

EI-478

JACK LEVINE (JACOB, YAKOV LELCHUK)
BIRTHDATE: MARCH 3, 1893
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RUNNING TIME: 1:55:34
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 3/1996
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RUSSIA (BELARUS), 1913
AGE 20

SHIP: "THE MAURETANIA"
PORT: HAMBURG
RESIDENCES:
RUSSIA: PONESH, BELARUS
US: NEW YORK, NY

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, June 9th, 1994. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Jacob Levine. Everyone calls him "Jack." Mr. Levine came from Russia in 1913. He was twenty years old at that time. He is now one hundred and one years old, and I want to welcome you. Welcome. Mr. Levine can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

LEVINE: My birth date is March the 3rd, 1893.

SIGRIST: And where in Russia were you born?

LEVINE: That this is the guberniya, like we this, we say here the state, New York State so over there was Milska guberniya. Milska guberniya, that's White Russia.

SIGRIST: White Russia?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Does that mean that the city of Minsk was in that state?

LEVINE: Well, no, personally I wa-- never was in Minsk, but the surrounding, I came from a, a village. A very small village. It was only two streets, two small like blocks. And I, and I was, I was there until twenty years. I never went out from that little village.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the village?

LEVINE: The name of the -- Ponesh.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LEVINE: P-O-N-E-S-H.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

LEVINE: Ponesh.

SIGRIST: You said it had two streets?

LEVINE: What?

SIGRIST: You said that the village had two streets?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What, what else did the village have? Can you describe it for me?

LEVINE: Oh, well, you know, I could, I have to mention some Russian words.

SIGRIST: As long as you spell them when you mention them.

LEVINE: Yeah. You see, where our village is, which they, they would call here - vi - vi - vi- a village is supposed to the United States of America, village consists of four streets, three streets, or a regular, farm, a few, a few farms around. Over there was, a village was a, only a small, very small - a about two or three blocks. But we had where I came from, Ponesh, they called it selo [village]. Selo. S-E-L-O. Selo. Why? Because there was a church, there was a -- no, a state office, city office, where you called it the few clerks, officials. Appointed or elected, although we didn't, we don't have elections at that time. And they -- they were appointed from the, from the capital of the state, Minsk.

There was, so they call it pravienie Pravienie. Over here they would say a pravienie is a city office, like we'll say in New York -- the mayor, city, city office. So the city office, it means the pravienie. P-R-E-E-F-V-, pravienie, L-E-N-I-E pravienie. So the fact is that I came from a selo, not from a village. A selo. Because of this, because there is officials, that they govern the -- all the rest of the towns. They call it derevnyas, small villages. So I remember peasants from all around used to come on a Sunday or on other holiday to church, and they register in the office, and it was a pope, a pope there.

They call it here a priest. A galakh A galakh. A priest. The priest, the priest was in the church every Sunday, talking to them, just, just holding a lecture -- lecture. And, and that's why it, it was, it was already more than a village, you see, because all the rest of the villages are under supervision of this place what they call it selo. Because previenie, a church, a ga-, a priest, and also a few military men. They call it "radnik" [PH]. Radniklike here a sirgeant a - a

sergeant -- the sergeant of the police, a police sergeant you would call it. And under him was a f-- few helpers.

SIGRIST: So this was a more important place...

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...than your basic village.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. That's right.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what the buildings looked like in this town? What did the buildings look like?

LEVINE: Oh, the buildings. Yeah. It was one floor, little "khatas". Khatas means, a khata [hut] means a, a home.

SIGRIST: How do you spell khata?

LEVINE: Khata. C-H-A-T-A. Khata.

SIGRIST: Khata.

LEVINE: Yeah. And it, so it, there was only one floor right from this ground, you go in, from the outside, from the street, you go in right in the house, and we could say that the ceilings are much higher there. And this is the khata with a little window here, a little window there, and. So this was the buildings, the homes of the peasants. And outside there is what you call here a garage. They, they call it shtal. A shtal, shtal. Two, there is the cows, no, there was the -- where they had the horses, the, the wagons, the, all the tools for the working the on the farms, on the land. Because every farmer had a certain, a certain part, a cer-, a cer-, a cer-, about, about a mile or a mile and a half of field. Field. Where they, they grow their, the bread, you know, the, the...

SIGRIST: The wheat.

LEVINE: The wheat. So this was the, the surrounding. And this how people live there. They worked on the farm, wherever it grow up from June, July, August, they have it for the rest of the month of the year. Bread, all kinds of, of, of, all, all, all kinds of seeds the we -- they makin' soups, and you know. And it was, a father, my father was a carpenter.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

LEVINE: Abraham. Abraham Levine.

SIGRIST: Now was your name Levine in Russia?

LEVINE: No, in Russia we had Lelchuk.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LEVINE: L-E-L-C-H-U-K.

SIGRIST: Lel, Lelchuk?

LEVINE: Lelchuk.

SIGRIST: And Abraham Lel-, Lelchuk was your father's name?

LEVINE: Yes.

SIGRIST: And he was a carpenter. Tell me what he made as a carpenter.

LEVINE: As a carpenter? He made furniture. Tables, chairs, you're having a peasant build his khata, his, his home, his home. He needs a table, he needs chairs, he needs a bed. And it's only one room. There is no, there is no bedrooms or kitchen or living room or what. There is a big, one room, and this room, half of the room takes the stove. There is no stoves like we have here with your gas. Over there they have, it takes half of the room. Stove, you, you, you bring in woods from the outside, and you, you, you burn the woods in the oven. You put the oven, the woods in the oven, pieces woods like this. And then you put, when it's get very hot in the oven, you put inside the, the pots with the food that you cook, that you eat. And the other corner of the house was the table with the chairs around, and the, on this side is the beds where you sleep. And there is also to the others, in the other corner, certain machines which they, you know, over here we go to the store, we buy material, well, well, material, this kind material or...

SIGRIST: Fabric?

LEVINE: Yeah. And we give it to a tailor and he makes it for when, what we need. Over there they have to make the material themselves. So they, they planted in the, on the fields with seed, from seeds certain "kerens" [PH], like this. And after the season when they grow up, they take off from the fields, they bring it to the garage, "shayer [PH], where they keep the, sometimes beside the, there is a place also, they, well, a place also from the, the garage is, which, which they bring in all the seeds from the field, from outside the field. And they, they thrash it on the floor like this. Yes. So, so the, the, the, the little kerens get separate, and the, and the, and that was called the seed, get separate. And then they wash it. And then they dry it, and then they comb it, make it clean. And then they have a, like we, we would call it here a certain machine which the women, that, that's, that's the job of the women. Not of the men.

SIGRIST: A loom? Spinning?

LEVINE: They make, they make cotton on it. From the cotton they wash it again. And then they put it in machine, and with the fist --yard by yard comes out beautiful, beautiful, about five, six yard the length of cotton. Cotton. We, we call it here cotton. They call it there "lavent."

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

LEVINE: Lavent. L-, L-A-V-E-N-T. Lavent. That's, over here it's cotton. Cotton. No, no wool. Wool, wool is something, something, different, different kind of, from, from a different kind of, of the thing on the, on the, on the field where it, where it shows is, there is cotton, wool. Wool has to be taken care of special.

SIGRIST: Did they have sheep for the wool?

SIGRIST: Yeah. Sheep. From, of course, from the sheep, from the sheep they, they, they give them a good, close haircut, a close haircut. (he laughs) And, and they, they dry it, they wash it, and then they make cotton like I told you before. And then also they, they make certain materials. This is wool already. And then they make colors, too. There are red ones, black ones, brown ones, all kind of colors. I remember in the small villages like where I come from was two tailors. They were making for the women, blouses, for the men, underwear, and also on the top, like, like jackets. Little jackets. Tailors. We were two, about, about nine, ten Jewish people from a village. Two tailors, two shoemakers, two carpenters, and the rest like little groceries. Little groceries. And also a shul, a synagogue. Synagogue for the Jewish people. But in a village where is - of two or three blocks, streets, like nine or ten houses, there is no shul, no synagogue, no church, and nothing, nothing else. (he laughs) So, we call...

