EI-919
ROBERT BLOCKER
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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POLAND, 1921
AGE: 6

SHIP: S.S. ROTTERDAM
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay. Today is August 2nd, 1997 and I'm here today in Canton, Ohio with Mr. Robert Blocker, who came from Dambrova [PP]—

BLOCKER: Dambrova, Poland.

LEVINE: Dambrova, which was Russia-Poland, right on the border there in 1921 when he was six years of age. At the time of this interview, Mr. Blocker is 82 years of age and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, well, I'm really looking forward to this and I think our emphasis is going to be on this country, since you were young when you arrived. But if you could start out giving where you were born and when you were born.

BLOCKER: I was born in Dambrova, Poland March the 14th, 1915.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you live in Dambrova up until the time you left for America?

BLOCKER: Lived in Dambrova up until the time we left for—for the United States.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, I know you were only six years old. Do you—do you—do you have memories of Dambrova?

BLOCKER: Yes, most of the memories I have are, naturally, stories that your mother and grandmother and sisters and brothers told you. But I vividly remember we lived in a nice area surrounded with most of our families, my uncles and so forth, at that time. And I also remember we had a—a small hill going down into a small lake where we used to go sled riding. Beside—beyond that, I remember vividly during World War I tales that my mother and my older sister told me. The German Army occupied our house where we lived. And primary, that was a matter of—they went to anybody's home that had any food to get. So they stayed there for several days and I'm told they put me into a circle, being of the Jewish faith. And he started singing the song, "Ruven, Ruven Has Eaten Ham." Also, the—one of the—either a colonel or an officer of the German Army at that time took a liking to my sister, just—nothing sexual or anything like that. But he sort of liked her and he got the men to make sure that no problems happened into our home. They were there maybe for four or five days. They left and then we had some Russian troops come into our home for awhile, as they were fighting the war of 19—of World War I.

LEVINE: And what was that like with the Russians?

BLOCKER: That wasn't too bad because they just came in, took some food if you had some, and left. Beyond that, I don't remember a lot, except the story I was told about my middle brother, Abe—Abra—well, Abe and there—his name was changed to Ray later—was lost. [chuckles] And he was out in the—in the field following a cow that we had. So they found him and brought him back home. Beyond that, I can't tell you much more about life in Dambrova, except I know we had certain ovens in our house. Mother would bake cakes there and bread. You know, you eat a lot of stuff on your own. [telephone rings] Get that, Helen. You want to stop for a minute?

LEVINE: We'll pause for a second. [tape off/on] Yes, we're going to resume here.

BLOCKER: And—and also, my father had a tin shop in the home. That's where he did his work and that's where he made a living on. And one of my cousins told me the story that he was one of his apprentices working there with him. And outside of that in Brava [PP] I don't have much other recollections. I remember meeting my—knowing my—some of my cousins that lived with me who are still alive and couple of them still

living in Canton. But beyond that, I can't tell you too much more about Dabrova [PP].

LEVINE: Okay, what was your father's name?

BLOCKER: My father's name was Yahuda [PP] Leb.

LEVINE: L-A-B-E?

BLOCKER: L-E-B, Leb.

LEVINE: L-E-B, Leb.

BLOCKER: Leb, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BLOCKER: Yahuda Leb.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you have grandparents?

BLOCKER: Yes, my grandparents was—my grandmother's name was Esther Ruven, who I was named after. My father's name—grandfather's name was Barrow [PP].

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did you—this—this was for father's—

BLOCKER: My—no, this was my mother's—

LEVINE: Your mother's—

BLOCKER: —father and mother.

LEVINE: Okay. What was your mother's name and maiden name?

BLOCKER: My mother's maiden name was—her last was Wilkof and her first name was Sara.

LEVINE: Okay. How do you spell Wilkof?

BLOCKER: W-I-L-K-O-F.

LEVINE: And did you know your grandparents when you were a little boy?

BLOCKER: No, I think my grandmother had already died. That's why I was named after her. They—Jewish people do not name primarily after living parents.

LEVINE: And what was your name when you were born?

BLOCKER: My name when I was born was Ruven.

LEVINE: Ruven, uh-huh.

BLOCKER: And then it was changed to Robert when I first went to school. I went to school with a mixed group of kids, Syrians, Greeks, Italians, Jews, African Americans. It didn't matter what my name was. I—we moved to a new area in the school where there were only three or four Jewish kids. And several times on the playground I was taunted, singing of the song, "Ruben, Ruben, I've Been Thinking." I told the kids to stop. We had a little tussle; nothing serious. The principal came down, wanted to know what was going on. We told her. She gave him the devil for taunting me and changed my name to Robert. [laughs]

LEVINE: Huh. Was it originally spelled R-U-V-E-N?

BLOCKER: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay.

BLOCKER: It was changed to Rubin when I was taken first to school, introduced to school in the—in the first grade at Liberty—Liberty School in the southeast end of Canton by the rabbi's wife, who was in charge then of taking care of the school, introducing them to the principal or the teacher and saying, "This is a new student and his name is Rubin Blocker and he'll be attending school here."

LEVINE: I see. I see. So it went to R-U-B-I-N.

BLOCKER: Yes.

LEVINE: And then Robert.

