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ALFRED LEVITT (ABRAHAM, ABRAM)
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1998
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RUSSIA, 1911
AGE 17
PASSAGE ON "THE BIRMA"

LEVINE: [...This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.] Today is September 8, 1995, and I am here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Alfred Levitt, born Abraham Levitt [PH: Leveet].

LEVITT: Yes.

LEVINE: He came from Russia in 1911 when he probably had just turned seventeen years of age. I want to say that I am delighted to be here with you. I'm looking forward to your whole story, and I'm very happy to be able to be the one that makes this story part of our Ellis Island Oral History Collection.

LEVITT: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

LEVINE: Let's start at the beginning. If, for the tape, you would give your birth date, your birth date, for the tape, again.

LEVITT: Again? August 15, 1894.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born?

LEVITT: Born in Starodub, which is a small village in Belarussia.

LEVINE: Did you live in Starodub up until the time that you left for the United States?

LEVITT: I was born and lived there all the time. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, when you think of Starodub, what do you remember about it? What comes to your mind?

LEVITT: It comes to mind, the first thing is that the winters were very severe. We were poor people, and it was very difficult for children of my age to go outside because we had no warm clothing, and we stayed inside. But when winter was over, spring was beautiful. There's a lake in the little village. We'd go swimming, and we'd go fishing. My father was a carriage maker. He made carriages for the bourgeoise of Europe.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents? Do you remember your grandparents?

LEVITT: No.

LEVINE: No.

LEVITT: I don't.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

LEVITT: Hyman, Hyman, Chiam, Chiam.

LEVINE: Chiam.

LEVITT: My mother's name was Sadie.

LEVINE: Do you remember her maiden name?

LEVITT: Yeah. Also Levitt. She came from a Levitt family.

LEVINE: So they were related?

LEVITT: Yeah, they were related.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have sisters and brothers?

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Sisters and brothers.

LEVITT: My father was married twice. And in the two marriages, there were fourteen children.

LEVINE: Which marriage were you a child of?

LEVITT: The second marriage. And I'm the third from the youngest.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular brother or sister?

LEVITT: I was too young to make such a distinguishing difference (Dr. Levine laughs) in the whole family. The respect for anyone who was older than I am, regardless of whether I liked him or I didn't, I had to give him respect.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, now, your father, he, uh, I would think that his profession was . . .

LEVITT: His profession was to build carriages...

LEVINE: Carriages.

LEVITT: ...for the bourgeoise of Europe.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that, about his . . .

LEVITT: Well, I do, because I used to help him. He used to grind his own color. And I ground color in two slabs of marble. We used to

grind color, in the color that he wanted for the carriages. And he boiled his own oil, all with his ten fingers, no tools. And there was no money to buy tools. So it probably took him about ten months to build a carriage. In the meantime, the family starved. Okay? So . . .

LEVINE: And what kind of a person was your father? What...

LEVITT: He believed, he believes a good Jew, but what he believed in he didn't know.

LEVINE: And your mother?

LEVITT: My mother was a very religious woman. She, too, didn't do much with reading. Most Jews of Europe, they used to read but never knew what it meant.

LEVINE: What language were you speaking at home?

LEVITT: Russian, Russian and, and Jewish.

LEVINE: Did you go to school at all?

LEVITT: Yeah, I did. When I was very young I entered Russian school.

LEVINE: And do you have any memories of your school days in Russia?

LEVITT: That I could read so much. There was the language.

LEVINE: And this little town of Starodub, how many families, roughly, lived in your little town?

LEVITT: You mean all, regardless of religion?

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: There was about eight thousand.

LEVINE: Oh. And were the Jews living in a separate area in the town? No.

LEVITT: No, no. They were all scattered. We had our own home, our own piece of land, and all that. And I don't know how long, when we came there, when my father came there, I don't know. I was too young to find that information. I regret now. If I were, I'd get all that information, but I don't know.

LEVINE: What do you remember your mother doing when you were growing up?

LEVITT: My mother, she used to help my father earn a living. And the little village gave her a permit to set up a little table during the days of the market. And she was selling candies, all kinds of candies and things, from a table this size (he gestures).

LEVINE: A few feet.

LEVITT: She earned a few cents a day, and she come back, feeding the children.

LEVINE: Where would she get the candies from? Where would she get the candies that she sold?

LEVITT: Well, there were wholesalers in the village who'd sell to people...

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember market day?

LEVITT: Yeah, she'd sell packages of tobacco, in the first place. Packages of tobacco, that the peasants, it was usually the peasant bazaar. And they'd come there to buy a package of tobacco, and maybe a couple of pieces of sugar candy, or a little wooden doll or something. I mean, all those things. She had an

assortment of things. In the wintertime, she'd have a large pot with burning coal under her skirt. She had to sit there all day long. And the cold in Russia was very severe. How was she going to get warm? Well, the pot was under her skirt. The coal was smoldering, getting the heat all to her, she felt warm.

LEVINE: And, um, so did you, did you celebrate any holidays, or were there any occasions?

