

NPS-53

ABRAHAM (AL) DESSER

BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 1, 1974

RUNNING TIME: 57;10

INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE A. KEYLOR, 11/1978

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 4/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: STACEY MENAKER, 7/1995

ENGLAND VIA CANADA (BORN POLAND), 1935

AGE 32

PASSAGE ON "THE VIRGINIA"

NASH: Today is March the 1st, 1974, and I am speaking with Mr. Abraham "Al" Desser who came to the United States to live permanently at the age of thirty-two in the year 1935. Mr. Desser was born in Lask, Poland. Mr. Desser, tell us about, tell us about your childhood.

DESSER: Well, I shall try to recollect some of the highlights of my childhood. I do not recall the events that led to our family leaving Poland shortly before my third birthday, but from what my mother and father told me, my father who was a tailor, felt that the opportunities, the economic opportunities, to better himself and his wife, my mother, and family would increase if he went to England. And we went to England and after we arrived in England, Dad went into business. He went into the

clothing business, and I recall by the time I was six or seven, Dad having a shop in the West End of London where he made riding habits for the gentry, as they were called in those days. And we lived in a house in the West End of London where the shop was on the main floor, the kitchen was in the basement, and the living quarters were upstairs. At that time my father and mother were Orthodox Jews and when the shop was closed Saturday, being the oldest of five children, four at that time, Dad and I would go to the great Portland Street Synagogue in the West End of London. The shop would be closed and my father would wear a cutaway coat and a high hat, and I at the age of six or seven with my velvet suit, we would traipse off to the Portland Street Synagogue where would participate in worship. I also recall at the age of six or seven going to school in London. One school I remember was, well, I remember two schools, one was King Edward Free School. It was called the King Edward Free School, and the other one was called the St. John's School. Both in the West End of London near where we lived. I get back to England periodically and I go to where the St. John's School was and it is now a warehouse. And the King Edward Free School no longer exists. The name I believe was changed. But, the memories of England are vivid during that particular period because of my mother's family lived in England and they still do. And then at the age of, shortly before my ninth birthday, Father and Mother decided that we would migrate to Canada. The reasons I believe were to go to the New World where opportunities were greater and the life would be better. We then, Mother and Father, Father went first. He went to Toronto and then sent for us and Mother and the four

children, three boys and one girl, went on to Toronto. And I believe the boat we came on which landed in Quebec City, in the province of Quebec in Canada, was called the SS Virginia. And we landed in Quebec and then from Quebec we went by train to Toronto.

NASH: Let me interrupt you for a moment. What was the trip like and what sort of process did you have to go through to emigrate to Canada?

DESSER: Well, I believe that we came over, it was either steerage or third class. I remember enjoying the boat ride very much, to the consternation of Mother who had four children to take care of, and years later she said she was always looking for me in various sections of the boat because of my gyrations around the boat. But, I am still a good sea-going passenger, and even though the trip was rather turbulent, it did not bother me. But, I do recall a lot of fellow immigrants in steerage or third class. And I remember sneaking into the first class corridors periodically where the gentry, as it were, would imbibe me with delicacies that were not available in steerage where we were traveling.

NASH: Were these people mainly English speaking?

DESSER: You mean in first class?

NASH: Well, I mean the immigrants.

DESSER: As I recall it, yes. England wasn't really a stopover point for many of the passengers. The people, as I recall on the boat, were mostly from the British Isles, who had decided to immigrate to Canada. In Canada we settled and my father became a tailor with a tailoring establishment. They manufactured ladies' coats and suits.

NASH: I wondered how the immigration process to Canada differed from the immigration process to the United States. As you know, people had to stop in the United States at Ellis Island and undergo all kinds of examinations. I wondered was there anything comparable to that in Canada?

