

EI-1045

LEO (NACHMAN [PH] LIEBER KUPFERBERG) COOPER

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LEVINE: Today is March 14th, 1999 and I'm here in Fort Myers, Florida with Mr. Leo Cooper, who came from Russia at nine and a half years of age in 1922, May 25th, to be precise. And [clears throat] this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if you would start out, please, by repeating some of the information. The name you were born with.

COOPER: Lieber—Nachman—oh, sh—Nachman Lieber Cooper. Nachman came first. But I didn't know that till years af—till after I came here.

LEVINE: You thought Lieber came first?

COOPER: Pardon?

LEVINE: You thought Lieber came first? It was—

COOPER: I didn't know anything about Nachman till I saw it on my father's citizenship papers.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Okay, so it was Nachman Lieber Kupfberg.

COOPER: Kupferberg.

LEVINE: Kupferberg. Okay. And—and where in Russia were you born?

COOPER: Rotnov [PH].

LEVINE: Rotnov.

COOPER: It's about—I think at the—towards the east—the western part of Russia, close towards the Polish border.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. And did you stay in Rotnov until you left Russia?

COOPER: No. We were—travel around different parts of the country, different parts of the little town. Maloritta [PH]. I don't know where that is anymore. But we stayed also in the—in the village, in a dorf [PH]. You know what a dorf is?

LEVINE: Why don't you say it for the tape?

COOPER: A dorf is a—is a little town surrounded by fields, which are usually owned by the czar or his entourage. And we lived in a—in a log cabin type with a thatched roof on it with a dirt floor with an oven and a pepperchuck [PH]. We used to call it a [unclear] and a pepperchuck.

LEVINE: What's a pepperchuck?

COOPER: A pepperchuck. Well, as you came in the house, as I recall it, you faced the—the oven. You faced the oven. That's where you baked your bread and did your Shabbos [PH] cooking and all that thing. And towards the back of the house, connected to the back of the oven, was a platform, which had—was a big platform, which—on—on top. Below that was the [unclear] where you cooked small things, heated small things. And on top was—that got hot—warm. So in the cold weather you came up there to lay—lay down there—lay down on there to dry out or warm up. That's what's called a pepperchuck.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: [several words unclear] that's [unclear] in pepperchuck [several words unclear] pepperchuck. [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay. So you were—you were traveling around to—

COOPER: Yeah. Well, our house—during the war, our house was burned down a couple of times. And we got in one place and also during the war, the Germans, when they came into the area, made our house the communications headquarters. And they strung telephone wires and in—and insulators. As a matter of fact, just this thing right here, one Friday night I picked up a broken insulator, white insulator. And I threw the thing and the thing cut me. So they u—they used vodka to—instead of alcohol [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: —to prevent the infection.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when the soldiers moved into your house, were—you left?

COOPER: No, we was there.

LEVINE: You were there the whole t—

COOPER: They—they were very fine people. I'll tell you about that a little later. [unclear] came to the country when I learned about the Germans of that time.

LEVINE: Okay.

COOPER: Which is not—a different kind of breed of cat altogether than what they were in—during World War II.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So—so you remember all that when they moved into your—

COOPER: Quite clearly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Not because somebody told me but because I do remember.

LEVINE: Yeah, is there anything else you could say about that, when the soldiers were actually occupying—

COOPER: Yes, they were—

LEVINE: —your house?

COOPER: They—they were very gen—gen—genteel, gentle people. They weren't—they weren't—they weren't imposing on any of us. They

went—they weren't oppressive in any shape or form. They used that, our house, as a communication center to wherever it was, I don't know. They stay there a few months, I think, until almost that the war was over.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: After the—before the war ended, the—my mother—you've heard of—you've—have you heard of Bellahavitzes [PH]?

LEVINE: [unclear]

COOPER: And Cossacks?

LEVINE: Well, yeah.

COOPER: You've here of them?

LEVINE: But tell everything about your personal experience with them.

COOPER: Well, this is part—my personal experience.

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: Well, the Germans were fine. When I came to this country—I'll tell you about that later.

LEVINE: Yes.

COOPER: When I—when I read about—starting going to school, learned about that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: But the—the Bellahavitzes were—were Polish rogue soldiers, different than the Cossacks. The Cossacks were Russian. The Bellahavitzes were Polish, primarily. They came into a town. They—they—they went with the AI—so-called Allied armies that tried—you know, fought against Germany. When they came in, they—they were—they were total anti-Semitic. They'd round up people in our town and they—they—some of them, they strung up. I know one family, we h—we happened to be there at the time. They rounded us up and put us out in—in the woods and field there and made some of the people dig their graves—

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: —before they shot ‘em. And one family, the mother—they had two children. Yeah, two children. And the—when one of the soldiers asked them, “How many children do you have?” And they only said, “One.” It happened to be the one that was there with them. But they forgot the—about the other one. And so they—the other one was captured and was killed. These—these were saved, I think, to ransom and ransomed them out. It was a bloody mess altogether. They burned the town down and they were—they were very miserable. At one time, the only way my mother could escape—escape—escape recognition as a Jew is she worked with the peasant women in the field. We were in a field planting potatoes. And when a rogue soldier came by, a Bellahavitz came by, a tag—ragtag army. And he saw the women in the field. Some [unclear] saw my mother and they started chasing her on his horse. And she ran and I chased after him and threw stones at him but, of course, couldn’t do anything about it. Finally, he went to the [unclear]. He—and he took off. He—he slapped my mother on the neck with a sword. And she grabbed it; she cut her finger here and got scars on her neck.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: So we have evidence of that effect.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: That was part of the—part of the European experience. We also had to hide. I remember one time we hid in the—in the cemetery and dur—during the night. Well, of course, can’t remember all the details. Another time during the war, we were home, a bunch of us. Not just Jews, but everybody were loaded on trucks and they took us somewhere—I don’t know where—during the night. I don’t know where we went and we fin—finally came back. So that’s about the youth. So the overall experience of—of the wartime.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Have you had repercussions from that?

COOPER: You mean my—mentally?

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: No, huh-uh. I want to mention one other thing. During 19—1917, we were there when the—when the Bolsheviks came in. And the Russian Army was defeated and we saw the soldiers straggling in in rags, wounded, bloody and everything else, on trucks and on foot. They came through our town. And that was when the—that’s when the Russian czar was—was incapacitated, and his family were killed during that time in 1917.

LEVINE: 19—right.

COOPER: And we didn't—I wasn't involved—didn't see anything about that but I saw the sol—rag—those soldiers coming in. So they were ripe for—for communism to take over, for communism to take over, Lenin, Trotsky and all and his gang. And Stalin came in on the thing too. So that's—those are things that—that I remember. That's how the thing—[clears throat]—that's the thing when I see the Russian film about Russia. That's what I remem—recall that.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. So did—what happened after the war? Do you remember the years after the war was over—

COOPER: Well, we came here—

LEVINE: —and before you left?

