

EI-521  
IRVING BASKIN  
BIRTHDATE:  
INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 4, 1994  
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 83  
RUNNING TIME: 54:25  
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.  
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

RUSSIA, 1923  
AGE: 12

SHIP:  
PORT:  
RESIDENCES:  
? RUSSIA: STRECHIN  
? US: NY, NY

BASKIN: This here?

LEVINE: Oh, that's just to-yeah, that was just to say that you'd like to be interviewed.

BASKIN: Ah.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm here today on August 4th, 1994. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm about to speak with Irving Baskin, who came from Russia when he was 12 years old in 1923. And I look forward to hearing everything you can remember and I'll ask you the questions and whatever you remember, be great.

BASKIN: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay, Mr. Baskin, could you state your birth date first?

BASKIN: I was born in Russia, a little town. The name was Streshin.

LEVINE: Could you spell that? Any Russian words or-

BASKIN: Well, I-

LEVINE: -words that I might-

BASKIN: -might be able to spell it. S-T-R-E-C-H-I-N. Streshin. That's a small town. And the next main city was Zhlobin.

LEVINE: Can you spell that?

BASKIN: Z-L-O-B-I-N. And it was about 20 miles from our town.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, Streshin, how-how would you describe it?

BASKIN: Well, the main capitol of Streshin was Homle. They call it Gomel. They call it Homle Gomel Gubirniya. And, well-

LEVINE: What-what was it like? What-what do-

BASKIN: In my town?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASKIN: The most you said of my town--. You see, this building has 22 floors. You take three floors and this is the town.

LEVINE: [laughs] And-and so everybody lived with the houses attached? Or were they separate?

BASKIN: No, they were separate. Everybody had a small house. There was nothing--only a ground floor house, you know. Nothing upstairs. And we had two rooms. Everything was--we all lived--there was about--there was me, my brother, sister, my mother, my grandfather. And there was another aunt. We all lived in one house. And as far as sleeping is concerned, we slept four in a bed. And one slept--there was an oven and then there was a--like a--

LEVINE: Shelf.

BASKIN: A shelf and somebody used to sleep on top of that. It was pretty crowded. And we were very poor, very poor.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you slept on?

BASKIN: Well, we--they--we had a bed. We had a bed but two used to sleep in the front and two on the--on the other side.

LEVINE: Wow.

BASKIN: And as far as the cleanliness, there was a toilet outside. We had no sanitation whatsoever. And whenev--whenever it used to snow--it's not like here in America--the snow remained until when it got warm. And at times, the snow was so high that if I looked through a window now, you couldn't see nobody. That's how high it was. One--once--[chuckles] one time I remember a funny thing. We had a--a Russian man, he was a hunchback. And the time--that time, we had a lo--lot of snow. So we looked out a window and we saw so--walking--all you saw was his hat. And my mother thought it was a pig. [chuckles] It was really--that was really high.

LEVINE: She thought it was a pig?

BASKIN: Yeah. All we saw was bl--something black walking and we didn't see him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASKIN: And we had it pretty rough there. We had nothing to eat. I used to eat 'days'. See, my father was in the Russian Japanese War. He left me when I was four years old and I haven't seen him until he sent for us. During the war then we—we had no communication whatsoever.

LEVINE: What—how—what was your father's name?

BASKIN: My father's name was Jack, Yankel in Jewish. Jack. And he told us stories. It was unbelievable. He used to—

LEVINE: Tell me some that you remember—

BASKIN: He told us that they had nothing to eat during the war there when he was a soldier. They used to eat rats, horses, dead horses, whatever they could get a hold of. It was really—

LEVINE: Where was he during the war?

BASKIN: In Japane—Japan.

LEVINE: He was in Japan.

BASKIN: Russ--Japanese, yeah. Then from there he went to America and we had—didn't hear from him for about seven, eight years. Then—then we heard from him and he sent for us and we traveled quite a lot. But now I started to tell you about the—how rich we were. We had nothing to eat. I—I used to eat 'days' - one there—

LEVINE: [unclear]

BASKIN: I used to eat—

LEVINE: [unclear]

BASKIN: I used to eat days, one day by my aunt, one day by my uncle. And it was really rough, really rough.

LEVINE: So—

BASKIN: But we managed.

LEVINE: Now, your grandfather—whose father—

BASKIN: Yeah, my grandfather, that's my mother's father. We lived with him. He was a tailor. And we didn't even deal with money. I don't remember dealing with money. We used to—let's say like you wanted a pair of pants done or a suit or whatever. And they used to give us potatoes or flour. You know, things like that. We had one cow and about two families lived on that cow.

LEVINE: You milked the cow.

BASKIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASKIN: And it was really rough, like I said. I remember my father made me a pair of pants from burlap. That is really cool. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Yeah.

BASKIN: And it was really bad until we—we got here in America, of course.

LEVINE: Well, tell me—your grandfather, what was his name?