LEVITT: We celebrated the same exactly, Purim, Yom Kippur, all these Jewish holidays, we used to celebrate (?). As a young boy, I did exactly what my father had told me to do. I didn't know any difference.

LEVINE: Do you remember any rituals of any kind that were different than they are in this country, surrounding birth or marriage or death or any . . .

LEVITT: Well, I do remember a bris. You know what a bris is?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEVITT: It's that you, it's introduction to the youngster into the realm of the Jews. He became a Jew. So I'd watch an uncle of mine, who had to be an older person who performed the operation. And it was at the moment I watched it, and while that was a ritual, every boy was born. We lived in the compound there for five families of the same, Levitt family, all sharing the same, the same piece of land, each one having his own home, see? And there were boys and girls and all of that, see. So every family having a boy had a bris. And we'd come to the ritual. Everybody would come.

LEVINE: And your uncle performed these brisses...

LEVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: ...for the other families?

LEVITT: Yeah, sure. He was the oldest, and it was an honor to have an older person, an older uncle, to perform the operation.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about that particular uncle?

LEVITT: I remember that when a girl got married they generally had a band of music. They used to call them klezmer, you...(he writes)

LEVINE: Okay. K-L-E-Z . . .

LEVITT: Klezmers.

LEVINE: M-E-R-S.

LEVITT: This is a plural, of course, erase that. Just klezmer.

LEVINE: Klezmer, without the "S." Uh-huh.

LEVITT: Yes, yes. But they have three or four people playing violin, dancing, and all of that while a couple was getting married. So, now, this is an interesting thing. During the holidays we used to go to shul, a synagogue. That's a building in the village built for the Jews, and that's where the Jews used to come during the holidays, to read the Torah and all of that. I was too small to understand it, see. I'd come, I'd come and visit it, but I didn't understand it. I still don't, because it didn't interest me.

LEVINE: What did interest you when you were young, when you were in Russia?

LEVITT: I was interested in writing Russian poetry.

LEVINE: And did you do that?

LEVITT: More than anything else. As young as I was, I wanted to write poetry. And help my father build a carriage. Make, boil the oil and grind color, do a little shopping for him and all of that, say. We had a place, a studio, a large studio with a stove, heated, and my father used to work there.

LEVINE: Were you the only child that helped him, or did your brothers and sisters also . . .

LEVITT: No, no, my brothers, too. My older brothers did something else. They painted somebody else's houses, and earned some money that way, see? We were known as keretniks[ph]. A keret [ph] is a carriage, see? And the Russian way to say it is keretnik [ph], see? We were known as keretniks [ph], the whole family. There were four brothers, who settled in the same place, and they all did this carriage-making, see? So we were known as keretniks [ph].

LEVINE: Was that a profession that was looked up to in your town?

LEVITT: Oh, yes, oh, yes, oh, yes, yes, yes. You had to know. You had to know. You, nobody could build a carriage with ten fingers. And those carriages, and Sundays the rich people who, who had it made, used to promenade with two horses, see? And I was standing all alone on the side enjoying the riding. My father and I did it.

LEVINE: So you took pride, you and your father took pride in your work.

LEVITT: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, yes. We were, we were stable people. We were known and we were respected. There's no question about it, see. Only I wanted to get away from the place. It was too small for me.

LEVINE: You mean, before you knew you were coming to America, you knew that you wanted to leave?

LEVITT: Yeah, oh, yeah. I ran away from home.

LEVINE: How old were you then?

LEVITT: About fourteen or fifteen years of age. I just ran away. I couldn't pay for my ticket on the railroad. I slept underneath the benches so that the conductor never knew. So I traveled to many parts of Russia.

LEVINE: Ah. And then did you return home?

LEVITT: And then I returned home, see? Because Mama had wrote to me that we were ready to go to America, see? My brothers who had come here previously struggled hard enough to accumulate enough money to send to us to come to America. So when I was a hundred, a thousand miles away from home, Mama wrote to me, "Come home immediately. We're going to America."

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought of America before you came here? What did you expect?

LEVITT: Very little. There were no newspapers, and I couldn't, even if I wanted to read, I could read Russian a little bit, there were no newspapers, so I don't know. America was something way, way, away. (he getsures)

LEVINE: So you had several brothers who had come before . . .

LEVITT: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: You and your mother and father. Uh-huh. And who came with you when you came here?

LEVITT: My father, my mother, two sisters, two sisters and two brothers.

LEVINE: And do you remember getting ready to leave? What did the family do? Did they, did they sell their home?

LEVITT: Yeah, they sold their home. It's easy enough. We sold our home. There was very little to take with us. We generally got a little sack a little more than this. (he gestures)

LEVINE: Do you remember the departure?

LEVITT: I do, I do very much. There's a small, a small narrow gauge railroad, and it starts from Starodub and , and reachs about fifty miles away to a larger city with a wide gauge railroad that traverses all of Russia. And in order to get to Libau . . .

LEVINE: L-E-I-B-O-W ? [sic, Libau]

LEVITT: Yeah, you know, way the hell out there. And I had to get there. So we start from the small, the narrow gauge railroad about fifty miles away. And when we get there, we get on the wide railroad to take us to Libau. And then there's the boat, and the ocean, and that's where you got on for America.

