

KECK-53/BOONIN

KECK-53

LOUIS BOONIN

BIRTH DATE: 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 21, 1985

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INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

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RUSSIA, 1920

AGE 18

PASSAGE ON "THE SUSQUEHANNA"

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Louis Boonin on Monday, October 21, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 3:30 and we are about to interview Mr. Boonin about his immigration experience from Russia in 1920. This is the beginning of side one of tape one of interview number 053, 053. Let's start back at the beginning of your story. Tell me where and when you were born.

BOONIN: I was born in Scultz in 1902 and . . .

DALLETT: Can you spell that for me?

BOONIN: In English? S-, no, no C-L-U . . . Yes . . .  
( break in tape )

DALLETT: Okay. After talking about it we've decided it's spelled something like (S) C-L-U-T-Z-K. Okay, and that was in 1902.

BOONIN: 1902. And, uh, I grew up there and I went to school there. First I went to Hebrew School and then I went to a school that was also for boys. It's a boy's school and I learned Russian and a little German. I had German and French. I took German and then I went there for two years and then the war started. First World War. And the school, am I speaking loud enough? And the school closed up. Went out of business. And the, I remember the superintendent of the school, he left Clutzk and he went further away from there. Because the front was getting nearer. And, uh, I was taking lessons at home from my brother for a year or so. And then he graduated high school and he wanted to study so he went, he left Clutzk and he went to University.

DALLETT: And so your brother was older, you had an older brother.

BOONIN: Yeah, he was older. He was three years older, yeah. And then, uh, my father was in the lumber business. He had a lumber yard. And, uh, he had a partner with him, but his partner was drafted, did I mention that? He was drafted in the army and he was captured by the first attack when the Germans attacked the Russian army. He was in a prisoner camp for five years. Yeah. And, uh, well, my father kept the business going and he said, "We'll pay the partner's family, the wife and the family, the same wages he got when he was working." So, uh, they, well, the war was going on. Then the Germans occupied Clutzk, in 1971. I remember when they walked in, and the Russians retreated and they went as far as Kiev, that's Ukraine.

DALLETT: You remember that day when the Germans came?

BOONIN: I remember the day as clear as now. Yeah, I was standing with a friend of mine on a public place, like a main street. They were marching four abreast and I was standing on the sidewalk, out of the way. But there was a peasant, a Russian peasant. He was standing on the curb and one soldier came over to him and he told him in German, I don't know if you

understand. Can you understand German?

DALLETT: No, but say it in German.

BOONIN: Well, he said, I'll translate it." (German) That means, "Get out of the way, you rotten pig," or whatever. Schwein is a pig. He got out of the way. Well, they were marching on. They didn't bother the Jewish people then. No, they kept on going. And, uh, one thing they did for us. We didn't have no electricity. So I think they were about six months in Clutzk and they put, in each house was allowed one electric light. And it was fifty cents a week, yeah, fifty cents a week. And then they, well, they, I think the United States went into the war and they, uh, the Germans were getting a beating and my brother, I had a brother here, an older brother, he was drafted in the war. And my other one was in the Red Army already.

DALLETT: You had one brother that was in the United States already?

BOONIN: Yeah. The first war, yeah. He was studying to be a pharmacist. Yeah. Then he graduated just when I was, the week that I came here he graduated pharmacy. So,

uh, I, uh, oh, yes, then when the Germans retreated back to Germany, so the, uh, the civil war started in Russia. I don't know if you know the history. There was one front that was open in the Ukraine and one in White Russia. They called it "White Guards," white generals, they were against the, the Revolution. The Revolution started. The czar was overthrown and they, uh, the Germans were getting a beating and my brother, I had a brother here, an older brother, he was drafted in the war. And my other one was in the Red Army already.

DALLETT: You had one brother that was in the United States already?

BOONIN: Yeah. The first war, yeah. He was studying to be a pharmacist. Yeah. Then he graduated just when I was, the week that I came here he graduated pharmacy. So, uh, I, uh, oh, yes, then when the Germans retreated back to Germany, so the, uh, the civil war started in Russia. I don't know if you know the history, there was one front that was open in the Ukraine and one in White Russia. They called it "White Guards," white generals, they were against the, the Revolution. The Revolution started. The czar was overthrown and the

Polish were on one front and the allies were also supporting the Polish, I think. They were against the Revolution. And, uh, they walked into, one day they came into, the Polish army came into our city. And they, they stood there I think seven or eight months.

Well, I couldn't get no work and my parents died. In the meantime they died in 1917.

DALLETT: Your father was not in the army. He was not drafted.