BASKIN: His name was Mayshe-Moisha . He was a tailor there. I had an uncle. He used to be a cantor. If he was here, he would be very wealthy. He had a beautiful voice. I remember him.

LEVINE: Well, your grandfather, do you—do you—he was your mother's father. So what was his last name?

BASKIN: Sloven.

LEVINE: S—

BASKIN: S-L-O-V-E-N or V-I-N. You know, in America, they—they change the—

LEVINE: And—

BASKIN: When—when I came here I was 12 years old and one—one of my aunts—one of my aunts took me to register to school. I was 12 years old.

LEVINE: Wait. Before we talk about America, let's just first talk about Russia.

BASKIN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And then we'll move along. Okay. Your grandfather, do you remember any experiences with him in Russia?

BASKIN: Oh, there was nothing really exciting. You know, he was a tailor, a nice old man. And he—

LEVINE: [unclear].

BASKIN: He was very—he was good to us, you know. He kept us, the whole family in—in his house because we had no place to live. And I had a few aunts there.

LEVINE: They were in the house too?

BASKIN: No.

LEVINE: No.

BASKIN: Just—just his family. And let's see. What else? But ask me something.

LEVINE: Okay. S—so your mother's name?

BASKIN: My mother's name was Sadie.

LEVINE: Sadie. And—

BASKIN: Yeah. Well, we—we traveled from—when my father sent for us, the few things I can remember very well. It took us about two months to get here. We stopped in Germany, you know, and England and we—when we're on board ship—this is a funny thing—some of us were sick, seasick, you know. And then, mind you, this is going back 70 years, more than 70. And the sailors—you think of—you think of things going on now with the robberies and—and all that, politics and things. That sailors went around and they sold us oranges. We never s—I saw an orange at that time. We never knew what oranges or bananas. We didn't have that. A dollar a piece for one orange! And we, greenhorns, we took it. And then when we got to Ellis Island, we had to stay there for two weeks. They wouldn't let us out because we had—pardon the expression. We had lice.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASKIN: You know, the—no such thing in—where we were that they had the bathtubs or any—anything like that. We used to go swimming, of course, in the lake. And the women had a—their—the—well, the—Jew—I don't know what you know. The Jewish religion, even over here, they go to mikvah. They call it a mikvah. They had a mikvah there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you go to school in Russia?

BASKIN: I just went to Hebrew because we couldn't go to—we couldn't afford to go to school. We had to pay money. We couldn't afford it. I—I almost became a rabbi. When I came here I was bar mitzvah. You know what bar mitzvah? And when I got up to say the prayers and all that they knew right away I wasn't a—an American. But what I'm trying to bring—come back to now, I went to register to school. So we had a woman that's my aunt. That aunt took me. I was 12 years or so, was a big boy already. She asked him, "What's his name?" She knew me as Itcha [PH]. So, luckily, they—she says, "We'll call him Irving." She could have given me some other fancy name. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

BASKIN: And they—they put me four—in—in kindergarten. Kindergarten, mind you. I was there a few days and they put me for a—of course, I was already a—I—I wasn't a baby. And all along, it was rough going.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: Even coming here, we had it rough. My father had a job. He was a plasterer's helper. At that time, they had to lug everything. I once watched him work and I couldn't—couldn't take it. Now, they got all different kind of thing, elevators and all that. But he had a job that when it rained, he couldn't work. It was always outside. When it snowed, they wasn't working. And when it was cold they couldn't work. When it was hot, it was hard to work and the rest of the time there was no work.

LEVINE: [laughs]

BASKIN: Really, we were on welfare. It was bad, very bad.

LEVINE: So now, who traveled with you?

BASKIN: I came here with my mother, one brother and a sister. And when we came here my mother had a—another s—she had a baby, another boy. This little boy is now 70 years old.

LEVINE: How—well, what are your brother and sister's names?

BASKIN: My—my one brother I have is—his name is Nat. He—that's the one that came—

LEVINE: With you.

BASKIN: —with me. And the other one is David and my sister's name is Rose. My sister is still alive, thank God. She's in Florida. She's 86. I'm going to be 84 in—in September 24th.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow.

BASKIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, going back to Russia again, what did you do for enjoyment? Do you remember any pleasant times?

BASKIN: Enjoyment, oh, yes. Yes, there was one—one particular thing. We—

LEVINE: Here.

BASKIN: Oh, sorry. I keep playing with that thing. We used to play—we used to make our own ball. You know, a ball, we used to make it out of—with cloths. You know, make it a—with a lot of rags. And finally, when we had a ball, there was one game in particular I remember. We didn't have no baseball. I didn't know about baseball. We used to get—let's say the—this is a wall and let's say there's four, five boys. One boy—boy throws the ball against that wall and whoever catches it, then the others have to run. You know what I mean? And then whoever catches the ball, and the nearest one that he sees that he could—he used to hit him with the ball. And that ball was a—a hard ball, e—even harder than a baseball. Much harder. That was one game we played.