LEVINE: So how long did it take you to get to the port?

LEVITT: To the port? Oh, about two days to three days. I remember, it's

so distant, so distant. And I'm glad it's distant. (Dr. Levine laughs) Because I didn't want any interference in my mind. I wanted to become an American. And I wanted to master each language. I wanted to master everything, a better life, an American life says I can live here beautifully, and that's what I did.

LEVINE: Well, what port did you actually leave from? What was the port that you . . .

LEVITT: The port that I came from?

LEVITT: Libau.

LEVINE: And you took the ship there?

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And the name of the ship?

LEVITT: It was Birma.

LEVINE: Birma. And do you remember before you left, did you just reach, uh, Libau right before you got on the ship?

LEVITT: Yeah. Libau we stayed in for about a week, before all the, the formalities were arranged, papers and everything else, and we stayed in a place arranged for us by the Worker's Circle. That's a large organization in New York, in America, and they arranged everything for us.

LEVINE: A place for you to stay, and . . .

LEVITT: And everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were you examined at all before you came? Did you have

to go through physical examinations?

LEVITT: No.

LEVINE: No.

LEVITT: Not at all, not at all. Just papers, just papers.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that week in Libau where . . .

LEVITT: What I got to tell you is, for the first time I saw waves on the ocean. I never saw the ocean, and Libau was right on the ocean. It's Latvia. So I'd run out from the house where I stayed, where I supposed to stay, without Mama's consent, just to see the ocean, just the waves is an amazing thing, see? I never knew there was so much water and the power of the ocean. Terrific.

LEVINE: So, uh, what do you remember about your voyage? What do you remember about your voyage, when you were crossing the ocean on the Birma?

LEVITT: All I can tell you is my mama and papa were in first class, and we were in third class because it cost more money to be in first class. And they were in a different part of the boat. One night there was a terrific storm. The boat was just going up and this and that way. And I was just worried what's going to happen to Mama and Papa. Without consent, I opened one of the (he gestures). . .

LEVINE: Portholes?

LEVITT: Bustles, and climbed out and hung onto things until I got to the door, and where my mama, luckily the door was open. (he coughs) And I walked in. And I walked in to my mama's chamber

where she was. She was happy to see me. And I stayed overnight with them. But I was very lucky. I could be swept up into the boat right away.

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a seventeen year old coming across the ocean to America?

LEVITT: Well, it's a dream, a dream of coming to a new country with great possibilities of becoming a man. Of learning a language of a new country, going to school. Meeting new people, people who were not prejudiced against Jews. Don't forget that I ran away from a place where Jews were discriminated against. I couldn't go to the Gymnasium even if I wanted. They wouldn't let me. And here I was free to do anything I wanted. It is a bird out of a cage. There's no question about it. I felt very good.

LEVINE: So after that tumultuous night on board ship, when you stayed with your mother and father, then was there anything else that happened that you recall on that voyage?

LEVITT: I think that there were, the people who took care of the boats, I don't know the names of them, were looking for me. Because my brothers and sisters were worried where I was, and they reported it to the man in charge, and they began to look for me. And I was sleeping with my own papa. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember when the Birma came into the New York Harbor?

LEVITT: I do, I do very much. I remember, and seeing the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Did you know what it was, at that time?

LEVITT: I heard something about it. And the fact that seeing the skyline

itself was, was something that my mind wasn't prepared for. I'd only seen the houses where I was born. Well, here's the skyscrapers. It was something my mind couldn't encount--, it couldn't digest for the moment. But it was very, I was thrilled, absolutely thrilled to come here, I say, very happy. My brother, one of my brothers was there waiting for me, for the family. He had an apartment already rented in New York for us to come right in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, do you remember Ellis Island, any impressions...

LEVITT: What I remember? I remember a bunch of people in back of me. They tried to, they tried to examine me, every bit of my scalp and hair, (?) if I have any disease or anything at all. And the same with my mother and father. And all of us were clean and out we went.

LEVINE: Now, did your brother come to Ellis Island? Is that where you saw him?

LEVITT: Sure.

LEVINE: And what was that like, the reunion with your brother? What was the reunion with your brother like?

LEVITT: There's only one experience that I didn't like. I was looking over the rail of the boat when it was anchored, and before we were ready to, to get off the boat. And I was looking over the rail. Parading up and down was my brother, looking for me. I don't know what he said or what he did. Maybe he had no right to do what he did. The man, what he was, the policeman or somebody, said something to him, and he slapped him in the face. I felt very, very bad, see? Here I'm coming to America, freedom,

democracy and everything else, and here my brother's getting slapped. My impulse was a very bad one but I never carried it out. I was going to pick up a pail of water and dump it right on the man's head, but I never did. I did not want to commit any crimes or any misdemeanor, but I never forgot it. I don't know what he said to the man, and how he did to deserve being slapped. But that I remember, my first impression, and I'll never forget it.