BLOCKER: Right.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, how about your father's mother and father? Did you have any contact with them?

BLOCKER: No, that is a sad part. I never knew my father's mother or father. Never—never even heard their names because my father died at an

early age. And I'll explain that to you a little later. But I did know he had a sister who lived in England—married and lived in England. And when my father—during the war my father went to war. They drafted him because he was a tinsmith and he did a lot of things for the Polish Army or the Russian Army. [chuckles] I don't know which.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: After the war, he came home and my mother, again, was pregnant. My father died, I would guess, between 1919 and 1920. The baby was born after my father died, my youngest brother. The reason we came to America was very plain. At that time, all my mother's brothers—many, many of her cousins, except a few, had left for the States and they were here in America. She had a younger brother left who came to her and said, "Sara, you have five children, a baby about two years old. You better make plans to go to America." He said, "I'm young." He was a writer. "And I can"—

LEVINE: Provide?

BLOCKER: —"do for—provide for myself." He—I think he was just getting married at that time too. Well, she decided to do that and he helped her and wrote to her brothers and her—his brothers, the Wilkof family. And they arranged for us to have passage from Poland to the States. They sponsored us and so forth and so on.

LEVINE: I see.

BLOCKER: Ah—

LEVINE: Before we talk about leaving there, let me just ask you a few more questions about life there. Do you have any recollections of your father's tin-smithing?

BLOCKER: Not exactly, except from my cousin, who was his assistant, came to the States too and lived here in Canton till he passed away, told me stories, you know, about my father, how he worked, what he made. He made locks. He sharpened saws. He [coughs]—and that was primarily the business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, was—was Dambrova—was it a—what size town was it?

BLOCKER: It was a city at that time, I would say, in the neighborhood of maybe 15, [coughs] 20,000 people. Most of the Jewish people—there was a synagogue there—most of the Jewish people lived, like, in a little sthetl, like, together in a—in a—in a group, like.

LEVINE: In the center of town?

BLOCKER: Yeah. In fact, I—a very prominent man here in Canton, Ohio by the name of Joe Fisher [PP], who today have five big supermarket stores, came to me many, many years ago—he's gone now—and said to me, "You know, your my landsman [PP]," which means you're a friend of mine. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I lived five hou—or six houses from your mother and your uncles." So every time he saw me he would say, "Landsman, how are you?"

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, that's nice.

BLOCKER: Those—those are some of the stories was related to me over—[clears throat]—over the years.

LEVINE: Now, how—how were relations between Jewish people in Dambrova and—and the Polish population?

BLOCKER: I can only answer that from history itself. History shows that there wasn't very much relationship. We had some Christian people who would come to the home on Friday to light our fires, because we were—my mother was orthodox. And primarily, all Jewish people in Russia, Poland were orth—orthodox Jews. And they would light the fires so we'd have heat for the next day, because Friday and Saturday my mother would not light fires. Outside of that, being as young as I was, I didn't have much contact with the outside area beyond where we lived.

LEVINE: Well, what were your family speaking when—when they were in Dambrova?

BLOCKER: Yiddish.

LEVINE: Yiddish.

BLOCKER: Actually.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BLOCKER: I still know a little bit about it. My mother came to the country. She never did go to school, of course. She was 38 years old when she got here so most of our conversations were Yiddish.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: And she—she, herself, though could write Hebrew. She could talk a little Polish and a little bit of Russian.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: Quite a bit of Russian at the time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: My sister was about 11 or 12 at the time and she was—went to school and she was pretty intelligent young lady. She was able to speak some Russian, primarily Yiddish. And she also—she got her—taught in the Jewish temple.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, who—could you name your sisters and brothers in the—

BLOCKER: Yes.

LEVINE: —order of their age?

BLOCKER: In the order of their birth—a—

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

BLOCKER: Yeah, my sister was the oldest and her name was—Jewish name was Shana Bailey [PP], transferred to Sally. My sister—then my brother's name was Hime—Himey [PP]. That's my oldest brother. My next brother was Abraham, then myself, Ruven, and then my little brother was named after my father, Yehudleb. And he died at the age, two, two and a half years old when we got off ship. Fortunately, they didn't detect it; he had typhus.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm. Now, say—could you spell his name?

BLOCKER: Yehud is Y-E-H-U-D Leb—L-E-B. [coughs]

LEVINE: Okay. So were you closest to any particular one of your brothers or your sister or—

BLOCKER: No, it—it was a sort of a mix and we were all pretty well together. My sister actually, after a time when we were living in the southeast end of Canton, went and lived one of her—with one of our uncles in order to go to a different type of school in a better—little better environment. My brothers—my two brothers and I—when we first got to the United States, we lived with one of my aunts and uncles for about four months

until my—they got us a home of our own to live maybe a couple blocks from them right next to the synagogue.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, just to complete the—the Polish part of it, did you have uncles and aunts living around you when you lived there?

BLOCKER: Well, some, yes. Most of them had left long before we did. Some of them left as early as 1909, 1910. But the biggest part of them left before the war. They knew war was breaking out and they wanted to get out of there, because it was pretty hard to be Jewish and go into the Polish or Russian Army.

LEVINE: And wh—did they come to the Canton area, Ohio?