Now, were there other games? I don't still - I don't remember. We used to go swimming in the river. We made our own life preservers, you know, wh-when you-want to learn how to swim. I remember one time [clears throat] we used to make-we used to get grass, tall grass, you know. And big, tall gra-let's say about this high, about three feet-three feet -- to put down a bundle here and a bundle here, two bundles. And we tied it around here and tied it around on both sides, both ends. And then you got-we used to lay down-lay down on the-on this-on the -- on the cour-on the str-- whatever it was. And-

LEVINE: And that held you?

BASKIN: And that held you up. And one time, I remember one of the cords split open. That's how I learned how to swim. And I started to paddle with my hands and that was it. What else can I remember? There's a lot of things I remember. Most of the things were bad. [chuckles]

LEVINE: What were kind of bad things?

BASKIN: Excuse me?

LEVINE: What kind of-

BASKIN: Well, like a-we had nothing to eat. We hardly had anything to wear and, like I told you, I used to wear my sister's shoes. And it was from hand to mouth. And another thing I remember, they don't do it here. That's-that's not-for health's sake. I remember my aunt had a-it was-had a child. And you know how they used to feed him? They used to take-they didn't have no cakes or fancy things, used to take bread, take it in their mouth, chew on it and take it out and feed the child. And that-and-and yet, we all were healthy. Here, you get a little scratch and, bingo, you got to go to the doctor already. [pause] Well, let me see now. The-cleanliness was pretty rough. That's why they kept us in Ellis Island, you know. We came here with lice.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember in Russia any instances when somebody was ill and-

BASKIN: Yes.

LEVINE: -they called for some kind of treatment?

BASKIN: I'll tell you about there - being ill. We didn't have no hospital in my town. The-we had a-a-a druggist. He was the-the main chief druggist. One day, my mother went to visit a neighbor. And the neighbor had a calf, a cow.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: And that damn cow attacked my mother. And he-she -- the calf hit her so-I don't know-and that's-was bleeding for two days. We couldn't get a doctor. Just continued bleeding and finally, this-they called him a felsher ,a felsher. That's a-

LEVINE: Pharmacist.

BASKIN: -a pharmacist. That's right. And he helped her, you know, and thank God. Over here, that would have been a big case.

LEVINE: Yeah. [chuckles] Do you know what he did for her?

BASKIN: Nothing. Nothing. I don't even think he came to visit her.

LEVINE: The felsher?

BASKIN: No, not the-oh, the felsher, you mean?

LEVINE: The one [unclear].

BASKIN: Oh, well, he-he must have given her some kind of a medications or compresses or whatever and-and she was all right. And then again, as far as water was concerned, these people now out there in Africa, they know what water means now. We had problems like that too. We had no water, running water in the house. We had a-a well. And out of that well, most of the town had to get the water from there.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother doing laundry?

BASKIN: Oh, yes. We-we- there was -- I remember how she did laundry. She used to-we used to go by-by the lake, not in the house because you had to use a lot of water. Used to go by the lake on the side and stand- there was a-a big stone, a rock, whatever you call it. And they used to wash it and used to hit with a-with some wood, you know, and then rinse it out and hang it up and-

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And what chores did you have when you were a-a boy? What chores or duties did you have?

BASKIN: Oh, what chores? I was a relig--. Well, I-well, I used to go to Hebrew school, you know, and really-really nothing. I mean, II didn't -there was nothing to-for us to do. It wasn't a thing that we could go to work, get a job somewhere. When I came here I got a job right away at 13 years. When I was 13, I already went out and delivered in a sta-from a stationary store. I used to deliver merchandise to offices, you know, papers and things. And I-I used to-right away, I started to talk with-I used to hang out with the-with the American boys. I used to speak to them in Jewish. They speak to me in English. And somehow or other, we-we managed to understand each other.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. But I-I mean, around the house. Was there anything that-that you-

BASKIN: Around the house?

LEVINE: -needed to do?

BASKIN: Well, there was nothing really to do, actually. We couldn't go shopping because there was-we had nothing to-to buy, you know. And-

LEVINE: Did you have livestock or did you grow anything?

BASKIN: Yeah, we had a cow. I told you, we had a cow.

LEVINE: One cow.

BASKIN: And two families lived on that cow. One of my aunts—we made butter out of it, of course, and everything else, out of that cow.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: One day, I remember it. We were so many people in the house. And as I told you, there was no room even to sleep. We had to sleep two in the front—two and two. And it was so cold, we had to take the cow into the house, which was a—and then we—then we realized, after the cow went—went out—we realized that it's—it's a good apartment.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

BASKIN: And I—I had a couple of aunts, uncles. It was really nothing exciting. Let's put it this way. W—the only thing is at that time I remember, even then, the Jews were being hurt by the—the goyim. You know, what they call the gentiles. They used to throw stones at us, you know. But it wasn't that bad. I remember one time there he was a—a man. He used to go about 20 miles to buy stuff and bring it to the town and sell it, you know. And one day, when go—going there—going there—that's the town that I told you, Zhlobin—he got killed. Somebody killed him. He had to pass a lot of woods and forests there and all that.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, did they kill him because they robbed him or—

BASKIN: They robbed him.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASKIN: They—listen, even then, things were rough with the—with the crooks or whatever you want to call 'em.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASKIN: Things were bad.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Let's see. So when you—when you got money, did you—it was—your father finally sent money after—

BASKIN: Yes.