LEVINE: Did you, did you have any experience with the police, or officers, when you were in Russia, before you had come?

LEVITT: Never, never, never. No, no. We were respected citizens. We had a tradition, I don't know how long we were (?) in the place. I don't know when my father got there, I don't know. I wish I did. And where we came from, I do not know.

LEVINE: So when you, when you, your brother met you, what was your brother's name, the one who met you?

LEVITT: The first one?

LEVITT: The brother who . . .

LEVITT: Isadore.

LEVINE: Isadore.

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you and your mother and father and sisters and brothers went with Isadore to an apartment?

LEVITT: Yeah, yeah, he had an apartment on 103rd Street and Park Avenue.

LEVINE: What, do you remember any of your first impressions when you were leaving the ship and going to . . .

LEVITT: Well, the impression was that I was seeing so many people around me I never saw before. Park Avenue had trains running, Grand Central, the New York Central trains. And I never saw them before, see? A lot of things. And I also saw horses drawing streetcars. They were not electrified at the time.

LEVINE: How about the apartment itself? Do you remember it?

LEVITT: The apartment, there was a bed there for me, and rooms for everybody to sleep. And Mama, of course, began to cook for everybody and all of that. But we didn't stay there too long. After a year-and-a-half we moved to Madison, to Madison Avenue and 107th Street, a bigger apartment, a better section, nicer people around you. And then I went to school, to public school.

LEVINE: After you moved?

LEVITT: Yeah, Public School 83 on 110th Street and Third Avenue.

LEVINE: How was that school different from the one in Russia.

LEVITT: Oh, all the difference. In the first place, in Russia my ears were attuned to what the teacher was saying. But here I didn't know what he was saying, you see, until my ears became in tune to it, say. But I didn't stay there too long. I quit public school a year after being there, and joined Harlem Evening High School.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What made you quit? Why did you quit?

LEVITT: I felt that I wasn't getting what I wanted. I already being, I was too mature for the people I saw in school, the boys. So I

went to Harlem Evening High School, and the principal, the man that I (?), said to me, "I'll give you two questions. If you passed them, you're admitted." I says, "What were they?" He says, "Spell for me the word 'accident.'" So I, I says, "Two C's." (they laugh)

LEVINE: And what was the other one?

LEVITT: Two-thirds of fifteen. I says, "Ten." He says, "You're admitted."

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here so Kevin can turn over the tape. We'll pause for a minute.

LEVITT: It was registering?

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Okay. So after you answered those two questions, then you . . .

LEVITT: The principal says, "You're admitted." Then the war broke out, and I joined the navy.

LEVINE: So you, you really didn't go to the Harlem Night School?

LEVITT: I did, I did.

LEVINE: Oh. How long were you there?

LEVITT: Oh, about three years?

LEVITT: Oh. And was that to your liking? Was that school to your liking?

LEVITT: Very much liking. I began to learn things. I learned, I began

to study English, and I began to study the loss of my accent. I didn't want the accent. And studied geometry and algebra and calculus. And it, and even learning how to play the piano, see?

LEVINE: Do you remember what you did to get rid of your accent?

LEVITT: (he sighs) It's a long struggle, being constantly aware of the imperfections of some of my speeches. I began to practice, and those points of imperfection, and, until they finally rested perfectly in my memories, and I lost it completely. But it was a hard struggle, constantly being conscious, every word that I utter. I want my ears to say it's correct.

LEVINE: Now, was your family still speaking Russian at home? Was your family speaking Russian at home? Yeah.

LEVITT: Oh, yeah. Russian at home, or Jewish. Russian or Jewish, but not English. My mama never spoke, she never, she never knew English.

LEVINE: What was your mother and father's attitude toward becoming American? Did they want to hold on to their old ways, or did they want to become Americans?

LEVITT: My mother was very happy to be with her children. They were here, she was happy, she had her own brood. She brought them up from birth there. And they were, in a way, making some parts of success in the commercial world, which they couldn't do at home. My father was too old to know the difference. So it was simply an adaptation of necessity.

LEVINE: So your father didn't work here? It was your brothers who were providing for the family.

LEVITT: Yeah, my father was too old to work here, see? Once I got into the high school, my drive was so keen and steady I became the chairman of the general organization of the school, see? The flow of my language was becoming very, very, very audibly correct. And I was able to get up to the top, see? And speaking was my great love, speaking and writing. And being in school on 107th Street, I went into an art class, and that's where my art career started.

LEVINE: Oh. Could you say anything about that, how it started?

LEVITT: It was a school on 107th Street which was known as the Ferrer School. And it was an art class, ran by a very important woman. One night I was passing, and I just walked in to find out what it was all about. And Robert Henri was present, and the school didn't start. So I said, "Why?" No money to pay for a model. I said, "Don't worry." I stripped my pants off immediately, and I went on the stage. (he laughs) And I says, "(?) students." And it started. For that, for that reason they allowed me to come to the Robert Henri School free of charge, and I began to paint.

LEVINE: Now, was Robert Henri School there, on 107th?

