KECK-188
HARRY LAUFER
BIRTHDATE: 1898(?)
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 5, 1986
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 88(?)
RUNNING TIME: 37:00
INTERVIEWER: DEBRA ALLEE
RECORDING ENGINEER: (?) DALLETTE
INTERVIEW LOCATION: NOT GIVEN
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NOT GIVEN
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: NOT GIVEN

AUSTRIA, 1921
AGE: 23

SHIP: NOT GIVEN
PORT: LE HAVRE
RESIDENCES:
AUSTRIA-HUNGARY: RADUA
UNITED STATES: NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MS. ALLEE: This is interview number 188 with Harry Laufer. This is Debra Allee. It is five minutes to four on Thursday, the fifth of June, 1986. We're beginning the interview with Mr. Laufer about his experience of immigrating from Austria in 1921. Could you start by telling me about where you were born, and when?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, yes. I was born in a place called [Radua], that—and the province was Bukovina. And that used to be one of the eastern provinces of the Austrian Empire. In 1912, our father died, and my mother was left, she was about thirty-four, thirty-five years old, with seven children. I was the oldest, fifteen, and the youngest was three weeks old. In the beginning, it was not too bad, until the war, when the Russians invaded the second time. You know, most of the

Jewish people fled. And the family marched about 250 kilometers across the Crisana Range, on the Hungarian side, from there the government took them, and distributed them as refugees. And I was in service then, I was taken to service, then when I came home, 1918, when the war ended, the family was also home already. I was over the winter home, Romania occupied that territory, and I was over the winter, in the spring of 1919, I was drafted into the Romanian army, where I served a year. And then they released me. I had to give up uniform, because—for country here, the soldiers take the uniform home. There, you had to give it up. By the way, Romania was one of the allies, and the United States and the British gave them surplus uniforms. I was wearing American uniform at that time. So when they released me, I had to give the uniform back. They sent me home, for clothing. And we were poor. I came home; I didn't have any clothes home. So, I was desperate. So, we had a neighbor, a peasant, that had just come home from United States, and he had American clothes. He gave me a pair of pants, and a shirt, and he lent me a pair of shoes. And there was a jacket. I gave up the uniform, and I came back home. We were very poor; sometimes we just didn't have food to eat. So my mother decided the only thing, if she could somehow ship me to the United States. New people come to the United States, they get jobs here, they work, and we had nothing else there. So, my mother was a nice lady, trustworthy. She contacted several people, and they lent her money. Was enough to reach the port, western Europe. And we had here some relatives, distant relatives, so I wrote to a cousin of my father, and they were here from before the war, and they were the kids that used to go with me to school. I figured they wouldn't let me down. So I wrote this cousin a letter, that I'm trying to get to the United States. I'll come to a port; I'll send them a telegram, he should send me a ticket. And when I reach the United States and

start to work, I'll pay him back, with thanks and the interest and everything. And I never got an answer. So, I was stranded in Paris, in the HIAS, you know the HIAS? I was stranded there, waiting. During that time, another relative, a woman with five children, was going to the United States. Her husband was a brother to the man that I sent the letter. So, she saw me there, my predicament. And she came to the United States, I had there an aunt, she came there to visit her, it was relatives. So she told her about my plight there in Paris. So this aunt contacted a cousin of mine that was about a few months in the United States, but he had sisters and brothers that were here before World War One, and he went to his sisters and brothers, and they all contributed, and he brought this money to my aunt, and they sent me that money to Paris there, the HIAS, and I bought a ticket and I boarded boat on February third, and after a stormy trip—

MS. ALLEE: And you bought—where did you—

MR. LAUFER: In Paris.

MS. ALLEE: In Paris?