BOONIN: No, no. He wasn't drafted, he was too old. My brother, the one that left Russia, he left in 19, he came here, he came of age, eighteen you have to go in the army. You have to serve two years. And I remember an officer came, a Russian officer, and that was before the Revolution. He came in and he said, "Where is your . . ." He told my father, "Where is Mendel Boonin?" That was his name. And my father said he went to America. Well, he was fined three hundred rubles. Paid that and that's all. So, anyway, I couldn't get any work, my father lost his business and then he died and then my mother died after that. And, uh, I couldn't get a job. I didn't have any trade, so to learn a trade you have to pay the, uh, the owner of the little factory, the little

shop. You have to pay him and work six months free, like apprenticeship. Well, I didn't have the money, so I wrote to my brother in America that I would like to come to United States.

DALLETT: Did you receive letters from your brother?

BOONIN: Yeah. We were corresponding, yeah. And, uh, he sent me some money. And he sent me this ticket for the ship, yeah. And, uh, also an affidavit that he will take care of me until I get on my own feet. So that was a big paper, bigger than that. It had an American stamp on it. And I was using that as a passport. I thought I'd get away with it. So one day I got ready and I told goodbye to my aunt and uncle and this man that was captured, he came home from the prison and I said goodbye to him. And they gave me some addresses to go and communicate to the people so they would help him. And, uh, I hired a man, a horse and wagon. He also had a daughter and a grandson, this man, that was going to Baltimore. The young woman, she had a husband in Baltimore. And I was heading for Philadelphia. Anyway, we were stopped on the way, gone about two or three hours. We stopped and it was a Polish officer. And, on the highway, a soldier.

And he says to me, "How old are you?" I says, "I'm seventeen-and-a-half." He said, "Why aren't you in the army?" I said, "I'm a Russian citizen and I'm not old enough." "Where's your passport?" He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to America." He said, "Where is your passport?" So I took out my affidavit and I showed him. So he looked, looked. She, "All right." He couldn't read it. So we went further.

DALLETT: Speaking in Polish? The officer?

BOONIN: Half and half. I could speak a few words in Polish. I couldn't speak. Oh, yes, I want to mention this. Before I left Clutzk I had to go to the police station. To travel, to get out of the city, you have to have a permit. So I went in and a sign says you have to speak Polish. Well, I managed to say a few words. He said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want to go to America. I want to get a, a pass." He says, "Are you a Communist." I says, "No." He says, "Where do you live?" So I gave him my address, my name and address. He says, "We're gonna investigate you. We're gonna investigate you. Come back in two weeks." So they must have investigated. They didn't find

anything on me. I was lucky. I did belong to the Young Communist League but they destroyed the records before the, uh, the, uh, Polish got in. So he gave me a pass, a little paper that I was good character, I'm not a communist. So I was, so after traveling as far as a place called Baronovitch, then there's a train there. And he left us, said goodbye to the man, and I went to this lady and her little boy, he was about five, I think. And we went to a small hotel there, a Jewish hotel. It was Friday. And there was a few elderly men. It was getting dark. They said, "Would you like to go to synagogue?" I said, "Yeah, I would like to go." They said, "We're going. Come on along." And we were going just about two blocks and there was, we were coming to a railroad crossing. And it was two Polish soldiers. He says to us, "Where are you going?" We told them we're going to a synagogue.

He said, "No, you're not." He says, "Here are shovels and picks." We had to fix the road there. And we worked for about an hour and he told us to go.

And, uh, I think, uh, next day or so we made our way to go to Warsaw. And we got there, it was dark already. And we could hear the, h, on the way I met two of my boyfriends from the same city. They were

traveling to their father in Brooklyn. And, uh, we were schoolmates, we were going to the same school. So it was very pleasant to see them. And, uh, we were traveling together now. They had some money, too, but we were hiding it. I had my hundred dollar bill here (points behind shirt pocket). I had just a few marks. I had. When we got to Warsaw it was evening. And we didn't know what to do. We were in a strange city. So a man with a horse and wagon but more, what do you call it, a drushka. It's like they have on Fifth Avenue, you know those horse carts?

BOONIN: Yeah.

DALLETT: They take you for a ride. Well, that's what it was. And he had one horse. And he says to us, "Are you Jewish?" I said, "Yes, we are." He said, "Well, you better get off the street because the police will capture you and send you to the front to dig ditches because there's fighting going on." You could hear some of the fighting, too. So he says, "I'll take you to a place. Maybe she'll put you up. It was a widow. She has three daughters, she might, she has a big house, she might put you up for the night or for a few nights." So we went there. And we came in and told

her our story and she says, "I don't have any beds. I got three daughters. I can give you some bedding and you can sleep on the floor. And we'll see tomorrow what will happen." So we did. We took the, we stayed there overnight. And one of the daughters worked in the police station. And she says, "You're strangers. You have to go today and register in the station house." And we told her we were going to America. She says, "Yeah, this is the first thing you have to do." And we all registered and then we, uh, we found out where the, the passport office is. And we got in line. The first day we were unsuccessful. We were waiting the whole day and we didn't get waited on. They told us to come back the next day. We came back the next day and we were lucky. We got in line and we got the passports. This passport here. It cost five hundred zylotte. Five hundred zylotte would be maybe a hundred, a hundred dollars. And this is my picture that was on there. And, uh, then you're still not free to go to America. You have to get a visa.