BLOCKER: They came to Canton, Ohio. One of—one of our cousins—what the heck was—Abraham Worshilski [PP], who was related to my uncles and to my mother, I think as a first cousin. I'm not po—could be a second cousin or a first—he was one of the first ones here.

LEVINE: How do you spell his last name?

BLOCKER: Worshilski. They call it now Worshil to make it easy. W-O-R-S-H-I-L.

LEVINE: Okay.

BLOCKER: And another one was a—a Max Bobroff—B-O-B-R-O-F-F. They were here first and they were the ones that got my uncles to come in, except one uncle, like I indicated before, stayed behind. He was the youngest of the—of the five—of the five brothers. He stayed behind and he's the one that told my mother to leave Poland. We also—my mother also had a sister. Her name was—hmm—well, she married a Meister [PP]. She was a Wilkof and married a—a Sam Meister.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BLOCKER: What the heck was her name—Si—It's a short name but I forget it.

LEVINE: This is Harry Meister's—

BLOCKER: Harry's mother—

LEVINE: —mother and father.

BLOCKER: Mother and father. I can show you pictures of them; I have them over here. She also left before m—my mother was the last one to leave

and her younger brother never did leave. And there's a story behind that that's very interesting.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Okay.

BLOCKER: In 1938 or '39, thereabouts, he wrote to a cousin of mine, Elsie Wilkof. Now, Elsie Wilkof was my first cousin. She married a second cousin named Sam Wilkof. He wrote to her telling he would like to have a typewriter with Russian script because he was a writer. Well, the family got together, sent him a typewriter. It's about 1936, '37. The exact year, I don't know. We never—from that point on, never heard from him. We thought all these years he probably either got killed in the Hol—Holocaust or in the war or whatever. Well, here, lo and behold, just about six months ago, a cousin of mine, Ray Wilkof, gets a telephone call from California by a young man named—not young anymore, 73 years old—Boris Wilkof. And how'd he get my cousin's name was he had a piece of paper and it said, "Elke," which is Elsie; Oxford, the name of a street; Canton, Ohio, zip code. He went to the Jewish Congress and they traced it to Elsie Wilkof, who is the mother of Ray Wilkof, who since has—who had died, it so happened. But through her name, they traced it to Ray Wilkof, her son. And he—and I got a letter here. He explained his life. His father actually didn't die in the Holocaust. He died in 1963 or 1968. They were always—were afraid to write, being of the Jewish faith, that they wanted to come to this country, because if they'd intercept a letter, all hell would break loose. So after the Cold War was over, his son-in-law, who was divorced from his wife but had a child, or their granddaughter, decided to help them come into the country. And they're—they're right now living in California. He was a—he was a doctor in Russia.

LEVINE: This was the one that started out—

BLOCKER: This is Boris'—

LEVINE: —being a writer?

BLOCKER: No, this is the son.

LEVINE: This is the other one.

BLOCKER: This is the son—

LEVINE: The son.

BLOCKER: —of the writ—

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Okay.

BLOCKER: Boris Wilkof is the son of Lazer [PP] Wilkof, his father, who we thought had passed—died or disappeared or whatever. He was a doctor. He fought and got hurt in the battle of Leningrad and Stalingrad. And at age 44 or 40, around in there, from his letter, he went to medical school and became a doctor. His wife also is a doctor. And—and his daughter was a—I think a nurse. Well, come to this country at 73 years old with diabetes, wounded, can't speak the language, naturally, they're not going to go to work anywhere. The daughter presently is working—worked for awhile as a receptionist part time at a doctor's hospital temporarily while somebody was on vacation. And now she going to school to learn more English to get—try and get a better job. Their granddaughter, being sponsored, I think, by her father, is going to college in San Diego and she eventually will become a lawyer.

LEVINE: Oh. Do you have any idea why the original uncles who came to this country and settled around Canton, Ohio—why Ohio? Why it was—

BLOCKER: No.

LEVINE: —that they came here?

BLOCKER: Well, the—the first ones that came were actually cousins of my uncles.

LEVINE: Okay.

BLOCKER: And why they came, I—I have no idea. I think there's no—I could—I could be wrong but 99 percent I think I'm right, because of the Depression, of being Jewish, living in Russia or Poland. You know, Pol—when you talk about Poland and the Jewish, you talk about ghettoes. You talk about—

LEVINE: Anti-Semitism.

BLOCKER: —anti-Semitism to a—[chuckles] n^{th} degree.

LEVINE: But I was just wondering why Ohio? You know, why didn't—

BLOCKER: Well—

LEVINE: —they live in New York or why wasn't it [unclear]?

BLOCKER: They landed in New York and somehow or other, they came here because they must have been offered a job or whatever. And, in fact,

the cousin I mentioned here, Abraham Worshilski, was the founder of our synagogue, which is now 107 years old.

LEVINE: Wow.

BLOCKER: Maybe 110 years old. And so they were re—religious people. You know, then it—it spreads out. Eventually, you [chuckles] become Reform or Conservative or whatever.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in [unclear]?

BLOCKER: Well, it—it was—I was told it was a pretty good-size home, several bedrooms, no—no inside plumbing, of course, which was still not [chuckles] in Russia or Poland today very much. That's nothing new. And we had a little farm area. We had a cow; we had some chickens. And I think most Jewish people had that type of thing and—and even the Polish people. That's how they lived, raising a little bit of their own fruits and vegetables and things of that nature and living together. We had a synagogue there, which I understand still is there. Now, my—

LEVINE: Oh.