MR. LAUFER: Yes. And I sailed from Le Havre. And I arrived here, the boat arrived here on February fourteenth. And the next day, the fifteenth, the ship docked. Well, that time so many immigrants came here, that Ellis Island couldn't handle them all through. So we were kept on the boat for twelve days, that was third class. It was second class, they discharged everyone. Then, they decided to work overtime, that was what we were told. It was Sunday, that was February the twenty-seventh, they took us to Ellis Island, and they start to examine us, pass us through. I went through several doctors then I came out, I

took my [. . .] while going out, they were was a long corridor, and there was a fence between—a wire fence. And in front was sitting a man, in front of a desk, he motioned me over, he says, “You know how to read?” I say, “Yes.” He said, “Read one of those things.” And there were more than one [. . .] I could read. I said, “Which one is this?” Forget it. “You have any money?” I say, “No, I don’t have any.” I had a little left, so I spent it on the boat. And he says, “I’m sorry, I can’t leave you go. If you show me you have [prepared], this way I can leave.” So, the ones that went to the right of that fence went out to the boat. And the ones to the left, he motioned me to go to the left, I went the whole length of the corridor, and I landed in a large room. There were more people there. And I came into that room, there’s another man sitting at a desk, and he stops me, he says, “Where are you going?” So I gave him my uncle’s name and address. He wrote it on his desk. “You have twenty-five cents?” I said “No.” He says, “Go ahead.” Then I learned he was from the HIAS. They were sending telegrams to the relatives here. So, after twelve o’clock, they stopped examining. Those that were left were taken back to the boat and brought in the next day. And us, after they marched into a large dining hall, and there were beautiful tables set all covered white, and they set dinner. I don’t remember now exactly what I ate. But it was one of the best dinners maybe I ever ate. I never forgot it. I thought to myself, “Is this how the United States received its immigrants?” I just couldn’t imagine it. Then, after a dinner, they marched us in to a place that was like a theater. And they have a concert. They played different music. They announced that different people from different countries, so they play different kind of music. And towards the evening, we went out there, and they directed men separate in a room to sleep. Overnight. And the bunks had the springs. So we spent the night there. The next morning, they woke us up early, we went to another room, large room, all the

immigrants. And on one side there were like bars. And we stay; somebody said we wait here, here we have to wait for our relatives or friends to come meet us. And after a while, I saw through the window a boat came, to Ellis Island, and people disembarked, came off the boat and they went into the building, and they came like from here. And so, I was all eyes. And there was my aunt. When she saw me motion, she came over to greet me. Then, she went over to a window to answer a couple of questions, and they let me out, my aunt took me home. A little while after we came home, one of those cousins that contributed to the ticket came to see me. As soon as she—the first thing after she greeted me, she says, “About your ticket, you don’t have to worry. You don’t have to pay anyone back.” And that was my second great surprise. Because I received in Paris hundred and twenty dollars. That was so much money, I never had so much money. And now she tells me I don’t have to pay back. So then, the evening, I had an uncle that came here a few months before. He was a brother to my aunt. My aunt is my father’s sister. And he worked at a Jewish hospital in Brooklyn. He came a few months before—in the laundry there. And he knew I was coming off the boat, so he spoke to somebody there, and they told him to bring me in. So, I got off Ellis Island February the twenty-eighth, and next morning, March the first, my uncle took me with him, and I started to work. I came there, he introduced me to a certain lady, with a name Mrs. [Klau], and I followed her into the hospital. They gave me a pail and a mop, and they showed how to mop the floors. And only the—the hallways and the bathrooms. And, I worked there for a few days. Then, they put me—I was a waiter, with a black boy, the nurses’, the nurses’ dining room. At that time, there were a hundred and thirty-nine nurses there. Anyway, I worked at the hospital until about the end of the year. And then, we discussed with the family, they said I need something better for the future. So they decided—we decided I should try to learn a