DALLETT: Right. And what was your name? How were you called at that point?

BOONIN: This is Russian. Lejba Boonin.

DALLETT: Lejba. L-E-J-B-A.

BOONIN: Now, here's Scutzk. Let's see how they pronounce Scutzk.

DALLETT: And how is that you had the money to pay for this? Was this money your brother had sent you from America?

BOONIN: Yeah, he sent me one hundred dollars. So I, uh, I happened to change it somewhere and, but I still had most of the money hidden. So after I got this there was a Jewish society, the HIAS, one, but then there was another one called the Jewish Distribution Committee. And they were helping with advice or moneywise, the immigrants that were traveling. And there was a lot of immigrants coming into Warsaw for the same thing I was. They said it was close to five thousand a day. So we went in there and, uh, we, uh, we didn't have very much success the first day. The second day we were waiting in line there to get, to get our passport. Each one, if you came in today they'd put your passport under the others. Like, not on the top. Anyway, the second day there was, someone hollered there was going to be a raid. The police were coming. Pick up some men to, like he said, to

dig ditches, send to the front. They were still fighting there. So they told us to stay off the streets, all together if we could. We had to go a few blocks to come to this office. Well, this went on for about three or four weeks. And then on the fourth week we were, every day we had to report to this house where the Committee was, the Jewish Distribution Committee. And so they, well, so one morning the, uh, the crisis was getting nearer, the Russians were, seemed to be getting ahead in the fighting. And there was a rumor that they're gonna walk into Warsaw so the American consul announced, we went to the, they sent us to the consul and we, he announced that everybody that has a passport will get a visa. If you got ten dollars. Pay ten dollars and they'll stamp your card and then you can get out. Get to another city. So I, uh, got in line, I got my passport and my boyfriends also. And we went, from there we went to, and the next day we got onto the train and we went to Danzig.

That was a free city but now they call it Gdansk, it's on the Polish, then I think it was international city, I think, but it was called Danzig. And there we came in on the train and then we had to walk, or they gave us trucks, transported us outside of the city

into a big warehouse. They had some bunks but they didn't have enough for everybody. So I remember I slept the first night on the floor.

DALLETT: You were still traveling with your two friends?

BOONIN: Yes. I had a little package and I used that for a pillow.

DALLETT: What was your package?

BOONIN: I had some underwear, I think, and another jacket I had.

DALLETT: That's all you were bringing with you.

BOONIN: That's all I was allowed to take. No jewelry, nothing. So, uh, there we had to wait for our boat. We were there, I think, two weeks, or three weeks, I forget now.

DALLETT: Now, were you already booked on a boat, you had your steamship ticket all ready, right?

BOONIN: I had, I had, yes. I had a ticket.

DALLETT: You had a ticket, but you were waiting . . .

BOONIN: But I was waiting, yeah.

DALLETT: To be able to get on one.

BOONIN: To get on because it was so many people ahead of me. And, uh, so I think we spent about two or three weeks in Danzig. We were like under, under arrest. See, we weren't allowed to go. Only one day they announced, they said, "Anybody wants to go to the city to buy something, you know, to eat." They gave us food there but we had to pay for it. So I said, "Yes, I'd like to go to, uh, to the city." We were outside of Danzig. And, uh, they let me go. And I think I saw a restaurant. I went in there and I had something to eat. I think it was a German restaurant. I ordered some food and I ate. I was supposed to return at six o'clock. So I came back at six o'clock and, uh, another, another day they let us go, the three of us. And we wanted to take a bath. So we were walking on the street and we didn't know where bathhouse is. So we stopped a man and we told him, in half German, half Yiddish. We said (Yiddish/German). So he says (Yiddish/German). So we walked and we finally found it and we came in. Was a lady attendant and she says (Yiddish/German), something like that.

DALLETT: What does that mean?

BOONIN: (Yiddish/German), the bath, you know, they had tubs in different rooms. And we said, (Yiddish/German). So she filled it up and we took the baths and then we took a walk and we went back to our camp. And, uh, I remember they said a few days later, after we were examined there and we had to get our clothes fumigated. They said we had lice that we brought in from Poland or from Russia. So they had to take off our clothes and, that's in Bremerhaven, or Danzig, I don't remember exactly. So they gave us back our clothes. They put them in a steam, like in a steam bath. Came out dry cleaned. And we put it on. And then they told us we can, next morning we'll have a small boat take us to Bremen. First it was Bremerhaven. Small boat. And then they took us to the large, to the large ship, the Susquehanna.

DALLETT: Susquehanna is the name?

BOONIN: Susquehanna. Yeah.

DALLETT: Of the ship.

BOONIN: Yeah. I don't know whether you're interested. I

found. I traced it. Who the Susquehanna was. It wasn't a very good ship. It took twelve days. It was a, an American captured, it was a German freighter, a German freighter. I don't know what the name was. They captured it during the war.