BLOCKER: —my grandson, David Blocker, who right now is in Israel as a Student Council—two years ago went to Russia and Poland. And he had a copy of my father's grave written in Hebrew. He went there—to go from there on in—go to Israel. Well, he got as far as Krakow and the guy says, "The trains are running slow. There's nothing left in Dabrova. Even the cemeteries were desecrated. I doubt whether you'll find your grand"—it would be his great grandfather's grave. "But if we try to go, you might miss or connection to where we have to get back into Warsaw to go"—

LEVINE: [unclear]

BLOCKER: —"to Israel."

LEVINE: Is Dambrova near Krakow or is it much [unclear]?

BLOCKER: It's—Dam—Dabrova is on top; Krakow is down below. It's quite a ways from it. You had to take a rickety, rickety train to get there. You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BLOCKER: So they didn't want to take the chance of going there. And she says, "We know, from history, that there's nothing left there."

LEVINE: Okay.

BLOCKER: Except the old synagogue, sort of desecrated, is still there. Today, I don't know if any Jewish people moved back or not. I doubt it.

LEVINE: Okay. How about foods? Do you recall any foods from Poland in your little [unclear]?

BLOCKER: Well, my mother cooked quite a bit. One of the foods we—is a staple amongst a lot of Jewish people, naturally, is gefilte fish. She made a lot of, we call it, pancakes. The—in Jewish, they call latkes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: And she used to make them, two, three at a time. As fast as she made them, we ate them. Now, she came to this country, she was still making latkes. [laughs]

LEVINE: Well, it sounds as though the family was fairly comfortable.

BLOCKER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: You weren't poor?

BLOCKER: No. No, no. We weren't poor in Russia. But the sad part—or Poland—when you leave, you leave poor. We were allowed to take what—I could carry a bag. My brother was allowed a bag and my sister—my sister and brother were allowed each bag. My mother was allowed a small suitcase-like.

LEVINE: Trunk?

BLOCKER: Trunk-like.

LEVINE: Okay, uh-huh.

BLOCKER: Trunk-like. No fancy jewelry. Her diamond ring, if she had one—I don't even know if she did have one—whatever type of ring she could keep. Moneys, I was told, possibly in those days, 200—equivalent to $200, maybe less. I really don't know. The passage, of course, was paid by my uncles and so forth, so she didn't have to worry about that. I do reflect and remember when we got into New York we were delayed for about ma—maybe two or three days. There was something wrong with our papers. My uncle and his cousin, Mr. Bobroff, had to talk to somebody in Washington, or they went to

Washington; I don't know which. And they got the papers straightened out and we were permitted then to leave Ellis Island—leave the boat, rather, and go into Ellis Island, be processed, examined, de-liced, checked out, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. [chuckles] And the thing that stays in my memory and that—it flashes back to me is when we got out—out of Ellis Island and we went into Pennsylvania Railroad Station. I can picture it today with the big dome inside, the people dashing and running all over. And I said to—I keep saying to myself, "Why did that stay with me?" [laughs]

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, I guess it was—

BLOCKER: And we got on a train and went from New York right to Canton. Our family met us, took us to a home of my mother's sister and her husband, the Meister family. They had a schwitzba [PP] there. People used to take baths there and hot tub, today it's called, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: And we stayed there about three or four months till we got our own place. And that's when my—we discovered my little brother had typhus and passed away.

LEVINE: Oh. Well, do you recall anything that you or your brothers or sister or mother brought? Any of the things that you actually brought to this country from the Old Country?

BLOCKER: Well, in all honesty, my sister was—I wouldn't say trying to be a socialite or anything, but she seemed not to want to have any connection anymore with the—that past. And a lot of stuff was destroyed. My mother had shaws [PP]. She had—we had her little wicker basket, or trunk, you'd call it, for many years. And over the years it, you know, decayed and we threw it away. She did bring several prayer books with her written in—in Hebrew. A picture—she had a picture—several pictures of some of my—her brothers or my uncles, a picture of—naturally, of her husband. But beyond that, nothing of any value.

LEVINE: Candlesticks?

BLOCKER: Huh?

LEVINE: How about her candlesticks? That seems to have been—

BLOCKER: Well, she—she had a menorah, a little, small menorah that she brought with her. But outside of that, a little bit of linens that they're allowed—

you're allowed to take—as much as you're allowed to take, you know. They—the house that we had and everything else, the government took over. My father actually died from being in the army. He came home, got pneumonia and died because he was sick. He was—he was a prisoner in the German camp for a short while. And then he got out and, from what I was told, he had a long distance to walk to get home. There—there was no—there was no big Jeeps and trucks and—and transportation to get him home. When he got home he was well for awhile and then he got pneumonia real bad and—and died.

LEVINE: Well, now, why was it that the government took over the house?

BLOCKER: Well, they still do that today, primarily. You want to lea—if you want to leave Russia—I don't know about today during the—since the—Russia's trying to turn to a democracy. So is Poland. But in those days, if you wanted to leave, you left with what was on your back and what you could carry.