SIGRIST: Can, can...

LEVINE: ...we call ourselves, we are little, little city people.

SIGRIST: Can we talk about your father some more? Your father you said was a carpenter.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he make the furniture in your house?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is, is...

LEVINE: It, it was a, we, I remember when I -- I was twenty years old when I left my hou-- my old home. So we had our own house which my father was building himself. I remember two or three peasants helped him. For the rest it took him a year's time to make the house. More meanwhile, while we were building the house, we were, we were tenants. We were living in a, in a peasant's house, we would pay them rent. And then we were -- when the house was finished we moved in our own house. I remember while he was in the army for five years, and he served in the army, that the Czar's father. It was a, the Czar himself was called Nikolai, and his father was Alexander. So he served five years in the army for that, for Alexander, for the Czar Alexander.

When he came home, the peasants from the all surrounding signed that they give him so much and so much land to build a house. But not should be mentioned his name. It had to be on the name of a peasant, because my father was Jewish. And no Jews has at that time, hasn't got the privilege to own real estate. When he bought a house, he paid, he paid the, the, the peasants -- money for the house, but it was still on the name, the house was carried, the name in city hall, the main office, the peasant's name. Not my father's name. Because my father was Jewish. And Jews had no right to own real estate. That was eighty-five, eighty-four years ago. And...

SIGRIST: What, what was your father's personality like? What, what was his character like?

LEVINE: He was very religious. I remember I had to, in the morning when I got up I had to say a prayer that I, my, my soul came back from heaven, right in here. (laughs) And I got a life, I'm live again. So I say a prayer and I thank God for that.

SIGRIST: Can you say that prayer for us?

LEVINE: Modeh Ani [I give thanks] they call it.

SIGRIST: Can you say it?

LEVINE: That's, I wish I could say, I had to take a little booklet, I didn't take it. I forgot already. You see, there is a thank God for, for giving me back the soul, for giving me back the mind, and for giving me back the, the life, because while you're sleeping you're, you're not living, you're not alive. And all kinds of these thing here.

SIGRIST: Would you have spoken Yiddish or Russian?

LEVINE: I spoke Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Yiddish.

LEVINE: Yiddish. Then, then we learned - we learned Russian, too, because we, we, we lived together, or what. They, they were our neighbors. So I, so I understood every word that they were - they -- talking about. And I was talking, too. A matter of fact, when I was twenty years old, and they were talking already there going to be war. So they stopped off -- the passports, to give out passports out of the country. In the country you could go from town to town, from city to city, from state to state on a, on a passport, on a inside passport. But out, to leaving the country, they stopped off, they don't give you one. And I was about to leave already, so they, they called my da-- they called for me.

Because this, when I got born, the very first day already you give, you let it know a week later or month later, but the date when I was born was reg--, registered in the sta-- in the state building. So they knew every person, the age, everything. So I received notice that I should come to the army. They examined me and they, and they rejected me

because, first of all, I had trouble with my ear. When I was seven years old, I had a trouble with it. They call it the running ear, they call it. You know, it was a doctor, too, in the, in the selo. Because that's why they call it selo, everything, it was a doctor, a shul, everything. With, with the military, they have sergeant.

So they rejected me physically because of the bad ear. And, but still so they, they let me know that they cannot send me to the front when the war breaks out. But I could do some other work around. Around, around, round, round, round, there's plenty of, of doing some work in the back of the line. Now I had to still, so I knew that I had to still be - - the, the border. This was only at night time when it's very, very dark. So they had agents, which here accumulated, got together about fifty or even a hundred people, and they had it, and then we, we started out to, to march, to march and of cross the border at night time. They call it ganvenin dem grenetz You, that means, that means stealing the border.

SIGRIST: Say that again, please?

LEVINE: Stealing the border.

SIGRIST: No, say it in Russian.

LEVINE: In Russian. In Russian...

SIGRIST: Or Yiddish. Whatever it was you just called it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What, what did you just call it?

LEVINE: Ganvenin dem grenetz. Stealing the border. Ganvenin - stealing the - the border - the grenetz. That's how we we--. While doing this, they start out on a Sunday night. And on the border naturally there is, there is, mi-- military watch-- watchmens. We were, we were, we were -- I we-- Russia at that time, Soviet Russia. Oh, Soviet Russia was later. At that time Russia was, was on the, on the other side of the, of the border - the grenetz--was Germany. It was, it was, this is Russia, and the other side was already Germany.

There was no Poland. When I came to Poland, from Poland we had to cross the, the border to Germany. It was in the middle of the night and on a Sunday night. Why on a Sunday night? Because on a Sunday night there are -- there are wa-- watch people on the -- but they are not as many. And the one man was leading us. He was me - leadering [sic]. He was carrying a white, a long, white stick from a tree. And we, we, we should look up and see where he is turning. This turn, or the other one. And I lost one of my shoes because it was very wet. They call it muddy. Muddy. And I, and very dark. There is no light, so all we had, we have a nighttime light, over there is no lights.

So while were seeing, following, following the, the stick, like this, so we, we, we had to follow the man that carries that, and that's

how we cross the border. I lost one of my shoes and I couldn't walk no more. And I stepped in in a deep, muddy place. I remained all in the back. The whole company of about forty-five or fifty people were away to the -- far away from me already, and I was left all in the back. But I kept on walking while I was barefooted. Naturally I hurt myself very, very much, but I didn't feel it already. I was walking. I was there. Until I came into a village. I came into a village, so the little, it was still dark, so the little fire that they had in the, in the house (they, they didn't have no electricity like this).

So it was gasoline, gasoline at that time. So I follow that and I came to the house and I knocked on the door. And an old woman, a very old woman, opened the door for me. And she looks at me, she says I'm, I'm, I'm barefooted. She calls her husband, I think it was her husband. He says, "Let him in, let him in, let him in. Open the door wider, let him in." So I came in and they looked and--. So before I explained them what happened to me, they sent, they said, "All right, you'll explain later" They put me on the stove. On the stove is very warm. And they covered me up because I was very shivery from cold, too. It was March. Then, then the, they cooked a big pot of milk. And they made it hot milk and they gave it to me on the stove, and I drank the milk.

SIGRIST: We need, we need...

LEVINE: After I drank the milk...

SIGRIST: Wait. We need to just pause, just for minute, so, so Peter can flip the tapes over, and then you can keep going with your story. So hang on just for one second, and we're just going to pause for Jack Levine, so Peter can flip the tapes over.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now resuming with tape two. You were at the home of the old woman, and she just made you a big pot of milk.

LEVINE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Keep going with your story.

LEVINE: After, after I drank the milk, I fell asleep. I fell asleep. I was very tired. And I was hungry. I was, I didn't eat for days. And the company, when they entered at that town, that little town, it was already more than a village, it was like a little town. They went from one house to the other looking for me, because they counted. When they came in they said that they're one man short. Supposed to be so many, so many, and one man short. So they went around from one to, one house to the other and they found me. And they found me, they were talking Polish. Some of them were talking Polish, some of them were talking Russian, some of them were talking Jewish. I told them the whole story.

So they, they took me to a shoemaker store, and they bought me a pair of shoes. I didn't have no money. I had ten dollars, because the rule was at that time when you come to the United States to Ellis Island,

you had to show ten rubles, ten dollars. Because before you find anything to do and earn money, you have to, you have to eat. (he laughs) So ten dollars, you had to show that you have ten dollars in your pocket. And while I was, I was fell asleep I don't know what happened with me. When I got up I found, I haven't got, I haven't got my money. But they brought me into that store and put me the shoes on. And I want to pay. I, I find out I have no money.

So the people that were that found me paid for me. It was about five, six people there. So they all chipped in a, each one a ruble or two rubles, whatever they need, and they bought food for me. The shoes was not regular shoes like these here, but boots till they, till they, they reached till here. Boots. And, and from there, we took a little boat. And for twenty-four hours we came that little boat to (drinks) Bremen. A Jew-- a German town, a German, yeah, that was a German. Bremen, Bremen was a Jewish, was a, a...