DESSER: As I recall it, we did have examinations, but we did not stay in Quebec City for any extended period of time. The examinations were rather quick and I do not think the facilities in Quebec City were comparable to the facilities at Ellis Island. I think the procedure was rather a quickie procedure, quickie production line procedure of getting the immigrants into the hinterland as quickly as possible. When I say hinterland, I don't want to imply they are backwards. I mean Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, other cities throughout the division of Canada. At the age of, and then I went to public school in Toronto, and my first summer job was at the age of twelve in the Toronto Carpet Factory where I worked as assistant to a man that operated a loom. And I think my salary was eight

dollars a week. And then the next summer at the age of thirteen I managed to get a job in the Lang New York Trunk Factory in Toronto where I earned, I think, nine dollars a week for the summer. And I lined trunks and valises with paper lining. I remember putting plaster on the paper lining and lining them. And then at the age of fourteen I went looking for a permanent job and I would walk up and down main streets where the factories were located asking if they wanted anybody. And finally I was hired by a coat manufacturer who had a small shop, and he hired me to teach me how to become a garment cutter. And at the end of the week he said, "I cannot pay you any salary because you are not contributing," though I don't think he used the word contributing, "but, you are not contributing to the profit of this company. But, you stay here and eventually we will give you a weekly envelope after you learn something about cutting." And after I believe a month or so he did give me eight dollars a week and after several years I think I went up to twenty-one dollars a week. During that period, I became very active with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union-Cutters Local in Toronto, where I attended meetings due to the fact that my father was an active laborite and an active Eugene Debs type socialist. And I would attend meetings with my father and at the age of sixteen, while working in this coat shop, I believe it was called Adleberg and Company, I became secretary of the Local. But, in between fourteen and sixteen I had a job for a while, this was during World War One, in a steel foundry where, it was called the Turnbull Elevator Company, where I worked ten hours a day, six days a week, and I earned six dollars a week. I stayed there until

shortly before the end of World War One when I went to work in the coat factory. The Turnbull Elevator Company, I worked in the basement of this old clubhouse which was turned into a foundry and I remember earning twelve dollars a week which was a rather huge sum. I was thinking of going back to school evenings but I did not. And my habitat after working hours, ten hours a day, six days a week, was a billiard parlor called Flavells, and that was a social gathering place not far from where I lived. And I remember Dad gave me fifty cents a week to spend and billiards were five cents a game, and I think we could go to the movie houses for ten cents, and we could buy frankfurters for a nickel. My fifty cents lasted several days.

The days that I did not have five cents to play pool I would stand by and watch the others playing. At sixteen when I went to work in the, after working in the foundry for a while, I, because of working conditions, I developed a slight attack of rheumatic fever which incapacitated me for a while, and that too I think contributed, plus the fact that the war was coming to an end, they were laying people off, and that contributed to my leaving the Turnbull Elevator Company. Many years later while I was a writer and researcher for the National Industrial Conference Board, I wrote a study called "Collective Bargaining in Canada," and I am very proud of the fact. I believe it was the first study done on collective bargaining in Canada. I had great cooperation from my colleagues and members of the Canadian Department of Labor in Ottawa. And after doing the study, which I am pleased to say was praised by Labor Union leaders and industry leaders in Canada, I was invited to address the faculty of the University of Toronto

and sitting in the audience was an executive of the Turnbull Elevator Company. I mentioned to the chancellor of the university who introduced me, about my experiences in the Turnbull Elevator Company and about the horrible working conditions and he said, "Well, why don't you mention it in your address?" I said, "No, I do not want to embarrass this executive because it was not his fault. It was a long time before he became an executive with the company and the working conditions had improved tremendously." At the age of, after I went into the garment industry I attended union meetings and I became secretary of the local union, and then a delegate to the Central Trades Council where I sat at the feet of the labor orators both left, right and middle, and listened to what they had to say. I think the seeds of my continued interest in labor-management relations began during that period. The psychological impact of this entire area of activity was tremendous. After a few years I came to the United States on periodic visits, but continued working in the garment industry in Canada. I also worked as a part-time salesman for the garment manufacturers I worked for, and then at the age of thirty-two I migrated, thirty-two or thirty-three, I migrated to the United States permanently and became a worker in a garment shop here.