DALLETT: Captured by the Americans?

BOONIN: By the American Navy, yeah. And they turned it into a passenger ship. And this, this line must have rented it but, the American airline, or whatever, American, yes, steamship line, whatever they called it. Yeah. And, uh, so we got on the boat. We were in, all the way down in steerage. For the first three days I was seasick. And I didn't care whether I ate or not. I felt very sick. And, uh, on the fourth day I wanted some food. And all I got was potatoes and herring. And I paid for, paid for food and going across the ocean. So we had several young men who were older than me, about twenty or twenty-three. They were also going to America. And they said, they decided that they'll have to use some force to get food. They didn't get any food either. And they were getting hungry. so they got a hold of this steward, I think they call him a steward. He was arranging the meals.

They said, "We want to eat." He says, "Well, if you want to eat you gotta pay for it." They said, "Oh, no, we're not going to pay. We paid once. We got our tickets." And they said, "Either we eat or we're gonna have a battle here." So they brought us food and we ate. It wasn't so hot, but it was all right.

DALLETT: Do you remember, do you remember actually eating that meal?

BOONIN: The first meal, it was some kind of a meat stew or something like that. And they gave us bread. We could have white bread or rye bread. And, uh, finally we came to Ellis Island. And, uh . . .

DALLETT: Can you just tell me a little bit about the sleeping accommodations?

BOONIN: Well, it's bunks. I think it was two or three bunks. I had the lower one, I think. I was lucky I had the lower one. Then there was the second and third bunks. It wasn't a very pleasant ship and we weren't allowed to go on the, we were like in the third class. So it was second class and an upper deck. But we weren't allowed to go.

DALLETT: What was the weather like? What time of year was it?

BOONIN: It was good. It was September. We got on, we were all, we left in July and we got in in September. I don't know where. I must have lost some time in between. I think we stayed, in Poland we stopped in that place called Lodz, I think. A textile city, I think. I didn't mention that. But, uh, all together I think it took me about three months since I left Russia. And after twelve days we landed in Ellis Island. I don't know what time of the day it was. But my brother was all ready. I told him that I was on the way. I wrote him before I left and I don't know how he got to know, he must have called up to find out. So he came. And, uh, I, uh, he waited three days. He came the first day he didn't have a chance to get on because somebody else ahead of him. But he had a little reference because he was in the army, the American army, served two years in the army. He went overseas. So, uh, finally, oh, the first morning we had to get up six o'clock in the morning, make our beds, get washed and dressed. And we had breakfast seven o'clock.

DALLETT: This is on Ellis Island?

BOONIN: On Ellis Island, yeah. It's like a barracks.

DALLETT: Before you got on Ellis Island were you examined on the boat before you came here?

BOONIN: Before, yeah, when, before we got off the, the boat, we were in the water, yeah. In the United States. Yeah, an American doctor came in, looked at my eyes, my throat, and I think they gave us a, uh, shot in the arm. I think, I'm not sure. And, uh, they let us go. And we got the rooms. Had several rooms. Then we had to get up six o'clock in the morning and we had to be in the dining room at seven. At eight o'clock you're finished and then you go outside if you want to.

DALLETT: What was that room like where you slept?

BOONIN: It was a large room, something like a barracks, yeah.

DALLETT: Again, bunk beds?

BOONIN: Yeah, old-fashioned, yeah.

DALLETT: And the dining room?

BOONIN: Dining room, I forget what it looked like. It looked

like a long tables and benches. No chairs. And the food, I don't know what it was. I didn't care. I was glad to get off the boat. So in the morning, about nine o'clock they told everybody to come outside. The sun was shining. It was warm. And, uh, a lady came in. She says, "Anybody speak English?" Said, "No." "Russian?" "Yeah, we can speak Russian."

DALLETT: What language was she speaking in?

BOONIN: Well, she could speak two or three languages. Yeah. She asked first if we could speak English, if we could understand English. Said no. So, "Russian?" "Yes." "Jewish?" "Yes." So, um, I don't know what nationality she was, but first of all she said, "Now you're, welcome to the United States. You came from a different country, different society. Communist or Bolsheviks, whatever they call them. And now you came to a free country. And we want you to forget your past and you become good citizen." And that was every morning. The next morning, because there was another boat came in the next morning. And three mornings she gave the talk.

DALLETT: End of side one.

KECK-53/BOONIN

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of interview number 053.

BOONIN: My brother, yeah, they called me in and my brother was in the room waiting. And also my cousin. He brought along my cousin. The same age, also in Philadelphia.

DALLETT: Now why was it that they kept you there for three days?

BOONIN: Because, I explained in the beginning, I didn't have enough carfare to get to Philadelphia, from New York to Philadelphia. They said if you need, if you have fifteen or twenty dollars they'll let you go. But then it's better if you wait. So they'll take you. So I, it's a good thing I did wait. And, uh . . .