LEVINE: And you didn't get to sell your house.

BLOCKER: You didn't get—you didn't get anything. That became had property of the state.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Do you remember when your father died?

BLOCKER: Yes, he died between 1919, 1920. Tha—that I know.

LEVINE: Do you have any recollection of—

BLOCKER: I have just a—

LEVINE: —the funeral or—

BLOCKER: No.

LEVINE: —or any—

BLOCKER: I don't have that. The only recollection, I remember when he—he was in bed for a short while. And doctors, whoever they were, came to see him there. He didn't go to—didn't go to a hospital. They probably didn't have much of a hospital; I don't know. But outside of that, I didn't know much about my father, except the stories that were told to me. I never met his sister, who was the only relative he had, was one sister. And she moved, got married, went to England. And her—and her husband—her husband used to make the leather—leather works and the harnesses for the—for the kings and queens of England.

[laughs] They were very big in leather. And they did a lot—a lot of work for the—to the royal horses and things like that. In fact, her family—my aunt's family still lives in England, are pretty big business people, exporters and importers and things like that. The only mistake I made, I never got over there. My sister did. She met them. My brother met them. And we met his cousin, Alec. He looked at him. He says, "My gosh. You look like my brother, Bob." [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, wow. So—

BLOCKER: He—also, my daughter, Diane—she graduated from college undergraduate—not the graduate school but undergraduate school. She went to England and he picked her up at the airport. So she got to see him [unclear]—

LEVINE: Did she think he looked like you?

BLOCKER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. She says, "He looks exactly like you."

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Well, what—when you left Dambrova and got at—you had to travel to Amsterdam for the ship.

BLOCKER: Right.

LEVINE: Do you remember that period—

BLOCKER: Yes.

LEVINE: —at all? Anything?

BLOCKER: A little bit of that because we went from Dabrova with horse and wagon to an area in Poland where the train took you then to another station to go on into Holland. That I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember saying goodbye to people? Do you remember actually leaving?

BLOCKER: No, no. I don't remember that at all.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: The only people would be around would be, you know, neighbors—

LEVINE: [unclear]

BLOCKER: —or my one uncle.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: And he, I think, from what I was told, when he talked to my mother the last time he told her to leave. I think he made a journey to get out of Dabrova and go deeper into—into Russia. And I think in the letter I have—I'll have to get it—I think he moved into—what is it? What's the name of that—there was a book came out on it too. "Gorky Park" or something like that.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah, um—

BLOCKER: I forget the name of the book and the name of the city that he moved into—

LEVINE: [unclear] Park, yeah.

BLOCKER: —from what I was told. Something like that. And—and that's where—we never—never actually—I can't remember if he was there when my mother left or not or maybe he took her there to the boat—to the train. I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay. So how about the S.S. Rotterdam? Do you recall anything about the passage [unclear]?

BLOCKER: No, the only thing I know about that, we were in steerage. We didn't have the money to be on second class or first class. And one thing my mother told us always, "Don't leave each other." [laughs] So why she said that, I don't know.

LEVINE: Well, that's probably good advice. [chuckles] Okay—

BLOCKER: She always carried the baby in her arms. My sister and my older brother sort of, you know, held onto each other. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And when the ship arrived in the New York harbor, do you remember that? Were you aware—

BLOCKER: No, I—you could—not really true memory, except when you read about these things, you see the pictures, it comes into your mind like [laughs]—

LEVINE: That's [unclear], right. Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. And Ellis Island, any recollections of that?

BLOCKER: Yeah. The only thing I can remember Ellis Island is getting undressed and going to take a shower to—

LEVINE: De-lice?

BLOCKER: —de-liced or whatever they—and be examined. I do remember part of that but not real vividly. It was real quick for the youngsters. They looked in your eyes or your teeth and probably checked your body. But I do think they did a more accurate test on the adults and—because there was a certain disease going of, eye disease—

LEVINE: Right.

BLOCKER: Tracoma or something like that.

LEVINE: Right, uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: So they were checking for that. And fortunately for us, whether it didn't show on my little brother—his typhus didn't show up until we got in the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, wow. Now, was your mother aware that your little brother was sick?

BLOCKER: No.

LEVINE: At the time?

BLOCKER: She—not until they came to the States, yeah.

LEVINE: But when she was at Ellis Island she didn't know either.

BLOCKER: She didn't realize, no. No.

LEVINE: So nobody realized.

BLOCKER: No.

LEVINE: So were you stay—when your papers—when you were getting the papers straightened out so you could enter the country, were you staying at Ellis Island?

BLOCKER: No, we were stay—you had to stay aboard ship.

LEVINE: Oh, you were on a ship.

BLOCKER: You had—you couldn't leave the ship, from what I understand, until your papers were all straightened out. Now, if someone—after when they examined you, if you had a certain disease you would have to go back on the ship. And in fact, reading stories, there was a case where a young—they made the mother and the father and the rest of the family come—go onto the United States and they held a child back. Now, there's a story my mother told me. I can only relate it from what she told me. We had some—whether they were African American—African—black Africans. They were colored skin. They might have been some other nationality; I don't know. But one of them was aboard ship and jumped ship into the ocean because she didn't want to be sent back.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

BLOCKER: And I think those cases happened several times during all the years. And you can't blame anybody for those things. You know, 3, 400,000, 500,000 people coming to a country. They weren't set up for it properly, as everybody knows. That's common knowledge. And there was hardships but life is that way.