LEVITT: No, no. Robert Henri School as on 23rd Street and Broadway, but he came to, occasionally to help because he was in sympathy with the principals of the school.

LEVINE: Now, were you still writing poetry?

LEVITT: Yeah, I still (?). And some of my poems are in the Smithsonian Institution.

LEVINE: So how did you, then did you take up painting from then on?

LEVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I decided, contrary to my mama's advice, she says, "Alfred, you'll never make a living painting pictures. You'll open up a store selling hardware, shoes, hats, whatever." I said, "Not for me. I want to paint and I want to write." So I disregarded Mama's advice, and I continue doing it, despite the fact that at times I was very hungry because there was no money to buy food.

LEVINE: When did you leave living with your family?

LEVITT: When did I leave?

LEVITT: Yeah, when did you leave your family's house?

LEVITT: In 1920.

LEVINE: Now, had you been in the navy? You say you were in the navy?

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: When was that?

LEVITT: I was in the navy beginning with 1918, 1919. In the submarine base, New London, Connecticut, Connecticut.

LEVINE: What was that experience like for you?

LEVITT: Well, when they asked me what I was doing for a living, I said I was an artist. So they put me on a submarine to chip off old paint and paint it and then you're an artist. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEVITT: A submarine has holes in it for the water to come in, hey? And then it has a shutter that shuts it off. I had to climb into the

hole, chop off, uh, scrape off the old corrosion and give it a coat of new paint. That was because I was an artist. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, where would you say you were in your art career at that point? Had you been painting, then, for some years before?

LEVITT: When I think of painting, when you start painting, you're just an amateur. You're (?). You don't know what to do. It's an experience. And, of course I started painting doing all kinds of things but they're nothing, until I started to get through with training by Robert Henri and various others, Hans Hoffman and all that, I became mature. I traveled Europe. I was in Paris, I studied in Paris. I studied at Cooper Union.

LEVINE: So when you got out of the navy, then did you study with Robert Henri?

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And when did you go to Paris?

LEVITT: 1928.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, um, as a student of such a famous person as Robert Henri, what would you say about him as a person and as a painter?

LEVITT: To me, I admired him. I admired his knowledge. As to deeply where the man was, I couldn't penetrate him because he won't let anybody come too close to him. He'd come to see what you're doing and give you corrections and that's it, and show you an example of how to mix colors and things of that sort. But what it was inside, his philosophy of life, I couldn't tell. I don't know. But he was a pleasant man to talk to, a decent sort of a

fellow, a human, and that's it.

LEVINE: How about Hans Hoffman? What would you say . . .

LEVITT: Hans Hoffman is a different type, sort of man. He was German, in the first place. Hans Hoffman came here as the devotee of a new approach to painting, after the Renaissance period. See, Hoffman had an idea that we in the twentieth century had to abandon our classical attitudes to painting. It was good in the fourteenth century. It was good in the thirteenth century, and so on and so forth. It's not good in the twentieth century. Well, how do I to get that? See? Well, Hoffman taught me an awful lot, see? (he draws) Now, which is the first, and which is the second, and which is the third?

LEVINE: I guess it's . . .

LEVITT: Now, this is one, (he draws) this two, and this is three. Now, if I, this was, if this was white, and this was red, and this was yellow, which color would come out first? Because color depends upon the light it possesses. Well, each color has a certain amount of white. Yellow is not yellow unless there's white in it. Now, white is simply the day of light, see? All it is that Hoffman taught me, which we didn't know before. In other words, (he draws) say this is a man. When you look over here, why is it so small?

LEVINE: Distance.

LEVITT: Why is it so small? Well, it's perspective. Our natural vision is built that way. Now, we only see it that way because when we get there it becomes the same way. (he draws)

LEVINE: So these things were . . .

LEVITT: To know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEVITT: So you have to understand, this was used, this principle, during the Renaissance. Today we use this principle, which is called "planular." (he draws) See, these are planes.

LEVINE: Do you ever, do you remember anything that Hans Hoffman said about your work?

LEVITT: About my work? One day I brought him a few samples. And right away, as the man that he was, he said, "Well, they're amateurish." I said, "That's why I'm here." And he took me in, see? And, but, when it came in principal, you can't forget, they're important, see? But, you know, Robert Henri and Hoffman, I have one understanding of painting.

LEVINE: So, um . . .

LEVITT: (very close to the microphone) I am, I'm giving you a few things...

LEVINE: Yes, (she laughs) you're teaching me, right. Well, how about, then what happened in your life and in your career?

LEVITT: Well . . .

LEVINE: You studied with them, and . . .

LEVITT: I married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how did you meet your wife?

LEVITT: In Central Park at a concert.

LEVINE: And what was her name?

LEVITT: I went to, I went to Central Park. There's no money, and I know there's a concert in Central Park, so you walk in there. And when you walk in you see a half a dozen girls sitting on the grass. Being a young boy, where else am I going to go? I sit down near them. And you get talking to them. You talk to a woman, and in my days when you talk to a woman you have to take her home, see? So she lived in the Bronx. I had to take her home. I took her home, well, I never stopped coming. (they laugh)

LEVINE: What was her name?