trade, and they knew some furriers, so they tried to put me into a shop to learn. There was a cousin that I met here—I didn't know him before—he put me in the shop where he used to work. I started to learn the trade. And started to work and I earned very little. I went as far as thirteen dollars. And there there was a man working, he was cutting [. . .] coats or something, he told me, he says, "Harry, you're worth more. You wouldn't get it here. You better leave the job. Go down to market, you'll get a better job." So I listened to him, and Monday I didn't come in. I went to the fur market, you know, Seventh Avenue, and was out there for a couple of days. And then a man called me, says, "You're an operator?" "Yes." I followed him to a shop, and they put me to work. And I finished the day, he says, "How much you want?" And from thirteen dollars, I didn't know how much to ask, I was afraid I'll ask too much, and I wouldn't get the job. I'll need another job. I said, "Forty dollars." Keep bargaining, bargaining, and finally I had to settle for thirty dollars a week. Then I finished a full week, and I got thirty dollars for one week. I thought I'm a millionaire already. And during that time, I was sending for my brother, because he was also [. . .] he should come here on account of military service, they couldn't stop him there. So after a couple of months, I wrote him, to come to a port and send me a telegram. I didn't have enough money. He'll send me a telegram, I would send him a ticket. And he arrived here on October or November 1922. That was the second time when I was on Ellis Island. And then after that, we tried to bring the rest of the family. We saved a little money in 1923, I went and bought tickets for the rest of the family. My mother, and four sisters and brother. But, at that time, Congress enacted immigration laws, that not too many people could come, especially Romania had a very small quota. So, we had to wait. I wasn't a citizen yet, and I first became a citizen in 1927. Normally, I would have become a citizen in 1926, after five years, but there were

so many applications, the courts were jammed. So I had to wait another year. And that time I studied immigration law, they said any immigrant that comes in the United States and he has left behind a family, a wife and minor children, they can come on a preferred quota. So, I explained that to my mother, because I had my younger brother, he was nearing eighteen years, and I was afraid they wouldn't let him out, because of military service. And he was below—less than eighteen. And then there was the younger sister. So I explained to my mother, if she'd come, she can bring the younger children, and my mother listened to me. As a citizen, I made a petition to Washington, and she came without a quota. And she arrived here in the fall of 1927. After she arrived, she took out the first papers, the declaration of intention, to become a citizen. With this, she made papers out, affidavit, and the three younger children arrived. So we were four here. And then my sisters, this one and two older sisters, they were left there, and they had to wait for a while until finally they arrived, and the whole family was together again. Here, you like to see some pictures?

MS. ALLEE: Yes, I will, in just a minute. I was going to ask you to tell me a little bit, to go back to Romania, and tell me a little bit of what life was like there, when you were young, before your father died.

MR. LAUFER: Well, my father was a cattle dealer, and he made a living, it was nice—besides, at that time it was Austria, it was a different country, different than Romania. And, it was not too bad, he was not rich, but it was not too bad. Then after he passed away, it was very bad.

[UNIDENTIFIED]: Our father was killed by a peasant.

MS. ALLEE: Oh.

[UNIDENTIFIED]: Yes.

MS. ALLEE: Do you want to tell how that happened?

MR. LAUFER: Well, it was an accident. The wagon, something, and my father had an argument, and he grabbed—he had a pitchfork. And he hit him.

MS. ALLEE: And in the army, did you fight in World War One, then?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, I served in the Hungarian army.

MS. ALLEE: What kind of a soldier were you?

MR. LAUFER: I was first infantry, and then I was transferred, I was with a pack train. It was [. . .] We used to deliver everything to the front. Right to the trenches, we used to deliver everything. Under fire, and there was always, mostly artillery fire.

MS. ALLEE: So it was a hard time.

MR. LAUFER: Yes, and besides, we were stationed—the front was in the mountains. Now, our line was on top of the mountain, and below it were the Russians. And here was a valley, and we were under the mountain. So we were shielded. And our artillery was on the other side of the valley. And when they used to have artillery duels, the shells used to fly over us.

MS. ALLEE: So you could have gotten hit by your own army.