NASH       What made you come to the United States?

DESSER:    I think I was about thirty-three then.

NASH:       Why?

DESSER: Pardon?

NASH: Why did you come to the United States?

DESSER: A very good question. I was very active with labor unions in Toronto and I remember one employer saying to me that he would give me a job if I would not unionize his shop, and I was blacklisted by the employers because of my intense activity as a pro-union advocate in Toronto. and I remember the letter being sent to David Dubinski [PH], who at that time was the manager of the Cutters Union in New York, recommending that I be given a job. I came to the United States where I managed to work for a short while as a garment cutter in Hattie Carnegie's, which was a rather swanky garment shop. The money was pretty good, and after being there for a year, or less than a year, I was asked to become an International Organizer for this Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and I went at the suggestion of Mr. Dubinski, [PH] who at that time became president of the ILGWU. I became an organizer for the Garment Workers Union. They paid me thirty-five dollars a week and twelve dollars a week expenses. And as an organizer my first assignment was in New England, and I

helped to charter labor unions in various sections in New England, particularly in Springfield, Massachusetts, where I unionized, I helped unionize, I was in charge of the organizing campaign, and the local union was chartered there. I became very active with the local labor federation and the delegate to the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor Conventions, where because of my so-called speaking and writing ability, I was put on the Resolutions Committee and participated very actively in the activities of the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor. I recall very vividly addressing a convention of the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor in 1938, in which I stressed very strongly the need to boycott scrap iron that was to go to Japan and Germany, and in a rather emotional plea I asked the convention to adopt a resolution condemning the export of scrap iron to Japan and Germany because perhaps some of our loved ones would be killed if a war was declared and be killed with the arms that came, the scrap iron that came from the United States. After this particular speech, I, unbeknown to me, because the Hearst papers were interested in boycotting key eastern countries who were accepting our scrap iron or buying our scrap iron, they publicized my address. And I think it went over the wires across the country and the

convention, to my great surprise, even though my resolution was defeated, the last day of the convention, in adopting a resolution of thanks to those who participated in the success of the convention, I was included with Senator Henry Cabot Lodge as a recipient of the vote of thanks. I say rather humorously that votes of thanks are greatly appreciated, but as I later discovered, a vote of thanks and a token gets one a free ride on a subway train. I think I was quite a rebel, that is I use the term rebel in the nonconformist sense. Not just to be nonconformist, but really disgusted with some aspects of the establishment, primarily because this great nation, the United States of America, with a wonderful document called the Constitution of the United States of America, is being ignored so often by the powers that be. And I would stress that time and again. Through my years as a labor organizer I, I was arrested. I remember the time I was arrested because the charge made by the mayor of a New England community where we were conducting a strike. And after finding out that the mayor had made these ridiculous charges against me, I sued him for fifty thousand dollars and received a public apology from the mayor.

NASH: Did you receive any money? Did you receive the fifty

thousand dollars?

DESSER: No, I was satisfied with the public apology, and I learned afterwards that he was being considered for judgeship in the state of Massachusetts, but because of his ridiculous accusations against me personally, the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor decided now to conduct a campaign against him being appointed a judge. I met him a few years afterwards and he apologized personally and I felt sorry for the man because he was a victim of some gossip mongers. But I was a labor organizer until 1939 when the American Federation of Labor offered me a position as one of their representatives, and I worked out of Washington and I was always a maverick and, although I had the greatest respect for William Green, the president of the American Federation of Labor and the secretary-treasurer, George Meany, [PH] David Dubinski [PH] and many others, I felt that they weren't moving fast enough. And while in charge of an organizing campaign in the southern part of the United States where I had a crew of organizers working under me, I refused to agree to segregating a black block in a southern community and as a result of that and other disagreements, I left the labor organizing field. I had heard about a position with the National Industrial

Conference Board, and I went up to see them and to my great surprise, they hired me as a researcher and writer.

END SIDE ONE

BEGINNING SIDE TWO

NASH: Why were you surprised?