SIGRIST: A German city.

LEVINE: A German town.

SIGRIST: Why did you want to come to America? Why did you want to leave Russia?

LEVINE: I'll tell you why. I had here two brothers. One brother, the third, I am the third one. One brother, he was twenty-two years -- he was twenty-three years. Twenty-three years. The other brother was twenty-one or twenty-two years. I am the third one.

SIGRIST: What are your brother's names?

LEVINE: My brother's name is, they called him Sam. While his, his name from (unintelligible) was Zeleg. S-E-, not S- but Z-, E-L-E-G. Over here we called him Sam. Sam Levine. The other was Willy. Vilia [PH]. One was working in Yonkers. He was a tailor. He was working in a store. And the older one, Sam, he was also a carpenter. And a first class carpenter. He made a high class furniture. But over here was in German all these trades. The Germ-- the, the furniture trade was in German hands. And you find out that you are a Jew, they found all kind of, not -- to say there is no work. (he chuckles) We don't need you. There is no wage.

SIGRIST: When did you brothers come to this country?

LEVINE: I came 1913, and he was five years already here. So that means that he came here 1907, 1908, something like this. My younger, my, my older brother before me, he came two years later. So when I came here one brother was five years, the other brother was three years here. The carpenter had to become a presser. A presser, a bigler in a, today they have a, they have a union. So they call it the, the International Garment Workers Union. International Garment. He was working with a, with an iron. Today you, you, if you notice the house, your, your mother or your sister is pressing something, is with a, is not, is not the same iron that was at that time eighty years ago because over there in the

iron you had to be fire inside. There was no electricity at that time. So he was working and he was making nine dollars a week. And when I came over here, which this was the first place where I came off, which I don't recognize. (he laughs) I...

SIGRIST: But why did you want to come? Why did you want to leave Russia?

LEVINE: Because there was not, there was no, not, nothing, you see, land we couldn't have, like the, like the peasant have, had land, and they lived on the land, and they, they worked and they had what to eat. Jewish people had to do, to create something. He was carpenter, tailor, anything, shoemaking. I saw that there is no, in twenty years already, and I don't have a chance to earn one dollar a week. One ruble a week. There was no, nothing to do there. And the same was with my, with my brother. How did he learn this place, this kind of work? My father was a carpenter. So when he grew up, he helped me father and he was working together with my father. But my father was making white furniture. That means only till he paint it. They call it white, white furniture. And my brother wanted to make all kind, all kind of styles. All kind of high styles.

So he went to the big city, to the big, to the states, to the cities there. Like the, they call it here, Albany, the capital of the New York State. He went to Minsk. And he was working there for two or three years and he learned that. So when he came over here he thought that he has it, he has a trade in his hands. But nothing doing. He couldn't get no work. So the tailoring business, the garment, the garment business was in Jewish hands. But the boss, that was, he himself was a Jewish. So there he found work. And he learned how to, not really, it didn't take him too long to learn this bigeling, and he got a job for nine dollars a week.

But this is season work. You work nine, ten weeks, season work, and then slack. At that time you did, there was no unemployment insurance. There were, today you fall out, you fall off from work, you collect, you, you, in a week or two weeks later you're getting unemployment insurance. Five, ten dollars a week, five dollars a week, whatever is they say is -- that time. But they didn't have at that time even that much. So from the nine dollars a week that he, when he was working, he had to save so much and so much to wait until he starts to work again. (unintelligible) Which is about six, seven weeks without work at all.

When I came over here, he took me down from here, I was very weak. And I looked very bad. He got scared. He took me to that, to the doctor right away. And the doctor examined me and said your brother is not sick, but he may get sick. So he needs rest, he needs, he need at least three, four weeks not to do a thing. Just, I said, how can I do it, what shall I do it. I live, I live myself in a, in a bedroom, which I paid three dollars a month, four dollars a month. I can't take him in. And who is going to take care of him. So he said, well, the best thing is to send him to the country. So at that thing he find a place for nine dollars a week in, in the mountains. The first stop in the mountains, I

think I remember it was a, a little townhouse. Little townhouse. And, for nine dollars a week. And he himself, he himself found a job to press neckties. Also he got nine dollars a week. Nine, ten dollars a week. So he kept me there for three weeks, in the, on the farm, in the mountains. And I came back. (he gestures) I was...

SIGRIST: Strong.

LEVINE: Oy. So a friend of his, his friend, he became my friend, too. He send me up in a shop on, in Twelfth, if I remember Twelfth Street between Third Avenue, between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, I think. In a shop where they're making raincoats, which they, they, you know, for the rain, raincoat they call it. Raincoat. And they start to learn me, so, first of all they start to learn me how to work on a Singer machine. After two, three days, I was, I knew already, I learned already, and I was working for him for ten weeks. He gave me five dollars a week. After that it got slack. (he laughs) So, so I remember, I didn't save up money. I couldn't save up money to live. So I went every morning to find a job. The first job I find on Canal Street, corner Broadway, there was Rosewasser Brothers. Jewish people. Rosewasser Brothers, a big factory of three or four floors. They were making for the army leggings. Leg--, they call it leggings.

SIGRIST: Leggings. Sure.

LEVINE: Yeah. Leggings. And I got a job there. And they gave me five dollars a week. And the second week, I learned the second week, he says, "You could work now piece work." So at piece work, when I start doing piece work, and I knew already about it, I made seven dollars a week. Then I made eight dollars a week. I was working, we start to work eight in the morning, we stop half an hour lunchtime, and till six o'clock. This was I think forty-five, forty-five hours a week. So I work, so over there I start to make six dollars a week, seven dollars a week, eight dollars a week. I, I, I tried not to lose five minutes, even when I wanted to go to the toilet. (he laughs) I kept myself inside. I was afraid I, I lose five minutes.

SIGRIST: Can I ask you a question? You said in Russia that Jews couldn't own land...

LEVINE: No.

SIGRIST: ...and that they were basically the tradesmen in the town...

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...they were the tailor. What was the relationship like between the Gentiles and the Jews in your town in Russia?

LEVINE: Very good. Very good. You see, the government was anti-Semitic, but not the people. Among the people you find individuals. Individuals. But the, the majority was very good people. I remember Sunday they used to come into our house, the neighbor that lives on the one side, the other house. The other neighbor that lives on the other

side, they came into our house, watching how my father works. And talking. And they were eating in our house. And we were eating in their house. We are not supposed to eat not kosher. But they eat, they, they don't know already anything something like kosher. So bread, milk, meat could be not kosher. But bread and milk is, there is no such a thing not kosher. It's the same thing to, we eat, they eat, they together.

You know, I was here already, and the war broke out. And after the war broke, finished, and the revolution came in Russia. But the thing is that was established the Bolshevik government, there were bands of, of, of murderers -- went around from village to village killing our Jews. They didn't mean to clean out the Jews just for killing. To take away everything to find for themselves. Robbers. So a robber, when he robs you, he, he kills you. You should recognize him already, so he kills you. Now, when they came into our town, to our little selo, when they came in, the, some of the peasants let us know that they are, that they, they're coming, bands are coming, and they are afraid of them, too, because, because if they see that they are, they, they're protecting me, they'll kill him, too.

So my father, so when I left, I left still me father and mother, and I brought a little brother of ten years old, and a little sister of five, six years old. They all get wherever they could on themselves and went to the woods. And we have woods. When you go in the woods, you, unless you come into this place as oftenly, you know where you are. But when you are over there the first time or the second time you get lost. You cannot go out from there. You don't know which way to turn, this way or this way. (he gestures) It was trees and trees and trees, and, so we went to the woods. Now not only my father, all the rest of the Jewish people. About twelve, thirteen of them. And it was very cold. But they had to stay there. Now my father, after, on the, on the second, on the third day, he wanted to know, to see if the house is still on the, is still, is still there, is still, the house is still there.

