from another planet with this sissy suit on. And, uh, a few of the bullies in the circle started to push me around. I didn't know what for. I hadn't done anything. I hadn't bothered anybody, but they kept pushing me and, uh, I didn't know what to

do, so I just got pushed, that's all. Take a step back, and take a step back. And finally one of the bigger boys, a bully, came over with a piece of wood that he placed on my shoulder, he balanced it on my shoulder. I didn't know what it was for. And then he would knocked it off and push me. Then he would pick it up again and put it on my shoulder and then knock it off and punch me, you know. And this went on for a couple of minutes, and I was getting a little perturbed at this. (he laughs) So about the fifth time he did that I picked up the stick of wood and started to hit him with it. I chased him all over the yard, and the other kids were yelling and laughing and yelling and everything else. It was a chip on my shoulder and I was supposed to fight him with my fists, you know, I wasn't supposed to hit him with it. But I didn't know at the time. But as time went on I made a few friends in class, particularly kids who lived in my neighborhood and, uh, would come up to the house and play with me. And then we would walk to school together. And eventually I, uh, began to be accepted by the others and learned enough English to navigate reasonably well and, uh, after that I enjoyed myself. It was fine.

PHILLIPS: What, uh, take us up to the Depression. Perhaps, before you do that, tell me about what your parents were doing.

WEISMAN: Well, my parents were both working but, uh, what happened after

that was that the work began to peter out, and the work they were doing was very hard. They had not been used to doing physical work in their lives. They were mostly people who were literate and did more advanced type of work requiring the brain rather than the brawn. And, uh, they got together, one of the meetings we had with some of the relatives, and some of the relatives had grocery stores. And they suggested to my mother that she buy a store. Now, they had saved some money, about $500, I guess. And, uh, they scrounged around and found a grocery store in Brooklyn, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, at 557 Stone Avenue. And, uh, it turned out that my parents bought the store and quit their jobs and we left the apartment in Williamsburg and, uh, went to live. There were three rooms behind the grocery store for living quarters. And we moved over there. Of course, at the time we moved there, what I didn't realize, was that I was getting into an area where Murder Incorporated was operating and I would wind up going to school with most of the members of that infamous organization. But at the time the change was very welcome. Food was never a problem, with the grocery store. And I enrolled in the local schools, with the grocery store. And I enrolled in the local schools, P.S. 109. And, uh, life was a little easier, even though business wasn't very good. And we lived there till I would say, from about 1929 to 1937, uh, in the store. Of

course, the Depression came along in about '31 and, uh, a lot of the people lost their jobs or were working part-time. And, uh, my mother was providing them with food on a sort of a charge account that never really got paid, or partially paid. Uh, until she went broke, which was in 1937. But we also had some relatives in the grocery business in Niagara Falls, New York. And they communicated with my mother, who was the boss in the family, if you haven't deduced by now. Uh, and told her that the Depression was not quite as severe in the smaller cities that are in the upstate places, as it was in a Metropolis like New York or Buffalo or Albany. And, uh, that they had a location that they thought would be a pretty good venture for her. Uh, so she sold all the stock we had and, uh, whatever fixtures. And, uh, took the money and, uh, they all left for Niagara Falls. I stayed in New York with my cousin Daniel because I was, 1931 I was in NYU in New York. No, it was 1931 that they went to Niagara Falls. I'm sorry. Not 1937. 1931 they left, uh, Brownsville and went to Niagara Falls and bought the store. Uh, when I was a freshman at NYU my tuition had been paid and the books had been paid for and, uh, so I stayed behind. I didn't have any place to live, so I lived in Washington Square Park. I slept on the benches and did my homework outside. In bad weather I would sneak into somebody's doorway and stay over there. After . . .

PHILLIPS: Where was your mother at this point?

WEISMAN: My mother was in Niagara Falls.

PHILLIPS: So you were by yourself.

WEISMAN: I was still in New York, by myself.

PHILLIPS: How old were you?

WEISMAN: Eighteen.

PHILLIPS: So what would your mother have thought about you staying in Washington Square Park?