LEVINE: —the war—

BASKIN: Sometimes, we didn't get the money. They used to st-- get it out of the—out of the envelopes. He sent for us, you know.

LEVINE: And then—

BASKIN: And another thing, come to think of it, I remember now. He sent us—we should go first class. We wound up third class. We didn't know. They put us there so we thought that's where we belonged.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you—when you—do you remember leaving your town?

BASKIN: Leaving? Oh, of course.

LEVINE: W—were—were you—

BASKIN: We went—we first had to go 20 miles to a town, Zhlobin, because we had no trains in my town.

LEVINE: How did you get there?

BASKIN: With a horse and wagon. And from there, we took a train already to a big town. I don't remember the exact name. Maybe it was Homle. I don-- don't remember what town. And then from there we went to Germany. And I think from Germany we —we left. We—

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

BASKIN: No, I don't. I have a passport. I still have the passport. It's in my—one of the boxes that I have there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And let's see. Did you have examinations?

BASKIN: What?

LEVINE: Examinations?

BASKIN: When we got here?

LEVINE: In Germany before you left?

BASKIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they checked us but I guess they didn't notice the lice. [chuckles] But they found it over here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASKIN: And w—they wouldn't let us out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.--

BASKIN: My father used to come to visit us and he came by boat. And we—we—he—they wouldn't let him in, you know. We just had to see him and, to come to think of it, you know, I never—I don't re—I didn't remember my father then. I—they—they said that's my father and I had to believe it. [chuckles] He was—he was a nice man—my mother, both.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you—what you felt or thought when you first saw your father?

BASKIN: [sighs] It's hard to believe. I don't know. You know, you feel strange. You never saw the man and they tell you it's your father. But when I got to know him, I found out he was a good man, very good man. I remember once I was—and he was 75 when he passed away. I don't remember when he—I once played cards with him. We played pinochle, two-two hands. And he made a mistake. I says, "What are you doing?" I says, "You see what you did?" He says, "Don't holler at me. I'm an—I'm an orphan." He's an orphan. [chuckles] He was kidding along. Yeah, he was very nice.

And my mother, may she rest in peace—she was a very religious m-woman. She—here already, I'm talking about—I'll tell you about my—my mother that—it's hard to believe. She never had an education. She never went to school. She never—didn't know how to read or write. But she was so smart. It's—it's hard to express now what she did. And she was very good. She—and very religious. I remember one time she taught me one thing that I'll never forget. She once sent me to a grocery. You know, we used to have this—grocery stores, not supermarkets like they got now. And we—we very seldom had money. So she gave me a dollar and I bought some stuff and the man gave me change of \$10. And then I—I didn't know what to do because I thought maybe she gave me a dollar. You know, at—at that time, you're—I was taught that. So I come home. I said, "Ma, what did you give me? A dollar or 10?" She says, "What kind of 10? I have no 10s. I gave you a dollar." I said, "Look what he gave me." "Go right back and give it back to him."

And that—I grew up that way. They can call me anything they want but they can't say I'm not honest. The only—every place I worked at, I always had the keys to the place. They trusted me. The fact is, one boss—I was already about 18 years, one of my first job—he trusted me with his wife and children. By that, I mean he had a home in Nanuet [PH], a summer home. He came over to me and he asked me, "Irving, would you like to go to stay two weeks in—with—in our farm there?" He had—in Nanuet, they had a farm. I says, "Yeah." Says, "You'll help my missus there." And I was there for two weeks. There was nothing, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: And with him, I remember another thing. When I—my first raise, I was—I started over \$15. At that time, they didn't give no checks. They gave cash.

LEVINE: What ti—what year was this?

BASKIN: Excuse me?

LEVINE: What year?

BASKIN: Well, I went out of school when I was 16. So that's 78 years ago. Anyway, I—I got my pay and I see \$17 there. So I went in there and I says, "Your office," I says, "Your—mistake in my pay. You got too much money here." "Get out of here." The next week, I got \$3 more. In other words, I got \$20. So, surely, I thought this time was a mistake. I go in and same thing happened. He said, "Get out of here." He—he was—he

was one of the best—I learned from him a lot too. He was—he was very, very honest and good. He asked me one time—he says to me, “Have you got a radio near your hou—home?” I said, “No.” And about a week or so later I come home and my mother says, “[not understood] arayn geshikt a radio do” [sent a radio here]. A Stromberg-Carlson -- I remember it, a radio and a phonograph. If you—I don’t know if you remember those things. And I even remember the price. It was a \$110. He—so I went over to him the next day. I says, “Did you send a—?” he says, “Yeah.” I said, “I haven’t got no money.” He says, “Don’t worry. You’ll pay whenever you’ll have it. You’re a very nice man.”