DALLETT: How much did you have left at that time?

BOONIN: Five dollars.

DALLETT: Five dollars.

BOONIN: Yeah.

DALLETT: Because it cost on the boat or whatever.

BOONIN: Yeah. And, uh, oh, can I mention, on the way when I was in Germany in Danzig, we were, like, we had a high fence and the, the (?), what do they call it, (?), or young ladies, used to come over and say (German). "Have you American . . ." I didn't smoke. "Have you American cigarettes?" And, uh, "No," we told them. "No, we don't, we don't have any." But they wanted cigarettes, candy, chewing gum. And we, we tried the beer, lager beer, it was a, they called it stout, it's a real heavy beer. I enjoyed it. It was a five pfennig a glass. Now we got back to Ellis Island. So naturally I hadn't seen my brother, well, he left in 1912, I think, 1911 or 1912, and this was 1920. So we hugged each other and then my cousin, I hadn't seen him, he came before. He came in 19, in 1907, no, 1909, I think. So, uh, he was already a pharmacist. And so he went home. He said he had to go home and go to work.

DALLETT: Home was in Philadelphia? Where was he a pharmacist?

BOONIN: He lived in Philadelphia. And my brother says to me, uh, "Now I'm gonna take you, take you to give you a

bath." He said, "Do you have any other clothes?" I left some of my clothes there. Just what I was wearing. I said, "No, that's all I have." He says, "After we have a bath." We went into a nice, in Brooklyn, I think, we had cousins in Brooklyn, so first we went and we got, I got a bath and I got refreshed and I ate, he gave me a dinner. And then he said, "I'll buy you a suit of clothes." So we went to a store and he got a suit of clothes. Then we called up our cousins, we had two cousins there and they invited us to stay overnight. And we talked for a long while and then, uh, in the morning we got up and we took a train and we went to Philadelphia. So . . .

DALLETT: Did the other two boys that were on their way to Brooklyn . . .

BOONIN: They said goodbye to me.

DALLETT: Did they also stay on for three days? At Ellis Island?

BOONIN: No, I think their father came the first day. Was lucky, I think. I think so. And, uh, when I came to Philadelphia my brother was, uh, working in a pharmacy

for a cousin. Another cousin, and he was going to school during the day and working at night. Late hours. I think nine, ten o'clock at night. And, uh, so I came in and visited my cousin. His mother and my father were brother and sister. And he says, "Hello." He said, "I'll tell you one thing." He says, "I can speak two or three words of Yiddish." He said, "You'll have to go to school and learn English and I'll give you a job in the, in the pharmacy. You'll work in the laboratory, you'll make citrate. In them days they used to make citrate. They used to put up small bottles of boric acid so, uh, today everything comes packed. So I went, I started at night school. And I was working during the day in the pharmacy. And I had to travel a long distance but I found my way. And the, the teacher was a lady teacher and when she heard my name she said, "You know, we're relatives. My sister married your cousin." Her name is Needle and her, her, her sister, an older sister, married my cousin. "So," she said, "it doesn't make any difference, you have to study." And, uh, so I went for two years. I studied. And then . . .

DALLETT: Where was it that you lived then? Where in

Philadelphia?

BOONIN: I stayed in West Philadelphia. Fiftieth and Nestor. The pharmacy was downstairs and the living quarters upstairs. And I stayed with my brother, had a big room and we had a double bed and we slept together and I used to get up a little early, I was used to getting up early, and so the pharmacy business, is it all right if I explain?

DALLETT: Sure, sure.

BOONIN: The business wasn't so good. He was doing a little moonshining, my cousin, I found out. He was, wanted to make money. It was Depression. 1925 was the Depression. This was 1923, I don't know, the business wasn't going so good. And he told me, the butcher came in one day and he said, we started talking, you know, so, uh, he said, I'm looking for a young man like you." He said, "You got a job?" I said, "Well, my cousin says I should look for a job because he's not making any money." He says, "I can give you a job in the butcher shop. You'll help me, you'll clean, take out orders on the bicycle." And I knew the neighborhood already. So I says, "Okay. I'll take,

I'll take the job." He gave me a job. He says,  
"You'll start working at seven o'clock. It's right in  
the neighborhood." I don't know if you know  
Philadelphia.

DALLETT: Yes, I do.