COOPER: The war ended in 1918.

LEVINE: Right.

COOPER: Oh, we—we traveled around but s—stayed on the dorf. We—we stayed in Maloritta, other town. We—that's about—my mother tried to—well, I—I might point this out. I was raised by three women, my mother, my aunt and my grandmother. My grandmother and my aunt were on my father's side. My mother and I were just—no one on her side at all.

LEVINE: You were an only child?

COOPER: I was—I was—there were twin—I was twins.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: My—my—my—he was older, about a half hour, they tell me, th—than I was. But when we were riding on top of the—on top of the wagon, the refugees, the—the—the—the wagon was being pulled by—by a ox—by ox or cow combination. And I remember vaguely we were riding on top of the thing. And I'd heard later that he died of cholera.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: So th—

LEVINE: At what age?

COOPER: They told—they expected me to go but I fooled 'em. I con—I continued after my brother went.

LEVINE: You mean you had cholera?

COOPER: I had cholera. My brother had cholera. But I survived; my brother didn't.

LEVINE: Wow.

COOPER: And all—that's all I remember—remember about that [unclear].

LEVINE: How old were you then?

COOPER: About two and a half years, I was told.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. So you were raised by three women, essentially.

COOPER: Three women, my mother, my aunt and my grandmother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how—

COOPER: That's—

LEVINE: Do you remem—t—tell me about your grandmother. What do you remember about her?

COOPER: Well, she was—all three women are very strong women. My father left—I might mention this to you. Might be of—a concern to you. I didn't know my father until I came here.

LEVINE: Because he had already come before—

COOPER: He—he—I was—I was told I was three months old when he came to America. I didn't see him till I came here.

LEVINE: What was his name?

COOPER: His name was Jacob. Jacob Kupferberg at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And—and your grandmother?

COOPER: Her name was, of course, Kupferberg.

LEVINE: Kupferberg. And—

COOPER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: So my aunt, she was—she was married [clears throat] to a man by the name of Fishman [PH]. And he came to the United States first. Then she came a little bit later before we did. She left—she left for [unclear] be—before I did and she went through—came through Canada. And they settled in Akron, Ohio.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: So through my college period, I lived with them in 1936 to '41.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: So [coughs]—

LEVINE: What exper—what do you remember about your grandmother when you were in Russia?

COOPER: Well, she was a very domineering person. She—she—my aunt—she lived with my aunt and my uncle. Her name was Fishman. It's—it—it—Isluk [PH] Fishman, Hannah Fishman and my grandmother's name was—I forgot. I can't think of my mother—well—her mother's name right now. But she died while I was living in Akron with them.

LEVINE: Oh, sh—

COOPER: I think she was about 65 years old at the time.

LEVINE: So they all came to America.

COOPER: Yeah, we all came to—my—my aunt came before I—we did. But my grandmother and my mother and I came together—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: —in 1922.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So do you remember any experiences with your grandmother, your—while you were in Russia that—

COOPER: In Russia, no. I don't—

LEVINE: —kind of give you a—

COOPER: —remember much about that.

LEVINE: How about your aunt?

COOPER: My aunt was the same situation. I—I was more or less involved with my mother more than them.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. And how about your mother? How do you remember her, as a little boy, nine years old or less—

COOPER: Well, she was very, very independent. As a matter of fact, she kept the family together and provided the—the living for us.

LEVINE: How did she provide the living?

COOPER: Well, she did some sewing. I don't know. We—I don't know how—how it worked but I think we got some help from—from the United States. That's when we heard from the—from the refugee packages.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: I remember we got some packages from—from the United States [clears throat] during the war, I think, or after the war, that had Carnation milk in it. I remember this thing about—I remember drinking that and remember how good it was to—can still taste it, sweet and heavy, like sweet, clean.

LEVINE: Huh.

COOPER: And I'll—when I see—when I see Carnation I always think of that, for some reason. There's a relationship there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So you traveled around with—with the three of them?

COOPER: Uh-hmm, yeah. Moved from here to there. I didn't—I didn't remember any details about that. All I know that we were different places. Sometime, we were in town. We were in—in a—in a shtetl.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: You've heard of that term?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: No doubt. I remember we were living in the house there, the—the—the—the—most streets, they were all mud. And the s—some sidewalks were all wooden sidewalks. And we had the—the horses traveled the—you've seen the wagons?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: Where they—for the horses and have the big things on their—to car—to drag—to pull the wagons?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: We had that. And we had a—we had a cow. We live in—in the dorf. We had a cow and we used to go out—we used to—used to go out in the field and—and harvest—help harvest the wheat. At that time, used a sickle, not the scythe but a sickle. The scythe used—

LEVINE: What's the difference between the scythe and the sickle?

COOPER: The scythe is a big, long thing about this long. The blade is this long.

LEVINE: About two feet?

COOPER: About two, three feet.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: And it had a long handle on it with a curved handle, which you hel—held like this and you swung this way to the left, from left to right—ri—depends whether you're left-handed or right-handed.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

COOPER: And sickles used—are small. You've see—seen the—the emblem of the communist party?

LEVINE: Oh, yes.

COOPER: That's a sickle—

LEVINE: Yes, yes. Right.

COOPER: —and a hammer.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: It's to cut small stuff.

LEVINE: So—

COOPER: So we had—we—we had a cow and we kept her in a barn, a little shed. And we had straw there and we—we—wood—we had wood piled up for the—for the oven. And one time, I—I would pretend I was going to smoke. So I smoked a ci—so I lit a straw and held a match and the thing—so I burned my fingers so I dropped it. And the [chuckles] straw caught fire and the—and the neighbors came around with buckets—bucket brigade and pulled that thing out. [chuckles] My mother told me later they—they were going to throw me in the fire. [laughs] They were so mad about it. Anyhow, we saved the place.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

COOPER: I remember that sort of, little incident like that.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Okay. So you were traveling around. Now, at some point, did you get communication from your father?

COOPER: Oh, yeah, from time to time. Well, that was an interesting point. My father—my father came here in 1912. I think about 1917, '18, after the war, [clears throat] he wanted us to come. But my grandmother didn't want to come. She wanted to stay where she was. You know how older people are attached to a certain area? So that's what kept us from—from—from leaving, my mother and I. But my aunt went. She went to—I don't know. She came, I think, a couple years before we did to the United States.

LEVINE: Now, how did—how—what were the circumstances under which she came? D—she—

COOPER: I don't know, but—

LEVINE: She and your uncle came together?