LEVITT: The name? Claire.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

LEVITT: Her maiden name? Bibuld. B-U, B-I-B-U-L-D, Bibuld. A nice, a nice girl, a nice girl, a nice person. And I married her. So . . .

LEVINE: And then were you an artist by profession? Is that what you were doing?

LEVITT: I was an artist, but not yet in profession. I got a job at Dunne's and Bradstreet's, filing clerk, putting papers away and all kinds of things, earning fifty dollars a month, see? My wife was earning eight dollars a week. So we were able to get along, see, get along together. But I kept on painting besides, see? Going to school at night, she went to school and became a lawyer.

LEVINE: When were you able to be an artist full-time? When were you able to be an artist full-time?

LEVITT: When I was able to be full-time? When I was invited to show in a gallery. It's a credit to me that they, the gallery man recognized that I have talent. That was the Babcock Gallery, one of the best in New York City.

LEVINE: What was the name?

LEVITT: Babcock.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

LEVITT: It was in there, and they gave me the first show, see? I became an artist. I couldn't sell much, but I was an artist, see? So if you sold a picture for fifty dollars, you were very lucky. I get ten thousand for a painting now.

LEVINE: What would you say, could you sort of sum up your art career, because I know you had another career after that, but what would you say about the high points of your artistic life?

LEVITT: Well, to have been accepted, to begin with, by Babcock, to me it was the great achievement, see? And then being accepted in various independent exhibitions, being invited. Being accepted in the Brooklyn Museum, by the Whitney Museum, by the Modern Museum, all those things, I became known. And it gave me strength. It gave me confidence that I am an accepted artist, you see? All after hard work, absolutely. It's my determination was to be on top. There's plenty of room on the bottom, but there's very little, there's plenty of room on top, but there's no room on the bottom, and I didn't want to stay on the bottom.

I wanted to be up on top. That was my purpose. And my wife was understanding. She helped me. When I met her she used to put a half a dollar into my pocket because I had no carfare, see?. Because my drive was to become somebody. I came from a place where I wasn't anybody. Nobody was there, especially a Jew. When I got here I says, "I'm going to be somebody, and leave my footsteps on the sidewalks of New York." And that's what I did.

LEVINE: How did you get interested in prehistoric art and cave art?

LEVITT: I read a book by the name of Lust for Life by Irving Stone, which is the biography of Van Gogh. It interested me very much, and I decided to go to France to see where he painted. St. Remy de Provence is where he was, and that's where I stopped, and I stopped and stayed there for three years. I came to the municipality and I told the mayor of St. Remy de Provence who I am and what I want. He says, "I'll give you a place where you can paint provided you teach some of my girls and boys." And I did.

LEVINE: What did you say you wanted? What did you tell him you wanted?

LEVITT: I told him that I wanted to paint the Provence. And I had no money. But I said I'm going to give my talent to teach girls and boys free of charge. And they gave me a studio, they gave me an apartment, and they gave me everything free of charge.

LEVINE: And what would you say happened to you in your own person during those years?

LEVITT: Well, the atmosphere, the color, the light of the Provence revolutionizes your whole being, see? You're definitely made an

artist. It made a human being out of me. A broad, great vision, and great ambition, see? And I studied Van Gogh from A to Z. While there, I bought a little car, an automobile, and I decided to visit Lascaux. You know where Lascaux is? Because I read, when I was home in the United States, about the discovery of Lascaux, and I wanted to see it, and I went to see it. And when I saw it, I fell in love with it.

LEVINE: What was it that struck you so?

LEVITT: It's an amazing, it's an amazing reaction. I can't describe it in words. When you walk into, when you're led into a cave, because you can't walk into, you know, you'll get killed. You get to know the manager of the cave, he lets you in there, you take a look. Things on the wall, beasts, the people painted twenty five thousand years ago. And I call myself an artist? Imagine what those people had done. I made up my mind to make a study of prehistoric art. I spent twenty five years studying. I'd been to a hundred caves. I lived in caves. The French government gave me a silver medal for my studies.

LEVINE: Are your studies recorded anywhere? Are your studies recorded anywhere?

LEVITT: My studies?

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: I wrote about it, I lectured. I lectured at NYU, the Archeological Society of North America. I lectured in all those places, I lectured. I've written a good deal about it.

LEVINE: Are there actual books, or are there articles, or . . .

LEVITT: Well, I have articles, but no books. I was going to but it's not an easy matter to write a book, you know, see? I had so many things to do as an artist. But that's what I did, see? I, I happened to be an expert in prehistory. There are very few in the United States. The French government has three people in New York who got a medal. I'm one of them, (he whispers inaudibly) because I wanted to know the reason why men and women of that period which we call hominids, why they took to painting, and where did they get the materials to paint, and what reason did they have to paint.

LEVINE: Did you answer that in any way?