LEVINE: Now, what was the business?

BASKIN: He was—we were in the—I was in the embroidery line, pleating, stitching, you know, for the—we worked for the dr—dress line. Yeah.

LEVINE: So it was—

BASKIN: All my life, 54 years I was in that line.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: And—

LEVINE: And what was the company? The name?

BASKIN: Well, the first—the name of the first company was the Landau [PH] Brothers, were two brothers.

LEVINE: Is this the one—is this the man you’re talking about that sent over the radio?

BASKIN: That’s right. Yeah, Landau Brothers. One of them passed away. He had a heart attack. Lucky he didn’t kill anybody. He felt bad and he parked his car and— died there.

LEVINE: W—so where was this? Where was the company?

BASKIN: New York on—this was on 36th Street.

LEVINE: And where were you living?

BASKIN: I was living in Brownsville.

LEVINE: Brownsville.

BASKIN: In Brownsville, yeah. At first, when we moved—well, we came here, we lived in Powell Street, 113 Powell Street. That’s what we—with an aunt of mine. Then we moved out, a few blocks away, to Junius Street. On Junius Street, there was—there was really also funny. A lot of funny things happen when you live that long. [clears throat] I lived over here, Junius Street. Right over here was the IRT Train. About a block away, there was the BMT going that way. And down below, there was a choo-choo train. There was plenty of noise.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Uh-huh, yeah. Let's see. Do you remember any other attitudes that your mother or father had that they passed along to you?

BASKIN: I could tell you about my mother. She—as I say, she was a religious woman. When we came here we went—we lived on—and then we moved to [not understood] Street. She—she and another woman, a neighbor of ours, they used to go—we—the—every Friday to collect for the rabbi. The poor rabbi was a poor slob by himself. He used to go to a woman. You know, this one used to give bread. This one used to give khali [sacramental bread]. This one used to give a piece of chicken or—you know, used to—he used to—they used to br—get out that stuff and bring it over to him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: And when he died—I remember the rabbi. He—he married me. When he died, the—the block was black with those Khasidim, you know, the—all the hats there, was a very, very nice man.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: So you were working for the Landau Brothers. Were you working for them when you met your wife?

BASKIN: No, I met my wife in another place. I worked for him for about 10, 15 years and then I worked at another place. My wife, how I met was also—everything seems funny. I was a foreman there and there was a—there was a fellow used to come up at 11 o'clock and ask for anybody who wants—he used to work in that lunchroom—you know, in a lunch place, you know. So they used to—he used to mark down whatever they wanted and they used to deliver it. One day, he say—he say -- asked me if I—if I can give a—get his sister a job. I didn't even know what nationality he was. I thought he was Italian. I said, "Yeah, bring her up." To make a long story short, I saw her. I sort of liked her and she only lived a few blocks away from me. And I asked her for a date and that's how I met her. I—

LEVINE: Did you give her a job too?

BASKIN: Yeah, I gave her the job. Sure. She worked there till I met her. And I remember, I spent my whole pay. I was making at that time about \$50. I took—I, myself, never went there. We went up on a plane, a two-seater, sightseeing. I remember I paid \$2. Oh, her mother gave me hell. Gave her hell too. Anyway, after nine months, we got married. One thing I can say and she could say the same thing. Actually, I lived my whole life [not understood] [clears throat]. She never married me for money and I never married her for money. She—she—I had nothing. She had double nothing. But we're still—we're still married, by the way.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful.

BASKIN: We're-just celebrated our 50-our 55th anniversary.

LEVINE: So tell me a little bit about-like what-what was involved in being a foreman in-in the factory?

BASKIN: A foreman? Well, you have to know-of course, machines, you know, like sewing machine. We have a-everything was sewing machines. And then there was pleating machines. You know, I-I can't explain it to you, you know. Then we had-we-we used to get-I'm talking about my line. Let's say your-matter of fact, your dresses, your cut dress-the whole dress, on your sleeves and fronts and backs and skirts, whatever. And then if you have any trimming, like you want embroidery over here, or you want shirring on the skirt. And they used to give it to us.

And we used to-we-and-and then we had pleating. You know a pleated skirt? We used to do the pleating. I got to tell you a little story about pleating. Now, they got all kinds of material, you know, that doesn't shrink. It doesn't change color or nothing. I remember we got in an order of pleated skirts and, actually, I think it was about 2 or 300 skirts. And then when you have about 50 or a hundred you-you ship it out there and they start working on it. And I get a call. I met a shipment. I get a call. "Irving, you ruined me. What happened?"