COOPER: No, my uncle was here already.

LEVINE: Oh, so he sent for—

COOPER: She came—yeah, sent for her.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: My father sent—sent for us too but we—we didn't—we didn't come until—1922, we finally did come. And that's another story.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, do you know why it was in 1922 you did decide to come?

COOPER: [sighs] Well, it was after the war. Things were getting kind of rough there and so Grandmother finally decided—she was getting older. She wanted to see her son, I guess. So we finally came. He sent us the money and we came. We—we decided to come and here—we got our passports and here we are.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So once you decided to come, then what happened? I mean, did you—

COOPER: Well, we prepared. We—we got rid of some of the stuff and packed a bunch of stuff in the—remember the wicker baskets?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: They used to—Ellis Island was full of them, that time. Big—big trunks—wicker—wicker trunks. And so we packed everything in there.

LEVINE: Can you remember anything that your mother took, or maybe even you took as a little—

COOPER: Cook? Oh, she used to cook [unclear]. You're talking about cooking?

LEVINE: Oh, well, that too. I was s—I was saying what you packed.

COOPER: Oh.

LEVINE: What she took with her.

COOPER: Oh, she packed her shawl. We p—packed our bedding and per—personal clothing, whatever we had. And not—you couldn't take very much.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: But we were able to come [unclear]. You want me to tell you about that now, I can.

LEVINE: Okay.

COOPER: We got our passports. We got everything ready to go. And so we boarded a train in—in Rotnov, I think, at that time. We went then by

train. We went to Warsaw. We stayed there overnight. I think we—my mother knew some people there. So we went in [unclear] one of their apartments. I remember the courtyard, the—the—in Warsaw. The buildings surrounded a courtyard. And you had gates, open arches on—on either end.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And that's how we went—that's how you went in. Inside was a brick—brick courtyard. I remember that. I remember being on the—on the thing of the third floor. And we visited some friends there and she—she served tea. And somehow, I got a hold of the cup or the kettle, whatever it was, and I spilled it. And I burned—burned myself. I think I've got a—it's on this leg here. It's probably all gone. I—right here.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: [unclear] h—hot water—boiling water spilled on me.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: So that was the thing I remember there. From there, we went to—to Berlin. We stayed there overnight. I vaguely remember the streets nice and—nice and clean. I got my first ice cream sandwich there.

LEVINE: How was that?

COOPER: Was—the street vendor. We had a—10 pfennigs [PH], I think it was, that time. Little dime-sized coin with a hole in it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: And so we got my first ice cream cone—ice cream there. From Warsaw, we traveled to Cherbourg, France. We stayed there, I think, several days till finally our sh—ship came in. And that's where I first saw my first colored person in Cherbourg, France.

LEVINE: And what was your response or reaction?

COOPER: I couldn't quite figure out what he was. I thought—I related him to the—the—used to have monkeys on a string. Then they used—they were dressed about the same way. I guess they were servants, whatever they were at the time. So that was all I remember about that. And we—we boarded the ship in the—in late afternoon. And—

LEVINE: And tell about the ship that you boarded.

COOPER: The—the Majestic. I think it was the maiden voyage of the White Star liner. And we were fortunate enough to get in third class, not—not steerage but third class. After you tol—tell me—I can tell you about that if you want to.

LEVINE: Yes, go ahead.

COOPER: My—we both—we had bunks. We had a private bath, believe it or not.

LEVINE: Wow.

COOPER: And we had two bunks, one on top of the other. I took the top bunk. We had a little ladder we climbed. My mother used the lower bunk. My—my grandmother had another room or—I don't think she was with us. She may have been; I'm not sure. But anyhow, being a kid, I—I roamed around the ship. I met the one, the—one—another kid. And we roamed a little. We went to the engine room. We used to play with the—with the ent—ventilators. They used to draw air in, used to throw handkerchiefs on the ventilator. And one—we were—went over—went up to second class category there. And they chased us down. We c—we c—ran down. [chuckles] We threw balls around, just played around a little bit. We went down to the engine room. They threw us out of that. We were just nosing—nosing all over the place.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: That was—that's what—that was the nice part of the trip.

LEVINE: Okay. So it sounds like you were—you were on an adventure in your mind.

COOPER: That's exactly right.

LEVINE: In a nine-year-old's mind.

COOPER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Yeah, we were—we were learning—learning the world, so to speak.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How would you describe yourself, as a nine year old, coming here?

COOPER: Oh, I was a frisky little kid.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: I was—I—I used to envy kid that have bikes. I never had a bicycle. To this day, never had a bicycle. [laughs] And I u—I used to play the—the—you may have seen that or—about playing with hoops on the street.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: With a stick?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: Then we got through with that, used to go by a picket fence and rub the sticks against the picket—made a noise. And we used to run around.

LEVINE: This was—this was when you were in—

COOPER: When—this was in Europe, yeah.

LEVINE: You—traveling around and—

COOPER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: That's right. But that's—that's about—I—I enjoyed our trip. We came—we arrived in the—it took five and a half days. We were at sea. A—totally uneventful. We came in the New York harbor. I—I don't remember seeing the Statue of Liberty because it arrived in the night. And we stayed overnight. The following morning, we boarded the—we boarded the—the transport from the ship to the harbor to—to enter at Ellis Island. We all marched in with our bags in our packs to the Great—the Great Hall where—where they interviewed us, stamped us. And they gave us our blankets. I went with my mother, a two-tier metal cot, the kind we used to use in the—in the military. They still—I guess they still use 'em. And I went to have—they gave us each—gave us two blankets, one to cover and one to sleep on with a pillow.

LEVINE: Do you know why you were detained and needed to stay there?

COOPER: I think it was a matter of somebody was supposed to meet—met—met us there and never showed up. We finally—my mother contact the HIAS, the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: You've heard of them, I imagine.

LEVINE: Yes.

COOPER: So through them, I contacted my father and he sent us more money, I think, to be able to—to get enough money to—to—we had to have a certain amount of money to be able to—to—to go out—to go on. So that's—we stayed there about eight days.

LEVINE: Now, had—had your father become a citizen in this par—

COOPER: Oh, yes. He was a citizen.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Yes, in the meantime. I remember standing—looking at the—the rivets of the—of the fence, looking at the harbor, watching the ships come in sev—for several days. That was part of the—that was a part, the adventure. We used to eat in the, you know, big mess halls.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that?

COOPER: Yes, I remember we had our first mo—I saw my first movie there. It was a western.

LEVINE: Really?

COOPER: And I didn't—I met—I don't remember any—playing with any of the kids around there but I think we roamed the—I roamed the place, always with adventures, looking for things to do, finding out new things. And so then on—on the eighth day, we finally got the okay to go.