Because if they didn't find nobody in the house, they burn the house, too. So my mother didn't let him out, (unintelligible) let him go. But he didn't listen to her. He went out. He went there. First of all he was, he was wearing, his clothes, was wearing like, like a peasant. The peasants have beards till here. My father has a beard like till here, and the clothing are just like a peasant. From cotton, from white cotton. So while he was, came into this, to the house, before he came into the house, he met the, the priest, the priest. Under the priest they call it - they call it a d'yakom [deacon]. You know, here is, when a priest has an official, (unintelligible) an official, what is under him. What they call him, what they call him?

SIGRIST: Like a curate? Like an assistant priest?

LEVINE: Assistant.

SIGRIST: An assistant?

LEVINE: An assistant priest.

SIGRIST: Okay.

LEVINE: He met assistant priest. So he says, "[Russian, not understood] from here. Because when they'll see you, when they will see you, they, they'll kill you." "How will they, they know that I'm, that I'm Jewish?" "Even a little kid will tell you, will, will call your name, so they will they will know already. You, don't stay, don't go on here, don't walk on, go back to the woods, because, because your, your, they're going to shoot like this." And they shoot out. They shoot out seven, seven Jewish people. They put them out to the, to a, to a tree, and they hold, shoot them (unintelligible). So while he was walking to the house, and he was a way already from the house about a half a block, three, three of these bandits, of the killers, of the murderers were walking from the other side. And they saw him.

So he saw them, too, that they're coming. He couldn't start, start to run, because they would right away know, they would shoot him. So he bent down and sat to tear up little grass. (he indicates) He, to show them that, that this is his, his farm, and this is his land, and he's not Jewish. He's, he's a peasant. And they stopped him off, and they start to talk to him. The neighbor sitting in, in his house, looking out from the window, he saw that. So he ran out. He says, "What do you want from my father?" You see? "Oh, that's your father? That's your-" "Yeah, that's my father. What do you want from him? He's a sick man."

So they left and they went away. Now if he wouldn't run out to tell them that he's, that's he's his father, they would shoot him. So when my father came to, to America, he left the house for him. He gave it, the house, the whole thing for him. I remember when he told me this story, we all chipped in to five dollars, my brothers, me, and we send him. So he receive twenty-five American dollars, which it was fifty rubles. Besides the house that he got. Because he saved his life.

SIGRIST: Wow, that's a great story.

LEVINE: That's a great story.

SIGRIST: But in general, in your experience, the relationship was good?

LEVINE: Yes. Yes. Yes. The majority of the people are, are good.

SIGRIST: One thing I haven't asked you yet before we get you to America is your mother's name.

LEVINE: My mother's name. My mother's name was Khaye. C-H-A-Y-E. That means life. Chaye, life. That, that a Hebrew word. Chaye. Chaye means life.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

LEVINE: Maiden's name was Rudnik. Khaye Rudnik. Rudnik, R-U-D-N-I-K. Rudnik.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about what your mother was like as a person?

LEVINE: As a person. There is, my father and mother was two persons, which everybody would be like here -- they were, they were never divor-, they were good. I never, I never, I cannot, I cannot remind myself, when I, when my father was little excited, when my father is bad, he's gotten. How they love each, each other, and how they love the, both of them the children. Nu. When we were here already, when I came, after me came another brother. My bro-- Sol, his name was Sol. Shleyne -- Sol. But he, at fifty-two he died. He died from a heart attack. Al-died when he was fifty-two years old. He came here, he was, he himself was thirteen years old, fourteen years old. But he was a tailor already. And he was working there, he was working also in the Ladies Garment Workers Union. He got married, he had two, three children, two sons and a daughter. That's his daughter over here. (he indicates) And Carol is the granddaughter.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother. Did your parents come to this country, did your mother come to America?

LEVINE: Yes. I, well, we brought they both, they all, so we heard, you know, we got the, then we began to receive letters. So we heard already from the letters or from the press, from the newspapers was doing there, how the, the people killing each other. Like today also, not in the same way, in Bosnia, what do you call it.

SIGRIST: So you wanted to get your parents to America?

LEVINE: Yeah. So, so they sent for them, and they came to Warsaw, Poland. Because already Poland was already an independent country. It was already Poland. So Warsaw was the capital of, like here we have Washington. So they came to Washington, to, to Poland. And we sent, they received from us money and, and also tickets. We bought tickets over here, and we sent them the tickets from the ship. Ship tickets. When they receive that, they went up, they went also, they, they, but they didn't have to steal the border. They, it was after the war. It was free.

SIGRIST: What year was this? What year did they come?

LEVINE: 1921. You count nineteen, they came 1921, and they were here twenty-five years. But...

SIGRIST: And they left...

LEVINE: But...

SIGRIST: They left from Warsaw, or did they go somewhere else to get the ship. Where did they get on the ship?

LEVINE: On the ship? They got, they got, yeah also it, it was also Germany. Hamburg. Hamburg. Hamburg was a town, and from there the ship. They, yeah, they came to Hamburg. And they came in 1921. This is

after the First World War. The Second World War broke out I think about '41, '39 or '40.

SIGRIST: Did your mother, did your mother like America when she got here?

LEVINE: Yes. Yes. They appreciate so much. I remember I used to come home, you know, I was twenty-three years old. Twenty-four, no, when they came I was already twenty-eight years old. I was eight years away from them. So, "You, you came late at night. You came by yourself. It's already nine, ten o'clock. It's so dark. Aren't you afraid?" "No, this is not Russia. This not Russia. Nobody, nobody--". At that time we, I came downtown Fifth Street between Avenue C and Avenue D. In New York, downtown, to, to my father's sister there. An aunt. People, people were there at, twelve o'clock at night was, at that time was no radio, no, no television. They, they were in the street. Summertime especially. In the street. Today here in Co-op City, I live here in Co-op City, why, it's getting dark, you see nobody in the street. I say here is nobody (unintelligible) when somebody is meeting you in the street, those ask you are you Jewish, are you Gentile, are you this, are you that.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause right now for just a couple of minutes. We're going to take a little break, and Peter's going to put another tape into the machine. And then we'll get you to America, because we haven't gotten you on the boat yet.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist. We're beginning Tape Two with Jack Levine who came from Russia in 1913 when he was twenty years old. It is Thursday, June 9th, and I'm at the recording studio at Ellis Island. I also want to say that Mr. Levine has a nice hot cup of tea now. We got him a cup of tea while we were breaking to put in a new tape. Mr. Levine, I want to ask you, do you remember what you packed to take with you to America?

LEVINE: What I packed? You know, a suitcase. They call it a chemodan. Chemodan. Chemodan. Chemodan. This is, my father made it himself. He was a carpenter, so he could make out of wood he could make anything. So he made me a chemodan the size of a, of a middle, a, of a middle box. Like they call it what?

SIGRIST: Like a trunk?

LEVINE: No, yeah, like a little trunk. Yeah. Little trunk. What I had inside? I had, because I figured that it --the -- it took me, usually it had to take me only three weeks to come here. But it took me two months. So I had to have stockings, underwear, a few shirts, a few underwear, and a two, three pair pants. I couldn't hold them in my hands, I had to have a suitcase. So this was my package.

SIGRIST: Say the name of the suitcase again, please? Cham, chamodan?

LEVINE: Chemodan.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

LEVINE: Yeah. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you spell it?

LEVINE: Chemodan. C-H-E-, E-M-O-D-A-N. Chemodan.

SIGRIST: Was it made out of any specific kind of wood?

LEVINE: Well, as the, it was the same material that they makin' here a suitcase. Same thing.

SIGRIST: Was there something that you took with you that you took because it was a memento of Russia? Something that you took to remember Russia by?

LEVINE: Something to remember?

SIGRIST: Some object, like a prayer book or something like that.

LEVINE: No. What we are, first of all, at that time I was very religious, too. Very religious. I had to take a Sider. It means the way you, the way you, every morning, every morning when you get up you got to pray to, you got to say a prayer. So I had a Sider, which is a prayer book, a pray book, prayer book, and phyl-- your, did you ever see Jewish people when they pray, they put on a little, over here a little a, a...