MR. LAUFER: Well, our artillery was fired over us, over the mountain to them. And the Russians were firing back, and they also spotted—there were some units, like us, we were there a unit, there were like two hundred horses. A pack train, you know, they used to deliver up to the mountain and everything. And they [. . .] tried to hit us, but they were just yards away, so happens they couldn't get it. And they were very close already. We had to move to another place. And that other place, they knew also where, they used to shoot, fire shrapnels, you know that shells that explode in the air. But nothing happened. Although only once, something little happened to me. I delivered top— from there, something, and I was up the night before, with a buddy of mine from another platoon was sick, had a cold. So the staff sergeant asked who wants to volunteer with his horses. So I volunteered, and I went up. And while we were unloading, we carried some barbed wire sort of things. A shrapnel came, and killed the horse, the leading horse that I was holding, and my cap flew off and I got a little scratch on my head. That's all.

MS. ALLEE: You were lucky.

MR. LAUFER: Yeah. Otherwise, we were mostly under fire. Artillery fire.

MS. ALLEE: Well, did you feel a lot of loyalty to Austria in the war?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, Austria was a fine country, wonderful country. It could be compared to the United States, as far as freedom and everything. Wonderful country.

MS. ALLEE: And it got—from what I gather, it got broken up at the end of the war and the Romanians came into your part?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, that's right, yes. Romania was a friend of Austria, but in 1916, Romania declared war on Austria, and joined the Allies. When she declared war, the German and Austrian armies marched in and defeated them right away. But then, after the war, when the Austrian army was remembered, Romania was kind of resurrected, and she occupied many territories that formerly were Austrian, especially Hungarian territories, like there's Transylvania, Maramures, Manat, and then where we come from, Bukovina—Romania occupied that.

MS. ALLEE: Was it different under Romania, I guess?

MR. LAUFER: Yeah, a little different. As far as soldiering, it's almost the same. They teach you to train your knife in the same direction as anyplace. But, it was a little different.

MS. ALLEE: Did they—what war was it you were in? Why did they want you in the army? The Romanians?

MR. LAUFER: Ways—in the post-world war, they joined the Allies, and they declared war against Austria.

MS. ALLEE: So you were in the army again in World War One twice—I mean, when you were in the Romanian army—

MR. LAUFER: No, that was after the war.

MS. ALLEE: That's what I meant.

MR. LAUFER: Yeah, that's after the war.

MS. ALLEE: So, why did they want you?

MR. LAUFER: Well, they came in, right away, they have draft, so the first thing, in a new province, they organized the first one, two infantry regiments, and I was in one of them.

MS. ALLEE: You were already experienced.

MR. LAUFER: Yes, that's right.

MS. ALLEE: But you only had to be in for a year, so that—

MR. LAUFER: Yeah, after a year they let me go. In fact, we were all former soldiers, many of them were buddies that I knew from the Austrian army.

MS. ALLEE: And life was not much different under Romania, except—

MR. LAUFER: Well, maybe a little different.

[UNIDENTIFIED]: Excuse me, may I help you? I should tell them that you were hiding from the Romanian—

MR. LAUFER: No, I wasn't hiding in anything. I was left home. That's right. You don't remember. I served a year.

MS. ALLEE: Did you have any problem because you were Jewish, or anything, with the Romanians?

MR. LAUFER: With Romania? Well, I didn't have problems, but there were problems. I was in one company, a third company, and there was a lieutenant—it was nothing wrong, but they came—the holidays, Jewish holidays, you know Rosh Hashonah, New Year's—there was an order from the regiment, all the Jewish boys should be released for the holidays. But there was no train; many didn't go home. I had an uncle about three hours away, so I figured out I will go there. So I went away. Some were from the city. And then there came the next holiday, what you call Yom Kippur, they gave us off—and the temple there had room for the soldiers, so we went. Then came the next holiday, the fall holidays, you know, eight days, so the companies are lined up in the morning to march out on the training field, and a messenger brought a message from the regiment that all the Jewish boys should be released for the first two days [of the] holiday. So the lieutenant said, "All the Jewish boys, step out." When I saw him, I didn't like his face, the way he looked. The lieutenant. I say, "Lieutenant, I'm a stranger here, in this city, I have no place to go. I'd rather not miss a day of instructions." So he sent me back to my line, to my squad. And the other boys, he ordered the rifles for inspection. You know, they open up the rifles, he looked in. Right away, he told them—there were about five, six boys—he says, "Each one gets three days in the lock-up for not keeping the rifles clean." So they left, they went away for the holidays. And then after the holiday, when they came back after two days, they were locked up for three days. Then after a while, I decided I'll get out of this company. So I asked for a transfer. I asked for a transfer to another city, one battALLEEon of this regiment was in a different city. So I asked, I'd like to be transferred to the third battALLEEon. So there was a staff sergeant in the office, not the outside. And he said, "If you want to transfer out of this company, I'll transfer you. But not where you want. I'll transfer you where I want." I figured maybe he'd send me away somewhere