LEVINE: Is there—before we leave Ellis Island, is there anything else that you remember? Any other people's situations or an—anything about—were there a lot of people there when you were there—

COOPER: Oh, on Ellis Island?

LEVINE: —or not so many or—

COOPER: Oh, yeah. They place was jammed. Oh, the place was loaded with people. Have you seen pictures? People—

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. B—were there other people besides people immigrating that you were aware of who were there?

COOPER: No, I—no. Look, I remember the—some—some of the—some of the personnel that—that—that take the—the—and interview the im—the immigrants.

LEVINE: H—how did—

COOPER: And process them.

LEVINE: How did they treat you?

COOPER: Very nice. Very, very, very friendly. While—while—while I was riding from Warsaw to Berlin, I think it was, I got my—my—my finger caught in my—in the door, running around f—in the train. My mother was worried that she wouldn't let me go through because of my injury. In the meantime, m—my grandmother got a cold or something, or they thought, 'Well, is she going to be held up there?' Maybe that's part of the reason why we were—stayed there so long. I don't know.

LEVINE: Ah.

COOPER: But fortunately, we were released and—and we—we left.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: In—in New York.

LEVINE: Now, did you stay with your grandmother and your mother when you were staying at Ellis Island? Were you in the same room?

COOPER: Yes, we—yeah, we—not same room. We were different—different rooms. I don't remember the details of it but we—I remember my mother. We were in a big room in a big cot. Maybe they were there—she was there. I don't know. But anyhow, we were in that big room. And we had—we each [clears throat]—they showed movies. We—they gave us good meals. We had good—and they treated us very nicely.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: The doctors checked us out, be sure we were okay. And, you know, the Immigration—the Immigration Service was very good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And the HIAS? Do you remember anything else about them?

COOPER: All I remember about the HIAS was Mom—my mother told me that they helped us leave—helped leave Ellis Island and go on, continue on our way, arranged for our tickets to go to—to Michigan, to Three Rivers, Michigan. [unclear] heard of that? Not—ever heard of Kalamazoo, Michigan?

LEVINE: [unclear]—yes.

COOPER: We were just 25 miles south of Michigan.

LEVINE: And that's where your father was working?

COOPER: My fa—yeah, he had a summer resort and a farm.

LEVINE: Huh.

COOPER: A 69-acre farm.

LEVINE: And he—

COOPER: And that—that's where we first came. I want to tell an interesting episode on that. [clears throat] As I said before, I didn't—had no idea what my father looked like. You see pictures of men dressed with their ties and all—white shirts and all that sort of thing. I used to [unclear] of pictures of Mama. This is my—my—this is my [unclear]. "Did my father look like that?" She—"I don't know." [chuckles] She didn't him very well either.

LEVINE: That was a truthful answer, I guess.

COOPER: That's right. She didn't know. So anyway, we finally arrived in F—at the Three Rivers Railroad Station. And it was a cloudy, rainy day and we were waiting for my—somehow or another, the—the stationmaster called my father. We gave him the name and he looked it up in the telephone—telephone number. And he called my father—was supposed to come to meet us. I had no idea what he looked like. Neither did my mother. So when he finally came, he was—well, I pictured him being all dressed real—like all—like the pictures I saw. Instead, he came in. He had a—a ragged, dirty raincoat and unshaven and all covered with mud, because on the way up he had—it had a country road. You had to come up a hill and the Model T Ford got stuck and he had to push it. So he got all splattered with mud. So when he came in the—into the door of the—of the station, of the waiting room, my mother looked at him. My grandma looked at him. I looked at him and said to my—to my mother. I says, "Is this my [unclear]?" Said, "Is this my father?" She said, "I don't know." We looked at each other. My

grandma looked at him. He finally recognized who—who we were, that he could be only one person. So that's how we met—met my father. Total disillusionment. But anyway, it worked out. Remember also, you probably heard of the story about the Europeans always thought that the land of the—United States was—was paved with gold.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And the gold grew on trees. And so when we finally came in, my father had a resort. We had about a 18-room house over there. It was owned—originally owned by a—by—by a—an actress, I think Marie Engel [PH]. She was a singer or actress, whatever she was. So that—that was the farm. We had 69 acres. It's—was a summer resort. [clears throat] By the time we—we came in, the sun had come out. We—we lived on a big lake—on a lake and the s—the sun started—reflected off the lake. Golden image. On top of that, we got the room with a brass bed, slept in a golden bed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [chuckles]

COOPER: So—

LEVINE: Now, how did your father come to have the resort and the—and the—and the farm?

COOPER: Well, what happened, when he came in, my—his brother, Uncle Abe, was already in Chicago. He was already established in Chicago. He came there several years before. So he went to work for my uncle in a dairy. He had a dairy business then. Then he went to work as a bricklayer or something. Then he heard about somebody wanted to have—somebody told him about a farm, a resort. So he wanted to be independent. So somehow, he was able to—to negotiate to buy this farm with 69 acres, a summer resort, had cottages in it. And that's where he ended up.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: And he was there, I guess, in 19—about four or five years before we came.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And he established.

LEVINE: What was it like for you, getting used to having a father?

COOPER: It was—I guess I took it in stride.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: And—

LEVINE: What kind of a man was your father?

COOPER: He was a very—again, a very strong person. And I can—I think I can show you a picture of him, if you want to see it.

LEVINE: Oh, great. Well, I—let's wait till we're done because—

COOPER: Oh, okay.

LEVINE: —we're all hooked up here.

COOPER: Yeah, a very strong man, very strong willed person. I guess I—they tell me I look like him a lot.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

COOPER: So if you see me I guess you see him. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how did he relate to you and vice-versa?

COOPER: Kind of strange. He put me to work right away herding—herding the cows on the farm. [clears throat] And my mother went to work in the kitchen, take care of the—the resort-niks.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was it—oh, it was May when you—

COOPER: Yeah, May. May 25.

LEVINE: Yeah?

COOPER: They—they came for Decoration Day, Memorial Day. She call it Decoration Day in those days.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: [clears throat] Now, it's called Mem—Memorial Day, which of course, was the 30th of May at that time. So I got in—met the kids and went out to—went out to the—to the lake. The lake was just about a couple hundred feet away from the house—and met the kids. We all played around a lot. And I used to herd the cow and bring 'em in from the

pasture and gradually went to work. You—you've seen farmers working behind the plow? We had two horses, three horses. After a while, I got—I—I did the plowing with the horses with the rings around my back, around my shoulders, steer the horses that way.

LEVINE: And—

COOPER: [unclear] plow.

LEVINE: —did you like all this—

COOPER: Oh, I liked it. I didn't mind it a bit.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: We had an orchard. We raised apples, different kind of fruit, plums and so on, plus wheat, corn.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how did your mother like being in this country?