LEVITT: I built my own hypothesis. I have a hypothesis which is not necessary universally accepted, but it's mine. It satisfies me. I have built an answer to my questions why people of that time took to painting. How did they eat? Where did they get their food? And why were they moved to paint? Those are very, very deep questions. I spent twenty five years to find out. I couldn't find out to satisfy everybody, but I have my answer, my own, which I lectured, New York University, Mary Washington College gave me a doctorate, because I gave them six lectures and they made me a doctor of humane letters.

LEVINE: Now, how did they, how did your work on the prehistoric caves, how did that feed into your own painting, or did it?

LEVITT: I never copied, but I saw. That to me was enanthema. I believe only in creating things that my impulse demands. Most paintings are abstract, most of them, even in the Renaissance period, because you can never copy. Only a camera can approximate a

copy, but not color. You can make a liking. I can paint you as a liking, but it won't be you. You're real inside of you, see? And that needs studies and understanding and all of that, which takes a long time. So the caves don't interest me from that point of view. I admire the greatness of men of that period to paint an animal so powerfully, so beautifully strong, that I'd be ashamed to duplicate it, see? So why did they do it that way? Well, there was a great hunger, there was a great need, and there was a great impulse in them to translate. We haven't got that feeling today. You walk into a restaurant and you order a steak, and as long as you have money in your pocket, they'll give you a steak. Is that right? And the men in the cave couldn't go over to a restaurant for a steak. He had to kill the animal. And that describes a different mental attitude, a different physical attitude, and a transformation on the whole thing. They're different concepts, see? It doesn't fit into our mode of life. So you learn a lot of facts, and you store it into your mind, see? But you have your own way of doing it today, to be part of your century, part of your life.

LEVINE: Did your painting change, did your painting change very much after you were studying the caves . . .

LEVITT: Oh, surely. My painting changed very often. As I grew older, as I experienced more, as I felt a keenness of things sharper, I had it translated in color. I have maybe a half a dozen styles. I never creat--, wanted to have a permanent style, because it's too repetitive. I created it when I needed it, as you saw in the pictures I showed, see? Everything is a creation. Just like writing poetry. You can't repeat the poem. Every time you write a poem, you're impelled by an experience that you want to

translate. It becomes a different poem. The same with a good painting.

LEVINE: And are you still writing poetry today?

LEVITT: Oh, sure, I do. I write poetry. I write a lot of poetry. Literature is part of my life.

LEVINE: Well, I want to say, before we finish with this side of the tape, that you have two boxes of material at the Smithsonian. You have, here in New York . . .

LEVITT: In New York, in New York, in Milwaukee, mention my name and they'll give you two cassettes and a machine, and you get in there, and all you do is try it and see my life in there. (Dr. Levine laughs)

LEVINE: And also we're going to have some additional material on file here of your work.

LEVITT: You mean to tell me all we talked about was registered?

LEVINE: Yes. (she laughs) Okay. Well, we're going to finish this side now, and then we'll just put on another tape and conclude in a few minutes.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We're beginning now on tape two. And I want to ask you what you feel most satisfied that you've done in your long life. What is it that brings you the greatest satisfaction?

LEVITT: My satisfaction, of course, is due to the, its development in America. To be able to clothe my impulses in form and color that

soothes me aesthetically, I've accomplished something. I'm very happy. Every time Michael shows those things, I says, "Did I do it? Have I done it?" So I'm glad his support. I feel that I have gone through those vital moments in my life demanding its fulfillment, its externalization, to externalize it. And I had to find the form that pleased me, just like a woman walking into a shop and she can only put a gown on when it pleases her. It's the same feeling. I wanted to find a form for my impulse. Well, it doesn't come, you can't buy it anywhere, and it doesn't come overnight. It's a matter of experimentation. Not all things that I did are worthy of my praise. I kicked my foot through many pieces of paper because they were no good, which is true with every artist whether he's Rembrandt or Picasso. They had their moments of exaltation, complete satisfaction, and moments where they kicked their feet through their, things they did. Because a human being is that sort of an animal. The chemistry in this body does not always mutate the same way by virtue of things on the outside of the animal, the enviroment. Every time you turn, there's something that moves you the way you do. And once you've, as you move, you're trying to externalize that feeling, and something that you can look at and almost feel, you see? That's creating. And I'm very proud of being an artist. I'm established. I'm known almost throughout the world in some fashion. (Dr. Levine whispers inaudibly, he pauses) I'm sorry that my mama and papa are not alive. I should like to show them, and they would know, and that her opposition was wrong. That my consistent denial of her advice was the right thing to do. (Dr. Levine laughs)

LEVINE: How do you, do you think the fact that you came here as a young

man to this country and was an immigrant, were an immigrant for a period of time, do you think that influenced you as a personality?

LEVITT: There's no question about it, there's no question about it. After all, I'm a student, having exposed my mind to Thomas Jefferson and Lincoln, and men of that calibre, and Franklin Roosevelt. I would have to be a piece of stone not to respond to the greatness of those people. I fashion my ideal, my idealism, on the influences that I've received reading those people. To me, Jefferson was the father of democracy, of the great (?) to say, despite his deviations today. But as a weak man, I couldn't get it in Russia, and there was a czar over there who squished my throat. Over here I was free. He's fashioned me as a human being, understanding the human nature, and being very, very happy and proud of being alive in America.