BOONIN: Gerard Avenue. 52nd and Gerard was a butcher shop, a  
kosher butcher. And, uh, I worked for him for about  
not quite a year. And I couldn't get along with his  
wife, though. He used to go out and buy and she would  
know I'm supposed to go home two o'clock. She would  
give me lunch. I had breakfast home and she would  
give me lunch. And she would tell me, well, "Do this  
and do that, do this." And, uh, one day I got a  
little bit peeved and I said, "One boss is enough.  
Two bosses is too much. I'm gonna quit." Then I was  
sorry I said it. Because it was an easy job. I had  
the whole day. Two o'clock on and I had off and we  
used to work, I had off Saturday. So I had to look  
for a job. So I got a job in a factory. And, uh, a  
shirt factory. It was, you know, not very easy work,  
it was not a union shop. It was 1923, I think, 1920  
or 1923. I think it was 1923. And I used to help out  
there and I think I worked six months. I was getting

fourteen dollars a week. So I went over, we had a superintendent, I call it. The place was Jewish. Cohen & Son. They were very wealthy Jews, I heard, German Jews. But he used to run the place. And, uh, I went in his office. I said, "Mr. Thompson." His name was Thompson. I says, "My name is Louis Boonin. I'm here six months. I would like to have a raise." He says, "We can't afford it." He can't afford it. Which was a lie. They were doing very good business. So, uh, I says, "I'm gonna quit." He says, "Go ahead." So I did quit and I went to Manchester Shirts at Broad and Wallace. I went in there, I says, I worked for Superior and I want to make a change." I went to the foreman. He says, "How much do you want?" He asked me, I says, "About twenty dollars a week." "Come in. Come in tomorrow. Come in to work." That was a bigger place. And, uh, I wasn't very satisfied but I worked a week or two and one day I ran into one of my cousins and he says to me, "What are you doing?" I hadn't seen him for a while. I think it was a picnic in the Park, Parkside Avenue. I says, "I'm working in a shirt factory." "Shirt factory?" he says. I don't want you to work in a shirt factory." He was older than I. He was about, he was a civil

engineer. He says, "You got a job waiting for you."  
I says, "Where?" He says, "My brother has a market in  
Sharon Hill." You know Sharon Hill?

DALLETT: Yes.

BOONIN: Right off Chester Pike. He said, "Call him up." He  
says, "His wife is sick and he'll give you a job."  
So I called him the next day, Monday. He says, "Come  
over." I didn't go to the shirt factory. He told me,  
he says, "Go up and see your cousin. She's not well."  
So I went up and saw her. She told me she didn't  
feel good. And, uh, he needs help. So I said, "All  
right. I'll, I don't know much about meat or  
groceries. I never worked in it." He said, "They'll  
teach you." They had a man already there, a butcher.  
And they had a good store, a lot of credit and  
delivering. So I fitted in. And his sister worked  
there. So I worked there a year and I liked it very  
much. I liked the business. And, uh, his brother  
came from Penn State. He was taken up there. His son  
is the one that's writing the story. So he came home  
and they sent him to school to study law. I think he  
was in his second or third year. And, uh, so my  
cousin says to me on the side, he says, "Louie," he

said, "my brother came home. I have to give him a job for the summer." He said, "You can stay here and, uh, you can look around for a job." So I said, "All right." I said, "I'll look around." So I found another job on Baltimore Avenue in a delicatessen store and, uh, I moved out. I moved to my brother. My brother was married and he had a room for me. He didn't have any children yet and I was boarding there. His wife was giving me food and I was working. And, uh . . .

DALLETT: So by now you knew a lot of English?

BOONIN: By now, oh, yes, I lost my accent. In fact, my teacher told me, the second year when I said I'm going to quit she says, "Well, I would advise you to go to a higher school, but if you want to quit. But you lost your accent and you're, you can get around on your own." So anyway I worked in a delicatessen store and I met a Polish, the manager was Polish, the owner was Jewish. He was a sick man. So I worked there. Then I, one day I met my future wife. And, uh, I went six months, then we got engaged and then I got married. And I went in business myself. In the food business.

DALLETT: Food business?

BOONIN: In Germantown, yeah. I was there fifty years. I want to tell you about my brother. He didn't want to come here.

DALLETT: That one was in the army in Russia.

BOONIN: In Russia. No, he didn't want to come. He says, "I am a Communist." He told me in his letter that I should join the union. He heard that I was working. I wrote him that I was working in a shirt factory. He said, "You should join the union and fight for the working people." Well, he told me to read a lot about philosophy and all that. But I didn't, it wasn't in my blood to be a Communist. So I became a, what do you call them? A middle man. I had a grocery store. I was making a living. Too bad we didn't have a family, though. But my brother-in-law made up for it. He had sixteen. My wife's brother married a gentile, Catholic girl. And they had one every year. They had sixteen, eight boys and eight girls. So we wanted to adopt but they said, "No, they're not for adoption."

DALLETT: So your brother never did come from Russia?

BOONIN: No, he never came. No. One time he had a chance to come here when he was, he graduated electrical engineering. And they wanted to send somebody to New York to study. Westinghouse, different ways of how to, they were interested in the water, water cooling or something, in Russia. So, uh, he said, they sent his boyfriend. Why? Because he wasn't Jewish. And they knew, they must, they knew the other family in Russia, my brother. So they didn't send him but they sent his boyfriend, said he was gentile. So then I lost track of him. But in 1939 after the, after the War, I got a letter from another cousin. I had a lot of cousins. He lived in Sclutzk, but he escaped with his family, wife and children, to Kirgirsh [ph]. It's way out in, in a part of Russia. Cadrian [ph] Mountains, somewheres around there. It's very far from, so they traveled for miles and miles and he got, somehow he got my address here. And he wanted some help. So we, I got together with my family and we sent him clothes and we sent him food. And matzo he wanted. Then he, I asked him, how is, ever heard from my brother, because he left before, in 1939 he left Sclutzk, my cousin. He said, "Yes," he says, "I can tell you this. In 1939 I had trouble with my eyes.