COOPER: Well, Mother—unfortunately, Mother went right to work. And she never had a—never had a happy moment in her life while she was here. There was bickering between them. And she was—she went—when she went to work at five o'clock in the morning in the resort, she didn't go to bed—she—when she got through work at eight, nine o'clock, s—she was exhausted—

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: —and went to sleep, so really didn't have much social life. In the wintertime was—it wasn't bad. We used to go to Kalamazoo for holidays. And we used to get kosher meat from—from Elkhart, Indiana or South Bend, Indiana or—or Kalamazoo. She—she would eat chicken but she wouldn't eat the beef. She did all the cooking, did all the laundry. We had the [unclear]. In Europe, we did—we used to wash the clothes by the river with—with—slap 'em on—against stones. Here, she had a—a scrub board, the corrugated scrub board.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: Used to do that by hand. We finally got a—a washing machine, the old Maytag, I think it was in those days. So we finally worked up and worked that up.

LEVINE: With the ringer.

COOPER: Yeah, with a ringer. Sure.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Now, how about your grandmother?

COOPER: My grandmother didn't—didn't live with us. She left with her—went to live with a daughter in Akron.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: So that was that. She—they used to visit but she lived with them over there. My father and my grandmother never got along because they—they were at each other's loggerhead. So anyway, so this was just my mother and my father and I. Then in 1923, my older brother—my—my young—my next brother was born. He's Morrie [PH]. He lives—he lives in Detroit area and so my—my other brother was born in 1927. They both live in Detroit. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

COOPER: In fact, they were here just not too long ago.

LEVINE: Well, did you start school that next September?

COOPER: Well, during the summer [clears throat], I—as I said, I was with the kids a lot, learned—learned English pretty much by that time. And so when I got to school I started the one-room, brick—little red brick schoolhouse with the—

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: —with the bell on top and outhouses on—on the back, girls and boys outhouses. I started with—with kindergarten and fr—I remember the first word she wrote was cat—C-A—A-T. That's the first word I learned in English.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: Then we read these little books about "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a—the—a bucket of water. And Jack fell down and broke his crown." All that sort of stuff. The first year, I made third—made th—made three grades the first year. And the next year, I was—was in the fourth grade, or third grade, rather. And from then on, that—I had no

trouble learning English. But in the meantime, I forgot Russian. And the Hebrew, I knew. I went to cheder [PH] in—in the Old Country.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And—

LEVINE: How did at the school compare with the cheder in the Old Country?

COOPER: Well, cheder, we—I think I'm—there were one or two students in there.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: I remember one book I—I read. I think I even brought it with us to the—to the—to the country when I came here. It had the—it had a picture of Abraham, a pencil drawing of it. And used—we used to—they took—studied the [unclear]. We studied Gomorrah and—and [unclear] a little bit, all in Hebrew. I didn't understand what the words—didn't know what the words were but was able to read Hebrew pretty well. I still can pretty well.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: Need a little brushing up but I can still pretty good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, how—what did you speak at home in—in—

COOPER: Yiddish.

LEVINE: —when you were in Russia?

COOPER: Yiddish.

LEVINE: Yiddish. And how about when you came here?

COOPER: Oh, Yiddish until I learned English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: [clears throat] My mother and father spoke—spoke Yiddish and sometime they'd speak Russian to each other when they don't want to know what I want—what they said. So—but anyhow, I got a little bit of it. But the—but the primary home language was Yiddish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Just like the Spanish—the Spanish here speak Spanish at home.

LEVINE: Right.

COOPER: [clears throat] Even though the kids worked hard at learning English in schools. Same situation.

LEVINE: Did they continue doing that or did they at some point cross over—

COOPER: Well, my mother learned English. My father was able to write Eng—write—read and write English pretty well. My mother didn't too much but she used to get the "Forwards," which by the way, I—I get the English version now.

LEVINE: Really? Uh-hmm.

COOPER: I subscribe to it.

LEVINE: Good. Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And she used to love—love and cry over the [unclear] Brief.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: You know what that is?

LEVINE: No.

COOPER: You ought to learn the—those things, you ought to know about. But the "Forwards"—let's see—

LEVINE: Okay. Now, we can't because you're hooked up. You want me to unhook you?

COOPER: I'm going just around the corner here.

LEVINE: Okay.

COOPER: I think I've got a copy of it here, this English version. See "Forwards?"

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: That was the—that was the—the Bible that the Jewish people lived by. That told them everything about—this was all in Yiddish. By the way, they started publishing Yiddish again lately, in the last year, I think they started.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: To me, that's the Jewish "New York Times."

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. But didn't you mention a particular—I thought you were talking about a particular column or something in the "Forward?"

COOPER: The "[unclear] Brief."

LEVINE: Right.

COOPER: "[unclear] Brief." [clears throat] You don't know anything about that?

LEVINE: No.

COOPER: When you get back to New York or wherever you get, go—go to the "Forwards." Visit them.

LEVINE: Yes, I know where it is. Yeah.

COOPER: And ask them about the "[unclear] Brief." It was a—most of the time, women wrote about their vicissitudes when the husband left them. They try to find them. They couldn't do it so they complained and cried and all the—all the women read the thing. And they read the other women's problems and they sort of related to that. So then that was—that was the most important part of the paper, the "[unclear] Brief." It's still very famous.

LEVINE: Wow. And is it in the current one?

COOPER: It's not in now. No.

LEVINE: It's—no, it isn't in this one.

COOPER: Maybe in the Yiddish part.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: It's like the—like let—letters to the editor.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

COOPER: But they were all telling about their griefs and their problems.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: Wondered how to solve them, things of that sort.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: "Can you [unclear]—can you find my husband? I wonder where he is. He left me with two children," or whatever it might be. And that reminds me of the last time I visited the—New York several years ago. We went up the Lower East Side. And we went to a place that we heard about or read about and saw how they lived in those days.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: So that brought the—brought that—brought a visual image of what—what the—how they really lived.

LEVINE: Do—did you go to the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street?

COOPER: We were on Orchard but didn't go to the museum.

LEVINE: Yeah. That's—that's—

COOPER: I didn't know about it at the time.

LEVINE: Right, yeah. You—

COOPER: We—we were Orchard Street. What other streets are there?

LEVINE: Delancey.

COOPER: Delancey. Taylor. Was there a Taylor Street there?

LEVINE: I think so.

COOPER: Oh. It's all about—several blocks—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: —in the area there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: De—Delancey's Restaurant was farther down by the Bowrey.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: That area. So that sort of brought back nostalgia of what we read about.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, this—this column. Was this something that your mother or d—

COOPER: My mother used to read that all the time.