LEVINE: Do you feel you have some side of you that is a Russian part of you?

LEVITT: No.

LEVINE: No.

LEVITT: Not a thing. I have consciously eliminated anything that would make someone doubt my Americanism. Primarily, of course, is my accent. I eliminated it completely, see? And my mastery of this language. English, to me, is a beautiful language, and I've mastered it. My vocabulary is very large.

LEVINE: Well, at a hundred and one years of age...

LEVITT: Yeah.

LEVINE: ... what do you attribute such a ripe old age to?

LEVITT: A sanity, a sanity of mind and a sanity of a stomach. (Dr. Levine laughs) Two things. And those are the two principles. If two work in symphony, if two work in concert, there's no reason why one can't stretch out to be a hundred years. I'm an example.

LEVINE: It seems that visual artists often live to a ripe old age, visual artists who are still actively . . .

LEVITT: You understand, you're right, see. Visual artists don't abuse themselves in many ways. If there's one thing that drives them is to do a good painting and they fashion their impulses to help accomplish it. It doesn't deviate them into different ways. I don't eat hot dogs (Dr. Levine laughs), and I don't wash it down with a Coca-Cola.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else that you can think of relevant to your coming here to this country as a young man, your making the kind of life for yourself that you wish to lead?

LEVITT: Well, my first job here in New York was with a button factory. In my days, women used to wear coats with buttons made of cloth and metal rings around them, if you know this. The metal rings had to be painted. I got a job, I'm an artist, I'm not a student, and I was painting for six dollars a week sitting at the table painting little rims on the button, to put on the coats that the women used to wear.

LEVINE: Were you in a, uh, in a factory, or you were doing this as homework, at home?

LEVITT: No, in a factory, in a factory. People who had a big, Columbia Button Works. And I was a good one because I knew how to handle color already, see? And they wanted me there. They were happy to have me. Painting rings on buttons, see? That was my first job. And then after getting some education in high school and all that, I got a job in Dunne's and Bradstreet's filing papers and things of that sort. And there I got fifty dollars a month. I've advanced, I say. I was a really, I was a good learner. And the opportunity was visible and palpable, touchable, in the United States. It wasn't where I come from, which was the great thing to me. Me, a poor little boy coming into a nation where I could put on a decent suit of clothes, see, and go to the theater occasionally and go on Broadway to see a show. I could never do before. I was in a different world. It opened my mind. But I wanted to know why and how you had to be an American. You had to know its origin. You had to know something about the Constitution and the Bill of Rights...

LEVINE: Do you remember when you became a citizen?

LEVITT: Yeah. I became a citizen when I entered the, when I joined the navy. There was no questions asked. Nothing, push you right in. You joined the navy and you became a citizen.

LEVINE: What motivated you to join the navy? Why did you join the navy?

LEVITT: I joined the navy because I had two brothers, and one of them had a job who could support, who could contribute something to the family. As an artist, as a student, an artist, I, Mama, I couldn't give Mama anything. So I went to the navy officers, the board of something, I forget the name, and I told them, "If you

give, if you tell me that you will not draft my boy, my friend, my brother into the army, I'll join the navy." (Dr. Levine laughs) Because I told him that, "My brother supports the family, I don't. And I'll trade." And they agreed. So I joined the navy and they let my brother go. (he whispers inaudibly) And I was just a buck private, a buck private, doing like every---, all the chores of a buck private and I was perfectly happy. I had no desire to climb, to become an officer. That didn't interest me at all, see? Because I don't particularly support the navy or the army. To me they're institutions of killing, see? So it was interesting. But I had to do what I did, my stint for the country, and I did it to help Mama, to let my brother go free. All of that made me into an American, see. (?) I know my country, and I've traveled from coast to coast. I've been to most states in the United States, with my wife. I've camped in every state. And it took three months time to get to Los Angeles, and three months time to come back.

LEVINE: Why did you camp? Why did you camp?

LEVITT: Why did I camp?

LEVINE: Yeah.

LEVITT: I have no money to pay for camping, you understand? We had the provisions to make dinner. I catch fish in a lake. (?) And knowing the country. I know my United States now. I swam in the Atlantic and I swam in the Pacific. See, I wanted to know. I wanted, I wanted to touch everything, to feel everything. I'm a very curious individual, see. I wanted to know why things are as they are, not just overlook them. I want to examine them and respond. I'm very happy. I'm a happy man. At a hundred and

one, I'm still romantic (they laugh). I mean, in the sense I got my (?). I love life. I love it very much. And I have the means to live. I paint, I lecture, I have exhibits. There's nothing finer in life, nothing finer.

LEVINE: I think that might be the perfect place to end.

LEVITT: Hmm?

LEVINE: I think that might be the perfect place to end our interview. It's a beautiful statement. I want to thank you so much for a most interesting interview.

LEVITT: I hope I didn't say anything wrong.

LEVINE: You didn't, I assure you. I've been speaking with Alfred Levitt, and this is September 8, 1995. We're here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off. Thank you.