SIGRIST: The phylacteries?

LEVINE: Tefilin. Tefilin. And also on the left side, the left hand, (unintelligible). So I had this with me, because this is, this I needed every day. Before twelve o'clock. What else did I take? A Khumish. Khumish means the bible. So being on the ship, being on the, the little ship, being on the, the wagon, on the taxi, you had something with you to look at. We, we didn't have, we didn't have no newspapers. We didn't have no press -- with you. (he laughs) Or radio or television. So this, this, this was my, my belongings.

SIGRIST: Were you given any food to take with you?

LEVINE: Food?

SIGRIST: Food. Did, did your mother give food to take with you?

LEVINE: Yes. Yes. It was a sandwich. We call it here a sandwich. Call it sandwich, two slices of bread, something in between, something like cheese, or something like vegetables. This was only good for, for two days or three days. And the, the rest, it was, don't forget that I couldn't undertake such a hu--, such a huge, to, to, to come, to come from my, from my, where I was born to New York, just like that, like, like here I take the subway or the bus, and I go. It was arranged

through a manager. The manager accumulates a certain amount of people, like twenty-five or fifty or thirty or thirty-five. And you'd give him a hundred rubles, and he has to bring you here. Everything is arranged. The ship, the seat, the taxis, whatever is necessary.

When I came to, to Warsaw, I get off the train, I had somebody meet me, somebody met me, and took me to a kontor. [ph] kontor means a, a guest hall. A guest hall. And over there I find already people waiting, the same thing like me, going to America. So there was a restaurant, there was meals, and we ate as much as we could. We didn't have to pay. We had, everything was arranged. He had to bring us over here until the, my brothers took over, it was his respon, responsible [sic] to bring me here.

SIGRIST: So you went from Warsaw to Germany you said?

LEVINE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Correct?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you get the ship in Germany?

LEVINE: In Germany, we get the ship in Bremen. Bremen they say. Bremen.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the ship?

LEVINE: Mauretania. Hamburg, Hamburg.

SIGRIST: In Hamburg?

LEVINE: Hamburg.

SIGRIST: And tell me what you thought when you saw ship for the first time?

LEVINE: From, from Hamburg -- till we came to Hamburg from a German little town, we took a little steam shi-- a little steam ship for twelve hours or fifteen hours to bring us to Hamburg. And in Hamburg was Mauretania. Mauretania was a big British steam ship, which it was in the First World War, it got lost. It was, it was sunk. So, it, we got on the ship, it was Sunday, on a Sunday, and Friday we came here. Five days. It takes today with the steam ship seven or eight days to cross the Atlantic shore, the Atlantic Ocean. And at that time, eighty-four years ago it took us five days. Mauretania was -- I remember, it was shooting. Shooting. Not, not swimming.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me where you slept on the ship?

LEVINE: I slept on the floor. I was sick. I was lying on the floor. That's why I was robbed the ten rubles.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what it was like to be sick on the ship.

LEVINE: Oh. I wanted to vomit. (he laughs) With a headache. What think? But not. I didn't eat. For five days I didn't eat. They brought me the, the food to the, to the bed. You know, we were in a little roomke [sic] like this, and it was two beds. One on the top and the other one on the bottom. I was on the top. So, so the guy that was sleeping on the bottom, he, he took care of me. He took care of me, and he took the ten dollars, too. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about being on deck. Were you ever on deck of the ship? Did you ever go up on deck at all?

LEVINE: On the, on the deck?

SIGRIST: On the Mauretania.

LEVINE: On the deck? Yes. Yes. Of course, when I came to myself, I felt better, I, I eat something already, I came up to the deck. And I couldn't stay too long, because the ship, the, the, the waves of the water, the waves were so high like woo, woo. (he gestures)

SIGRIST: Now what were the other passengers like on the ship? Were they all Russians or were they different nationalities?

LEVINE: Yes. Yes. Mostly, it was an English ship, so the, the sailors and all the officials are, are British. Were British. And the passengers was from, from all over. (he laughs) From Poland, from Russia, from White Russia, from, from Ukrainia, from Italy, from Germany, from whatnot. It was about a thousand people maybe.

SIGRIST: Did the ship go directly from Hamburg to New York, or did it make a stop somewhere else?

LEVINE: No. From Hamburg to, to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Didn't stop in England at all...

LEVINE: No.

SIGRIST: ...to go...

LEVINE: No.

SIGRIST: ...across.

LEVINE: No. Oh, oh, I think, how, wait a minute, wait a minute. I came to England. England, England (unintelligible). And even London. Even, even from London we, we took a small boat, and it took us I think about a day and a night, something like fourteen, fifteen hours, and brought us to Hamburg. And in Hamburg was the steam ship Mauretania. So we went up, went up from the little ship right to the, to the, to the big steam ship.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this that you're travelling?

LEVINE: This was March. Purim, Purim. [Feast of Esther] March - Purim, Purim. March [not understood]. You know, I myself didn't know exactly the date. I knew the month that I was going. February, March. March. So I made myself the fifteenth, the fifteen of March. But when I went in I wanted to know exactly the date, which it was (unintelligible) not necessary. But I wanted to know. So I went in at 42nd Street in the library, and I asked them. And it took them maybe ten minutes look it up. They said, "A hundred years ago was the 3rd of March." Purim, you were, you was born in Purim? Yes, my mother said I was born in Purim. That's a hundred years ago.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came in to New York Harbor?

LEVINE: Statue of Liberty? This is the Statue of Liberty we are now.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing it when you were on the ship?

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. We were on the deck. We were, you know, people that was staying on the deck heard the announce-announce--. We, another, another three hours, another five hours we are, we are, we are, boy, we are being, we can, we are arriving. So everybody was staying and, and watching, looking around. So I remember that a lot of people like this here. "Oh, oh, Statue of Liberty there." "What they are pointing at already?" This is Statue, they call it in English Statue of Liberty. And you know what means Statue of Liberty? This is the mean, this is, this is a building of freedom.

SIGRIST: Now do you remember being processed here at Ellis Island. What do you remember about being processed at Ellis Island after you came into New York?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being here on Ellis Island?

LEVINE: When I came to Ellis Island, my brother supposed to be here and pick me up, take me over. A day passes, nobody came. Second day passes, nobody came. Of course, they gave us what to sleep and they gave us what to eat here at Ellis Island. Finally on the third day a man comes over to me, and he says he is from the Jewish "Akh Nosas Orphen" [PH]. That means the immigration that is on East Broadway. On East Broadway there was an office, they call it the immigration office. People that came from Europe, and they have nobody here, so they took care until you got a job. You got a home, you got to, a place. So if nobody came to take me down here, they send you back.

When the ship, the same ship that brought you here is leaving another three, four days later or five days later, is going back, I'm going back with it. So he, this man comes over to me, and he says, "Whom do you have?" I say, "I have two brothers." And, and, and not, not, I don't seen one of them. Not one of them. They say, give me your ad,

their address. So I gave them the address. 41 Canal Street. 41 Canal Street was a bank. They, they are, they are boarders. They lived, this month they lived here, the other month when they got a job somewhere else, they moved out and lived there. So they couldn't have a steady address, so they had an address of 41 Canal Street. Why they did? Because the few dollars that you earned, you, you, you, you try to save it in the bank. And the, and the bank, by doing this, had in mind to -- if you belong to the bank, if you, wherever you could save a dollar or two, you could belong to the bank. You, and that's how, so, so they put this, post office, and they put a man in a roomke like this which he handled the mail.

Because it, it was not my brother's alone idea. It was all the people that came from that, from that city, from Milska Gebirnye, from they all the same. They all belonged, they all had their money, their little money what they had in the bank, and the mail, because, because no mailman couldn't follow you where you, today you live here and tomorrow you live somewhere else. So you had an address in the bank.