to another regiment [. . .] here, I was all buddies, we were former Austrians. So he sent me in the same building upstairs to the first company. And when he transferred me there, there was a captain there, and he was an aristocrat. And he was a [boyar]. A [boyar] in Romanian means a big landowner. In fact there was a man, a sergeant, in the same company, he came from the same place as the captain. He said he's so rich he can keep his company on his estate, on his expense. And this man a real aristocrat. A wonderful man. He was like a father. All the soldiers really loved him. And that's where I finished service.

MS. ALLEE: And about the journey here, you went to Paris. Did anything interesting happen on the way to Paris?

MR. LAUFER: No, I went to Romania, I went to Bucharest. The passport I took out in the capital city where I come from, in the province. Then I went to Bucharest, and then I went to a steamship agent, and I told them I like to go just to a port. And he had just transferred, ready to go away. Immigrants, you know. Transports, you know, like they have now tours, transports. And then they took us to the American consulate, and I got a visa there. And then after a couple of days we started out. They had some going to Antwerp, and some to Paris. And I went to Paris. Here, I saved a piece of my passport is still left.And I got married at my mother's house, then I don't know what happened.

But this is saved.

MS. ALLEE: That's you. You were very attractive.

MR. LAUFER: And here—here's the American visa.

MS. ALLEE: So you wound up going to Paris, then?

MR. LAUFER: Beg your pardon?

MS. ALLEE: You wound up going to Paris.

MR. LAUFER: Yes.

MS. ALLEE: How did you like Paris?

MR. LAUFER: It's a beautiful city. It's a nice city. Tourists, who have money, go around spending it. But I was just walking around and looking.

MS. ALLEE: Did you have to stay there a long time while you waited?

MR. LAUFER: I was there altogether about seven weeks. And I received the money. I saved several—

MS. ALLEE: And the ship, what was the trip on the ship like?

MR. LAUFER: Well, the ship was—there were so many immigrants came, they converted—it was a former transport. And they converted—the French converted it into a passenger ship for civilians.

MS. ALLEE: And were you seasick?

MR. LAUFER: What?

MS. ALLEE: Did you get seasick?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, yes. It was very stormy. For five days, I was

laying on board, I didn't eat or drink anything. Then, I got better, and better, and then near the coast here, I remember I was standing on the front deck, on the right side, and somebody spotted land. Everybody said, "Look, America!" It was really something. I just couldn't stop looking at it. And it was late in the afternoon, and then it was dark, and we reached New York. I said, "That's the land of hope, finally I'm arriving here."

MS. ALLEE: And you saw the Statue of Liberty?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, we passed by there on the way in.

MS. ALLEE: Did you know about the Statue of Liberty?

MR. LAUFER: There was a man, a German man, German nationALLEEty, he was a former Austrian, but he came from Yugoslavia, you know, Yugoslavia took part in the territory [. . .], and he explained to us about America, and he showed us the Statue of Liberty, what it means. And different things, and when I came, I knew already.

MS. ALLEE: What did you think of—well, when you went with your uncle where did you—you stayed in New York?

MR. LAUFER: Yes

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MS. ALLEE: With your aunt. Where in New York?

MR. LAUFER: Well, my aunt lived on the Lower East Side.

MS. ALLEE: What did you think about New York City itself, and the Lower East Side?

MR. LAUFER: Well, it was a big city, not like we were used to out in the sticks.

MS. ALLEE: Did it seem noisy, filled with people, or, did you like it?