LEVINE: The time?

COOPER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: When she came, that was—that's the first thing she went to, like today we go to the editorial page or to the comic section.

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: This was her thing.

LEVINE: Oh. I'll have to look up into that. That's great. So—so the "Forward" came to you in Michigan.

COOPER: Yeah. My—

LEVINE: And

COOPER: My mother—mother subscribed to it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Of course, we had the local paper too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: [coughs] But while I was gr—growing up in—even—even in those days while I was still going to grade school, I used—I used to r—read all kinds of magazines I could get a hold of. I—I went to high school. I graduated in—I came in '22 and graduated in '27. In '28, my uncle talked—talked my parents into letting me go to Chicago to high school over there. I went to Link [PH] Technical—Link Tech High School. And I lived with my mother's sister in Chicago. You ever been to Chicago? Know anything about it?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, I've been there.

COOPER: Have you? Did you ever live there?

LEVINE: No.

COOPER: Oh. I lived on northwest side. They had—behind a grocery store.

LEVINE: You—your aunt had a gro—

COOPER: My aunt—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: [unclear]. My father—my—my uncle was a—was a—was a door-to-door peddler of fruits and vegetables with a wagon. I used to go with him to the—to Randolph [PH] Street to Chicago where the—where the—where the markets were—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: —and pick up the wholesale stuff. Well, those are some of the things I went—and incidentally, my uncle in—in Akron, where I lived later, did the same thing, only did it with—he did it a horse first. Then he finally got International truck. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. [chuckles]

COOPER: And I helped him with that a little bit too.

LEVINE: Well, what was it like for you to switch to a city and to be in Chicago?

COOPER: Oh, it was [unclear]. I made friends right away, the next-door neighbors. And Link Tech High School was towards downtown. And we used to—used to take the trolley, five cents for a ride, and I took a cour—took my course. The non—I took one year there and I came—then I came back home and lived on the farm with—with my family and went to Three Rivers High School. And there—nothing really exciting at the—at the time. Hmm. Oh, I—I took—took ma—au—took auto repair shop in those days. So we picked up a—the derelict of a 1923 Chevrolet. Half the engine was gone. I towed it home and I fixed it up, rebuilt it and [unclear] my—with my car.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: I fixed it up and made it run.

LEVINE: Did you have a sense of what you wanted to do? Or wasn't that something that—

COOPER: Not at that time.

LEVINE: —you thought about or—

COOPER: Not—not—not even in high school. But I—I was more or less a people person rather than a think person. But I went—actually graduated high school, I again went back to Chicago to Crane Junior College. I was there one year and I came back, stayed out a year. Then my aunt— aunt and uncle said, “Why don't the you come to—to Akron, Ohio? We got university there. You can go to college over there.” That was in 1933. And I did. I went to Akron U for one year. Then I transferred to Kent State. Remember the famous—infamous Kent State?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: That was in 1933. '34, I entered Kent State and graduated from there in 19—[clears throat] I got my one—my first degree, bachelor of—of— bachelor of arts in sociology, economics, history, business administration and speech. So I graduated for that. Then I went to summer school and I got my bachelor's of science in education as a teacher. I graduated as a—as a teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: Oh, I used to—substitute teaching.

LEVINE: In Ohio?

COOPER: In Ohio. In Akron, Ohio. Yeah. The—they had—I think the—no matter school was, no matter what subject it was, they always called me. At that time, was getting \$5 a day as a substitute teacher. I taught French, such as [unclear]. I taught shop. I taught math, soc—history. Whatever—whatever it was. Ke—just keep the kids in order.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: One school, I was—[clears throat] I was always called for when there was a teacher absent. I—I got a class with pretty—pretty rough class. So I picked the—picked one of the kids up who was—in fact, seemed to be the leader of them. I took him—I took him aside. I said, “How about you? How—you'll—how about you and I working together to—to control the class?” And we worked it out. It was fine. And they—they respected him. They respected me and we got along real well. [clears

throat] And that's why they called me up—back for the same class every time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. So did you enjoy that, the teaching?

COOPER: Oh, yeah. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: I enjoyed it a lot.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How would you describe yourself at that point in your life when you were just a young man starting a—a career?

COOPER: I—I was so much—pretty much a loner. My—I was—sort of had a—a—a low opinion of myself. And so other kids—other men going around—I—I didn't get over that until 1960, believe it or not.

LEVINE: What happened in 1960?

COOPER: Well, that's another story.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we'll keep going.

COOPER: Yeah, uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Now, we're in the '30s, right?

COOPER: Anyway, as—what happened was—this is an interesting thing. While I was in Akron, O—or Akron, going to college there, I happened to pick up a "Time" magazine. And in the article—in there was an article by Alfred P. Sloan, who at that time was chairman of the board of General Motors. It was during the Depression. He said, "There's no reason why anyone can't work if he wants to work." So I challenged him. I wrote him a letter, asking, well, "Here I am. I'm going to graduate. I want to get a job." So I got a le—I got a reply from him. He invited me to come to Detroit. That was in 1937.

LEVINE: Well, now, were you actually out of a job by then because of the Depression?

COOPER: Well, just substitute teaching. I was selling shoes, working my way through school, through college selling shoes. I worked on NYA, National Youth Administration, [clears throat] which was a—a youth program for the—for the unemployed kids who want to work for the school. I planted trees, cleaned toilets. Whatever was to be done, I did.

And I finally graduated to [clears throat] doing work for my professor. [clears throat] I think I'm—making a big chart for him on the—the growth and distribution of rubber in the United States—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: —and the rest of the world. That was the—that's my last year of college. And then I—interestingly enough, I—I sold shoes. I did substitute teaching. But I couldn't get a fulltime job at the time. So I—the last year of school at Kent State that summer, I ran a—I—I got—I sold the idea of a radio program to one of radio stations in Akron, Ohio. And I modeled a—my program after, you know, it's the University of Chicago Roundtable. Men get together and discuss certain things. So one of the—I got the—got different people about local—local situation, local affairs and national, international affairs. And one time, I got—among the people I had was the—the regional director of the National Youth Administration, NYA. And after the program, said to me, "Leo." He says, "Why—why are you doing this?" I said, "Well, two reasons. I enjoy it and maybe one day I'll meet someone who'll give me a job someday." Sure enough, a year later, he called me and he asked me to—invited me to work for the NYA as a coun—[clears throat] youth counselor. And that's how I got in with the federal government.

LEVINE: Wow.

COOPER: Back in 1941.

LEVINE: Well, h—what happened when you wrote the letter to—

COOPER: General Motors?