So when I saw the man that he told us, told me where I give me their, their address, I told them, I said, no telephone. Who had a telephone that time. So he says, "This is a bank. You know what a bank is? In a bank, you keep money. And you put in money and you take out money, and you put in money and you take out money. That was is a bank for. You give me address of a bank." I says, "Yes." So he says, well, then I'll go to the -- I'll have to go to the bank and find out, because we have them their mail. Because while I was going there, it took me almost two months to get there, I was writing mail. I was writing letters. I was writing about a dozen letters. And they didn't receive any of them. They just happened not to come to the bank at that time. They did have no...(he laughs)

SIGRIST: No money, to...

LEVINE: When they came to the bank. And it happened just when my brother, my older brother, Sam, came also in the bank. And my brother knew that man because it's, it's already the, for five years, my brother was already five years. So he, he had, he had, he knew already enough about the Forwards, about the East Broadway, about everything. (he laughs) So you know what I mean, he's from the, from the immigrant society. So he comes over and says, "What are you doing here?" He says, "What are you doing here?" "Say, do you know you have a brother coming here?" Says, "Yes, yeah."

"Well, you did you get my mail here?" "Well, not yet." "Go, go ahead collect your mail. You'll maybe, you'll get ten, ten letters maybe." He runs down, stairs, it was all the way downstairs. You know, and he received a few letters. Four or five letters he received. I'm on the way. So now you, he's, he's here in Ellis Island already. He's there three days already. They'll send him back if you wouldn't come to the--. So he didn't go nowhere else, and he grabbed on by the bus right away, and he came to the Ellis Island, and they found me there, and he took me.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being kept here at Ellis Island. For instance, where did they feed you when you were here?

LEVINE: I remember it was like a, a cafeteria style. Yeah, a cafeteria style. You could, I think they -- I had a soup, I had to have there the soup. (he laughs) You know, us - us people from Europe, they, they, they lived on soup. What was the main, the main thing is soup. After the soup I had the coffee. Coffee, I never tasted coffee, I was afraid of coffee. So I took a glass of milk, and we had piece of cake. And this was about breakfast, I think we, we, I remember we had also cereal. I remember, I remember I didn't know what is cereal, what is cereal. I know soup. Soup is cooked, (unintelligible) like a cereal, cereal look like the soup. What is cereal. Cereal is in the morning, as they explain it. It's in the morning like a soup.

Take it, ask for cereal. You'll like it. You'll love it. So I took cereal. (he laughs) So they gave me cereal. So when they asked me what kind of cereal, I said I don't know what kind of cereal. (he laughs) Well, they talk to me Jewish. I say, all right. They have, they must have told me they have farina, they have oatmeal, they have what. I said, "I don't know. You have to tell me, you have to just give me, I'll eat anything." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you have to go through any kind of medical exams when you were here? Did you go through any kind of medical exams...

LEVINE: Yeah, right here. When I came down from the, from the ship, I had to pass a medical. So it was the same thing. They put me on a side, where they put people on a side at which they find something is the matter with them. That they can't pass it. We cannot pass me. I, I, nobody tells me anything. But I here from other people what, what that means, they put me on the side. So after that I came over to this desk and I said I want to talk to the doctor. Say, "Well, where are you talking? You're talking Germany or Russia or--" say I talk Yiddish. Yiddish, all right, sure. Yiddish. He shows me to the doctor. I said, "Why do you, what, do I pass? That pass, he says, "No". What was the matter? Well, I cannot tell you. We don't know what the matter is. But we, it was three doctors. I remember when you went there, one, one doctor examined you, and then another doctor examined you, and then a third doctor examined you. They all listened to my heart, they all listened to the, all, all, all around. And they, they didn't pass me.

I said, "What was the matter? Am I sick." "No, we cannot tell you that you are sick. You are not a sick man. But you just, you just, you, you need, you must, you must, you, you are doctor's care. You need another doctor's care." I said, "What's the matter with me." (unintelligible) "You, did, did you eat lately, lately did you eat." "I didn't eat for three weeks I didn't eat. I just lived on a piece of bread. A piece of bread. So, so what is going to be, going to send me back?" Says, "No (unintelligible). You send them back unless nobody will come to pick you over. But if somebody will, you have two brothers here, they'll come, they'll bring you over." "But did I pass the doctor?" "You see, you, you didn't, you didn't reject your name, you're

not rejected. You - you can come in, but somebody has to take you off. We cannot leave, we cannot let you off alone, all alone."

Well, when my brother came he took me off again. They give me right to my brother. So I remember my brother then told me. He said, your brother, my brother asked the doctor again the same thing. He says, "Your brother is not a sick boy, but he may get sick if you didn't, don't take care of him. For three, four weeks he doesn't have to do anything but just rest." So he sent me to the mountains for nine dollars a week.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island, did they do tests on your ear, because your ear was bad.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well, they did (unintelligible). I told them. I told them about the ear. And he says, "All right, your ear, your other ear is very good." Not, not (unintelligible) also this one, of course, because it's, the doctor said, "What do you want? You have only one ear. It's a hundred years already." (he laughs) He says, "All the hearing is only on one ear. He's got (unintelligible) (he laughs) He's got (unintelligible).

SIGRIST: Was it crowded at Ellis Island when you were here in 1913?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Lots of people?

LEVINE: Lots of people. I went off from the ship, we were at that maybe, I, I know being five days on the ship, I, I imagine it was maybe more that seven or eight or eight hundred. But I know I, I, -- Jewish people alone was at that time about five hundred. Italians and Russians, peasants, were a few hundred, too. But mostly they were Jewish people.

SIGRIST: You already said that you had never seen cereal before.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there anything else that you saw here at Ellis Island that you had never seen before?

LEVINE: No.

SIGRIST: No? Just the cereal and, and the coffee you said.

LEVINE: Coffee.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well, tell me what it was like to see your brother? When he came to get you, how did you feel when you saw your brother?

LEVINE: Oh. First of all, when my brother left home he was eighteen years old. So he was here five years before I came. So he was twenty-three. He was twenty-three. I didn't recognize him, because he left with a face like this. (he indicates) With a color, beautiful color. I saw him, pale, fallen, and he, and (unintelligible) he was full, he was,

"Shleyim," I say, "You got smaller? You got you, I think you need the country, not me." I said, he said, "No, I feel all right, I feel all right." But, of course, he didn't feel all right. He worked hard and he didn't eat. Finally, you know, at that time, I remember the, I remember the, the automats. You remember the automats in New York. Were just about nine years ago they went away. But at that time, coffee, coffee with a roll, even three in the morning, have coffee, cup of coffee with a, with a tele-- with a soup at lunch time. And, and supertime another cup of coffee or a soup.

Because the, the five dollars a week what you got, you had to, it had to be for something else, too. It had to be for stocking, to buy underwear, to buy stocking, to, to buy the, the rent. The rent was three or four dollars a month. (he laughs) So, you see, naturally he told me that when he came over here, so the people that he met here, we had an uncle, too. Because his wife was my father's sister. But he was so poor, they all worked by the tailoring, by the garment, Ladies Garment-- Ladies Garment Union. And the earnings what they made, they made about, about seven, eight hundred dollars a year.

It was so little, it was, it didn't, I remember one thing, I, I never forget. My aunt found a dollar on the-- it was slack time. Slack time. There was no work in the shop. You had to wait until start to work, another week, another week, or another week. So she found a dollar on the stairs. They were living on the fourth floor. She found a dollar on the stairs. When her husband came home, she showed him she found a dollar. She says, "What shall I do. Who do I, I have to tell somebody, I have to ask somebody. Somebody lost a dollar. Somebody lost a dollar."

SIGRIST: Wait, wait. Stop right there. Stop with your story. We need to flip the tape one more time, and then you can continue with your story. Peter...

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

[long pause]

SIGRIST: All right, we're beginning Side Two, Tape Two with Jack Levine. You're aunt found the dollar, she brought it upstairs, she showed it to your uncle.