DESSER: Pardon?

NASH: Why were you surprised?

DESSER: Well, I did not think I was qualified to be a researcher and writer. And Harold Brown, the man that hired me, and Avry Robbie, [PH] his assistant, said well leave that to us. So I said, "What will I do?" "Well, you come in and we will give you a desk and tell us what you want to do." Well, at the end of three months I hadn't accomplished anything, a lot of conversations with fellow researchers, and I went into the boss and I said, "You know I am earning more money than I ever earned in my life, but I don't think you are getting anything for the money you are paying me." And they said, "What do you want to do?" and I said, "Well, in the province of Ontario they just passed a labor law and I don't think laws are the answer to, I don't think laws are the final answer to improved labor-management relations." "You know, we are not protagonists," Harold Brown said. "What

do you want to do?" I said, "Well, why don't I write an article on the Ontario Labor Court." He said, "Well, go ahead." Well, I wrote the article and after I wrote it he called me into his office and he tore up the article right in front of me and he said, "You go back and write the way you talk. You are not a novelist, you are not writing a paper for your Ph.D." So I thought this was the end of my job and I went back and very indignantly rewrote the article and he said, "Okay, this we can use." And then right after that I suggested that I write a column called "Trends in Collective Bargaining," and he said, "Fine, go ahead." And then at the end, the column lasted four years, and then at the end of four years, I was in Conference I think between five and six years, and then as a result of domestic difficulties, I left the board because of personal problems and I was teaching at New York University once a week, the Graduate School of Education, Washington Square, on collective bargaining contracts, and then I was hired by, for a little while I was Director of the American Arbitration Association and then I was hired by the United States government as one of the assistants to Dr. John Steelman, [PH] the assistant to the President of the United States. He hired me as a manpower "expert" in which I evaluated events that led to the creation of the War Labor Board and the Weight Stabilization Board. And my wife and I who were living separately at the time, I tried very hard to get us together again without success. And then in 1949 while I was a part-time employee at the White House, (break in tape) the Marshall Plan started and I was asked to go abroad by executives of the Marshall Plan in Washington and I turned it down, but my wife, who was then

still my wife, she was a journalist and a former correspondent in Europe when she was quite young, at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three she did some free-lance journalism work in Europe and always talked about the wonders of Paris. I then learned there was an opening in the Marshall Plan office in Paris, and I told them I would let them know. They offered me the job as labor advisor to the French Mission of the Marshall Plan in Paris, France. I phoned my wife, said, "By the way let's start again in Paris." Well, until then, a few months before that she wanted a divorce, and she said, "I'll think about it." and I said, "Well, why don't you come to Paris with me and let's try again, with our daughter." She said, "Well, I'll let you know. I'll think about it, and when will you be in New York?" This was on the telephone from Washington. I said, I will be in New York next weekend." "Well, let's discuss it then." I came to New York and she said, we were living apart, and she said, "I'll go to Paris with you on one condition, that if at the end of a year you do not, we don't get along, you will agree to a divorce." I said, "Okay, it is a deal." And I went back to Washington and agreed to become labor advisor to the French Mission at the American Embassy in Paris where the Marshall Plan was being administered. And my wife said also, "Fix up an apartment." And I said, "Fine." And I managed to get a lovely apartment, penthouse apartment in Paris overlooking the Seine and the Arc de Triumph and Montmarte. We had three terraces. And she came to Paris a little later. I met her at the boat with my daughter. She came over with my daughter, but I knew after she had been in Paris for several days that the jig was up, that she would wait for the end of the

year and then ask for the divorce. And that is what happened. At the end of a year she said, "You promised that if we don't get along you will give me a divorce." I said, "Well, as a rule I don't break my promises, it's a deal." So I managed to get her a ticket back to the United States of America and drove her to Le Havre and out her on the boat, and it was like Madame Butterfly in reverse. As she went off and I stayed on the dock, except in this case I wasn't Captain Pinkerton. This was quite a shock to me and the remainder of my stay, I wanted to get out of Europe. When I came back she met me at the boat and reminded me that there was an appointment with the attorney the next day, which I agreed to keep, and we were legally separated. I decide at that time that I would just roam around for a while. After several months the State Department offered me a position as a foreign service reserve officer in Southeast Asia.