See, we used to pleat the skirts and then they put into a-a-a box -- a steam box, they call it. We used to make our own steam. And after 10, 20 minutes, you take it out, you know. And it holds its place. It was all white. Everything was white there, you know. The-the whole dress was white. He says-he says, "The pleated - the skirt changed yellow." So I didn't know what to say. I says, "I'll tell you what you do." I still had some here. "Bring-send a-I'll send a boy over. Bring me-give him a-a package or a skirt and I want to com-see what's doing." [unclear], I take a hold the package and I take a hold of the-that we didn't do yet, you know. I walk over to the window and, from the sun, it changed color. From the sun, mind you. And so we had to get the whole shebang back and make everything one color, the whole dress already. You know, the sleeves and the-whatever was left over. And a lot of things therein that line.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did your wife continue working after you were married?

BASKIN: No, no. She didn't work. No. Then I had to go-then the war started. I was married in 1939.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASKIN: And I went to work in the-oo-both-er with that thing again. Then I went-

LEVINE: [chuckles] [unclear]

BASKIN: [chuckles] I went to work in Groton, Connecticut, became a welder. And I had no children at that time. So, you know, a single

fellow, single man, they used to ship across. And I found myself in the Army after a year or so.

LEVINE: Well, wait a minute. You—in Groton, Connecticut, what was there?

BASKIN: Submarine base. I was—became a welder. I was—so—so actually, I could—

LEVINE: I've got to give you something that doesn't make noise.

BASKIN: I could say—actually, I could say—that's all right. Actually, I could say that I won the war. First, I built the ships. Then I went to fight over there. I was there three and a half years in the Army.

LEVINE: Yeah. You had no children at that time?

BASKIN: No. And we—the fact is we never had children. We—we adopted a—a little girl. The little—the little girl is 45 years old already now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. What's your daughter's name?

BASKIN: My daughter's name is Rochelle. And she had—she had it rough too. She got married and then she got divorced. Now, she remarried. But thank God, we're still here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASKIN: What can I tell you?

LEVINE: So how did you feel about serving in the Army?

BASKIN: How—how did I feel?

LEVINE: How did you feel about being drafted?

BASKIN: Well, there was nothing I could do. I'll tell you—tell you. See, I was—I could have dodged the Army or re—actually remained, maybe in the States. I didn't know. [sniffs] I have—I had—I have a—a perforated eardrum. And before we went across, the captain—I remember his name—Captain Til—Tidwell went—came over to me and says, "Look, Irving, I can leave you here," It was a port of embarkation, "But you never know. Somebody got to grab you." And here I was already with the outfit six months before we went across. So I went with them. O—of course, it was pretty bad when we got across. We came there and, all of a sudden, they told us to start digging ditches. "What for? We're—we're in town." "There's a plane comes here without a—without a pilot and that's a bomb." I said, "How can a bomb fly without a pilot?" There were the [unclear]. I once saw one of them hit 14 houses, two floor. They all—from the, you know, the sh—from the sound, from the hit—

LEVINE: Impact.

BASKIN: Impact. And then I was—I was—I was put on—I was—we were on a railroad. I—they put me in a railroad outfit, by the way. What do I know about railroads? I used to travel the IRT all my life. [chuckles] And they put me in—in a hospital train. Our job was to go—we always followed the Army. When they were in France we used to go—we were in England. We used to take from France back to England in a train. And then from France, went to Germany. Well, my first day was a very bad experience. I—I helped the nurses and the doctors there, you know. I walked in and there the soldiers laying there with stomachs open, with hands shot off. It was a bad sight. So I walked out. I couldn't take it at fir—it was a shock. And then I says to myself, 'Well, what am I doing? These poor boys, they—they went through so much. You got—you got to help 'em.'

So I come back and I says, "Anybody here from Brooklyn?" That started it off. And after that, nothing bothered me. I became so hard. You'd be surprised. I—when I came in—when I first went into the Army I was timid, quiet, you know. You—whatev—whatever they told you to do I would do. I remember they gave me two pair of shoes and they didn't fit me. And I had a sergeant, a gentile. He hated my guts because I was Jewish. So he—he used to pick on me. "Baskin, go on KP." I come out of KP. "Baskin, go on guard duty." And I—I was told I got to listen to him. Finally, one day when he took my shoes away, we were in camp. I remember it was raining. We were in a bivouac area with tents. Comes in, "Go on guard duty." I didn't have no shoes. I had a pair of civilian shoes somebody gave me.