LEVINE: So her husband says, "Don't tell everybody that you find a dollar, because when you going to tell that you find a dollar, well, whoever you talk to, they'll say, 'Oh, I lost it, oh, I lost it.' But when you hear somebody will say she lost a dollar, so you'll know that, that this is the person, that show the dollar. But when you tell them before (unintelligible) everybody can say - can say, 'I lost a dollar.' " (he laughs) So I say, "What's about, what's about a dollar. What?" All right, somebody lost a dollar, a dollar. She's going to ask, she's going to ask everybody who lost a dollar. (unintelligible) (he laughs) You going to hear first who lost the dollar. Then you'll be sure that this is the person.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you saw in New York in 1913 that, that you had not seen in Europe before. How was New York City a different place than Europe had been?

LEVINE: Oh. (he laughs) When I came in from the ship, I was, I was dressed very funny. Dressed, that's what they wear outside, in Europe. A kutchma. That means a ha-- that means a -- a fur hat. Kutchma. It's so high. With the, with the boots that they bought me by a shoemaker which I lost my shoes. So it was -- the boots was not, that was not shined for how long. And when my brother took the subway on, on the, when you get off Ellis Island, you go, you walk up to the Third Avenue Elevator [sic]. That's how the, the, at that time, Third Avenue Elevator. So people looked at me. One says to the other, "Look at him, look at him. A Yiddishe Yide-- (he laughs) He an immigrant, an immigrant, an immigrant." I look funny. (he laughs)

He brought me to Fifth Street. We got off Fifth Street. It was a subway station near Fifth Street. Not a subway, but an elevator, Third Avenue Elevator. And between Avenue C and Avenue D, Fifth Street, 721 East Fifth Street, (he laughs) my, my, my, my, my father's sister, my own -- aunt, we were living there. It was on the fourth floor. Three, was not three. Yeah. A kitchen, a, and a little living room where they, they were sleeping in the living room. And another room for the children. She had two children, two boys. So she brought me in. And I was there first ten days until my brother got a place for me in the mountains for two weeks or three weeks, I don't remember.

And then I came back. I felt good, I looked good, and I lived with my aunt for two years. And during these two years, I tried to do all kind of work. I was -- until I learned how to -- how to be an operator in a shop. And my brother told me, "Don't forget you are -- when I came over here, the people what I met asked me, 'Are you crazy? You, now you picked a time to come here. People are dying from hunger here. Couldn't you wait another year when it's better time' It's very bad times. Thousand of people walking around without jobs. They have no jobs." "When I heard this," he says, "When I had money I would go right back."

Because we were not rich home. We had bread, we had soup, we didn't have no money. We couldn't, we, we couldn't, we couldn't earn no money because there was no industry, nothing to do. But we had food. We lived between, between peasants which they, they, they have their own food. And where, where my father makes that table or that chair or anything, we don't get paid with money. They have no money. They didn't have any money. They paid with food. And there were people from little, bigger towns, used to come and, and buy whatever you had left. Whenever you had enough, more than enough, my, my, my, my father made there this table. He would get for this table, maybe around three dollars. Three rubles or four rubles. So he get paid with food. Before the amount that maybe ten rubles. Maybe ten dollars. It was more than money. So they didn't starve. We had money in the, we had what to eat.

We, we had our own house. We didn't have to pay rent. And then we were tenants. We were live, we lived by peasants, you know, there are rich peasants and poor peasants. The rich peasants have three, four, five

houses. And who are the, the tenants? Jewish people. When the tenants didn't pay no rent, they didn't put them out to the street, on sidewalk. I, like they do it here. You live one year, you live two years, you live three years, you never paid a dollar rent. You didn't have it, you have no money. Unless you accumulated somehow some money, you gave it to him. But they never put out on the street a tenant. You could live three, four years without rent.

And you had what to eat. You didn't have no money. You, you went, saw sometimes, summertime you couldn't, didn't go, I didn't have no shoes. Who wears shoes on summertime? You goin'-- a pair of shoes cost three rubles, four rubles. So you had to have, you had, you had to have a jacket, and underwear, you have a shirt or a blouse or anything, [not understood] that's enough. So you did, you were not dressed, you wore your, you didn't have to, you didn't have to go to a restaurant and pay money for food. You had everything, a house, your mother. Especially in our house we had plenty to eat. You know why?

Beside my father that made carpenter work, my mother was, was, was also a tailorin . She used to make blouses. She was always by the hand. We had no machine. Like over here they're working with the, with the Singer machines. Did you ever see a Singer machine? Always by the hand. She made for the, for the, for the women, blouses, skirts, and something else. Yeah. She was not paid with food. And when the, and when the, the kremer [shop keeper], they call it the kremer. Kremer means people that ran little groceries. So the little grocery runs the wife, and he goes around from house to house and buys, he -- whatever he has to sell, where you make soups or you make bread or you make khala, you make, or whatever, he -- they had cash. Where did they have cash for, from? If there was no, nobody had money there in the little, in the little village, where did they have cash. They had, some, somebody has, had a little money, like (unintelligible). You know a state has about twenty little towns around, huh? Now there is little industry somewhere else. So, so I, I forgot what they call them, people that they bring in things over here, too. They bring here things, this comes from Philadelphia, this comes from the west side, this comes from, from Wash-, from whatnot...

SIGRIST: They import things.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. That's how they live.

SIGRIST: So when you came to New York, New York was experiencing bad times economically in 1913.

LEVINE: Economically, bad times. Bad times.

SIGRIST: But you did eventually get work in, in the, the textile factory, correct? You made raincoats and things.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever join a union? Were you eligible to join a union when you worked in the factory?

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Could you talk a little bit about what that was like?

LEVINE: You know, at that time when immigrants came every day, every, I think three, four times a week ships coming in with immigrants. So New York, the New York industry was with the Ladies Garment Workers, and the garment workers, the garment trade, the garment trade. Whether it's women, ladies' garment work, or men's garments work. So, I know what happened with me. We, as my, I walked with, I walked with my brother in the street. (he laughs) You know I live on the east side, in Fifth Street for, so there is Seventh Street, corner. There's Avenue B is Thompkins, they call it Thompkins Square Park. Yeah. We used to go into the park every day. Every day, summertime.

So there are people always in the park, talking, talking about the trades, about the unions, about this, about that. Politics, whatnot. A man -- and my brother meets a friend, and he introduced me. He says, "This is my brother just came from Europe. Not working yet, looking for a job." "What does he work?" "Anything. He has no trade in the head. He, he, he can fake any job." He says, "I'll take him, I have a shop in Twelfth Street between Third Avenue and Eighth Avenue, Twelfth Street, there is a shop where they making garments -- wear, rainwear. Rainwear. Okay. So we're making a date, and we meet one day, and he takes me over there, and introduced me.

So where I went there - and I sai-- it's not a big shop. Small shop. But about nine, ten people were working there by the machines. And he comes over to a man. He says, "You have, I see near you is an empty machine. Nobody is working here?" He says, no, nobody working. We had, we had enough with that. We don't, we don't need any more. All right. So I says, "Who is the boss here?" Well, the boss is in the office, a little room over there, in the office in the front. So I ask him, can I go in there, and can you go in, and I ask him, I want to talk to him. He says, "Well, what do want to talk to him." He says, tell me, and I'll tell him. He says, "All right, I'll tell you. He should get some, something to do here." Says, "Well, I'll ask you the boss. I said--. So he brings in the, the, -- a Yidel. He said, "Lozmir reyden Yiddish." (unintelligible) Let's talk Jewish. Lozmir reyden Yiddish.

"I, we are not, we haven't got too much work for them. But as you're telling me that he just came in and he needs a job and he has to learn something, yes. I'll take him in. Providing one of them of these operators that's working here will show him what, how to do it." So one of them said, "Yes, near me there is an empty machine. Nobody is working there. So I can show him, and I can, and I, I, and I can sit near me as long as he wants, and he can learn. And then, whether he can work here or whether he knows already the trade, he can, he can find somewhere else." So that's how it happened. He took me in, and they were, so he said, but, so after my brother says it, "Well, how much you going to pay him for the, for the." He says, "Before you speak I don't, I don't know how much I'll pay him. But I'm going to show it to him."