And the doctor, the eye doctor in Sclutzk sent him to Harkov [ph] and my brother lived in Harkov." I'll show you (he gets up to get photograph). This is it.

My brother and his wife and two children. So he went to Harkov [ph] and he found out where he lived in an apartment. And, uh, he met his wife and he had another child, three children. He said, "Why don't you write to your brothers in America?" He said, "Not allowed." That was 1939. And that's all I heard.

DALLETT: That was the last.

BOONIN: No more, that was the last I heard. He wasn't allowed to write.

DALLETT: And you've not heard from the children or from anyone?

DALLETT: The only thing I heard, one day I went to a meeting. There was a, twenty years ago or so, it was after World War Two, it was at the West Philadelphia where they had the civic center. It was a display of Russian goods, I think. And they spoke English. They were Russian men and women. And I went over. I happened to be there. I went to see. It was a lecture there. So I went over to one lady, a young lady. I said, "Do you speak English?" She said,

"Yes." I said "Did you ever, where are you from?" She said, "Moscow, ." And I had some relatives in Moscow. Boonin. They were, one was a scientist, one a chemist. They were cousins. But, uh, they become, I think communists or they wanted, they didn't want to correspond. They were afraid of their position. I says, "Did you ever hear of Boonin family? Boonins?" She said, "Yeah, several Boonins in Moscow." I says, "Here is the address." And I had one of those pens. I says, "Here, I'll give you a pen. Take it back to Russia. And will you give these people, when you see them, give them my address?" I never heard. I wrote to the American consul, the Russian consul, the American Red Cross, to find out what's, even the congressman that was going to Russia. All they said was, "We don't have no records. All the records were lost since the World War Two. It was lost in the War." I don't know what happened.

DALLETT: When was your name changed from . . .

BOONIN: When I took my citizenship papers.

DALLETT: When was that? Tell me what happened.

BOONIN: When I was here five years. Five years you get your,

you become a citizen, full citizen. So they asked me what name do I want to take. Well, I had, we had Leo and Leum. I said I'll take Louis. And they already had the name spelled B-O-O. So I had to go according to them. Because we have some in New York. B-U-N-I-N. I looked them up. It was our family. They didn't change it like we have. So I, yeah, five years, when I was here five years I took out my papers and they changed it.

DALLETT: So then you became Louis Boonin. Let me just take you back, do you remember when you came into Ellis Island, I think you mentioned it was during the day that you docked there.

BOONIN: Yes.

DALLETT: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came in?

BOONIN: Yes, I did see it.

DALLETT: Was that the first you had seen that or did you know to expect that that would be there? Had you ever heard of it?

BOONIN: No, I never heard of it. Not in Russia. My father

was here twice and when he came back, he was here before I was born and then after I was born. In 1903 I think he was here, or 1902. I was born in 1902. He says, "I'll tell you," at night, you know, the lights there, he said, "I'll tell you a story about Philadelphia, America. There was a big store." He meant Wanamakers Department Store. "You can buy there from a piano to a needle." He couldn't believe it. He was here twice. See, he had a sister here and he thought he would settle here. In fact, in 1914 they were planning to come to the United States, the whole family. But the war started in 1914. The war broke out.

DALLETT: And when you settled in Philadelphia, well, you had your brother. But was there any, was there a community, a Russian community around Gerard avenue at that time? Or were you . . .

BOONIN: That I don't know. I lived, I lived, I settled in West Philadelphia, among gentiles. And they all spoke English, so I had to learn quick. And then my cousin's wife had a big family and they were all born here. In the United States. And they, well, I already was beginning to speak English. They, they

spoke very little Yiddish. And, uh, then I landed in, when I worked in the, in the shirt factory, I got friendly with a foreman. He was Jewish, and he says, "If you want to work in the shirt factory," he says, "I'll give you a room. My wife is sick." He says, "I do the cooking." The children they sent away because she was a nervous breakdown and she couldn't take care of the children. She had two children. So we used to, I lived there a year but I didn't, didn't know of any, we had, I belonged to a club. Ah, it was called the Youth Club. I think it was an English name. But we all spoke English. And we used to have dances there every Friday night or Saturday night. That's where I met my wife. She came to a dance and we danced a couples chances. And she gave me her telephone number and I gave her mine. And we ah, I don't know if you have time. When I was working in the shirt factory in the summer a young man came. A very skinny boy and I says, he was hired to do something. I said, "Well, you can work with me." You know, we were laying out cloth to make shirts. And you have to walk about from here to the other end of the building. That's how long it is. It's hard work. And he was in high school. His name was, he became a

senator, a U.S. senator. So I'll remember his name.  
Toll, Herman Toll.