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: Well, I—he invited me to come down. I came down there and stayed with some—with some friends of ours who used to come to the resort. I stayed with them. That's 1938. I didn't—never did get to see him. I did get a job selling stokers for Delco—Delco—Delco Department, which is part of General Motors at the time, furn—furnace stoker. That's before your time. Used to have coal stokers. Used to attach them to the furnace. [clears throat] You filled them up and they pushed the coals into the—to the furnace. So anyhow, that—that—meantime, I was there selling shoes and I also worked for the WPA. I worked at Cass [PH]—Cass Tech. I did some teaching there, some unemployed people. And that's—so that's how I got in with the government.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: And then I was laid off at NYA in the—in July. August, I was—I was given—offered a job to go to Dayton, Ohio, rehired NYA there. So [clears throat] I took the same kind of job at—in Dayton, Ohio. That's how I got to Dayton.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And then from there I was—during the war, I was—I got a—I got a transfer to the Army—the Dayton's Army Signal Corps, which later became the Air Force. And there I became a youth counselor and here I am.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow. Well, just—

COOPER: Also, in the meantime, someone talked me into—to stop work, to quit the government. Oh, yeah. This will be interesting too. Stop—[unclear] informed me to go to work for a packing company, meat packing company as a personnel guy. So I did that. And I did that for about, what, nine months, I think. And then I was laid—laid off there. I didn't go back to work for the government again. I got into that—I—let's see. What was it? Oh, yeah. When I was laid off at the—the packing company, I went—tried to f—find out what I could do for myself. So I went into the printing business, because when I was living in Akron I—I started publishing the—the—the newspaper for the Jew—Akron Jewish Center.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: That's how I got the—little bit in the printing in—printing skill and knowledge. I [unclear] printing. I just had people do it for me. I laid the thing out and everything. So I said, "Well, what kind of do to make a living and not have to invest money into anything?" So I said, "Well, I know a little bit about printing. Maybe I can do that." So I lined up several printers who would do work for me at a discount and I could mark 'em up and sell it. And I did that for quite a while. In the meantime, the—the employer, the—the company that laid me off tried to—let's see. Oh, yeah. I applied—I applied for unemployment compensation, which I got. I think it was \$50 a week or a month, whatever it was at the time. So he—he u—wanted to stop the thing. And they—they—they called me in and said, "We can't—we can't pay you anymore because you—you—you're working. You've got a job." I said, "I don't have a job. I'm trying to build up a business. Are you going to try to—to punish someone who's trying to help themselves to get off of this thing?" So I said, "I think—I think I still—I think I still ought

to be on unemployment compensation while I'm trying to build myself up." I won the case against him.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: I got—I got unemployment compensation for the whole year while building up my business. I—I got all the Jewish—the Jewish communities, all their business. I published the Hadassah bulletins, the—the temple bulletins over there. I did—I did the—their bar mitzvah invitations, whatever it was. They still talk about it.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: Even for my wife, my present wife, my—the invitations. [chuckles]

LEVINE: You what? You s—you sold to—

COOPER: Sold my—sold my wife—th—this is my sec—second marriage.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Well, how did you meet your first wife?

COOPER: Oh, intro—we [clears throat]—that was in Akron, Ohio. We were at a Hadassah dance, I think. She was active in Hadassah. And I asked her to dance and we did. And she talked about what I did and what she did and so on. And she—she offered to help me get—get—get business, printing business, even in those days. So little by little, we got to know each other and I sort of liked her.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: Just like putting it mildly.

LEVINE: [chuckles] What was her name?

COOPER: Her name was Sylvia.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

COOPER: Feldstein [PH]. Matter of fact, her brother and sister are living here in—in Fort Myers.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

COOPER: Yeah, too. So anyway, let's see. Ah—

LEVINE: So did you settle in Akron then? Was that where you stayed?

COOPER: Well, we stayed there, yeah, until it came—until we came to Dayton.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: We—after we were [clears throat] married we lived with her—with her parents. And—and had a—had a bedroom there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: [clears throat] I tried selling life insurance. I didn't—couldn't do anything with that. So th—then that's when I got the job with the—with the federal government. I was okay for that. Then they give me the transfer to Dayton, Ohio and here we were.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you were doing youth counseling then?

COOPER: Youth counseling, yes. Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

COOPER: Went out visiting all the high schools to see if you get recruits to come into the—to the shops to learn how to—and be machinists, be foundry people and carpenters and whatever else might be. So I visited all the schools in the area and did the same thing in Dayton.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: So that's how that—

LEVINE: Great.

COOPER: —worked out.

LEVINE: And then did you have children?

COOPER: Not until after the war.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, what about the war? Or when the war broke out, how did that affect you?

COOPER: Well, I was—I was in the—working for the Dayton Signal Depot. I was in charge of employee relations at that time. Matter of fact, the part—we were—we were—we—I was involved in—in r—rationing of food, gasoline, tires and all that thing. I was in—I handled the rationing for—for our department, for the—for the entire group. And also, I—I installed

the [unclear] of the—for employees of the federal government to get group health insurance, hospitalization. I—I solicited several companies and finally picked the Blue Cross, Blue Shield. At that time, we didn't have any—any—any authorization to deduct the premiums from wages. So I arranged with one of the banks there that we would pay in X number of dollars. People'd bring it—bring the money to me and I would deposit it. And every three months, whatever it might be, how it was set up, I would send one check. So our people were covered by—by—by the hospitalization program, which I established, which, later established by the—accepted by the federal government. Now, we all ha—all the federal government has—has the hospitalization, medical. [clears throat] So that's with—first experiment, as far as I know, that was ever done by the federal government.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wow.

COOPER: They used to call my—the place where my of—my part of the office “the sunshine corner.”

LEVINE: Hmm, that's nice.

COOPER: [unclear] made—made him feel good.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So now, did you have children when World War II had—

COOPER: Well, I went to—when I was drafted, the first time I was rejected. Because I was rejected I was dejected. [laughs] A year later, they—they drafted me again. And I went through the process. I went to Ferragut, Idaho. That's in—in the Rocky Mountains or wherever had the Ferragut Navy Base. We had a naval base, training base over there. Boot camp. So I went over there. I had six weeks and then I—well, after—when I got through with that I had a chance to—to be assigned to ship's company, was the sta—the work there as a—as a seaman at—at the—on the base. And I went to school there and finally got promoted to—to petty officer second class in personnel. After I finished school there and worked, then we had to get transferred. We had a chance t—to—we had a chance to pick three places. That's stay where we were, to go to Great Lakes or to go to Bainbridge, Maryland. I guess my grades were good enough of my—my examination to—to get the first place. I went to Bainbridge. In the meantime, my wife stayed in—she was in—she was in Dayton—in Akron all that time. When I got my transfer to—to Far—to Bainbridge, Maryland, I—I brought her with me over there and we stay there till the end of the war.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: And also, while I was there, I had—they picked me to go to—to school again at Gr—at Great Lakes to—to—to separation school, as they called it, to m—muster the men out after the—through with service. And there I was again lucky because I had a fellow I used to work for at Bainbridge, was in—was at Great Lakes.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: And he was in charge of the—of that particular department program. So he [unclear]—he sent me back to—to Farragut, I—to Bainbridge, Maryland where my wife was.