WEISMAN: She didn't know. I didn't tell her where I was. She thought I was living with my cousin Daniel, but my cousin Daniel had two small children and lived in Canarsie, which was a good ways away from the school and, uh, I only had the money that I had left over to live on. I averaged fifteen cents a day. And it cost a nickel to go to Daniel's place, and another nickel to come back, and that was two-thirds of my daily fund. So I didn't go there except on weekends. And when I did go there I used to sneak through the subway. Wait for a train and just before the door closed I'd scoot underneath the turnstile without putting a nickel in, get into the train and go to Canarsie and stay with Daniel over Saturday and Sunday. Then I'd do the same thing to

get back to school again. Uh, so I did that for a good part of my freshman year. Uh, I used to go to Greenwich Village, which was close by Washington Square and, uh, there was a vendor, an old Italian vendor there, who used to sell hot dogs about a foot long, and you could put sauerkraut and mustard and everything on them for a nickel. So I used to eat one hot dog for breakfast, one for lunch and one for dinner, and I lived on hot dogs for something like six months, except when I went to my cousin's and ate over there. However, when the weather got bad in Washington Square Park, I talked to a counselor, a housing counselor at NYU. And he gave me a letter of introduction to the caretaker of the Judson Memorial Church, which was right on the edge of a park. And I took the letter there and talked to the gentleman who was in charge of the church property and, uh, we made a deal that I could sleep in the gym in the basement of the church on one of the exercise mats if I would clean up the gym every night. So I used to go nights and clean up the gym, sweep the floors, hang up all the equipment in its proper place, and then I'd spend the night sleeping on an exercise mat, and go to school in the morning. So, uh, the last four months of my six month sojourn, I at least had some housing. But, uh, before the freshman year was over I collapsed and, uh, the doctor examined me and said that I was suffering from malnutrition and, uh, exhaustion and suggested I go back to my parents in Niagara

Falls, so that's what I did. That was 1931.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about the, some of the social activities that your parents were engaged with their friends.

WEISMAN: Well, they mostly, the store was very confining and they mostly stayed in the store. Most of the activities were meetings with relatives and friends on usually a Saturday when they had get-togethers, which were primarily funerals, bar mitzvahs, and weddings and graduations. And, uh, we had a lot of family on both my mother's and father's sides. Some of them were fairly well-to-do, and we used to go to their houses and socialize, mostly. Eating, drinking and talking, a little dancing. They had victrolas. I got the job of winding the victrola.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

WEISMAN: The reason I remember all of this is I'm in the process of writing an autobiography.

PHILLIPS: This is tape, this is Mr. Weisman, tape number two of two. It's interview number 404 [DP-30]. Uh, tape number two of two. So let's pick up on what you were saying.

WEISMAN: Well, we, when we moved to Brownsville, I didn't realize what sort of an area it was, and it was pretty much of a ghetto for

immigrants and the working poor, except for the few professionals who were there like the pharmacist and the doctors and such. And, uh, it was a rough neighborhood and, uh, there were street gangs in it. The pressure on the kids that went to school was to join in the activities of the street gangs. And it was a pretty difficult thing to fight because the pressures were so great. Uh, but for the most part I stayed out of trouble. I was very much interested in schoolwork doing, I was highly motivated and doing very well in school and, uh, I started a school paper in the junior high school and, uh, I started a school paper in the junior high school that I was in and became the editor of the paper. And later on in high school I was the sports editor for the high school magazine that came out once a month. And, uh, I stayed out of the way. I picked friends who were of the same persuasion as I was about the gangs and other things. And, uh, we stuck together pretty much and, uh, planned our activities in areas where we would not be subject to gang pressure. So just Prospect Park, or Central Park, we'd go to concerts and museums and, uh, play cards in each others homes for toothpicks. Uh, we didn't have any money. Uh, and we stayed out of trouble for most of the time. By the time the pressure was really great I was already eighteen years old and I had left the area. So I never did get involved with the gangs, but there were several experiences I had. Public

school and high school, most of the gangster kids were afraid of their mothers primarily. And they used to go to school, and they were in several of my classes. Abe Rellis of Murder Incorporated was in my English class in high school. Uh, he came to an untimely end one day when he was going to be a government witness. But by and large I avoided those people. (a telephone rings)

PHILLIPS: Okay.