NASH: How old were you at this time?

DESSER: Pardon?

NASH: How old were you?

DESSER: At that time I was forty-six. And after accepting the position as foreign service staff officer I went to school for a little while a foreign service school and they gave me a diploma which I still have, and a couple of days before I was to leave for Burma I was offered a

job with the Weight Stabilization Board. And I told them that I had agreed to go to Burma in Southeast Asia as an attache. I was rather proud of the fact that I could view the labor-management scene objectively as my Canadian studies for the Conference Board and my American studies proved. These studies were praised by labor and management, which pleased me very, very much. And I went to Livingston Merchant at the State Department and I said, "I would like to back out from my agreement to go to Burma." And he said, "Well, I learned about your desire not to keep your commitment, but we cannot force you to go to Burma but if you do go to Burma, if you do not go to Burma, we will regard it as an act of ill faith on your part." Well, the only answer to that was I went to Burma. And again in Burma, I did not see eye-to-eye with the State Department. I was an "ugly American" in the eyes of some of my colleagues in the State Department. I mingled with the natives. I cannot reveal the details, but I was opposed to the policies in the State Department at that time. I felt that distributing pictures of Franklin Roosevelt, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, was not the answer. I felt the answer was in providing better living conditions and better food for the natives rather than through propaganda sheets and propaganda movies, and broadcasting messages to populations that did not have radios. If they did have radios they probably could not understand the language. My daughter once asked me, "Dad, were you an ugly American?" I said, "Darling, in the eyes of some I was and in the eyes of others I wasn't." I came back to the United States very disheartened, very heartsick, and did not know what to do. What ideology I had was broken into splinters. Through the

years, wherever I had the opportunity to go to school evenings, I did so. I then decided for the first time in my life to go into business and I met a gentleman in Burma who suggested I go into business with him and go into international trade. While I was considering this, I was offered a position as a federal mediator for the United States government. After giving it a great deal of thought, I accepted the position as the United States mediator. I am awfully glad I did because for twenty-two years I was able to participate as a peacemaker in the McCoy/Hatfield situations of labor and management. I am rather proud of the fact that I was able to work with the parties in bringing about a higher degree of industrial peace through the processes of collective bargaining. Someone once asked me in an interview, "What are the highlights of a mediator's functions?" And as I recall it, I indicated five points. One was listening. Let me add in parenthesis at this point, being an extremely gregarious person, it has always been a tough job, end of parenthesis. Number two, knowing what the parties are talking about. In parenthesis, let me say that it is very important to explore each issue and ask if one does not know, and do research. Number three, separating the wheat and the shaft. There are always a lot of abstract semantics in the process of bargaining and separating the wheat and the shaft is very important. Number four, suggestions, and in the process of mediation making suggestions is extremely important, and it is important to develop the situation so that the parties feel that the suggestions are theirs, not by a third party. Psychologically it is an extremely important procedure. And five, timing. Sometimes, like a festering sore, you cannot

appease it by stopping the flow the first day. It will sometimes take a while to develop before it is ready for nipping. And the same is true in labor-management relations. Sometimes you know the first day what will settle it, but the time isn't right. Now these five points that I have indicated, each one is just as important as the other. And I have a cartoon at home which was done by Lichty [PH], the (?) cartoonist, showing a big man about my size going through a plate glass door marked "conference room." He is carrying an attache case marked "mediator." And one office girl said to the other, "Thank goodness labor and management agreed on one thing. That's throwing out the mediator." Mr. Lichty [PH], (?) cartoonist, has given me the original of that cartoon, inscribed to me. I am very proud of it. But there is more truth than cartoon in that picture. If the parties can agree to throw out the mediator, progress has been made.