And I got so angry. I says, "I'm not going." And I left the—the—the tent and I went into supply room. And I said, "Where the hell are my shoes?" It was two weeks I had to wait for 'em. There was a lieutenant. He changed my life. That's—there are some people that could change your life for good and for bad. Both. He—he heard me holler. He comes over, "What's the matter, Soldier?" I tell him the story. "The guy picks on me. I got no shoes." He says to me, "Your mother is not here. You have to help yourself." Oh, boy! After that, I never had it so—so good. I come over," I want a pair sh--" I never wore underw-- more than once a twice a day. "A pair of shoes. I want socks." In other words, what I'm trying to bring out is you h—I opened up my mouth and e—and even to now, if I'm right, I'll tell you. If I'm wrong, I'll apologize to you. But—but you're not going to put nothing over on me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: You know what I mean? Not that I'm so smart. I'm only able to see that if—if you're—if you're—if you're right, you're right. But if you try to do—to throw your weight around and if you're wrong, I'll let you have it. I'll let you know. But actually, see, and I became a more—how would you say it—well, the—not—I wouldn't say rough. Well, I—I answered them back. Before, I used—didn't answer anybody. You can tell me to do it, do it. Now, if you tell me, "Go—go to KP," I said, "Look, I was at KP and I'm—I'm off duty now." You know, in other words, to give your point you—you—and tell you that you're wrong and I'm right and that's it.

LEVINE: And this lieutenant that you encountered in the—when you were going for the shoes—

BASKIN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: H—how—why do you think he made such an impact on you then?

BASKIN: Because he told me that, "Your mother is not here. You have to fight for your own. Y—your mother can't tell you what to do. You got to do it yourself." It got—it penetrated in that thick head of mine.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASKIN: Now, that's a fact. And I didn't have it too bad. Thank God, I—the only bad experience I had, and I thank God for that, I remember we went to—from France into Germany. [clears throat] We used to—we went by trucks, you know. And there was booby traps all around. So the driver took the wrong street, the wrong road. So he hollered out to me, "Hey, Baskie, go down and direct me," you know, because if you go off of the—the road, he's liable to hit a mine. So another fellow—another soldier next to me says, "I'll go down." "All right. Go ahead." He goes down. Boom! His leg was taken right off. And you—would you believe, I envied him. And ask me why.

LEVINE: Why?

BASKIN: Because he was going—he was going home. [chuckles] At least, he's going home. Without a leg, all right. But that's the way, you know, fate—it was—it wasn't bad. Thank God, I came home safe and sound.

LEVINE: How do you think being in the war affected you after that?

BASKIN: Well, as I told you—

LEVINE: You—you became more assertive.

BASKIN: More—more—what would you say?—I had more confidence in myself. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: [unclear]

BASKIN: Not that I became a bully or anything of that sort. I just—I—as I said before, if you're right, I'll—I'll thank you. I'll—this and that. But if you're wrong, you'll hear from me, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about coming here as an immigrant? Do—do you thi—how do you think that affected you later on in your life? Just the fact that—

BASKIN: Well—well, the fi—the best thing was that I had something to eat. And—and then I—I became one of the boys. You know, I started to—fell out with the young fellows and went to school. I had to go out of school though and that was, I think, the last in 8A or 8B, I was supposed

to graduate already. But things were bad. We were on welfare. And my father, like I told you, he had a—had a—a job that he—he—he couldn't work a whole year. So we went to work, my sister and I. And I remember my first—my first week's salary, \$15, I gave 14.50 to my mother and 50 cents I kept for carfare for the next week. It was rough. I went through a lot.

LEVINE: What about being—going through such difficulties when you first came here? Was there a time when it changed?

BASKIN: Of course.

LEVINE: When—what—can you think—can you talk about that—

BASKIN: Well—

LEVINE: —when it changed?

BASKIN: When I came here, I—the first thing, I was glad to see my father, of course, and that we were here and we had something to eat. We were—we had food now. So, all right, it wasn't elaborate, that you would call, but—and it was a diff—it felt different entirely. I—it felt like more free. You know what I mean? Because over there, we had bad things with the—with the gentiles, even at that time. The—the Jew is always being punished. I don't know for what. He tries not to—he tries to be good but, yet, is the—he always gets it. You—you take even now. They're trying to make peace in Israel. They wouldn't let 'em. They—they still bomb their—Aus—Australia and—where was it? In—in England.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm. How about being Jewish? Did—did your attitude about being Jewish change after you came to this country?

BASKIN: No.

LEVINE: No.

BASKIN: No. I was glad to be Jewish. I mean, I was brought up Jewish and I was—in fact, if I would have stood there another year or two I would probably become a rabbi. You know, I was learning the—the Gemora there, the Torah and everything.

LEVINE: Was that something you wanted or it's more that your family wanted it?

BASKIN: Well, there's nothing that I could do. What else could I do? I—what I—I wanted—they—I knew—I knew I had to do it. You know what I mean? I knew I had to go to this—I was a Jew. I had to go to—to learn. But it was—I came here. Things changed, though. You know, you start out to pal—you palled up with other boys and—and—and I still know how to daven [read scripture] and all that but, I mean, it was different, you know. And one of—the more—the worst part of it was because I had to work on a Saturday. When I started to work, I had to work on a Saturday. My kid brother—kid brother—he's—he's 82 years old. My—my brother, he's—you see where there's difference between me and him. I think I take after my

father and he takes after my mother. My mother was religious. He's religious. He was a religious boy. He didn't want to work on a Saturday.