WEISMAN: Okay? So I avoided the people and their activities. They wanted to recruit me when I was sixteen years old to go to Atlantic City and collect protection money from the news vendors on the boardwalk. And, uh, there were a group of two or three boys, and we were supposed to harass the vendors if they didn't pay protection money. Set the papers on fire, uh, maybe beat them up, or scatter the newspapers or the magazines all over the boardwalk, and things of that nature. And they were going to pay us a hundred dollars apiece to do that for a two-week stint in Atlantic City. And, uh, I didn't go. (he laughs) I disappeared at the time, and then I had to stay out of sight because the people who wanted me to go wanted to know why I wasn't available. So it was touch and go but, uh, I had my nose broken several times and physical encounters, not of my choosing. But other than that, I survived. And when I was

eighteen years old, uh, I left Niagara Falls. Uh, I left for Niagara falls and, uh, I had met my wife-to-be in Brooklyn, when she was ten years old and I was fifteen, and I was reluctant to leave because by the time she was sixteen we were sort of engaged. And I wanted to get back to New York City, which I eventually did, and we were eventually married. And we're celebrating our 52nd anniversary next month, but that's another story. (he laughs) Anyhow, I got away from the gangsters and I got up to Niagara Falls and didn't have a job. Uh, but my cousin Eddie (?) was working as a cab driver. And he said that they had a vacancy in the company, and if I wanted to get a job driving a taxi, he could get me an interview. Uh, so I went for the interview, and I got the job, and I started to, uh, drive a cab. The Depression was still on, wages were low. I averaged about eight to ten dollars a week including tips. But I was living at home, and that was no problem for me, and it was a very interesting experience, particularly when, I worked at nights because I was the lowest man on the totem pole, so, uh, we worked from midnight to, from 8:00 PM to 8:00 AM, a twelve-hour stint. And Monday, Wednesday and Friday I only worked till 2:00 AM and I got to go home early. Well, one of my interesting experiences was that one of the cab stations was in the red light district and, uh, during the night business was slow and the weather was bad in the cab, and they used to invite me in

and I'd sit around the reception room and talk to the girls. I was very interested in their experiences, and how they got to be where they were and why, and why they were doing it, and so forth. And I had intended to write a book about it someday, but I never did. Uh, I also believed that, uh, I ought to be pure for the sake of my wife who was a virgin also, so I had refrained from any sexual activity up to this point and, uh, some of my cabdriver friends thought this was something that was not to be tolerated, so one day they dragged me into this house of prostitution and tried to undress me. Fortunately, they were all going in there to begin with, and they had given me all the money to hold because sometimes the girls would make the money disappear while they were undressing me and they trusted me. And I had the money, and while they got me half undressed I dashed out to a window and opened it and held the money out over an eight-inch, eight foot deep snow drift and told them, "If you come anywhere near me all this money," which was mostly in coins, "goes into the snowdrift." So they, uh, stopped. I got dressed again. (he laughs) I got out of there fast and never went back. But that was an interesting experience. Another interesting experience I had was a man came into the cab office and said he wanted a cab drive to go with him to Niagara Falls, Ontario, which was on the Canadian side, and bring home a friend of his who was drunk, and he would pay me five dollars, which

was about a half a week's pay. So I agreed to go. We went in the man's car because he wanted me to bring the other person's car, his friend's car, back to Niagara Falls, New York. There was prohibition in the United States, but none in Canada, so all the Americans went over to the Canadian side to drink, which was quite common activity in those days. And, uh, so we went to the Fox Head Inn in Niagara Falls, Ontario where his friend was, and his friend looked like he was three sheets to the wind. And he took his friend in his car, and gave me the keys to the friend's car, which was a Cadillac limousine, and asked me to drive the other car back to the garage, and the cab company's garage, and leave it there. I agreed to do that. He took his friend, and I took the Cadillac and I drove it to the garage. And, uh, that was that. About two weeks later the same man came and gave me the same proposition to do the same thing. And, uh, I agreed again. And, uh, I did the same thing again as I had done two weeks previously, brought the car into the garage. The cab dispatcher thought it was a big joke, and I was wondering what the humor of the situation was. This was about two o'clock in the morning. And he said, "Well, come with me and I'll show you." So we went back into the garage and, uh, he opened the Cadillac, which was a large limousine with leather upholstery and little buttons, squares about ten inch by ten inch squares, and he removed one of the buttons and the lip flapped loose and

the roof of the Cadillac was full of half-pint bottles of whiskey, flat bottles of whiskey. I had been running whiskey across the border in violation of the Volstead Act and didn't even know it. So the third time the man came and asked me to do that, I really laced into him.. I told him that was a hell of a thing to do because you could have gotten me in a Federal prison for doing something like that. And he says, "Oh, don't worry about it." He says, "Everybody's been paid off. Everybody knows what's going on. You're not being victimized." I told him I'll, in the future he'd have to get somebody else, I wasn't going to do it any more. I never did.