LEVINE: That's right. Did your mother—do you remember if your mother was anxious about, like, maybe somebody wouldn't be let in or—

BLOCKER: Well—

LEVINE: —that you might be turned back?

BLOCKER: Not really. We were fairly healthy. Even when we got in the States, my one brother never got sick till later in life. My sister was hardly ever sick. Yet [knocking sound]—I'm yet to be in a hospital myself—

LEVINE: That's wonderful. You look [unclear].

BLOCKER: —overnight. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BLOCKER: A little problem but never had to spend a night over—in a hospital. And my mother was pretty healthy. She lived to be 90 years old. She was the last of the family to pass away that lived here in the—in the States. Her younger brother, as I related—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: —died in about 1968 or so.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: She died in 1973.

LEVINE: Oh.

BLOCKER: And born in—she was 38 years old when she got here so—

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, now, you mentioned the big dome that you remembered at Pennsylvania Station.

BLOCKER: Pennsylvania Station. The interior of it and the seats and the people and the hustle and the bustle. I went back there. When I went to New York, I went back there just to go to Pennsylvania Station to look at it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Were there any other first impressions that stick in your mind those first days or weeks?

BLOCKER: Well, in all reality, depressions didn't enter my mind. I was six years old. I can't tell you whether I got here in April or May or what month. But within a month after I got here, my brothers and I went on the streets of downtown Canton and we started selling newspapers. And at that time, newspapers sold for a penny apiece. So I didn't have to do much about change, give a person a penny, smile, "Thank you." They gave you a penny. If they gave you a nickel you looked at it and if you looked long enough, they'd tell you to keep it. [laughter]

LEVINE: Can you describe anything more about—like what did you do? You—you went somewhere, picked up a bunch of papers?

BLOCKER: No, no.

LEVINE: Oh.

BLOCKER: It was well regulated. You had to come to a corner and they had to—they call street managers. And Babe Stern will tell you a story about that too. But he—later on, Babe became a street manager. You became a street manager. You were assigned a corner. There was competition. I sold maybe the "Canton Daily News." Somebody else sold the "Canton Repository." There's two—always two newspapers in the—in the cities in those days. The Cleveland papers used to come

in there, the “Cleveland News,” the “Cleveland Press.” The “Plain Dealer” was a morning paper. I didn’t sell that much, except on weekends. Papers came in from New York. Papers came in from Detroit, different, you know, cities, especially during the weekends. And you were assigned corners and we bumped each other around to—to, see—to—you put a paper in a person’s face. If he got there quick, he’d take your paper and give you your—your money and go. If the other guy got there [chuckles] ahead of you, he’d sell the papers. But it was pretty well regulated and I sold newspapers in the downtown area of Canton right by what used to be known—Star County sheriff’s jail office. And the sheriff lived there. Well, at about seven years old I got to know the sheriff pretty well, his wife and he had a daughter there lived with him. And about seven o’clock in the evening he’d see me. Somebody would rap on the window. I’d see him. He’d go like that or his wife would. I’d go in there and they’d give me some food to eat. [laughs]

LEVINE: Wow. Now, when you [chuckles] say it was well regulated, did you have a set corner?

BLOCKER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: That was always your corner.

BLOCKER: I was—always my corner as long as I maintained it and—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BLOCKER: —and the—somebody else—in later years, it—you got to sell all the newspapers you wanted. You could sell the “News” and the “Press” together. “News” went out of business and the “Press” stayed in business while I was still selling papers. Now, the thing about selling newspapers—people say, “What’s there to selling newspapers?” Well, I would leave school, and this I hate to talk about is, if I went to school, did downtown. We lived on Fourth Street Northwest in later years and that was a good mile and a half from school, from the downtown area. And I’d get—if I saw the right bus driver, he’d let me get in for nothing and I’d come downtown on a ride. If not, I’d walk downtown, get your papers. I had some customers—we all did—to deliver some papers, like, some of the—there used to be a lot of furniture stores, shops. You’d get to know the people. They’d say, “Bob” or “Rufky”—they called me Rufky at that time as my nickname from Ruven. And I’d leave a paper. At the end of the week I’d go and collect. But mainly, you stood on the corner. And by selling those papers on that corner, I got to know all the judges that—because it was right by courthouse—the judges and the juries and the prosecutors and the lawyers and

friends, stockbrokers. One stockbroker one Christmas day came out of his office. He says, “Come on inside a little bit.” He brought me inside his office, set me top—on top of a table, brought out a—my first pair of long pants [laughs] and a jacket.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BLOCKER: And he became a very good friend of mine. But we used to sell papers on weekends. That was a hard job. I’d go downtown Saturday at 10, 11 o’clock and I would sell newspapers until one, two o’clock Sunday morning. At that time, we’d close up, go down to our—to the—where the papers came in for the Sunday papers, rest maybe a couple hours, get the new papers, put them together—stuff them together is what they called, the different sections. At seven or eight o’clock you went back on your corner, stayed there till two o’clock Sunday afternoon. I wouldn’t see my mother from eleven o’clock Saturday till two o’clock Sunday afternoon. So people say, “Well, how’d you do with your Hebrew school?” I says, “I went one year and quit. My object was to make a living.”