LEVINE: Hmm.

COOPER: So we stay there the rest—the war was over.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh.

COOPER: [unclear] out of there.

LEVINE: And then what, after the war?

COOPER: After the war, I came in and got my job back [clears throat] in Dayton, Ohio.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And that's where we stayed all the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what happened in 1960 that changed your opinion of yourself?

COOPER: Well, what happened then, I—I—I did printing. I went back to work for the government and then continued my printing—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

COOPER: —as a part-time job. Then I got into real estate, bought real—bought real estate apartments. I started out with—with white property. Then I got into black property. I was do—I did that from 1956, '57 till—till we came here, about 18 years. And I was at—I—making a good living. We moved from my—from a Cape Cod bungalow, 1,250—\$12,500 to one to a \$25,000 [clears throat] colonial, two-story, four bedroom colonial during the 10 years so I felt I've accomplished something. I've—I've—I was good as—good as an—anybody else.

LEVINE: Oh.

COOPER: So that time, I [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

COOPER: Success—what success—what—what's the thing that the movie—
success—is it the Jack Hunter or the movie like that where the guy was
down and suddenly he's suc—success—success spoils—spoiled Jack
Hunter or what—whatever his name was.

LEVINE: Oh, yes. I have—

COOPER: Remember that movie?

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: I wasn't spoiled. I kept on working.

LEVINE: Okay. Oh, good. [chuckles] Well, let me—let me ask you—[telephone
rings] do you need to get—

COOPER: [unclear] wife will answer the phone.

LEVINE: [clears throat] You were going to tell about your name change.

COOPER: Oh, yeah. [clears throat] I tr—my—I was—I—I be—I had the regular
citizen—what I have is a citizen—

WOMAN: Leo?

COOPER: Yeah.

WOMAN: [unclear]. [tape off/on]

LEVINE: Resuming here after a phone call. And we were talking about your
name and your name change and how it came about.

COOPER: Well, my—my—I was never called Nachman. I was always called
Lieber. So when I came to the United States I changed to Leo. And my
father changed his name from Kupferberg to Cooper. And that's how
we got our name.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was it an attempt to be more American? Do—

COOPER: Well, it's—all—most of the foreigners change their names when they come to the United States to be more Americanized.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: So my father did the same thing.

LEVINE: Yeah.

COOPER: And Lieber, which means lover or whatever it is in Yiddish—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Just ch—just changed it to Leo. Instead of Leon, Leo.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. And how about your birth date?

COOPER: My birth—I don—we didn't know when—exactly when I was born. But 1923, Rosh Hashanah, I think at that time came out on the 28th of September. And my mother told me I was born eight days before Rosh Hashanah. So the birth, it came out the 20th of September. So we use the 20th of September as my birth date.

LEVINE: Okay.

COOPER: Officially.

LEVINE: And what's the year of it?

COOPER: 1912.

LEVINE: Okay.

COOPER: I'm 86 now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, okay. And you started to say earlier about the things your mother cooked in Russia or—and/or your grandmother.

COOPER: Well, see, when you look for [clears throat]—on—on Friday—Friday night we used to have—not [unclear] but used to have roast beef, potatoes and we used to call kartoffel [PH], potatoes and the rye bread and the challah [PH] on Friday night, used to bake it in the—in the oven, [unclear] but in the oven.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: And chicken soup. On Passover, used to have the—we used to get fat—fatten—get ducks and fatten them up and then use ‘em for Passover.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: Ducks or geese, whatever the case might be.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did your mother or your grandmother or you carry over any other customs in this country that you can think of that—that you held to and—

COOPER: Well, my mother carried over kosher. She wouldn't eat any—anything but kosher meat. [unclear] light candles on Saturday—on Friday night, used to celebrate the h—Jewish holidays. We used to have a seder on Pes—Pesach. We still do. In fact, we're going to temple seder this we—this year.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: Brenda got a call. So pretty much we—we didn't—of course, in the old—in Europe was all orthodox. We didn't know any different. There was no such thing as reform or conservative or reconstructionist or whatever—or human—or humanist or whatever. It was all the same thing. [clears throat] You know, I used to go to the—we used to go to—to the synagogue, little synagogues that when they used to sit on—on top of the balcony.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: [unclear] stayed down there. And the—or in [unclear] where the torah is, used to be in the middle and the seats surrounded it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

COOPER: And of course, then the mar—the United States [unclear] was a little different. We used to go to the temple in—or synagogue at Kalamazoo after we came here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COOPER: On—on holidays. And that's about the essence of it. We celebrated H—Hanukkah, Hanukkah [unclear] and all that sort of stuff.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what would you say, looking back as, coming here as an immigrant of nine and a half years of age—do you think that had an impact on your personality?

COOPER: Oh, yes. I think it did. Oh—oh, I—I grew up as an American, not as the foreigner. I made up my mind, whether consciously or unconsciously, that, “I’m now in America. I’m not living back there. I’m living here. I want to be like everybody else,” so played with the kids, argued with them, fought a little bit with them, you know, like kids do. And we got along real well, participated in—participated in the plays. I remember being in—being at a Christmas play that—that the one—the one-room schoolhouse. One teacher, eight or ten kids, all eight grades.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

COOPER: [unclear]

LEVINE: Okay.

COOPER: I used to do a lot of reading while I was in eighth grade. [clears throat] I remember reading my first western book when they learned to—how to read. “Light of the Western Stars.” I used to r—read Zane Grey’s books.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

COOPER: One I remember distinctly was “Light of the Western Stars.” This is how I learned about the west and the cowboys. I also read a book, “Horsemen of the Plains.” I read that book seven times. So for curiosity, a couple of years ago I happened to be a member of the—of the Library Board downtown here. I was able to get the book. They traced it down for me, found the book that I read all those—that was in grade school. I got the same kind of thrill reading it again after all these years.

LEVINE: Wonderful! We’re going to stop here because we’re at the end of the tape.

COOPER: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: But I want to tell you, a pleasure to interview you. Thank you so much.

COOPER: Thank you for the opportunity.

LEVINE: I’m talking with Leo Cooper. And it’s on March 14th, 1999 and this is Janet Levine signing off.

EI-1045/COOPER

[END OF INTERVIEW]