PHILLIPS: What did you finally finish up doing as a career?

WEISMAN: Well, as a career, uh, I was married and had a child in Niagara Falls and, uh, my wife's parents and her three sisters had moved to Los Angeles and, uh, I had decided to go back to school and get my degree. I left NYU in 1931 and, uh, I had switched into various different technical jobs, and I found that I had some engineering skills that I had not been aware of before. And, uh, so I decided to go back to school and get a degree, but I had a problem. My father had died, and my mother had sold the store and was living with us. I had a three-year-old daughter and I had to work. So I wanted to go to Cornell and try to enroll over there, but that was a hundred and sixty-five miles

away and I couldn't commute. And I got an announcement that the University of Buffalo was starting an engineering school, but it was day school only. I had planned on going to night school, but that would have taken about eight or ten years. So I was very happy to hear about it, and I ran down to the University of Buffalo and enrolled. And, uh, they were a little leery of taking me on because by that time I was thirty-two years old and had a family and a full time job, and I intended to work at the job full time while going to school full time, and they figured that would be too much of a load. However, I pleaded with them and harangued them and everything else, and the Dean of Engineering, who had been the Assistant Dean at the University of Michigan, had come over to the University of Buffalo to take over the engineering school. Uh, he was very sympathetic. So they agreed to take me on as a freshman on probation. And if I got a C average or better for my freshman year I could stay. If not, I would get thrown out. So I agreed, and I enrolled. In September 1944 I started, thirteen years after my previous college experience. I went back to the University of Buffalo and started in engineering school. I worked from midnight to eight in the morning at the chemical plant in Niagara Falls where I was employed. I got the union to agree that I didn't have to work the day shift because I had to go to school in the daytime, and that was included in the union contract. I didn't

have to work the day shift. Uh, so I worked from midnight to eight in the morning and then drove to Buffalo twenty-five miles to the campus, and went to classes from eight thirty to about three thirty, then went home and ate and did some homework and slept about three hours and then went back to work again. And I did this for four-and-a-half years, averaging about three to three-and-a-half hours sleep a day, following the same routine, good weather or bad. And finally in January of 1949 I received a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering. I was a mess physically. (he laughs) Blood pressure was down to ninety over something, I can't remember what. But it was a great satisfaction to know that I could do it. I didn't think I could. I personally didn't think I could. And about halfway through I was ready to quit, but I was too stubborn to quit. And my wife, my mother kept telling me, "I told you so. You can't make it, it's too much." So to spite the both of them, I got through and I got my degree. And after that I, of course, I'd had about thirteen years of industrial experience in different phases of mechanical engineering in chemical plants, mostly. I worked at Owen Mathison Chemical Plant for ten years, uh, in the Research Department, and also as a stationary engineer in the boiler room. And, uh, so I'd had a great deal of practical experience, but I didn't have the theoretical experience, and I found out that without the degree people, I

trained for jobs above me, were passed over my head, and, uh, put on salary, and that was my motivation for getting a degree. And also the fact that that's what I really wanted to do in life and, uh, so that's what I did. And I came to Los Angeles in 1949. Jobs were scarce. A friend of mine got me a job with a survey crew with a construction outfit that was building houses in Westchester. And from there I went to work for an insurance company for about three years as a Loss Control Prevention Engineer. And while I was doing that I took a Civil Service examination for the State of California in the Industrial Safety Division. And, uh, I passed that and was number one on the list, and I was hired by them in, uh, 1952 and, uh, was later promoted to Senior Engineer and Nuclear Engineering Specialist and retired in October of 1980. I also became very active in the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and served as an officer in the Los Angeles chapter, which was the second largest in the nation, for many years, and left as Chairman of the section. I also helped to found a Pressure Vessel and Piping Division of the A.S.M.E here. And I still attend meetings and I am active in raising funds for engineering student scholarships.

PHILLIPS: Okay. I think that's probably as much as we need. Let's wrap up interview number 404 [DP-30] with George C. Weisman. It's about two o'clock. Thank you.