So he puts me in machine, and first he tells me how to go around with the machine. How to put the cotton in, how, how to put, the shuttle inside, everything. He put me everything. And he gave me, he takes little rags, piece of pa-, piece of cloths, piece of rags. And show me how I should, I should, I should work on it. And he saw that I, that I am doing it all right. After the week he takes out five dollars, and gives me five dollars. He says, "I never thought that I'll have to pay you. But you're wor-, you're wor-, whatever you did for me, it's worth five dollars." He give me five dollars. So I was working for the man for about four or five months until it was, until it, they made all the orders and it was slack. Got slack. Now what it means, slack? Slack, it means you have no more, the work is finished. You have to wait till new orders come in. Now...

SIGRIST: How long were you working before you joined a union? Or did you join a union?

LEVINE: So, yeah. So this was an open shop. That's why he, he was allowed to take me in and show me, it was an open shop. But three weeks later after he showed me how to work, a man comes in and he says he is from the union. So the boss says, "If you are from the union, you should have told me that you want to come up in my, my place. I would tell you yes or no." I said -- he said, "You bet-- when I'll tell you that I come up from the union, you, you will never say yes. (unintelligible) You say always no. So I don't tell this thing. I come up. Unless, unless you, you call the police on me, you take me down to the policeman, but I could, I want to talk to the workers. (he laughs)."

So that's how it happened. He came up, and he, he, so he came up and he said to the boss, "Do me a favor. I want to talk to them just fifteen minutes." So the boss comes over there and stop the power. And all the machines stop, the power, and they start to talk. Eh. From, for me it was something new. It was - "You, you're working long hours, you're working on your, your everything what the boss thinks that you're worth, but the, everything that, you, you, you, you work with your hands, but, but, but, but, but the, the, beside it comes to money, it the boss, it the boss decides how much you should get."

And, one man from the operator stands up and says, "We are not beginning to, we are not starting to work now. You'll take us all in the union, we become union people. And this, the delegate that came from the union says, "That's what I mean. That's what I mean." And he stopped, we went down, and we were registered. We paid, every, everybody pay, but I didn't pay. Because I told them I just started to work. (he laughs) Just started. They said, "No, later on, later on. It cost four dollars. Cost four dollars, you become a union man."

SIGRIST: What was the name of the union?

LEVINE: The Ladies Garment Workers Union -- it was - rain - rain-- raincoat is not the Ladies Garment Workers Union. Raincoat belongs to the man's garment workers union. But then, then I was working by skirts. Then I was working by blouses. And then I find a job on, on Canal Street -- corner Canal, corner Broadway -- a factory that they're making, making

leggings. Leggings for the army. For the army. Oh, the, it was, it was about the First World War broke out (unintelligible), and there was no slack. They were working all year. All year. They were working about three, four hundred people. And some of them are made eleven or twelve dollars a week. Some, some people work there, was working there for ten years already. They had factories in the, in Philadelphia, they had factories in New Jersey, they had factories here in New York. And I was working in Twelfth Street, in Canal Street, for two years. I made, they started also with five dollars, but I start to make piece work, seven dollars, nine dollars, eight dollars, according...

SIGRIST: When you worked for the leggings factory, were you still, was that under the control of the Ladies Garment Union?

LEVINE: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: It was.

LEVINE: Yes. I, it was, it was a -- nobody, nobody had to know that. You know it. Because, because the union, the work union was very treyf - - not kosher in the factories.

SIGRIST: So there are union workers and non-union workers in the same factory?

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you very active in the union as time went on, or just, you were just a member?

LEVINE: No, no. No. I, when I learned the, I remember, I remember when I was going home, we were working till six o'clock. Six o'clock it was time to stop. We came home, it was already seven, seven o'clock, tired, hungry. But then, later on, later on I became active. Why? Because I find a job in Mount Vernon. You heard of Mount Vernon?

SIGRIST: Mount Vernon?

LEVINE: Yeah. I found (unintelligible) Mount Vernon. It was dresses. And it was a union shop there. And I was there, I was there, the, including me were three or four people Jewish. They were also Italians. Italian woman, Italian girls. So they made that shop for a union shop until before I came there. When I came in there it was an advertising -- an ad. You know, that time was we had Jewish papers. Before there's the Morning Journal. So the Morning Journal was always ads, job ads, jobs. Ads. So I read about it, and I went, I went there, and I find a job, and I stayed on that job for a couple years. And I made at there, twelve dollars, there I began with twelve dollars week work. Then after a, a few weeks I start to work piece work. I make nineteen dollars, twenty dollars, I start to make.

SIGRIST: Things were getting better at that point.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: We're going to be ending in just a few minutes, and I want to make sure that I ask you when you got married. When did you get married?

LEVINE: I was married, I was twenty-nine years old.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

LEVINE: It was twenty, '22. 1922.

SIGRIST: And what...

LEVINE: When I came 1913 it was about eight, nine years there already.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of your wife? What was her name? Your wife.

LEVINE: My wife's name?

SIGRIST: Yes.

LEVINE: My wife's name was Becky.

SIGRIST: And her, and her maiden name?

LEVINE: I forgot. She's dead seventeen years.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe...

LEVINE: The whole, the whole family, they--they were --you see, that's why I feel so bad. I feel, I envy those people that are left already, because I have to go through it anyway. I, I can't make it another hundred. I know today, today or tomorrow, every day, every day I feel I'm, I am on the way. I am on the way to go. So we were five brothers, one sister. They're all gone. My parents, all gone. First my par-, I am only, the only one (unintelligible) that live. I have cousins, I have cousin, everybody, I'm all alone.

SIGRIST: What were the names of your children? You married Becky, and how many children did you have?

LEVINE: One son. (he laughs) He's...

SIGRIST: And on tape can you say his name? For us on tape can you say your son's name, please?

LEVINE: Milton. Milton Levine. Milton Levine. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And did he have any children? Does your son have children?

LEVINE: One son. I had one son, he had one son. He's right here. (he indicates)

SIGRIST: And what is Milton's son's name?

LEVINE: Dave.

SIGRIST: David. Did you ever go back to Russia to visit? Did you ever go back to Russia to visit?

LEVINE: No. No.

SIGRIST: Did you ever want to?

LEVINE: No. No. From the very first day I came here, I suffer, there were times that I went up to, you know, years ago there were jobs, on the wall, signs. Hanging off little, little, little piece of paper. An operator want-- a presser want-- a clerk boy, a helper, sweep, a floor sweeper. There were times I went down, I went down to look for a job. Slack time, in my shop finished. I got to wait another four, five weeks until you can start to work. But I look for a job. So I look for a job. Then up in a place I saw a sign that they want a boy. I come up and they say, "Who puts that sign out? I didn't put that sign out." So the other one says - I don't know if his partner or what, "So, what, what are you telling, to telling me about a sign. The man came, the boy comes [sic] up, ask for a job. Have you got a job for him? Give it to him. You have no job, what are you arguing with me who puts that sign out?"

He says, "Why do you have to argue. I'll work for ten cents an hour. Give me a job. Ten cents an hour." "What are you going to do with ten cents?" I go in the automat, and I buy for five cents a cup of coffee and for five cents a roll, a better roll than you buy here in the grocery store at that time. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't be hungry. It was five cents. So he took me up. He took me up and he gave me seven dollars. Not ten cents an hour. Gave me seven dollars. He sent me there, he sent me here with an order to, because he was, he was - he was making little garments, children, children clothing. So the stores that he was working for were on Bro-- some of them on Broadway, some of them in Brooklyn, some of them in the Bronx. So he sent me to, to bring it to, to there and bring it over here. I was running around. He gave me five, seven dollars a week.

SIGRIST: We need to end now, Mr. Levine. But thank you very much for coming out here. You've been wonderful. You have an incredible memory and it was nice that your family brought you out here. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Jack Levine on Thursday, June 9th, 1994 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Thank you.

EI-478/LEVINE