LEVINE: Were you really helping the family at that point?

BLOCKER: Oh, yeah. In those days, when you sold papers during the day. If you made your 50, 60 cents with papers selling for a penny or two, I’d come home ten o’clock at night, eleven o’clock at night. My mother would probably in bed and I’d just walk in and whatever money I made, I’d put on her dresser. My brother would do the same thing. She took that money, bought food, bought what little clothing we could. She went to work at the Tempkin [PP] Roller Bearing Company. She worked there for about 12 years.

LEVINE: What’s the name of the company?

BLOCKER: Tempkin Roller Bearing—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: —Manufacturer, the big—largest manufacturer of roller bearings in the United States, practically, I would say in the world today. And she worked there for about 12 years until 1933 or ’34. She had to go—she got—felt sick. She didn’t know what was wrong and she insist that she wouldn’t go anywhere except the Mayo Clinic [chuckles] in Rochester, New York. Well, at that time, I decided a year or two before that to quit selling newspapers because papers changed. The editions used to be—stock market used to close at noon. Papers would come out with the final stock market and we’d sell the stock edition. The baseball

games used to—played in the afternoon. So we sold the baseball editions till late at night. Well, baseball started playing at night. Stock market started closing at four o'clock, four-thirty. Too late—they didn't want to—too late to get their papers out—that late out at—out at [unclear] so forth. So newspaper sales started to drop off and with Depression time and the people that I worked for, a Mr. Solomon and a half brother, Mr. Drier [PP], my—we—I checked in on a Sunday—Sunday morning and I said—we called him Cooley, his nickname—"I'm going to look for a job in a factory. I got to get off the streets." And I said, "I have some friends that are managers and assistant managers of some of the plants. And they told me to come, they'd get me a job." Well, he said, "Don't do that. They just opened up a store." Because the big newsstand stole—closed up behind the block, he opened up a little store not much more than maybe 30 feet wide and 40 feet. He said, "You go up there. You know my sister, Rose. She'll give you a job. Tell her I said so." I walked in. I said, "Rose, Cooley told me to go to work here." She opened up her arms and hugged me. [laughs] I went to work there and, within three or four months, another young man who was carrying a newspaper route joined me. And she, within the year or so or less, decided to leave it. We took over as managers, co-managers. We ran it together. He's of the Lutheran faith and I'm of the Jewish faith but we're probably closer than brothers or sisters or aunts or uncles. [laughs] And we still are today. We sold the store. Well, we bought the store in 19—in 1983. Yeah, about 1983 and we sold it in about 1993. And the—

LEVINE: What was the name of the store?

BLOCKER: The News Depot. It was named the News Depot because in those days, primarily we sold newspapers, magazines, things of that nature, cigars, cigarettes, which were big. Then we got in—we were one of the first stores in Canton to have a Hallmark greeting card display. Then we got into books and I can remember vividly when I went in working there about the first couple of months, somebody come in—woman asked for a "Harper's Bazaar" and I says, "We don't sell brassieres here." [laughs]

LEVINE: But now, was it a newsstand all those years from—

BLOCKER: Oh, no. Oh—

LEVINE: —when that—you were first hired?

BLOCKER: Yes. It was only open about, maybe, six, seven months before I got in there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: And from there—from the small room there was areas behind us. And this young man and I expanded as far as we could go there. In later years—about the last 30 years, I—in 1963, '64 area we moved in on Market Street.

LEVINE: Which is the main street.

BLOCKER: Which is the main street in Canton and was right in the heart of downtown. And it's still there today. And there we expanded twice. We had a store there, in about 50 by 200 with two entrances front and back, going from one street to the other. We were actually one of the best bookstores in this part of the—of Ohio. We didn't say that but our salesmen said that, that came and called us from Doubleday, Simon and Shuster, Harper's and so forth. And people asked me about a book, "Did you read it?" I says, "I don't read books but I read reviews and I can tell you all about them." [chuckles] One of the things that happened—

LEVINE: Okay, we have about 10 more minutes on this—

BLOCKER: One of the things that happened when I went into this store, that people that I sold newspapers on the streets, as soon as they saw me in the store, and downtown was the hub of everything with restaurants across the street, hotels and everything, they came into the store. And they became my book customers, friends. When they see me on the streets today I still get the same, "Hello, how are you?" and things like that. Now, in retrospect, I'll tell you about my sister. My sister went to school, graduated real quick, got married when she was about 22 to a Dave Kramer [PP], who has two children. He died rather young but his—his one son became a pediatrician. His other son is right today head of the Marquette University Science Department. My sister—those are my sister's two kids.

LEVINE: Right.

BLOCKER: Myself, I have two children. One became a doctor, a pediatrician, who you talked to. My daughter is a lawyer in Canton also. My brother had a son and a daughter, Billy and Judy. Billy's here in Canton practicing as an arthritic doctor. The daughter lives in Florida, teaches school as a—speech therapy, married to an attorney. My other brother had two children. Unfortunately, my brother was a go-go-go guy, made a lot of bucks and then lost it all in—in the building business. And his kids are living [unclear]. They work. One is a very top-notch chess player,

rated at one time around here about ninth or so in the area. And that is really my family. I'll tell you a story how I met my wife. [laughs]

LEVINE: [unclear] good. And, oh, tell me her name and maiden name.