MR. LAUFER: Well, we just got used to it, and I never saw so many people together. We got used to it.

MS. DALLETTE: We're going to turn the tape over now, so I'm just going to say end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

MS. ALLEE: This is the beginning of side two. Do you want to tell me a little bit about your life here?

MR. LAUFER: My life here? Well, I lived in America, in a free country. Years ago, there were Depression years.

MS. ALLEE: Did you work in the fur business the whole time?

MR. LAUFER: Yeah.

MS. ALLEE: Down on Seventh Avenue in the Twenties and Thirties?

MR. LAUFER: Yeah, I spent my life there. I'm retired now.

MS. ALLEE: And you just—did you have your own place?

MR. LAUFER: No, I worked for people.

MS. ALLEE: How did you meet your wife?

MR. LAUFER: How I met my wife? I met her on a boat. A friend of mine was going to Europe, and I went to see him off. And he was there with his wife, he went—his sister went to see him off. And I went out, and I saw the girl on the boat, and then afterward, I called her after, asked if she would go out with me.

MS. ALLEE: And that was it.

MR. LAUFER: That was it.

MS. ALLEE: And then how many children did you have?

MR. LAUFER: I have two daughters. My older daughter lives in Staten Island. She has three boys, the one that's graduating now, and that's the other one, and the third boy, the youngest, he graduated last year, and he works for AT&T. And my younger daughter lives in Westchester, and they have two boys also. The older one has now two years college, and the younger one, that's the youngest of my boys, he's entering college this fall.

MS. ALLEE: Congratulations.

MR. LAUFER: Yeah, well, very nice boys.

MS. ALLEE: Did you ever go back to Europe? Did you ever go back to your homeland?

MR. LAUFER: No, never went back there. But I traveled, I was in Israel a few times. In fact, in March, I had an invitation to a wedding there. We have relatives that came from Europe after the Holocaust. So, I went to the wedding. I was there for ten days.

MS. ALLEE: Last March.

MR. LAUFER: Yeah.

MS. ALLEE: Did you ever think about what the difference would have been if you'd stayed or if you came here? When you—how do I put it? Well, you and the family made a decision that you should come here.

MR. LAUFER: That's right.

MS. ALLEE: That started you all coming here. Did you ever think of what it would have been like if you hadn't made that decision, and you just stayed?

MR. LAUFER: Well, I don't know what it would have been like. And it just—well, we were really very poor, and in a hopeless position. And when I came, that was—my mother's life, and mine—and then I'll come here, and then I'll try and bring the rest of the family. In fact, I— how shall I say—I acted like a bridge here, you know what I mean?

MS. ALLEE: Yes, yes.

MR. LAUFER: Because I expected to bring them here. That was our only hope.

MS. ALLEE: And it was fulfilled, they came.

MR. LAUFER: Yes, that's right, they took a long time, the quota laws, and all that. But, and then I had my youngest brother, I served in World War One. My youngest brother served here, in the United States Army.

MS. ALLEE: In World War Two?

MR. LAUFER: Yeah.

MS. ALLEE: Was he in the whole time, for the whole war?

MR. LAUFER: Yes, he was drafted after the war started, and he served.

MS. ALLEE: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about, or to tell about your experiences coming over?

MR. LAUFER: About what?

MS. ALLEE: Is there anything more that you would like to talk about? And tell?

MR. LAUFER: Well, what can I tell you? We live in the United States, we are all very happy. And my mother came here, and the time came, and she became a citizen. It was the greatest thing to her. I told her, "Mama, now you're an American citizen. You're not the same that you were there." And that was the greatest thing to her. And she went to vote,

she used to go to vote, to her it was just—a great day to her. She was an American and she goes to vote. In Europe there was no such thing as women voting. And here, it was a wonderful thing. She lived nice few years here, wonderful, happily. But she was not well, and she passed away.

MS. ALLEE: So thank you, for letting us come and tape you.

MR. LAUFER: You're welcome. You're very welcome.

MS. ALLEE: This is the end of interview number 188 with Harry Laufer. The time is now 4:35.