I says—I used to give him jobs. At that time already, I was working and I —I became a shipping clerk that time. And I—I used take him to work. But I --says to me, "Not if we got to work." "You have to work on a Saturday unless you can get a job someplace by a -- the religious place." And he—he—he started to work Saturday. Then he—he didn't want to work Saturday. You see, he—he—he w—there was—he—he felt different than I did. And I don't blame him. And thank God, because of me, he's—he did all right. He did better than I did. I was a foreman and—and I—I—I didn't get no com—I had no, what do you call it, retirement plan or nothing. And he—he—he had it. I gave him a job with a friend—to a friend of mine and they were doing pretty good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: He gets a pension, you know, every month.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. What do you feel most proud of?

BASKIN: What am I prou—

LEVINE: What makes you feel proud that you did in your life?

BASKIN: That I'm honest. My—my mother taught me that and that's what I—I like to be nice to people. But I hate when somebody is too smart. I don't think that I'm smart and I don't think that they should be—to tell me what to do. I'll tell you. I'll give you a little incident of what happened only yesterday about being smart. They had an outing here. We went to a restaurant and, from there, we went to a movie. After we finished eating, the one in charge of the restaurant, a woman, came over to me and my wife. And she says, "You're going to see this and this picture."

Now, see, that's what I didn't like. She's trying to tell me what to see. I said, "Look, there's five pictures there. Let me see what they got and --" "No, you're going to go see what—what we see." I said, "Okay. We'll see about that." Then my wife came over. She spoke to some of the women that they're going to see it; it's a good picture. So I—she says, "Let's go see it." I said, "All right." I don't mind—I didn't—I don't mind going there but I didn't like the attitude. But she—where she tells me what—if she was to say to me, "Look, there's only one picture playing, or two pictures playing. Which one do you want?" You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASKIN: She—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: -became a-a boss. Some of these girls over here work. They think they-they're helping out Carol. They-blah, blah, blah. They-they become big shots.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASKIN: Th-that, I don't like, you see?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: I like to be a mensch and I want you to be a mensch. You be good to me; I'll be good to you. You'll be nasty; I'll be nasty too.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: I mean, that's my attitude.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: I may be wrong. Sometimes, I-I flare up a little bit, you know. But after that, I'll tell you. See, some people, they keep it inside. Let's say you'll tell me something and I-and I'll tell you something and you wouldn't answer me. You'll keep it inside. But-and-and you feel it. You-you hurt. So if you'd get it out of your system and say, "Look, you shouldn't have said that. I don't like that." You know? And then you forget about it. Like, when I was a foreman, I remember the girl used to make a mistake, the operator, I used to tell her, "Look what you did." The next minute I used to come over and forget about it. But I had to ge-tell her about it. You understand? I don't like to keep it inside.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BASKIN: And believe me, they-they liked me. Then when I left-when I retired, I was 70 years and they made a party and it was very nice.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, it sounds like that's something you-y-that was a change in your life where you didn't hold things in and you-and you [unclear]-

BASKIN: I never took it out-out-took it out on anybody. I just wanted-I wanted to be a mensch and you be a mensch too. If you like me, I'll like you. If you're gonna-if you're not gonna like me, I wouldn't bother with your-that's it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Well, is there anything you'd like to say in closing about coming to this country, Ellis Island-?

BASKIN: The country, America?

LEVINE: Being an American?

BASKIN: I'm very proud of being Amer-American and very proud to be a citizen. I vote every year. And-but the only thing I don't like is

what's going on now, and I don't have to tell you what's going on with all these robberies and you can't get out in the street. And it's rough. It's bad. I'm here 10 years. I don't think I went out—at eight o'clock, I never went out at night. Years ago, we were—we were l—sleeping on the roof or in the park and all over. Nobody bothered us. And I—it's—it's a rough life now. All the—even the—as bad as it is, we still have it better than any other country. But they got to change. It's got to—they got to do something about this murder, robberies and all that.

LEVINE: Would you have any advice for an immigrant coming here today?

BASKIN: Oh, I—advice? [chuckles] Well, what can I tell him? Really, it's not up to me to tell him what to do. He has to be—he has to know himself and eventually, he'll learn, no matter who it is. He—you—you got to use your head. You got to be a mensch. That's it. That's about it.

LEVINE: I think that's a good place to stop. I want to thank you, Mr. Baskin.

BASKIN: Thank you for taking me here.

LEVINE: I've been speaking with Irving Baskin, who came in 1923 when he was 12 years old. He came from Russia through Ellis Island. Today, Mr. Baskin's 83.

BASKIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And he—it's August 4th, 1994 and I'm here in Far Rockaway, New York. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

EI-521/BASKIN