NASH: Mr. Desser, I would like to ask you, why do you think, starting from rather humble origins in Poland, you have been so successful in the United States. What do you owe your success to?

DESSER: I don't know whether I have been successful or not. So help me, I don't. I like to feel that I have made somewhat of a contribution, but remember my life has been in the realm of labor-management relations from being a youngster, going to meetings with my father, and I recall, this event may have had a great bearing on my life, at the age of twelve my father was on strike and there was no money in the house but there

was a grocer named Yaffy [PH] in Toronto. He had a grocery store on Cameron Street, and periodically he would allocate flour to each striking family. And on a little cart (break in tape) and with this cart I would go to Mr. Yaffy's [PH] grocery store and he, on this particular occasion, gave me a five-pound bag of flour to take home. And I remember lifting up the five-pound bag of flour to take up the stoop of our house when the bag broke and I shall never forget the silent expressions on the faces of my mother and father when they looked and saw what I did. But they did not say a word. They went and brought large spoons, we lifted up the flour, strained it, and Mother made the most wonderful woven bread known as challah. I still like challah even though it did not have the dusty taste of the stoop of the house we lived in in Toronto. The years have been very kind in many respects. I am still a dreamer in the Walt Whitman sense. I often think of a great line from Leaves of Grass by that wonderful, wonderful man Walt Whitman, which says, "Superb individuals, a superb nation make." I hope I have it correctly. And I do sincerely believe that individuals, individual liberty, individual freedom through the processes of free elections, free collective bargaining, many other freedoms, we can improve our lot. I did a review not so long ago for the Cornell University Labor Relations Quarterly. It was a review of a book by an Oxford Don on labor-management government situation in Great Britain. And in the review I wrote that history has to be measured in fifty-year steps. I made an error. I wrote this review a little over three years ago. If I had written it a year or two later I would have written, "History has to be measured in hundred or two hundred

year steps." We are inclined to be very impatient. Progress is slow, and although I am a great admirer of the late George Bernard Shaw, I think he was overly pessimistic when he was reputed to have said before he passed on, "The longer I live the more I become convinced that our planet is used as an insane asylum by inhabitants of all other planets." I believe that we have a great, bright future. Like the old-fashioned test tube, before something positive emerged, there was always a certain amount of fissure from the conflicting elements put in the test tube. Have I made a contribution? I hope so. This melting pot called the United States of America with its many, many opinions, is a great blend, and blend does not mean being Pollyannish. One has to have conflict, preferably of a peaceful nature, before positive results come forth. This immigrant goes through life learning from day to day, and when I go on to the happy hunting grounds, which I hope is a while off, I will have many unfinished thoughts, but it is pleasant trying to find the answers and trying to find out why people act the way they do. The almost twenty-five years that I spent with the Federal Mediation Conciliation Service have been a godsend. I often felt that I learned more from the parties than they learned from me. In our American society, culture is not something that is limited to the upper income brackets, the society atmosphere brackets. When I use the word society I mean that which makes the music pages and society pages of our daily press, TV and radio. I have met production workers in the mines of the United States, in the mines of France, on the docks Marseille, on the docks of America, who have just as much culture as the patrons of the Metropolitan

Opera. Their semantics may be a little rougher, but many of them love music, dance, theater, good literature, along with good baseball, hockey, and football. Our society is a growing society. And when I say our society, I do not necessarily mean the society of the United States of America. I mean world society. And I am so pleased to be part of the Statue of Liberty Museum of Immigration, where I am able to serve as liaison between the Statue of Liberty Museum of Immigration, and the United Nations delegations who we invite to visit this wonderful museum, showing the contributions of immigrants to our society. And as I look back and look forward, I stress look forward, gosh, one has to be an optimist because in spite of the negative viewpoints, negative sights, negative news, there is a lot that is positive going on, positive and good. Any further questions?

NASH: I have no further questions and I have enjoyed speaking with you very much. Thank you Mr. Desser.

END OF INTERVIEW