BLOCKER: My wife's name is Helen. Her maiden name is Morris and now it's Helen Morris Blocker. And I tell women when they get married to use their maiden name as a middle name. Otherwise, you get lost.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BLOCKER: [chuckles] That's why I don't know much about my father's background, you know.

LEVINE: Right.

BLOCKER: The—her—the people I worked for at the News Depot was her father's first cousin. And her mo—her mother came to visit. But prior to that, I want to tell you, I just came home from the Army after serving 32 months overseas. I went from the Harv [PP] to Metv [PP] to Bavaria down to Stuttgart. I wound up in Manhattan in the military police.

LEVINE: What year was this now that you—

BLOCKER: In 19—from 1943 to 1945 or '6 when the war ended. I came home. Helen was overseas as a Army nurse. She was a first lieutenant overseas. She came home about the same time and she did some practice in New York for awhile as a—as a private nurse. And her mother and her came to visit in Canton. And my boss, her cousin, said, "Would you like to have a date?" And I said, "Sure." So I came to his home and waiting for her to come down and her mother came down first. That's my date? You know. [chuckles] And there—and she followed after, says, "That's your date." So we went out and had dinner and she's in Canton three or four days and I—we met each other those three or four days. Then we talked on the telephone. She lived in New York at that time. And I said, "Well, I'm coming to New York in June to the ABA—American Booksellers Association. How would you like to meet us—meet me there?" I said, "We'll be at the Hotel Roosevelt." So she came and we went to the Hotel Taft with my partner and his wife. And we're sitting, having a couple drinks but never too many, having dinner. He—and my partner poked me and said, "Didn't you come here for a purpose, to ask Helen something?" [laughs] And I turned around and said, "Yeah, Helen, would you like to get married?" [laughs] So she looked at me. She says, "Well, you have to meet my father first," or something like that. [chuckles] So I went and I met her father. And he knew of me through this cousin.

And I said, “We want to get married.” Like, “How would you like to come to Canton?” My mother would have a reception at her home. And that’s what we did and in 1947 we got married and in September we’ll be celebrating our 50th anniversary.

LEVINE: Wonderful. That’s wonderful. Now, a few last questions before the tape ends.

BLOCKER: Okay.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of that you’ve done in your life?

BLOCKER: The most proud thing I can really think of, coming from what I—you have to always remember where you came from and never forget where—what you came from. I would say, coming from nothing and winding up owning a business, and a successful little business—nothing big, but gave me a good living. I was able to send my—my dau—daughter to college. She went seven years out of state in [unclear]. My son went to medical school about 12 years altogether. He didn’t borrow any money.

LEVINE: Wow.

BLOCKER: I was able to help my mother keep the family together. But the most thing I’m proud of is the fact that here I am, never went to school, quit high school as a sophomore to go to work, married a lovely girl. Close the door.

LEVINE: Well, that’s fine.

BLOCKER: Raised children, good children.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: Very close family. And my biggest thing in life is I love my—not only my family but my cousins. We’re together a lot. We see each other a lot, talk with each other a lot, which to me is something people don’t do today.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

BLOCKER: And that’s the thing I’m most proud of, being able to stay in the store for 60 years and I always had one theory. “Don’t quit your job unless you find a better one.”

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BLOCKER: And I have to say in the—in the world of turmoil, that I tried to be as honest with people as I could. And I think that's why people came to the store. And if they moved to Florida, they would still write and say, "Bob, send me a copy of this. Send me a copy of that." I was—I was the floor manager. My other man—my partner was the manager. He took care of the office work.

LEVINE: Oh.

BLOCKER: The bookkeeping, the buying and things of that nature. And I'm also very proud of the fact that I was able to stay with him and he stayed with me without any arguments. And our families became close. We went to their children's weddings. We went to—to his wedding and everything else.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BLOCKER: And those things, to me, are as much as all—all the jewels and all the wealth that a person might think of in—as far as money goes, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, what do you think about the fact that you came here as a young child and—and an immigrant child and started out a new life? Do you think that made a difference in who you are and in your personality, that immigrant experience?

BLOCKER: Absolutely. What it—what it did, it—the opportunity was there. Today, there's no kids selling newspapers on the streets. And that little opportunity of selling newspapers got me to rub shoulders with the known, the unknown, the good, the bad and the indifferent of the community. And that taught me, when you see a fire, go across the street. You see a fight, don't join it. You see people doing things wrong, just go the opposite direction. And from that, I was able to make more friends than anyone, really—not—not social friends so much as wherever I go, I bump into people and they shake my hand and want to know how I'm doing. And that, to me, means—means everything. That means everything to me.

LEVINE: Well, that might be a beautiful place to end. I want to thank you so much for a really interesting interview.

BLOCKER: [laughs]

LEVINE: Thank you, thank you. I've been speaking with Robert Blocker, who came at six years of age in 1921 from Poland—well, Po—Russia, Poland.

BLOCKER: Dabrova.

LEVINE: Dabrova. And today, at the time of this interview, he's 82. It's August 2nd, 1997. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]