DALLETT: Toll?

BOONIN: Toll. He lived in West Oak Lane. Rose Toll? Maybe  
you heard of it?

DALLETT: I've heard that name, yeah.

BOONIN: So I was getting a vacation. A week's vacation. And  
I heard somebody tell a young lady from Trenton. Told  
me, "Instead of going to Atlantic City, go up to a  
place called Birmingham, New Jersey." It's right near  
where they had a soldier's camp there. Camp, I forget  
which camp it is. They closed it and opened another  
one. Anyway, I says to Herman, he was getting a  
vacation, too. I says, "You wanna take a week's  
vacation?" I says, "I got three, two friends and  
myself and you make four. We'll make it a foursome.  
We'll go to Birmingham, New Jersey." So I went to the  
station, railroad station, to buy a ticket. I says,  
"I want a ticket to Birmingham, New Jersey." "Never  
heard of it." The train, it's near Mount Holly.  
Mount Holly. So I said, "Yes, there is, because I  
just spoke to a lady and she just came from there.

There's a hotel run by a French couple. French." And so he looked in the book and he found it. Yeah. So we all went to, to the place there and, uh, there was a few young people there. A young lady and there was a Frenchman there on vacation. But we wanted a little excitement. You know, like, we got up and had breakfast and we didn't know what to do. So the man says to, to us, "Why don't you go over to, uh . . ." What did I say? "Mount Holy. It's a half a mile and then there's rowboats. Rent a rowboat. My wife will give you lunch. Something to drink, and you'll go out every day." So we did that. We rented a boat and about Wednesday or Thursday, I just want to tell you this. Two young ladies come out to our place and, uh, well, we got acquainted. They said they came from Atlantic City. I said, "What are you doing here in these sticks, I think, in these backwoods?" They said, "Well, we got tired of Atlantic City and the ocean. We wanted excitement." So, well, the only thing we can do is give you a sit in the boat and we'll take you for a ride on the boat. And, uh, so this was Wednesday and we were going home Sunday already. So they had a good time. At night we used to play penny ante. Cards. And they had, Friday

night they had dancing there. Soldiers came over. Camp dix. That's what I was trying to remember. It all comes back to me. And Herman became a lawyer. He studied law. And I kept in touch with him. And then he wanted to give me a job in City Hall here. I told him, "No, Herman, I'm not a politician." And he had a law office with a partner on Chestnut Street. So I went to see him about something, I wanted to get advice. He says, "I'm going to city hall. You want to take a walk with me?" It was a great, big man. I don't know if you ever saw him personally. I have his picture someplace. He, uh, became, nice clothes, everybody hollered on the street, on Broad Street, "Hello, Herman. How's it going?" So I said goodbye. I said, "If I need you I'll get in touch with you." But then I heard he got sick. He had a stroke. Lost his voice. His wife took over when he died. She's out of politics. She was running for a state job and she didn't get it.

DALLETT: The one thing I want to ask you is, if you wouldn't mind, could you just, go over with me what these papers are, because the National Park Service wants to know what kind of papers people have and you have some

wonderful documents here.

DALLETT: Well, this is a copy of my passport. If this will do you any good you can have this.

DALLETT: Good, I would love to have that. I see your passport was issued in Warsaw.

BOONIN: In Warsaw. We also have the American. I took some stamps off. I was a stamp collector.

DALLETT: And this was issued in 1920, right?

BOONIN: 1920, right. Yeah, if you want it.

DALLETT: I'd love a copy.

BOONIN: This is a copy of the passport. I don't have . . .

DALLETT: And then you have that ship's manifest.

BOONIN: Yeah. I have a copy of that. Yeah. This is the original.

DALLETT: But the ship's manifest says that you were on the Susquehanna 14th of December 1920. And you also have a ticket from the boat, stamped when you got your medical examination.

BOONIN: This is the consul of Spain on the back here. Now, what American interest, here, representing the American interest. In Poland, I think, vaccinated, yeah, consul of Spain, I think he was representing the American, I don't know why. But this is the inspection card.

DALLETT: You have the inspection card from 4th of September, 1920.

BOONIN: That's when I go on.

DALLETT: And you have those tickets for you when you were in that camp, in the camp for meals.

BOONIN: This is the barracks. Barracks. That's what they call it. Zimmer means room.

DALLETT: So it was a ticket that said what room number you were in and that you paid for your meals.

BOONIN: Yeah, I paid for my room and board. And here's another one. That's in German. Lager, herr, Mr. Boonin, this is the date, the ninth month, oh, it's the opposite, the eighth month, the ninth. It was in August or September, 1920.

DALLETT: This is the end of side two of interview number 053.